

So you want to be HIV+?

By Michael David dela Cruz Tan Published Dec 1, 2012

Bug chasing a la Pinoy

In GayRomeo.com (or, for the tamer, PlanetRomeo.com), I came across one barebackpozzers' profile, whose shoutout stated, verbatim:

"Online: bottom/top slut likes fuck now, anyone interested? i have nice pozz load! i like pozz other young ass | only bareback."

Closer inspection showed that barebackpozzers is, basing on his profile, a 24 year old gay Caucasian who is in the city of Manila. Standing 171 centimeter tall, and weighing 67 kilograms, he – who has little body hair, albeit has a designer stubble – is single, and is looking for sex dates sans the use of condoms (as he claims, "Safer Sex: Never").

As he further elaborated – again, verbatim – in his profile:

"i am for vacations there, from france here. i am young fit guy. i am wild in bed like fucking ass and getting my ass fucked like hell. i am into fisting, like gang bang, pissing, even scat/shit play... anyone interested? i only do bareback...and i have nice load hiv pozz cumload for you... so write me."

It may be because of the size of his penis (he claimed it's XL), a big lure for size queens (or even princesses). Or because many, arguably affected by colonial mentality, are big on Caucasians. Or because, in truth, barebackpozzers – despite/in spite of his HIV serostatus – is actually a good catch ("a 12 in a scale of 1 to 10," as many are wont to say).

But that many actually responded to his invite highlighted not only barebackpozzers' appeal, as an individual, to those who come across his profile; but, by extension, of what he is offering, that is: HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus).

And while barebackpozzers himself refused to be interviewed on the record for *Outrage Magazine* (despite his willingness to "just chat"; as he said, he can "be cited, not quoted"), his profile, nonetheless, piqued my interest on the presence of bug chasing in the Philippines.

This – for me – is a tricky situation to be in: while it may not be pervasive, and therefore may not necessarily need to be given lengthy coverage as this could simply sensationalize it, its very existence nonetheless means that I can't just ignore it. After all, with the likes of barebackpozzers and his takers actually existing, at least looking into bug chasing seems to me a worthy endeavor.



No study is known to have been done on bug chasing in the Philippines. But here is what's worth highlighting: a main driver of the HIV epidemic in the Philippines is the continuing high prevalence of HIV among high risk groups, particularly men who have sex with men (MSM), largely due to the noted high prevalence of unsafe behaviors among the members of this key population at higher risk.

'I WANT' IN FOCUS

That the world is no stranger to HIV goes without saying. There was a time when it was pigeonholed as a "gay disease"; but not anymore, since we know it affects (and is affecting) everyone. It is already widely accepted that the virus that weakens the immune system (i.e. HIV) could eventually progress to Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS), which could weaken the body so that it will be unable to fight off opportunistic infections (OIs), which – in turn – could lead to death.

It is thus, well, peculiar (for lack of a better word) for some men to search (at times openly, too) for someone who is HIV positive, hoping to be infected with the virus. As the practitioners would say: the "bug chasers", as they have come to be known, looking for their "gift givers". And there actually are "bug parties" that allow for the meeting/s between the bug chasers and the gift givers to happen.

Sadly, there remains a dearth in the body of knowledge about this. For instance, as early as 1999, Drs. DeAnn Gauthier and Craig Forsyth explored through a qualitative research the then emerging trend of gay men who forego condom use and the development of a barebacking subculture; just as they also noted that some of the barebackers were in search of HIV.

It was in 2003 when Dr. Richard Tewksbury became the first researcher to acknowledge the Internet connection of bug chasing, with the bug chasers using the Internet noted to post their interests in seroconversion. His 2006 research furthered this, analyzing the behaviors, attitudes and demographics of bug chasers and gift givers.

Still other researchers dealing with this include: Blechner who, in 2002, touched on “Intimacy, pleasure, risk and safety” at the Journal of Gay and Lesbian Psychotherapy; Crossley who, in 2004, dealt with gay men’s narratives, unsafe sex and the ‘resistance habitus’ in the British Journal of Social Psychology; Hatfield who, in 2004, explored the story of the bug chasing phenomenon in a paper presented at the National Communication Association Conference; Moskowitz and Roloff who, in 2007, dealt with sexual addiction and the bug chasing phenomenon in Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity; and LeBlanc who, in 2007, did an exploratory study of bug chasers in Sociological Imagination.

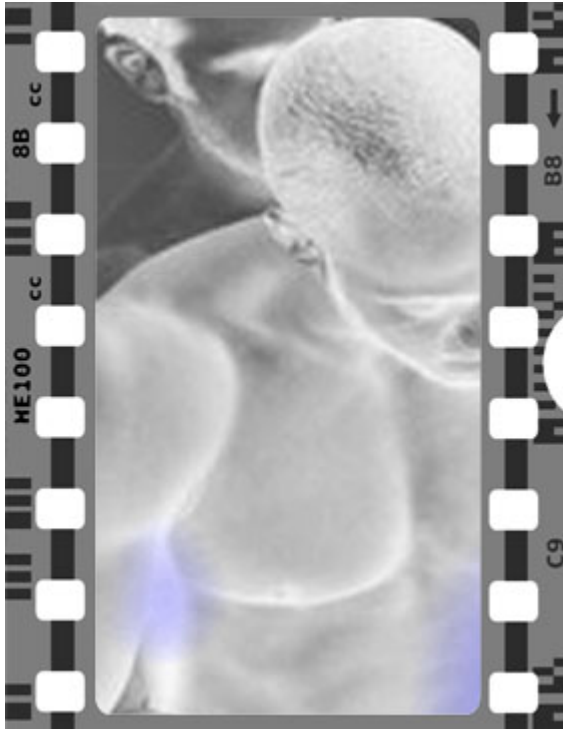
No similar study is known to have been done in the Philippines.

What is known, however, is the worsening HIV situation in the Philippines (among only a handful of countries to register an increase in the HIV infection rates, when the global trend is seeing a decline in these numbers). Earlier, in July during the 2012 National Dialogue on HIV and Human Rights, the National AIDS Registry of the Department of Health (DOH) reported an “exponential increase” in the new reported HIV cases in the country. In fact, more than half (60%) of the cumulative infections reported in the country were in the last three years alone; and from one new case detected every three days in 2006, the reported HIV incidence has increased to about one every two to three hours (or eight to 10 per day) in the first quarter of 2012. The 2012 figures are expected to reach over 22,000, and this number – if the trend is not halted – could reach over 35,000 by 2015, according to the National Epidemiology Center (NEC).

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Only this September, there were 316 new reported HIV cases in the Philippines. Most of the cases (96%) were males; with the main mode of transmission reported to be sexual contact (312). And – worth pointing out – males having sex with other males were the predominant type of sexual transmission (82%).

How many of these HIV-infected MSM actually sought out to be infected with HIV is anybody’s guess; but that there are MSM who actually bug chase should be something – by itself – worth a closer consideration.



Bug chasing, by itself, could be a “matter of concern, as it puts one’s health into risks,” Dr. Jojo Sescon of the AIDS Society of the Philippines (ASP) said. However, “there are a lot of things that need to be learned in terms of learning the context of how bug chasing practice has evolved (in the Philippines).”

REASONING OUT

According to one 090SPARKS, a HIV-positive PlanetRomeo.com user, he has yet to meet anyone who openly asked for him to give his “gift” to. But he remembers “one guy who insisted for me to join orgies. I asked him if he knows of my HIV status, as stated in my profile. We just ended having a fight because he didn’t think my status should be an issue (in my participation in these orgies); and his way of thinking irritated me,” he said in Filipino.

Thus, while barebackpozzers openly promoted gift giving, 090SPARKS is not directly asked; those who want to have sex with him just do not seem to care about his HIV status.

And for 090SPARKS, what these people do not consider is “HIV is something you bring with you for a lifetime.” He believes that even with the likes of him who help spread knowledge and awareness about HIV, “I still encounter many who hold erroneous beliefs – for instance, that it’s okay for two HIV-positive people to have unprotected sex.”

Not surprisingly, according to Dr. Jose Narciso Melchor C. Sescon, president of the AIDS Society of the Philippines (ASP), while they have worked with the MSM community, he has “yet to see one who chases people with HIV, and welcomes to be infected with it.” However, there is a need to give current surveillance efforts scrutiny to ascertain “if such ‘nuances’ does exist in the Filipino MSM community.”

In their 2006 study involving 1,228 respondents, Grov and Parsons identified six categories of bug chasers and gift givers, i.e.

1. The “committed bug chasers” were men who indicated they were HIV-negative and seeking HIV-positive partners. Majority (62.2%) were bottoms, with 7.5% of the sample classified under this category.
2. “Opportunistic bug chasers” included men who were HIV-negative and indicated that their partner’s HIV status did not matter. Most were versatile (43.6%) or bottoms (46.3%); and 12.1% of the total sample falling in this category.
3. “Committed gift givers” were men who were HIV-positive and sought out HIV-negative partners. Only five men fell into this category.
4. “Opportunistic gift givers” were men who indicated they were HIV-positive and that their partner’s status did not matter to them. Most (61.8%) were versatile; and they comprised 26% of the sample population.
5. “Serosorters” were men who chose their partners according to their HIV status. This is a somewhat interesting category, since, although all the men in the study indicated in their online profiles that they were a gift giver and/or a bug chaser, their behavioral intentions were not consistent with the identity. Some HIV-positive men (8.5%) indicated preference for other HIV-positive men; and some HIV-negative men (12.5% of total sample) indicated preference for other HIV-negative men.
6. “Ambiguous bug chasers or gift givers” comprised 16.3% of the sample, and this included men who indicated that they did not know their HIV status, so that it was difficult to determine if they were seeking to bug chase or give the gift.

Grov and Parsons concluded in their study that bug chasing and gift giving “might occur among a select few individuals”, and there was “substantial variation in intentions to spread HIV” (with some actually claiming not having any intent to spread HIV) among the respondents who indicated that they were either gift givers or bug chasers.

Various reasons have been raised to explain bug chasing.

For one, there’s belongingness, with – among others – [Dr. Gerald Schoenewolf claiming that some bug chasers “want to feel accepted and a part of something”](#). Other researchers noted the same, including: Blechner who, in 2002, found that some bug chasers were “lonely and alienated”, so they saw HIV as a path to becoming part of a community that elicits public sympathy and caretaking; and LeBlanc who, in 2007, noted that some identified becoming part of the “community” or “brotherhood” as a reason for bug chasing.

This touches on the self-esteem of the bug chasers, since – as Schoenewolf (2004), for instance, claimed, citing psychiatrist Antoine Douaihy, who works with AIDS patients in Pittsburgh in the US, confusion, depression and mental illness may contribute to a self-destructive behavior like bug chasing.

Secondly, there’s the supposed excitement that goes with it. As Freeman noted in his now-controversial [2003 Rolling Stone article](#), since many (if not most) people may consider bug chasing as a bad idea, bug chasers may find it stimulating to do “something that everyone else sees as crazy and wrong”. As CBC news reporter Caloz (2001) earlier said, “they are just turned on by the risk”.

In Filipino, “*masarap ang bawal.*”

This attraction was cited by at least one Grindr user, and another one GayRomeo.com user who agreed to be interviewed: John* and one bigNjuicy (with John one of those who responded to barebackpozzer's profile), respectively. Both in their 20s, they frequently attend orgies that "take pride in non-use of condoms," John said. In these sex gatherings, "you don't know who's giving you what, so it's exciting."

bigNjuicy added the "usual reason": "*Mas masarap pa rin ang balat sa balat. Bahala na kung ano man mangyari.*" This is a thought elaborated by yet another GayRomeo.com user, one besthunkmale, with: "Spur of the moment; *kung tag-init, wala na discussion.*"

Thirdly, for some, bug chasing is considered as chasing a high, somewhat akin to addiction, so that – as Moskowitz and Roloff (2007) noted – the high previously derived by performing other sexual risk taking behaviors is now topped by bug chasing.

And fourthly, bug chasing could mean "getting over it" – in Filipino, "*para matapos na*".

For instance, one of Freeman's interviewees for his **Rolling Stone** article was quoted as saying that "getting HIV will make safe sex a moot point", and that after getting infected, "nothing worse can happen to you".

At least one GayRomeo.com user – a certain hot_dante02 – agreed with this, telling me that "*mabuti nga tapos na usapan.*"

Sescon supposed that "there are reasons that could have make people practice bug chasing, (including): a) for the thrill of it, (since) there are people who are into risk-taking behavior and this gives them pleasure; b) by choice, as people would think this is a way to gain a more meaningful (serious) relationship; and c) just for the experience, since HIV is 'just a usual disease' and there are ARVs that are effective in prolonging people's lives."

Bug chasing, by itself, could be a "matter of concern, as it puts one's health into risks," Sescon said. However, "there are a lot of things that need to be learned in terms of learning the context of how bug chasing practice has evolved (in the Philippines). But at all times, sexual health providers need to be informed, be keen and be sensitive to be responsive to the health needs (not just of bug chasers, but of the community as a whole)," he added.

There may still be other reasons, but – as earlier mentioned – the lack of studies that locally look into bug chasing somewhat automatically limits analysis of the same.

CLOSER CONSIDERATION

According to Philip A. Castro, program officer for HIV and AIDS of the United Nations Development Programme (Philippine Country Office), since 2010, male-to-male sex constitutes more than 80% of newly reported HIV cases through sexual transmission. Unfortunately, the 2009 Integrated HIV Behavioral and Serologic Surveillance (IHBSS) reported that "condom use at last high-risk sex" among (MSM) was dismal at 32%, considered problematic since the 2009 IHBSS also revealed that the HIV prevalence among MSM actually increased

four-fold since 2005, with some sites in the country reaching 1% to 4%. “These alarming statistics highlights the growing concern on unsafe sexual practices (e.g. barebacking, et cetera) among the MSM population,” he said.

For Castro, “the growing epidemic on HIV among the MSM population have led to the review of existing policies and interventions, and the (on-going) development of a more effective and comprehensive package of HIV and AIDS services for the MSM and transgender populations.”

Already, there is an existing HIV prevention program targeting the MSM population, including outreach peer education, condom distribution, and referral to services such as HIV voluntary counseling and testing, STI diagnosis and treatment, and antiretroviral treatment. A challenge being faced now is the 2009 IHBSS revelation that “access to these information and prevention services is wanting considering that only 29% of the MSM surveyed have been reached by prevention services; with several evaluation studies also revealing gaps in the quality of information and services delivered.”



According to UNDP’s Philip A. Castro, “the gay community needs to take ownership of HIV and AIDS as a community concern, and to collectively mobilize to address the problem. “

UNDP Philippines is supporting development of strategic information, which helped enhance understanding on HIV and AIDS among MSM and TG, and inform development of appropriate policies, particularly the 5th AIDS Medium Term Plan (AMTP), the national strategic plan on AIDS for 2011-2016. The UNDP HIV and AIDS Programme undertook a systematic process in informing an improved AIDS programming for the MSM and TG populations. To enhance the understanding of the HIV-related risks and vulnerabilities of the MSM and TG people, the Programme conducted exploratory and in-depth studies on the populations. In addition, the Programme mapped out community-based MSM and TG groups and interventions to generate information on the extent of the AIDS response among the populations in the country.

Building on the above initiatives, the Programme is currently undertaking an assessment of the HIV and AIDS interventions for MSM and TG populations, which aims to identify the strengths and gaps not only of the current national response, but of the key HIV programmes that have been implemented in recent years. These initiatives advance the country's knowledge base of MSM and TG behaviors and community-based interventions, and help inform the development of effective and evidence-based comprehensive package of services for MSM and TG.

Meanwhile, ASP continues to work with the Department of Health (DoH) on HIV programs for most at risk populations, particularly those belonging to the MSM community, including male sex workers, and people who inject drugs.

Castro admitted that “barebacking (that is the conscious and deliberate act and not just the non-use of condom) and bug chasing are still relatively new and unexplored phenomena, and we are yet to (extensively) understand these emerging phenomena among the MSM and TG populations.”

As such, Castro said that “the gay community needs to take ownership of HIV and AIDS as a community concern, and to collectively mobilize to address the problem. The first AIDS movement was mobilized by the gay community in the US during the time when members of the community were badly hit by the epidemic. Now we're seeing decreasing rates of HIV among the population in the US. It is the opposite case in the Philippines. Now that we're seeing an impending explosion of the epidemic among the population, the community needs to take part in the response together with the government and CSOs. Program implementers from government and non-government agencies have only limited capacities, even more so if the population they are trying to reach is complacent and unresponsive.”

The need to “own” the issue is an apt call – something ironically stressed by barebackpozzor himself, when he told me that even with the “negative connotation” attached with his “offer”, “there are takers, you know.”

And again, for as long as there are “takers”, no matter their number, then bug chasing remains a problem needed to be faced.

****NAME/S CHANGED, AS REQUESTED, TO PROTECT THE INTERVIEWEE/S' ANONYMITY***

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