

# PROJECT UNDRRESS YOUR SOUL

## Expanding counselling services to hard-to-reach MSM in a MSM sauna in a conservative and homophobic society

C.H.Choong | Oogachaga Counselling and Support | Singapore

### About Oogachaga Counselling and Support

Since 1999, Oogachaga (OC) has been providing counselling and support services to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) communities:

- Centre-based face to face counselling for LGBTQ individuals;
- Centre-based support groups for gay, lesbian and bisexual women;
- Hotline service for gay and bisexual men;
- Workshops and community talks for LGBTQ individuals.

As one of the key non-governmental organisations in educating Men who have sex with men (MSM) communities on HIV/AIDS, OC has always integrated information and knowledge on HIV/AIDS, STIs and safer sex practices in its programmes for MSM.

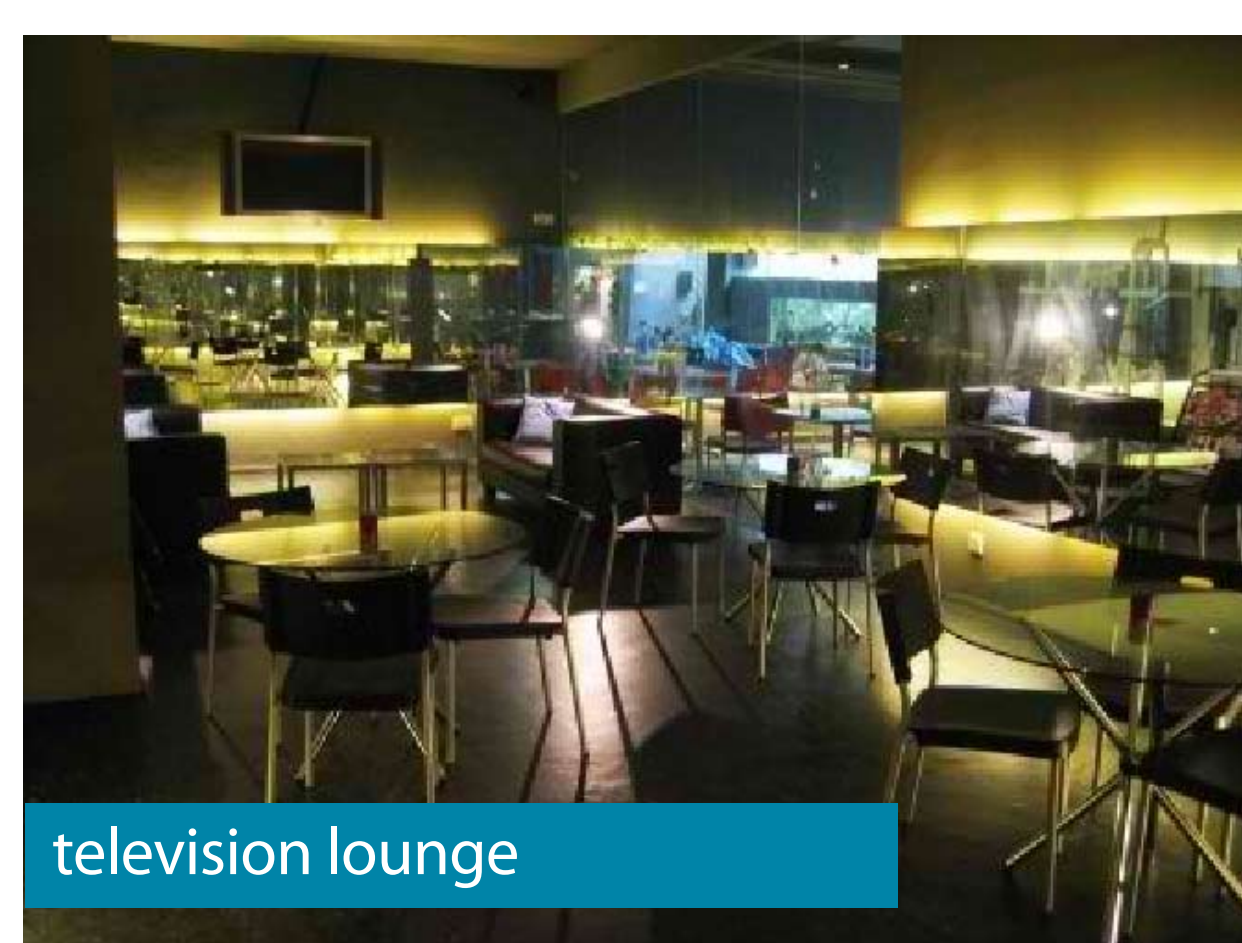
### About Project Undress Your Soul

In a survey conducted by Fridae.com in 2009, on MSM Behavioral Science, 39% (480) of the MSM respondents seek sex partners in the saunas. This made the saunas the second most popular venue for sex.

Our observation revealed that LGBTQ resources in Singapore, inclusive of OC counselling and support service, were not very well known to this group of respondents.

Club One Seven is one of the biggest MSM saunas in Singapore. In 2009, Club One Seven raised its concern to OC that the sauna patrons often seek advices from its staff on issues concerning emotions as well as information on safer sex. Club One Seven then decided that professional services should be made available to its patrons.

OC conducted **Project Undress Your Soul**, its first sauna-based counselling services at Club One Seven from February 2009 to June 2010. A total number of **21, three hours** sessions were conducted and **44 MSM** used our service.



### Project format

A professional counsellor is stationed in Club One Seven to provide face to face counselling services to the sauna patrons.

The location of the counselling session is dependable on the patrons' needs:

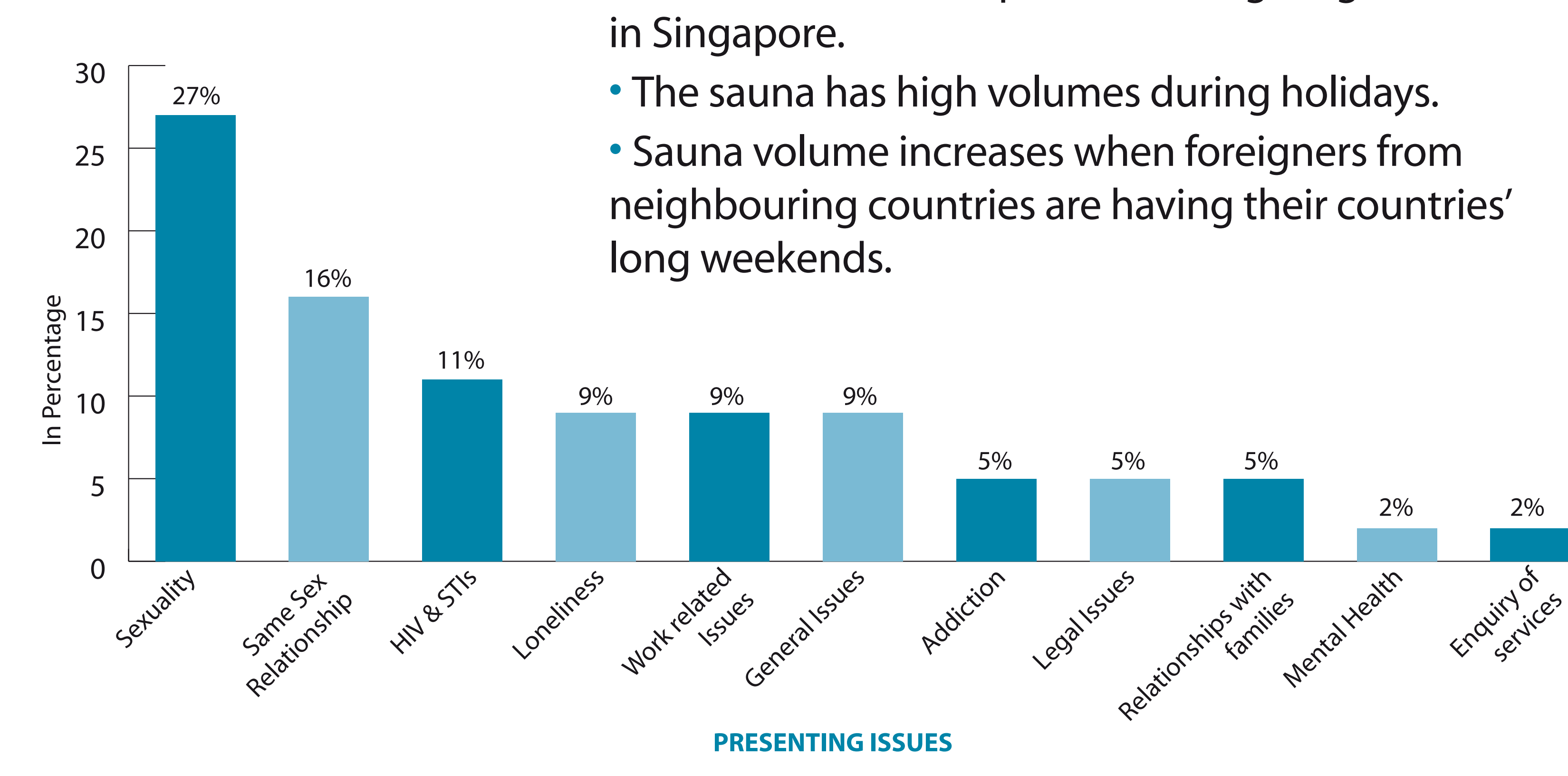
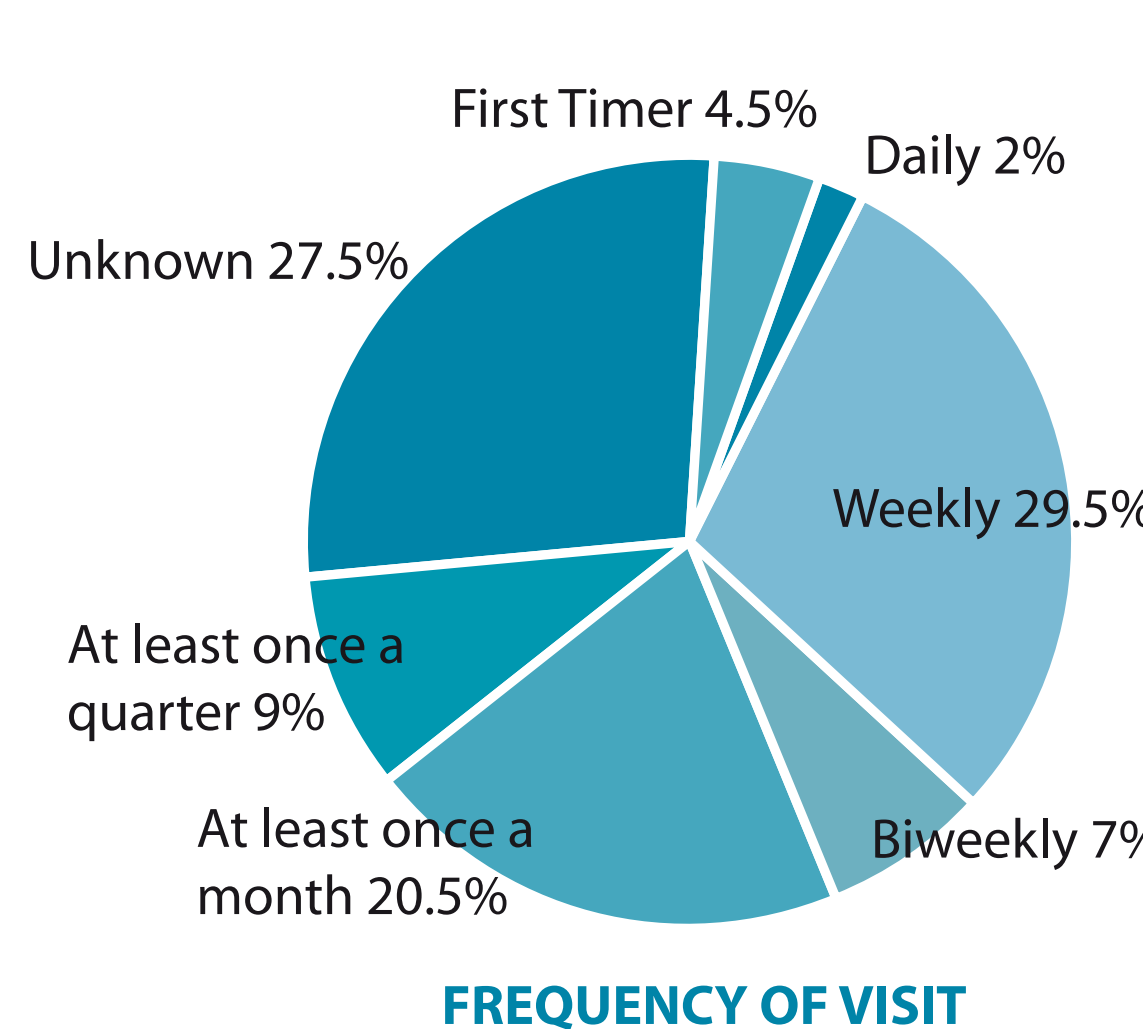
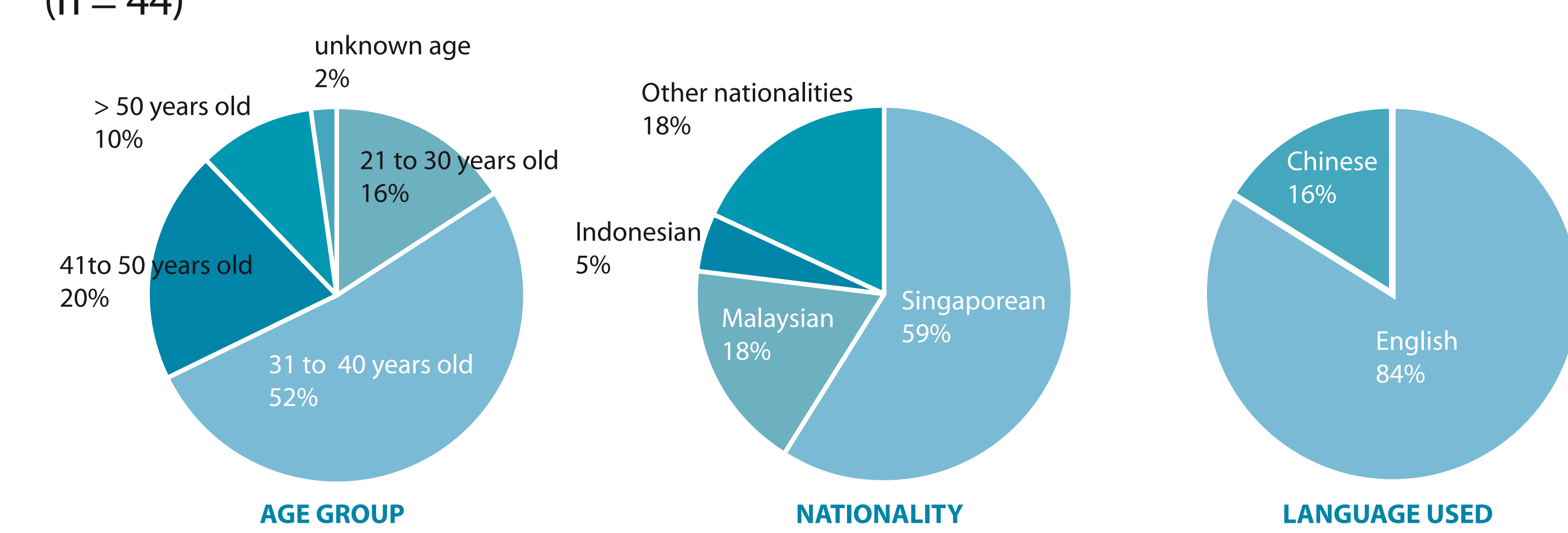
- Patrons who seek private chat will be attended to in a corner within the television lounge set up with lightweight portable dividers.
- Patrons who prefer to seek a casual chat rather than counselling will be attended to at various available space e.g. a smoking area next to the hydropool, gym or cafe.

### Project publicity

- Sauna mailing list
- Oogachaga website
- Posters
- Printed flyers



### Service users profile (n = 44)



### Observations

- Majority of patrons aged 31 to 40 years.
- Many patrons are foreigners living in Singapore.
- The sauna serves as a popular venue where regular friends meet.
- Timing on Sundays as compared to Saturdays is assessed to be more suitable for the project as patrons are more restless.
- The sauna is less frequented during long weekends in Singapore.
- The sauna has high volumes during holidays.
- Sauna volume increases when foreigners from neighbouring countries are having their countries' long weekends.

### Challenges

- Making patrons feel comfortable to the idea of counselling or seeking help.
- Lack of proper physical space.
- Finding the right volunteer for the project.
- Patrons making sexual advances.

### Achievements

- A new non-centre based approach outreach to MSM.
- Counselling can be done in a sauna setting.
- Provided information of Oogachaga and its supportive services.
- Provided information of ACTION FOR AIDS anonymous testing services.
- Reached out to non gay identified MSM, closeted MSM and foreign MSM.