At their simplest, bugchasers are gay men who fetishize the HIV virus, fantasize with being infected or actually pursue infection through high-risk sexual encounters. These men rename HIV as the ‘bug’ or ‘gift’, HIV-infected semen as ‘seed’ and the community of people living with HIV as the ‘poz brotherhood’. It is difficult to locate the origins of bugchasing: some argue that it is as old as HIV itself, whereas others believe it to be a recent phenomenon (Freeman 2003; Gauthier and Forsyth 1999). It is clear, however, that bugchasing groups thrive online: they use contact websites and hook-up apps to find partners, forums to share anecdotes and discuss opinions, and social media such as Twitter and Tumblr to share pornography and engage in conversations. While bugchasers’ online presence has been widely researched, little information exists about their offline experiences. At the same time, in recent years, there have been major developments in the context of HIV. New anti-retroviral medications make HIV a manageable chronic condition while allowing those infected to reduce the amount of virus in their blood to ‘undetectable’ levels, meaning they cannot infect others and PrEP prevents people from being infected with HIV. These are significant changes that have not gone unnoticed by researchers (see, for instance, Dean 2015a). This paper aims to explore the significance of these developments for the bugchasing phenomenon through three personal stories.

In fact, these new contexts and tools challenge traditional views of the ‘bugchaser’ as a stable identity category resulting from a process of linear deviance. I adopt Susanna Paasonen’s (2018) approach, which considers sex as a fluid and playful process of negotiation. Paasonen’s work guides the consideration of three cases based on in-depth interviews: Scott, an ardent bugchaser; Marvin/Eric20, for whom bugchasing is only entertainment; and that of Milo, whose bugchasing desires are uncertain, instrumental and evolving. These cases challenge the stability of a ‘bugchaser’ identity, evidencing some of the diversity of bugchasing experiences available and previously unrecognized by research. In addition, these cases illustrate diverse engagements with online media, which complicate the assumptions about bugchasers’ use of social media by previous researchers. Overall, this paper works towards a larger goal of providing the sort of empirical, ethnographic and qualitative data about bugchasing experience that has been previously absent in this area of research.
After discussing an overview of the available research on bugchasing, the paper moves to the methodology through which the stories were obtained. The three cases are then discussed at length, with particular emphasis on how the three men conceptualize their identities and/or practices, their use of PrEP and of the internet. These narratives are considered, arguing that a ‘bugchaser’ identity is fluid and evolving, and that bugchasers use social media in diverse ways.

**Background**

**The available literature and its failures**

Previous research has approached bugchasing from two perspectives. On the one hand, a few researchers have considered bugchasing from an approach based on media studies and queer theory, with a focus on pornography that implicitly or explicitly depicts bugchasing (e.g. Florêncio 2018; Lee 2014). On the other hand, a different set of research has been produced that seeks to quantify bugchasers through their online presence, aiming to provide a taxonomy and characterization of these men (e.g. Moskowitz and Roloff 2007a, 2007b). This section provides an overview of both fields and draws attention to the biases and assumptions that underlie them.

Key to bugchasing research is Tim Dean’s work in *Beyond Sexuality* (2000), *Unlimited Intimacy* (2009) and some of his shorter pieces (2008, 2011, 2012, 2015a, 2015b). In particular, *Unlimited Intimacy* is a seminal study of barebacking, the eroticisation of unprotected anal intercourse among gay men, and bugchasing. The book conceptualizes these practices as means of intimacy and ultimate hospitality between strangers while, at the same time, it also explores the role of fear and othering in narratives of these behaviours. More focused on media representations of bugchasing through pornography, Lee (2014) writes about constructions of masculinity in pornography while Morris and Paasonen (2014) talk about the role of HIV and identity politics in the pornographic productions of the Treasure Island Media pornographic studio. Other, more theoretical engagements, have been Holmes and Warner’s (2004) study of bugchasing and barebacking through the theories of Deleuze and Guattari and Hammond, Holmes and Mercier’s (2016) focus on the semantics and meaning-making among bugchasers and gift-givers as a process of interaction with public health discourses that produces new meanings. Finally, Robinson (2013) also proposes an interesting reading of barebacking and bugchasing within a queer framework. While these are enlightening engagements with the discourses of bugchasing, they lack an ethnographic grounding that could explore how bugchasers actually experience their desires and negotiate their bugchasing narratives.

The other strand of research, more concerned with measuring the bugchasing phenomenon and describing its participants has turned to internet-based dating sites for evidence. Dawson et al. (2005) compiled one hundred user profiles from barebackcity.com¹ (now defunct) and analysed users’ reported HIV status and the status they desired in their potential partners. They conclude that the levels of bugchasing were “extremely low” (81) and that indifference to HIV was more common than explicit preference for it. Employing the same site, Tewksbury (2003) analysed 880 personal advertisements. Curiously, he found that, despite the website’s somehow explicit aim of facilitating bugchasing – by allowing users to filter partners by their HIV-status, for example – only 4.8% of the adverts considered expressed preference for HIV-positive partners. Thus, he established that there were “very few men specifically seeking serodiscordant² partners” (477).

Also using barebackcity.com, Grov (2004) analysed 81 profiles that made use of terms such as ‘bug’, ‘seed’ or ‘gift’, common keywords among bugchasers. Grov identified profiles “displaying some sort of intentional desire to either infect or be infected with HIV” (337–338). The fact that, out of the thousands of available profiles, only 81 were classed as bugchasing led the author to concede that

¹Researchers on bugchasing mostly used two sites: barebackcity.com and ultimatebareback.com. Although bugchasers were present in both, the sites’ main public were barebackers (men who have unprotected anal intercourse but not an intentionality to contract HIV). However, there were/are almost no explicit bugchasing-only sites available.

²Meaning having a different HIV-status.
bugchasers were a “highly vocal few” (339). With the same methodology, Grov and Parsons (2006) collected 1,600 profiles of self-proclaimed bugchasers or gift-givers and classified them according to the users’ HIV-status and the status of their desired partners. They found that a large amount of the sample (approximately 70%) employed the labels “bugchaser” or “gift-giver” but expressed interest in partners with the same HIV-status, which led the authors to argue that bugchasing and gift-giver “identity did not consistently match behavioural intentions” (500) online. Moskowitz and Roloff (Moskowitz and Roloff 2007a) followed a similar process to conclude that, out of their sample of 150 bugchasing profiles, only 31.5% of the users expressed preference for HIV-positive partners, while 60.6% showed indifference to the status of potential partners. They concluded that “most [users] were not looking for seroconversion, but were looking for ambiguous situations or partners” (353).

While these studies are important in establishing that bugchasers are a minority in online sites, using them today is problematic due to their sole reliance and mostly uncritical analysis of online samples. First, the available research has focused only on two sites, both of which have long gone defunct. At the same time, there is no available research on alternative sites, such as Twitter, Tumblr, or different platforms, such as smartphone GPS-based dating apps (e.g. Grindr). Each of these sites presents unique affordances and limitations which generate distinct environments: whereas some may be constructed as a place to find willing partners (e.g. Scruff, NastyKinkPigs), others may be more apt for the exchange of pornography (Tumblr). In order to assess users’ behaviours on these sites, their experiences of them, and the reliability of their online statements, we need to consider the intense processes of mediation that the sites generate. This task has only been undertaken by a few scholars, and none explicitly looking at bugchasing sites (see Race 2015; Tziallas 2015).

Second, there is little acknowledgement on the part of the researchers of the fact that people’s online practices cannot be assumed to directly echo their offline behaviours: users may choose to misrepresent the intensity and/or nature of their desires and experiences. At the same time, people who actually engage in bugchasing offline may not participate in online groups. Of the research mentioned above, the only two pieces that make a clear acknowledgement of this are Dawson et al. (2005) who argue that “it may be a leap of faith to equate an advertisers’ report of their HIV status with their actual serostatus. It is not uncommon to have misrepresentation in Internet profiles, especially when the aim is to attract a sexual partner” (80); and Robinson (2013), who argues that, “future research should seek to interview these men in order to see if they are actually enacting these behaviours offline, and how these men are taking up these online discourses within their everyday (sexual) lives. Despite these limitations though, a discourse around barebacking is happening online, in which many barebackers are partaking in – either by reading the posts or commenting themselves” (108). Robinson’s statement could also be applied to bugchasing, which frequently is located under a barebacking umbrella online. This paper agrees with the fact that online discourses are taking place and are, indeed, worth considering at length. However, it also argues that interview material is necessary to understand exactly how men construct their bugchasing identities, experience their desires, and use online media. Thus, I present a first exploration of that through three cases. Although a tactical separation between online and offline has been made for this paper, I am not naive to the fact that creating a clear-cut distinction between the online and the offline is unrealistic and fails to represent how gay men experience online and offline spheres in overlapping ways (Mowlabocus 2010).

**Context changes, new questions and evidence**

Two of the key issues that underpin the above research is whether bugchasing is mostly fantasy or reality – and exactly what these two labels mean for public health – and an interest in exploring the characteristics and background of ‘bugchasers’. Richard Pendry, producer and director of the documentary *I Love being HIV+*, titles his 2006 article for the BBC as “HIV ‘bugchasers’: Fantasy or Fact?” (Pendry 2006). This is an important question that has only been partly addressed. Arguing that, for many men, bugchasing may be a fantasy with little potential to become a reality does not necessarily deprive it of interest. After all, even

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2Gift-giver is the name used among bugchasers to refer to HIV-positive people willing to ‘share their gift’, that is, infect others.
Goffman (1974) argued that, “surely, the total number of man [sic] hours a population spends per day in privately pursued fantasy constitutes one of the least examined and most underestimated commitments of its resources.” Furthermore, fantasies – including sexual fantasies – are a fundamental way in which we negotiate our personal biographies and social structures (Rodriguez 2011). Even if bugchasing was mostly an online fantasy disconnected from the ‘offline’ world, it still would be an interesting inroad into exploring how HIV is currently constructed in our society and the role of the internet in gay men’s sexuality. However, I do acknowledge that there is a pragmatic difference between fantasizing about HIV and actually contracting the virus. Infection poses economic, medical and social challenges that fantasy does not. We ought to acknowledge these material realities.

This article proposes that many men who define themselves as bugchasers do not experience their desires in a fixed way as fantasies or realities. A binary division like this does not account for the daily alterations in desires, experiences and needs. Through an analysis of three cases, I argue that bugchasing may lie as something in between fantasy and reality: perhaps sometimes is one, sometimes another; perhaps a fantasy in need of a push to become a reality, perhaps something else entirely. I do so by providing a case that follows the traditional ‘linear’ and fixed idea of a bugchasing ‘identity in reality’, and three cases that provide more complicated alternatives for bugchasing experiences.

Methodology

This article explores three cases. These were obtained as part of a larger project which included interviews with men who defined themselves as ‘bugchasers’ due to their fantasizing about HIV infection online and/or seeking the virus ‘offline’. Participants were recruited through the creation of a research-specific Twitter profile, to which anonymised participant quotes, questions and literature excerpts were uploaded weekly, generating a sense of rapport and accountability with online bugchasing groups. Participants messaged the profile directly or interacted with its posts before being asked to participate. Standard participant information, consent forms and pseudonymization procedures were followed. In total, 25 participants were recruited. All participants were males, ranging from 24 to 69 years and living in the UK, US, Canada, Mexico, Germany, France, Australia and Philippines.

All participants were in-depth interviewed via Skype. Participants were given the option to use audio-only or audio-and-video connections, although only audio was recorded and then transcribed. The use of online interviews was favoured for several reasons: not only did it allow to extend the geographical location of participants, but it allowed them to find suitably private venues and times and establish a degree of distance during the conversation, which is particularly necessary when interviewing about sensitive topics such as stigmatized sexuality. Following the path established by Ellis (1995, 2004), Tillmann (2001, 2015) and Kiensinger (1998), the interviews were framed as exchanges of opinions and as non-judgemental spaces where participants could share their experiences. A strong emphasis was placed on participant comfort during the interviews.

Bugchasing narratives: from identity to entertainment

This paper presents three personal stories selected for their relevance in exploring the fantasy-fact dualism in bugchasing through their use of PEP and PrEP. The form of case study was preferred as it allows for more in-depth consideration of the totality of factors around these men’s decisions regarding PEP and PrEP and provides a better background to understand their relationship to bugchasing identity and online media.

The excerpts in this piece have been transcribed but not edited for style. Idiosyncratic grammar, use of words, and syntax are used to represent each participants’ background and emotions at the time of the interview.
Scott: “being a bugchaser is such a hot choice”

Scott is a 53 year old male from Sydney, Australia. The interview took place over Skype while he was driving home. Due to poor signal, only voice was used. However, far from being detrimental, the use of voice-only and the interview taking place while driving provoked a radical openness from Scott, which allowed him to talk for hours with minimal prompting. The first question of the interview was an open-ended ‘tell me more about yourself’, which allowed Scott to create a frame for the interview, highlighting certain aspects of his identity. In this way, Scott comments: “I’ve come the full spectrum, I think: safe sex to experiencing how amazing barebacking was, how much of a better feeling it was.” He explains that, having reached adulthood in the 1980s, his early experiences were marked by a profound fear of HIV/AIDS and that it was only in his late 40s when he started experimenting with bareback. It was in 2010 when he first had “a guy cum inside me” accidentally. From that unintentional beginning, Scott started asking that guys ejaculated inside him while having sex, even if he only had sex with those he believed were HIV-negative:

“A couple years ago, I was spending a lot of time on Twitter and on Breeding.zone, and my desires for the intense sexual experience of taking a cock from a poz guy just came to the foreground. I really had to admit to myself that I really was a bugchaser and I actually started trying to seek out positive guys to breed me.”

Scott’s explanation presents a linear narrative from being fearful of HIV and safer-sex to a bugchasing identity by means of increasing sexual experimentation facilitated by online engagements. In fact, both Twitter and Breeding.zone are websites which frequently appear mentioned by the research participants as contributing to a development and affirmation of bugchasing desires. Scott’s narrative and the role of online sites fits into the deviance framework proposed by Becker (1966). In this view, a full bugchasing identity would be the product of a sustained ‘deviant career’ facilitated by certain factors such as online engagements.

Scott’s bugchasing identity is constructed mainly in positive terms: “being a genuine bugchaser is such a hot choice: it’s very stimulating, it’s very sexy, it’s very intense. The sex is like your adrenaline is pumping.” Scott sustains that bugchasing sex is more exciting than other forms of sex and argues that it is a ‘choice’: moving from safer-sex to bugchasing is an agentive process. Scott is not naïve about the practical implications of HIV infection. When asked about whether the long-term effects of HIV ever troubled his fetish, he replied:

“No, I’m totally fine with it. I know what the health implications are, but I’m totally fine with them. I know my intent to stay unmedicated for as long as possible will tie in with that, but I’m totally fine with that, totally fine.”

Scott is not only familiar with the medical facts of HIV but uses them as part of his bugchasing practices. His reference to staying unmedicated refers to his refusal to engage in anti-retroviral treatment soon after being diagnosed, which has proven to significantly reduce the risk of comorbidities and long-term complications (Brown et al. 2017):

“I’m adamant that when I do test poz, I feel for guys in my position and how difficult, and how much it hurts, and how painful it is having this desire and not having it fulfilled so I will stay off medication for as long as I possibly can and I will make myself available as a gift-giver.”

That is, his commitment to his bugchasing identity extends to risking his own health to provide a’ valuable’ service to other bugchasers by infecting them, a form of sacrifice out of the suffering of not having had his desire to be infected fulfilled.

The pain of this unfulfillment is one of the few negative affects that Scott associates with bugchasing.

While being a bugchaser is a “hot choice”, it is also “such a disappointing choice because most guys out there are not genuine.” He explains that most people who will play along with bugchasing narratives will do so only under the influence of certain drugs such as crystal meth and amphetamines (a practice known as chemsex) (see Race 2009), which he strongly opposes. His choice is further constricted by the effectiveness of public health programs in Australia: the availability of anti-
retroviral medication and testing in the country mean that most people infected with the virus are diagnosed and treated. When on effective treatment, most HIV-positive people reach ‘undetectable’ status, meaning they cannot infect others (see Prevention Access Campaign 2016 for a key summary of this, and Dean 2015a; Feliciantonio 2017; Jones 2017 for a discussion). These are obstacles that Scott has to overcome to become HIV-positive and prove the legitimacy of his bugchasing identity. He recalls a story:

“One guy I’ve chatted to, who was bugchasing just like me, he tested poz in October of last year and he resorted to using a toothbrush in his hole before spending a week with another guy who had only recently seroconverted after having sex in Thailand. So he pozzed up. Two weeks later he was poz. Since then, he says, he has successfully pozzed up to ten other guys.”

This story, regardless of its veracity, serves as an example of an ‘ideal’ narrative and portrays the apparent extents a bugchaser is willing to go to be infected. Scott also points: “I know a couple of friends of mine who have been successful at becoming poz […] they have a feeling now that they’re proud, a feeling that the seed is very potent, it’s very strong.” In this imagery, HIV (also referred to as ‘seed’) confers a degree of mystical energy and power. These narratives of success serve to create a common folklore for bugchasers who, like Scott, recite them as evidence of the rightfulness of their quest.

What is at stake for Scott in bugchasing? What does it mean to him? Whereas authors such as Reynolds (2007) have proposed diverse meanings for HIV and HIV-infected semen, the virus has a clear significance for Scott: connection.

“I want to feel a connection with another man. I want to feel that man… I want to have a part of another man living inside of me. Almost like the feeling of wanting to be pregnant, that’s how I would sort of describe it.”

While other participants have explained their desires as fuelled by seeking thrill, breaking taboos, or feeling ‘complete’, Scott’s narrative is anchored on a genealogical construction where HIV serves as a vehicle of connection between men and establishes a system of kinship that parallels heterosexual reproduction in its emphasis on genetic material. This construction is analysed by Tim Dean in Unlimited Intimacy (2009), where he asks: “What would it mean for a young gay man today to be able to trace his virus back to, say, Michel Foucault?” (89), metaphorically illustrating the genealogical power of HIV to establish alternative lines of kinship and alliance, a view supported by Scott.

Twitter, another of the factors of the deviant career presented by Scott, reappears at the end of the interview. Scott says,

“for me, [social media platforms] are a key component of my daily life, certainly for my sexual life I get support from people on Twitter who are there to support me and with my desires and I can tell you quite frankly that I don’t have any one like to speak to when I want to speak about bugchasing […] The intimacy and connection with my social media contacts, particularly through Twitter, is very important to me.”

Scott, who maintains an active yet anonymous account on Twitter, is clear that his presence on the social network plays a significant role on his identity and life. This is in line with the assumptions of previous researchers, who believed that presence on certain social media and dating sites could evidence a users’ identity. In Scott’s experience, these engagements online provide intimacy, support and affirmation, generating ideas of community.

Scott’s narrative is radical in his commitment to a bugchasing identity. He represents many of the characteristics previous researchers have associated with bugchasers: a strong social media presence, a committed resignification for HIV as a means of connection, intimacy and erotic arousal, and a definitely accepted ‘bugchasing’ self-identification. However, his case is unique among my participant sample and, thus, should not be carelessly assumed to represent the whole of the bugchasing group. The following case studies, those of Marvin/Eric20, and Milo, who show varying degrees of commitment to the fetish, beliefs in HIV and uses of social media.
Marvin and Eric20: is this real life, or is it just fantasy?

Marvin’s interview has been one of the most interesting of the project. Marvin proved to be an enlightening critic of gay culture, well-versed in its historical struggles and willing to openly talk. Perhaps the most interesting feature of Marvin’s case was that he was Marvin but also Eric20, his online, younger, alter ego. This case focuses on that interaction between the offline Marvin and the online Eric20, the ‘real’ and the ‘fantasy’. The two personae, Marvin and Eric20, use social media differently and perform different bugchasing roles. In so doing, they contest the certainty of bugchasing-as-identity presented by Scott previously.

Marvin, a 69 year-old man who lives in London, was happy to engage in a conversation about the research and his past experiences with HIV prevention over Twitter. Although he didn’t identify directly as a bugchaser, he still wanted to be interviewed and I thought he could be an interesting gatekeeper and informant. When asked to introduce himself in, he replies:

“I’m 69 years old, I’m not retired but stopped working years ago due to ill health. I’ve worked in marketing and administration in legal environments, I also worked for an HIV charity in the late 80s and early 90s. I am HIV negative.”

This introduction is further complemented by a background story: while active during the early years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the UK as a manager at an important HIV charity, Marvin now showed a considerable degree of infirmity and disability which had ‘forced’ him to stop having sex six years ago, given that he was unable to find willing partners.

From the start, Marvin makes it clear that his relationship to HIV is conceived in negative terms:

“I lost most of my friends, lost most of my close friends, lost a lot, almost all of my past boyfriends, only one of them is still alive; and I lost the one person I truly loved. And there’s quite a bit of – I’m not sure about anger – but I mean, I lost all my friends and there is a big hole in my life as a result of that.”

In this way, Marvin activates the images of the early years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. However, at the sexual level, Marvin’s relationship to the virus is marked by indifference: “I never sought HIV, but I have never necessarily taken particular precautions when meeting people who are HIV positive for regular sex.” The indifference and lack of safer-sex or risk-reduction practices is, upon further questioning, underpinned by a belief that he was immune to the virus, since he has not been infected despite having been exposed regularly.

Marvin’s interview turns all the more interesting when he reveals: “I have another internet character who is considerably younger and is HIV positive and doesn’t take meds. It is just a fantasy character.” That character is Eric20, a twenty-year-old gay man who exists in a variety of online platforms. Marvin explains:

“What can I say? How did I develop him? I invented him. I had photographs of somebody I took in the early 1980s and I used those pictures as the guy’s profile pictures. So this guy, his pictures were taken in the early 1980s, when the guy was 19, I think, maybe 20, and that was 35 years ago.”

Eric20 has a rich backstory: born in England, he attended Imperial College London and now works writing computer code for a ‘secret’ organisation. When asked whether people ever challenge the legitimacy of Eric20, Marvin replies: “He has been the same age since 2002–2003, but the internet people are very thick. Especially on sex sites. So they are very, very dumb.” In the few cases when they challenge Eric20’s legitimacy, Marvin would simply block them. Marvin’s perception of online users as ‘very dumb’ is radically different from Scott’s identification with them.

Talking about Eric20’s sexual tastes, Marvin explains: “he’s basically into everything that I’m not into. So he is into extreme BDSM and stuff like that,” as well as bugchasing. In particular, he argues that Eric20 receives bugchasing related-messages “all the time.” When asked about these, the interview takes an interesting turn:
Interviewer (J): Do you get many proposals on your profile for bareback or bugchasing?
Marvin: Hmm… My official profile, no. My official profile doesn’t put down an HIV status and my official profile, because I’m 69, doesn’t get many hits. What a surprise!

Interviewer (J): I mean in your fictional profile.
Marvin: My fictional one? Oh, god, yes, all the time.

Interviewer (J): How do you reply to them?
Marvin: Hmm… I initially, if they are older, I block them. If they are younger, I entertain them for a bit.

Interviewer (J): Okay. Would you also entertain them in real life?
Marvin: Of course no, no, no, it’s not real life. Is this the real life? Is this just fantasy? No. It is entertainment.

A clear division is established between Marvin and Eric20: whereas Eric20 has a well-developed backstory, he is rendered as an instrument of entertainment for Marvin. There is no confusion: Eric20 is a bugchaser, but Marvin is not. And yet, in such a strong defence of the separation between ‘reality’ and ‘entertainment’ there is an unanswered question about why bugchasing would be entertaining for someone who is not a bugchaser in ‘reality’. I question him further:

Interviewer (J): Yeah… and this character, do you ever, like, feel like that would be an ideal life or…?
Marvin: Oh, god, no. No, it’s not REAL. These are not real. Definitely not real.

Interviewer (J): So you wouldn’t want to be like him?
Marvin: OH, GOD, NO. He is into the most extreme sex, which I don’t enjoy, never enjoyed. But, as I said, it’s highly entertaining.

Again, Marvin sustains the separation between the practices, desires, and identities of Eric20 and his offline ‘real’ self. Eric20 is relegated to be an instrument of entertainment. Given Marvin’s veiled refusal to discuss whether he held any bugchasing desires himself, even if channelled through Eric, I decide to focus on what kind of entertainment Eric20 provides:

Interviewer (J): Is this an entertainment of the sexual kind or more just amusement or…?
Marvin: It’s totally entertainment, but it is mostly sexual. So yeah, I have a wank at the end of it.

The fact that Eric20 is used as Marvin’s source of pornography (as he acknowledges that he doesn’t consistently use any other pornographic material) problematises Marvin’s emphasis on a reality/fantasy division regarding the desires Eric20 embodies. Marvin is not entirely unaware of this, either, as he argues:

“I mean, it’s interesting because I have… there’s a proper me, the Marvin, and then there’s the Eric character who is the complete opposite but… my Twitter so far is that I tweet about HIV and chemsex because I do. Because I have been there, I’ve seen what’s happened with all my generation and people who died from HIV and I really don’t want it to happen, but then on the other side of the coin, I have my Eric character who is my entertainment.”

This blurring is perhaps bound to remain undecipherable in the interface between the desires, the nature of one’s fantasies and our use of social media.

Marvin and Eric20 represent a blurry and messy relationship to bugchasing where identity is far from clear, stable or fixed. They represent a different take on what bugchasing is: not entirely reality, but perhaps not totally fantasy either. The fact that Marvin’s bugchasing is confined to the online
realm may well be incidental, due to age or infirmity. Overall Marvin and Eric20 represent a serious challenge to the assumption that those who express bugchasing interest online actually engage in bugchasing behaviours offline. Far from an instrumental site where Marvin finds willing partners, these online websites are more a sexually recreational life-line for a man who has lost his offline sex life. They are a source of entertainment, as he emphasizes, with no offline parallel.

This blurring occurs through a series of sites such as GayRomeo, Recon, CollarSpace, etc. Marvin is clear that each site presents unique advantages and is more popular in certain geographical areas or communities. He has recently closed several of the profiles due to the evolution of the sites which he felt didn’t welcome his interests anymore. Overall, Marvin believes that Eric20 is bound to disappear: “I’m getting less and less interested in Eric, so I’m spending less and less time. Because I’m busy doing other things.”

**Milo, PrEP as ‘training wheels’**

Milo is a 28 year-old gay man living in the south of France who was very interested in doing an interview but insisted that it be written, as he didn’t feel he could express himself well enough in English. This form of interview presents its own challenges: the impossibility to do follow-up questions and the difficulty in assessing the participant’s wellbeing. However, Milo’s responses were carefully thought out. Milo, who argues that he has a very good knowledge of sexual health, defines bugchasing as “the fact to expose yourself to the opportunity of getting HIV or STDs, knowing or not, passively or actively,” and acknowledges that “following my definition of it, I must admit that I am a bugchaser, even if I don’t really accept it for the moment.” Unlike the certainty of Scott and Marvin regarding their bugchasing identities or lack thereof, Milo presents himself as a bugchaser that is not yet entirely sure about his identity and his own acceptance of it.

The uncertainty of Milo’s identity is best explored through his use of PrEP, meaning pre-exposure prophylaxis, a drug regime consisting of a daily pill of tenofovir and emtricitabine which prevents HIV infection (see Dean 2015a; Feliciantonio 2017 for further discussion of the role of PrEP in gay culture). Milo explains his beginnings in bugchasing thus:

Interviewer (J): When and why did you realize you were a bugchaser?
Milo: It’s quite recent. About a few month ago, I begun to speak with two neg guys who were willing to get HIV. We spoke a lot about it and they convinced me to try it (what I was already doing before PrEP in a certain way). I had a pause on taking pills for a few days because of no-sex period, was really horny and I fucked one of them knowing he hadn’t been tested for two years and already had some anon loads in him that day. On my way home, I realized that I took another step on my fantasies that night. It’s been a few months since I really stopped taking my PrEP pills regularly. During August, I totally stopped it for 1 month and get loaded by 4 guys (3 anon and 1 friend). It was a real turn on not knowing what will happen.

In linear narratives, the abandoning of PrEP is normally presented by bugchasing discourses and fiction online as a significant milestone for bugchasing identity: leaving PrEP is seen as an allegiance to a bugchasing identity as it removes the last barrier of defence against HIV. In this case, PrEP takes place alongside bugchasing, as pills are still taken – albeit irregularly – while engaging in unprotected sex. The notions of barebacking (with PrEP and thus not at risk of HIV) and bugchasing are blurred as Milo performs the same sexual acts, sometimes under the protection of PrEP, sometimes not. There are, however, different emotional and erotic charges to these acts, as Milo highlights the erotic appeal of non-PrEP-ed sex. This is further evidenced in the reason he provides for not having entirely abandoned PrEP:
Interviewer (J): Do you ever think about the long-term side effects of HIV?
Milo: Yes I actually do. That’s what keeps me from stopping PrEP totally.

While irregular PrEP taking does not protect against HIV, it remains here constructed as a way of avoiding fully identifying with a bugchasing identity. This is further emphasized in his statement that: “I’m actually on PrEP, but not all the time. I think it’s a great way to stay negative as you can still bareback. As many bugchasers say, it’s like ‘training wheels’ for the moment you finally decide to go without it.” Unlike Scott and Marvin, Milo presents a more ambivalent and blurrier bugchaser identity, particularly evident through his use of PrEP.

Assuming an identity for Milo based on his online engagements would be problematic given how flexible his offline behaviours are. However, Milo does have a presence online, where he spends hours trying to find sexual partners. While he acknowledges that he considers some of his online contacts as friends, he explains: “I don’t think they consider me as a friend too.” This troubles him:

“Those online conversations are important for me because I usually can’t get high [horny] alone. I need someone to share my fantasies with. But it’s frustrating because many times, I realize that when they are not excited anymore, they don’t care about me. I try to protect myself thinking that they were just fake.”

Whereas Scott’s online engagements were key to his daily life, and Marvin’s were plain entertainment, Milo’s lie somewhere in between: perhaps not as significant and he’d like, but painfully significant still. Interestingly, we see the opposite side to Eric20, where Milo is the ‘victim’ of purely entertaining engagements.

Similarly to Marvin/Eric20, Milo also engages in a dual performance online: “There is my ‘wise, kind, smart and sexual’ self and my darker ‘dominant/submissive, bugchasing, hardcore’ self online, depending on what I’m looking for at the moment.” Even if not as developed as Eric20, Milo’s online character still problematizes the assumption that bugchasers online and offline are parallel identities. Despite Milo not fully accepting his bugchasing identity, he has accepted some of the narratives common among bugchasers, such as the ritualized relationship between gift-giver and bugchaser: “I would expect my relationship with my gift-giver as ritualized, maybe like the vampire and recruit relationship, if I may say so.”

**Conclusion**

Previous research on bugchasing has represented bugchasers as performing a fixed and overarching identity in their search for HIV. Stories like Scott’s evidence that bugchasing can act as a powerful sexual identity. However, I argue that this is not necessarily representative of the bugchasing group. In fact, the two other cases considered here complicate this identity-based assumption. Men who engage in the fantasy or practices of bugchasing identify with their fetish in complex and evolving ways. This requires a framework capable of theorising the fluidity of practices and emotions that bugchasers such as Milo seem to experience in their sex lives. Such a framework is provided by Paasonen’s (2018) conceptualization of sex as play in her work *Many Splendored Things*. Her position that “sex involves experimentation, quest for intensity of sensation” (2) and is not reducible to identity categories is appropriate to the analysis of the data I have presented here. In particular, in her discussion of BDSM, she argues that perhaps it would be worth considering these as practices that people do instead of identities that people are. In the same way, we need to assess whether bugchasing is experienced as an identity or a practice by bugchasers themselves, as well as the complex and multifarious links between sexual identities and practices.

PrEP, as a new medical intervention, complicates a stark binary between fantasy and reality, providing avenues through which bugchasers may seek to ‘play out’ their fantasies while remaining safe from HIV. In so doing, the parallel use of online as fantasy and offline as reality is also challenged: PrEP-taking bugchasers may still be located within the realm of ‘fantasy’ when engaging in offline sex. At the same
time, these cases reveal how PrEP and PEP may coexist with bugchasing in fluid and, perhaps, contradictory ways, thus questioning stark separations between safer-sex and bugchasing.

Finally, these stories provide evidence in how bugchasers use the internet in the development of their fetish, and how they feel about their online involvements. In particular, the experiences of Marvin and Milo clearly contest previous research and present a complex interaction between online practices and offline behaviours. These cases could suggest that internet bugchasing groups provide support and affirmation for some bugchasers such as Milo. However, others, such Marvin, are very clear about the separation between their online and offline selves. Overall, and in need of further and more extensive research, it is clear with these three case studies that the internet plays a major social and sexual role in bugchasing groups.

This paper has provided empirical evidence to suggest that bugchasers do not experience their fetishes as fixed identities parallel to their online engagements. Instead, the stories have explored how these men feel their bugchasing desires and identities as fluid and evolving, experiment with their online practices, and participate in medical HIV-interventions in diverse ways. In so doing, this paper calls into question the assumptions underpinning previous research and proposes that interview and ethnographic material is required to fully comprehend the nuances and complexities of the bugchasing groups. However, I recognise the need for further research and the sampling of more participants from diverse backgrounds and identifications. Overall, in addition to providing a more comprehensive portrayal of bugchasers as fluid and evolving practices/identities, this exploration also contributes to better understand how these men engage with the internet, use social media, and how such mediate practices influence their offline behaviours.

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