

Tensions in How Potential Users and Service Providers Perceive the Utility and Acceptability of Online HIV/STI Risk Self-Assessment Tools

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BACKGROUND and OBJECTIVE

- Online HIV/STI risk self-assessment tools, aimed to increase awareness of HIV/STI prevention and testing strategies, may be useful in increasing sexual health literacy.
- We know little about how potential users and service providers perceive these tools.
- This study's aim was to assess perceptions about the utility and acceptability of risk self-assessment instruments, also known as "risk calculators," for HIV/STI.

METHODS: Recruitment and Procedures

- We recruited potential risk calculator users via an email invitation sent out through the BC Centre for Disease Control's STI clinic email list.
- STI clinic clients were pre-screen and allocated to separate focus groups according to age and sexual orientation.
- Inclusion criteria included having ever tested for STIs, aged 15 and above, and being able to communicate in English.
- HIV/STI service providers were recruited via email invite through professional networks.
- We conducted 5 five focus groups in Vancouver, Canada, between June and August 2017.
- Potential users and service providers interacted with 5 online HIV/STI risk calculators selected for varied target audiences, completion lengths, and recommendation messages, and also with a BC-specific risk calculator currently in development.
- Using a structured interview guide, group discussions focused on expectations, use contexts, perceived benefits and drawbacks, and tools' features.
- Session transcripts were examined to determine patterns and themes using an interpretive description approach.

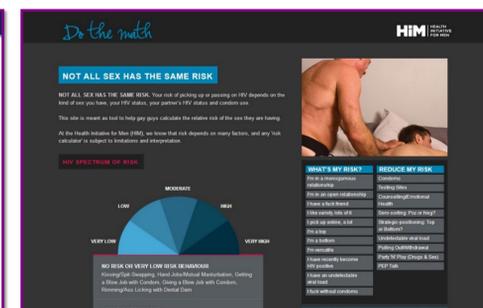
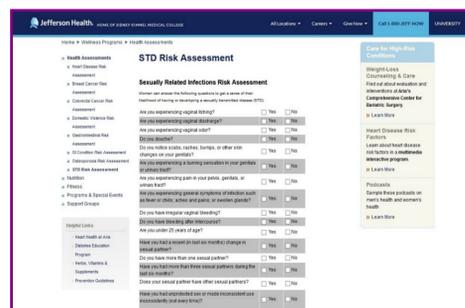
RESULTS: Participant Characteristics

POTENTIAL USERS:

- 12 potential users: 4 youth, 3 gay men, 5 other STI clinic clients
- Varied geographic backgrounds: 8 born in Canada; 9 outside of Canada
- Highly educated: 9 had college, university, trade education; 8 had graduate education

SERVICE PROVIDERS:

- 5 service providers: 3 nurses, 1 CPS outreach nurse, and 1 sexual health manager
- Highly experienced: between 1 and 30 years of direct work with clients seeking STI prevention services



SCREEN SHOTS OF ONLINE HIV/STI RISK CALCULATORS

RESULTS: Four Tensions in How Users and Providers Perceive Online Risk Calculators

Most potential users had no previous knowledge of HIV/STI risk calculators, while service providers were familiar with them but emphasized messaging and design challenges.

Potential users distinguished between HIV/STI risk calculators that they perceived as overemphasizing "risks" and scolding users, and those that enabled users to learn about HIV/STI "chances" and were viewed as sex-positive.

*Stephen: I didn't come across online risk calculators before.
Javi: Me either, never.
Luke: I guess, I had only heard them because of the previous usability study I had done here [at the BCCDC]. So before that I had not heard about them and I didn't really know that they existed.*

-- youth, 24, 27 & 25 yrs old respectively

"What I like about Do the Math, it at least isn't totally deficit-based. So they say, 'Our model with this assumes that gay men are honest, caring individuals who would not knowingly put others in harm.' 'We take them at their word, no, your individual circumstances with all your instincts,' which I thought was good because a lot of them were so deficit-based."

-- "Brett" (service provider, 2 yrs of STI prevention work)

"You have to answer the questions and it's radio buttons [in the Assess your Risk for HIV calculator]. They're all there I'm not sure what their relevance is all the time. And then you have to submit your answers and then you get scolded for the answers."

-- "Megan" (STI clinic client, 36 yrs old)

"Every risk calculator or indicator that we've used has been reactionary, which I find disappointing in terms of prevention. We're just going 'oh, you've done this, go get tested.' And that's when I keep going back to behaviour, we should really focus on allowing people to make educated decisions and adjust their behaviour in terms of prevention. And we would see reductions rather than just reactionary [recommendations]."

-- "Ryan" (gay man, 35 yrs old)

Some users expected HIV/STI risk calculators to provide information about specific encounters or symptoms, while others anticipated general guidance on sexual behaviours and HIV/STI prevention.

While participants often searched for sexual health information online, most saw online HIV/STI risk calculators as a first step only that could not replace testing recommendations provided by nurses and doctors.

"If it's going to tell you this general likelihood based on the sampling and that 'you should get tested,' sure. But I think we all know that it's gonna say you should get tested. So what I would really want out of it would be something that I had just engaged in gives me a '1.3% chance of transmission of this' and 'a 4% transmission of this.'"

-- "Jeff" (gay man, 30 yrs old)

"The potential benefit, as I see it, the most is that by teaching people about risky behavior, your goal is to eliminate the risky behavior which makes the collective less prone to risk or more healthy. It's like the same effect that you get when you vaccinate people, it's this critical mass."

-- "Moshe" (STI clinic client, 50 yrs old)

"I did hear about [risk calculators] just from Google, just researching clinics basically when that came up. I've never taken one online but I was kind of just questioning if it would be useful. I think as a first step, just as first step I can see the usefulness."

-- "Laurie" (youth, 25 yrs old)

"I think this type of information to be received online, you're kind of a little concerned. Getting an email saying 'Hey, Miss Jane Smith, you have hepatitis B.' I'm kind of like whoa!, right, 'I think you should call me and tell me to come in.' I don't think results for any type of testing that involves any type of bodily fluids should be told online. And I know we're in this generation where things are easier to find out that way, but I prefer a nurse telling me. I feel it's just that trust thing."

-- "Natalie" (STI clinic client, 31 yrs old)

CONCLUSIONS

- While perceptions of online HIV/STI risk calculators varied within socio-demographic groups, tensions around knowledge, expectations, underlying messaging framing, and willingness-to-use were found among potential users and service providers.
- These tensions suggest both a niche use of risk calculators and a need for more careful development of online sexual health literacy tools that accounts for these differences in perceptions.