

# Internet-based health promotion programs for sexual minorities in Canada: A study of the components, objectives and future developments<sup>1</sup>



Sexual and Gender Diversity :  
Vulnerability  
Resilience



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**Context:** Various studies have underlined the Internet's potential to promote health among sexual minorities. Yet research has essentially focused on programs for men who have sex with men (MSM), while Internet-based programs for other sexual minorities remain poorly documented.

**Objectives:** The aim of this research is to **provide a profile of Internet-based health promotion programs for all sexual minorities in Canada.** In the first phase of the research, we have focused on identifying:

- 1) Websites that offer health-related information for LGBT sexual minorities in Canada
- 2) Types of organizations managing these websites
- 3) Targeted LGBT populations
- 4) Health topics addressed
- 5) Interactive activities on the websites

In the second phase, we will analyze the development process of some of these websites in order to identify the success factors and obstacles of maintaining and developing existing programs. This research will also provide an opportunity to examine the advantages and limitations of evaluative research on health promotion programs delivered via the Internet.

**Methods:** To achieve the proposed objectives, research was organized into two major phases extending over a period of two years (2008-2009 and 2009-2010). In the first phase, we used search engines to find Internet websites with health-related content managed by Canadian organizations. We identified 237 such websites, and site managers were invited to complete an online questionnaire. Between January and September 2009, 72 organizations participated in this survey.

## Preliminary Results

### A – Analysis of identified websites (N=237) (see table 1)

**Organization categories:** Two main categories of organizations managing these websites emerge, those providing information on various topics related to LGBT health and those presenting information more specifically related to HIV/AIDS.

**Types of organizations:** Most organizations in these two categories are community organizations and associations or coalitions, e.g. organizations working for civil rights or fighting homophobia.

**Targeted populations:** 11% of websites target all publics but present some health-related information for sexual minorities; 39% specifically address issues related to the health of sexual minorities; 50% are dedicated to HIV/AIDS prevention and, for the most, target all publics with a few addressing only MSM populations. Some of these websites are particularly designed to meet the needs of youth, cultural communities, First Nations, families, people living with HIV/AIDS, and health professionals.

### B – Organizations participating in the survey (N=72)

**Geographical locations:** The participating organizations that completed the online questionnaire are mainly from Quebec (35%), Ontario (25%), British-Columbia (14%) and Alberta (10%). There are fewer organizations from other regions (between 1.5 and 4%).

**Targeted populations:** 11% of these websites target all publics but present some health-related information for sexual minorities; 39% target all sexual minorities with some addressing specific LGBT communities; 50% are dedicated to HIV/AIDS prevention and generally target all publics with a few addressing only MSM populations.

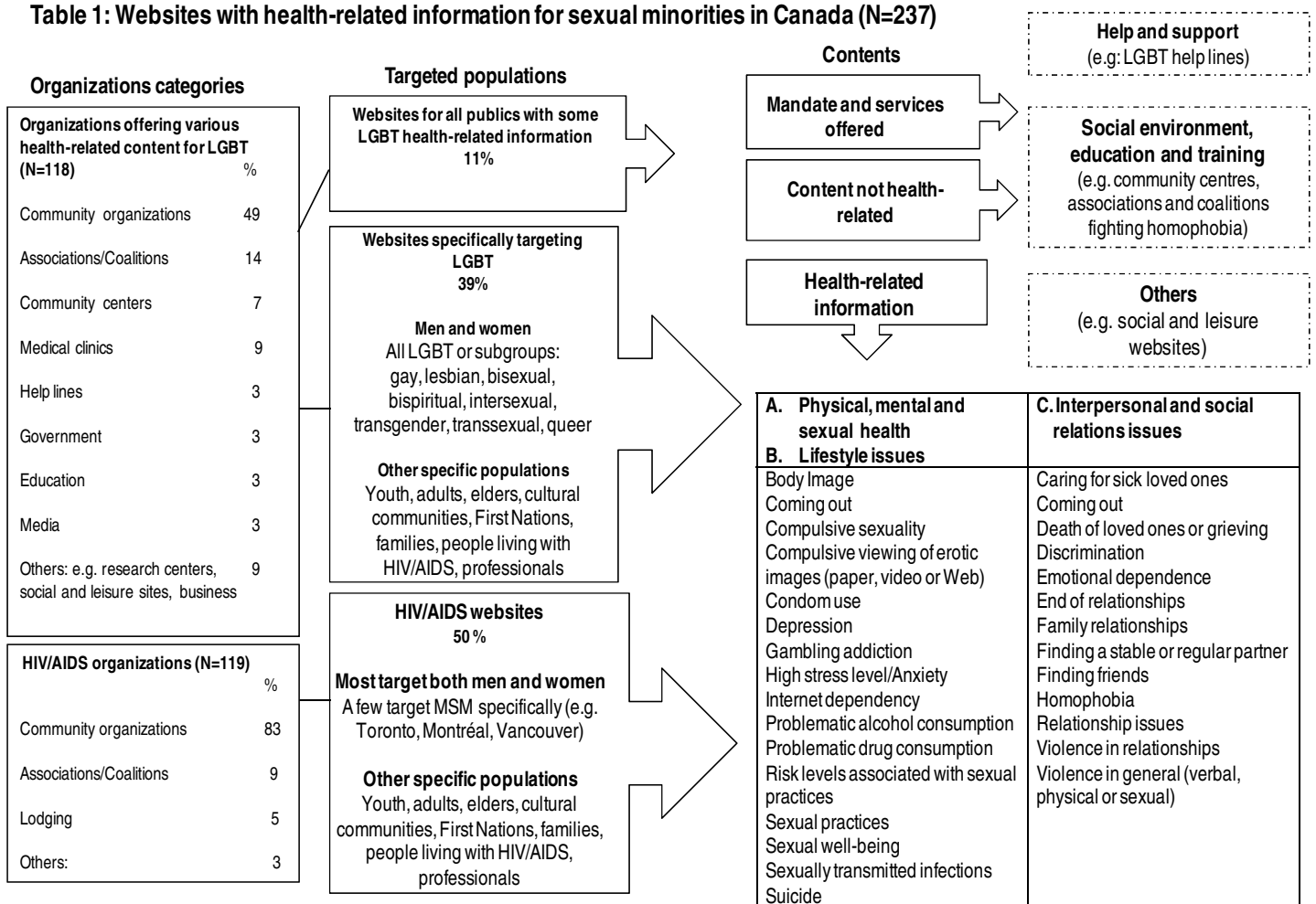
**Available health-related information** (see table 2 and 3): The main issues addressed on participating websites (close to 50% or more) are: homophobia, sexual well-being, condom use, STDs, discrimination and coming out, and family relations. About one third of the websites provide information on relationship issues, one quarter address violence, drug use, suicide and depression, and one in five websites take up issues such as ending relationships, alcohol consumption or death of loved ones. Less frequent themes (20% or less of participating websites) are: stress and anxiety, emotional dependence, body image, taking care of a sick loved one and looking for a regular or steady partner. Gambling addiction, Internet dependency and compulsive sexuality are addressed even less often (less than 10% of websites). Statistically significant differences appear when comparing the health-related information available on LGBT and HIV/AIDS websites. The organizations presenting information more specifically related to HIV/AIDS are more focused on issues related to sexual health (sexually transmitted infections, condom use, sexual practices and the risk levels associated with them). LGBT websites present information related more to suicide and numerous issues related to interpersonal and social relations (discrimination, coming out and violence).

**Interactive activities:** Apart from providing an email contact, organizations providing real interactive activities are relatively few (approximately one quarter to one third), but many declared they were interested in providing such activities. A new strategy adopted by organizations is to create a profile on popular social networking websites such as *YouTube*, *Facebook* or *MySpace* to reach out to users who do not visit the organizations' websites. These networking websites offer significant opportunities for health intervention (see table 4).

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**Table 1: Websites with health-related information for sexual minorities in Canada (N=237)**



**Table 2: Health-related contents in LGBT and HIV/AIDS websites**

	All %	LGBT %	HIV/AIDS %	p
Sexual well-being	54	48	58	n.s.
Sexually transmitted infections	52	31	74	0,0001
Condom use	55	35	78	0,001
Risk levels associated to sexual practices	43	21	67	0,001
Sexual practices	39	10	70	0,0001
Suicide	30	48	11	0,003
Problematic drug consumption	27	21	33	n.s.
Depression	27	28	26	n.s.
Problematic alcohol consumption	23	17	30	n.s.
High stress level/Anxiety	23	28	19	n.s.
Body Image	18	17	19	n.s.
Compulsive sexuality	7	3	11	n.s.
Compulsive viewing of erotic images (paper, video or Web format)	6	3	4	n.s.
Internet dependency	4	3	4	n.s.
Gambling addiction	4	0	7	n.s.

**Table 3: Health-related contents in LGBT and HIV/AIDS websites**

	All %	LGBT %	HIV/AIDS %	p
Homophobia	50	59	41	n.s.
Discrimination	50	66	33	0,016
Coming out	45	59	30	0,029
Family relationships	43	55	30	n.s.
Relationship issues	32	35	30	n.s.
Violence in general (verbal, physical or sexual)	32	45	19	0,035
Violence in a relationship	30	35	26	n.s.
End of a relationship	27	35	19	n.s.
Finding friends	24	31	15	n.s.
Death of loved one or grieving	21	17	26	n.s.
Emotional dependence	20	17	22	n.s.
Caring for a sick loved one	16	7	26	n.s.
Finding a stable or regular partner	10	10	11	n.s.

**Conclusions:**

This exploratory study outlines the importance of community organizations that provide health information on the Internet for sexual minorities. The main issues addressed are associated with the problematic status of sexual minorities in contemporary society, and to HIV/AIDS and STD prevention. Mental health issues and other health problems are less often addressed, showing that while an increasing number of organizations are adopting a global definition of health, only a few have developed content from this perspective. Intervention programs that include interactivity (user-outreach worker or user-user) are still relatively few, but many organizations see their potential and would be interested in adopting these strategies. Joining social networking websites and including chat rooms on websites seem the most common. Better understanding of why organizations are slow to shift to these strategies is needed. It is also necessary to document existing online interactive intervention programs (goals, theoretical models, evaluation of outcomes). This is the objective of the next phase of this study. To do so, we have selected a sample of organizations that work with different sub-groups of the LGBT population throughout Canada and will conduct semi-structured interviews with the websites' managers.

**Table 4: Interactive activities within the websites**

	Available %	Planned %	Unavailable and not planned %
E-mail address posted on the site to communicate with a representative	91	5	5
Profile on an external site such as YouTube, FaceBook, MySpace, etc.	35	22	38
Website-integrated bulletin board	34	25	37
Site-integrated discussion forum	26	26	43
E-mail address for instant messaging programs, making it possible to communicate with a representative (e.g., Live Messenger)	20	11	63
Site-integrated chat room	6	20	66