



Published in final edited form as:

J Sex Res. 2010 November ; 47(6): 528–538.

Internet Sex Ads for MSM and Partner Selection Criteria: The Potency of Race/Ethnicity Online

Jay P. Paul, PhD¹, George Ayala, PhD², and Kyung-Hee Choi, PhD, MPH¹

¹ Center for AIDS Prevention Studies, University of California, San Francisco

² Research Triangle Institute (RTI) International, San Francisco, California

Abstract

The explosive growth in Internet use by MSM to find sexual partners has been noted in the research literature. However, little attention has been given to the impact of participating in this online sexual marketplace for MSM of color, despite race/ethnicity as a frequently used selection criterion in personal ads or profiles. Six focus group discussions [n=50], and 35 in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with African American, Latino, Asian and Pacific Islander MSM in Los Angeles, which included discussion of their use of Internet sites to meet/interact with other MSM. Men reported race/ethnicity as a pervasive and powerful factor in facilitating or derailing Internet-mediated sexual encounters. The racialized interactions that MSM of color reported ranged from simple expressions of race-based preferences to blatantly discriminatory/hostile interactions and often demeaning race-based sexual objectification. Experiences of rejection and a perceived hierarchy of value in the sexual market based on race had definite costs for these MSM using these online sites. Furthermore, the private and solitary nature of seeking partners online meant that there was little to buffer the corrosive aspects of those negative experiences. These online dynamics have implications for the power balance in Internet-mediated sexual liaisons, including sexual decision-making and sexual risk.

Introduction

Use of the Internet as a fast and efficient means of accessing sexual partners has grown in popularity among men who have sex with men (MSM), and has been linked with number of sexual partners, sexual risk behavior, and sexually-transmitted diseases (Benotsch et al., 2002; Blackwell, 2008; Bolding et al., 2005; CDC, 2003; Elford et al., 2001; Evans et al., 2007; Fields et al., 2006; Garofalo et al., 2007; Grov et al., 2007; Kim et al., 2001; Klausner et al., 2000; Liao, Millett & Marks, 2006; McFarlane et al., 2000; Ogilvie et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2004). Websites specific to MSM have emerged, catering to sexual connections between men in given geographic regions. The high volume of traffic on these websites has created opportunities for specifying requisite partner characteristics for a prospective sex “hook-up” in frank detail -- and finding a match to at least many of those criteria. Some see this increasing use of the Internet as having transformed the norms of gay male socialization and sexual pursuit (Bolding et al., 2007; Garofalo et al., 2007; Ross, 2005). Health promotion efforts and prevention activities acknowledge this by increasingly targeting sex website-using MSM (Anderton & Valdiserri, 2005; Blackwell, 2008; Fernandez et al., 2007; Kalnins, 2000; Kok et al., 2006; Rhodes, 2004; Rosser et al., 2006).

The use of particular selection criteria for desired sexual partnerships has its utility in maximizing the efficiency of “browsing” through a vast array of available information on the Internet. However, it also creates a milieu in which personal characteristics become commodities with definable market values. This can be reinforced by descriptions of the necessary and/or preferred traits of a prospective sexual partner. These sexual partner criteria may include specifications of race/ethnicity. Such specifications reify broad categorical divisions of race/ethnicity. Understanding the impact this may have on MSM of color, directly and indirectly affecting partner selection processes, is important to the comprehension of their sexual networks and decision-making.

The Internet has its potential benefits to those seeing themselves as marginalized/stigmatized or excluded from the mainstream -- either from the broader society or from established subcultures (McKenna & Bargh, 1998). It can facilitate a sense of membership in a virtual community among those lacking a sense of visibility in the real world, and provide outlets to express and fulfill social and sexual needs (Brown, Maycock & Burns, 2005; McKenna, Green & Smith, 2001). Certain niche or specialty sites exist to facilitate connections between men who do not fit stereotypic ideals of the gay community -- e.g., sites for “chubby-chasers,” men seeking “daddies,” or “bears” -- including sites that exist for men seeking sexual partners of a particular race/ethnicity. Men expressing a selective sexual interest in African American, Latino or Asian and Pacific Islander (API) men may, however, be viewed with suspicion by the MSM who are the objects of their attention. The meanings attached to such preferences can be ambiguous, and the special salience attached to race/ethnicity is not necessarily experienced positively. However, research has provided little on the felt experiences of MSM of color on the Internet when race/ethnicity is defined in clear-cut terms as a determinant of attraction. How are these men impacted by an environment that may reinforce race/ethnicity as a determinant of attraction (or conversely, as a perceived social disadvantage)?

African American, Latino or API MSM are likely to experience marginalization, cultural insensitivity, and racial discrimination in the predominantly white gay community consistent with that encountered in mainstream society (Ayres, 1999; Battle, Cohen, Warren, Ferguson, & Audam, 2002; Davis & Cross, 1979; Diaz, Ayala, Bein, Henne & Marin, 2001; Ellington & Schroeder, 1994; Feagin, 1991; Manalansan, 1996; Nemoto, et al., 2003; Peterson, 1992; Wilson & Yoshikawa, 2004). Research has suggested that encountering these social barriers/constraints may increase vulnerability to psychological distress, HIV sexual risk behavior, and substance use (Choi, Yep, & Kumekawa, 1998; Diaz, Ayala & Bein, 2004; Green, 2008a; Han, 2008; Wilson & Yoshikawa, 2004). The gay community may provide supportive social networks for some MSM that negate the impact of homophobia and prejudices of mainstream U.S. society. However African American, Latino or API MSM may need to look elsewhere for affirmation, the ability to integrate a positive sense of self, and the acquisition of skills necessary to manage a dual identity that may marginalize them in multiple communities (Crawford, Allison, Zamboni, & Soto, 2002; Operario, Han, & Choi, 2008; Stokes, Vanable, & McKirnan, 1996). By exploring the Internet-mediated exchanges of African American, Latino and API MSM with other MSM, this research examines how such interactions may be experienced as analogous to or dissimilar from those “off-line” contacts.

To discuss the online experiences of African American, Latino and API MSM, it is necessary to first provide a brief overview of Internet-mediated encounters. Sexual hook-ups are facilitated by two general formats online, which have their points of overlap: personal ads and chat-rooms specific to MSM. Websites with online ads allow men to rapidly post particulars of themselves and desired sexual encounters, and allow others to review large numbers of such personals rapidly. Interested parties contact one another via email (or

instant messaging [IM] on member-based sites if both are online), which can then lead to a hook-up if mutually agreeable. Chat rooms consist of virtual spaces identified for the use of particular groups; “chat” consists of typed messages directed towards all those in the chat room or specific individuals within that “space.” Members of sites that offer chat rooms typically post personal profiles, which may contain varying degrees of explicit sexual content. If potentially interested in another person in the chat room, an individual can access their profile to readily see if there are points of convergence between attributes and interests of both parties.

This research focuses on the online experiences of men with respect to the impact of posted personal ads and profiles -- the Internet forum used by most men in our sample for sexual connections. While some prior research has explored the online experiences of MSM of color, these studies have been far more limited in scope, both with respect to data collection and to exploration of the impact of the racialized nature of this virtual environment. Poon and colleagues (2005) conducted a qualitative exploration of the online experiences of Asian (primarily Chinese) MSM in Toronto, but these were men who specifically used Internet chatrooms, were not interviewed face-to-face, and were primarily describing their reasons for such use with consideration of implications for HIV prevention. Phua and Kaufman (2003) examined the issue of specification of race/ethnicity in Internet personals ads, but this was a quantitative study examining the race/ethnicity of those placing ads and their indication of racial preferences in such ads. The focus of Carballo-Diequez and colleagues (2006) was on sexual negotiation and HIV serostatus disclosure among Latino MSM in Internet-related encounters.

This work represents a different direction in attempting to gauge the impact of online ads that specify racial/ethnic criteria for sexual partners upon API, African American and Latino MSM. Our research data come from a series of group and individual qualitative interviews that explored the sexual and social relationships of MSM of color, and both race-based and heterosexist-based experiences of discrimination and exclusion. The Internet-specific occurrences they reported emerged out of a discussion of their broader social and sexual relationships with other MSM. The relatively unstructured nature of these interviews provided an opportunity for these MSM of color to provide in-depth accounts of the subjective impact of Internet-based racism and racialized sexual preferences. The consistency in which the themes described in our findings unfold across these interviews provides a forceful impression of the felt realities of these MSM.

Methods

Design Overview

We conducted a two-part qualitative study in Los Angeles as part of the initial developmental process for a larger quantitative study examining the impact of social contexts influencing sexual risk behavior for African American, Latino, and API MSM. In particular, we were interested in examining racism and discrimination within the mainstream gay male community, and within-group social pressures and supports. The men in both qualitative samples were recruited with the aid of a professional marketing firm, by publicizing the study online (e.g., on craigslist), through ads in “alternative” (non-gay specific) weeklies, and by posting flyers in a variety of bars and clubs (identified by key informant interviews as attracting African American, Latino, and/or API MSM), as well as in social service and AIDS organizations serving gay men of color. We began with a series of focus groups to elicit broader themes for the subgroups under study, and followed this by individual in-depth interviews informed by the focus group data. The focus group moderator had an extensive background in group facilitation, as well as many years of experience working on MSM-specific research projects. The individual interviews utilized semi-

structured open-ended questionnaires, and were conducted by two of the study investigators. All group and individual interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Focus groups were 2 hours in length and held in specially designed rooms for such groups in the offices of a professional marketing firm. Individual interviews ran from 90 minutes to 2 hours, and were held in the offices of the AIDS Project Los Angeles. All subjects provided written consent, and were paid incentives for their participation (\$75 for the focus groups; \$60 for individual interviews). The institutional review boards of both the AIDS Project Los Angeles (Los Angeles, California) and the University of California, San Francisco (San Francisco, California) approved the study.

Participants

Focus Group Sample—In July and August of 2005, 6 focus groups were held with men who (a) were between 18 and 50 years old, (b) reported having sex with other men within the past 6 months, (c) reported having had a new male sexual partner in the past 12 months, (d) were African American, API, or Latino, and (e) resided in Los Angeles County. We utilized stratified purposeful sampling (Kuzel, 1999; Patton, 1990) to assure respondent diversity, with groups being stratified by age (18-29 years, 30-50 years) and race/ethnicity. We kept the upper age limit at 50 years to ensure greater homogeneity to group membership and participant experiences, as these commonalities may facilitate communication flow (Brown, 1999). As we were interested in respondents' experiences in seeking out and finding new sexual and dating partners, our inclusion criteria identified minimal prerequisites that we felt would identify those sexually active and meeting new men for sex. Our sample ranged from 21 to 49 years, and consisted of 17 Latinos, 16 APIs, and 17 African Americans. Mean age was 31.2 years (S.D. = 7.6); median age was 29 years. Seven of the 17 Latino men were foreign-born, as were 9 of the 16 API men; all African American men had been born in the United States.

In-depth Individual Interview Sample—Between December 2005 and August 2006, we conducted 35 individual in-depth interviews with men who reported sex with other men in the prior 6 months, lived in the Los Angeles area, and were African American, Latino, or API. Inclusion criteria were based upon purposive sampling, with cells stratified once again by age and race/ethnicity. A total of 12 API, 12 African American, and 11 Latino men were interviewed. Sixteen men were 18 to 29 years old; 19 men were 30 years or older. (There was no upper limit on age in these interviews.) The age range was 20 to 60 years, with a mean age of 33.2 years (S.D. = 10.1) and a median age of 30 years. Among these men, one of the 11 Latino men was foreign-born, as were 9 of the 12 API men; the African American respondents were all born in the United States.

Research Data

Development of Focus Group Guide—The focus group guide was defined in broad strokes determined by the need to explore issues and dynamics critical to our subsequent research, as well as to inform the development of new quantitative measures. The key emphases were (a) identifying where and how these men met sexual and dating partners, (b) capturing their shared experiences with respect to these partnerships, (c) exploring experiences of discrimination and exclusion based upon race/ethnicity, and (d) identifying perceived key figures in their social network. The facilitator's role was to introduce the topic areas in turn, elicit input from as many group members as possible, and request clarification/amplification of remarks as needed.

Development of In-depth Individual Interview Guide—The individual interviews were meant to expand upon topics examined in the focus groups. There was less of a focus on the venues (real or virtual) frequented by participants in these interviews, to allow for

greater inquiry into more personal/intimate material than possible in focus group discussions. Thus, this mode of data collection allowed for in-depth discussion of experiences in meeting sexual and dating partners, general partner selection preferences, the influence of one's social network, experiences of and the impact of discrimination and racism, personal coping strategies, and sexual risk practices. After the first 10 interviews, 3 months were spent reviewing transcripts, developing ideas about the initial data, and refining our interview guide, allowing for an iterative process of exploration of the research topics (see Frankel, 1999).

Analysis of Qualitative Transcripts—The analysis of both focus group data and individual interview data followed a similar course, with the coding of individual interviews building upon the work done on focus group transcripts. A multi-disciplinary team of investigators initially read through transcripts together to generate descriptive categories for coding that incorporated both the topic areas defined by the interview outlines and the constructs that emerged from the text.

Once investigators had agreed upon an initial set of text codes, transcripts were divided among the investigators for coding. All transcripts were double-coded and the results discussed in meetings of coders until consensus was achieved. This iterative process led to a continual refinement of constructs and the definition of new codes for themes. All coded transcripts were then imported into ATLAS.ti (Muhr & Friese, 2004), permitting further exploration and extension of conceptual categories.

Results

Use of the Internet for partner selection was common for our respondents, especially among younger men. They described use of a variety of internet sites targeting MSM, ranging from those in which one simply posted ads seeking other men (e.g., craigslist.org) to those requiring signing up and establishing an online profile (paid memberships being required of a certain subset of this category). Our sample readily differentiated their use of the Internet from off-line experiences of “hooking up” or establishing contact with other gay men or MSM for the purpose of having sex.

Ease of Use

Ease of use was associated with key characteristics that have been identified elsewhere (Bolding, Davis, Hart, Sherr & Elford, 2007; Brown, Maycock & Burns, 2005; McKenna, Green & Smith, 2001; Ross, 2005; Ross, Rosser, McCurdy & Feldman, 2007). Among the key considerations for our sample common to the research literature were (a) ready access to particularized group of men defined by such factors as demographic characteristics, geographic location, and preferred sexual behaviors, and (b) the ability to present and discuss their preferences frankly in relative anonymity.

These sites also gave men the ability to partition their sexual lives from their social lives (sometimes a reflection of their own openness about their sexuality in general, other times simply a matter of avoiding judgments or reactions from other MSM). In some cases, this separation of the sexual and social spheres of their lives was consistent with patterns described elsewhere for MSM of color (Diaz, 1998; Operario, Han, & Choi, 2008; Peterson, 1992).

For me a little bit different 'cause I am bisexual so, you know ... So if I'm in a mood to like go online and actually have sex [with men] I'll go online and I can find somebody and for me it's just not -- I'm not looking for any type of relationship, at all, ... it is, is just like for the moment.

Bolivian, 29 years old

It's an easier, it's a more convenient way for people to hook up, because, you know, you have no one else around. ... I mean I'm in the privacy of my home; I could care less who's at my apartment. ... It's a way for men to be sneaky. ... I know some of these guys that I've seen and stuff, they wouldn't come up to me on the street and approach me or whatever. ... It's a place where they feel comfortable, but they wouldn't feel comfortable in a gay club or a gay bathhouse or at a gay parade.

African American, 28 years old

Finally, men commented frequently on the ease of both initiating and terminating contacts with men with minimal social awkwardness. These sites provide a curious meld of the private and public arenas, with interactions a fusion of intimacy and remoteness. A mouse click could immediately end an online connection, and the norms on such Internet sites place little emphasis on civility or concern for others' feelings.

It's an easier form of communication 'cause when I look at the way it's written down. Friends, it's all social, you have to see them face to face. So you know, there's a real fear of like basically someone's reaction towards you or acceptance of you. ... Online is totally different. You can have a different identity, you can be anyone who you want to be, and it's easier for you to turn someone down. And a lot of times when you're rejected, you know, sometimes you could care less 'cause it's not face to face.

Filipino, 28 years old

However, that ease of initiating contact with other men and meeting for casual sex was something about which men reported some ambivalence:

Just too easy. Like if you can, if it's really needed and you want to get somebody in ten minutes, then it can happen. But if you, if it's that easy to get them, then I'd be suspicious.

African American, 24 years old

Like you can conversate [sic] with them but you don't conversate, 'cause you don't conversate when you want to have sex with him. I don't know, that's how I feel. That's why you're on there. But there's almost a sense that you're devaluing human life or the human experience in a way, 'cause there's no foreplay.

African American, 25 years old

The ways in which online communication facilitates both contact with other MSM and the ability to terminate such connections with impunity comes sharply into focus in the ways in which race and preferences are discussed.

Racialized Selection Criteria

Race/ethnicity as either an explicitly defined inclusion or exclusion criterion was faced by all MSM of color, but appeared to be more powerfully felt by the API and African American participants in our interviews. While the potency of race/ethnicity on partner selection was an acknowledged fact of participating in the Los Angeles gay male community, online ads differed in critical ways in which this issue was constructed and negotiated. In face-to-face social interactions, race/ethnicity was a factor whose power was more often expressed in an oblique/coded manner and felt inferentially; online ads made clear and amplified the sense of race/ethnicity as a source of difference and value. The anonymity of the Internet also meant that men could express blatantly racist comments in exchanges of messages and be shielded from any real-time interpersonal or social consequences.

I think that some of the racial, like the racial differences are more obvious and more expressed. Everything is a lot cruder so there's no subtlety or nuance. ... And I think it's helped me, it's uh sort of-- sort of confirmed my suspicions about the racial preference.

Mexican, 23 years old

However, when I'm online it's a constant reminder in terms of ... the details of the ad and the specifics. You know, if they say "Asian only" or more frequently, "no Asians", then I say oh, yeah, that's right. That's me. ... In the online world, it's all about the specifics, so it's either, you know, "looking for Asian" or "no Asians, please." So it's kind of like, it's hard not to, you know, it's hard to ignore it. It's constantly in your face.

Japanese, 43 years old

People over email have called me "nigger" and stuff like that, and said "I don't want any, you know, parts of you," you know. Where they'll talk to me for a while and then, you know, I'll send them a picture and they're like "Oh my god, I can't believe this, blah, blah, blah."

African American, 25 years old

Sex ads emphasized the salience of race/ethnicity in negotiating sexual hook-ups for participants, thereby pressuring those responding to treat such labels as key attributes of self. This demand might not only be dissonant with interviewees' own sense of identity, but also lead them to collude with those who would imbue such categories with a putative legitimacy. By defining racial/ethnic preferences in broad categorical terms, these ads reinforced presumed distinctions between particular groups and collapsed intra-group diversity, thereby reinforcing stereotypes.

We'd trade pictures, and I don't think I look that Asian, but to some people they're real sticklers for it. They can tell I'm not completely Caucasian.

Chinese/White, 23 years old

That's ... why I don't get on the Internet anymore ... they confuse me being a Latino. And the moment they find out that you're Black and you consider yourself Black, suddenly everything changes.

African American, 36 years old

What kind of Asians? ... I remember one time there was this guy, he said 'No Asians,' so I kind of tested him. I got a picture of an attractive actor -- an Asian actor -- in the Philippines, and posted it and like 'Oh, here's my picture.' 'Oh, you're cute! Let's hook up.' 'I thought you don't like Asians!' So it was kind of like, is there this stereotype of an Asian in their mind?

Filipino, 30 years old

At the same time, some reported a reluctance to rush to judgment, and found even explicit inclusion or exclusion criteria in Internet profiles and ads to be ambiguous. Several respondents argued against construing racially-based preferences as necessarily racist, noting that individuals tended to identify sexual partner preferences across a range of characteristics on the Internet.

I don't think it's racism, necessarily. You know, it's people's preferences.

Vietnamese, 26 years old

I don't know, especially in Los Angeles, like if there's someone that's looking specifically for a Latin -- a Latin guy and he makes it known, I don't think that's so,

so bad. Especially being in Los Angeles, cause ... the huge Latin population there is. The guy that wants to hook up with you isn't showing any interest in just any Latin guy, he's picking you.

Puerto Rican/Guatemalan, 25 years old

I can't fault you for liking what you like, but kind of makes you wonder.

African American, 23 years old

Race and Rejection

The lack of face-to-face contact was variously reported as making sexual rejections easier in some circumstances, but more difficult in others, especially if a profile did not explicitly identify racial/ethnic criteria and this was disclosed subsequently via email or IM. In addition, the online experience differed from in-person exchanges with respect to the level of exposure in sheer numbers to other MSM's racialized exclusionary criteria or preferences.

Just in terms of ethnicity on craigslist, there's just, you know, a whole ... when I've gone on there, if there's like, say there's a hundred postings on a page, you know, 98% will say they're specifically looking for Caucasian men or Latin men. Sorry, no Blacks, you know, or no Asians.

African American, 30 years old

I will notice that most other ethnicities are looking for white guys, even Asians are looking for white guys. And so they will put on their profiles, "I'm looking for Caucasians and Latinos only, no Asians, no Blacks, etc." So -- and I see that a lot, probably at least 60 or 70 percent, I'd say. So it may be a generalization, but I've seen that all over.

Filipino, 25 years old

The online environment did not facilitate responses to such stereotyping and potentially discriminatory attitudes that might prove otherwise effective or reinforce a sense of power elsewhere: attempting to challenge such stereotypes, or choosing to socialize selectively in environments where one would not encounter such attitudes.

I think it's been so many -- I mean, you just can't get like upset and shaking our fist at the computer screen and -- you know. You just move on and it's not even worth it. There are other people and what can you do?

Chinese, 34 years old

Like you try to ignore them, and any time -- every time you go online they bombard you and it's like really hard to get away.

Nicaraguan, 24 years old

It can drive you crazy or you can kind of put it in perspective and just kind of know that there are people out there who are better than that, who aren't posting ads that say no Asians and so forth. ... So while on the other hand, there's a lot of that stuff going on in terms of that stuff that fucks with you, there's some of that stuff on that people make an effort to do the opposite of that. ... So it also kind of like -- there's hope.

Filipino/Chinese, 44 years old

Racialized Sexual Preferences and Objectification

Some participants also had strong reactions to those online profiles specifying a preference for particular men of color. For some, leveraging race in these circumstances to achieve their

goal of sexual connection was simply part of the transaction. For others, however, it raised the undesirable likelihood of being fetishized or objectified.

The incidents where the guy's attractive and I'm interested, I will play that to my advantage. I'll commit him [sic]. But 9.9 out of 10 times it's not that case, where it does come off derogatory and it does make me very uncomfortable.

Chinese, 31 years old

It's almost like once you go online you're ... kind of made into this archetype almost, meaning that as a Black person, a Black male particularly, you're made into this Mandingo fantasy.

African American, 25 years old

I think it's bad. I feel like -- like somewhat like -- totally stereotyped. Like you just want me for that reason and like, that's it? ... I kind of feel cheated sometimes, like -- I, well, I expect a lot more, basically. ... When they mention that -- that they like me for that reason and they go on about that, I usually just get so turned off ...

Nicaraguan, 24 years old

People bring in their own assumptions to that and think because I'm Asian, because we're polite, we're bottoms, we're submissive and that sort of thing.

Filipino/Chinese, 44 years old

Race and Perceived Value in the Sexual Marketplace

API and African American men were most articulate in identifying distinct racial stereotypes and a race-based sexual hierarchy underlying the online specification of race as an exclusionary (as well as a preferential) criterion. White MSM were seen as typically privileged online when seeking sexual contacts. API men were cast as desexualized and lowest on the sexual hierarchy. African American men experienced rejection as potential sexual partners as part of other men's broader discomfort with or social distancing from them as Black men. Some API men felt that there was much greater latitude or social acceptability for individuals online to specify "No Asians" in personal ads or profiles, whereas explicitly stating "No Blacks" would be more likely to be perceived as racist. They suggested such preferences were often coded as "Whites Only." However, other men reported exclusionary criteria that included Blacks as well as APIs or Latinos.

I know that speaks to what -- this perception largely among White gay men of what is cool. They love the idea of a Latin lover, but somehow a Black person is a sexual object. It is something -- to not be crass, but -- that you fuck, you don't date.

African American, 36 years old

I just almost think that in terms of the hierarchy that you [other focus group member] were talking about, it's like White and then anything else. But even more so sometimes, like I almost feel like the Asian is not even on the hierarchy at all, 'cause I just see that a lot. "No Asian." But you don't see a lot of like "No Black" and "No Latinos," so they're somewhere like below the Whites, but then Asians are nowhere on this map. It's just we talk a lot about being ignored and stuff like that, and I think that's very apparent.

Chinese, 31 years old

There are people that will, you know, they want it because it's a fantasy and then there are folks that will not look at you, will not touch you, just because you're Black, you know what I mean? ... It goes both ways, and the people who don't

want to touch you or even look at you, you know, they wouldn't even want to talk to you otherwise.

African American, 25 years old

This repeated experience and exposure to negative messages about their attractiveness to other MSM takes its toll.

As far as you know, feeling like you don't want to be Black anymore, I, that thought has crossed my mind on several occasions on those long hours online and you're just trying and trying and trying. And everybody's turning you down. ... You're just like, "Damn, you know, is it because I'm Black?"

African American, 24 years old

I think you have to have a really strong sense of worth here to not let that faze you.

Mexican, 25 years old

I think there definitely is a negative impact on self-esteem with myself or making a general statement, the Asian community that we're not desirable, and then when people are IM'ing us, we feel like oh, someone is interested in us and it could be an undesirable person to us but we felt like we need that attention.

Filipino, 30 years old

Descriptions suggest that connecting successfully with men on the Internet is reliant upon one's ability to sell oneself as a product -- with "hook-ups" facilitated by an awareness of one's bartering power in a given sexual marketplace. In circumstances where one's race/ethnicity all too often determined much of one's value as a sexual commodity, this not only had an impact on the person's sense of self, but on their perceived power in this forum to find desirable connections with other men.

It makes me expendable to some degree. ... If the partner I'm searching for is only looking for a person of color, then sort of any person of color will do.

African American, 28 years old

In that situation [where someone comes on to me because I'm Latino] ... people that are interested in me are few and far between, so I take kind of what I can get.

Mexican, 23 years old

API men were likely to describe experiences of being the objects of sexual interest of men to whom they were not at all attracted -- specifically, older white men. This was based not only upon their lack of physical attraction to these men, but upon a discomfort with the role expectations these men had for Asian MSM.

I've seen the younger Asian male and a much older man because they gave them that attention. So that builds into that whole power dynamic thing of 'Oh, I give you attention, I give you money, I give you whatever, so you're submissive to me, you're my toy.

Filipino, 30 years old

If I'm talking online and I am propositioned by someone who's really old, I'll have a negative view ... It's like, what is that stereotype out there, thinking you know, oh, if you're 45 you have a chance with a young Asian sort of kid? ... I mean, not that, you know, I'm not God's gift to the world and God's gift to men, but I do think on that cynical side, you know, what makes them talk to me? Just because I'm Asian and I'm younger? Would they do that to the -- I'm wondering if they'll do that to any other race as well.

Filipino, 29 years old

I'm a little bit more accepting of Asians who just kind of play into that role as opposed to non-Asians who assume that Asians are like that, because -- I don't know. Sometime there's a certain make-up to them that thinks that's the way that they get attention, or that's the way that they deal with that, that's the way that they feel worthy.

Chinese, 31 years old

Discussion

Internet use to find sexual partners is an increasingly significant part of the social/sexual lives of urban MSM, overtaking the use of traditional venues for such contacts within particular demographic segments. The ubiquity of Internet-mediated connections increases the importance of understanding the particulars of these online experiences. Study participants acknowledged the allure of sexual pursuit in this arena, given the seemingly endless opportunities for sexual connection at their fingertips. The direct and relatively uncomplicated nature of this format generally compared favorably against the more complex social rituals and expectations to be found in gay-identified social settings in Los Angeles. However, this means of advertising and satisfying one's sexual availability was also a cause for concern or disquiet on the part of some participants.

African American, Latino and API MSM reported race/ethnicity to be a frequent criterion for online sexual partner selection (both to exclude as well as emphasize racial/ethnic mixing). The capacity of race/ethnicity to facilitate or derail Internet-mediated sexual hook-ups was an inescapable part of respondents' online experiences. At the same time, its power to define sexual partner availability and sexual scripts particular to sexual negotiations is not specific to the Internet, but a part of the broader social experiences of MSM of color (Diaz, Ayala, Bein, Henne, & Marin, 2001; Green, 2008b; Wilson & Yoshikawa, 2004). The racialized hierarchy of erotic desirability delineated by the men in this study is consistent with descriptions of gay social settings (such as bars) noted by Ayres (1999), Green (2008b), and Soares (1979).

Our research suggests that special characteristics of the online experience can amplify certain dynamics and social/psychological consequences of this racialized sexual marketplace. These include the physical space and social isolation in which online contacts with other men (or their advertised sexual preferences) occur, and the primacy of words in defining initial contacts online. In addition, the highly specific nature of a range of advertised criteria for sexual partners online also raises questions for some Black, Latino and API MSM as to how to interpret racialized preferences and when to attribute such advertised criteria to prejudice.

Typically, the likelihood of experiencing racial/ethnic hostility is situated within a dimension of physical space, with private spaces viewed as the most protected and public sites seen as leaving one most exposed to discriminatory experiences (Feagin, 1991). Internet-mediated sexual "hookups" enable one to negotiate such contacts in the privacy of one's homes -- perceived by our respondents as an advantage. This creates a curious paradox where one's most private space both serves as a haven and isolates one while encountering racial/ethnic prejudice.

Due to the solitary nature of computer-facilitated searches for sexual partners, there are fewer buffers to such discriminatory experiences than in the course of conventional social interactions. While one can readily terminate contacts suggestive of racial/ethnic stereotyping and prejudice, this is a limited option for managing such negative experiences

for MSM of color. Important forms of coping -- e.g., the ability to draw upon social support and opportunities for direct confrontation and education (Choi, Paul & Ayala, 2007; Wilson & Yoshikawa, 2004) -- are minimized. Although individuals' personal identities might be sheltered by the anonymity of cyberspace, thereby mitigating the emotional toll of rejection (Brown, Maycock & Burns, 2005), there is no way to cocoon oneself from the repetitious emphasis on race/ethnicity as a key factor in determining one's sexual "desirability" to others.

This focus on race/ethnicity as a determinant of sexual interest is heightened by the primacy of the written word online. Words prompt the use of labels, including reductionistic categorizations of race/ethnicity. A consequence is that the online discourse on race/ethnicity is far less subtle than in face-to-face encounters, with the anonymity of the Web also affording some an opportunity for unbridled expression of racial prejudice or stereotyping.

In addition, the volume of online personal ads/profiles powerfully reflects and reinforces a tacit hierarchy of erotic desirability based on race/ethnicity. Our respondents -- whatever their racial/ethnic identification -- consistently viewed white men as being the most favored, followed by Latino men, with Black and API men being viewed as least desirable. For the men in our study, their prospective role as sexual partners was overlaid with expectations based upon racial stereotypes, including race-specific sexual objectification. Men in our sample using the Internet varied with respect to the degree to which their online postings took advantage of or rejected such sexual attributions.

In part, this was linked to the interpretations accorded to these preferences by our respondents, which ranged from viewing them as innocuous to offensive. Some participants were highly sensitized to viewing such advertised preferences as subtle forms of racism or "racial microaggressions" (Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002; Sue, et al., 2007). Others were influenced by the apparent sociocultural context, and instead conceptualized them as no more than one more specified individual preference. In some instances, these reactions might be linked to the sexual appeal of the poster/potential partner, which could define one's own sexual capital (Green, 2008b). The experiences of API MSM -- facing rejection, racialized objectification based upon a passive, submissive stereotype, and sexual advances from men often viewed as undesirable -- made it more difficult to shrug off these preferences. The limited description by Latino participants of racialized sexual interactions online may be a function of their perceived sexual status relative to white men.

Online encounters with both racial/ethnic prejudice and racialized objectification were linked to a devalued sense of self by a number of our respondents, as well as depression and distress. This impact is consistent with that reported elsewhere (Broudy, et al., 2007; Diaz, Ayala, Bein, Henne, & Marin, 2001; Green, 2008a; Yoshikawa, Wilson, Chae, & Cheng, 2004). As noted earlier, actions that might mitigate the psychological distress of such experiences -- engaging social support and the ability to directly confront or challenge racism and discrimination -- are constricted by the nature of the online interaction.

In addition, sexual stereotyping and the sense of being devalued in the sexual marketplace due to race/ethnicity can influence power dynamics within individual "hook-ups" and sexual behavior choices. These dynamics could result in MSM of color acting out stereotypic scripts that impact their power within sexual dyads. These preferences may also derogate men's sense of self and perceived negotiating power in the sexual marketplace (Green, 2008a; Han, 2008; Wilson & Yoshikawa, 2004).

Thus, the consequences of Internet use for sexual "hook-ups" by MSM of color may be totally at variance with those advantages derived from the use of non-sexual Internet sites

and newsgroups (McKenna & Bargh, 1998; McKenna, Green & Smith, 2001). Whilst McKenna and colleagues have highlighted the potential that “virtual communities” offer for demarginalization and emotional support, sexually-focused Internet sites are more likely to expose MSM of color to blatant rejection, objectification and experiences of race-based prejudice than in their daily lives in the real world.

This study provides an important window on the experiences of African American, Latino, and API MSM on Internet sites providing opportunities for ready connection with sexual partners. In doing so, it extends our knowledge of the impact of these sites. To our knowledge, this study is the first in-depth research into the impact of such ads and profiles upon the men in question. However, its limitations must be acknowledged. The diversity of the sample and their experiences could not be fully explored in these analyses. A subset of our Latino and API respondents were foreign-born rather than U.S.-born; while the preponderance of these men had lived in the U.S. for many years, this factor was not examined in this study. We did not explore how race/ethnicity of preferred sexual partners and self-identified race/ethnicity may interact to impact personal vulnerability to the racial stereotyping and differential sexual status accorded by race/ethnicity online. In addition, experiences of those men who do not identify as African American, Latino, or API, but rather as “multiracial” was not explored in this study. The particular ways in which they respond to and negotiate the demands of an Internet-mediated sexual marketplace based upon reductionistic racial/ethnic categories is an interesting research question of itself.

Future research would be helpful to extend the findings of this study. Our sample were men in the Los Angeles area, and while cyberspace is often treated as a uniform environment, the characteristics of personals ads and profiles of other men in proximal location to the viewer must be influenced by men's residence. Thus, these experiences may not be common to men of other cities and locales. In addition, it would be helpful to understand more about how MSM of color mitigate the impact of such experiences. In what circumstances are the experiences on the Internet perceived as particular to a given online venue and not to be generalized to other venues (whether online or in the non-virtual world) where contacts may be made? In that regard, it would be useful to learn more about how such men perceive their options for meeting sexual partners and their relative costs and benefits. Despite the apparent influence that these experiences can have on power dynamics between MSM of color and the diverse male partners they meet over the Internet, we also need to know more about how these experiences may impact the sexual choices of MSM of color, especially with respect to the risk for sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV.

Acknowledgments

This research was funded by a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health, MH069119.

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