

## Online and offline relationships, trust and social capital: preliminary findings from the e-male survey in Australia

**Author:**

Holt, Martin; Rawstorne, Patrick; Kippax, Susan; Worth, Heather; Bittman, Michael; Wilkinson, Jennifer

**Event details:**

AIDS Impact 2007 Conference  
Marseille, France

**Publication Date:**

2007

**DOI:**

<https://doi.org/10.26190/unsworks/441>

**License:**

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/au/>

Link to license to see what you are allowed to do with this resource.

Downloaded from <http://hdl.handle.net/1959.4/11528> in <https://unsworks.unsw.edu.au> on 2024-03-29

# Online and offline relationships, trust and social capital: preliminary findings from the e-male survey in Australia

Martin Holt<sup>1</sup>, Patrick Rawstorne<sup>1</sup>, Susan Kippax<sup>1</sup>, Heather Worth<sup>1</sup>, Michael Bittman<sup>2</sup> and Jennifer Wilkinson<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> National Centre in HIV Social Research, The University of New South Wales, Sydney

<sup>2</sup> The University of New England, Armidale <sup>3</sup> The University of Sydney

## Background

Unlike other studies investigating online sex-seeking and HIV risk, the e-male project is the first to investigate the social aspects of the online practices of men who have sex with men (MSM) in relation to HIV prevention. The study has a unique focus on the social capital associated with the online and offline social networks of MSM.

## Method

The pilot phase of the e-male survey was conducted online between November 2006 and January 2007. The anonymous survey contained items on gay community attachment, current sexual relationships, HIV status, internet use, friendship and family networks, sources of support, civic participation and a range of demographic variables.

## Results

The survey was completed by 503 people, of whom 471 men met the eligibility criteria (aged 18 or over, residing in Australia, reporting having had sex with a man in the previous five years). Most participants were gay men residing in metropolitan areas of Australia. 75% were HIV-negative and 14% HIV-positive and 72% said they had used the internet to look for male sex partners.

Participants reported regular contact with a broad range of friends and family members (see Figure 1).

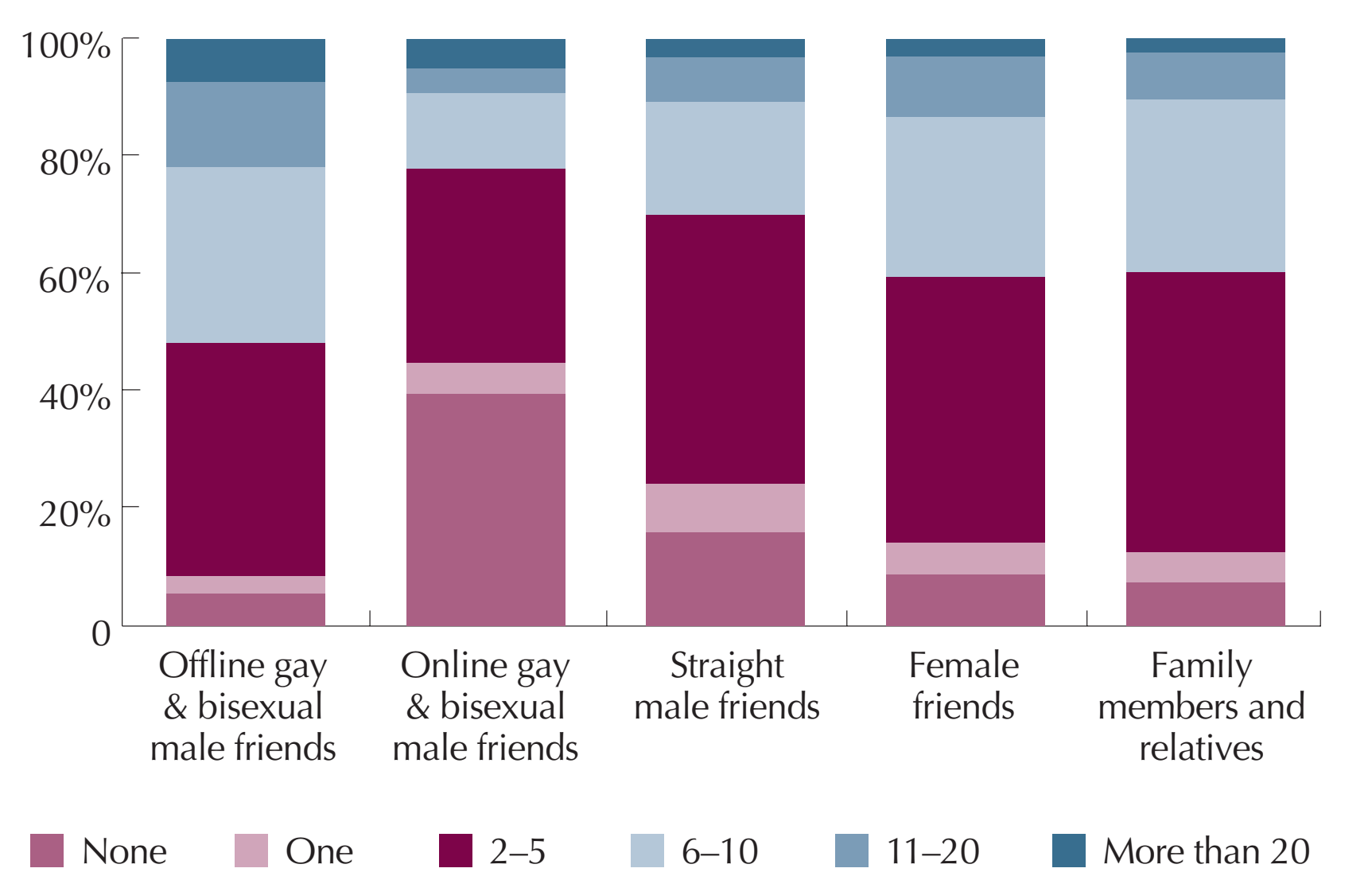


Figure 1: Number of friends and family members with whom participants said they were in regular contact

## Discussion

Our results show that when the social capital of MSM from online and offline relationships is assessed, men report:

- that they have a broad range of relationships, including friendships that are exclusively based online
- that online friendships are characterised by less trust, reciprocity and reliability than offline relationships
- that it is common to meet offline gay or bisexual friends via the internet.

61% of men reported having had at least one online gay or bisexual male friend, a friend they had never met face to face and with whom they only communicated online. In addition, 63% reported that they had first met at least one of their offline gay or bisexual male friends via the internet.

## Measuring social capital

Using survey items, scales were constructed to measure the social connectedness of participants with their different groups of friends and family members (social capital). The same scale (which we have called the Strength of Social Connectedness Scale) was found to be reliable for each group ( $\alpha$  0.84–0.91). The items in the scale were:

- I make a great effort to maintain my relationships with them.
- I trust them to look out for me and act in my best interests.
- I usually tell them exactly how I feel.
- I feel I could confide in them about almost anything.
- I believe we are willing to help each other out.
- My friendship with them is very important to me. (In the case of family members this item was phrased, ‘My relationships with them are very important to me.’)

Using scores for these scales (see Table 1), we found that participants indicated that they relied upon and trusted their female friends the most, followed by offline gay and bisexual male friends, family members and straight male friends. Online gay and bisexual male friends were the group they trusted and relied upon least.

Table 1: Mean scores for Strength of Social Connectedness scale for each group of participants’ friends and family

Group of friends or family	Mean score for Strength of Social Connectedness (from 1–5)	Cronbach’s $\alpha$ (internal consistency reliability)
Offline gay and bisexual male friends	3.83	0.84
Online gay and bisexual male friends	2.90	0.86
Straight male friends	3.71	0.86
Female friends	3.98	0.91
Family members and relatives	3.83	0.87

The common use of the internet by MSM for sex-seeking and socialising, and the high number of online friendships reported by MSM, reinforce the idea that it is appropriate to target HIV education and prevention activities online. However, the apparent lack of trust and reciprocity in online friendships suggests that caution must be exercised when relying on online networks of MSM to share health information and provide mutual support. These issues require further attention and will be addressed in the second phase of the e-male study, which will be conducted in late 2007.