



AIDS PREVENTION IN A VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT FOR HOMOSEXUALMEN

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to analyze aspects related to AIDS prevention in virtual homosexual male environments that focus on the exposition of the body. It was taken as a reference the idea that cyber-body is in cybersexuality, where the body of the other, virtualized, becomes only a place of visit, like a page on the Internet and sex between them is ideal. The methodological design used was of a qualitative nature, focusing both the analysis of the senses underlying ideas and their contextualization in the light of broader cultural meanings. Among the results we found, the following stand out: the desired masculine body formatted by defined muscles and absence of hairs; Perceived advantages of the internet in the search of the sexual partner and the use or not of the condom as a measure of protection against AIDS based on evaluations of the partner. It is concluded that it is important to make the virtual environment a space for problematization of ideas and experiences in favor of the realization of pleasure between people.

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INTRODUCTION

The issues of cyberculture are increasingly present both within the scope of the academy and in our social everyday life in general. Whether for recent social and political issues, or because of its relation to public health, the virtual environment is gaining more space in contemporary discussions. Today we have an area of action and intervention of the most varied sciences. We no longer debate about the virtual space without real, and now much less of real without virtual, since the boundaries between these fields have become less demarcated. In this sense, we understand the body in its transposition from the real to the virtual, in the form of a representative image. As Le Breton (LeBreton, 1999), points, following the virtual world, the cybercrime meets the cybersexuality, which becomes reference; the body of the other, virtualized, becomes only a place that can be visited, or in this case access. Although the virtual world is understood as part of the real (Carvalho, 1999), this cyberspace is not materialized, but dynamic where participants can "move" and create a new life, exploring this world of information (Campbell, 2000).

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It is not something tangible, but a non-physical space where its members have the possibility to move and create themselves exploring the opportunities offered by this new "world". The virtual, creates a world of simulation where sometimes the representation becomes more real than the world itself. For decades researchers have been focusing on online research methodologies, trying to recreate an environment that is closer to the real one to carry out their researches (Campbell, 2000; Lemos, 2003 & 2000; Bowers, 1992; Kiesler, 1994; Honorato, 199b; Rosso, 2005; Spears, 1992; Parks, 2002 and Fernebeck, 2004). Online research is not only real research that uses the network as a means of propagation, but rather research that understands this new sociabilizing universe, with its own rules and norms, and which must be followed to avoid biases (Campbell, 2004; Lemos, 2003 & 2000; Bowers, 1992; Kiesler, 1994; Honorato, 1999b; Rosso, 2005; Spears, 1992; Parks, 2002 and Fernebeck, 2004). The rules range from norms of online etiquette to forms of dissemination of instruments, use of new technologies, adaptations of terms of consent and format of investigations. Among the studies that refer to the discussion on the search for sex on the Internet, there is the idea that this increases the risk of contamination by sexually transmitted diseases (Bull, 2001). However, it is verified that the need for more studies in relation to the theme (Bowen, 2004). Online research not only makes it possible to broaden

the public health research area, but it can also raise new questions for the discussion of this area. In this sense, virtual space can become a powerful field of research for objects of health study of specific social segments and populations in general, including AIDS prevention actions. From this perspective, the main objective of this study was to analyze aspects related to AIDS prevention in virtual homosexual male environments that focus on the exposition of the body. As specific objectives, we aimed to: (a) identify patterns of men's bodies as the initial condition of male homosexual interaction in cyberspace; (c) to identify meanings attributed to male bodies conveyed in virtual spaces by young men and (c) to analyze possibilities and limits of prevention against AIDS in virtual homosexual male environments.

The research was qualitative in nature, aiming at knowing and interpreting a reality^{15,16} and focusing on the phenomena and their interactional consequences. The theoretical-analytical reference was the hermeneutic-dialectical perspective, advancing both in the understanding of the meanings underlying the testimonies, and in the problematization of the results found through this understanding (Gomes, 2007). The research was approved by the Committee of Ethics in Research of the National Institute of the Health of the Woman, the Child and the Adolescent Fernandes Figueira of the Foundation Oswaldo Cruz, Brazil. The field of study was the website <http://www.disponivel.com.br> (www.disponivel.com), which was the first Brazilian site for virtual encounter of homosexuals, with static profiles, regionalized, providing contacts for real encounters. It has the largest number of Brazilian users (not disclosed), hosted by the largest Internet provider in Brazil (Universo Online - UOL) and with a strong marketing appeal in the "Gay Pride Parades" organized by the country. This site was accessed and it was identified male users who declared themselves in the age group between 18 and 24 years old, had Portuguese as their first language and used body image as the main picture. In relation to these users, two research strategies were used. The first one was to collect the information posted in the profiles available to the public (step 1), while the second was to send an invitation to these users (step 2) via the internal message of the site explaining the nature of the study and informing a external link to the informed consent term hosted in another site.

In terms of stage 1, information was collected on profiles declared by users on the site about physical characteristics, sexual orientation, sexual preferences, safe sex, drug and alcohol use, among others. In total, 339 user profiles were collected that met the inclusion criteria. Of these users, who were invited to participate in the research, 55 filled out an online questionnaire, 45 of which had their answers taken. The other questionnaires were discarded because they were used for instrument testing. Users who have adhered to the invitation were asked to answer the open questions posted on a form on a website, with the following questions: (1) What characteristics do you think a male body should have? (2) When you choose, through the Internet, a partner to live a pleasure experience, what do you take into account? (3) What are the advantages and disadvantages of using the Internet as a means of finding partners for sexual pleasure? (4) What do you mean by "safe sex"? (5) One of the user profile fields relates to safe sex. Many users omit this information. Does not this information generate reactions on you? (6) When choosing the partner to meet and have sex in the real world, do you take some care to prevent Hiv/AIDS? Which one or which ones?

(7) The affirmation that one do not practice safe sex influence your choice of partner? (8) What would you recommend for a young man who seeks a sexual partner through the Internet? Regarding the profile information (Step 1), due to the nature of the research, there was no concern about using inferential statistical measures. Thus, the information was worked through simple and percentage frequencies in order to provide context to better locate the qualitative data. As for the answers collected via electronic questionnaire (Step 2), the information was worked through qualitative analysis of the data, using the method of interpretation of the senses¹⁷ through the search of an internal logic of the answers, always situating in a context of its production. The method consists of identifying the senses, grouping them and performing interpretive syntheses, at the same time interpreting and establishing relations with cultural issues attributed to these senses.

RESULTS

Characterization of User Profiles

Regarding the physical characteristics of the 339 user profiles analyzed (Step 1), we observed the following predominance: age of 18 years, weight in the range of 70 to 79 kilos, height in the range of 170 to 179 centimeters and white skin (Table 1).

Table 1. Physical Characteristics

Characteristics	Gap	N	%
Age	18 – 20	178	52
	21 – 24	171	48
Weight (Kg)	40 – 59	15	5
	60 – 79	168	48
Height (cm)	80 – 109	156	47
	140 – 159	29	9
	160 – 179	220	65
SkinColour	180 – 199	90	26
	White	68	20
	Brown	89	26
	Black	182	54

The Brazilian legal age is 18 years, so, those who are minors will tend to inform the minimum age to access the site. There is no need for proof, just a statement to agree to the terms of membership to the website, as is standardized in the virtual world. Although not included in this information, the marital status should be interesting to verify in future research. Sowell and Phillips²⁰ (2010) found 28.5% of US site users who were married and used this way to find partners. Weight and height demonstrate a great concentration of the most standardized measures of the Brazilian. According to IBGE²¹ the average of the Brazilian over 18 years is 1.74m.

It is important to emphasize that one of the inclusion criteria is the presentation of the body as the initial image and, by the current aesthetic standards, this should be muscular. In the posted profiles it is emphasized that in general users declare that they do not use tobacco, drink and drugs (Table 2). However, we can not disregard the fact that there is an important percentage of users that make use of these "socially". Regarding the declaration of penis size, 63% of users opted for the "Medium" response, followed by those who declared "Large" (9%), Small (7%) and "No answer" (21%). Perhaps because the size of the penis is seen as an instrument of self-promotion justifies the fact that considerable part of the users choose not to declare the size of their genital organ.

Table 2. Use of tobacco, drink and drugs

Aspect	Answer	N	%
Smoking	Yes	40	11
	No	189	56
	Socially	83	25
	No answer	27	8
Drinking	Always	38	11
	No	85	25
	Socially	182	54
	No answer	34	10
Drugs	Always	17	5
	Never	178	53
	Socially	76	22
	No answer	68	20

In what refers to sexual orientation, we observed the following percentages: "straight": 2%, "homo" 56%, "bi": 13% and "No answer": 13%. As expected, because it is a homoerotic site, the self-denominations "homo" and "bi" predominate. The fact that more than a tenth of users choose to dial "No answer (NA)" can be interpreted as a non-acceptance of fixed classifications or a refusal of labeling attributed to the sex of the people who are the object of the desire. In relation to body hair, the response "Hair" is predominant, with 60%, followed by "Normal" (15%), "Hairy" (13%) and "NA" (3%). Today, hair removal clinics exclusive for men are growing in Brazil, and hair removal is no longer targeted at athletes or the gay public. Regarding Safe Sex, 82.01% affirm that "Always", "Sometimes (6.19%)," N A"(11.21%) and" Never "(0.59%). the vast majority claim to practice safe sex, but we observe that neither the site nor the users make clear what they understand as safe sex. In a way, this information is not closely related to what is observed in the specific literature. With the increase in the use of the Internet and the number of users who search for sex through websites and apps on their mobilephones, there is an increase in the number of partners and the worldwide computer network has become an important factor in HIV transmission and contamination, creating a greater exposure to risk (Bull, 2001; Bowen, 2004; Sowell, 2010; Paul, 2010; Sanchez, 2012; Tsui, 2010 and Bowen, 2007).

Sense Attributed to the Male Body and to AIDS Prevention: The analysis of the senses - implicitly or explicitly - present in the answers to the questions of the electronic form (Step 2) allowed the organization of data processing in three thematic axes: the desired male body; the virtual search of partners for sexual pleasure and the meanings attributed to "safe sex" and AIDS prevention.

The desired male body: Regarding the desired male body, among the senses associated with this body by the subjects of the study, it is the force that stands out and emblematically represents masculinity. The force is expressed in a proper aesthetic. In this sense, a chest designed and framed by arms with well defined muscles would be the typical expression of a strong male body. In this aesthetic pattern, they do not fit the hairs or at least their presence must be discreet because they can hide the pectoral definition. The hairs are more tolerated on the face, forming the beard. Fat should also be banished from this body, especially in the abdomen which should reach 0% percent fat. Descending from the defined thorax and passing through the abdomen without fat, the statements focus on the central muscle, which is the penis. This should also be developed. The muscular definition of both the thorax and the penis is associated with masculine qualities. As an illustration

of the strong fat-free body, two sentences of users responses stand out:

"It must be masculine, muscularbut nothing exaggerated except the penis or being thin but masculine nothing feminine" (n21).

"Muscles and male traits, proportional, breasts and arms strong / defined, hair in the right proportion and 0% of abdominal fat." (n37).

Associated with this aesthetic pattern, healthy appearance appears as indicative of healthy practices or care to be taken for the maintenance of the body. Thus, the concept of caring is broadened, being understood as health in general. Thus, aesthetics and health practically overlap. "I usually payattention if a person cares for the body, believing that caring for one's own body is critical. Who is intelligent, interesting, cares for himself. But that does not mean that you have to be muscular." (N32) Alongside this body pattern, it is also possible to perceive that the body can be represented by parts of it, as fragmented. Chest, buttocks, genital organs, legs and other parts are cited as gender characteristics. There is a great deal of emphasis on the issues of "masculinity" and "femininity" as if each gender had its representatives only physical. In this sense, what is associated with the "feminine" in the body of the other should be avoided and what is considered as "masculine" should be shown. Although it is a site for searching partners, the sense of body as an instrument of a purely mechanical sex was not so present. In this sense, the body is not only a means to an end (sexual act) but an important part of a process of seduction, attraction, sexual act and encounter. The bodies desired by some users should not only be formatted in an aesthetic pattern, but should also express some qualities that go beyond body shape, such as "intelligent", "educated", "reliable" and consistent with the profile posted on the site . In this question it was possible to perceive senses with clear demarcations between virtual reality and physical reality. As an example, we highlight the following sentence from an answer:

"the same characteristics that in real life, I really like to know personality, I like the guy to be smart, educated, nice and beautiful, obviously" (n13).

Virtual partner search for sexual pleasure

Regarding the virtual search for partner, from the beginning, we observe that there is a concern with the evaluation of the information of the possible partner, highlighting the subjectivity and practicality to evaluate the profile or chat and demanding abilities on the part of those who evaluate. In this evaluation, "appearance" and "good conversation" stand out, as if it were possible to evaluate many personality traits simply through the internet from these aspects. Some examples, which demonstrate this subjectivity implicit in the evaluation by the text, are found in the answers about what they take into account in the search for a partner. The following testimony is exemplary:

"Age, sexual preference (top, bottom or versatile - preference for tops), size of the dick, man's tendency to be top or bottom manner that is not effeminate (the type that screams like a lady during sex), beauty a certain degree...beauty is essential - remembering that what I find attractive or attractive may not be seen like this by other people) ... I think that's basically it. If

the guy is dumb (notclever, who writes everything wrong) I can not take the chat forward and end up not arranging to meet. A certain degree of intelligence and verbal articulation is essential. The dynamics in the conversation help (being monosyllabic irritates me as much as grotesque Portuguese mistakes) "(n9). According to some users, the virtual can be a reflection of the real, when pointing to the fusion of the written with the spoken, as if the digitalization replaced the speech, verifying, thus, possible errors or evaluating a interaction in real time. "The way you express yourself in phrases, you have to be able to speak beautifully and engage in conversation. If it contains many Portuguese errors it is already in disadvantage "(n16) Perhaps the term "good conversation" here refers to how the person types, uses the rules of the Portuguese language and interacts, without this actually involving speech, since the interactions are made via chat or private messages, so, in a way asynchronous. The reduction to aspects of "appearance" and "good conversation" reflects a sense of speed required for virtual interactivity. In this evaluation, it is possible to perceive both the dichotomy between the real and virtual instances, as well as the extent of both. When they search for partners, the characteristics and criteria adopted for their choices are based on their experience, citing that they prefer the same things as in real life, just not specifying how the synchronization of the global network causes them to identify it. How to identify character through a static profile or exchange of chat messages? Some give the sense of practicality only mentioning the images or photos, referring again to the typical service for fast food sex. Here the real and virtual merge as if they had the same rules of interaction. Virtual partner search for sexual pleasure involves both advantages and disadvantages. The internet itself is seen as advantage as it offers a facility for dating. The internet-mediated meeting provides many possibilities for encounters, either by making it easier for those who are more timid, or by breaking down geographic or spoken language barriers. As examples, we highlight the following fragments of statements:

"[The internet] for shy people helps a little" (n4).

"The advantage is that you can find a partner in a few minutes in the comfort of your home" (n12).

"The great advantage is the physical barrier that the Internet breaks down, making it easier to meet people from the most diverse regions and even our own that we did not know about oursexuality." (N15)

Two aspects cited in relation to the virtual search present nuances of advantages and disadvantages: security and practicality. Security, on the one hand, can be compromised in interactivity because "people lie a lot" and because there is "the risk of finding people of bad nature who can deceive." Thus, so-called fake profiles can exemplify. Security is closely related to the possibility not only of so-called fake profiles, but also of security issues, which are related to the bad nature of the other and also to the perception of the user, the other may have bad intentions as the user himself has misjudged the items you consider to be safe. So as a disadvantage there is "the risk of finding people of bad nature who can deceive you."

At the same time there is the sense of security for the advantage, Many believe that being at home, safe, without public exposure, there is less danger. Common feeling to users

of cyberculture. The practicality so important to the advantages also presents nuances of disadvantages, since the sense of involvement, when the interest stops being only sexual for relationship and the initial agreement was only of casual sex. So if there is "diversity of choices and ease of searching," on the other hand "if you meet someone on the net and be interested in something more serious then the guys do not give much credit to their feelings."

Safe sex" and Hiv/AIDS prevention: In relation to "safe sex", several senses were presented by our subjects: condom, someone known, without consequences, only sex, number of partners and absence of drugs. In general, the answers relate to the fact that sex and penetration are synonymous, because when oral sex is mentioned, it appears in the form of "exception". Thus, when "safe sex" is approached, some subjects disregard other ways of HIV transmission. There is also a social construct of number of partners and promiscuity, where quantity would mean greater exposure, regardless of whether there is risk or not. The use of drugs is also mentioned, reinforcing the original social idea of the AIDS epidemic as a disease of homosexuals and drug addicts. When questioned about the omission of the answer to "safe sex" some meanings arise, as confidence and security but always relative to the other. "Even those who say they always have safe sex, I still have a way of questioning during the conversation. In general, users claim to do only when dating. (...) Therefore, people who soon face no problem in putting themselves at risk bothers me a little. Because it gives me a sensation, and it may be false ... that he may have this carelessness in other fields of life "(n14).

Associated with this, we highlight unreliable information: "Many people stop reporting various information in their profiles, I do not answer them at all." Others say that they only have safe sex, but they are lying, so what matters is that when you find the person you have safe sex, your profile may not even match his reality. "; lack of information: "neither do I answer." (n16) In the senses attributed to Hiv/AIDS prevention, we find the use of condoms, with the inclusion of oral sex practice as necessary. However, senses such as hygiene and intellectuality appear as protective characteristics, as if caring people and academic training were criteria for AIDS prevention. Again the amount of partners appears as a risk and the sharing of possibly contaminating materials as a trace of care. Regarding the positive affirmation of safe sex practice in the profile, the attributed meanings were: risk; subsequent confirmation; conditional; security, and mistrust, as if mere affirmation or denial in the profile removed any need for further investigation or precaution or at least mitigated any suspicion. When questioned about recommendations to young people seeking the same goals on the internet, the meanings assigned were again safe with care guidelines, as well as prevention. Always taking into account the risks and danger that these environments can bring, without ever forgetting that, just as in the real, there are traps in the virtual.

DISCUSSION

The desired masculine body - strong, with defined muscles and certain intellectual qualities - is a projection that the interauts do where real and virtual, sometimes they are confused, sometimes they overlap. This differs from the choice of netizens to describe their own body, since the vast majority chose "normal" (86%). This makes us think that when choosing

the body of the other as the object of desire, we use more commonly used images as erotic or healthy. Self-perception of the body may take into account the real limits to achieve this pattern. On the other hand, there is a concordance between the body self-perception and the body characteristics of the other desired with regard to the depilated body pattern. Based on the meanings attributed to the desired body in the other, we observe that the cyberbody (LeBreton, 1999) forms a cybersexuality as a reflection of a politics of desire (Garcia, 2005). In it, eroticism is portrayed as a unique moment, in which nudity, as it becomes more marked, represents exploitation in the body of others, but with technological resources, presence is no longer essential; through fantasy, the body is left behind to give wings to the imagination of the one who seeks the sexual satisfaction, making the machine preferential. This modified object is seen as business card and the subject's judgment will be based on the body. The subject then will always model him according to his needs, seen as a source of acquisition, material or emotional¹. The first contact will be made by the body and having this the desired characteristics, the door for negotiation will be open, as long as this standard is maintained. In this pattern, the aesthetic and the healthy blend to the point that the former is the result of the latter. This body, or part and fragment of it represented in images, would be symbolism of the homoerotic desire in the virtual environment. In addition to the sense of virility, this aesthetic pattern brings a sense of wholesomeness, linked to caring for the physical as a synonym of health. This idea of healthiness and aesthetics united structures the representation that the beautiful is what is cared for and therefore healthy. Schraiber (Schraiber, 2012) observe that the sense of healthiness - structured by the practice of bodybuilding - does not always operate in the health axis. Sometimes, contrary to the so-called, it constitutes an injury to the corporal health. In the virtual search for the partner of sexual pleasure, the encounter of desire is not always tangible. It is often a non-physical space where its members have the possibility to move and create themselves, exploring the opportunities offered by this new world. A world of simulation is created, where sometimes the virtual representation becomes more real than the outer world itself or is understood as part of the real⁰ (Carvalho, 1999), but this cyberspace is not concrete but with intense dynamism where this user can move, creating new lives and absorbing more and more the world of available information (Campbell, 2000). In the search for partners and the connectivity between desires, sometimes a dichotomy is installed. Users describe perception or assessment skills of the other as if they were in the real world. Typed text is confused with conversation skills and typos do not compromise intellectuality. Intellectuality is what we have seen to be one of the senses linked to prevention. But at the same time, they perceive real and virtual as distinct. The emergence of cyberspace necessarily did not isolate people. Sometimes, connectivity in search of sexual partner sincreases the possibilities and enables the frequency of encounters, as long as the user know show to circumvent some of the disadvantages that the internet can provide. Knowing how to deal with these disadvantages means recognizing that in the virtual encounter, real health risks can be generated. We observe, however, that Internet users do not always seem to dimension the risks in virtual encounters to arrive at the realization - sexual or imaginary - of sexual desires. This makes us relativize the prevalence of "always" having safe sex (82%) in the characterization of user profiles. Thus, sometimes what the site users think is safe sex does not necessarily

constitute protection against health risks, including AIDS prevention. We observed that the meanings related to safe sex and disease prevention are closely linked to conceptions of condom use, non-use of drugs and cultural characteristics about promiscuity. We must also emphasize that safety for them is related to hygiene and intellectuality, as if they made sure that the user practices safe sex. The evaluation of some of them, as some of the subjects studied by Alves²⁸, at certain moments associate the use or not of the condom as a measure of protection against AIDS to the judgment that they make of the partners. On the other hand, unlike some of the testimonies found by Silva²⁹, the non-use of this measure is not related to the fidelity established between partners, but to the number of partners, in which reducing this amount, the protection is increased. Some senses attributed to safe sex by our subjects may reinforce the idea that people who use the Internet for sex increase the risk of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)^{13, 20}. As our study did not intend to measure this, we can not endorse such an assertion. But based on our findings, we can reinforce the importance of involving homoerotic websites in the prevention of STDs in general, including AIDS. When engaging these sites, it is important not to think of the Internet as a way of conducting research or disseminating tools, but rather with a social, virtualized field where there are new norms and rules that act directly on the behavior of our modernized subjects and scanned. Final considerations Our study reinforces the idea that the Internet is an excellent tool for research on human behavior, especially sexuality. The virtual and the real merge and separate, in a constant relationship in which users now perceive themselves as virtual, now perceive themselves as real, demanding their evaluation skills and experiences at all times.

We cannot yet speak of a total virtualization of the body, with the creation of own abilities. We still rely on the physical skills of assessing and interpreting signals to judge situations that could lead to risks. For us it is clear the importance of engaging the homoerotic sites for the development of preventive actions against AIDS more effective for the internauts that interact in these spaces. The important thing is not to demonize the internet for the risks it can cause, but to invest efforts so that in the virtual environment we can problematize both ideas and sexual experiences. In this problematization, that cognition is not an impediment of realization – imaginary or real - of sexual desires. That sexual intercourse be directed towards pleasure without bringing disease to the body, both between people of different sexes and between those of the same sex.

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