

Gay men's sexual health promotion in virtual space: Exploring stakeholders' attitudes and approaches to outreach on mobile apps in Nova Scotia

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Introduction

Context in Canada

- Men who have sex with men ("MSM") have experienced discrimination due to sexuality and HIV stigma (Smit et al., 2012).
- MSM continue to account for roughly half of new HIV infections in Canada (Lachowsky et al., 2016).
- Social networking applications ("SNAs") have predominantly been where MSM meet for sexual encounters.
- Grindr is the most common app used, which is a GPS-enabled SNA which was released in 2009 (Gudelunas, 2012).

Context in Nova Scotia

- There is a culture of silence in the gay community surrounding HIV/AIDS discourses in NS (Lewis, 2015).
- As of 2011, Public Health Division of the NSHA (Central Zone) reported an over 3000% increase in syphilis since 2002 (D'Angelo-Scott, 2014).
- The perspectives of professional stakeholders in HIV/AIDS/STI prevention must be understood to enhance prevention efforts.

"Grinding Against HIV"

- Was a study conducted in 2016
- 16 Grindr users and 4 sexual health professionals were interviewed to learn more about app use and prevention
- This study is a secondary analysis of the stakeholder's interviews

Research Questions

- What challenges do sexual health service providers face with the advent of SNA use among MSM in the Halifax region?
- What opportunities do virtual spaces have for health promotion?

Methods

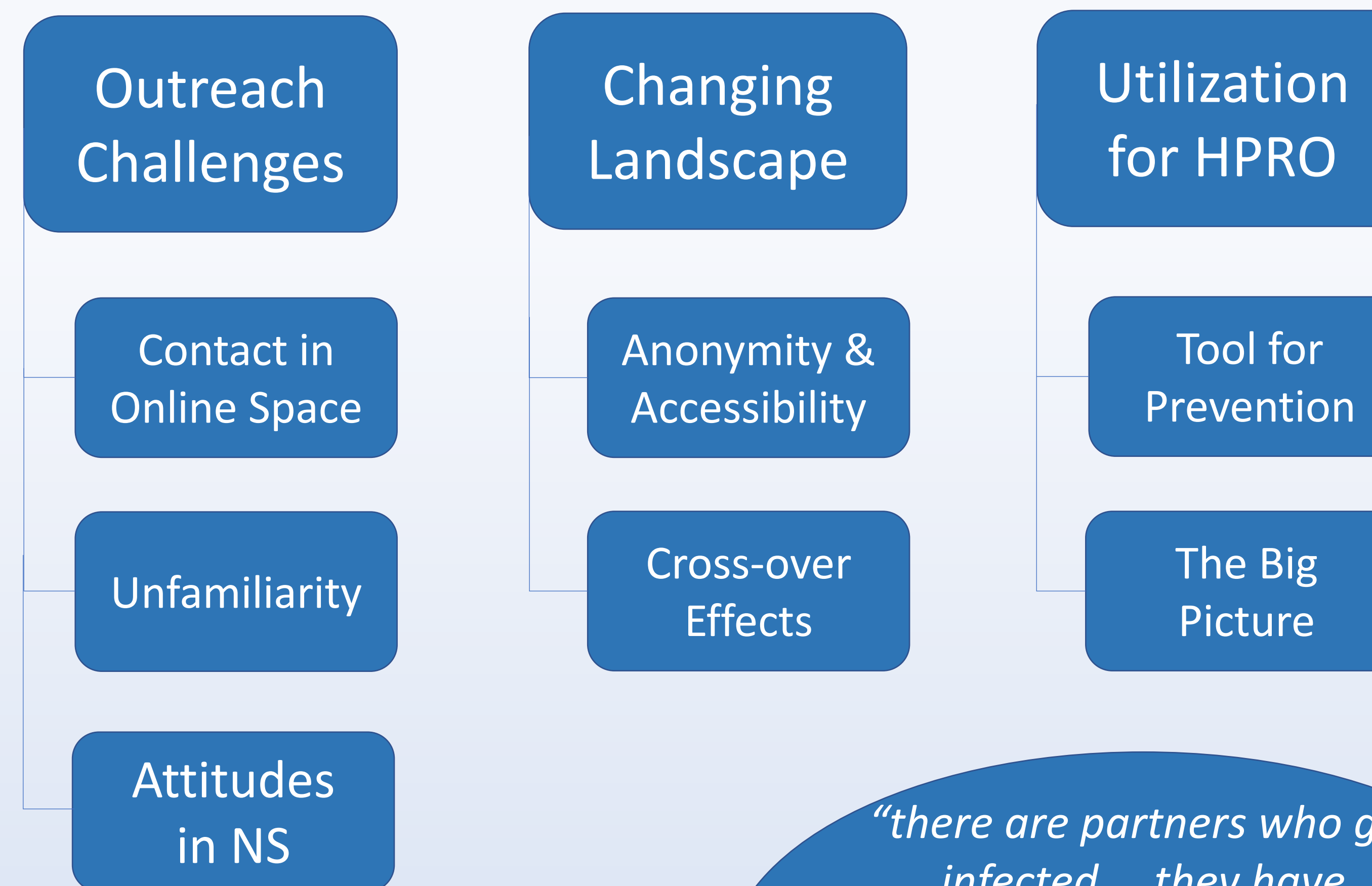
Methodology

- Four sexual health professionals were interviewed as part of the larger study. Secondary thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was employed to examine this data for this research project.
- In "Grinding Against HIV", participants were selected based on first-hand experience in STI/HIV prevention efforts.

References

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Findings



Outreach Challenges

Contact in Online Space

- Traditional outreach conducted by stakeholders has been phone numbers and contact on some partner-seeking websites

Unfamiliarity

- Stakeholders are unsure how the app itself operates

Attitudes in NS

- NS is not as accepting as more urban areas in Canada
- Stigma keeps people in the closet

Changing Landscape

Anonymity & Accessibility

- Gay community is shifting into discreet and accessible online partner-finding communities

Cross-over Effects

- Grindr allows for more discreet exploration of male sexuality
- Increasing rates of syphilis in the female population

Utilization for HPRO

Tool for Prevention

- Stakeholders feel using online space in prevention is an opportunity for health promotion

The Big Picture

- Interest in upper, systems-level prevention

"there are partners who get infected ... they have absolutely no contact with that person...no way of passing on the message that they've been positive." (P2)

"...he said he's just ordering [an encounter]... I don't know how the Grindr works...totally not up to speed on that at all." (P1)

"...20, 25 years ago to do sexual health outreach that meant going to physical spaces, that meant going to bars, bath houses, cruising areas ... The internet has replaced all of that for the most part and now we have what I refer to as take-out sex..." (P3)

"...if we don't explore how they're being used now so we can understand what the potential uses are in terms of health promotion...that's a definite lost opportunity." (P3)

Discussion

- Stakeholders recognized the importance and their obligation as health professionals to incorporate media such as apps in their prevention strategies, but lack of experience prevented them from doing so.
- Health professionals noted the changes they've experienced throughout their careers, such as increasing syphilis rates and more diversity in sexualities.
- Some health professionals did not see these new technologies as creating new problems within sexual health, but saw it as something that changed people's behaviors.
- This "changing landscape" of technology was something they felt like they were not keeping up with as service providers.
- Professionals felt as though they had support from their supervisors, but time and resources were challenges. They viewed the apps as untapped resources here in Halifax that could be used for health promotion.

Implications

- Health professionals desire to use SNAs as a tool for their work. They believe that resources like Grindr can be used to help men access resources and provide education on STI prevention.
- These online spaces can provide alternative routes to deliver information.
- Grindr can be an appropriate space for such messaging as it is an integral part of the lives of many MSM, and it is always a sexual space.
- Communicating with leaders in the MSM community can help professionals learn what strategies will work within Grindr and other spaces.
- Barriers for health professionals expressed were time and resources. Advocating for training and time will be needed to move forward.
- Technologies are constantly changing and strategies for promoting sexual health must change with them.

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