Correlates of recent HIV infection among men who have sex with men recruited through the internet in Huzhou City, Eastern China

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Abstract

Objective: To identify factors associated with recent HIV infection among men who have sex with men (MSM) in Huzhou City, Eastern China, who seek sexual partners via the internet.

Methods: Adult members of Tencent QQ instant messaging software, who completed a face-to-face interview questionnaire and serological HIV testing at baseline, were enrolled into this prospective cohort study. Questionnaires and serological testing were also completed at 6 and 12 months. Cox proportional hazards was used for initial bivariate analyses of differences between participants with or without recent HIV infection, and for subsequent forward stepwise multiple regression of statistically significant variables.

Results: Out of 415 baseline participants, 283 completed the 12-month follow-up (25 with recent HIV infection and 258 without; recent HIV infection rate, 8.20 per 100 person-years). Recent HIV infection was shown to be significantly associated with ≤ high school education (versus college/university), registered residence outside Huzhou City (versus within Huzhou City), having ≥ two male sexual partners, and syphilis infection.

Conclusions: Improving education levels, treating syphilis promptly, and reducing the number of male sexual partners may reduce HIV transmission among MSM in Eastern China.
Keywords
HIV, HIV in men who have sex with men (MSM), HIV transmission

Introduction

Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection among men who have sex with men (MSM) is a major public health problem in China.1–3 Out of groups at risk, the prevalence of HIV in China is growing fastest in MSM,4,5 and in 2015, MSM accounted for 28% of all new reported HIV infections in China.6 Huzhou City in Eastern China has a relatively low prevalence of acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS),7 but the rate of new HIV diagnoses among MSM increased from 4.1% in 2009 to 41.7% in 2014.8

There is a high risk of HIV transmission among MSM, which is mainly associated with some MSM having multiple sexual partners and unfixed sexual partners, and engaging in unprotected anal intercourse (i.e. inconsistent condom use).7,9 Unlike previously, most MSM are now more inclined to seek sexual partners through the internet than through fixed locations.10–13 Several surveys have reported factors, such as multiple sexual partners and inconsistent condom use, as associated with recent HIV infection among MSM;14–19 however, the rate of recent HIV infection and associated risk factors among MSM who seek male sexual partners through the internet remains unclear. Thus, the aim of the present prospective cohort study was to evaluate the correlates of recent HIV infection in MSM recruited through the internet in Huzhou City, Eastern China.

Participants and methods

Study population and data collection

This prospective cohort study included MSM aged 20–60 years recruited through convenience sampling in Huzhou City, Zhejiang Province, Eastern China. Males who used Tencent QQ instant messaging software (Shenzhen Tencent Computer System Co., Ltd, Shenzhen, China) were invited to participate via 18 MSM-oriented Tencent QQ ‘making friends’ groups.7,16,17 Individuals who agreed to enrol in this study, and who subsequently completed a baseline questionnaire and who were found to be negative for HIV antibodies following baseline serological testing, were enrolled. Participants then completed two further questionnaires and underwent serological HIV tests at 6- and 12-month follow-up appointments.

Study participants were assured of privacy for the follow-up interviews and strict anonymity in order to decrease reporting bias. Questionnaires were completed by individual face-to-face interviews, conducted within a 30 min radius of Huzhou City, that were performed by four well-trained interviewers (ZY, JL, ZD, MJ) between October 2014 and January 2016. Serological tests were performed by obtaining 5 ml blood samples from participants at voluntary counselling and testing clinics. Blood samples were allowed to stand for clotting, then centrifuged to obtain serum. Serum samples were stored at −80°C prior to testing for HIV by enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) (HIV ELISA kit; Beijing Wantai, Beijing, China) and samples that were positive using the ELISA screening test were confirmed using a more specific Western blot immunoassay (HIV-2 BLOT 1.2 kit; MP Biomedicals Asia Pacific PTE Ltd., Singapore). Both types of test were performed according to the manufacturer’s instructions.
All baseline surveys and serological tests were conducted between October 2014 and January 2015, and 12-month follow-up surveys and serological tests were conducted between October 2015 and January 2016. Following the 12-month follow-up, participants were divided into a control group (without HIV infection) and HIV group (HIV infection detected at the 6- or 12-month follow-up serological test) for statistical analyses of factors associated with HIV infection.

The study protocol was approved by the Ethics Review Committees of the Huzhou Center for Disease Control and Prevention and each participant provided written informed consent.

**Questionnaire measurements**

Self-reported data on marriage status (unmarried, divorced, married, or cohabiting), registered residence (within Huzhou City, outside of Huzhou City), age, duration of residence in Huzhou City (≤2 years or > 2 years), education level, monthly income, sexual orientation (bisexual, uncertain or exclusively homosexual), number of male sexual partners in the last 6 months, and number of anal sex experiences with a man in the last month, were obtained. All participants were asked whether they had sex with steady male partners; whether they had received HIV prevention services (such as HIV publicity materials, condoms, consulting services, and training seminars) in the last year; whether they had previously been tested for HIV; whether they had used condoms every time they engaged in anal sex with a man in the last 6 months; whether they drank alcohol or took drugs (including for sexual enhancement, erectile dysfunction, or premature/delayed ejaculation), or used aphrodisiacs (to increase libido) during sex with a man; and whether they had a current syphilis infection. Knowledge of HIV was evaluated by inquiring about eight HIV-related issues as previously described; an individual was considered to have comprehensive knowledge of HIV if he responded to ≥ six questions correctly. The rate of HIV infection was calculated as the number of participants with newly diagnosed HIV infection divided by the total number of person-years at the end of the 12-month follow-up period.

**Statistical analyses**

Data are presented as mean ± SD or n (%) prevalence for each parameter. Cox proportional hazards was used for initial bivariate analyses of the association between each parameter and participants with or without HIV infection. Variables that exhibited statistically significant differences (considered to be indicated by \( P < 0.1 \)) were included in a forward stepwise multiple Cox proportional hazards regression model to identify variables independently associated with recent HIV infection. All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS software, version 19.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA) for Windows, and a \( P \) value < 0.05 was considered to indicate statistical significance.

**Results**

**Background characteristics and initial bivariate analysis**

A total of 902 MSM were invited to take part in the study, and nearly half agreed to enrol (response rate, 46%). A total of 415 MSM respondents were finally enrolled following completion of baseline questionnaire and negative baseline HIV test result. Of these, 327 and 283 completed the 6- and 12-month follow-ups, respectively, resulting in a 68.2% (283/415) continuation rate at 12 months. Of the 31.8% of participants who had dropped out by the 12-month follow-up, follow-up losses were due to
being absent from Huzhou City, a deacti-
vated contact phone number or QQ
number, and refusal to continue participa-
tion in the study. Potential reporting biases
were investigated by comparing the analysis
group who completed the follow-ups, and
the group of participants who did not com-
plete follow-ups. Statistical analysis (Cox
proportional hazards) of the general charac-
teristics between these two groups revealed
no statistically significant differences.

At the 12-month follow-up, 25 cases of
recent HIV infection were reported, equat-
ing to a rate of 8.20 per 100 person-years
(95% CI 5.6 per 100 person-years, 10.9 per
100 person-years). Using 6- and 12-month
follow-up data, the control group com-
prised 258 MSM without HIV infection
and the HIV group (with recent HIV infec-
tion) comprised 25 cases (Table 1).

Overall mean age was 29.8 ± 6.1 years in
the control group and 30.2 ± 8.3 years in
the HIV group, and there was no
between-group statistically significant dif-
ference in age. Initial bivariate analyses
revealed that education level, residence
location, number of male sexual partners,
consistent use of condoms, use of alcohol
and drugs during sex, previous tests for
HIV and current syphilis infection were sig-
ificantly different between the control and
HIV groups (Table 1).

Approximately half (137/283 [48.4%]) of
respondents reported that they had used
condoms every time they had engaged in
anal sex with a man in the last 6 months,
and 4.4% (6/137) of participants who had
used condoms every time during anal
sex with a man in the last 6 months were
positive for recent HIV infection compared
with 13.0% (19/146) of respondents who had
not used condoms every time (P = 0.016).
Nearly two-thirds (188/283 [66.4%]) of
respondents had ever been tested for HIV,
12/188 (6.4%) of whom had acquired recent
HIV infection compared with 13/95 (13.7%)
of respondents who had not undergone HIV
testing (P = 0.048). Present syphilis infection
was reported in 38/283 (13.4%) of respond-
ts. A higher proportion of respondents
with syphilis were positive for recent HIV
infection (7/38 [18.4%]) compared with
respondents without syphilis infection (18/
245 [7.3%]; P = 0.027) (Table 1). In addi-
tion, having a lower education level (P =
0.024), registered residence outside Huzhou
City (P = 0.020), ≥ two sexual partners (P =
0.019) and consuming alcohol and/or drugs
during sex (P = 0.072) were significantly asso-
ciated with increased rates of recent HIV
infection (Table 1).

**Multiple regression model**

Stepwise multiple regression analyses using
Cox proportional hazards (Table 2) showed
that respondents who had completed col-
lege/university education were significantly
less likely to be diagnosed with recent HIV
infection than those who had not (HR
0.399, 95% CI 0.172, 0.926; P < 0.05).
Respondents were significantly more likely
to be diagnosed with recent HIV infection if
their registered residence was outside
Huzhou City versus within Huzhou City
(HR 2.930, 95% CI 1.196, 7.180; P < 0.05);
if they had ≥ two male sexual partners in the
previous 6 months versus < two male sexual
partners (HR 2.773, 95% CI 1.150, 6.687;
P < 0.05), and if they had a present syphilis
infection versus those without syphilis (HR
3.174, 95% CI 1.259, 8.002; P < 0.05).

**Discussion**

Together with paid blood donors and intra-
venous drug users, MSM are a focus of
AIDS prevention and control in China,
due to increased risk of HIV, mainly as a
result of many having multiple sexual part-
ners and engaging in unprotected anal
intercourse. The rate of recent HIV
infection in the present study was 8.20
per 100 person-years (95% CI 5.6 per
Table 1. Bivariate Cox proportional hazards analyses of variables associated with recent HIV infection, acquired during a 12-month follow-up, in men who have sex with men recruited via the internet in Huzhou City, China

| Variable                                           | Control group \(n = 258\) | HIV group \(n = 25\) | HR (95% CI)       | Statistical significance |
|----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|
| **Age group**                                      |                          |                      |                   |                          |
| \(\leq29\)                                         | 131 (91.6)               | 12 (8.4)             | 1.110 (0.506, 2.432) | NS                       |
| \(>30\)                                            | 127 (90.7)               | 13 (9.3)             |                   |                          |
| **Education level**                                |                          |                      |                   |                          |
| \(\leq\)High school                               | 102 (86.4)               | 16 (13.6)            | 0.391 (0.173, 0.885) | \(P = 0.024\)           |
| \(\geq\)College/university                        | 156 (94.5)               | 9 (5.5)              |                   |                          |
| **Marriage status with female**                    |                          |                      |                   |                          |
| Unmarried or divorced                              | 204 (92.3)               | 17 (7.7)             | 1.709 (0.737, 3.960) | NS                       |
| Married or cohabitating                            | 54 (87.1)                | 8 (12.9)             |                   |                          |
| **Registered Residence**                           |                          |                      |                   |                          |
| Huzhou city                                        | 139 (95.2)               | 7 (4.8)              | 2.821 (1.178, 6.755) | \(P = 0.020\)           |
| Outside of Huzhou city                             | 119 (86.9)               | 18 (13.1)            |                   |                          |
| **Residence duration in Huzhou city**              |                          |                      |                   |                          |
| \(\leq\)2 years                                    | 45 (88.2)                | 6 (11.8)             | 0.687 (0.274, 1.720) | NS                       |
| \(>2\) years                                       | 213 (91.8)               | 19 (8.2)             |                   |                          |
| **Monthly income**                                 |                          |                      |                   |                          |
| \(<\)4000 RMB                                      | 185 (90.2)               | 20 (9.8)             | 0.634 (0.238, 1.690) | NS                       |
| \(\geq\)4000 RMB                                   | 73 (93.6)                | 5 (6.4)              |                   |                          |
| **Sexual orientation**                             |                          |                      |                   |                          |
| Bisexual or uncertain                              | 85 (93.4)                | 6 (6.6)              | 1.506 (0.601, 3.770) | NS                       |
| Exclusively homosexual                              | 173 (90.1)               | 19 (9.9)             |                   |                          |
| Had sex with steady male partners                  |                          |                      |                   |                          |
| No                                                 | 132 (92.3)               | 11 (7.7)             | 1.312 (0.596, 2.891) | NS                       |
| Yes                                                | 126 (90.0)               | 14 (10.0)            |                   |                          |
| **Comprehensive knowledge of HIV**                 |                          |                      |                   |                          |
| No                                                 | 50 (89.3)                | 6 (10.7)             | 0.773 (0.309, 1.935) | NS                       |
| Yes                                                | 208 (91.6)               | 19 (8.4)             |                   |                          |
| **Number of male sexual partners in the last 6 months** |                      |                      |                   |                          |
| \(<\)2                                              | 157 (94.6)               | 9 (5.4)              | 2.655 (1.173, 6.008) | \(P = 0.019\)           |
| \(\geq\)2                                           | 101 (86.3)               | 16 (13.7)            |                   |                          |
| Had anal sex with a man in the last 6 months       |                          |                      |                   |                          |
| No                                                  | 43 (93.5)                | 3 (6.5)              | 1.457 (0.436, 4.868) | NS                       |
| Yes                                                 | 215 (90.7)               | 22 (9.3)             |                   |                          |
| **Number of times had anal sex with a man in the last month** |            |                      |                   |                          |
| \(<\)4                                              | 197 (90.8)               | 20 (9.2)             | 0.811 (0.304, 2.161) | NS                       |
| \(\geq\)4                                           | 61 (92.4)                | 5 (7.6)              |                   |                          |
| **Used condom during last anal sex with a man**     |                          |                      |                   |                          |
| No                                                  | 97 (93.3)                | 7 (6.7)              | 1.520 (0.635, 3.639) | NS                       |
| Yes                                                 | 161 (89.9)               | 18 (10.1)            |                   |                          |
| **Used condoms every time during anal sex with a man in the last 6 months** |            |                      |                   |                          |
| No                                                  | 127 (87.0)               | 19 (13.0)            | 0.322 (0.129, 0.806) | \(P = 0.016\)           |
| Yes                                                 | 171 (92.1)               | 16 (7.9)             |                   |                          |

(continued)
100 person-years, 10.9 per 100 person-years), which is higher than reported for young Chinese MSM (6.7 per 100 person-years) and MSM in Beijing (7.8 per 100 person-years).

As there are no MSM bars, bathrooms or clubs in Huzhou City, MSM are most likely to seek dating or sexual encounters with men via online resources. Of the present study cohort, 68.2% completed both the 6- and 12-month follow-ups, equating to a relatively high drop-out rate of 31.8%, which may have affected the study results. Losses to follow-up were

| Variable | Study group | Control group (n = 258) | HIV group (n = 25) | HR (95% CI) | Statistical significance |
|----------|-------------|-------------------------|-------------------|-------------|-------------------------|
| Had commercial anal sex with a man | Yes | 131 (95.6) | 6 (4.4) | 0.856 (0.294, 2.493) | NS |
| | No | 211 (90.9) | 21 (9.1) | 1.193 (0.544, 2.614) | NS |
| Had sex with a female | Yes | 47 (92.2) | 4 (7.8) | 1.388 (0.521, 3.699) | NS |
| | No | 146 (91.8) | 13 (8.2) | 1.194 (0.545, 2.618) | NS |
| Seek male sexual partners by internet | Yes | 68 (93.2) | 5 (6.8) | 2.163 (0.933, 5.011) | P = 0.072 |
| | No | 190 (90.5) | 20 (9.5) | | |
| Consumed alcohol, drugs, or used aphrodisiacs during sex with a man | Yes | 215 (92.7) | 17 (7.3) | 1.499 (0.681, 3.302) | NS |
| | No | 43 (84.3) | 8 (15.7) | | |
| Had group-sex or sex-party with men | Yes | 141 (92.8) | 11 (7.2) | 1.194 (0.545, 2.618) | NS |
| | No | 117 (89.3) | 14 (10.7) | | |
| Doubt yourself infected with sexually transmitted diseases | Yes | 146 (91.8) | 13 (8.2) | 1.903 (0.377, 2.673) | NS |
| | No | 112 (90.3) | 12 (9.7) | | |
| Have ever been diagnosed with a sexually transmitted disease | Yes | 205 (91.1) | 20 (8.9) | 1.003 (0.377, 2.673) | NS |
| | No | 53 (91.4) | 5 (8.6) | | |
| Have ever been tested for HIV | Yes | 176 (93.6) | 12 (6.4) | 0.453 (0.207, 0.993) | P = 0.048 |
| | No | 82 (86.3) | 13 (13.7) | | |
| Received HIV prevention services (HIV publicity materials, condoms, consulting services, training seminars) in last year | Yes | 149 (90.9) | 15 (9.1) | 1.087 (0.488, 2.419) | NS |
| | No | 109 (91.6) | 10 (8.4) | | |
| Present syphilis infection | Yes | 227 (92.7) | 18 (7.3) | 2.684 (1.121, 6.427) | P = 0.027 |
| | No | 31 (81.6) | 7 (18.4) | | |

Data presented as n(%) prevalence for each variable.
HR, hazard ratio; CI, confidence interval; RMB, renminbi.
NS, no statistically significant between-group difference (P > 0.1; Cox proportional hazards).
attributed to being absent from Huzhou City, a deactivated contact phone number or QQ number, and refusal to continue participation. Respondents whose registered residences were outside of Huzhou City were found to be significantly more likely to have recent HIV infections, emphasising the importance of AIDS prevention work among migrant workers.

The present study showed that respondents who had completed college/university education were significantly less likely to be positive for recent HIV infections than those with lower education levels (HR 0.399, 95% CI 0.172, 0.926), and concurred with the results of other published studies showing that higher education levels were associated with significantly lower rates of recent HIV infection.25 Therefore, the importance of HIV testing should be emphasised to MSM who have a low level of education. Core knowledge about AIDS has been shown to be associated with lower rates of HIV infection,8 thus AIDS health education may promote behavioural change among MSM. However, there is a serious HIV/AIDS-prevention knowledge gap in MSM who engage in high-risk sexual behaviour,20,26

Table 2. Multiple regression analyses of factors independently associated with recent HIV infection, acquired during a 12-month follow-up, in men who have sex with men (n = 283) recruited via the internet in Huzhou City, Chinaa

| Variable                              | B     | SE    | Wald  | Statistical significance | HR (95% CI) |
|---------------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|--------------------------|-------------|
| Education level                       |       |       |       |                          |             |
| ≤ High school                         | –     | –     | –     | –                        | 1.0         |
| ≥ College/university                  | −0.919| 0.430 | 4.570 | *P = 0.033*              | 0.399 (0.172, 0.926) |
| Registered Residence                  |       |       |       |                          |             |
| Huzhou city                           | –     | –     | –     | –                        | 1.0         |
| Outside of Huzhou city                | 1.075 | 0.457 | 5.529 | *P = 0.019*              | 2.930 (1.196, 7.180) |
| Number of male sexual partners in the last 6 months |       |       |       |                          |             |
| <2                                    | –     | –     | –     | –                        | 1.0         |
| ≥ 2                                   | 1.020 | 0.449 | 5.158 | *P = 0.023*              | 2.773 (1.150, 6.687) |
| Used condoms every time during anal sex with a man in the last 6 months |       |       |       |                          |             |
| No                                    | –     | –     | –     | –                        | 1.0         |
| Yes                                   | −0.713| 0.493 | 2.088 | NS                       | 0.490 (0.186, 1.289) |
| Consumed alcohol, drugs, or used aphrodisiacs during sex with a man |       |       |       |                          |             |
| No                                    | –     | –     | –     | –                        | 1.0         |
| Yes                                   | 0.267 | 0.468 | 0.326 | NS                       | 1.306 (0.522, 3.264) |
| Have ever been tested for HIV          |       |       |       |                          |             |
| No                                    | –     | –     | –     | –                        | 1.0         |
| Yes                                   | −0.592| 0.412 | 2.059 | NS                       | 0.553 (0.247, 1.242) |
| Present syphilis infection             |       |       |       |                          |             |
| No                                    | –     | –     | –     | –                        | 1.0         |
| Yes                                   | 1.155 | 0.472 | 5.992 | *P = 0.014*              | 3.174 (1.259, 8.002) |

a All statistically significant variables from the initial bivariate analyses were included in a forward stepwise multiple regression Cox proportional hazards model.
HR, hazards ratio; CI, confidence interval.
NS, no statistically significant independent association (P > 0.05; Cox proportional hazards).
and reducing this knowledge gap is a challenge to HIV/AIDS health education.

The results of the present survey indicate that participants who had two or more male sexual partners and those with syphilis were more likely to have recent HIV infections than the corresponding comparator group, and several published studies have shown that syphilis infection, multiple sexual partners, and unprotected anal intercourse are major risk factors for recent HIV infection. The importance of using condoms consistently during sexual activity, and reducing the number of sexual partners, should be stressed during HIV/AIDS intervention work targeting high-risk behaviour.

The present study has several limitations. First, it was dependent on self-reporting of risky behaviour and was thus subject to reporting bias, primarily social desirability bias and recall bias, however, respondents were assured of privacy for the follow-up interviews and strict anonymity to decrease reporting bias. The potential reporting biases would exist between the analysis group who completed the follow-ups, and the group of participants who did not complete follow-ups, and statistical analysis of the general characteristics between these two groups revealed no statistically significant differences. Secondly, estimates of risky sexual behaviour in participants recruited through the internet may result in overestimation of the level of high-risk sexual behaviour among the entire MSM population. Finally, respondents were recruited by convenience sampling from MSM-oriented Tencent QQ ‘making friends’ groups, which would not represent a completely randomized sample. Therefore, the findings of the present study need to be verified in a larger study population or through further investigations of MSM recruited through the internet, to identify the correlates of recent HIV infection in MSM who seek sexual partners via the internet.

In conclusion, published HIV infection rates among MSM have been estimated using prospective cohort studies or laboratory methods and show that MSM are at high risk of HIV infection. HIV infection rates differ between regions and over time, but the overall situation appears bleak. In MSM recruited in Huzhou, Eastern China, who seek sexual partners through the internet, the rate of recent HIV infection was associated with education level, registered residence, current syphilis infection and number of male sexual partners. Thus, strategies to improve academic qualifications, treat syphilis promptly, and reduce the number of male sexual partners may help to reduce transmission of HIV in this high-risk population. Prevention and control strategies and measures specific to each country are required to enhance awareness of AIDS and reduce transmission of HIV.

**Acknowledgement**

The authors would like to thank Shigui Yang for his valuable contributions to statistical analysis of data in this study.

**Declaration of conflicting interests**

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

**Funding**

This research received funding from the Mega-Project for National Science and Technology Development under the ‘13th Five-Year Plan of China’ (2013ZX10004-904, 2017ZX10105001-005), Huzhou science and technology research plan projects (2017GY26) and Zhejiang Provincial Program for the Cultivation of High-level Innovative Health talents. The funders had no role in study design, data collection and analysis, decision to publish or preparation of the manuscript.

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