

HEALTH RELATED ASPECTS OF SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR AMONG INTERNET DATERS IN SLOVENIA

Z ZDRAVJEM POVEZANI VIDIKI SPOLNEGA VEDENJA LJUDI V SLOVENIJI, KI SE PREK INTERNETA DOGOVARJAJO ZA ZMENKE

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Abstract

Background: The article presents the results of the first sociological study in Slovenia on sexual behaviour of internet daters, with a particular focus on health-related aspects of sexual behaviour.

Methods: The sample consists of people who use (have used) Internet dating services. Snow-ball sampling was done through e-mail alerts and by posting banners on Internet dating sites. The data were collected in January and February 2007. The final sample consists of 1349 respondents.

Results: The majority of our respondents had either no (44.2%) or few (1 to 5 - 48%) sexual contacts with persons they got to know over the internet. Depending on their sexual orientation, 15 to 40% of men had sex on the first date compared to 7 to 18% of women. One third of heterosexual men and women did not use a condom during their first sexual intercourse with the last person met online. Homosexual men are far more likely to use condoms, as only 17% stated that they did not use a condom, in comparison with heterosexual and bisexual men.

Conclusions: Results of the survey show that the time that passes between first on-line contact and first sexual intercourse represents an important indicator of potentially risky sexual behaviour as far as sexual health is concerned. Our data show that this is the case especially for bisexual males. Data on condom use show that the "AIDS era" left a strong impact on the population of homosexual men, who far more often use a condom in comparison with heterosexual and bisexual respondents.

Key words: internet dating, number of sexual partners, condom use, gender, sexual orientation

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Izvleček

Izhodišča: V članku predstavljamo izsledke prve sociološke raziskave o spolnem vedenju uporabnikov interneta za internetne zmenke v Sloveniji s posebnim poudarkom na z zdravjem povezanih vidikih spolnega vedenja ljudi, ki se za zmenke dogovarjajo prek interneta.

Metode: Vzorec predstavljajo uporabniki internetnih strani za spoznavanje partnerjev. Uporabili smo vzorčenje po metodi snežne kepe prek elektronske pošte in z objavo oglasa na portalih za spoznavanje partnerjev prek interneta. Podatki so bili zbrani v januarju in februarju 2007. Končni vzorec sestavlja 1.349 anketirancev.

Rezultati: Večina anketirancev ni imela (44,2%) ali pa je imela majhno število spolnih partnerjev, ki so jih spoznali prek interneta (od 1 do 5 – 48%). Glede na spolno usmerjenost je imelo spolni odnos na prvem zmenku z osebo z interneta od 15 do 40% moških v primerjavi z od 7 do 18% žensk. Tretjina heteroseksualnih moških in žensk pri prvem spolnem odnosu z zadnjo osebo z interneta ni uporabila kondoma. Med uporabniki kondoma pri prvem spolnem odnosu z zadnjo osebo z interneta je največ homoseksualnih moških. Med njimi jih je 17% navedlo, da kondoma niso uporabili.

Zaključki: Izsledki raziskave kažejo, da je čas od prvega on-line stika do prvega spolnega odnosa pomemben pokazatelj za zdravje potencialno rizičnega spolnega vedenja. Naši podatki kažejo, da to velja še posebej za

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biseksualno usmerjene moške. Podatki o uporabi kondoma kažejo, da je »obdobje aidsa« pustilo močen pečat na populacijo homoseksualnih moških, ki v daleč največji meri uporabljajo kondom v primerjavi s heteroseksualno in z biseksualno usmerjenimi anketiranci.

Ključne besede: internetni zmenek, število spolnih partnerjev, uporaba kondoma, spol, spolna usmerjenost

1 INTRODUCTION

Internet dating or on-line dating is becoming an increasingly popular virtual space where people are searching for sexual or romantic partners. It is considered to be a new partnership and marital market. On-line dating has also become increasingly popular in Slovenia over the last decade (1, 2). The leading Slovenian on-line dating service ona-on.com has over 117,000 members.¹ While the internet created several advantages and is considered to be a useful means for finding an intimate partner, it also involves risk-taking such as psychological disadvantages (e.g. questions of trust and deception, rejection and loss, psychological violence). Lawson and Leck explain that internet dating is "an example of an activity that requires taking risks and trusting an unknown person who may be thousands of miles away" (3).

Internet dating – unlike the "old" technological mediators such as printed ads, phone ads, etc. – broadened the marital and partnership markets, especially for those who are generally outside one's social networks in real life due to spatial, social, cultural and other reasons. In this manner, normative pressures stemming from these social networks become less important and enable people to explore new areas of sexuality and intimacy with a greater extent of anonymity and privacy (4) and an avoidance of social stigma. While "blind dating" used to be ascribed to the "desperate ones", those who have failed to meet partners in their everyday life, it has now become a mainstream practice (5), also in Slovenia where internet dating is practiced by people from various social strata, groups and ages (6).

The article is based on the first sociological survey on internet dating in Slovenia. The aim of the survey was to collect general data on the phenomenon of internet dating as it is practiced in Slovenia, including data on the prevalence of internet dating, practices, dynamics and forms of using internet for dating. One part of the survey also researched several aspects of sexual behaviour of internet daters, with a special focus on health related issues.

Based on this study, the article presents findings about the sexual behaviour of internet daters, focusing on

number of sexual partners, time that has passed from the first on-line contact to the first sexual intercourse with the person met on-line and the use of condoms during the first sexual intercourse with the last person met on-line. Data are analysed according to the gender and sexual orientation of the respondents. First, the existent research on internet dating and sexual behaviour are presented, followed by a description of methods – data collection, sample and measurement instruments. The main part of the article is devoted to the presentation and analysis of survey results, followed by the discussion and conclusion.

1.1 The existent research on internet daters and their sexual behaviour in Slovenia and abroad

Previously there has been no research conducted on the sexual behaviour of internet daters in Slovenia. Several studies have addressed the sexual (risk) behaviour of teenagers in Slovenia (cf. 7-9, for an overview see: 10), and one study was conducted on the sexual behaviour of the general population in Slovenia (11-13), focusing primarily on public health and epidemiological issues (14, 15) and also on sexual risk behaviour (16-18).

The majority of research on internet dating abroad focuses on sociological and psychological issues pertaining to new ways of meeting sexual and romantic partners in the virtual world. However, there have been several studies conducted that look particularly into the (risk) sexual behaviour of internet daters. Qualitative research on gay men in London (19) shows how the process of filtering and self-presentation, both being a part of internet dating, construct the framework for the management of HIV transmission risk. Another qualitative research on internet daters who seek sexual partners online (20) showed that virtual space helps in expressing one's sexual scripts related to the intra-psychic dimension of these scripts (desires, fantasies, etc.) and might negatively impact the health of those daters who are eager to quickly move from on-line communication to off-line activity as they do not devote time to discuss risk related issues. Similarly, Whitty and Carr (21) showed that online dating offers potentially more playful space than the real world but might be problematic if people engage too far into their world of fantasies and the Internet. A French

¹ See www.ona-on.com (Last access 19.1. 2013).

study on heterosexual internet daters (22) pointed out that internet dating sites create new “sexual territory” that is divided between hyper-sexualized and hyper-romanticized spaces. While new dating scenarios facilitate the engagement in primarily short-term sexual relationships, these sites are nevertheless framed with traditional sexual norms. Finally, a Nordic study on MSM (23) found that the flirt network among MSM on-line daters exhibits similar structures to off-line sexual contact networks and might enhance the spread of STIs.

2 METHODS

2.1 Data collection and sample

Our sample consists of people who use or have used Internet dating services in Slovenia. Snow-ball sampling was done through e-mail alerts and by posting banners on Slovenian Internet dating sites such as *Ona-on*, *Kupido*, *Frendi in flirt*, *Spoznaj*, etc.

The questionnaire was available on-line from 26 January 2007 to 12 February 2007. 1672 then active or former Internet daters participated in the research.² The final sample consists of 1349 respondents, 544 male (40.3%) and 805 female (59.7%). Nearly half of the respondents (47%) were between 21 and 30 years of age, followed by a little more than 20% between 31 and 40 years of age. These two age groups represent the majority of our respondents and the results primarily reflect the experiences and stands of these people.

As Slovenia has no major urban centres – the capital has 350,000 inhabitants – it is difficult to talk about major differences between urban and rural centres. How the Internet reduces or perhaps sharpens these differences remains to be researched. In our sample, nearly 43% of respondents reside in urban centres, nearly 40% in small towns and nearly 18% in rural areas.

The educational structure of the sample differs from the general population. In our sample, the most outstanding group with respect to education level is the group with higher or university education (nearly 27%), while the 2002 Census showed that 12% of the Slovenian population hold a university degree. Still, similarly as in the general population, nearly 51% of respondents finished general (not vocational) secondary school.

There are two big groups in our sample employment-wise: a little more than 51% of respondents are full-time or part-time employed, and nearly 43% of respondents are students. The remaining respondents are mostly

unemployed, or they did not provide information on their employment status. 17 respondents in our sample stated that they were retired.

Sexual orientation was measured through self-identification of the respondents, who were asked to describe their sexual orientation. In the sample, 932 respondents (70%) stated that they were heterosexuals, 184 respondents declared themselves as homosexuals (13.8%), 149 respondents claimed that they were bisexual (11.2%) and 66 (5%) respondents said that they do not know or they were not sure about their sexual orientation. The relatively high percentage of respondents who declared themselves as homosexuals or bisexuals is a result of the fact that the invitation to participate in the research was circulated also by gay and lesbian organizations in Slovenia on their websites.

2.2. Measurement instrument

In this article, we are using the following scales:

Use of the Internet for various purposes (looking for a partner for ... an intimate partnership; to form a family; for a one night stand; looking for a partner exclusively for sex (also called “fuck buddy”); virtual sex partner; swinging/groups sex; friends and social companionship; chat contacts) on the following scale: never – rarely – sometimes – often – daily.

Number of sexual partners among persons met on-line on the following scale: 0, 1-5, 6-10, 11-15, 16-20, 21-25, 26-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51-100, 100+.

Time from the first on-line contact to the first sexual intercourse with the last person one has met on-line on the following scale: within 1 week – within 2 weeks – within 1 month – more than 1 month – not yet had sexual intercourse. Sexual intercourse was defined as either vaginal, oral and/or anal sexual activity.³

Reasons for using condom during sexual intercourse with the last person met on-line on the following scale: protection against STIs – protection against pregnancy – other reasons – have not used condom – not yet had sexual intercourse.

3 RESULTS

In this section, we present the basic descriptive results about behaviours of internet daters in Slovenia. These include purposes for using on-line dating; number of sexual partners met through the internet; time elapsed from the first on-line contact to the first sexual intercourse; and condom use.

³ Respondents who have not yet had sex with a person met on-line were excluded from the analysis.

² Respondents with a large portion of missing data (n=309) and those who stated at the end of the questionnaire that their answers were not sincere (n=14) were excluded from the final sample.

3.1 Purposes for using Internet dating sites

According to our data, the majority of respondents do not use Internet dating sites for just one particular reason. The first two most often listed reasons are not directly related to sexual activities: the majority of men and women regardless of their sexual orientation stated that their main reasons for using Internet dating sites are to *chat* and look for *friendship/socialising*. However, homosexual and heterosexual men are more likely to look for *friendship/socialising* than bisexual men, who are – particularly in comparison to heterosexual men – more often looking for sexual partners. The third reason for using internet dating sites (regardless of gender and sexual orientation) is looking for *intimate partnership*. Heterosexual men are more likely than homosexual or bisexual men to use internet dating sites to find a person *to create a family* with. There are also differences between heterosexual women and men, as the latter more often mentioned creating a family as their major

reason for using internet dating sites. On the other hand, there are no significant differences between heterosexual and homosexual women, as one fifth of them stated that looking for a person to create a family with is their key reason for using internet dating sites. Statistically significant differences can be found among those respondents who listed sex-related reasons among the reasons why they are using internet dating sites. Homosexual and bisexual men were more likely than heterosexual men to mention *virtual sex* and *swinging/group sex* as the type of sexual activity they are looking for on-line.

Significant differences were also found between women of various sexual orientations. While more homosexual and bisexual women than heterosexual women are looking for a *one night stand*, bisexual women were more likely to list *fuck buddy*, *virtual sex* and *swinging/group sex* as the activities they are looking for on-line in comparison to heterosexual and homosexual women.

Table 1. *The purpose of using internet, all respondents, in %.*

Tabela 1. *Namen uporabe interneta, vsi anketiranci, v %.*

Using internet for Namen uporabe interneta	male moški					female ženske				
	hetero	homo	bi	χ^2 (p)	n	hetero	homo	bi	χ^2 (p)	n
Partnership Partnerska zveza	60.5	69.4	57.4	3.63 (.163)	515	49.2	68.3	51.1	7.95 (.019)	739
Forming a family Ustvariti družino	32.7	16.9	26.4	11.26 (.004)	513	20.9	20.0	10.9	5.11 (.078)	735
One night stand Partner za eno noč	54.3	65.3	64.2	5.42 (.067)	512	15.1	23.3	37.0	26.3 (<.001)	736
Fuck buddy Partner za redni seks	53.4	58.1	68.5	4.56 (.102)	515	14.4	13.6	32.6	19.50 (<.001)	735
Virtual sex Virtualni seks	26.1	41.9	49.1	17.97 (<.001)	514	15.2	18.3	30.4	12.81 (.002)	736
Swinging, group sex Svingerst, skupinski seks	15.6	27.4	26.4	9.73 (.008)	510	2.4	5.0	16.3	37.03 (<.001)*	736
Friendship, socializing Prijateljstvo druženje	77.7	87.1	63.5	12.54 (.002)	512	79.5	90.0	89.1	7.97 (.019)	738
Internet chat Klepet po internetu	87.2	92.7	86.8	2.87 (.238)	514	90.7	90.0	93.5	.84 (.659)	742

* 2 cells have expected count less than 5, statistical significance should be treated with caution.

3.2 Respondents who have sexual experiences with partners met on-line

Out of all our respondents, a little more than 44% reported that they *never* had sex with a person met on-line. All these respondents were excluded from our further analysis, which focuses on issues pertaining to sexual experiences of individuals who met through the Internet.

In the following table, data regarding the number of sexual partners is presented, the time that elapsed from the first on-line contact with a person to the first sexual intercourse with that person and the use and reasons for using a condom during sexual intercourse with the last person met on-line. Data is broken down by gender and sexual orientation of our respondents.

Table 2. Sexual activities of internet daters, in %.

Tabela 2. Seksualne aktivnosti internet daterjev, v %.

	male moški			female ženske		
	hetero	homo	bi	hetero	homo	bi
Number of lifetime sexual partners met through internet dating services Število seksualnih partnerjev v življenju, ki jih je anketiranec spoznal preko interneta						
1-5	82.0	64.6	60.6	94.9	100	98.1
6+	18.0	35.4	39.4	5.1	0	1.9
n	183	99	33	256	40	4
χ^2 (p)	13.70 (.001)			3.09 (.213)*		
Time from the first date to the first sexual intercourse Čas od prvega zmenka do prvega spolnega odnosa						
On the first date Na prvem zmenku	23.9	42.2	46.9	15.5	11.8	29.8
Within 1 week V 1 tednu	16.8	21.7	28.1	9.9	32.4	12.8
Within 2 weeks V 2 tednih	19.4	19.3	9.4	14.6	8.8	12.8
Within 1 month V 1 mesecu	22.6	6.0	6.3	21.1	29.4	23.4
Later than 1 month Kasneje kot v 1 mesecu	17.4	10.8	9.4	39.0	17.6	21.3
n	155	83	32	213	34	47
χ^2 (p)	25.39 (.001)*			24.87 (.002)*		
Reason for condom use (for the last person met on the internet) Razlog za uporabo kondoma (za zadnjo osebo, ki jo je spoznal po internetu)						
Protection against STIs Zaščita pred SPB	36.7	82.2	41.9	39.4	3.0	36.7
Protection against pregnancy Zaščita pred nosečnostjo	25.4	0.0	9.7	23.4	0.0	12.2
Other reasons Drugi razlogi	5.9	0.0	3.2	3.9	6.1	4.1
Have not used Nisem uporabil	32.0	17.8	45.2	33.3	90.9	46.9
n	169	90	31	231	33	49
χ^2 (p)	61.78 (<.001)+			44.37 (<.001)*		

* 2 cells have expected count less than 5, statistical significance should be treated with caution.

+ 3 cells have expected count less than 5, statistical significance should be treated with caution.

3.2.1 The number of sexual partners met through the Internet

Men reported more sexual partners met on-line than women. Female respondents regardless of their sexual orientation are less likely to be engaged in sexual activities with people they have met on-line than men. However, there are statistically significant differences based on sexual orientation: both homosexual and bisexual men and women met more sexual partners on-line than heterosexual men and women.

If we take a look at our sample generally (see Table 3), then the majority of our respondents (92.3%) had either no sexual contacts with persons they got to know over the Internet (44.2%) or had one to five sexual partners (48%). Respondents with six or more sexual partners met through the internet count for nearly 8% altogether.

Table 3. *Number of sexual partners met on-line (%)*.

Tabela 3. *Število spolnih partnerjev, ki jih je anketiranec spoznal preko interneta (%)*.

Number of sexual partners Število spolnih partnerjev	%
0	44.2
1-5	48.1
6-10	4.1
11-15	.8
16-20	1.4
21-25	.2
26-30	.4
31-40	.2
41-50	.4
51-100	.0
100+	.2

3.2.2 Time elapsed from the first on-line contact to first off-line sexual intercourse

In line with our finding that men engaged with more sexual partners met on-line than women, men in general also proceed more quickly from getting to know a person on-line to having sexual intercourse with them. Depending on their sexual orientation, 15 to 40% of men had sex on the first date compared to 7 to 18% of women. Heterosexual respondents are less likely than homosexual and bisexual respondents to have sex on

the first date. Particularly bisexual, but also homosexual, men are the most likely to have sex on the first date, which is in accordance with the above mentioned reasons for internet dating: more homosexual and bisexual men than heterosexual men are looking for sexual activities on-line.

3.2.3 Condom use

Among internet daters from our sample, condom use during their first sexual intercourse with the last person they met on-line is related either to preventing sexually transmitted infections or to protecting against pregnancy.

About one third of heterosexual men and women did not use a condom during their first sexual intercourse with the last person they met on-line. If we exclude lesbian couples, then proportionally the largest percentage of those who did not use condoms during their last sexual intercourse is represented by bisexual men and women. About 45% of them had sex without a condom. The least risky behaviour (if we measure it solely by the use or non-use of condoms) was recorded among homosexuals: a little more than 82% of them used a condom during their first sexual intercourse with the last person they met online.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

The results from the first Slovenian research on the sexual behaviour of internet daters shows important differences among respondents based on their gender and/or sexual orientation. Most generally, four major conclusions can be drawn from the study:

- (1) Although the majority of our respondents regardless of their gender and sexual orientation use internet dating sites to create an intimate partnership, homosexuals and particularly bisexuals more often look for sexual partners (one night stand, fuck buddy, etc.) compared to heterosexuals.
- (2) More men than women are looking for sexual partners on-line. Consequently, men reported having higher numbers of sexual partners met on-line than women, and they are also faster in proceeding from on-line contact to off-line sexual intercourse than women.
- (3) In line with the above findings, heterosexual respondents are less likely than homosexual and particularly bisexual respondents to have sex on the first date.

- (4) In terms of using a condom during the first sexual intercourse with the last person met on-line, homosexual men used a condom most frequently, while bisexual men and women used it least frequently.

Previous studies (24) on sexual behaviour of internet daters have shown that those who quickly move from on-line contact with another person to meeting off-line might experience risky sexual behaviour, as they do not devote enough time to discussing risk related issues. Our findings are in line with this conclusion and hold true particularly for male bisexual respondents: from 65% to nearly 70% of our male bisexual respondents use the internet for sexual practices such as a one night stand or fuck buddy, while at the same time they were least likely to use a condom during their first sexual intercourse with the last person met on-line. One of the limitations of our study is the fact that we did not ask our respondents about the gender of the last person they met on-line and had sex with, which would be a useful piece of information particularly for the group of bisexual males who seem to engage in the most risky sexual behaviour. It could be that majority of this group are actually MSM (men who have sex with men): they might be in a (heterosexual?) partnership and are looking for sexual adventures on the side. However, we cannot make any of these conclusions on the basis of our data. Further research should be invested into this question, particularly as bisexual respondents might not be addressed by preventive health measures targeted either at the homosexual or heterosexual population.

We can say that "the AIDS era" has left the strong mark on the male homosexual population, as most homosexual men from our sample used a condom during their first sexual intercourse with the last person met on-line. They have used it to prevent STIs. Less than half of hetero- and bisexual respondents used it for the same reason, but roughly one third to two thirds of hetero- or bisexual respondents had not used condom at all. Heterosexual men and women have very similar percentages of condom use. A large percentage of heterosexual women did not use a condom during their sexual intercourse for protection against pregnancy, which probably means that they used some other means of protection. On the basis of our data, we can conclude that heterosexual women are more concerned about possible pregnancy rather than possible STIs, leaving them more vulnerable to the latter. On the other hand, homosexual men are more aware of possible dangers for STIs and behave more responsibly in this respect. While identity positions related to one's sexual orientation turned out to be important information

when addressing the sexual behaviour of internet daters, gender seems to be of key importance as well. Previous studies (25) have shown that internet dating sites are framed with traditional sexual norms and the findings from our study are in line with this conclusion: men seem to be more involved in sexual activities than women, who are traditionally understood as the non-sexual gender. Women also reported having less sexual partners than men.

The role of traditional norms might also explain the differences between heterosexual men and homosexual men: the latter are faster in engaging in sexual intercourse with a person met on-line than heterosexual men, who are faced with traditional sexual norms when looking for female sexual partners on-line. In situations of sexual intercourse between two men, such sexual norms do not exist and that might at least partially explain why homosexual and bisexual men more often have sex on their first off-line date. Furthermore, among men, homosexual and bisexual respondents are more likely to be engaged with more sexual partners that they met on-line. This can be attributed to the fact that meeting places for homosexuals and bisexuals are limited and the Internet often remains the only channel for homosexuals and bisexuals to meet (26).

Finally, there are some limitations to our study that need to be mentioned. The research was not conducted on a representative sample. Despite the fact that the sample of more than 1300 respondents is a large sample for Slovenia, the conclusions should be treated with caution. Our aim was to conduct an exploratory study in order to offer a basic and general insight into this relatively new social phenomenon.

The research was conducted in 2007. Although the behaviour patterns of internet daters might not have changed in the past few years, it is a fact that more and more people are using internet dating sites. A continuous and more nuanced research is needed on this topic.

Finally, as already mentioned, the study did not record the gender of the person our respondents met on-line. The lack of this information is particularly problematic with the bisexual group of our respondents, whose sexual behaviour turned out to be potentially most risky.

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