

PrEP AS A MEMORY PILL: GAY MEN AND GENERATIONAL IMAGINARIES

Authors:

Riley, B^{1,2}

¹ University of Sydney, ² ASHM Health

Background:

In the years since PrEP became widely available, the reduction and even removal of HIV anxiety has been widely reported among gay men as a side-effect. Public discourse about this aspect of PrEP, the promise of “sex without fear”, has often been framed in generational terms, with PrEP users describing their experiences in comparison to previous generations of gay men. This study sought to understand how experiences of PrEP can illuminate generational narratives of gay life and the histories of AIDS, by drawing on cultural scholarship on “counter-memory” as a response to historical and political shifts that followed the AIDS crisis.

Methods:

This qualitative study involved semi-structured interviews with 18 gay and queer men born between 1981 and 1996, who were living in Australia and using PrEP for HIV prevention. Interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically.

Results:

Participants explicitly situated their experiences using PrEP as part of larger generational narratives of HIV and gay life. Participants linked their HIV anxiety with formative experiences growing up during the AIDS crisis, and the ways their identity formation as gay men were tied to dominant cultural narratives negatively associating homosexuality and AIDS. Participants connected their PrEP use to gay and AIDS histories, by situating it as part of the history of the HIV response, and by comparing their anxiety-free sex enabled by PrEP to pre-AIDS sexual imaginaries.

Conclusion:

By drawing attention to experiences of HIV anxiety, PrEP illuminates generationally distinct ways participants understand their relationship to HIV and to gay life. Further, by removing HIV anxiety associated with sex, PrEP functions as a “memory pill” by prompting gay men to imagine a connection to pre-AIDS sexual cultures. These findings demonstrate the ways PrEP can provide generational frameworks for understanding gay men’s experiences of the past and present of HIV and gay sexual cultures.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

None