

Emerging virtual sexual networks and implications for implementation of online HIV prevention interventions: a qualitative study among transgender women in India

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Background

- Limited research in India has explored the use of virtual platforms by key populations, particularly transgender women (TGW), for socialization and partner-seeking.
- Virtual networks present a promising avenue for introducing HIV prevention interventions, complementing traditional physical outreach methods.
- This study investigated the nature, characteristics, and dynamics of emerging virtual sexual networks among TGW in India.

Methods

Study Design and Setting

- Qualitative study conducted from January to June 2023.
- Three metropolitan cities in India: Chennai, Mumbai, and Delhi.

Data Collection

- 12 focus group discussions (FGDs) & 12 in-depth interviews (IDIs) with transgender women (TGW).
- 6 key informant interviews (KIIs) with community agency leaders and project managers.

Sampling and Recruitment

- Purposive sampling of TGW, including: sex workers, users of both physical and virtual platforms, and exclusive users of virtual platforms.
- Recruitment through partner agencies and peer networks.

Key Areas Explored

- TGW's familiarity with digital networking spaces; Access to and use of virtual platforms; and Associated risk and protective behaviors.

Analysis

- Thematic analysis approach, along with grounded theory analytic techniques.

Findings

Sociodemographic Characteristics

- **Age and HIV Status:** Mean age (TGW) = 26 years (SD 4.8). 8% - living with HIV.
- **Gender Identity:** 70% - self-identified as TGW or Thirunangai, 26% as hijras.
- **Use of Virtual Platforms:** 91% reported using virtual platforms for sexual networking, and 95% reported receiving money for having sex.

Themes

Use of Virtual Platforms

- **Popular Platforms:** Virtual platforms such as dating apps (Grindr, Blue, etc.) and Facebook were predominantly used, especially by younger and techno-savvy TGW, to reach paying partners during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Advantages of Virtual Platforms

- **Confidentiality:** Virtual platforms provide a level of confidentiality that is crucial for TGW who cannot engage in physical sex work due to fear of exposure.
- **Client Screening and Filtering:** These platforms allow TGW to screen and filter clients, reducing the risk of physical harm.
- **Better Payment Negotiation:** TGW can negotiate better payment terms and ensure advanced payment through digital transactions.

Risks of Virtual Platforms

- **Sextortion and Harassment:** Despite the advantages, virtual platforms pose significant risks such as sextortion and verbal harassment.

Theme	Illustrative Quote
Mental Exhaustion	"It is physically and mentally exhausting to manage multiple online clients at the same time. It's impossible to satisfy all of them and when they are not satisfied, they use vulgar language." (FG 2, Delhi)
Sextortion	"A client recorded my nude videos and blackmailed me for free sex in the future. I blocked his number and never contacted him again." (IDI 3, Chennai)

Socioeconomic Status and Access to Interventions

- **Exclusive Use of Online Platforms:** TGW from middle and upper socioeconomic statuses often use only online platforms and lack access to traditional physical outreach-based HIV interventions.
- **Appeal of Smartphone-Based Interventions:** These TGW found the idea of introducing smartphone-based online HIV prevention interventions through WhatsApp and short videos appealing and feasible.

Theme	Illustrative Quote
Reaching Underserved TGW	"Earlier, the methods to reach out to the community about HIV prevention were pamphlets or in-person communication. Virtual platforms can be used to reach more people, especially those transgender women who are not registered with CBOs." (KII 1, Delhi)
Adapting Outreach Methods	"Outreach workers from CBOs come to hotspots and distribute condoms. As more transgender women are now on the virtual platforms, the outreach workers could now target these platforms for awareness creation." (FG 2, Mumbai)

Conclusions

- **Tailored and Integrated Interventions:** Customize HIV prevention interventions for TGW based on diverse characteristics and extend to online platforms.
- **Risk Mitigation and Digital Literacy:** Develop strategies to address online risks and provide digital literacy training for safe networking.
- **Collaborative and Peer-Led Outreach:** Partner with digital platforms and employ TGW community members for peer-led outreach.

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Theme	Illustrative Quote
Confidentiality	"I live in Delhi and my family and relatives reside in Delhi. I can't stand on roads for sex work as my family will get to know. Online sex is safe and it ensures confidentiality." (IDI 2, Delhi)
Better Negotiation	"You can bargain with your client for better pay. If they do not agree, you can refuse to provide the service." (IDI 2, Delhi)
Digital Payments	"These days payment through GooglePay is very common. I ask my clients to pay me online. I earn INR 500 to 1000 per day." (IDI 1, Mumbai)
Client Screening	"At cruising sites, all kinds of clients can approach you. If you deny, their ego will be hurt and they can misbehave with you. This can be avoided in virtual outlets. You have the freedom to choose whom you like." (IDI 2, Delhi)