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Experiences of Stealth Breeding and Associated Factors to HIV Post-Exposure Prophylaxis Seek Among Gay Men in Brazil

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Stealth breeding is the act in which a man, without the consent of their partner, removes the condom during sexual intercourse, breaking the previously established agreement and configuring an unprotected sexual relationship. The evolution of cases of infection by the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) remains worrying for public health, with prevention considered the only strategy for its control, especially with emphasis on Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP) after an episode of sexual violence. Our goal was to analyze the stealth breeding experiences from the victims' perspectives and the associated factors with seeking PEP among gay men who experienced stealth breeding in Brazil.

Methods: This quantitative study followed the conceptual references of intersectionality, health care, and masculinities. In total, a diverse sample of 601 gay cisgender men, all of whom suffered from a stealth breeding experience, from all regions of Brazil, aged between 18 and 61 years, responded to an online survey in 2023.

Results: From this sample, 421 sought PEP after the experience, and 180 did not; Over 50% reported becoming infected with an STI. A multinomial logistic regression revealed that those who were victimized by a casual sex partner and those who disclosed the experience to others showed higher odds of seeking PEP in the aftermath of the stealth breeding.

Conclusions: We concluded that stealth breeding is a reality in Brazil among gay men, which should generate more discussions about sexual violence among gay men and reduce the overall societal stigma that prevents them from seeking help and more emotional support, as well as seeking PEP after an episode of sexual violence.

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Introduction

Stealth breeding is defined as the act in which a man, without the consent or knowledge of his male partner, removes the condom during sexual intercourse, breaking the previously established agreement (Brennan, 2017). The same phenomenon is called stealthing among heterosexual people (Brotsky, 2017). The literature highlights the difference between stealth breeding and other bareback practices. The latter deals with sexual relations in which the people involved agree not to use condoms, and there is a vast literature on gay and MSM sex research on this topic (Bezerra & Giacomini, 2020). It is also important to mention “bug chasing” and “gift-giving” since both

describe sexual practices in which HIV infection occurs intentionally and is carried out with the knowledge and consent of those involved (Klein, 2014). Conversely, stealth breeding indicates the unilateral violation of the agreement established by the partners during sexual intercourse, as one of them is unaware of condom removal (Nunes & Lehfeld, 2018). HIV transmission can occur in stealth breeding, but it does not define the term (Brennan, 2017).

HIV infection remains a worrying topic in public health due to the high rates of new cases and the challenges of prevention strategies worldwide (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2018). Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP) stands out as one of the actions of the “Combined

Prevention” strategy to prevent new cases of HIV infection in case of unprotected sex. In Brazil, PEP is fully available through the public Unified Health System (SUS), free of charge, and represents a public health measure aimed at preventing HIV infection. It should be taken within 72 hours after exposure and it is part of the clinic protocol for victims of sexual violence (Brasil, 2017), such as stealth breeding.

Since 2009, the use of PEP has been recommended considering consensual sexual exposures that represent a risk of infection, based on the assessment of the person’s risk exposure situation. PEP is also indicated in situations of sexual violence and accidents with biological materials. It is essential to expand access to PEP by implementing its prescription in healthcare services (Brasil, 2020). However, data from the Brazilian Ministry of Health point out that most gay men and other cisgender MSM accessed PEP following consensual sexual exposure, with only a small portion due to a sexual violence episode, less than 1%, from 2023 data (Brasil, 2017).

Previous empirical evidence about stealthing in Brazil (Ferrari et al., 2024) showed that 2,275 women were victims of stealthing. Among this sample, only 55 women (2.4%) sought PEP after this sexual violence. The authors concluded that cisgender women, in general, were worried about not getting pregnant after an episode of unprotected sex and did not seek PEP.

No empirical research was identified about how gay men experience condom removal without consent and whether they tend to seek PEP in the Brazilian context. In this context, we aimed to characterize the experience of 601 Brazilian gay cisgender men who were victims of stealth breeding based on social markers of difference, such as the age at which the stealth breeding occurred, the status of the relationship with the perpetrator, how they had met, and other social aspects such as religion, level of education and income, race/ethnicity, and region of the country where they live. At last, we tried to understand the social support network of the victims after the episode of stealth breeding - to whom they disclosed the experience (if they did so). The social support network is understood as the set of relationships that a subject perceives as

significant in times of stress, such as situations of violence (Sluzki, 1997).

International studies point out characteristics that were associated with increased odds of using PEP: Being 18 to 30 years old, individuals from racial/ethnic minority groups, and those with lower incomes, being single, having had unprotected anal sex with another man, having heard of PEP from social support network, such as friends, internet or health care facilities (Adan et al., 2020; Hugo et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2008; Mehta et al., 2011; Zablotska et al., 2011).

In another perspective, studies in the Brazilian context indicate a different prevalent profile in the search for PEP after unprotected sexual intercourse: they are generally men who have sex with men, young men between the ages of 25 and 32, of white ethnicity, with a higher level of education, single, they did not have a stable relationship with the partner which the unprotected sexual happened that made them seek PEP and generally users of private health services (Araujo & Cavalli, 2023; Brasil, 2021; Carneiro & Elias, 2018; Santos et al., 2020; Silva et al., 2023). From the studies mentioned, we aimed to identify whether those variables influenced seeking PEP after the stealth breeding experience.

Conceptual framework

To understand how social markers of difference can influence seeking PEP after an episode of stealth breeding, we used the intersectionality perspective as a theoretical contribution (Hooks, 1994; Nogueira, 2017). The authors consider intersectionality a theoretical and methodological approach to understanding social inequalities in health and propose political actions to address them.

The intersectional perspective in understanding health care aims to discuss how overlapping social markers of difference, such as gender, sexual orientation, class, age, territoriality, race/color, among other aspects, create complex experiences of privilege and oppression, shaping an individual’s health and influencing their engagement with the healthcare system, structuring and guiding important issues of health-seeking help (Hankivsky et al., 2010). Thus, the

intersectionality approach inaugurates a new theoretical-methodological aspect that seeks to analyze the complexity and irreducibility of one social marker of difference over another. Markers are defined as social constructions prior to the existence of subjects, which are articulated, producing greater or lesser inclusions or exclusions, depending, to do so, on a series of social factors (Hankivsky & Christoffersen, 2008).

In health investigations in the context of South America, studies that propose to incorporate into analysis the complexity with which these economic, generational, gender, and race/color factors affect the bodies of subjects, and their experiences have been rare, which has generated significant gaps (Vigoya, 2018). These gaps have been the target of theoretical-methodological investment by researchers who use the intersectionality approach (Ferrari et al., 2021; Gomes, 2015; Lugones, 2014) in expanding the understanding of inequities through the possibility of including the complex ways in which social markers relate and reinforce each other.

The intersectional approach in health brings together equity and social justice perspectives. The debate, which has been ongoing since the first decade of the current century, considers the structural arrangements of social markers of difference, seeking to go beyond recognizing the multidimensional nature of health inequities. Furthermore, it proposes the development of research designs and analysis models capable of simultaneously measuring and analyzing the multidimensionality of social markers of difference in processes of health inequities (Bauer, 2014).

Therefore, considering gay male sexuality as the central object of this study, we rely on authors who argue that these should be analyzed in concrete everyday life and in the social relationships that men establish among themselves in the Brazilian context (Alves & Araújo, 2020; Ferrari et al., 2021). Intersectionality enhances the investigation of masculinities, as there are consequences for health depending on the roles that subjects play in their daily lives (Bowleg, 2012).

The authors of this article consider that this framework provides clues into the dimensions

that relate to patients' various abilities and how healthcare services' characteristics interact in providing access to care along the continuum of PEP seeking. This framework could provide the basis for a more substantial operational measurement of the various aspects related to patients' abilities to interact with health services to seek PEP.

In addition, it may guide policies addressing specific gaps in patients' abilities to promote access. Therefore, we view access as the possibility to seek healthcare services, reach healthcare resources, obtain or use healthcare services, and be offered services appropriate to care needs.

Hypotheses

We formulated the following hypotheses:

1. Stealth breeding is not perceived as sexual violence, and the search for PEP would be generally low among the victims.
2. Concerning the factors associated with seeking PEP in Brazilian literature, we presume that white, older gay men with high educational levels would have a higher rate of seeking PEP than black and younger gay men with lower educational backgrounds after the stealth breeding episode.

Method

Study design

An online survey was developed and distributed to women and men from all regions of Brazil. Eligible men and women were 18 years or older, living in Brazil, who could read and write in Portuguese, and who were victims of stealth breeding or stealthing. For this study, we focused on the stealth breeding experience among gay men who responded to the survey. All the respondents were victims of stealth breeding less than 10 years before completing the survey, and none took PrEP when stealth breeding happened. According to the Ministry of Health in Brazil, only in 2009 was the use of PEP extended to nonoccupational exposures, including following sexual contact or injection-drug use (Brasil, 2017).

Participants

The sample consisted of literate gay men aged between 18 and 61 who lived in Brazil. The data refers to stealth breeding in any period of the participants' lives. This study included participants from all Brazilian states, particularly urban and metropolitan areas. Following recommendations for self-completed surveys on sexual health in populations that include people with low educational levels (Diniz et al., 2017), the survey format was simple, without conceptually complex questions or requiring long answers.

According to Table 1, 601 men responded to the online survey. It is a somewhat diverse sample: from different socioeconomic statuses, racial/ethnic backgrounds, religious affiliations, and professional activities. However, we can trace a more consistent profile: all were gay and cisgender adults, most of them were victims of stealth breeding during their youth, living in urban areas of Brazil, professed a religion, were primarily white, had a high level of education, and were from the middle class.

Measures

The online questionnaire was exploratory in scope, consisting of a set of sociodemographic questions and a questionnaire regarding participants' experiences of stealth breeding that was created for this study. Sociodemographic questions included sex assigned at birth, gender identity, sexual orientation, educational level, socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, religious affiliation, and state of residence, all measured as categorical variables with predefined possible answers. Age was measured as a continuous variable.

Regarding the circumstances of the stealth breeding experience, the questionnaire included (a) relationship with the perpetrator, (b) how they met the perpetrator, (c) how they felt after the experience, (d) how the perpetrator reacted after the experience, (e) when they realized the perpetrator had removed the condom, (f) what were the consequences for their lives, (g) their social support network - to whom they disclosed the experience (if they did so), (h) if they knew

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample.

		%	N
Sexual orientation	Gay	100%	601
Gender identity	Cisgender	100%	601
State of residence	State capital	95.2	572
	Metropolitan area	4.8	29
Region of Brazil	North	11.6	70
	Northeast	21.0	126
	Midwest	20.8	125
	Southeast	34.3	206
	South	12.3	74
Age	18–24	19.6	118
	25–29	24.5	147
	30–39	49.9	300
	>40	6.0	36
Religious affiliation	No religion	45.1	271
	Catholic	24.0	144
	Evangelical	15.1	91
	Spiritualists	11.1	67
	Others	4.7	28
Race / ethnicity	White	59.6	358
	Brown	25.3	152
	Black	15.1	91
Educational level	Postgraduate	52.9	318
	Graduate	21.8	131
	Undergraduate	16.1	97
	Completed high school	9.2	55
Socioeconomic status	Up to 2	20.8	125
(Personal income in	2–4	14.9	90
minimum salary)	4–10	42.8	257
	10–20	11.6	70
	No income	9.8	59

other people who had also been victimized, (i) if they knew the terms 'stealthing' or 'stealth breeding', (j) if they sought PEP in the aftermath of the stealth breeding experience, and (k) the perpetrator's gender, all measured as categorical variables with predefined possible answers; and (l) age when the episode happened, which was measured as a continuous variable. Based on previous literature on this topic, these questions were developed specifically for this study and chosen to examine different aspects of the experience.

Procedures

This study used an online link prepared through Google Forms. Sampling was non-probabilistic through convenience, purposive, and snowball techniques. Participants were recruited online through ads on social media (Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp). Through emails, Brazilian public and private universities were asked to share the call for responses among their communities. Feminist and LGBT institutions and health workers were asked to share the ads on their social media. In addition, participants were asked to forward the survey to other men

who would be eligible to participate in the study. Before starting the survey, participants were required to check consent tick boxes, which were used to obtain informed consent anonymously. The tick boxes ensured that participants met the eligibility criteria, understood the questions, and knew their responses would be anonymous. The online survey emphasized the anonymity of participation in such a sensitive and unstudied topic. Before the survey's online launch, pre-testing was undertaken to optimize question clarity and comprehension. Five pre-testing interviewees were recruited by the snowball sampling technique (Simkus, 2022). All interviewees found the survey easy to understand and straightforward. Survey comprehension was satisfactory, and no changes were made to the questions. The survey was distributed between February and August 2023, and the collected data were stored in a password-protected account accessible to the lead researcher only. All subjects gave informed consent for inclusion before participating in the study. The study was conducted per the Declaration of Helsinki, and the protocol was approved by the University of Porto Ethics Committee, protocol code "Reference 2023/04-05".

Statistical analyses

To analyze the data on the participants' experiences of stealth breeding and their behaviors in the aftermath of the experience, we ran descriptive statistics, including percentages for each response category. To examine the factors associated with the stealth breeding experience that could explain Post-Exposure Prophylaxis seeking-behavior (PEP), we examined the association between each independent variable and PEP-seeking behavior (0 = no; 1 = yes) through chi-square associations and Pearson's correlations and conducted a multinomial logistic regression.

Results

Stealth breeding experiences

Regarding stealthing experiences, some data drew attention (Table 2). Almost 52% of the sample had never heard of the term stealth breeding

Table 2. Experiences of stealth breeding.

		%	n
Knowing the term	Never heard	50.6	304
	Have heard	49.4	297
Realized condom removal	During sexual intercourse	70	421
	After sexual intercourse	30	180
Knowing other victims	Did not know	65.5	394
	Know	34.5	207
Perpetrator's status	Casual sex	53.7	323
	Casual date	35.9	216
	Boyfriend/husband	10.3	62
Age at the time	15–17	5.8	35
	18–24	34.6	208
	25–29	32.3	194
	30–39	24.8	149
	>40	2.3	14
How they met the perpetrator	App	54.2	326
	Mutual friends	21.0	126
	Bar/club	16.5	99
	Others (work, college, gym)	8.3	50
Feelings victimized	Victims of sexual violence	74.5	448
	This could happen to anyone	25.5	153
Perpetrator's reaction	Did not care	79.0	475
	Pressure to get PEP	8.5	51
	Never discussed	12.5	75
PEP after stealth breeding	Did not seek prophylaxis	29.9	180
	Took PEP	70.1	421

before the survey, and over 65% did not know any other victims. More than 70% responded that they were victims of stealth breeding during their youth, between the ages of 15 and 29 (WHO, 2024). Almost 90% were victims of stealth breeding in non-stable relationships. Over 54% met the perpetrator on dating apps, mostly on "Grindr." Almost 75% considered that they were victims of sexual violence, and almost 80% said that the perpetrator did not care about the episode. It is worth mentioning that over 50% of the sample reported an STI after stealth breeding. Syphilis and gonorrhea were the most cited. Almost 70% of the sample never told anyone about the episode. Lastly, 90% answered that the perpetrator should be punished and 83% considered that stealth breeding should be a crime.

The aftermath of the stealth breeding experiences

After the stealth breeding experience, over 70% sought Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP) within 72 hours, and over 52% reported becoming infected with an STI. Regarding the victim's social support network after the stealth breeding experience, over 69% stated that they never told anyone. Only two respondents went to the police station to report the episode.

Associated factors to seek PEP after stealth breeding experiences

To analyze the characteristics of the stealth breeding experience that could explain PEP-seeking behavior among the sampled men, a multinomial logistic regression using the enter method was performed with seeking PEP in the aftermath of the stealth breeding experience as the dependent variable (0 = no, 1 = yes), and current age, age at the time, religious affiliation, State of residence, socioeconomic status, educational level, race/ethnicity, perpetrator's reaction, perpetrator's status (boyfriend/husband vs. casual), disclosure of the experience to others, feeling victimized, meeting the perpetrator from an app, the moment when they realized the condom had been removed, knowing other victims, knowing the term 'stealthing or stealth breeding' (Table 3).

Preliminary chi-square association and correlation analyses indicated that economic status ($\chi^2 = .022$, $p = .013$), perpetrator's status ($\chi^2 = .111$, $p = .006$), disclosure of the experience ($\chi^2 = .116$, $p = .004$), and perpetrator's reaction ($\chi^2 = .107$, $p = .030$) were significantly associated with seeking PEP after a stealth breeding experience. State of residence (state; $\chi^2 = .123$, $p = .056$) was only marginally significantly associated with seeking PEP. Educational level ($\chi^2 = .003$, $p = .816$), feeling victimized ($\chi^2 = .021$, $p = .599$), meeting through an app ($\chi^2 = .055$, $p = .178$), realization of the experience ($\chi^2 = .021$, $p = .600$), race/ethnicity ($\chi^2 = .012$, $p = .768$), knowing other victims ($\chi^2 = .036$, $p = .379$), knowing the term 'stealthing' ($\chi^2 = .032$, $p = .426$), and having a religion ($\chi^2 = .024$, $p = .556$) were not significantly associated with seeking PEP. Lastly, current age ($r = .037$, $p = .361$) and age at the time ($r = .030$, $p = .462$) were not significantly associated with seeking PEP. The multinomial logistic regression model was significant, $B = .858$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 2.358$, $p < .001$, with around 10% of the explained variance of PEP-seeking behavior (Table 2). Only two variables were found that significantly explained PEP-seeking behavior in the aftermath of a stealth breeding experience: disclosing the experience to others and the perpetrator's status, with the odds ratio of seeking PEP

Table 3. PEP-seeking behavior.

Variable	n	Odds Ratio AdjOR (SE)	Wald	95% CI	p
Current age	601	1.076	1.816	[.976, 1.198]	.178
Age at the time	601	.949	.926	[.854, 1.055]	.336
Religious affiliation					
No					
Yes	330	1.069	.122	[.736, 1.552]	.726
Educational level 1					
Other					
Postgraduate	319	.544	.163	[.028, 10.402]	.686
Educational level 2					
Other					
Graduate	97	1.645	.917	[.594, 4.553]	.338
Educational level 3					
Other					
Undergraduate	130	1.316	.479	[.605, 2.866]	.489
Educational level 4					
Other					
High school	55	.901	.021	[.223, 3.648]	.884
State of residence 1					
Other					
North	70	1.565	1.661	[.792, 3.091]	.198
State of residence 2					
Other					
Northeast	126	.847	.249	[.441, 1.627]	.618
State of residence 3					
Other					
Midwest	124	1.436	1.277	[.767, 2.689]	.259
State of residence 4					
Other					
Southeast	208	.842	.214	[.405, 1.748]	.644
Socioeconomic status 1					
Other					
Up to 2 min wage	184	1.890	2.884	[.907, 3.939]	.089
Socioeconomic status 2					
Other					
2-4 min wage	90	.581	1.065	[.208, 1.629]	.302
Socioeconomic status 3					
Other					
4-10 min wage	257	1.485	.340	[.393, 5.604]	.560
Socioeconomic status 4					
Other					
10-20 min wage	70	1.051	.004	[.237, 4.662]	.948
Perpetrator's reaction 1					
Did not care					
Other	487	.669	2.548	[.409, 1.096]	.110
Perpetrator's reaction 2					
Never discussed					
Other	95	.458	2.420	[.171, 1.225]	.120
Perpetrator's status					
 relationship					
 casual	575	.349	6.192	[.152, .800]	.013
Disclosure to others					
 No					
 Yes	374	.562	8.125	[.379, .835]	.004
Feeling victimized					
No					
Yes	448	1.038	.028	[.669, 1.612]	.867
Meeting through an app					
No					
Yes	226	1.206	.802	[.800, 1.817]	.371
Realization					
During					
After	179	.869	.462	[.580, 1.302]	.497
Race/ethnicity					
white					
racialized	243	.945	.085	[.647, 1.380]	.770
Knowing other victims					
No					
Yes	231	1.113	.295	[.756, 1.640]	.587
Knowing the term 'stealthing'					
No					
Yes	297	1.113	.315	[.766, 1.617]	.575

Note: R^2 (Cox & Snell) = .078; R^2 (Nagelkerke) = .111.

Values in bold highlight significance. Significance value (p) is reported in the last column.

increasing when the men disclosed being victims of a sexual violence act and when the perpetrator was a casual sexual partner (versus boyfriend/husband).

Discussion

As previously stated, stealth breeding is an act of sexual violence due to condom removal without mutual agreement and a breach of the pre-established consent agreement. We point to a certain invisibility of the term, as almost 51% had never heard of it at the time of the research, and over 65% did not know any other victims of stealthing in their social circle. The term needs greater dissemination in academic, legal, and social circles to bring about greater visibility and awareness about the phenomenon, its severity, and the need to be incorporated into public policies, further demonstrating the difficulty in disseminating the term in non-English speaking countries (Ferrari et al., 2024).

It is also interesting that 90% of the sample considered that the perpetrator should be punished, and almost 83% responded that stealth breeding should be a crime. Even though it should be recalled that 'sexual violence' is subject to interpretation, nearly 75% considered themselves victims of sexual violence. The literature indicates that only 16% of men recognize that they have been victims of sexual violence during their lives, and that only 3.9% of cases are reported (Ferreira et al., 2023). Furthermore, in relationships between men, there is often a generalization that these relationships are egalitarian and, consequently, free from intimate and/or sexual violence (Souza et al., 2022). Thus, men being victims of sexual violence is a taboo subject, and they can assume that men cannot be victims of sexual violence (Hohendorff et al., 2017). Therefore, in the popular social imagination, men are always the aggressors of sexual violence; they are never the victims (Sarti, 2009). The data show that respondents had a critical view of the act of stealth breeding, considering themselves as victims of sexual violence. There is, therefore, a possible interpretation that the representation that men cannot be victims of sexual violence may

have changed in recent years in the Brazilian context.

As seen, only two participants went to the police station to report the act of stealth breeding. Authors mention that due to our culture of patriarchy and male supremacy, in which men are generally perpetrators of sexual violence, and women are victims, men often have difficulty perceiving themselves as victims of sexual violence (Bacchus et al., 2017).

Still, it is worth mentioning the contradiction in the results on how the victims considered stealth breeding a crime, and they did not report to a justice institution. Brazilian authors demonstrate that many LGBT victims of sexual violence do not report the crimes to police stations for fear of judgment, of being questioned, of experiencing institutional homophobia, of reliving the trauma, and of being questioned about what they did to "deserve" this violence. Furthermore, they demonstrate a lack of trust in authorities, shame, and the belief that nothing will be done to resolve the situation (Ferrari et al., 2021; Massa et al., 2021).

Institutional homophobia affects LGBT+ victims of sexual violence. Stereotypes about being gay result in LGBT+ people not being effectively protected from those who are supposed to harm them (Dovidio et al., 2010). The stealth breeding victims show us that we still have a lot of new and old challenges to remove the structures that have allowed institutionalized discrimination to fester unchallenged for decades in healthcare settings (Brasil, 2016). Debates about masculinities and men being victims of sexual violence can encourage reports of cases such as stealth breeding.

According to our findings, it is noteworthy that almost 74% of the victims were between 15 and 29 years old when the episode happened. Two-thirds of the sample suffered from stealth breeding during their youth. According to the literature, sexual violence among LGBT+ young people is a reality worldwide and can have devastating impacts on the victims' mental health (Carroll, 2016; United Nations, 2020). In Brazil, a cross-sectional epidemiological study used the 2019 National Survey of Health database documented disproportionately higher rates of sexual

violence among young gay men when compared to their heterosexual counterparts. Still, LGBT+ young people aged 18–24 report significantly higher rates of having experienced forced sexual contact when compared to heterosexual people (Vasconcelos et al., 2023).

Adolescents and youth face many challenges and transformations, making this a vulnerable moment, as they are more exposed to the problems encountered in their social context and suffer more significant repercussions on their health (Flores et al., 2020). In the case of LGBT+ youth, discrimination and prejudice increase the vulnerability to which they are exposed (United Nations, 2019). The prevalent homophobia in Brazilian culture can also result in a lack of awareness about sexual violence in same-sex relationships or the minimization of this type of violence. There is a fear of reporting dating violence to authorities, and there is a perception that they will not be taken seriously or could eventually be revictimized by the police (Gillum & Difulvio, 2012). Studies are necessary for understanding sexual violence suffered by LGBT+ youth to innovate proposals to tackle this problem, creating more inclusive strategies to help male victims of sexual violence.

In the case of Brazil, a country with high social inequality (Barros et al., 2000), the risk of sexual violence is different for young gay men who report struggling economically, who are brown or black, or with low formal education, who report higher rates of experiencing sexual violence than their more resourced, white, or cisgender peers (Brasil, 2017; Henning, 2015). These demographic differences not only show how environmental factors place some LGBT+ youth at higher risk for sexual violence but also highlight the need for training organizations that serve victims of sexual violence in racial/cultural humility and LGBTQ+ multicultural competency.

Further, 90% were victims of stealth breeding in non-stable relationships (casual relationships or “hookups”), and more than 54% met the perpetrator through the geolocation app “Grindr.” Regarding the data that 90% of the sample suffered stealthing in a non-stable relationship, the literature also points out that hookups have been empirically linked to sexual violence experiences

(Currier, 2013; Wade, 2017), especially among youth and college students (Maletsky & Elliott, 2019). The literature also points out that casual sex is framed by gender rules, even among gay relationships (Garcia et al., 2012). Society does normalize casual sexual encounters that may transform into opportunities for sexual coercion or sexual violence (Flack et al., 2007).

Other authors also point out that gay men who are users of dating apps are concerned about experiencing sexual violence through this use (Corriero & Tong, 2016), which corresponds to the data that over 50% of the victims met the perpetrator on “Grindr.” Recent research (Dietzel, 2021) mentions the manifestations of rape culture on Grindr. Rape culture is described as when “violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent” (Buchwald et al., 1993), and it exists online and offline (Henry & Powell, 2018). Grindr users described that rape culture extends beyond in-app interactions to in-person encounters, as observable by acts of sexual violence that several Grindr users had experienced. Authors suggest that Grindr and other dating apps pose risks associated with sexual assaults, sexual abuse, and risky sexual behaviors. In this way, apps can be addressed as technology-facilitated sexual violence perpetration (Badal et al., 2018). Still, Grindr is a highly sexualized space (Race, 2015), and gay men may feel pressured or expected to engage in sexual activity even if they do not want to (Klesse, 2016).

In a heteronormative world, these manifestations reflect societal structures, gendered power relations, inequality, and social ideologies that condone and trivialize sexual violence against gay men (Ferrari et al., 2021). Understanding these inequalities and power relations, the negotiation of condom use, and experiences of violence mediated by applications can be a significant research path for opening a dialogue of digital sociality and its implications for the health field among gay men, especially youth. Such discussions can provide support actions, allowing a critical reflection on how digital sociability has created new forms of socialization, codes, and vulnerabilities among users (DiPaola & Calo, 2024).

In another crucial point, although 70% of victims sought PEP in the aftermath of the stealth breeding experience, they did not have support networks. They preferred not to disclose their experience or the search for prophylaxis, notable in Table 3. Almost 70% of the victims never told anyone about the stealth breeding experience, which reinforces the silence and solitude of the experience by not sharing the experience with the victim's social network. Around 70% of the respondents sought HIV post-exposure prophylaxis within 72 hours of being victims of stealth breeding. It is known that the first 72 hours after a sexual violence experience are critical for HIV prevention (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2022). The search for sexual PEP may be the last resort to avoid infection after other methods have failed or have not been used, providing an opportunity to produce HIV prevention care uniquely. Victims' advocates, public health and policy professionals, health care providers, and any individual impacted by sexual violence should be aware of all the tools available to support sexual assault victims, including PEP (World Health Organization, 2007; Sachs et al., 2023).

Even though 70% of the sample sought PEP after stealth breeding, the data regarding the intersection where victims seek PEP are generally those who do not tell anyone in their social support network, may highlight a supposed shame and/or stigma because these men have been victims of sexual violence and needed to seek PEP to avoid HIV infection. Stigma can prevent some victims from seeking medical care, professional help, or emotional support from family or friends. Research in Brazil shows that HIV/AIDS stigma is an important obstacle to the use of HIV prophylaxis, showing how stigmatization processes associated with HIV/AIDS are present in the experience of using PEP (Grangeiro et al., 2015). Many participants did not reveal that they used PEP, which mainly meant taking care to hide the use of medication, especially from family and friends, for fear of being stigmatized or even judged for their non-heterosexual sexuality or for the supposed reason for seeking antiretrovirals. Gay men are often blamed for the sexual violence a perpetrator has committed against them and

may not be believed or taken seriously when they disclose or report an incident of sexual violence (Davies, 2002; Braun et al., 2009), mainly because the sexual violence happened outside official partnerships. Authors point out that stealth breeding may be morally acceptable for others, especially in anonymous sexual spaces, like bathhouses, where there is a culture of silence. Consent is perceived to be passively given in these spaces because the normative idea of consent as a communicative exchange is constrained (Daroya, 2022).

We further argue that the stigma of HIV/AIDS permeates both the search for and use of PEP, contributing to the invisibility and underutilization of this preventive method. Therefore, there is a need to integrate social interventions focused on combating stigma with implementing prevention technologies based on antiretrovirals. Given the limited time within which PEP needs to be started to be effective, we must work to promote a culture that rapidly supports victims and creates communities where they feel safe to seek both medical and support services. These findings support broader and de-stigmatized access to PEP in the public and private health sectors.

Over 52% of the respondents reported STIs after three months of being victims of stealth breeding. The type of sexual act performed during violence is considered fundamental. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the risk of contamination of HIV is on the order of 10 per 10,000 in receptive vaginal exposures. It increases to 50 per 10,000 when it comes to anal sex (Smith et al., 2005). Our data reinforces that sexual violence is often associated with physical trauma, sexual dysfunctions, unwanted pregnancies, and sexually transmitted infections (Vertamatti et al., 2013). The literature indicates that 58% of victims of sexual violence worldwide develop some STI (World Health Organization, 2022).

In Brazil, women and men in situations of sexual violence need immediate attention to treat physical damage and psychological consequences, prevent unwanted pregnancy, and IST prophylaxis (Brasil, 2012). The Ministry of Health maintains technical standards for preventing and reducing STI problems, intending to intervene on

the most prevalent agents with the most relevant clinical repercussions (Brasil, 2006). Health care for women and men in situations of sexual violence is complex and requires institutions and interdisciplinary teams prepared to provide reception, prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation care. Furthermore, it is necessary to provide sufficient information about the possible effects of violence on your sexual health (Brasil Ministério da Saúde, 2006; Brasil, 2012).

Lastly, we reinforce that the consequences of stealth breeding are not limited to victims becoming infected with sexually transmitted infections. This practice is an important public health issue that can result in a range of long-term mental and physical health consequences for its victims (Ferrari et al., 2025). All the respondents reported emotional effects that also contribute to compromising their sexual and social health. We note that stealth breeding is viewed negatively and raises questions about trust, personal health, and consent.

This study has some limitations. Despite the considerable number of respondents, it is not a representative sample. Also, our data was limited because most respondents identified as white, highly educated, and cisgender. It means that other social markers should be considered to obtain a more accurate number of victims in the country, considering the experiences of those with lesser literacy abilities and boys below the age of 18. The number of occurrences of stealth breeding is undoubtedly higher than the number of men in this research who have experienced it.

Conclusions

Stealth breeding is a type of sexual violence that affects gay men and the LGBT+ community. As our literature review shows, there is a lack of research on stealth breeding in the LGBT population and its consequences for HIV prevention. Our research data showed different paths for our hypotheses. The participants considered themselves victims of sexual violence, contrary to what the literature indicates about the difficulty for men to perceive themselves as victims of sexual violence. We can assume that, as gay men who face various forms of violence in their sexual and

affective lives, considering themselves victims of sexual violence is something plausible.

Furthermore, social markers of intersectionality, such as age, race/ethnicity, and education level, were not crucial in the search for PEP. However, the data demonstrated that victims who were not in a stable relationship and did not disclose the experience to their support network indicated a greater demand for PEP. We point to the possibility that the search for PEP may have become more democratic in recent years in Brazil (Massa et al., 2021). However, the socially constructed stigma of sexual violence and the search for PEP can still represent a strong challenge to the comprehensive care of these victims need.

Increased debates about sex education and condom use decision-making processes among adolescents and young gay men in schools and workplaces may mitigate LGBT+ young people's vulnerability to sexual violence. Investigating the prevalence and how sexual violence happens through digital platforms and geolocation applications that cater to gay men is also crucial to examine if these are aware of the sexual violence that can occur through their platforms and feel at least a sense of responsibility to help their users tackle such problems.

The still prevalent stigma attached to HIV/AIDS casts a worrying shadow over debates on public access to healthcare services, especially in environments where resources are limited, and care must be rationed. We still need strong practical and rights-based arguments in favor of extending access to PEP to everybody who needs it and will medically benefit from it, regardless of how or the circumstances under which they were exposed to HIV.

Author contribution statement

W.F.: Conceptualization, methodology, validation, investigation, formal analysis, data curation, writing—original draft preparation, and writing—review and editing. P.A.C.: Validation, formal analysis, review, and editing. M.N.: Validation, formal analysis, review, and editing. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of the paper.

Informed consent statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Institutional review board statement

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

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