



# Identities in Motion: Cyberspace and Myanmar Men having Sex with Men



Khine Soe Lin (corresponding author) E-mail: khinesoelin07@gmail.com Marc Van der Putten E-mail: marc.vdputten@sgs.tu.ac.th  
School of Global Studies, Thammasat University, Rangsit Campus, Klong Luang Piyachart Bld. 10th Fl. Pathumthani, 12121, Thailand

## Abstract

This paper explores how Myanmar men-having-sex-with-men (MSM) create identity through lived and mediated realities, by using cyber social networks, 30 in-depth interviews were conducted through snowballing among MSM cyber social network members. Content analysis was guided by a social network analysis framework. Networking positively affected connectedness and social support however norms and values were challenged. Age, experience, sex-roles, and peer-relationships seem to influence self-efficacy. Interpersonal dynamics were driven by online-cruising, dating, cyber-sex and off-line encounters. In conclusion, access to social networking offers an outlet for socio-cultural and legal oppressed Myanmar MSM, however building life-skills among younger users' needs attention. Social networks could be appropriate channels for social and health programs targeting MSM.

**Keywords:** Southeast Asia, gay-men, internet, cyber social networks, health promotion

## Aim

To address the question: "how do the cyber social networks influence MSM in developing self-identity and shaping lifestyle?" main objectives for this study were to: (a) describe characteristics of Myanmar MSM interview participants, and (b) explore perceptions among Myanmar MSM participants on how MSM cyber networks influence their self-realization.

## Methods

- A cross-sectional survey conducted in-depth interviews to 30 members of MSM social network member.
- Within an estimated target population of 9,170 MSM social network members, 30 were purposively selected based on inclusion criteria (men, Myanmar national, social network site member) and exclusion criteria (age below 18 years), through internet assisted recruitment of MSM cyber network users by a snowball sampling technique.
- Individual face-to-face interviewed used a semi-structured open-ended questionnaire guided by a social network analysis framework (Bond, 2003).
- Ethnograph (version 5.0) assisted a content analysis.

## Results

### 1. Socio-demographic characteristics

The majority (60%) was between 26-35 years of age, 83% resided in Yangon, 97% had a university level education, 53% were employed, and 37% were students. The majority (60%) was single men, 37% were in an intimate relationship, 67% lived either with their family, 7% lived with their boyfriend, 23% lived on their own.

### 2. Context

Single students and unemployed respondents discover MSM cyber networks from different sources, employed respondents with relationship relied on friends. Employed respondents tended to use chat room daily whereas unemployed respondents use one to three times per week. Most respondents met online friend in offline time.

### 3. Connectedness

Positive experiences in joining MSM cyber networks were quite similar across respondent groups such as making friends, exploring the MSM network, support in self-acceptance, building self-confidence, getting more knowledge about the MSM culture and social activities.

Common negative experiences across groups were breaking confidentiality and misuse of information, the use of fake profiles, cyber bullying, hijacking boyfriends, and sex driven dating. However, misuse of information and cyber bullying was more common in the younger age group.

### 4. Social support

Frequently cited forms of social support included: sharing of information including information on health issues and MSM friendly service providers, sharing of feelings, finding job opportunities, finding shelter with roommates, and financial support. Financial support has to be understood as the common practice in Southeast Asia to share resources among friends in times of need. In addition, some also referred to occasional patron-client relations.

### 5. Norms and values

Across respondents' subgroups, common factors adversely affecting the practice of safe sex were: condom availability, feeling ashamed to buy condoms, and the feeling that condoms adversely affect experiencing climax; being under influence of alcohol; and partner's preference to practice bareback (e.g. unprotected penetrative sex). Younger respondents

particularly referred to a hot and painful sensation when using a condom, the sense of physical separation from their partner, and reduction of sensitivity leading to less pleasure as barriers to practicing safe sex. Furthermore safe sex practice was also challenged when in a romantic relationship.

As for awareness about and use of recreational drugs, common recreational drugs listed among all respondents were alcohol and Viagra. Whereas poppers (alkyl nitrites), Yama (Amphetamine), cough suppressant (Dexto-methaphan) and Sedora (an herbal formulation to induce and increase orgasm, and assist with lack of sexual desire) where mainly known among the more mature (age >26). Most of the younger respondents (18-25 years) were not aware about these recreational drugs.

### 6. Self-efficacy

Across respondents' subgroups it was felt that age difference does affect self-efficacy in relationships, however the direction of affects differed. For example some agreed that older partners have to follow younger partners because older partners were perceived to be disadvantaged and have to give-in to please the younger. Others disagreed and thought that the younger has to follow the older partner because of their ability to influence and act as role model and because of the local culture where younger friends respect older ones.

### 7. Interpersonal dynamics

Not surprisingly older respondents (>25 years) were more likely employed and tended to have a longer history of having close friends in addition to their exclusive intimate relationship with a boyfriend. Whereas the MSM cyber networks provide opportunities to explore and establish initial contacts, close friendships were developed during offline time and were not necessarily preceded by online initiation.

### 8. Community dynamics

The younger respondents (18-25 years) key impacts were: breaking out of isolation, learning to accept oneself, growing confidence about ones' own worth, become aware of the existence of a local and global MSM community, develop a circle of likeminded friends, being able to disclose ones feelings and worries with peers, and learning MSM sub-cultural norms, values, behaviors, and appearance.

## Results

"Experienced persons can persuade. For example, if an experienced person said condom is not good and it can reduce the sensation, an inexperienced person might believe it and follow . . ." (ID19)

". . . I experienced cyber bullying. I showed my private parts in a video. Some guy recorded it and uploaded it on his profile site. Though it didn't contain my face, I knew that it was me. It made me embarrassed and annoyed . . ." (ID26)

". . . I heard that some cute guys are "chu sar". I met that kind of guy. He is an experienced one. He treated me skillfully and asked what he wanted. This happened when I started to use the website. I didn't support my next two boyfriends . . ." (ID11)  
"Chu sar" is the Myanmar term referring to a client who skillfully turns the power-balance to maximize benefit from the relationship.

". . . But, I think some serious people do not like condom because they feel condom separates them from their partner. If they are aroused and eager to have sex and a condom is not at hand, they do not use it . . ." (ID16)

". . . I became more open. I got a more positive view on MSM. The traditional social views I accepted earlier reduced. I learned to accept MSM as a natural behavior. In the past, I was confused about myself, but now I accept myself . . ." (ID30)

". . . We can get the up-to-date information and share experience with other MSM. We can learn about acceptance MSM in the community. They can also discover reasons why people deny their identity or why persons cannot accept themselves such as afraid of being rejected by family, employees or colleagues . . ." (ID13)

## Conclusion

### Cyber network

- offers outlet to discover sexual identity, self-acceptance and build confidence in coming-out, reduce isolation, seek peer support, address needs for intimate relationships
- opens a window to the world beyond national boundaries and imposed embargoes, fostering discovery of unfamiliar norms and values, subcultures and lifestyles
- set up the practice of promiscuity and the risks associated with causal sex encounters and exposure to recreational substances

### Further study needed

- Do the higher educated and economically less vulnerable Myanmar MSM mainly benefit from access to social networking utilities?
- Does cyber social networking offer an outlet for powerful cultural, social and legal oppression among Myanmar MSM?
- What is the impact of access to international cyber networks on norms, values and lifestyles among Myanmar MSM?

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