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Introduction

- Minority communities experience COVID-19 differently based on their respective histories of public health crises and pandemics including HIV/AIDS.
- Engage COVID-19 is a mixed methods study examining the impact of COVID-19 on gay, bisexual and queer men (GBQM) living in Vancouver, Toronto, and Montréal.
- Our objective was to explore GBQM’s interpretations and responses to COVID-19 public health measures in relation to their sexual health.
- We provide a preliminary analysis of GBQM’s sexual practices and responses to public health COVID prevention protocols during the first two waves of COVID-19.

Methods

- Between November 2020 and February 2021, 42 qualitative interviews were conducted across three study sites (13 in Montréal, 13 in Vancouver, 16 in Toronto).
- Participants in the Engage cohort study were recruited using purposive sampling to capture the diverse experiences of GBQM.
- GBQM were asked questions regarding the impact of COVID-19 on their social and sexual lives during the first two waves of the pandemic.
- Interviews were conducted virtually and participants received a \$50 honorarium for their time.
- Interviews were coded in NVivo Software using thematic analysis.

Key Takeaways

- The COVID-19 pandemic has affected GBQM’s sexual decision-making regarding encounters with new and previously known partners.
- Some GBQM reported feelings of guilt following physical hookups during the first two waves of the pandemic.
- COVID-19 has impacted how GBQM navigate race and racism in their everyday lives.

“Already people perceive me as the ‘house of the virus’: it’s my fault if there’s COVID. And if I have COVID, people will say I’m a minority, and everybody does that. So I have a pressure, if I get COVID, **people will say, I knew it, Chinese people get COVID.** I feel a pressure to not get COVID.”
(Queer, 24, East Asian, Montréal)

“I kind of ask **very detailed questions about, like their status.** Who they’ve been with? What they’ve been doing. Yeah, just – I just kind of decided to be **a bit more invasive** with the questioning their COVID status, just because I am, you know, immunocompromised. **I can’t really take risks like that.** So if they have proof, then sure. I’d be down to go ahead and have sex.”
(Gay, 25, mixed race, Toronto)

“**I’ve had four times where I have kind of been bad** and done something....And because I hadn’t seen him there previously, I was pretty confident that he would still be kind of, god I can’t think of a...how to say it without sounding offensive but ‘clean’ right? **I knew his dick wasn’t in someone else’s mouth yet,** so I agreed to play with him and **I felt hugely guilty afterward.**”
(Gay, 50, mixed race, Toronto)

“It’s turned it off. **I don’t have it [sex].** I’ve cancelled it. Simple as that... It is what is. Everybody’s in the same boat. Well not *everybody*. **My neighbour, he’s promiscuous. I disapprove.**”
(Bi, 70s, white, Vancouver)

| Sociodemographic Info | n=42 | % |
|------------------------|------|----|
| Age | | |
| 20-29 | 11 | 26 |
| 30-39 | 16 | 38 |
| 40-49 | 4 | 10 |
| 50-59 | 6 | 14 |
| 60-69 | 4 | 10 |
| 70-79 | 1 | 2 |
| Ethnoracial Background | | |
| Black | 5 | 12 |
| East Asian | 7 | 17 |
| Indigenous | 1 | 2 |
| Latin American | 2 | 5 |
| Middle Eastern | 1 | 2 |
| Mixed Race/Ethnicity | 9 | 22 |
| South Asian | 2 | 5 |
| Southeast Asian | 1 | 2 |
| White | 14 | 33 |
| HIV Status | | |
| Living with HIV | 9 | 21 |
| HIV Negative | 33 | 79 |
| Sexual Identity | | |
| Gay | 26 | 62 |
| Bisexual | 9 | 22 |
| Queer | 6 | 14 |
| Pansexual | 1 | 2 |
| Gender Identity | | |
| Cisgender | 34 | 81 |
| Trans | 7 | 17 |
| Non-binary | 1 | 2 |

Conclusions

- The COVID-19 pandemic has affected GBQM’s sexual decision-making regarding encounters with new and previously known partners.
- GBQM’s approaches to sex during the pandemic were shaped by public health guidelines, with some participants choosing not to pursue in-person sexual encounters and others adjusting their sexual practices to limit the spread of COVID-19.
- GBQM associated non-adherence to public health COVID prevention protocols with negative emotions (e.g. guilt, disappointment, judgment). Some participants expressed feelings of guilt following in-person sexual encounters and judgment towards peers who hooked up with others in person.
- COVID-19 has impacted how GBQM navigate race and racism in their everyday lives. Some GBQM of colour were concerned about being stigmatized based on their race and several reported experiences of discrimination during the pandemic.

Further information

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