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Romantic Ideation, Partner-Seeking, and HIV Risk among Young Gay and Bisexual Men

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Abstract

Structural changes in the acceptability of same-sex relationships may provide young gay and bisexual men (YGBM) with opportunities to develop expectations about their ideal future relationships. Expectations about the future may act as a promotive factor in youths' lives and reduce HIV risk-taking behaviors; however, few studies have examined the relationship between ideation of a future relationship and sexual behaviors of YGBM. In this study, we examined the relationship between romantic ideation (i.e., intimacy, passion, and commitment) and number of sexual partners in a sample of young men ($N = 431$; M age = 21.49 years; 88% self-identified as gay) who reported using the Internet to meet other men. Using multivariate Poisson regressions, we found a negative association between commitment and number of partners for unprotected sex, both receptive and insertive, in the past two months. We found similar results when we examined the association between relationship exclusivity and number of partners. These associations persisted after accounting for age, race/ethnicity, sexual identity, and hours spent seeking casual and romantic partners online. We found no significant association between number of partners and ideation of an intimate or passionate relationship, respectively. We discuss the implications of our findings and conclude that there is a need to consider and include YGBM's expectations about the future in on-going HIV prevention programs.

Keywords

love; HIV; gay; bisexual; dating; partners; relationship

INTRODUCTION

While early HIV/AIDS prevention campaigns were successful in encouraging men who have sex with men (MSM) to change their sexual behavior (Potts et al., 2008), the alarming resurgence of HIV/AIDS cases among MSM since 2001 has fueled the need to re-examine HIV prevention approaches for this population (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2009). National estimates suggest that, compared to MSM in other age groups, young MSM between the ages of 13 and 24 years had the highest increase in HIV/AIDS infections between 2001 and 2006. Simulations of HIV transmission within sexual networks suggest that a reduction in concurrent partners (i.e., overlap in multiple partners over time) with whom MSM engaged in unprotected anal intercourse (UAI) may decrease the overall HIV incidence in the population (Wohlfeiler & Potterat, 2005). While encouraging, the translation of these network simulations into on-going HIV prevention programs is complex

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(Kalichman & Grebler, 2010). Structural network characteristics, such as size and density, may tell us how HIV is transmitted, yet these characteristics do not elucidate why some men forego condoms with multiple partners in a given period while others engage in safer sex practices with multiple partners and/or only have UAI when in a serial partnership.

Researchers have identified multiple risks factors associated with number of partners (Bauermeister, Carballo-Diéguez, Ventuneac, & Dolezal, 2009; Clatts, 2003; Grov, Parsons, & Bimbi, 2010; Parsons & Bimbi, 2007), yet only a few studies have considered the role that promotive factors play in decreasing HIV risks (Garofalo, Mustanski, & Donenberg, 2008; Gwadz, Clatts, Yi, Leonard, Goldsamt, & Lankeana, 2006). These promotive factors may help elucidate why some men are able to avoid HIV risks while others cannot, and may inform HIV intervention programs focused on developing assets and resources that counteract or buffer HIV risks (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). In this study, we examined whether the ideation of the main components of a future relationship (i.e., intimacy, passion, commitment, and relationship exclusivity) served as promotive factors among young gay and bisexual men (YGBM) by testing their association to the number of partners they reported in the past two months.

Romantic Relationships

Romantic relationships are a critical component of human development (Roisman, Clausell, Holland, Fortuna, & Elieff, 2008). Structural changes in society's perception of homosexuality have made same-sex relationships more acceptable and visible, creating opportunities for YGBM to consider same-sex dating as a viable relationship type (Bauermeister, Johns, Sandfort, Eisenberg, Grossman, & D'Augelli, 2010; Russell & Consolacion, 2003). A recent editorial in a gay-oriented magazine dubbed the current generation of YGBM as the New Romantics:

Their lives are very different to those who were teenagers 18 years ago. Today's young gay men inhabit a world where their sexual identity is accepted by most and protected by law. They've grown up with mainstream representations of gay men as the norm. They have a new ideal—love, fidelity, commitment, marriage and children. They are the New Romantics— and they aren't afraid to express their sexuality or their emotions. (Gregory, 2008, p. 66)

In a recent study, D'Augelli, Rendina, Sinclair, and Grossman (2008) found support for this portrayal. In their sample, YGBM largely aspired to have long-term relationships in the future, with over half expecting these relationships to be monogamous and over two-thirds expressing interest in raising children. These findings are particularly meaningful as they may suggest that social changes are providing YGBM with an opportunity to develop outcome expectations (Bandura, 2004) regarding their ideal relationship.

Heterosexual youth who can envision their future are less likely to engage in risk behaviors (e.g., substance abuse, unintended pregnancy) that may compromise these long-term goals (McWhirter & McWhirter, 2008; Rothspan & Read, 1996; Seginer, 2008). Similar associations have been observed among older MSM (Appleby et al., 2005). Appleby et al. found that MSM who could envision their future reported fewer UAI occasions and partners; however, to our knowledge, no study has examined the association between ideation of future relationships and the sexual behaviors of YGBM. As a contribution to the literature, we proposed a study examining whether romantic ideation was negatively associated with sexual risk behaviors (i.e., UAI with multiple partners) among YGBM.

Researchers have often categorized sexual partners into dichotomous groupings (i.e., casual and romantic partners) and found that the likelihood of engaging in UAI may depend on their partner type (Lightfoot, Song, Rotheram-Borus, & Newman, 2005). The definition of

the two partner types may not be so clearly defined in real life (Hoff & Beougher, 2010), particularly among men who identify as being single (Bauermeister, Leslie-Santana, Johns, Pingel, & Eisenberg, in press). In pursuit of one type of relationship, youth may wind up having an interaction with a partner that is different than expected; casual partners may become romantic partners, potential romantic partners turn into one-night stands or evolve into other combinations (e.g., friends with benefits). Furthermore, even when YGBM intend to employ HIV prevention strategies by partner type, their limited sexual experiences may hinder their intentions to engage in safer sex. It has been noted that youth in this age group may have limited dating experience or have yet to develop scripts to categorize partners into types, be unsure about the type of relationship that they are pursuing when they meet a new partner, or feel infatuated and more willing to forego condoms as a sign of intimacy and commitment (Eisenberg, Bauermeister, Pingel, Johns, & Leslie-Santana, in press; Epstein, Calzo, Smiler, & Ward, 2009). Consequently, rather than focus on partner type, we thought it more useful to examine the different attributes that comprise interpersonal attractions.

Conceptualizing Romantic Ideation

Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of love (TTL) is one of the most popular and robust theories used to explain interpersonal relationships (Acker & Davis, 1992; Berscheid, 2010; Hendrick & Hendrick, 2003; Lemieux & Hale, 1999; Sternberg, 1997). In brief, Sternberg proposed that relationships are comprised of three interrelated constructs: intimacy, passion, and commitment. Intimacy represents the *emotional* component of relationships and is characterized by feelings of closeness, emotional support, and connectedness. Behaviorally, intimacy manifests as interpersonal trust, communication, and social support. Passion refers to the *motivational* aspect of a relationship and is characterized by physical arousal, manifested through touching and sexual consummation. Commitment embodies the *cognitive* aspect of love and is characterized by decisions to be in, and maintain or dissolve, a relationship. Behaviorally, commitment manifests as exclusivity, whether emotional or sexual, and active participation in the relationship during times of stress. Together, these three TTL constructs have been used to propose taxonomies that explain why some relationships foster romance (e.g., high intimacy and commitment, and varying passion over time), while others become flings (e.g., high passion and low commitment and intimacy) or friendships (e.g., high intimacy, low passion and commitment). Furthermore, idealized versions of the three constructs have been found to describe the components sought out in a relationship, and serve as a cognitive heuristic to rate satisfaction when individuals participate in a relationship (Sternberg & Barnes, 1985). Therefore, to advance our current understanding of the literature, we examined whether YGBM's total number of partners in the past two months was associated with each *idealized* TTL construct. These data may provide insights on how to develop strategies that decrease HIV risks if young men are involved in concurrent sexual relationships and/or promote involvement in serial relationships.

Study Objectives and Hypotheses

Data for this study come from a sample of YGBM who reported using the Internet to date other men. Online partner-seeking behaviors may be associated with HIV risk behaviors, including multiple sexual partners, inconsistent condom use, and the likelihood of reporting unprotected anal intercourse with a partner of unknown or serodiscordant HIV status (Benotsch, Kalichman, & Cage, 2002; Bull, McFarlane, & Rietmeijer, 2001; Garofalo, Herrick, Mustanski, & Donenberg, 2007; Ogilvie et al., 2008). Furthermore, Internet-based communications may instill a false sense of intimacy and security prior to a face-to-face meeting (Bauermeister, Giguere, Carballo-Diéguez, Ventuneac, & Eisenberg, 2010; Gackebach, 2007; Ross, 2005; Suler, 2004). In the case of YGBM, their exploration of emerging sexual identities and introduction to same-sex dating may further fuel trust and

infatuation. We therefore posit that online partner-seeking behaviors may confound the associations between romantic ideation and number of partners, and account for this possibility in our analyses.

The overall goal of this study was to examine the association between future relationship ideation and number of sexual partners, as these data may provide insight regarding how to bolster HIV prevention efforts for YGBM. We propose two competing hypotheses for the relationship between the TTL constructs and number of partners. First, we expected a positive association between number of sexual partners and the intimacy and passion constructs, respectively. We base this hypothesis on past research suggesting that individuals may forego condoms with sexual partners as a way of promoting intimacy and connectedness (Appleby, Miller, & Rothspan, 1999; Bauermeister et al., 2009; Frost, Stirratt, & Ouellette, 2008; Remien, Carballo-Diéguez & Wagner, 1995). Although prior research has found a positive association between commitment and unprotected sex occasions, most of this work has focused on men already in relationships (Appleby et al., 1999; Hoff & Beougher, 2010; Hoff et al., 1997). Compared to men in same-sex relationships, YGBM who identify as single and who place greater value on commitment may engage in more socially desirable behaviors (e.g., condom use) to make the best impression when pursuing romantic partners or to decrease their own risks of HIV exposure while dating and getting to know romantic candidates. As such, in our second hypothesis, we expected a negative association between number of UAI sexual partners, both receptive and insertive, and commitment ideation.

METHOD

Participants

Data for this article come from a cross-sectional observational study examining young men's dating experiences online (the "Virtual Love Study"; Bauermeister et al., in press). To be eligible for participation, men had to be between the ages of 18 and 24 and report having used a dating website in the past 3 months, had been sexually active with a male partner met on a dating website in the past 6 months, and be single. Participants were recruited through advertisements on two popular, non-sex specific social networking sites, referrals, and flyers posted at local venues commonly frequented by sexual minority youth. Recruitment materials asked men to participate in a research study examining the use of dating websites to meet other men. We did not define "dating websites" to ensure inclusivity of sites that are marketed for romance (e.g., Match.com, Chemistry.com) or for broader social purposes (e.g., Gay.com, Manhunt.com). Social network advertisements were viewable only to men who fit our age range and who lived in the United States. Promotional materials displayed a synopsis of eligibility criteria, a mention of a \$15 iTunes gift card incentive, and a link to the survey's website.

Our sample consisted of 431 young men ($M = 21.49$ years, $SD = 1.94$) who self-identified as gay (88%) or bisexual (12%). Close to three quarters of the sample self-identified as White or European American; the remainder of the sample identified as Hispanic/Latino (8.9%), Asian Pacific Islander (7.5%), Black or African American (6.1%), or Other (3.5%). Participants who completed our survey lived in 44 of the 50 U.S. states or territories, including Puerto Rico, and had comparable demographic characteristics across the four U.S. Census regions (19.5% from the Northeast, 24.8% from the Midwest, 28.1% from the South, and 26.0% from the West; 7 participants did not provide information on their state of residence). Highest educational attainment varied across our sample: less than a high school education (2.1%), completed high school (11.2%), technical or associate degree (4.0%), currently enrolled in college (46.3%), completed college (21.2%), currently pursuing a graduate degree (11.4%), and completed a graduate education (3.9%). Twelve participants

reported being HIV positive. For this report, we focus on the subsample who reported being sexually active with a male partner in the past two months (see Table 1).

Procedure

Study data were protected with a 128-bit SSL encryption and kept within a firewalled server. Upon entering the study site, participants were asked to enter a valid and private email address, which served as their survey username. This allowed participants to save their answers and, if unable to complete the survey at one sitting, continue the survey at a later time. If eligible, participants read a detailed consent form that explained the purpose of the study (i.e., exploring how sexual minority youth use the internet for dating) and their rights as participants. Youth were asked to acknowledge that they read and understood each section of the consent form, respectively (i.e., participation involvement, protection of privacy, uses of data, potential benefit, compensation, terms of the Certificate of Confidentiality, changing their mind about participation, and who to contact if they had questions).

Consented participants then answered a 30-45 minute survey that included questions regarding their sociodemographic characteristics, HIV status, Internet use, romantic relationship ideals, sexual and substance use behaviors, and general mood over the last few months. Participants could refuse to answer any question in the survey; refusals were treated as missing data in our analyses. For those surveys that were incomplete, participants were sent reminder e-mails encouraging them to complete the survey. Participants were compensated with a \$15 iTunes gift card via e-mail upon completion of the survey. Study data were protected by a Certificate of Confidentiality. All study procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Michigan.

Measures

Sexual Behavior—Participants were asked to report their sexual behavior with men and women during the previous two months using the Sexual Practices Assessment Schedule (SPAS; Carballo-Diéguez, Dolezal, & Ventuneac, 2002). Questions were posed both in formal language and vernacular (in italics) to increase comprehension. For this study, we included questions regarding the total number of male partners in the past two months and the number of male partners with whom participants engaged in unprotected receptive (URAI) and insertive (UIAI) anal intercourse, respectively.

Ideal Relationship Characteristics—We adapted and revised Sternberg's (1997) Triadic Love Scale (TLS) to measure *ideal* romantic relationships (Bauermeister, Johns, Pingel, Eisenberg, Leslie-Santana, & Zimmerman, in press). Participants rated the importance of a series of listed qualities in their *ideal romantic relationship* with another man (1 = *Not at all important*, 5 = *Extremely important*). To minimize order effects (Tourangeau, Rips, & Rasinski, 2000), we programmed the survey to randomize question order within each domain. We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis of the TLS and found support for a three factor orthogonal solution (cumulative variance explained: 58.43% [Intimacy = 50.09%; Commitment = 4.41%; Passion = 3.93%]). Means and SDs for TLS items are shown in Table 2. To ensure orthogonal measurement between the three factors, we computed each TLS subscale by multiplying each item by its factor loading, and created a mean standardized score for use in subsequent analyses.

Using the same response scale, we also asked participants to rate the importance of having their ideal relationship be monogamous ("How important would it be for you to be in a monogamous relationship with your partner?") or sexually exclusive ("How important would it be for you to be sexually exclusive with your partner?"). We computed a mean

score for Relationship Exclusivity based on these two items ($\alpha = .78$) and used it in subsequent analyses.

Internet Use—Prior to answering a series of questions related to their Internet use, we offered participants the following definitions for *date* (i.e., getting to know another man for a potential romantic relationship) and *hookup* (i.e., having a “no strings attached” sexual encounter with another man). Participants were then asked to provide the average number of hours per week they spent online looking for potential dating and hooking-up partners, respectively, using open-ended questions.

Data Analytic Strategy

First, we described the sample by the study variables and used the sociodemographic characteristics to test for mean differences in the main variables of interest. We found no differences (data not shown). For bivariate analyses, continuous variables with skewed distributions (i.e., hours per week seeking partners online, number of individuals met face-to-face after interacting online, sexual behaviors) were log-10 transformed to minimize violations to normality. We also examined whether multicollinearity would be a concern in our multivariate regression analyses by examining the correlations across study variables (see Table 3).

In multivariate analyses, we used Poisson regressions to examine the association between number of partners in the past two months and the idealized love constructs given the positively skewed count data for the number of partner variables. We adjusted for age, race, sexual identity, and hours spent online seeking romantic and casual sex partners in our regression analyses. Given concerns of multicollinearity between the TLS constructs and the sexual exclusivity items, the regression analyses were replicated using the relationship exclusivity composite score as the predictor. To minimize inadequate model estimation (Fleiss, Levin, & Paik, 2003) due to model overdispersion (i.e., an excessive number of zeros), we restricted the analyses to participants who had reported being sexually active in the past two months ($N = 376$) when the dependent variable was the total number of male partners. Similarly, we limited our analyses to participants who had reported engaging in at least one occasion of receptive ($N = 252$) or insertive ($N = 242$) anal intercourse when we examined the total number of URAI and UIAI partners, respectively. To ease interpretation of our findings, we include the adjusted odds ratios (AOR) and their 95% confidence intervals for all variables in our regressions.

RESULTS

As shown in Table 1, participants reported an average of four male partners in the past two months ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 5.78$). Sixty-two percent ($N = 252$) of the sample reported engaging in receptive anal intercourse in the past two months. Among those who had receptive anal intercourse, over half of the sample reported engaging in URAI with one or more partners ($M = 1.43$, $SD = 3.27$). Sixty percent ($N = 242$) of the sample also reported engaging in insertive anal intercourse, with over half of the sample reporting UIAI with one or more partners ($M = 1.31$, $SD = 2.95$). Half of the sample reported spending at least three hours per week online seeking a romantic partner ($M = 6.19$, $SD = 8.16$) and at least two hours seeking a casual partner ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 7.01$).

Most participants rated each idealized love construct as being important when thinking about their ideal relationship with other men. Over 80% of the sample reported that it would be important that their idealized relationship was monogamous (see Table 1). Similarly, close to 75% of the sample reported it was important that their ideal relationship be sexually exclusive. When compared to gay-identified men ($M = 4.40$, $SD = .98$), bisexual men

ascribed less importance to a monogamous relationship ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 1.33$; $t(52.65) = 2.32$, $p < .05$). Bisexual men ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.37$) were also less likely than gay men ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 1.07$) to rate that sexual exclusivity was important in their idealized relationship ($t(54.85) = 2.68$, $p = .01$).

Poisson Regressions on Number of Sexual Partners in the Past Two Months

Total Number of Partners—When we examined the relationship between total number of male partners in the past two months and the three love constructs ($\chi^2(8, N = 368) = 243.59$, $p < .001$), we found no association between the love constructs and total number of male partners (see Table 4). We found a positive association between the number of partners and hours spent per week seeking casual sex ($AOR = 2.32$, $p < .01$).

We re-ran our analyses using the relationship exclusivity composite score as our predictor ($\chi^2(6, N = 366) = 280.03$, $p < .001$), and found a negative association between total number of male partners and sexual exclusivity ($AOR = .78$ [95% CI: .69, .88], $p < .001$). Hours spent seeking casual sex remained positively associated with number of partners in the past two months ($AOR = 1.92$ [95% CI: 1.45, 2.54], $p < .001$).

Total Number of URAI Partners—We then examined the relationship between URAI partners and the three love constructs ($\chi^2(8, N = 236) = 122.49$, $p < .001$), and found a negative association between number of URAI partners and commitment ($AOR = .64$, $p < .01$); that is, participants with greater scores on the commitment construct reported fewer partners with whom they had engaged in URAI (see Table 4). Furthermore, we noted a positive association between URAI partners and hours spent per week seeking casual sex ($AOR = 2.49$, $p < .001$).

When relationship exclusivity was used as the predictor of interest ($\chi^2(6, N = 237) = 114.86$, $p < .001$), we also found a negative association between number of URAI partners and relationship exclusivity ($AOR = .76$ [95% CI: .63, .91], $p < .01$). No other covariates were found to be significantly associated with URAI partners in this model.

Total Number of UIAI Partners—Finally, we examined the relationship between the number of partners with whom participants had UIAI in the past two months and the three love constructs ($\chi^2(8, N = 227) = 91.88$, $p < .001$). Commitment ($AOR = .68$, $p < .01$) was negatively associated with number of UIAI partners (see Table 4). Furthermore, we noted a positive association between number of UIAI partners and hours spent per week seeking casual sex ($AOR = 1.97$, $p < .01$).

In analyses using the relationship exclusivity composite score as our predictor ($\chi^2(6, N = 228) = 79.81$, $p < .001$), we found a negative association between the total number of male partners and sexual exclusivity ($AOR = .77$ [95% CI: .63, .95], $p < .05$). Hours spent seeking casual sex was positively associated with UIAI partners in the past two months ($AOR = 1.75$ [95% CI: 1.21, 2.51], $p < .01$).

DISCUSSION

Network-level interventions may be a suitable strategy to curtail HIV transmission; however, the question remains: How may we encourage YGBM to reduce UAI with concurrent partners? Undoubtedly, the answer to this question is complex. Current HIV prevention recommendations encourage the reduction of UAI occasions and partners through the restructuring of sexual networks (Amirkhanian et al., 2005; Friedman et al., 2007; Luke & Harris, 2007; Peterson, Rothenberg, Kraft, Beeker, & Trotter, 2008; Wohlfeiler & Potterat, 2005); however, some scholars have argued that these strategies

attempt to police sexuality and ignore the subjective meaning ascribed to sexual behaviors (Dean, 2009; Halperin, 2007). Both perspectives have merit. Behavioral approaches seeking to restructure sexual networks may employ strategies that motivate YGBM to engage in safer sex practices (e.g., serodisclosure, consistent condom use), as long as they also preserve sexual agency and respect YGBM's rights to explore their sexuality with multiple partners. One way to preserve sexual agency is to understand how young men conceptualize their ideal relationships (i.e., what are they looking for?) in order to develop network-level interventions that are aligned with these expectations. By providing YGBM with strategies that help them both define their ideal relationships (i.e., what kind of relationship do they want?) and also pursue them (i.e., how can we help them find it?), we may be able to encourage HIV risk reduction (e.g., when could YGBM safely forego condoms with one or more partners?). As a contribution to these efforts, we examined whether romantic ideation could serve as a promotive factors towards these efforts.

Romantic ideation was a promotive factor in our analyses. YGBM who placed greater importance on commitment were less likely to report having had multiple UAI partners. Interestingly, we found no relationship between commitment ideation and total number of partners. Consistent with past research (Appleby et al., 2005), these findings may suggest that YGBM who can envision being in a committed relationship in the future may take active steps to decrease their own risk of HIV exposure while still exploring their sexuality with multiple partners. Consistent with our initial hypothesis, YGBM who placed greater value on commitment may be pursuing long-term relationships more actively. As a result, they may report fewer UAI partners because they are investing more time in getting to know potential romantic partners before foregoing the use of condoms. Past research with heterosexuals, for example, has suggested that these youth may delay engaging in unprotected sex with partners until they become serious, using unprotected sex as a marker that a committed relationship has formed (Bauman & Berman, 2005). At present, however, we know little of how YGBM pursue romantic relationships, including when and why they decide to forego the use of condoms with partners. These data are crucial to develop HIV prevention strategies that align with YGBM's interpersonal experiences. Future research, both qualitative and quantitative, that examines sexual decision-making when pursuing romantic relationships is needed.

Although intimacy and passion are considered important aspects of an ideal relationship, we found no support for an association between these two constructs and number of sexual partners in the past two months in multivariate analyses. These findings were surprising as past research has indicated an association between unprotected sex and these two constructs (Bauermeister et al., 2009; Frost et al., 2008; McNeal, 1997; Remien et al., 1995). One potential reason for the deviation from past findings may be linked to how intimacy and passion are conceptualized in the TTL (Sternberg, 1986). Whereas commitment focuses on cognitive decision-making, which includes the development of future expectations and goals, intimacy and passion are conceptualized as the emotional and motivational components of love, respectively. Consequently, rather than an abstract idea, the influence of passion and intimacy on sexual behavior may be more dependent on the chemistry and attraction evoked by a particular partner. Unfortunately, we did not measure feelings of intimacy and passion for specific sexual partners in this study. In addition, we did not examine whether the nature of the relationship between YGBM and their recent sexual partners (e.g., ex-boyfriends, friends with benefits). These different relationships may mask more nuanced associations between the number of UAI partners and intimacy and passion, respectively. Future research examining how intimacy and passion may influence sexual decision-making specific to different partner types (e.g., romantic versus casual) is warranted.

Monogamy and sexual exclusivity were also considered important traits in participants' ideal relationships with other men. Participants who rated relationship exclusivity as an important characteristic also reported fewer partners. Whereas older generations of gay and bisexual men may value these same characteristics (Kurdek, 1995), YGBM may place greater salience on these characteristics as they have grown up in a generation where homosexuality and same-sex relationships, particularly those that mirror traditional heterosexual partnerships, are increasingly accepted by society and pursued during adolescence and young adulthood (Bauermeister et al., 2010; D'Augelli et al., 2008; Russell & Consolacion, 2003). At present, however, it is unclear how the ideation and pursuit of romantic relationships varies if YGBM live in places where same-sex unions are illegal or not tolerated. Future research should examine whether socioecological factors (e.g., sexual prejudice, policies regulating same-sex relationships) may affect YGBM's expectations about the future, and indirectly influence the size and composition of their sexual networks.

Consistent with past research, participants reported a greater number of sexual partners if they spent more time seeking casual partners online (Liau, Millet, & Marks, 2006). Curiously, we did not find an association between number of partners and time spent seeking romantic partners online. These findings suggest that online partner-seeking may not inherently pose a risk; rather, exposure to HIV risks may be dependent on the kind of relationship being pursued online. Furthermore, although some sites are currently marketed for meeting casual and/or romantic partners, we were unable to account for how much time participants spent in each type of website. Given that past research has found that the expression of sexual behavior may be attributable to site characteristics and the sexual negotiations that do or do not take place with partners met in these sites (Carballo-Diéguez et al., 2006), future research should examine whether specific sites, or site characteristics, encourage or dissuade YGBM from engaging in unprotected sex with prospective partners. Taken together, these findings support the inclusion of sexual negotiation strategies with partners met online in on-going HIV prevention programs, as well as the development of web-based prevention programs (Hooper, Rosser, Horvath, Oakes, & Danilenko, 2008; Rosser et al., 2010; Ybarra, Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2007).

Our study had several limitations. First, our cross-sectional design hindered our ability to make causal assertions about our findings. As YGBM become more sexually experienced, their idealized relationship may change. Consequently, future research should examine whether romantic ideation changes over time and whether these changes influence sexual behavior. Second, participants were recruited as a convenience sample as there are no population frames from which to select a randomly representative sample. Third, some eligible YGBM may have been unable to participate in the survey if they had limited access to a personal computer or the Internet. Furthermore, some YGBM may have been dissuaded from participating in the study given the study incentive (e.g., iTunes gift card), particularly if they did not own a MP3 player. Finally, given our sample eligibility criteria (i.e., recently seeking dates online), our findings may not be generalizable to all YGBM, since some may have no interest in pursuing relationships online. Additional research examining the association between romantic ideation and sexual behavior is warranted, particularly among those who may not have easy access to the Internet or be actively seeking a partner online.

Does love matter? Our findings suggest that it may, even when it is just an ideal. Expectations about the future (e.g., romantic ideation) may be used as a promotive factor to curtail HIV risks among YGBM. HIV prevention programs may benefit from including expectations about the future, particularly by discussing how sexual behaviors may facilitate or compromise long-term goals. Future research examining romantic ideation is warranted

as it may provide insights on how to diminish HIV risks by decreasing the number of partners with whom youth engage in unprotected sex.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables

	Sexually-active		Engaged in RAI		Engaged in IAI	
	N(%)		N(%)		N(%)	
Sexual Identity						
Gay	334 (88.8%)		219 (86.9%)		208 (86.3%)	
Bisexual	42 (11.2%)		33 (13.1%)		33 (13.7%)	
Race						
White	275 (73.1%)		181 (71.8%)		184 (76.3%)	
Black	22 (5.9%)		14 (5.6%)		14 (5.8%)	
Hispanic	37 (9.8%)		28 (11.1%)		23 (9.5%)	
Asian/Pacific Islander	29 (7.7%)		18 (7.1%)		15 (6.2%)	
Other Race/Ethnicity	13 (3.5%)		11 (4.4%)		5 (2.1%)	
Education						
Less than High School	8 (2.1%)		4 (1.6%)		5 (2.1%)	
High School	39 (10.4%)		31 (12.3%)		25 (10.4%)	
Technical/Associate	14 (3.7%)		13 (5.2%)		10 (4.1%)	
Some College	174 (46.3%)		120 (47.6%)		110 (45.6%)	
College	79 (21.0%)		50 (19.8%)		56 (23.2%)	
Some Graduate School	44 (11.7%)		24 (9.5%)		23 (9.5%)	
Graduate School	17 (4.5%)		9 (3.6%)		12 (5.0%)	
Age (in years)	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
	21.46	1.96	21.42	1.98	21.55	1.94
Time Dating Online (hrs/wk)	6.13	7.69	6.33	7.74	6.36	7.44
Time Hooking-Up Online (hrs/wk)	7.30	4.29	4.92	8.11	5.18	8.54
Total Number Male Partners	4.12	5.89	4.54	6.27	4.89	6.38
URAI Partners	0.95	2.75	1.43	3.27	1.21	2.92
UIAI Partners	0.84	2.44	0.98	2.63	1.31	2.95
Intimacy ^a	4.63	.57	4.61	.61	4.60	.61
Passion ^a	4.39	.57	4.40	.58	4.41	.59
Commitment ^a	4.49	.59	4.47	.61	4.47	.64

	Sexually-active		Engaged in RAI		Engaged in LAI	
Sexual-exclusivity ^a	4.29	1.11	4.20	1.17	4.18	1.18
Monogamy ^a	4.37	1.00	4.31	1.05	4.31	1.05

Notes.

^a 1 = Not at all important, 5 = Extremely important

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for Idealized Relationship Constructs

Thinking about your ideal romantic relationship with <i>another man</i> , how important would it be for you. . .	Mean	SD ^a
Intimacy ($\alpha = .95$; 95% CI [.94, .95])		
To actively support your partner's wellbeing	4.52	.77
To count on your partner in times of need	4.56	.77
To know your partner counts on you in his times of need	4.48	.80
To receive emotional support from your partner	4.59	.76
To give emotional support to your partner	4.56	.73
To value the presence of your partner in your life	4.65	.68
To feel close to your partner	4.70	.68
To really trust your partner	4.76	.65
To feel your partner really trusts you	4.72	.64
Passion ($\alpha = .84$; 95% CI [.82, .86])		
To find your partner very attractive	4.36	.83
To fantasize about your partner	4.10	.93
To share yourself with your partner	4.43	.81
To sexually satisfy your partner	4.51	.76
To have your partner share himself with you	4.44	.80
Commitment ($\alpha = .89$; 95% CI [.88, .91])		
To not let other people come between you and your partner	4.33	.92
To view your commitment to your partner as solid	4.51	.81
To be certain of your love for your partner	4.48	.75
To view your relationship with your partner as a good decision	4.55	.75
To feel a sense of responsibility towards your relationship	4.42	.80
To continue your relationship with your partner when things get hard	4.45	.78

Notes.

^a 1 = Not at all important, 5 = Extremely important

Table 3

Bivariate associations of variables among sexually-active YGBM ($N = 376$)

	Age	Ed	Int	Comm	Pass	DO	HUO	SE	Mono	Male Partners	URAI Partners	UIAI Partners
Education (Ed)	.58**											
Intimacy ^a (Int)	.10*	.06										
Commitment ^a (Comm)	-.07	-.11*	.07									
Passion ^a (Pass)	.08	.14**	.01	.13**								
Time Dating Online ^b (DO)	.08	-.09	-.02	.07	.04							
Time Hooking-Up Online ^b (HUO)	.12*	-.01	-.08	-.07	.004	.45**						
Sexual-exclusivity ^a (SE)	-.10	-.02	.24**	.42**	.32**	-.02	-.25**					
Monogamy ^a (Mono)	-.09	-.05	.22**	.43**	.31**	.06	-.20**	.78**				
Male Partners ^b	.06	.02	-.08	-.14	-.07	.07	.23**	-.28**	-.18**			
URAI Partners ^b	.02	-.03	-.005	-.16**	.04	.07	.18**	-.24**	-.08	.69**		
UIAI Partners ^b	.04	-.03	.01	-.13*	.02	.12*	.19**	-.19**	-.11*	.56**	.58**	
Relationship Exclusivity ^a	-.10*	-.04	.24**	.45**	.34**	.02	-.24**	.95**	.94**	-.26**	-.19**	-.17**

Notes.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

^a 1 = Not at all important, 5 = Extremely important

^b Given skewed distribution, we used the variable's log-10 transformation in bivariate analyses.

Table 4

Poisson regression of love constructs on number of partners over the past two months, accounting for sociodemographic variables and Internet use.

	Total Number of Male Partners (N = 368)				Total Number of URAI Partners (N = 236)				Total Number of UAI Partners (N = 237)			
	b(se)	OR	95% CI	p	b(se)	OR	95% CI	p	b(se)	OR	95% CI	p
Intimacy ^a	-.08(.07)	.93	(.81, 1.06)	ns	-.10(.08)	1.10	(.94, 1.31)	ns	.17(.11)	1.18	(.95, 1.48)	ns
Commitment ^a	-.19(.10)	.83	(.69, 1.00)	ns	-.46(.17)	.64	(.46, .88)	**	-.39(.14)	.68	(.51, .89)	**
Passion ^a	-.11(.10)	.90	(.74, 1.09)	ns	.07(.20)	1.07	(.72, 1.58)	ns	.07(.16)	1.07	(.79, 1.44)	ns
Age	.03(.05)	1.03	(.94, 1.13)	ns	-.02(.10)	.98	(.81, 1.18)	ns	-.01(.09)	.99	(.84, 1.18)	ns
Sexual Identity ^a												
Bisexual	-.18(.21)	.84	(.56, 1.26)	ns	-.02(.32)	1.02	(.55, 1.88)	ns	-.18(.29)	.83	(.47, 1.46)	ns
Race/Ethnicity ^b												
Non-White	-.20(.14)	.72	(.63, 1.07)	ns	-.40(.25)	.67	(.42, 1.09)	ns	.01(.28)	1.00	(.58, 1.73)	ns
Time Dating Online ^c	-.17(.27)	.82	(.50, 1.42)	ns	.05(.54)	1.05	(.36, 3.02)	ns	.42(.32)	1.53	(.82, 2.86)	ns
Time Hooking-Up Online ^c	.84(.13)	2.29	(1.79, 2.99)	***	.91(.25)	2.49	(1.54, 4.03)	***	.68(.17)	1.97	(1.41, 2.76)	***
Intercept	.57(.87)	1.77	(.32, 9.65)	ns	.24(1.64)	1.27	(.05, 34.61)	ns	-.35(1.72)	.70	(.02, 20.42)	ns

Notes.

^dVariable is log-transformed to alleviate skewness.

^aVariable is standardized (z-score)

^bGay men serve as comparison group.

^cWhites serve as comparison group.