“Bug chasing” is a relatively new subculture that was both formed in the late 1990s and early 2000s and has steadily grown since. Specifically, bug chasing refers to the act of an HIV (i.e., Human Immunodeficiency Virus) negative individual seeking to become infected through sexual intercourse with an HIV positive individual – or, an individual “chasing” the “bug” of HIV. This phenomenon occurs most often between men who have sex with men. Operating as a misunderstood and generally perceived as deviant subculture, bug chasers are men actively seeking opportunities to meet and engage in anal intercourse without the use of condoms. Such individuals are popularly known as “barebackers.” Since their first appearance, bug chasers have gradually become a sizeable minority within the online barebacking community (Grov & Parsons, 2006; Moskowitz & Roloff, 2007a). Despite their growing presence and recognition, bug chasers have remained a relatively understudied population, although numerous studies have focused on identifying the characteristics and patterns of behavior barebackers. Understanding the origin and development of the bareback sex community is essential for understanding the context in which bug chasing operates, as bug chasing is essentially a subset of barebackers.

*Origin of Bug Chasing*
Throughout the early 1980s and 1990s, the AIDS (i.e., Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) epidemic spread fear throughout many segments within the U.S., especially the gay community. With the first documented case of AIDS within the U.S. in 1980, the close of the decade saw over 100,000 individuals having been officially diagnosed with AIDS and approximately 45,000 people had died from the disease as of 1989 (AVERT, 2013). Some of the ways individuals could contract HIV were through blood transfusions, intravenous drug use and unprotected sexual intercourse. To counter this epidemic, numerous public service campaigns were formed and emphasized awareness of modes of transmission for HIV. By the early 1990s the means of transmitting the virus, and accompanying means of preventing infection (most notably the proper use of condoms for sexual activity) were widely known in the United States, and increasingly being practiced. As a result, condom use quickly became the presumed norm within gay communities, and anal intercourse without a condom became heavily stigmatized. However, as with nearly all stigmatized behaviors, some individuals maintained an appetite for unprotected sex. Thus was born the subculture of MSM individuals specifically seeking others to have unprotected anal intercourse and barebacking was born.

The term of bareback sex originally referred exclusively to gay males that had unprotected anal intercourse, but has since been used to describe other individuals as well (Gauthier & Forsyth, 1999; Parsons & Bimbi, 2007). Emerging in the early 1990s, this behavior developed as a result to the increased social and political pressures to practice “safe(r) sex” using a latex condom. Although it is still a term used primarily to define men who have sex with men who engage in unprotected anal intercourse, this term has
since been applied to describe all individuals – regardless of sexual identity or orientation -- who engage in sexual intercourse without the use of a condom. Sometimes this is simply referred to as “condomless” sex. Since the emergence of public service campaigns aimed at making individuals aware of the dangers of having unprotected sex (vaginal or anal), bareback sex has subsequently been stigmatized as a deviant and an extremely risky act to one’s physical health. Moreover, this form of sexual activity has also been identified as being one of the primary ways in which HIV (as well as other sexually transmitted infections) is transmitted among MSM, thus gaining the attention of multiple academic disciplines to further understand this behavior (Grov, 2004). Included among the disciplines that have examined the phenomenon of bareback sex are psychology, public health and queer theory (Berg, 2009). Despite bareback sex being associated with high risk for numerous Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) there still exists a sizeable amount of MSM who actively seek out sexual partners for the specific purpose of bareback sex (Grov, 2004). However, in a review of 42 academic studies on barebacking, Berg (2009) found that such men represent only a minority of MSM.

The Internet has had a huge effect on the gay community generally, and MSM specifically, by largely replacing the role that bathhouses once played in the 1980s for connecting MSM in predominantly urban communities (Haney, 2003). The advantage that online communities have over bathhouses is that they do not restrict individuals geographically, thus offering greater potential inclusion than physical meeting places have traditionally offered in the past. Due to being heavily marginalized socially and politically, gay males have demonstrated to actively seek-out one another to form a community for both social and sexual purposes (Forsyth, 1996). The Internet has served
as a major facilitator for this purpose for its above noted ability to connect individuals from any geographic region and the greater ease of finding individuals that may have a specific sexual interest. As such, the prevalence of individuals who actively use the Internet to seek sexual partners varies based on one’s gender and sexual orientation. One study suggests an estimated 5% of heterosexual women and 10% of heterosexual men use the Internet for identifying sexual partners; however, an estimated 43% of gay men use the Internet for this purpose (Bolding, Davis, Hart, Sherr, & Elford, 2006). Thus, the internet represents a huge venue for MSM to connect with one another. The vast majority of MSM use the internet to seek out others through common online mediums such as websites, forums and chat rooms (Gauthier & Forsyth, 1999; Grov, DeBusk, Bimbi, Golub, Narvin, & Parsons, 2007). Consequently, with online sources providing the “home” for so many MSM, the vast majority of studies on barebacking and bugchasing have used websites as the primary source of data from which to gain insights regarding such behaviors and their practitioners (Berg, Tikkanen, & Ross, 2011; Blackwell, 2008, 2010; Grov, 2004, 2006; Klein & Tilley, 2012; Nodin, Valera, Ventuneac, Maynard, & Carballo-Dièquez, 2011, Tewksbury, 2003).

Due to this sizeable minority of MSM who actively seek bareback sex, websites, chat rooms, and forums have been developed to cater to the specific interests of these individuals. Grov (2006) identified six primary websites that offered bareback-specific content with approximately 30,000 profiles being present on such sites; however, the number of such targeted websites has undoubtedly grown (and most probably substantially) since 2006 with the continued development of and access to the Internet.
Studies on bareback sex communities have revealed different typologies among its members. Through studies drawing on data drawn from both websites and real-world interaction with members of barebacking communities, three distinct categories of barebacking MSM have been identified (Grov, 2004). These are the categories of seroconcordant couples, rational risk takers, and irrational risk takers. Seroconcordant couples refer to those who engage in bareback sex due to the belief that both partners are of the same HIV status, whether positive or negative. These individuals are with others of the same HIV status to reduce their risk of receiving an STI, STD, or to exacerbate their HIV status. The second category of rational risk takers also engage in bareback sex; however, these individuals believe certain sexual behaviors may pose more/less risk when compared to others. Therefore, rational risk takers are using some form of caution to guide their sexual behaviors, but are still engaging in a highly risky behavior. The final category of irrational risk takers are barebackers who deny the existence of risk for contracting HIV or perhaps may use unfounded and/or false information to justify their position. Even though barebackers can be found across these three ideal type categories, this is not an exhaustive list of barebackers. Additionally, and primarily recognized to have a visible presence only online, is the deviant segment of the barebacking community: bug chasers (Berg, 2009).

As introduced above, the term “bugchasing” refers to an individual whom is HIV negative intentionally seeking out opportunities to be infected through sexual intercourse by an HIV positive individual. However, this behavior is largely attributed to men who have sex with men seeking to become infected through practicing anal intercourse without a condom, or bareback. There are two necessary roles that must be embodied and
upheld for bug chasing to occur. These are roles of the “bug chasers” and “gift givers.” “Bug chasers” refer specifically to the individual who is HIV negative and is actively seeking an HIV positive individual to infect or provide the “bug” to them (Gauthier & Forsyth, 1999). “Gift givers” are those who are already HIV positive and are willing to “gift” their HIV infection to those seeking infection (Gauthier & Forsyth, 1999). Even though these two roles exist to form bug chasing, research has primarily focused solely on the role of the bug chaser and largely neglected the role of “gift giver.” One reason for this is the higher prevalence of profiles posted for bug chasers, they seem to be more prominent and more easily accessed for researchers.

Bug chasers most often identify sexually as “bottoms”, or passive, receiving partners in anal intercourse. Such a role facilitates infection. These individuals are surrendering their physical health to a specific individual to infect them with HIV. “Gift givers” are likely men who have sex with men who (at least for some sexual encounters) prefer or are willing to temporarily fulfill a sexually dominant role. Gift givers, while present in online bug chasing communities may feel less of a need to advertise their presence, may avoid posting in online communities due to stigma, or may be more interested in having a greater role in selecting sexual partners and those with whom they are willing to share their “gift”. Consequently, bug chasers are the most visible members of online bug chasing communities and have received greater attention through research as a result. Specifically, however, research has focused on who it is that engages in the bug chaser role and the motivations for why these individuals seek-out others to infect them with HIV.
Characteristics of Bug Chasers

Since bug chasers operate as a subgroup of the bareback sex community, they are mostly a reflection of the larger bareback sex community members. The overwhelming majority of barebackers and bug chasers have been identified as predominantly being gay white males that are approximately 35 years of age and are college educated (Berg et al., 2011; Blackwell, 2010; Klein & Tilley, 2012; Grov & Parsons, 2006; Grov et al., 2007; Moskowitz & Roloff, 2007a, 2007b; Tewksbury, 2006). The self-reported HIV positive status of individuals on MSM websites have been found to be approximately 5% with websites having a more bareback-centered foci ranging from 15% to 36.1% HIV positive (Blackwell, 2010; Grov & Parsons, 2006; Nodin et al., 2011). Additionally, these studies have found that those who self-identified as barebackers were 7.7 times more likely to be HIV positive when compared to those who did not self-identify as a barebacker (Grov et al., 2007). Even though barebacking is already perceived as a risky behavior, bug chasing is seen as having an even higher associated risk because the individual is bypassing the possibility of infection with intentionally seeking HIV positive individuals to engage in intercourse. The element of risk that is central to this behavior is an important characteristic for participants that needs to be explored in greater detail.

Risk is an inherent, and desired, component of bareback sex. Being over 30 years removed from the first reported case of AIDS in the U.S., the dangers of having unprotected sexual intercourse are today common knowledge. Therefore, the mere attraction to a behavior that is specifically established to bypass “safe sex” by exposing its participants to the potential for STIs and HIV is a risk-seeking behavior. In one study of a barebacking community, Klein and Tilley (2012) found that 8.1% of users believed
they had a zero-chance of contracting HIV, 43.4% only a slight chance, 25% some chance, 11% half a chance, 8.8% pretty good chance, and 3.7% not very strong. Other risk-seeking behavior is not restricted to sexual activities and potential infection, however. Barebackers and bug chasers are also likely to engage in other forms of risk behaviors. The first associated risk-seeking behavior with this population is drug use. Individuals who participate in bareback sex communities have been shown to likely be drug users with crystal methamphetamine being a reported popular drug of choice (Nodin et al., 2011; Parsons & Bimbi, 2007). Specifically, drug use has been most associated with “bottoms” in the barebacking community, and serves as a further extension of risk-seeking behavior. There is also the issue that drug use very likely reduces one’s inhibitions and likelihood of necessary precautions and safeguards when having sexual intercourse. Therefore, what may already be an extremely risky sexual activity may be further exacerbated by drug use that lowers one’s inhibitions yet further and consequently likely enhances opportunities for and likelihood of STI or HIV infection.

Although barebackers and bug chasers share many similarities, they are also known to have some substantial differences in regards to sexual behavior. Moskowitz and Roloff (2007b) found that bug chasers were noticeably different from the larger group of barebackers regarding their paraphiliac behaviors and have higher rankings on behavior/psychological sexual addiction measures. Moreover, bug chasers are more likely to be submissive and actively seek-out sexually aggressive and/or dominant partners. Thus, bug chasers as a people are a small but sizeable group within the larger community of barebackers that warrant their own subculture. Furthermore, bug chasers
are active risk-seekers in sexual practices, drug users, prefer subordinate sex roles, and may have some form of sexual addiction.

Motivations for Bug Chasing

With HIV and the potential for the development of AIDS posing so many health risks, the motivation for why one would want to contract such an illness remains an important question. There have been four possible explanations that have emerged for why HIV negative individuals may actively seek-out HIV positive individuals to infect them. These four possible explanations are: 1) an individual may be seeking to become a member of an HIV positive community, 2) taking control over one’s own destiny, 3) an extension of risk-seeking behavior, and 4) engaging in such as a form of political statement.

The first explanation for why individuals engage in bug chasing is due to seeking to become a member of a community. Historically, gay males have been a largely marginalized population both socially and politically. As a result, gay men may feel less than fully immersed in the wider community, and consequently may want to find other like-minded individuals with which to socialize, bond and share experiences. The efforts of gay men actively seeking a community to belong to and/or interact within has a long history in American society and has been evidenced in a variety of ways, including the prominence in gay communities of gay bars, bathhouses, political groups, and other social organizations and settings. Today, many of these settings and activities have been supplanted by the Internet and virtual communities. As evidence, an estimated 43% of gay men actively use the Internet for sexual purposes (Bolding et al., 2006). Within the gay male community, there exists the subgroup of individuals who are HIV positive.
These individuals are often seen as a veteran within the gay community who has received an illness through upholding community beliefs and related practices. Furthermore, their behavior is often idealized with many HIV positive men serving as role models for certain members within the gay community (Gauthier & Forsyth, 1999). It is in homage to this community of individuals that some believe serves as a reason for individuals to seek to become infected with HIV. Individuals that are already marginalized within mainstream society are longing for a community in which they feel a deep connection to, and a sense of belonging with, as well. To ensure that they can become a part of this community, they actively seek-out HIV positive men who can infect them and speed up the process whereby they can be included in the “community” and receive the subsequent benefit of social esteem.

A second potential explanation for why individuals actively engage in bug chasing is that to do so provides a sense of taking control of their own destiny. As emphasized by many of the public awareness campaigns of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, having sexual intercourse with any individual can be a risky behavior for the potential of contracting STIs and HIV. Therefore, one potential explanation for why individuals engage in bug chasing is that they want to choose when the seemingly “inevitable” act of infection will occur. That is, by engaging in bug chasing, the individual is able to control when, where, how and by whom they will be infected, rather than simply awaiting the inevitable. Instead of having a random individual responsible for their infection, bug chasers may see this as a form of control for an outcome over which they may believe they otherwise have little control. This can also interact with the previously mentioned concept of HIV positive men being role models within certain communities; therefore,
individuals could potentially choose a desired role model to be their “gift giver.” Through this process, the “gift giver” and bug chaser will become “bug brothers” where a pseudo brotherhood forms of being forever linked through their disease (Gauthier & Forsyth, 1999). Viewed in this fashion, by engaging in bug chasing an individual can feel as if they can have some form of control on a disease that often allows little-to-no control.

The third potential explanation for bug chasing is that it is merely an extension and additional form of risk-seeking behavior. As described above, individuals who self-identify as bug chasers have been shown to engage in numerous risk-seeking behaviors. The first of which is that they are members of the barebacking community that actively practices sex without protection, thus risking the potential of STIs and HIV. The second risky behavior that has been attributed to this population is engaging in illegal drug use. With these individuals already showing a higher preponderance for risk-seeking behavior, the explanation of bug chasing being a more extreme form of risk-seeking behavior is plausible. Since bug chasers have been identified as being predominately “bottoms” it is logical to think that this is an extreme form of a submissive role giving ultimate control of one’s physical well-being over to another individual.

The fourth explanation proposed for why individuals engage in bug chasing is that it is a behavior exercised for political reasons. As referenced above, numerous organizations and public awareness campaigns emerged during the 1980s and 1990s to better inform individuals of the dangers of certain behaviors that could increase one’s potential for contracting HIV with sexual intercourse being one of the primary targeted reasons. As a result, a new norm and standard for sexual practice had been formed and identified as “safe(r) sex.” The primary means of practicing safe(r) sex was the use of a
condom during sexual intercourse (anal or vaginal). Consequently, all individuals who did not practice sex in this manner were now deemed as deviant and potentially dangerous because of the risk that their actions posed to themselves and others. This is one of the primary reasons for why the bareback sex community was formed; barebacking is in direct opposition to the “safe(r) sex” standards that had become the new government-endorsed standard. Bug chasers, being a division of the bareback community, are possibly seeking to become infected with HIV as a political statement in protest to the government and the community at large instructing them how to have sex.

Although such propositions offer possible explanations for this behavior, there is still much to learn about this small but sizeable component of the bareback community. Some research has indicated that there is a great amount of misinformation available on how manageable the HIV virus is with advanced medication/treatment (Blackwell, 2008; Klein & Tilley, 2012). It is possible that many individuals who identify as bug chasers are doing so partly because they are misinformed on the dangers that accompany HIV contraction and its overall manageability. Great advancements have been made in HIV treatment since the 1980s, yet it may not be as manageable as some individuals engaging in this behavior may believe. With the continued development and growth of the Internet and online communities, bug chasing-specific communities are likely to have a greater presence in the coming years. Consequently, continued research is needed on both bug chasers and “gift givers” to truly understand the prevalence, composition and motivations for bug chasing.
References


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