Online ‘barebacking’ community and the creation of ‘sex pig’ identities: Exploring affordances of a Web forum in celebrating sexual excess
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Abstract
The Internet and HIV biomedical technologies are considered as significant technological advances underpinning “barebacking”, or condom-less anal sex among gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men (MSM). Online chatrooms, discussion boards, and geosocial networking applications (“apps”) are regarded as having facilitated new opportunities to meet and connect with other barebackers. Virtual spaces enabled the proliferation of online discourses specific to barebacking, such as “bugchasing” and “giftgiving” to refer to the intentional spreading of HIV. While previous research focus on the metaphors used by bugchasers and giftgivers online, such studies lack analyses of other barebacking practices and identities beyond intentional seroconversion. This paper seeks to fill this gap by examining the affordances of a barebacking online community I call “Pigpen” in offering space for MSM to discuss various topics apart from intentional seroconversion: in particular, the emergence of “sex pigging”. Analyzing online forum discussions, I argue that Pigpen opens possibilities for reimagining sex pigging desires, identities, and practices that are intertwined and constituted by HIV prevention discourses and biomedical technologies. While sex pigging is associated with sexual excess, I demonstrate that limitless sex is practiced in a variety of ways: ranging from the eroticization of HIV and other STIs, to avoiding transmission by adapting some harm reduction strategies. Some sex pigs reappropriate the association of pigs with revulsion and taboo by reframing sexual excess as pleasurable and productive of feelings of freedom. By contrast, other sex pigs renegotiate risk and safety by incorporating risk minimization, giving rise to the possibility of “safer sex pigs”. Thus, sex pigging desires, identities, and practices are more complex than previously thought because they do not neatly fall into the category of irrationality and irresponsibility.

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Introduction

One of the most significant technological advancements attributed to shifts in gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men’s (MSM) sexualities is the development of the Internet. The Internet provides means for communicating “previously unmentionable desires, fantasies, questions, critiques and fetishes”, including “barebacking” or condom-less anal sex [1]. Online chat rooms, discussion boards, and, most recently, geosocial networking applications (“apps”), such as Grindr, are said to have introduced some gay men to barebacking who would not have otherwise been exposed to it (Ashford, 2009; Burrell, et al., 2012; Gauthier and Forsyth, 1999; Landovitz, et al., 2013; Moskowitz and Roloff, 2007a).

Aside from the growth of the Internet, the introduction of highly active anti-retroviral therapies (HAART) in the mid-1990s is also attributed to the rise in barebacking. Some even conjectured that barebacking emerged as a direct result of HAART ostensibly responsible for the widespread idea among gay and other MSM that the epidemic was over (e.g., Berg, 2009; Shernoff, 2006; Wolitsky, 2005). Most recently, the approval of Truvada — an antiretroviral medication — for Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) in 2012 by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for daily use has changed prevention among MSM who have been consistently drummed over 30 years that condoms were the only means to have safer sex. As PrEP is becoming more widely available, concerns about its potential consequences, particularly disinhibition, or the belief that MSM will decrease the use of condoms and abandon it completely in favor of bareback sex have emerged, transforming barebacking practices and discourses. As Davis [2] asserts: “It could be argued that as PREP [sic] increasingly becomes available to barebackers […], the era of ‘bareback proper’ is now drawing to a close”. This article seeks to attend to some of these issues by analyzing how barebackers reconstitute safety and risk in relation to their sexual practices.

While MSM who self-identify as barebackers are traditionally difficult to access due to the stigma attached to the practice, the advancement of the Internet has allowed researchers to study materials, such as texts and images, created by barebackers in online sexual environments or communities. For example, writing about the influence of the Internet in the proliferation of barebacking discourses and practices, Ashford (2009) considers how members in online communities construct spaces for discussing sexual risks and practices leading to the emergence of barebacking subcultures [3].

In this paper, I follow Ashford’s (2009) lead by focusing on the affordances of a publicly accessible barebacking online community I call “Pigpen” in offering space for barebackers to discuss various topics surrounding condom-less anal sex, including “sex pigging”, associated with “no limits sex” and the celebration of sexual excess. While studying publicly available Web pages, like Pigpen, is claimed to be exempt from ethical guidelines because such online spaces are not considered “human subjects” (Walther, 2002), using a pseudonym for the Web site is done to respect the privacy of the online community and the confidentiality of its members (by using random male names) [4].

Analyzing discussions around sex pigging, I argue that Pigpen opens possibilities for reimagining sex pigging desires, identities, and practices that are intertwined and constituted by HIV prevention discourses and biomedical technologies, including PrEP. While sex pigging is associated with sexual excess (Dean, 2009), I demonstrate that limitless sex is practiced in a variety of ways: ranging from the eroticization of HIV and other STIs, to avoiding transmission by adapting some harm reduction strategies. Pigpen thus facilitates the reconstitution of dangerous and excessive sex as simultaneously pleasurable and subversive. Additionally, Pigpen allows for the negotiation of risk and safety through incorporating harm reduction measures into sexual practices, including negotiated safety-like agreements, serosorting, and the use of pharmaceutical interventions.

In what follows, I explain how the Internet plays an important role in the proliferation of online cultures of barebacking, further allowing for discourses around “bugchasing” and “giftgiving” — terms used to refer to intentional HIV seroconversion — to flourish. I elaborate that while there is a plethora of research that contributes to the understanding of bugchasing and giftgiving as defiant and normative, such studies are lacking in their analyses of other barebacking practices and identities beyond intentional seroconversion.
Thus, I focus on how participants articulate sex pig desires, identities and practices by describing Pigpen’s configurations and affordances in opening space for the celebration and contestation of sexual excess. Finally, I end the discussion by expounding on the role of Pigpen, alongside safer sex discourses and technologies, in creating space for discussing the possibility for “safer” sex pigs to simultaneously affirm and disavow sexual excess.

Online cultures of barebacking, bugchasing, and giftgiving

Without the Web, Mowlabocus (2010) claims, barebacking discourses and practices cannot exist. The Internet allows MSM to create language to talk about condomless anal sex as a choice, further shaping barebackers as individually responsible for the management of HIV risk (Carballo-Diéguez, et al., 2010). Additionally, bareback Web sites portray sexual risk-taking as desirable because it is something that masculine men do (Dowsett, et al., 2008; Ridge, 2004).

Web sites catered towards barebacking are also linked to the creation and sustenance of bugchasing and gift giving: barebacking subcultural practices with the goal of spreading HIV (Gauthier and Forsyth, 1999; Moskowitz and Roloff, 2007a, 2007b). Gathering data from the Internet, popular, and academic presses, Gauthier and Forsyth (1999), among the earliest to account for bugchasing, sought to advance explanations for the motivations of HIV-negative men to seek infection deliberately. According to their analyses, for some bugchasers, the problem has been that fear of infection has always inhibited their behavior; thus, these individuals wish for the “relief” of knowing that they are infected.

Moving away from motivational explanations to more sociological analysis, Graydon (2007) argues that the conceptualization of HIV as a gift serves a social function that strengthens social bonds. Additionally, discourses created by barebackers online are found to be quite normative. In particular, gay men draw on conventional understandings around gender to make sense of their sexual identities and practices. Examining messages posted in an Internet newsgroup, Graydon demonstrates that bugchasers are rendered feminine and needy while giftgivers are masculine and giving. Reynolds (2007) also indicates that the meanings around HIV infected semen are drawn from normative conceptualizations of pregnancy. In his investigation of messages posted on a barebacking Web site, Reynolds confirms that semen is understood by some bugchasers and giftgivers as containing men’s DNA and formative of notions of kinship (see also Dean, 2009).

While some scholars argue that several bugchasers and giftgivers online draw on normative discourses, others note that barebacking Web sites also facilitate the reconstitution of intentional seroconversion and other bareback sexual practices as subversive. Examining the metaphors of giftgiving and bugchasing in a barebacking Web site called “The Bareback Brotherhood”, Hammond and colleagues (2016) note that the construction of the spread of HIV as a means for “breeding men into new sexual subjectivities” is a resignification of HIV outside of its medical understanding as a disease [5]. This reconstitution of HIV reflects some of the ways in which bugchasers and giftgivers reappropriate the virus as having positive connotations rather than negative (Dean, 2009).

Although examining the metaphors used by bugchasers and giftgivers within barebacking Web sites demonstrates the richness of meaning of intentional seroconversion, my aim in this article is to shed light on other barebacking sexual desires and identities beyond intentional seroconversion to further understand various barebacking practices. My goal is to study the articulation of “sex pigging” by barebackers in an online forum I call Pigpen and situate these discourses within the context of HIV prevention discourses and technologies.
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What is Pigpen?

Pigpen is a New York-based Web site launched in 2010 which is claimed by its creators as the number one discussion forum for the barebacking community. Here, I chose the name Pigpen because it is reflective of the types of discussions in the Web site. As its creators maintain, Pigpen is a space where members share their sexual conquests, discuss sexual health issues, and encourage each other to have more uninhibited sex lives. Pushing boundaries of normative sexuality is one of the main themes in the discussions on Pigpen. Participants engage in discussing “pig play”: a range of sexual activities considered “dirty” and “raunchy”. As such, the term Pigpen is apt because it mirrors the general characteristics of the Web site as an enclosed space where “pig sex” can be discussed and explored.

The Web site is produced and maintained by a Web development company that creates and runs a variety of sites for the LGBTQ+ community. In January 2019, Pigpen had over 59,000 registered active and non-active members. Although it is American based, its members are located in vast geographical locations, covering North America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and Oceania. There are no demographic data available to provide more information about Pigpen’s members. Nevertheless, it is likely that discussions within this community reflect the views and experiences of men from the industrialized West, particularly from Anglophone countries (U.S., U.K., Canada, and Australia) and others who have a good understanding of English as it is the only language used on the site.

Pigpen is different from other Web sites, such as barebackrt.com, which is a “hook up” site where MSM find others for sex as the main purpose. By contrast, Pigpen is more forum based. “Forums” (or “discussion boards” or “message boards”) are online discussion sites where members hold conversations in the form of posted messages. Unlike chat rooms, which are based on real-time conversations, the messages in forums are archived. As such, they can be viewed and even responded to days, weeks, months or years after they were posted. Bareback.com is another site that also features forums. However, it is not as extensive as Pigpen and does not attract as many discussions and members. Moreover, Pigpen has significantly more members than bareback.com, which has only more than 16,000 members. This means that Pigpen is more popular and offers richer data for analysis.

So how is Pigpen designed and how is it used by forum participants? In the next section, I detail the configurations and affordances of Pigpen in offering space for barebackers to discuss “no limits sex” and the celebration of sexual excess through pig sex.

Visiting Pigpen: Configuration and affordances

Visiting Pigpen is like entering a mainstream gay porn Web site. Visitors are first warned that they are in a space containing sexually explicit material for gay and other MSM. Members and visitors are prompted with a pop-up message giving option for clicking either “Ok” or “Cancel” to certify that one is legally allowed to view pornography, and that they are not offended by bareback sex or other “extreme” sexual activities.

If visitors agree to these conditions, they may click “Ok” and are immediately brought to the main forums page. Pigpen’s main page exudes masculine characteristics through its black and red theme, and the presence of various advertisements for barebacking pornography, alluding to a sexually charged environment. The porn advertisements suggest that bareback pornography is an integral part of Pigpen and its survival. It also confirms the prominence of pornography in barebacking subcultures. As Mowlabocus, et al. (2013) state, for some MSM, bareback pornography represents a fantasy and an expression of desire.
Members or visitors can immediately browse the threads if they wish to. However, if one prefers to familiarize themselves first with the norms of Pigpen, including the expectations from visitors and members, they may click on “The Guidelines” made available by the designers of the forums by simply clicking on a box at the bottom of the page.

The Guidelines reiterate that the forums are specifically made by gay men for gay men. It states that while there are heterosexual and bisexual men who are visitors and members of the forums, some may not be interested in discussing heterosexual sex or sharing images or videos of women. As such, the Web designers made a dedicated part for visitors to discuss these topics in the sub-forum called “Straight/bi Section”.

Additionally, while there are many reasons for why individuals visit the Web site, the designers of Pigpen created a members-only space called “The Backroom”, where Pigpen participants can openly discuss intentional seroconversion. The Backroom is created to avoid offending some visitors who might be disturbed or disgusted by the topics of intentional HIV seroconversion. Becoming a Pigpen member is free and done by simply creating a username and password with a valid e-mail address to retrieve restricted sections. While some rules described here are seemingly constrictive, Pigpen nonetheless provides space for openly discussing sexual practices related to barebacking, including the use of recreational drugs.

As there are many topics (or “threads”) in each forum category, it is impossible to describe in detail the configuration and affordances of each of these discussions. As such, I limit my description in this paper to the General and The Backroom forums because they attract the most discussions among members of Pigpen: the former having close to 107,000 posts and the latter 70,000 posts. The General Discussion section is the main forum of the Web site, where members are encouraged to talk about anything they wish to discuss: including sex, politics, fashion, and even the weather. By contrast, The Backroom is where registered members can talk specifically about the fetishization of HIV through bugchasing and giftgiving.

Under the General Discussion, the topic that obtained the most responses is a thread where members are asked to describe where and when they took or gave their last “load” (or ejaculation). First posted in 2010 by one of the moderators of the forums, the thread has over 13,000 replies (as of June 2019) from active and non-active members: the former are members who contribute zealously to the discussions, while the latter are individuals who answer only once and simply observe or “lurk” after [6]. In these responses, participants describe how they met their sexual partners, location where sex happened, and the number of times they received or gave loads. The following response from a participant from Vancouver, Canada illustrates this:

Last night, a fuck buddy gave me his load at his place. Then, I was still horny, so I went into Stanley Park and got another load shot in my ass.
(Tony)

Most stories in the thread resemble Tony’s account that tell anecdotes of barebackers receiving or giving more than two loads at a time with either one or several partners.

Created by another moderator in 2018, the second thread that received the most responses is called “Perv/Taboo Chat”. In this thread, members post their usernames for instant messenger apps (such as Wickr, Kik, or Snapchat) to allow others to add them if they are interested in talking about their sexual interests in private. Some participants describe that they like engaging in barebacking and other “sleazy” sex in bathhouses or sex clubs. Most, if not all members also explain that they have “no limits”, a term used by Pigpen participants to allude to having no set restrictions during sexual encounters. For example, a “Horny 21 years old” from the U.K. portrays himself as a “pervert” who is looking for “no limit fuckers: The nastier the better!” “No limits sex” thus means pushing limits of normative sexuality.

The affirmation of sexual excess is also a common theme in The Backroom. The topic that garnered the most responses in this section is the thread called “How were you infected?”, where members are asked to
post their stories on how they acquired HIV. This topic was originally posted in 2012 and has more than 200 responses as of June 2019.

Most participants who posted in this topic identified themselves as bugchasers and have been infected by receiving multiple loads. For example, a participant in his late 50s explained that he was infected “the old-fashioned way” by: “Having lots of sex with scores of men at bathhouses in the early 80s”. Some also depicted being under the influence of recreational drugs: “In general, it went like this: get nude, get high, invite random dude to come over and fuck, insert raw dick into willing ass, top ejaculates, and repeat until pozzed”.

When members say that they have been recently “pozzed” or diagnosed with HIV, they are congratulated and welcomed into the “brotherhood” of HIV-positive men: “For me, bugchasing was a means of ‘bonding’ to the ‘gifter’ and connecting with the ‘AIDS brotherhood’” writes one participant. This concurs with Dean’s (2009) conjecture that HIV seroconversion through bugchasing and giftgiving is creative of kinship and productive of a sense of community. More importantly, members in this topic draw on discourses of personal responsibility when discussing bugchasing and HIV infection. As one respondent explains, “I don’t blame anyone but myself for my seroconversion”, revealing a participant who subscribes to the liberal concepts of individual responsibility, autonomy, and agency in relation to his sexual practices (Adam, 2005).

Another popular topic under The Backroom is called “Anyone recently taken a poz load?”, where members are asked to describe their recent bareback sexual encounters with HIV-positive men. This thread is quite similar to the one expressed above, where participants post stories of the last load they took or gave — only difference here is that the load is “charged” (a colloquial term used by barebackers to describe semen infected with HIV and/or other STIs).

For example, a self-identified bugchaser from California says that he has taken “about 12 charged undetectable loads with a couple”. In this thread, having no limits by taking as many charged or poz loads as possible is also common. As one participant explicates: “I was up in Dallas 7 weeks ago and took a bunch of poz loads. Got three for sure at Club Dallas [a gay sauna]”.

In this brief analysis, it is evident that the Web site opens space for barebackers to discuss a variety of topics around barebacking, especially the celebration of sexual excess. In what follows, I analyze the ways in which participants consider the avowal of sexual excess through the identity of sex pig and examine what this identity entails for some barebackers in the online forums. Data for this study were collected from the General Discussions and The Backroom sections of the forums between September 2013 and February 2014, resulting in 200 forum discussions. After downloading, the data were transferred to Nvivo (version 10) to manage and code all discussion threads. A thematic approach described by Braun and Clarke (2006) was adapted to identify major themes in the discussions. Data were subjected to multiple readings to identify and code the messages, which were then grouped into potential themes. This approach led to the focused codes of semen exchange, sexual excess, bugchasers, giftgivers, and sex pigs. These codes were then collated into potential themes and refined into two key patterns relating to the goals of the current research: the affirmation of sexual excess and safer sex pigs. Each of these themes highlight complexities that serve to create, reinforce, and destabilise the notion of sexual excess in relation to HIV prevention. Nominated here are key quotes from a range of discussions from Pigpen.

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**Sex pigs and the affirmation of sexual excess**

According to Dean (2009), the term “pig” is a recent addition in gay men’s vocabulary to mean a man who has no sexual limits. For Dean, pig identity challenges sexual norms because: “Being a pig entails committing oneself to sexual excess, [...] pushing beyond boundaries of propriety and corporeal integrity”
Similarly, Reynolds (2007) notes that the term is widely used by barebackers to describe being sexually “deviant”, particularly those who consider themselves bugchasers and giftgivers. Though Dean and Reynolds offer ways of conceptualizing “pig”, what it entails to barebackers remains lacking. In this section, I attempt to interrogate the different categories of sex pig identities that emerge from the discussions of barebackers in Pigpen forums. I show that forum participants create a variety of sex pig desires and identities that sometimes intersect with bugchasing, ranging from sex pigs who are also bugchasers to STI bugchasers. I explain that the reshaping of STIs and HIV-positive semen as desirable by some sex pigs allows for the reconstitution of the association of pigs with dirt and excess as productive of pleasure and feelings of freedom.

My analysis of the threads on Pigpen reveals that one of the characteristics of being a sex pig involves engaging in limitless sex and the eroticization of HIV and other STIs. For example, responding to the thread “Bottoms: Do only poz loads turn you on?” found in The Backroom, a participant demonstrates that being a sex pig entails boundless sex by “taking all cocks and all loads” without reservation or discrimination against HIV serostatus:

I am a total sex pig and take all cocks and all loads including poz loads. I am no limits and love being fucked and loaded. If a guy fucking me says he is poz, I beg for it. (Jack)

Rather than fearing and avoiding HIV infected men and their semen, Jack appears to consider them to be particularly desirable. Indeed, he begs to receive “poz loads”, suggesting a sex pig who may also be a bugchaser, reconstituting HIV as desirable rather than avoiding it. Thus, Pigpen enables some sex pigs to give new meanings to semen infected with HIV by eroticizing them and even regarding infections as symbols for their commitment to sexual excess.

Yet, some sex pigs push limitless sex further by going beyond the category of bugchaser by also desiring other STIs in addition to HIV, suggesting that some sex pigs are also STI chasers. In a thread from The Backroom asking participants if they also desire STIs (“Any STD chasers out there?”), another barebacker portrays infections as marks of survival:

Been a barebacker all my life ... I have a major pig fetish with a need to breed raw. Consequently, over the years I’ve had most STDs — gonorrhoea, syphilis, chlamydia, herpes, HIV — which I regard as badges of honour from my times in the pigsty. (Dom)

The text suggests an STI bugchaser sex pig who conceptualises limitless sex as engaging in HIV infection and the exchange of STIs. Rather than expressing remorse for the number of STIs that he had gotten over the years, he considers STIs as “badges of honour”, echoing Tim Dean’s (2009) conjecture that “[b]eing HIV positive is like having a war wound or a battle scar”. According to Dean, the acquisition of STIs through pig sex becomes marks of endurance, representing one’s masculinity “by surviving a set of physical ordeals”, including penetrations and infections [8]. Thus, taking greater sexual risks is not rendered dangerous but pleasurable because barebacking is seen as being fearless and it is what men do.

By identifying in the position of sex pigs, some barebackers also reshape the close attachment of pig with excess and revulsion. For example, Dom uses the figure of the pig to refer to his sexually excessive adventures as having been spent in the “pigsty”. Here, the construction of sexual excess through the identity of sex pig becomes a means for challenging safer sex norms. Some evidence of this is also apparent in other threads. For example, responding to the thread “Thoughts and Doubts about Bugchasing”, the following participant reveals:

Well, for me the desire to be a sex pig cock slut — the desire to have my hole ... turned into a man cunt, the freedom to take any and all loads — trumps all. Besides, it’s fucking queer, it’s transgressive. (Darren)
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While the history of HIV/AIDS shape the exchange of semen as dangerous because it is seen as a harbinger of disease and death, Darren reverses this discourse by actively desiring semen exchange, which he also regards as productive of feelings of rebellion and even providing a sense of freedom. Though Darren does not provide any further details as to why pig sex is productive of freedom, it is arguable that these feelings are intertwined with and enabled by safer sex discourses. As Crossley (2002) notes, because dominant health discourses shape safer sex practices as ideal and morally superior, they inadvertently create the conditions that encourage gay and other MSM to take sexual risks. Thus, engaging in barebacking takes a certain “aura of risk” and provides psychological feelings of freedom precisely because it is an affirmation of the taboo status of barebacking [9].

McNamara (2013) maintains that gay and other MSM who observe safer sex measures are considered respectable because their sexuality is portrayed as mature, responsible, and healthy. The respectable gay subject can be associated with what Lisa Duggan (2002) terms as the “new homonormativity”, a sexual politics based on upholding and sustaining heteronormative conventions, such as monogamy, instead of challenging them.

Interestingly, some participants in the discussion forums constitute the affirmation of sexual excess through sex pig as opposing homonormativity. As another participant expounds, his dilemma about committing to a life of sexual excess by becoming a sex pig arises from the pressures of complying to “homonormative life”:

> I know I am very much a pig, but live with the conflict of letting completely go or staying negative ... I am still negative and being an avid barebacker, it is not a matter of if I am going to get pozzed, but when ... I remain conflicted with just being the natural pig that I am and living the socially accepted homonormative life. (Leo)

The quote, taken from a thread in The Backroom called “Conversion Freedom”, reveals tension between the affirmation of sexual excess, on the one hand, and carefully measured and calculated safer sex, on the other. Here, becoming sex pig is understood as “letting completely go”, which can mean engaging in limitless barebacking that may lead to an undesirable outcome: becoming HIV-positive. This is opposed to staying HIV-negative, considered to be desirable and socially respectable because it is normative.

But what is so disgusting about pig sex that seems to induce feelings of social rejection? One respondent’s message to other participants entitled “You guys give the gay community a bad name” illuminates on the abject position of sex pigs:

> Speaking as a gay man who loves anal sex far more than most, you’re giving gay men a very bad image. Playing the stereotype of nameless, faceless, sex pig is, quite frankly, disgusting. And since you have anonymous sex, you more than likely are committed to a life of stds. Yes, I adore bottoming for my man. MAN, as in singular. Sex between us is far more intimate, more fulfilling, more comforting, and more rewarding ... I do feel sorry for you that you feel the need to fill your life with disgusting, dangerous behavior. (Erik)

For Erik, sex pigs who engage in anonymous, nameless, and faceless sex are “disgusting”, positioning them as immature, irresponsible and, unhealthy; therefore, sex pigs are rendered shameful. The abject position of sex pigs is construed as unsafe and “dangerous”, which Erik understands as being committed to a life of untamed and limitless sex that increases contact with HIV and other STIs.

Erik explains that a life committed to sexual excess is in direct opposition to monogamy: a calculated, predictable, and accountable sexual relation shaped to be more desirable than engaging in limitless sex.
While he confesses his love for anal sex, practicing it within the confines of morally sanctioned sexual relation (i.e., monogamy) elevates his desire and pleasure into a respectable position. By contrast, sex pigs who engage in excessive anonymous, nameless, and faceless bareback sex are relegated to the position of lowliness or abjection.

According to Julia Kristeva’s (1982) influential model of abjection, because disgust and shame moves us closer to the state of disgrace, we become uncomfortably associated with animals. As such, humans have endeavoured to demarcate the divide by distancing themselves from what animals represent. Michael Warner (2000) also suggests that sex is a way for one’s consciousness to merge with “the lower orders of animal desire” [10]. He believes that due to the association of sexual pleasure with animals, sex has become a source of shame. However, instead of salvaging their sexuality from the position of the abject into respectability, sex pigs affirm the indignity of sex precisely by celebrating sexual excess. By choosing to engage in shameful sex, sex pigs refuse to redeem excessive barebacking from the undignified position of animals. Quite the contrary, sex pigs avow the animality of sex and embrace shame attached to barebacking [11].

It is possible to suggest that discourses around the pig itself, drawn from Judeo-Christian traditions, are used by some sex pigs to reconfigure their desire for limitless and “dirty” sex as pleasurable and subversive. As a forbidden animal in the Bible, Elizabeth Lawrence (1993) writes that the pig “is cursed and reviled by both God and man, the object of scorn and taboo” [12]. The pigs’ low status, for Lawrence, is accentuated by its ability to live in dirt and garbage. As such, hogs are usually described as disgraceful: “huge, corpulent, dirty, foul-smelling, clumsy […], lustful, selfish, and slothful” [13]. It can be argued that the pig’s taboo status as a vilified animal due to its association with excess and filth is used by some barebackers to rearticulate their desires and practices as an affirmation of the abjection of the pig. While pigs are rendered disgusting, sex pigs avow this association precisely by indulging in all the dirtiness and excesses of barebacking.

To summarize, Pigpen forums enable barebackers to create a variety of sex pig identities that sometimes intersect with bugchasing to convey what “no limits sex” means. The analyses show that becoming a sex pig entails the eroticization of endless exchange of semen, particularly those infected with HIV and other STIs. The discussions also reveal that instead of elevating their sexual desires and practices to a respectable position, some sex pigs affirm the abject status of excessive bareback sex by reconstituting STIs as desirable and infections as productive of feelings of freedom.

Yet, while Pigpen opens possibilities for reimagining dangerous and excessive sex, it also enables the capacity for other participants to consider the possibility of “safer sex pigs”, which I discuss next.

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Safer sex pigs?

Tim Dean (2009) notes that: “There is really no such thing as a vanilla pig or a safe-sex pig”, because, as the discussions above demonstrate, sex pigs have no limits, take greater sexual risks, and eroticize semen infected with HIV and other STIs [14]. In this section, however, I consider the possibility of “safer sex pigs” as alluded to by some Pigpen participants in their discussions. My focus here is to analyze how some Pigpen participants discuss and understand the possibility for some sex pigs to avoid infection while committing to sexual excess. I suggest that sex pigging does not always entail being open to the acquisition of HIV and other STIs by incorporating some risk reduction strategies, including the use of PrEP and other pharmaceutical drugs.

As an example, in a thread posted in the General Discussions section entitled “New to the pig scene”, a neophyte forum participant sought some advice from more seasoned barebackers from Pigpen regarding the possibility of avoiding HIV infection while practicing no limits sex. He writes:
Want to start by mentioning I’m 24, military, neg and would like to stay that way. I am new to the whole pig scene. I have always been turned on by it and want to be used and abused as a bottom … I was wondering if there is any advice … to someone who is just getting their toes in the water with the whole pig scene but still wanting to stay clean and DDF [drug and disease free]. (Austin)

Although some sex pigs eroticize the exchange of semen infected with STIs and even regard infections as marks of endurance, Austin appears to reject these discourses by expressing his desire to remain HIV-negative. That is, while Austin acknowledges his strong desire for limitless sex, his version of pig sex is somewhat bounded for he is unwilling to accept the risks of HIV infection. This suggests that not all who consider themselves sex pigs affirm sexual excess and welcome HIV risks. Instead, some sex pigs appear to heed the public health imperative to avoid HIV infection, alluding to a form of “safer” sex pig.

In response to Austin’s post, Oliver, an active forum participant, notes that the sexual practices of sex pigs as characterized in the forums are highly risky and routes for the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs):

Being the kind of pig you read about on these forums and remaining STD-free are pretty much mutually exclusive.

In other words, Oliver reiterates the safer sex warning that engaging in highly risky sex, such as barebacking with multiple men and exchanging semen, inevitably exposes one to sexually transmitted infections. He advices Austin that considering staying “disease free” as a sex pig is not possible because infections and limitless sex are inextricable. Another participant agrees:

At a minimum, STDs are an occupational hazard for pig sluts like us. You know you’ll get one sooner or later. So you either need to be open and accepting of them, or sexualize giving/getting them just like people do for HIV [i.e., bugchasers and giftgivers]. For me, I’ve chosen to sexualize them and fucking love it. (Matt)

Matt’s response reveals a sex pig who simply accepts the inevitability of STIs given his sexual choices, including receiving semen anally without much care for the HIV or STI status of his partners. Matt somewhat distinguishes himself as someone who has chosen to sexualize STIs but not HIV, suggesting subtle differences among sex pigs. Notably, Matt makes an important distinction between eroticization of STIs and simply accepting them as “occupational hazard”, showing that STIs can either be sexualized or accepted but not eroticized. Here, Matt alludes to the heterogeneity between sex pigs: it may be said that by choosing to desire STIs, Matt is a sex pig who is also a STI bugchaser but not an HIV bugchaser. By contrast, Austin above may be categorized as a safer sex pig because he wants to avoid STIs and HIV.

Is it really possible, as Austin enquired, to be a safer sex pig and avoid the transmission of HIV and other STIs? In a later response to Austin’s post, Oliver appears to consider this possibility. To avoid transmission of STIs while engaging in sexual excess, Oliver indicates that one should practice monogamy and, at the same time, adapt some safer sex measures:

It is possible to bareback as a bottom and remain HIV-negative. But basically, you have to find yourself a really trustworthy top. Essentially, you’re looking at a monogamous relationship … And a joint HIV/STD test would have to be part of the process before you start barebacking ...

(Oliver)

Here, Oliver infers that becoming a sex pig and preventing HIV transmission may be achievable if one is to
follow some basic premises of negotiated safety: that it is safe to dispense with condoms if partners are in a regular relationship, are aware of each other’s serostatus, and are both HIV-negative, and that sex outside of the relationship is safe (Kippax, et al., 1993). Therefore, Oliver implies that “safer” sex pigging might be possible. Yet, he insists that following these preventive actions is limited because if barebackers like Austin wish to engage in sex pigging, remaining free of HIV and other STIs is not feasible.

Oliver, however, proposes that Austin can take PrEP to minimize the danger of HIV transmission while engaging in pig sex: “you can go on PrEP, which will lower the risk of HIV infection”. Other forum participants endorse the use of PrEP as a risk reduction strategy for those who wish to avoid HIV infection: “Starting PrEP would be great because you don’t need to be a member of the poz club to be a piggy bottom”. For sex pigs who are not bugchasers, PrEP facilitates a “safer” sex pigging, which another participant highlights:

I think PrEP is great [...]. I fully support those who choose PrEP a way to be as piggy as they want and stay neg if that’s what they prefer. (Tom)

For Tom, PrEP enables some barebackers to act out their sex pig desires but also prevent HIV transmission. Thus, PrEP allows for the negotiation of safety and risks when engaging in sex pigging, which the following participant affirms:

With PrEP, I feel like I can fully let myself be the kind of pig I realized I was years ago upon discovering this website. I know there’s still some risk, but in the last two weeks, I’ve been fucked probably 50 times by 14 different men. (Joe)

Responding to a thread in The Backroom, Joe supports the notion that Pigpen opens possibilities for reimagining sex pig desires, identities, and practices. Although the effectiveness of PrEP in preventing HIV transmission facilitates pushing sexual limits, Joe also acknowledges that the potential for STI exposure is always present. As Oliver writes, while PrEP may protect safer sex pigs from HIV, PrEP still “leaves the potential for other STIs like syphilis, gonorrhea, herpes, etc.” Alternatively, Oliver proposes vaccination as a means to avoid transmission of STIs:

At a minimum, I’d suggest getting the HPV [human papillomavirus] vaccination now. I’d also suggest stating clearly with potential sexual partners that you are looking for HIV-negative and no drug use. And then, take it slow.

Despite doubts from some participants (such as Matt) regarding the possibility of avoiding HIV and other STIs while engaging in piggy sex, the discussions above reveal that some men in Pigpen consider the possibility for the emergence of “safer” sex pigs. While some sex pigs appear to resist safer sex discourses by eroticizing limitless exchange of semen infected with HIV and other STIs, others seem to want to avoid infections by imposing some restrictions on their sexual practices in the form of harm reduction, including negotiated safety-like arrangements, serosorting, and through the use of pharmaceutical technologies (such as PrEP and HPV vaccination). Thus, Pigpen also enables some sex pigs to negotiate notions of risks and safety by incorporating some HIV prevention measures into their sexual practices.

Conclusion

The development of the Internet in the 1990s and advances in biomedical technologies in the management of HIV are recognized as driving forces in the proliferation of barebacking discourses and practices. The
Web has opened possibilities for creating barebacking online communities, which has led to the creation of bugchasing and giftgiving: barebacking practices with the goal of spreading HIV. Due to the controversial nature of these practices, various research has been conducted to analyze the metaphors used by bugchasers and giftgivers in articulating their desires.

Although examining the metaphors used by bugchasers and giftgivers within online communities is interesting and important in situating barebacking within the context of normative discourses, including HIV prevention, this paper sought to analyze the emergence of “sex pig” identities found in a bareback discussion forum I called Pigpen. I argued that Pigpen opens possibilities for reimagining dangerous and excessive sex as pleasurable and transgressive while also allowing for the negotiation of risk and safety by incorporating harm reduction measures into their sex pig practices.

I explained that while the Web site creates space for barebackers to discuss the celebration and contestation of sexual excess by identifying as sex pigs, safer sex discourses also play an important role in the construction of these identities. Indeed, while some participants in Pigpen render the evasion of safer sex measures as pleasurable and productive of feelings of freedom, others consider safer sex measures as normative and respectable. HIV prevention discourses are therefore implicated in the organization of barebacking discourses and practices in Pigpen and other barebacking online spaces.

My argument here echoes the ways in which Avila (2015), drawing on Foucault (1990), notes that HIV prevention campaigns are involved in the production of a social context that allows for barebacking to emerge. The celebration of sexual excess through sex pig identities may thus constitute what Foucault calls a “response to configurations of power” [15]. In this context, barebacking practices may be considered responses to power enacted through HIV prevention that encourages the promotion of health and management of risk (Tomso, 2008).

In signifying dangerous and excessive sex as pleasurable and productive of feelings of freedom, identifying as sex pigs may therefore be considered irresponsible and irrational because such practices circumvent the imperative to remain healthy by exposing oneself to STIs. Yet, sex pigging may not neatly fall into the category of irresponsibility and irrationality because some sex pigs consider the possibility of being ‘safe’ by incorporating harm reduction strategies. Sex pigging desires, identities, and practices are therefore more complex than previously thought.

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Notes

1. Mowlabocus, 2010, p. 148. To explain why some MSM engage in barebacking, it was first necessary to define what barebacking referred to so that researchers may name the factors that seemingly persuaded gay men to forego the use of condoms. In general, researchers agreed that barebacking was poorly defined (Carballo-Diéguez, et al., 2010; Halkitis, et al., 2005). The commonly accepted definition among researchers contained one element: condomless or unprotected sex regardless of serostatus. Beyond this definition, there was disagreement about intentionality, acceptance of risk, attitudes about HIV, and responsibility. To explore barebacking as a coherent practice, some researchers examined the conceptualisation of barebacking by MSM. For instance, Carballo-Diéguez, et al., (2010) suggested that a broad agreement existed among MSM that barebacking referred to anal intercourse without condoms. However, there was a lack of consensus beyond this and there was no single definition embraced by all men. As such, the Carballo-Diéguez and colleagues differentiated between intentional and unintentional condom-less sex, and also those practices that carried potential risks and those that did not.

2. Davis, 2015, p. 123.

3. Ashford’s analyses reveal that BarebackJack.com regards HIV as something that is negotiable, while Bareback.com has a more “outsider status”, where bareback is celebrated and a space is created for fantasising “HIV as either a fictional virus, or something akin to the common cold” (Ashford, 2009, p. 173). Ashford maintains that both Web sites challenge normative safer sex practices by allowing space for legitimate responses to “‘mainstream’ gay culture”, where barebacking can be discussed openly (Ashford, 2009, pp. 172–173).

4. In compliance with the research protocol approved by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board-A Project #111031.


6. “Lurking” is usually defined as simply observing without participating or contributing within the online community.


11. The works of Michael Warner (2000) and David Halperin (2007) are informative here in conceptualizing barebacking as shameful. Warner makes the link between shame and risk-taking when he writes that shame and stigma “are often among the most intractable dimensions of risk” (Warner, 2000, p. 213). For Warner, the repression of shame is sometimes expressed through risk-taking (barebacking in particular) because HIV prevention has “encouraged [gay men] to pretend that we were never abject, or that our only desire was to be proper and good” (Warner, 2000, p. 213). Extending these views, Halperin (2007) suggests that precisely because homosexuality is considered “abnormal and perverted”, it has become an enduring source of deep shame. He further continues that the abjection of homosexuality (and to an extent, unsafe sex) are inextricably linked to sexual risk-taking. Yet, HIV/AIDS prevention failed to “confront the mysterious depths [...] where the impulse to have risky sex originates” (Halperin, 2007, p. 63). Halperin argues that some gay men engage in risky sex as an affirmation of abjection: “in being the lowest of the low, in being bad, in being outlaws, in betraying both our own values and those of the people around us” (Halperin, 2007, p. 65).
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13. Ibid.


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