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Searching for Love in all the “Write” Places: Exploring Internet Personals Use by Sexual Orientation, Gender, and Age

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Abstract

Few researchers of Internet sexual exploration have systematically compared variance of use across sexual orientations, with even fewer surveying bisexual respondents. In 2004, 15,246 individuals responded to an online survey of their use of Internet personals and adult websites. Gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals (GLBs) were more likely than heterosexuals to have exchanged correspondence, met others offline, and had sex with someone they met through personal ads. Whereas gay men and lesbians of all ages were most likely to have established a long-term relationship as a result of personals, heterosexuals over age 40 were more likely to have established a long-term relationship than younger heterosexuals. Further, compared to men, women were approximately two times as likely to have established a serious relationship as a result of personals. Qualitative findings suggest that the Internet functions not only as a means of screening for desired characteristics, but also as a shield against prejudice in real life encounters. GLBs and heterosexuals alike used online venues as a means of sexual identity development, sexual exploration, and community building.

Keywords

Internet; online dating; gender; personals; age; gay; lesbian; bisexual

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The widespread use of Internet personals sites as a means to meet new people for sex, dating, and/or match-making has radically changed the pace of getting together; participants can potentially screen and meet dozens of prospective dates within a short period of time (Houran & Lange, 2004). Due to the ease and safety of online communication, stages of intimacy are often reversed, as self-revelations through repeated written exchanges typically precede telephone communication and meeting “in real life” (Hardey, 2002; Ben-Ze’ev, 2004). While physical attraction, as assessed by posted photos and written descriptions of appearance,

remains a powerful selection criterion (Hitsch, Hortacsu, & Ariely, 2006), this virtual medium--which provides ample space to specify information about one's interests and habits--allows profile posters many ways to distinguish themselves and attract attention (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006).

In spite of these profound changes, the two primary principles of partner selection, propinquity and homogamy, remain intact (Starbuck, 2006). Propinquity (finding partners nearby—i.e., seeking “geographically desirable” dates) is literally built into the software for Internet personals sites. For example, users may choose to limit their dating search to people who live 5–25 miles away if they are in cities, or up to 250 miles if they are in more rural areas. The Internet thereby allows users to electronically apply the principle of propinquity to filter the huge, nationwide pool of eligible partners.

Homogamy (seeking partners who share one's characteristics, such as the same religion, ethnicity, or educational background (Starbuck, 2006), is well served by Internet sites that solicit information on all these social variables, as well as other crucial demographic characteristics, such as age, sexual orientation, and whether one has (or wants) children. Specialized personals services have proliferated to cater to users' interests in homogamy. Examples of sites screening for religion include J-date (for Jews), DharmaDate (for Buddhists), Qiran.com (for Muslims), and Catholic Mingle; sites centered on race include EbonyFriends (for African Americans) and AsianSingles; and sites for older Americans include Dating For Seniors. But match sites and chat rooms can be centered around any unifying identity or interest that is a criterion for date/mate selection, as illustrated by HappyCows.com (for vegetarians), Disabled Passions.com, and HerpesPersonals.com.

Sexual Orientation and Internet Use

Because personals sites promise privacy and discretion, members of groups who have traditionally been marginalized or stigmatized, such as gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals (GLBs), may benefit most from personals sites, which allow them to seek friendship, romance, and life partners while minimizing their efforts and exposure to overt social scrutiny (Chiasson, Parsons, Tesoriero, Carballo-Diequez, Hirshfield, & Remien, 2006; Ross & Kauth, 2002). Gay men, lesbians, and bisexual men and women can visit numerous personals sites like PlanetOut.com, gay.com, manhunt.net, and BiFinders, as well as chat rooms designed for GLBs (Ross, 2005). Such sites may be particularly important to men who have sex with men and GLBs who live in sparsely populated regions. For example, rural men who have sex with men use the Internet to bridge physical distance and find each other (Horvath, Bowen, & Williams, 2006).

Internet use in general, especially on social networking sites like MySpace, appears to be more prevalent among gay, lesbian, and bisexual populations than amongst heterosexuals (Cooper, Scherer, Boies, & Gordon, 1999; Cooper, Delmonico & Burg, 2000). Some researchers have suggested that gay and bisexual men utilize the Internet as a tool to explore their sexual identity, especially during early stages of the “coming out” process (Ross & Kauth, 2002; Haworth Features Submission, 2005). One small-scale study showed how queer Australian youth, both male and female, used the Internet as a place to practice coming out in conjunction with seeking friendship and community (Hillier & Harrison, 2007). However, to date there is little empirical research investigating the role of the Internet for exploration of one's sexual identity, and it is unclear how heterosexuals may use the Internet as a means to test and expand their sexual boundaries.

Although there is a growing body of literature investigating gay and bisexual men's use of the Internet, much of this research has focused specifically on sexual risk behaviors, including use of the Internet to locate casual or anonymous sex partners, and often contrasting the type of

sex acts engaged in with partners met online versus those who are met in physical locations (Chiasson et al., 2006; Bolding, Davis, Hart, Sherr, & Elford, 2006; Grov, DeBusk, Bimbi, Golub, Nanin, & Parsons, 2007). Unfortunately, there is little research investigating gay and bisexual men's use of the Internet as a tool to navigate their sexuality and find intimacy, including dating and romantic partner-seeking. Similarly, few studies explore lesbians' and bisexual women's use of the Internet for sexual and romantic purposes. Further, little research has systematically examined sexual orientation differences in Internet use, especially comparing heterosexuals' and homosexuals' use of online venues to find partners for long-term relationships, as well as for casual sex.

Age, Gender, and Other Factors

Older women constitute another social category that might particularly benefit from the new technology. Relative to men, older women (e.g., > 40) are disadvantaged in the off-line (i.e. real world) courting market, and have greater difficulty than men in finding mates through their social networks (Mahay & Laumann, 2004). Yet it may be that ageism is alive online, too, insofar as it has been found that men (both gay and straight) are more likely than women to express age preferences in personals ads (Kaufman & Phua, 2003). Nevertheless, older women, who are overrepresented in online personals (Jagger, 2005), perhaps for lack of better alternatives, have embraced the Internet as a virtual place to meet dates and mates.

Finally, the anonymity of Internet meetings renders its sites ideal for individuals and groups whose sexual interests may require discretion or secrecy. One recent study explored how heterosexual married men wishing to circumvent the strictures of marriage utilize online venues to meet women for extramarital sex (Dew, Brubaker, & Hays, 2006). People whose sexual tastes run counter to traditionalist norms may find that the Internet connects them with their preferred sexual communities while shielding them from social scrutiny in their professional and friendship networks. For example, the Internet serves as a site of identity work and community for people who practice polyamory (Ritchie & Barker, 2006).

Current Focus

Using an exploratory and descriptive approach, this analysis will compare use patterns and indicators of success in sexual and romantic partnering between gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual visitors of personals sites. Insofar as the anonymity of the Internet creates a more secure place to explore and disclose all types of sexual interests, we also explore the attraction of virtual courtship for those with non-traditional sexual interests. Given that aging is a disadvantage in conventional dating markets, especially for women who are less successful than male counterparts at meeting new partners at work, church and other "embedded institutions" (Mahay & Laumann, 2004), we also explore how older versus younger members of each sexual orientation group fare using Internet dating sites. We expect to find that those with fewer alternatives in the physical world will be disproportionately drawn to the virtual world's personals sites and more successful at finding not just dates but mates online. We draw on both quantitative and qualitative data for these analyses.

METHODS

Participants and Procedures

Data from this project were procured from *Elle* magazine based on its 2004 ELLE/msnbc.com "Cyber-Sex and Romance Survey," a survey about the use of Internet personals and adult (i.e., sex-related) websites. During a two-week period in mid-February 2004, both elle.com and msnbc.com hosted this survey on their websites, though 98% of respondents came from msnbc.com web traffic. Visitors to each site were presented with a banner that took them to the survey. All participants were provided an opportunity to view the privacy agreement, and

asked for their birth year; those under age 18 were dismissed as under-age to participate. About twice the number of participants clicked the banner as chose to complete the actual 31-item survey, which took between 10–15 minutes to complete, and for which participants were provided no incentive.

In total, 15,246 individuals completed the survey. To prevent individuals from responding to the survey multiple times, a computer program prevented multiple responses from any given computer. The nine items of the survey dealing with online personals took about five minutes to complete. Preliminary findings from the survey were reported in *Elle* magazine (Elle, 2004), and on *elle.com* and *msbnc.com*. All findings reported in this analysis are based on secondary analysis of the anonymous data from this survey.

Measures

Participants were asked if they had logged on to any personals (i.e., match) websites. Those having ever logged on to a personals website were asked a series of follow-up questions including whether they had met dates and/or sex partners from personals sites and how their social lives changed as a result of online personals. Participants also indicated the number of people they met face-to-face from personals, and what they were “really seeking” from online sites. Because many personals sites allow users to browse personals without creating a profile themselves, participants were asked whether they had posted a profile, and if so, what experiences has resulted from posting.

Reported in “Quantitative Results” are the responses to these questions that were closed-ended; tables 2 and 3, based on items with a “check all that apply” format, include the exact wording of both questions and their answer options. Data on demographic characteristics including age, sexual orientation, education (high school or less, some college or associate degree, college graduate, graduate degree), and relationship status were also collected. Data on race and ethnicity were not collected.

In “Qualitative Results” we report on relevant narrative data that were volunteered by participants in an open-response section at the end of the survey. A total of 2,125 participants provided qualitative responses to an open-ended question inviting all respondents to elaborate on their previous answers by providing details about their positive and negative experiences with online personals and Internet sexuality.

Analytic plan

Where appropriate, non-parametric statistical χ^2 tests were utilized to test for differences across gender and sexual orientation. Further, a two-step logistic regression was conducted to predict the likelihood of participants having established a “serious” relationship as a result of online personals (operationalized as either having [1] dated a partner from the Internet > 4 months, [2] established a committed relationship, and/or [3] got married¹).

Finally, to complement the quantitative analyses, the 2,125 qualitative responses provided by participants were systematically analyzed for coherent themes using the principals of grounded theory and the “constant comparative method” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Responses were first organized by the two primary independent variables, gender and sexual orientation, resulting in the formation of the following groups: heterosexual women, heterosexual men, lesbian women, gay men, bisexual women, and bisexual men. For more efficient coding ATLAS.ti qualitative analysis software was used to review responses for coherent themes

¹Many gay, lesbian, and bisexual participants indicated they had gotten married as a result of online personals. Though gay marriage is still not legally recognized throughout much of the U.S., we have chosen to include “gotten married” for both heterosexual and GLB participants throughout this analysis.

within each group. Group themes were then compared across gender clusters for heterosexuals, and separately for lesbian, gay, and bisexual respondents, and then themes were examined for discrepancies and commonalities between heterosexuals and homosexuals. A third independent variable, age, was also considered.

RESULTS

Quantitative results

A majority of the 15,246 individuals who completed the survey (56.2%, $n = 8566$) indicated they had logged on to at least one personals website (see Table 1). Since quantitative questions on their use of personals sites were nested among those having previously logged into a personals website, the remainder of this analysis is focused specifically on those having logged into Internet personals ($n = 8566$). Heterosexual men (66.4%, $n = 5689$) comprised the largest portion of the sample ($M_{\text{age}} = 38.1$, $SD = 10.6$, $\text{Range} = 19 - 94$), followed by heterosexual women (22.7%, $n = 1942$, $M_{\text{age}} = 35.8$, $SD = 10.7$, $\text{Range} = 19 - 94$). As would be expected for the survey recruitment methodology, GLBs comprised smaller portions of the sample, though adequate for statistical analyses (Bisexual men = 3.8%, $n = 323$, $M_{\text{age}} = 39.3$, $SD = 11.5$, $\text{Range} = 19 - 94$; Gay men = 3.5%, $n = 302$, $M_{\text{age}} = 34.9$, $SD = 9.5$, $\text{Range} = 19 - 63$; Bisexual women = 2.9%, $n = 248$, $M_{\text{age}} = 32.4$, $SD = 10.5$, $\text{Range} = 19 - 94$; Lesbians = 0.7%, $n = 62$, $M_{\text{age}} = 37.1$, $SD = 11.7$, $\text{Range} = 19 - 94$). Most participants were fairly well educated, with many having completed some college ($n = 2957$, 34.5%) or an undergraduate degree ($n = 3334$, 38.9%); the remainder had completed postgraduate work ($n = 1799$, 21.0%) or high school or less ($n = 476$, 5.6%).

Among those who ever visited a personals website ($n = 8566$), most (72.7%, $n = 6226$) indicated having created a profile. Although some individuals reported having logged on to personals sites without creating a profile ($n = 2340$), they were asked the same series of follow-up questions about their use of online personals. Notably, compared to heterosexual men and women, GLBs were overall more likely to have actually posted a profile (see Table 1). Further, among men who posted a profile, gay men were the most likely to do so with a photo ($\chi^2 [2] = 32.5$, $p < .001$), whereas bisexual men were the least likely to post a photo. Among women who posted a profile, there were no sexual orientation differences in whether photos were posted in profiles ($\chi^2 [2] = 2.70$, $p = .26$).

What participants sought

Those participants having logged on to personals sites ($n = 8556$) responded to questions about what they were “really seeking” from personals websites. Categories are provided in Table 2. As participants were able to check off more than one response, column totals exceed 100%. Among male respondents, gay and bisexual men were the most likely to select testing one’s sex appeal ($\chi^2 [2] = 21.0$, $p < .001$) and sexual chat ($\chi^2 [2] = 67.4$, $p < .001$) from the provided check-off options. Compared to other men, a larger portion of bisexual men endorsed that they were in relationships and seeking discreet affairs ($\chi^2 [2] = 128.8$, $p < .001$). Finally, compared to other men, a larger proportion of gay men indicated they were seeking serious relationships ($\chi^2 [2] = 51.7$, $p < .001$) and new friends ($\chi^2 [2] = 132.0$, $p < .001$).

Among women, a larger proportion of bisexual women endorsed that they were seeking to test their sex appeal ($\chi^2 [2] = 11.4$, $p < .01$), seeking flirtatious chat ($\chi^2 [2] = 18.6$, $p < .001$), and sexual chat ($\chi^2 [2] = 125.5$, $p < .001$), but a smaller portion indicated they were seeking someone for a serious relationship ($\chi^2 [2] = 14.7$, $p < .001$). Compared to other women, a larger proportion of lesbians indicated they were seeking new friends ($\chi^2 [2] = 37.6$, $p < .001$), but lesbians were no more likely than heterosexual women to say they were seeking a serious relationship ($p > .05$).

Finally, among women and men who went to personals sites but had not posted a profile, the goal for more than eight in ten was simply “browsing” rather than seeking contact that would result in real-life meetings.

How social lives changed as a result of online personals

Those participants who visited a personals website *and* created a profile ($n = 6226$) were provided a series of “check-off” options to indicate how their lives had changed; categories are provided in Table 3.

Compared to other men, a larger proportion of gay men indicated that online personals had resulted in more friends from the Internet ($\chi^2 [2] = 63.6, p < .001$), dating relationships that lasted longer than four months ($\chi^2 [2] = 17.2, p < .001$), and committed relationships ($\chi^2 [2] = 20.2, p < .001$). Gay men were also the *least* likely to have indicated that online personals resulted in “no change” ($\chi^2 [2] = 76.6, p < .001$). Compared to heterosexual men, larger proportions of both gay and bisexual men indicated that online personals resulted in more sex ($\chi^2 [2] = 131.1, p < .001$). Finally, compared to other men, bisexual men were the least likely to indicate that online personals had resulted in them dating more ($\chi^2 [2] = 21.3, p < .001$).

Compared to other women, a larger proportion of lesbian and bisexual women indicated that online personals had resulted in more sex ($\chi^2 [2] = 26.3, p < .001$) and matches leading to friendships ($\chi^2 [2] = 9.5, p < .001$). Further, compared to other women, a larger proportion of lesbians reported that online personals resulted in committed relationships ($\chi^2 [2] = 12.6, p < .001$). Among women, there were no sexual orientation differences in whether participants had dated more and/or gotten “married” (as defined by participants) as a result of personals sites.

“Success” in establishing a relationship

The next portion of analyses explores the ways that Internet personals facilitated the establishment of a serious relationship (operationally defined above, in “Analytic Plan”). Internet personals significantly facilitated the establishment of serious relationships among heterosexual women over age 40 (35.8% v. 26.8% $\chi^2 [1] = 17.3, p < .001$) and heterosexual men over age 40 (19.6% v. 15.9%, $\chi^2 [1] = 13.4, p < .001$). There was no relationship between age and having established a serious relationship as a result of Internet personals among GLBs (percents by sexual orientation are reported in Table 3; data on age not shown).

Finally, a two-step logistic regression was conducted to predict the likelihood of participants having established a serious relationship as a result of online personals. In the first step, age, gender, sexual orientation, and education were entered into the model. The second step took into consideration if participants had also indicated they were “seeking” a serious relationship, in essence, to control for “intent” (see Table 4). Net the effects of other variables, bisexuals were statistically similar to heterosexuals in their likelihood of having established a serious relationship as a result of online personals. In contrast, gays/lesbians were more likely than heterosexuals to have established a serious relationship as a result of personals. Compared to men, women were approximately two times as likely to have established a serious relationship ($\text{Exp. } \beta = 2.15$). Controlling for the effects of other variables, older individuals also had a greater likelihood of having established a serious relationship. Among those who indicated they were seeking a serious relationship, older individuals had nearly ten times the likelihood of actually having established one ($\text{Exp } \beta = 9.85$).

Qualitative Results

In total, 2,125 participants responded to the open-ended question at the end of the survey. Of these, 781 participants said they had logged on to adult but not personals sites, so their narratives were eliminated, leaving 1,181 narratives from heterosexuals and 163 narratives from gay,

lesbian, or bisexual respondents for our analysis. These remaining ones suggested that gay, lesbian, and bisexual participants did not use the Internet in ways that strongly diverged from heterosexual users. We found that the Internet not only provides users with a means of identifying available partners while shielding them from prejudices, but also provides a venue for virtual communities and sexual exploration. Using narratives from both homosexuals and heterosexuals for illustration, we briefly explore these three dominant themes. Because many respondents who used personals sites also visited chat rooms and were sometimes vague about where they met the partner they were describing, we draw on their virtual encounters more generally; we did not draw from the few narratives from respondents who clearly indicated they were referring only to persons met via adult sites..

Identifying Available Partners

For both heterosexuals and GLBs, the Internet provided a means of avoiding the pitfalls inherent in relying solely on local, real world venues to meet other people. A potential romantic partner who one meets in a public place may disclose his or her goals and preferences gradually over the course of multiple dates; users of online personals can avoid over-investing time and energy in pursuit of less-than-ideal matches. As this 26-year-old lesbian states, “Work keeps me very busy, making it difficult to meet another woman who is attractive and has similar interests. Online dating saves a wasted date and is a great screening tool.” By sifting through profiles, Internet users can quickly weed out otherwise attractive candidates who possess “deal-breaking” attributes (“I could screen out smokers or 12-steppers or men with kids”—36-year-old heterosexual woman). As this 50-year-old heterosexual man summarized: “Using online dating sites both widens the field of potential partners and shortens the process of meeting ‘qualified’ people.”

Heterosexuals, especially residents of smaller towns and cities, voiced complaints about the lack of local eligible singles, and used online personals as a means of augmenting their meager dating pool. These narratives illustrate: “In the area where I live, outside of bars, there are very few places to meet single women 40–55 years old, and it is nice to have a place to find women in this age group looking for a man” (52-year-old man); and “I attribute my ‘bad luck’ if you will, to the LOUSY pool of eligible bachelors from which to choose in Albuquerque, New Mexico” (42-year-old woman). Personal obstacles, such as shyness, or more structural ones, such as the ageist culture of many clubs and bars, can be circumvented electronically: “Dating co-workers isn’t *always* an attractive option and meeting people at clubs isn’t either (especially at my advanced years). If you are serious about meeting people for dating and have issues with shyness, on-line dating is difficult to beat!” (42-year-old male).

Like heterosexuals, GLBs extolled the virtues of the Internet for allowing them to circumvent the scrutiny of the “bar scene” and transcend geographical barriers, but the difficulties of meeting compatible partners in real life were complicated by the paucity of gay-affirmative venues and the cultural prevalence of homophobia. A 20-year-old lesbian stated: “The Internet has opened up a way for more gay people to meet that normally wouldn’t happen, except for ‘gay bars’, which most small towns don’t have. Usually it’s hard to meet people and ‘know’ they are gay, but the Internet makes it possible.” A 24-year-old gay man elaborated that the Internet provides him with a sense of safety: “For homosexuals if you are not into the gay bar scene, there really aren’t other options for meeting people in small town America. It’s not like we can just walk up to any attractive guy/girl and ask them out. That’s asking for trouble.” For lesbians and particularly gay men, inadvertently approaching a violently homophobic heterosexual can pose “trouble” in the form of verbal abuse, a beating, or worse.

Paradoxically, the social distance afforded by this electronic medium appears to both enhance and inhibit honest self-expression. For many, the anonymity of the Internet facilitates honest exchange and rapid self-disclosure (“I was completely honest in setting up my profile, then

you instantly start interacting with people based on who you are, rather than what you look like—36-year-old heterosexual woman). However, other respondents complained about people who misrepresented themselves (“It seems that about 90% of the men I meet online have sent old pictures, lied about their dick size or lied about their body. I generally do this too”—29-year-old gay male; and “None of the men were as they claimed they were in person. The guy who said he might run my next marathon with me was 30 pounds overweight, and wheezed when we climbed one flight of stairs”—27-year-old heterosexual woman). Given that the Internet provides users with the ability to (re)construct themselves virtually, its use may pose more of a challenge for those who prioritize physical attraction and therefore value truth in advertising.

Finally, online venues served as a means of circumventing the strictures of marriage and securing extramarital partners while minimizing the risk of exposure: “After the sexual things I’ve seen online, I suddenly feel like I’ve missed out in life...I did cheat on my partner once with someone I met online, and it’s a battle within myself whether to cheat again, but something tells me that I will” (20-year-old heterosexual married female); “I met another woman interested in a same-sex, no strings relationship; it’s fun and a delicious secret from my husband” (47-year-old bisexual woman).

Opportunities to Join Supportive Communities

While the explicit purpose of Internet personals is to find a date or a mate, people often end up finding much more, in the form of friendship, as this 26-year-old lesbian states: “I’ve met honest people and made new friends.” A 34-year-old gay man agreed: “All of the men that I have met through my own ad or from responding to theirs have been among the finest people I’ve ever met through any means. And a few of the men I dated have evolved into friends.”

In addition to friendships, the Internet provides virtual community for people who might otherwise feel isolated due to their marginalized identities or niche sexual interests. Some felt that the Internet provided more than friends, but rather created real community: “Through my online activities, I have found a larger sense of belonging, where before, I felt I was alone in my thoughts and desires of sexual interest. I owe a lot to the Internet for providing a resource where others like myself can seek out each other and form a supportive community” (34-year-old gay man). Gays and lesbians are not the only ones finding community, as succinctly stated by this 40-year-old heterosexual woman, “On-line ‘lifestyle’ communities have given us (a long-time married couple) the ability to tap into a world of usually very normal people who are also interested in exploring their sexuality. We view web-sites together, chat online together, and play together at couples clubs. It has enhanced our relationship in many positive ways, not all of them sexual.”

Sexual Identity Development and Sexual Exploration

Given that in our hetero-normative society, GLBs face difficulties ranging from invisibility to overt hostility, virtual venues appear to be a perfect place to test one’s developing sexual identity. This 27-year-old lesbian explains: “Exploring online gave me confidence to come out as a lesbian and provided me with a safe place to be sure of what made me happy.” Recollecting a difficult time in his youth, this 22-year-old gay man noted another practical advantage: “I used it as a way to gauge reactions from other gay teenage kids and hear their coming out stories to build up my courage to tell my real-life loved ones.”

In the absence of any visible bisexual community in the real world (Lever, Kanouse, Rogers, Carson & Hertz, 1999), the Internet may have the greatest importance to those exploring a bisexual identity. A 50-year-old bisexual man claimed, “Online experiences have made it easier for me to come out as a bisexual. It helped me realize that there are a lot of people in the same

situation.” This 38-year-old married woman admitted to using Internet dating as one way of grappling with her changing understanding of her sexual identity: “I am struggling with my sexuality and trying to answer some questions for myself. I am very honest about this when I meet women online or in person.” Again, GLBs do not have a monopoly on using the Internet for sexual exploration, as this 39-year-old heterosexual man illustrates: “My wife and I have a loving, monogamous, consensual BDSM relationship. I find BDSM websites useful for finding information and advice from others with similar interests. It is also a great place to shop for ‘toys’, DVDs, fetish items, etc.”

And sexuality can be explored in tandem; early self-revelations, including those about sexual interests, can help people find mates who are truly compatible, as illustrated by this 31-year-old bisexual woman’s description of her early sex life with the fiancé she met online: “We had talked about anything and everything (and I do mean EVERYTHING!). I told him things I was sure I would not share in real life. As it turned out, we both had much better ideas of how to please each other when we did get together.” Clearly, the distance afforded by this electronic medium allows people the freedom to take risks, test sexual boundaries, and reveal more than they might in real life, paradoxically providing them with an increased sense of intimacy and enhanced communication.

DISCUSSION

With the widespread expansion of Internet use across the United States, Internet-based dating via online personals has become an accepted medium by which numerous Americans meet new partners for sex, dating, and/or match-making. As a result, it has drastically changed the culture of dating and interpersonal communication for many. This may especially be the case for those individuals who feel sexually-marginalized by mainstream society (e.g., GLBs, heterosexual women over 40 years old). Although a wide variety of personals websites have been developed and are utilized every day by millions across the globe, there has been little empirical research evaluating gender and sexual orientation differences in--and outcomes from--Internet personals use. Addressing this limitation, qualitative and quantitative data from the 2004 ELLE/msnbc.com “Cyber-Sex and Romance Survey” were utilized to evaluate the different ways in which people use Internet personals sites, with a particular focus on comparing and contrasting sexual orientation and gender.

The quantitative data from this analysis have indicated several findings worth highlighting. First, more than half of the participants indicated having previously visited an online personals website with nearly three-quarters of these individuals having created a profile on one or more sites. Furthermore, GLBs were more likely than heterosexuals to have created profiles. This finding mirrors those of previous researchers (Harris Interactive, 2007) and further supports the observation that GLBs continue to utilize the Internet as a resource to meet like-minded individuals (Chiasson et al., 2006).

Second, these data indicate, among men, gays and bisexuals were more likely than heterosexuals to have created their online profiles in an effort to test sex appeal, to seek discreet affairs (among bisexual men), and seek serious relationships (among gay men). Among women, bisexuals were most likely to endorse responses that clustered around exploring their sexuality (e.g., flirtatious chat, sexual chat, discreet affairs, and *less* likely to seek a serious relationship), while lesbians were most likely to be seeking new friends. Further, compared to heterosexuals, GLBs were more likely to indicate that online personals had resulted in increased “real life” encounters, often sex-related, but also resulting in friendships and committed relationships.

Although our data show that a significantly larger portion of bisexual men and women (compared to heterosexuals and gays/lesbians) were seeking discreet affairs online, we note that only a minority of bisexuals expressed this motive (44% of men and 19% of women). This finding needs to be couched in terms of the various ways the Internet has been used to explore different aspects of one's sexuality (Cooper, 2002). The Internet has become an effective medium to circumvent sexual stigma and the hetero-normativity of most real-world venues, enabling users to encounter others with similar socio-sexual interests (Chiasson et al., 2006). Clearly, these findings have public health implications, as the Internet may be an effective medium to facilitate community and health service providers' dispersion of health education/information, while also providing support to GLBs who are turning to the Internet to explore their sexual identity. Thus the Internet presents a unique opportunity to provide outreach and education to GLBs who might not otherwise be visible within "gay" communities, including bisexuals.

Third, age, gender, and sexual orientation all seem to play important roles in establishing "serious" relationships from online personals. Further, these were net the effects of other important variables (such as *intent* to establish a serious relationship). Older heterosexual women, and men, were particularly successful in this realm, which is notable and important given the relative lack of real world alternatives for older, heterosexual women to meet new partners (Mahay & Laumann, 2004). On the other hand, age did not play a significant role in establishing a long-term relationship among GLBs. This may be a result of so many GLBs (of all ages) using the Internet as means of finding partners in lieu of other venues. In essence, Internet personals are most attractive and most important to those who have fewer alternatives in the physical world for meeting potential dates and mates.

Qualitative data were used to elaborate themes that could only be tapped with a few short quantitative items, and were especially useful in illustrating that Internet personals are not just used to locate short-term sex partners. First, the Internet is particularly effective as a dating tool because it so easily matches partners on the basis of homogenous traits of interest. Second, the Internet provides not only an efficient filter for prospective dates/mates, but a shield from prejudice (e.g. homophobia, ageism, being labeled as "deviant" for having uncommon sexual interests). The same screening capabilities also appear to facilitate the formation of identity-based communities for support and/or mutual enjoyment, and are especially useful in bridging geographical and other barriers to connect members of marginalized and/or niche communities. Third, because this electronic medium provides some social distance and anonymity, it provides users with an increased sense of privacy and security as they explore many facets of identity, form relationships, and explore sexual behavior both virtually and in real life. By allowing people to find others like themselves, the Internet serves to demystify so-called "deviance," thereby promoting opportunities for self-discovery and expansion of sexual boundaries.

Gay, straight, or bisexual—male or female—the Internet provides individuals with the opportunity to interact with others they'd be unlikely to meet otherwise. People use the Internet to expand their social networks of like-minded individuals based on a host of interests, and these data illustrate how similarities based on sexual orientation or sexual interests are no exception. Further, although the Internet is popularly portrayed as an unsafe alternative to meeting in real-life venues, GLBs, women, and other categories of users appear to benefit from the Internet's ability to screen against physical threats and/or stigma.

Limitations as well as strengths of the study should be mentioned. To increase participation rates, the mass media survey was necessarily short and relied on single-item measures of key variables. Because our project was based on secondary analysis of the resulting data set, several of the items had less than ideal wording. This therefore limits the interpretations of the results.

For example, participants were presented with broad questions (e.g., “has your social life changed as a result of visiting online personals sites?”) and presented with a range of closed-ended categories. Although participants were given an opportunity to provide more information in a qualitative format at the end of the survey, as more than two-thousand participants did, this survey formatting has clearly censored a complete range of possible responses. Further, because only a minority of participants volunteered to respond to the open-ended question at the end of the survey, their narratives may not be representative of the experiences of the larger sample.

Although our sample was large, it was not nationally representative, and the survey did not gather information on ethnicity. People with higher socioeconomic status tend to be somewhat overrepresented in Internet research, although recent Internet surveys tend to include participants from a broad range of backgrounds and geographic locations (Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004). Further, differences between the demographics of Internet users and non-users have been diminishing over time as Internet usage becomes more ubiquitous, and the percentage of women, ethnic minorities, and older individuals using the Internet has increased (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2005). Nonetheless, given that the population of interest consisted of users of Internet dating sites, concerns about demographic differences between Internet users and non-Internet users may be moot. The broad-based appeal of the msnbc.com site provided an unusually diverse sample, and an opportunity to compare men and women who differed substantially in age, as well as sexual orientation. An anonymous online sample may have attracted a wider range of closeted gay men and lesbian women compared to studies using face-to-face interviews or recruiting via publications, interest groups, or gay Internet sites serving GLBs.

A significant strength of this analysis was its ability to capture a diverse range of understudied GLBs, particularly bisexually-identified men and women. Researchers have often queried GLB individuals’ use of the Internet independently from heterosexuals, whereas these data allow direct comparison and contrast based on identical questions. Internet surveys are perceived as providing considerable protection for participants’ anonymity, and it has been shown that respondents are more willing to reveal sensitive and highly personal information on a computer than in face-to-face interviews, or even traditional pen-and-paper surveys (Cooper et al., 1999; Ross, 2005). Finally, this analysis took a mixed method approach whereby quantitative findings were mirrored and supported with qualitative insight, and vice versa. Such an approach provides an ideal opportunity for well-informed empirical analyses.

Deficiencies in this study yield reminders for future researchers. Respondents’ relationship status at the time of survey participation may be different from their relationship status while using Internet personals; for example, we don’t know whether male bisexual respondents were married when they visited match sites. This is a limitation that can be easily avoided with the addition of one simple question. Another example: although women are taking an active role in expanding their dating opportunities by posting profiles, we do not know to what extent women are more liberated from the traditional gender roles that persist in real-world dating, where men usually “make the first move” and initiate meeting. Recent research suggests that adolescent girls use cyberspace as a site of collective empowerment, where they practice rebellion against the gendered strictures of heterosexual relationships (Kelly, Pomerantz, & Currie, 2006). Future research on adult users of Internet personals sites should be sure to investigate whether the social distance conferred by the Internet frees women to initiate contact with similar or greater frequency than men do.

Further, the Internet, where potential daters have an opportunity to express preferences or disqualify candidates with undesirable traits, provides a helpful tallying tool for researchers interested in studying which social characteristics remain important screeners for homogeneity

in contemporary courtship. And while Internet dating sites filter prospective matches on the basis of proximity, it is also clear that the Internet is a means to overcome geographical barriers to dating. It's likely that propinquity is more often transcended in chat room meetings where unanticipated real life partnerships sometimes develop, despite the participants' original intention to remain anonymous.² For match sites where getting together in real life is intended from the start, propinquity probably remains the rule, not the exception. Future researchers who study Internet-initiated relationships can ask specifically about physical distance at the time of first contact, as well as other details that will allow us to better understand how cyberspace has, or has not, changed the dating game.

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²For example, this was the case for a 36-year old heterosexual respondent who described a 2-year-long chat with a married woman he never intended to actually meet—ultimately both left their respective spouses and the woman moved 2,000 miles to marry him.

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Table 1Gender and sexual orientation differences in posting an Internet profile,^a n (%)

	Posted Profile w/Photo	Posted Profile w/o Photo	Did not post profile	Total
MEN ^b				
Heterosexual	2366 (41.6)	1651 (29.0)	1672 (29.4)	5689 (100)
Gay	197 (65.2)	64 (21.2)	41 (13.6)	302 (100)
Bisexual	139 (43.0)	122 (37.8)	62 (19.2)	323 (100)
WOMEN ^c				
Heterosexual	868 (44.7)	559 (28.8)	515 (26.5)	1942 (100)
Lesbian	27 (43.5)	26 (41.9)	9 (14.5)	62 (100)
Bisexual	131 (52.8)	76 (30.6)	41 (16.5)	248 (100)

^aBase: Those having ever logged into a personals site (N = 8566)^b $\chi^2(4) = 87.5, p < .001$ ^c $\chi^2(4) = 18.5, p < .001$

Table 2

Responses to: "When you've used online personals sites, what were you really seeking?"^a n (%)

	Heterosexual	Gay/Lesbian	Bisexual	χ^2 (2)	p
MEN					
Just browsing/curious	3190 (56.1)	171 (56.6)	164 (50.8)	3.6	0.17
To test my sex appeal	1020 (17.9)	81 (26.8)	77 (23.8)	21.0	< .001
Flirtatious chat (I didn't really want to meet anyone)	878 (15.4)	73 (24.2)	51 (15.8)	16.4	< .001
Sexual chat	1111 (19.5)	102 (33.8)	108 (33.4)	67.4	< .001
Dating for fun	1443 (25.4)	113 (37.4)	66 (20.4)	26.7	< .001
Someone for a serious relationship	1759 (30.9)	146 (48.3)	74 (22.9)	51.7	< .001
Someone for a discreet affair (I was in a committed relationship)	1065 (18.7)	43 (14.2)	142 (44.0)	128.8	< .001
New Friends	996 (17.5)	132 (43.7)	76 (23.5)	132.0	< .001
WOMEN					
Just browsing/curious	1092 (56.2)	32 (51.6)	127 (51.2)	2.6	0.27
To test my sex appeal	273 (14.1)	9 (14.5)	55 (22.2)	11.4	< .01
Flirtatious chat (I didn't really want to meet anyone)	320 (16.5)	9 (14.5)	68 (27.4)	18.6	< .001
Sexual chat	131 (6.7)	8 (12.9)	71 (28.6)	125.5	< .001
Dating for fun	535 (27.5)	20 (32.3)	81 (32.7)	3.3	0.19
Someone for a serious relationship	801 (41.2)	26 (41.9)	71 (28.6)	14.7	< .001
Someone for a discreet affair (I was in a committed relationship)	94 (4.8)	3 (4.8)	48 (19.4)	n/a	--
New Friends	518 (26.7)	34 (54.8)	97 (39.1)	37.6	< .001

n/a: χ^2 not performed, expected counts < 5 in one or more cells

^aBase: Those who had logged on to personals sites (N=8566)

Table 3Responses to: "How has your social life changed as a result of visiting online personals sites?"^a *n* (%)

	Heterosexual	Gay/Lesbian	Bisexual	χ^2 (2)	<i>p</i>
MEN					
I've dated more	816 (20.3)	81 (31.0)	41 (15.7)	21.3	< .001
I've had more sex	910 (22.7)	129 (49.4)	108 (41.4)	131.1	< .001
One or more matches led to a friendship	774 (19.3)	104 (39.8)	54 (20.7)	63.6	< .001
One or more matches led to a dating relationship (> 4 months)	595 (14.8)	59 (22.6)	26 (10.0)	17.2	< .001
I am now in committed relationship with someone met via personals	405 (10.1)	47 (18.0)	18 (6.9)	20.2	< .001
I married someone met through personals	254 (6.3)	7 (2.7)	17 (6.5)	5.7	0.06
It hasn't changed	2199 (54.7)	73 (28.0)	118 (45.2)	76.6	< .001
WOMEN					
I've dated more	373 (26.1)	9 (17.0)	49 (23.7)	2.7	0.26
I've had more sex	233 (16.3)	14 (26.4)	63 (30.4)	26.3	< .001
One or more matches led to a friendship	345 (24.2)	16 (30.2)	70 (33.8)	9.5	< .001
One or more matches led to a dating relationship (> 4 months)	260 (18.2)	15 (28.3)	41 (19.8)	3.6	0.17
I am now in committed relationship with someone met via personals	263 (18.4)	18 (34.0)	27 (13.0)	12.6	< .001
I married someone met through personals	145 (10.2)	2 (3.8)	18 (8.7)	2.7	0.26
It hasn't changed	561 (39.3)	18 (34.0)	75 (36.2)	1.3	0.53

^aBase: Those who had created an online personal profile (*N* = 6226)

Table 4Logistic regression: Establishing a serious relationship as a result of online personals, β (Exp β)

χ^2	246.1 ***	1818.9 ***
<i>df</i>	5	6
Nagelkerke R^2	0.04	0.30
Constant	-2.61 (0.07) ***	-3.54 (0.03) ***
Age	0.02 (1.02) ***	0.02 (1.02) ***
Female (1 = yes)	0.77 (2.15) ***	0.66 (1.93) ***
Bisexual (1 = yes)	-0.13 (0.88)	0.15 (1.16)
Gay/Lesbian (1 = yes)	0.74 (2.10) ***	0.55 (1.73) ***
Education	0.11 (1.12) ***	0.05 (1.05)
Seeking serious relationship (1 = yes)		2.29 (9.85) ***

 $p < .001$