

MASKED BEHIND THE SCREEN: DOMINANT GROUP PERCEPTIONS OF SEXUAL
RACISM IN ONLINE DATING PROFILES

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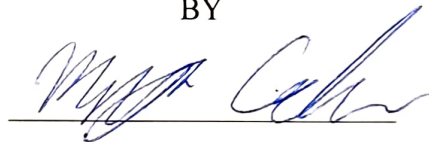
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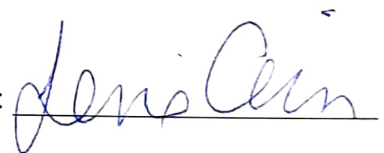
OF MASTER'S IN PSYCHOLOGY

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Abstract

Online dating applications provide a space for users to meet sexual partners through a streamlined approach. The profiles often include a place for users to add a short description or biography. Some users choose to include racially identified preferences or requirements in their online profiles. This phenomenon, known as sexual racism, poses a problem for racial minorities who are often excluded or not preferred due to their racial identity (Callander, Holt, and Newman, 2015). In the present study, 136 participants who identified as straight and white evaluated the character of a gay or straight man who depicted sexual racism in his profile. Consistent with research by Thai, Stainer, and Barlow (2019), I predicted perpetrators of sexual racism would be viewed more negatively than users who did not include sexual racism in their dating profiles. Perpetrators who expressed sexual racism were viewed as less warm, less competent, less moral, more prejudiced. They were also liked much less than the control. Drawing on research from the higher moral obligation hypothesis (Fernandez, Branscombe, Saguy, Gomez, & Morales, 2013), I also predicted an interaction of sexual orientation and sexual racism such that participants would rate a gay perpetrator more negatively than a straight perpetrator in dating profiles that include sexual racism with minimal difference of sexual orientation in the control. There were no significant findings related to sexual orientation. Despite disagreement over the acceptability of sexual racism by lay people, the present research suggests users who include sexual racism are viewed more negatively by other white people.

Keywords: sexual racism, prejudice, higher moral obligation, sexual minority

Masked behind the screen:**Dominant group perceptions of sexual racism in online dating profiles**

People who belong to marginalized groups often face social stigma and prejudice based solely on their social identities. Whether explicitly excluded or strongly discouraged from engaging, people with marginalized identities may feel unwelcome in spaces created and occupied by individuals with dominant social identities. The internet and online dating are no exception. Online dating websites and apps provide a space where users can specify partner preferences, deal-breakers, and everything in between. Profiles sometimes include preferences or requirements for potential matches based on physical traits or identities. Sexual racism, or the preference or exclusion of potential partners based on race, in the online dating community seems to surface anecdotally through the context of Grindr, a dating site for gay men. Although there is no empirical evidence indicating sexual racism is more prevalent in the gay community, perceptions of perpetrators who include sexual racism may vary depending on sexual orientation. The present study investigated how individuals from dominant social identities interpret the perpetrator of sexual racism in an online dating profile.

Sexual Racism

Romantic relationships are often formed through shared interests, personality traits and physical attraction (e.g., Fitness, Fletcher, & Overall, 2003). Physical attraction varies by the individual and some people may identify certain preferences in appearance. Preferences can include a variety of physical characteristics such as body types, weight, height, or hair color. Other preferences are more specific to culture and include a racial component, excluding people of a certain race or specifying a preferred racial “type”. The

discrimination of potential sexual or romantic partners based on racial identity is known as sexual racism (Stember, 1976).

Although the term sexual racism emerged as a tool for scholars to understand racism in the context of dating, the concept of sexual racism is not new. The United States historically criminalized interracial marriage through anti-miscegenation laws and other practices (e.g., Osumi, 2012). It was not until 1967 when the Supreme Court officially overturned anti-miscegenation laws with the decision of *Loving v. Virginia*. Media coverage after the decision from both historically black and white newspapers indicated most stories advocated on behalf of the Lovings (Hoewe & Zeldes, 2012; Ware, Zeldes, & Hoewe, 2015). Using media as a cultural mirror of public opinion, lay people seemed to agree the government does not have the right to enforce anti-miscegenation laws. Attitudes toward interracial relationships, on a global scale, started to see positive shift. However, on the individual level, actual behavioral change was much slower. Even decades later, a significant percentage (29%) of White people rejected all forms of romantic relationships with other races (Herman & Cambell, 2012). Although the Supreme Court ruling was one of the many accomplishments during the civil rights era, White people's attitudes toward interracial relationships were at best, mixed.

Opinions about sexual racism follows a similar trajectory as the expression of general racial prejudice or discrimination with a few key differences. Shifting social norms about race relations lead most people to agree explicit displays of prejudice toward racial minorities are wrong and should be condemned (Crandall, Eshleman, & O'Brien, 2002). Even so, the degree to which lay people accept or condemn prejudice varies by context and is related to social distance. Namely, discrimination in larger social settings is more often

perceived as racist whereas discrimination in closer, intimate social settings, such as romantic relationships, is viewed as more acceptable. Discriminating by race in larger social settings like employment or housing are viewed more negatively than discriminating by race in intimate relations like dating (Crandall et al., 2002). Therefore, sexual racism may be seen as more acceptable than other forms of racial bias.

Sexual racism is built on a hierarchy of racial identities, prioritizing some racial identities while neglecting others (Robnett & Feliciano, 2011). Consistent with in-person relationships, Rudder (2014) found users on online dating websites preferred – and were more likely to contact – matches of their same race, regardless of racial identity. For users dating outside of their race, racial minorities preferred White matches, regardless of gender. Gender differences did emerge among racial minorities who were rejected at the highest rates. Asian, Latino, and White men all rated Black women the most negatively. Black women are discriminated against based on racial stereotypes such as perceived aggressive personalities or behaviors (Bany, Robnett, & Feliciano, 2014). Similarly, although men from every race rated Asian women in their top three, women of all races except Asian rated Asian men the most negatively (Rudder, 2014). The relative consistency of racialized preferences across various dating sites reminds users that racial identities are relevant deciding factors in the sexual marketplace.

Despite the existence of sexual racism throughout history, the rising influence of the internet has served as a new avenue to express racial prejudices (Daniels, 2012). As cultural norms and policies shifted to showcase growing support for interracial relations, people who did not agree with the shifting opinions likely suppressed these attitudes in a public forum from fear of being policed in conversation (Condor, Figgou, Abell, Gibson, & Stevenson,

2006). The rising influence of the internet has served as a new forum for people to express their suppressed racial prejudices. Behaviors online are very different from behaviors in person in part due to the online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004). This effect comes from people's belief of dissociative anonymity and invisibility online compared to in person and people are more likely to behave in a freer way online. Individuals who are less likely to express prejudice or negative language in person may feel more comfortable sharing their suppressed opinions online. The emergence of online dating websites thus provided a new avenue to disclose racial biases that are less acceptable to disclose in person. As racialized language became a common practice for online dating profiles, researchers began to study the existence and implications of experiencing sexual racism (e.g., Bedi, 2015).

Due to the online disinhibition effect and the use of dating profiles to get to know new people before meeting them, online dating creates a unique space where sexual racism may be viewed as more acceptable. Online dating, especially with today's "hook-up" apps, utilizes profiles to provide information about the person before deciding to connect with them.

"Preferences" in Online Dating

Online dating apps offer a new way to connect with romantic or sexual partners. The unique properties of meeting someone online before in person distinguishes online dating apps from traditional date settings (Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis, & Sprecher, 2012). Rather than meeting someone for the first time and getting to know them based on first impressions, online matches allows people can get to know each other first before deciding whether to meet up. Finkel and colleague (2012) identified three main differences between online and traditional dating: access, communication, and matching. Having convenient

access online to many different people and an opportunity to communicate with them before meeting up allows users to be more selective in who they choose to meet in person. The matching process in online dating websites uses mathematical algorithms based on similar interests, traits, goals, etc. As online websites became outdated to a younger generation, a new era of apps based on geo-location changed the matching process. Applications like Tinder and Grindr use the phone GPS to locate nearby suitors in a less selective manner. These apps are known more for one- or two-time hookups rather than finding a long-term partner. Although many people do find long-term partners on the app, Tinder uses an algorithm that is less about similar interests or personality and relies mainly on attractiveness (Tiffany, 2019). The focus on physical attraction over other traits is consistent with short-term mating strategies (e.g. Li & Kenrick, 2006). In fact, the only requirements to make a profile on Tinder is the user's name, age, and gender. Users have the option to add more information to their profiles, but the app connects people based on how many – and who – swipes right. In the since-removed Elo scoring system, Tinder users were given a score based on interactions with the app. As noted before, sexual racism poses an additional problem for the ratings on minorities interacting with the app. Although their current algorithm still relies on who “liked” or “noped” the user, Tinder no longer uses the Elo score. In a blog post addressing the issue, Tinder claims:

We don't care (or store) whether you're black, white, magenta or blue. Our algorithm doesn't know if you make \$10 or \$10 million a year. And we aren't going to show you all the blondes first because they supposedly have more fun. We don't believe in stereotypes. So whether you're celebrating Diwali, Carnival, Eid Al-Fitr, or Gay Pride, we think the party gets better when great people, from all

walks of life, can get together. Our algorithm is designed to be open and we love our results (Powering Tinder, 2019).

Despite sounding like a color-blind, unbiased approach in the blog post, the user experience of Tinder and similar dating apps seems to indicate otherwise (Robinson, 2014). Beyond simply passing over racial minorities while looking for potential matches, some users choose to specify their personal preferences – or “dealbreakers” – directly on their profiles to further discourage certain people from becoming a match. In an attraction-based dating app, statements of sexual racism can be reframed as personal preferences in attraction, while largely ignoring the racial component that accompanies it (Holland, 2012). Emerging research about sexual racism indicates lay people disagree about whether or not having a racialized sexual preference in online constitute racism. In an online survey of 2,177 Australian gay and bisexual men conducted by Callander, Newman, and Holt (2015), nearly all (96%) of the participants had seen some type of racial discrimination in an online dating profiles. Additionally, over half of the participants (64%) believed it was okay to indicate a racial preference online, indicating a largely tolerant attitude toward displays of sexual racism. Finally, Callander and colleagues (2015) found a number of factors that related attitudes toward sexual racism with multiculturalism and racial discrimination on a broader level. Participants who had a positive attitude toward multiculturalism and/or had experienced racial discrimination before generally viewed sexual racism more negatively, suggesting it is not merely a preference that determines the use of sexual racism. The online disinhibition effect explained above may also influence *perceptions* of sexual racism. That is, more people expressing sexual racism due to the online disinhibition effect may

normalize the behavior and allow room for greater acceptance if racialized preferences are a common practice online.

Acceptability of sexual racism may also be influenced by the *type* of discrimination included in the profile. In research conducted on gay and bisexual men in Australia, a majority of the white sample (66.7%) engaged in positive discrimination toward potential partners (Callander, Holt, & Newman, 2012). Language like “Asian and Mixed race = SEXY!!” used in online dating profiles recognize racialized preferences in a positive manner and encourage people who identify with that racial category to match with the user who discloses the statement. Although statements with positive discrimination still constitute sexual racism, the language appears to be encouraging and inviting. Negative discrimination, or the exclusion of others based on racial identity, is less common in online dating profiles but still exists and can be conceptualized in two different forms. Thai, Stainer, and Barlow (2019) identify racial preferences as subtle and soft (“I am *interested* in white men”) or hard and absolute (“White men only”). Regardless of the specific language used in online dating profiles, racial preferences exclude or discourage users of a particular race from finding a potential match based solely on their racial identity. Mirroring the general acceptability of racism in today’s context, explicit, negative and hard forms of sexual racism are rated more negatively than subtle, positive, and soft statements in research conducted on gay and bisexual men (Callander et al., 2012; Thai et al., 2019).

Although soft and positive forms of sexual racism may be portrayed in a more favorable manner, users who include statements of sexual racism are still seen more negatively overall than users who do not. Research conducted by Thai et al. (2019) investigated gay men’s ratings of fake online dating users with and without sexual racism in

their profile. Participants were also asked whether they believed racial preferences in online dating profiles are considered racist (yes/no). At large, regardless of the participant's individual opinion about racial preferences, participants viewed the target who included a statement of sexual racism as more racist, less dateable, and were less willing to have personal relations with the target compared to profiles that did not include a statement of sexual racism. When evaluating the profile with sexual racism in further detail, Thai and colleagues (2019) also found targets with hard disclosures of sexual racism were rated more negatively than targets with soft disclosures, suggesting less favorable responses toward users who disclose explicitly.

Including a statement of sexual racism has implications for overall opinions of the profile and user but the perceiver's personal opinion about sexual racism also impacts how they view the profile. Thai and colleagues (2019) found an interaction between the participant's racial preference beliefs and ratings of the profile that included sexual racism. Participants who did not believe it is racist to include a racial preference viewed the target who expressed sexual racism as less racist and more attractive than participants who viewed racial preferences as racist. As discussed by Callander and colleagues (2015), individual racial preference beliefs may be indications of general racial attitudes. Due to the greater acceptability of prejudice for intimate social relationships and overall attitudes toward racial minorities, perceptions of sexual racism can serve as a cover to hide racial biases. Denying the racist nature of sexual racism normalizes the behavior and permits exclusion or discouragement of participation in online dating sites based on racial identity.

The study and interest of sexual racism goes beyond lay people's attitudes toward racial preferences. Biases within the field of psychology has led to a disproportionate

interest in sexual racism within the context of sexual minorities. All the research described above about sexual racism have studied racial preferences in gay or bisexual men (Callander et al., 2012; Callander et al., 2015; Thai et al., 2019). For example, a quick search on PsycINFO with the key words “sexual racism” leads to over a dozen articles about men who have sex with men¹ but very few about heterosexual individuals. Nine out of the first ten articles focus specifically on gay men. Researchers have even gone beyond the expression of sexual racism to study the impact of sexual racism on racial minorities. Specifically, scientists have studied the psychological well-being and self-esteem of racial minorities who experience sexual racism (Thai, 2019), the relationship between sexual racism and body dissatisfaction (Bhambhani, Flynn, Kellum, & Wilson, 2019), and ways to overcome the psychological distress associated with sexual racism (Bhambhani, Flynn, Kellum, & Wilson, 2018). Yet once again, almost all the research conducted focused on the implications of sexual racism on men who have sex with men. There is relatively no experimental, psychological research about sexual racism in the context of heterosexual online dating. Additionally, non-scientific anecdotal stories and articles about sexual racism began within the context of Grindr, a dating app for gay men. For example, individuals have compiled stories of sexual racism on gay dating sites into blogs such as “Douchebags of Grindr” (douchbags of grindr, n.d). Most of the people who use racialized language on gay dating sites and apps are white men who direct the language at people they are interested in or refuse to date (Mula & Fellow, 2013). Although specifying racial preferences on dating profiles is not unique to gay dating sites, anecdotal stories and experiences on these sites indicate a prominent issue of sexual racism in the online gay community. Research or

¹ Not all men who have sex with men identify as gay or bisexual, but the literature has looked at both. For the context of this paper, I will be using gay men unless the article states otherwise.

stories about sexual racism in heterosexual online settings are discussed less frequently and has less empirical research comparatively (c.f. Rudder, 2014). The prominence of studies and stories about sexual racism in the context of gay men may be due to the uneven usage of internet dating sites by gay people compared to straight people. For example, gay men are twice as likely to use the internet to find romantic and sexual partners than their straight counterparts (Callander et al., 2012). Before questioning the prominence of sexual racism in the context of gay men, it is important to understand why gay men and other sexual minorities utilize online dating websites more frequently than heterosexual individuals.

Sexual Prejudice

Much like sexual racism and other racist policies in the United States informing attitudes toward racial minorities, the social stigma of sexual minorities was backed by discriminatory laws and practices. Sodomy laws and policies against cross-dressing were explicit ways those in power monitored and punished sexual deviance. Legal practices and religious ideologies informed cultural attitudes toward sexual minorities well into the 20th century. In parallel with the civil rights movement, large scale movements in the mid-20th century saw policy changes, overturning laws and granting more rights to sexual minorities. In 2015, one of the biggest legal successes came with the decision of *Obergefell v. Hodges* in which the Supreme Court ruled same-sex marriage is protected under the 14th amendment. Policy changes in the past 50 years is promising for sexual minorities moving forward, but it cannot erase the many years of social stigma. Sexual prejudice, a similar but more inclusive term than homophobia, refers to internalized negative attitudes and feelings straight people have toward sexual minorities (Herek, 2000).

Despite shifting anti-gay norms and more positive attitudes toward sexual minorities in recent decades, sexual prejudice continues to fuel individual and group behaviors toward sexual minorities. Hate crimes and reactionary protests against recent legal progress serves as a public reminder of the presence of sexual prejudice (Herek & Lomore, 2013). Sexual minorities continue to experience prejudice and may feel threatened in public spaces dominated by heterosexuals. As an alternative to navigating sexual prejudice in public spaces, many sexual minorities turned to the internet to find community and explore their identity (Kubicek, Carpineto, McDavitt, Weiss, & Kipke, 2011).

The internet provides sexual minorities with a safer space to explore their sexual orientation and meet new people. In an annual report conducted by Grov, Breslow, Newcomb, Rosenberger, and Bauermeister, (2014) from 1990-2013, researchers found gay and bisexual men used the internet for sexual health education and as a resource to meet other sexual minorities online in AOL chatrooms and other forums. Given that online resources and communities specific to sexual minorities may not be readily found in person, it is not surprising that sexual minorities use the internet more frequently than their heterosexual counterparts (Miller, 2016). As the internet entered the 21st century, online forums shifted from AOL chatrooms to online dating websites and apps. Some people found romantic partners through forums and chatrooms but the introduction of online dating websites offered a new opportunity for individuals to explore their sexual identity while finding a sense of autonomy and control of their romantic life (Pingel, Bauermeister, Johns, Eisenberg, & Leslie-Santana, 2012). Rather than just using the internet to learn about their sexual health and meet new people, sexual minorities could be active agents in finding a romantic partner. Online dating services provide sexual minorities and other people with a

small market of potential partners (i.e. older adults) with a space to meet new people (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). Although the internet offers unique benefits for people who have traditionally been marginalized, the appeal of online dating is not exclusive to sexual minorities. Users of any sexual orientation may benefit from the increased access to new people online. Millions of users accessed online dating services in 2016 alone (Statista DMO, 2017). Why, then, do gay men tend to be the focus of media coverage and research on sexual racism? One possibility is that people hold different moral standards for gay people and straight people.

Just World and the Higher Moral Obligations Hypothesis

The higher moral obligation hypothesis offers one explanation for why there may be a disproportionate focus on sexual racism among gay men compared to straight men (Fernandez Branscomb, Saguy, Gomez, & Morales, 2014). The higher moral obligations hypothesis proposes that people expect victims of injustice to behave with higher morals than those who have not been victimized. Several internal processes are at play to explain the expectations for victims and may help explain why sexual racism among gay men is of particular interest for researchers and lay internet users alike.

To understand the higher moral obligations hypothesis, it is important to first understand the fundamental motivation to believe the world is fair and just. Lerner and Miller (1978) defined this human need to preserve fundamental beliefs as the just world hypothesis. Under the just world hypothesis, people need to believe the world is a just and orderly place where people get what they deserve. Believing the world is fair means people who are harmed must be in some way responsible. Experiencing or witnessing random acts of injustice and victimization violates one's belief in a just world. Rather than admitting

anyone can suffer injustice at any moment, witnesses and victims seek to preserve their personal belief in a just world. Because individuals typically cannot influence the outcome of a harmful event, people attempt to make meaning of their victimization after the fact.

There are many ways people make meaning of victimization; Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, and Larson (1998) identified sense-making and benefit finding as two distinct methods people primarily use when their belief in a just world is threatened. Using a sense-making approach, victims attribute their victimization to their previous actions or God's will.

Blaming the victim and coming up with behaviors that could have changed the circumstances are other ways people make sense from injustice. Using the benefit finding approach, victims are expected to benefit from their harm. The benefit finding approach presumes that victims acquire something positive from the experience, typically an internal change or outcome (Davis et al., 1998).

When chance misfortunes happen to others, observers fear similar random misfortunes may happen to them therefore may settle their fears by interpreting the victimization within the realms of a fair and just world (Lerner, 1978). However, justifying random and terrible events by placing them within a fair and just worldview can be harmful to victims. Using the two approaches described above, observers of harmful events either use sense-making or benefit finding approaches to explain the harm done to a victim. The sense-making approach can commonly be seen in the comments section of any news article when people describe behaviors they would do to avoid being in similar situations. Making sure to lock doors, staying in late at night, or going out in groups are some examples of the sense-making approach observers may use to maintain their belief in a just world.

Alternatively, outside observers may instead focus on the outcomes of the victimization and

believe victims acquire “something good” due to their misfortunes. Benefits generally indicate the victim’s life has changed for the better in some way related to their injustice. Often, observers believe victims acquire an improved moral character or strengthened resilience. Through the benefits finding approach of the just world hypothesis, outside observers expect victims to behave with higher morals than nonvictims.

To examine how observers’ perceive and make meaning of victimization, Warner and Branscombe (2011) conducted a series of studies depicting misfortune. In one experiment, researchers had participants read an excerpt describing a victim’s childhood abuse. Participants were then assigned to make meaning of the event from the victim’s perspective or the perpetrator’s perspective or were not instructed to make meaning of the event at all. Participants viewed victims as more obligated to help others and not do harm when asked to make meaning for the victim compared to the other two conditions. This finding demonstrates the importance of benefit finding when making meaning for the victim is salient. Participants were then informed that the victim either harmed someone else, did no harm to another, or volunteered to help others in the future. Researchers investigated the level of social distance participants desired after learning the victim’s future. Aside from a simple main effect of future harm-doing such that participants desired more social distance for the harm-doing victim than the no-harm or helping victim, Warner and Branscombe (2011) found a significant interaction between the meaning focus and future behavior of the victim. Learning that the target helped others in the future led participants who were assigned to make meaning for the victim to desire less social distance compared to the other two conditions. Again, the saliency and focus on making meaning for the victim led to more favorable opinions toward the target when he matched perceived obligations and helped

others. However, when assigned to make meaning for the victim, participants desired *more* social distance when learning the target did future harm. Observers perceive higher obligations when making meaning for victims relative to perpetrators; when victims violate these perceived obligations, they are viewed more negatively. In other words, making meaning of victimization leads to more favorable opinions when the victim matches expectations and more harsh opinions if the victim violates them.

Although anyone can become a victim to misfortune, the victimization rates of people with socially stigmatized identities is exacerbated. Individual prejudices and discriminatory behaviors combined with systematic barriers lead to higher rates of victimization for people with stigmatized identities. With interest to the study of sexual minorities, the higher moral obligations hypothesis can be further explored in research conducted by Fernandez and colleagues (2014). In one study, participants were asked to read the results of a fabricated study investigating group attitudes toward immigrants. The groups presented to the participants were gay men (stigmatized identity), civil servants, and bank employees (two non-stigmatized identities). Results of the study indicate gay men were expected to derive greater benefits from their group membership than the non-stigmatized groups. Supporting the higher moral obligation hypothesis, participants also expected gay men to have more positive attitudes toward immigrants (Fernandez et al., 2014, Study 3). Next, the researchers investigated how the psychological impact of discrimination affects the perceived morality of gay men. In a follow-up study, participants learned gay people were either psychologically strengthened or weakened as a consequence of experiencing discrimination. When gay people were believed to be psychologically strengthened, observers could more readily make meaning of injustice. Consequently,

observers then perceived that gay people had higher moral obligations toward other victimized groups and judged them more harshly when expectations were violated.

Furthermore, making meaning of victimization through the higher moral obligation hypothesis is not only related to direct and current instances of injustice. Recent research suggests that historical victimization based on identity can lead observers to deploy higher moral obligations toward people in the present who share the same victimized identities (Warner & Branscombe, 2012; Branscombe, Warner, Klar, & Fernández, 2015). In a study conducted by Branscombe and colleagues (2015), participants were primed with historical victimization by reading about Jewish people who suffered during the Holocaust. Although the participants in the experiment were asked about their attitudes towards Jewish people today, being reminded of the historical injustice of the Holocaust led participants to perceive a moral obligation for Jewish people to do no harm to others. When people who have been historically victimized violate expectations of morality and behave harshly towards others, they are rated more negatively than people who have not been victimized. Essentially, people with dominant identities ascribe an improved character for people with stigmatized identities based on their past victimization.

Evidence of the higher moral obligations hypothesis toward sexual minorities and the presence of this cognitive mechanism through historical victimization may better explain the focus of sexual racism in the context of gay men. Specifically, this suggests that gay men are expected to do no harm to others and behave with higher morals by members of dominant groups, regardless of their individual victimization. When gay users of online dating sites discriminate based on race, they violate the higher moral expectations to do no harm to others. Anecdotal stories and empirical evidence studying sexual racism primarily

in gay men might indicate a higher moral obligation that is violated and therefore an interest and focus in research. With the rise in sexual racism as a problem in the online dating world and the focus particularly on gay men, the current research explores how observers perceive profiles that express sexual racism.

The present research examines how outside observers with dominant group identities perceive sexual racism. Specifically, how a white, straight sample perceives the profile of a gay man compared to a straight man. The presence of sexual racism in the online gay community may violate dominant group perceptions of higher moral obligations for sexual minorities to be tolerant toward other stigmatized groups (Fernandez et al., 2014). Additionally, prior research suggests sexual minorities have more positive attitudes toward racial minorities relative to straight men (Kleiman, Spanierman, & Smith, 2015). Thus, sexual racism on the profile of a gay perpetrator should violate the expectation that sexual minorities are more tolerant toward racial minorities. The present study tests two main hypotheses: (1) Profiles that include a statement of sexual racism will be rated more negatively than profiles that do not and (2) Gay perpetrators who disclose sexual racism on an online dating profile will be rated more negatively than straight perpetrators with the same profile; however, there will be no significant difference between ratings of the gay and straight men in the control condition. Additionally, the gender of the participants was analyzed on an exploratory basis, although no predictions were made. Finally, in an attempt to replicate research conducted by Thai and colleagues (2019), participants were asked whether or not they personally believed it was racist to have racial preferences.

Method

Participants

Participants were Tulane University undergraduate students over the age of 18 enrolled in a psychology course who were compensated for their participation with course credit. A total of 238 students completed the study. Although 231 participants consented to have their data analyzed, data were only analyzed from 137 participants who identified as white and heterosexual in the demographics section of the survey.

Materials and Procedure

The study used a 2(Sexual Orientation: Gay vs. straight) x 2(Sexual Racism: yes vs. no) between-groups design. Participants signed up to participate online via Sona and were then directed to a consent script on Qualtrics. Participants read a cover story about the purpose of the study, provided consent, and were directed to view a Tinder profile fabricated by the experimenter. The Tinder profile photo was of a white man. The photo for the profile was chosen based on a pilot study by expert raters. Specifically, the selected photo was perceived to be relatively attractive ($M = 5.0$ on a 1-7 scale), likable ($M = 5.0$ on a 1-7 scale), and could be perceived as either gay or straight ($M = 3.13$ on a 1-5 scale where 1 = very gay and 5 = very straight). The Tinder profile also included his name, age, sexual orientation, distance, and a few sentences of text. The profiles were identical in each condition except for the manipulation of sexual orientation: gay vs. straight and the presence or absence of the sexual racist phrase (Appendix A). To determine which phrase to include in the profile, a pilot study was conducted with a series of different phrases that specify a dating preference. In the pilot study, participants rated each phrase using a 1-7 Likert scale for perceived prejudice, acceptability, and likeability of the person using the phrase. The phrase “no spice, no rice” was chosen initially, in reference to the exclusion of Eastern and Southern Asians. Participants perceived this phrase as relatively high in prejudice ($M = 5.63$,

$SD = 1.92$), low in acceptability ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 1.76$) and low in likeability ($M = 1.93$, $SD = 1.38$). Additional pilot testing, however, revealed the meaning of this phrase to be somewhat ambiguous. Therefore, the final phrase was modified to be: “No spice, no rice – just not really into Asians.”

After viewing the Tinder profile, participants were directed to complete a questionnaire that asked for their perceptions of the person who created the profile, referred to as the perpetrator. The first part of the questionnaire measured perceptions of perpetrator’s morality, warmth, competence, and prejudice. The presentation of the different traits was randomized (Appendix B). Participants were then asked about their overall liking toward the perpetrator and their overall acceptability of prejudice in different settings (Appendix C). Participants answered a series of demographic questions and were probed for suspicion before they were debriefed about the true purpose of the study. Finally, participants were offered an opportunity to withhold their consent with a post-study decision form.

Measures

Character Evaluations

Participants viewed a list of character traits and were asked to what extent each of the traits described the perpetrator on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = Not at All to 7 = Extremely. The character traits included measures for prejudice, morality, warmth, competence, and humor (Appendix A). Items related to humor were intended as “filler” items and thus were not analyzed.

Perpetrator Prejudice. The perpetrator prejudice measure consisted of five items: “biased”, “racist”, “prejudiced”, “ignorant”, and “open-minded” (reverse coded). The items

were adapted from Vorauer, Main, and O'Connell (1998) and averaged together to create an aggregate scale ($\alpha=.934$).

Perpetrator Morality. The perpetrator morality measure was adapted from Goodwin, Piazza, and Rozin (2014) and included a list of traits that are relevant to morality but not warmth. The morality measure consisted of four items including: “principled”, “fair”, “just”, and “untrustworthy” (reverse coded). The items were averaged together to create an aggregate scale ($\alpha=.770$).

Perpetrator Warmth. The perpetrator warmth measure consisted of five items including: “warm”, “caring”, “friendly”, “nice”, and “insincere” (reverse coded). The items were averaged together to create an aggregate scale ($\alpha=.918$). Both the perpetrator warmth and perpetrator competence were adapted from Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, and Xu (2002).

Perpetrator Competence. The perpetrator competence measure consisted of five items including: “confident”, “independent”, “competitive”, “intelligent”, and “incompetent” (reverse coded). The items were also averaged together to create an aggregate scale ($\alpha=.484$). While predictions from the higher moral obligation hypothesis do not suggest perceptions of competence will be affected, competence is one of the fundamental dimensions of person perception and thus was included for exploratory purposes (Fiske et al., 2002).

Liking Scale

The liking scale consisted of 15 items adapted from the liking scale created by Rubin (1970). The items were averaged together to create an aggregate scale ($\alpha = .968$), see Appendix B.

Personal Preference Beliefs

Participants were asked a single yes/no question about their personal beliefs in expressing sexual racism, “Do you believe it is racist to express a racial preference when looking for a romantic partner?” The question was adapted from studies conducted by Thai and colleagues (2019).

Attention and Manipulation Checks

Participants completed one attention check and two manipulation checks. The attention check question asked participants to identify the source of the profile (e.g., Tinder, Reddit, OkCupid, or Grindr). For the manipulation checks, participants were asked to identify the sexual orientation of the perpetrator (e.g., Straight, Gay, Bisexual, or Not enough information) and the extent to which the profile was biased (on a 1-7 scale where 1 = not at all and 7 = very much).

Table 1

Correlations between Dependent Variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Warmth	Competence	Morality	Prejudice	Liking
Warmth	4.66	1.20	–				
Competence	4.53	.70	.574*	–			
Morality	4.17	1.16	.837*	.682*	–		
Prejudice	4.00	1.62	-.833*	-.454*	-.812*	–	
Liking	3.68	1.27	.775*	.558*	.762*	-.708*	–

Results

Data Cleaning

Of the 137 participants who identified as straight and white, data were screened to remove participants who failed the attention check. One participant failed the attention

check and was excluded from the analyses. The manipulation check for sexual orientation was largely successful, $\chi^2(2) = 128.779, p < .001$. Nearly all participants correctly identified the sexual orientation of the straight perpetrator (95.7%) and gay perpetrator (96.7%). Participants who did not correctly identify the sexual orientation of the perpetrator selected “not enough information” rather than selecting an incorrect sexual orientation ($n = 5$). The second manipulation check confirmed the participants in the sexual racism condition ($M = 5.24, SD = 1.373$) rated the profile as significantly more biased than participants in the control condition, ($M = 2.35, SD = 1.412$), $F(4,234) = 145.713, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .521$. Due to the already low sample size and overall success in each manipulation check, no data were excluded from the analysis due to participants’ responses on the manipulation checks.

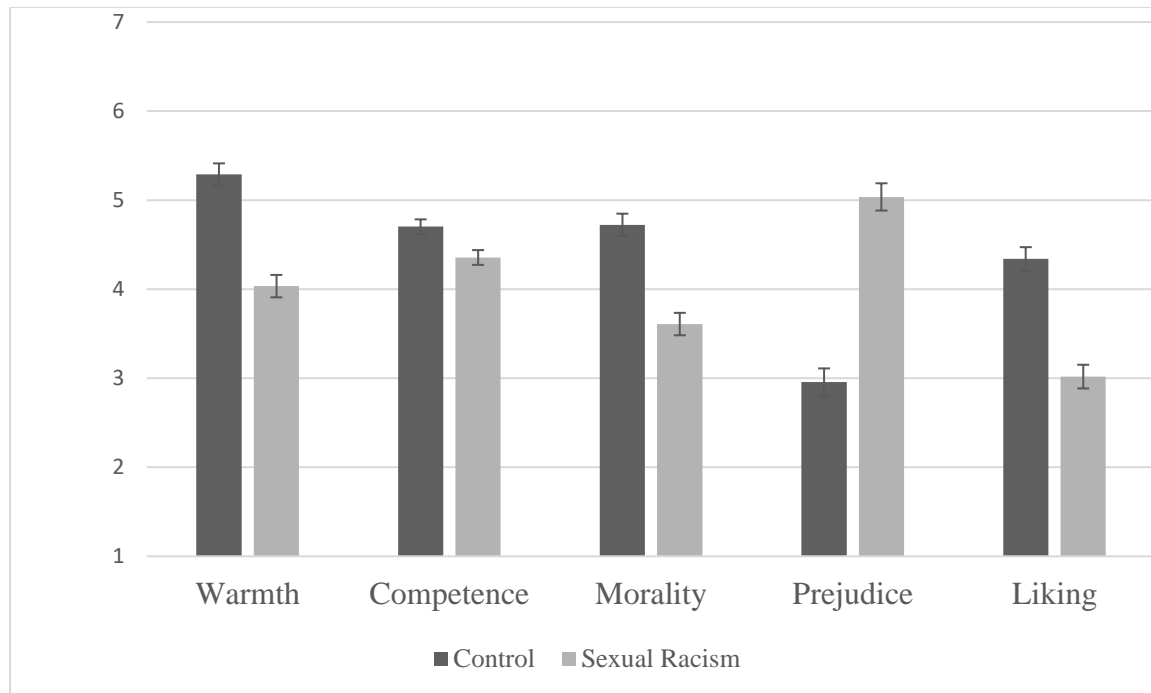
Hypothesis Testing

Character Evaluations

A 2(Sexual Orientation: gay vs. straight) x 2(Sexual Racism: yes vs. no) between-groups Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was conducted on the four character trait ratings: warmth, competence, morality, and prejudice. There was a significant main effect of the sexual racism, $V = .410, F(4, 129) = 22.597, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .410$ (Figure 1). There was no significant main effect of sexual orientation, $V = .040, F(4, 129) = 1.339, p = .259, \eta_p^2 = .023$. Contrary to predictions, there was no significant interaction of sexual orientation and sexual racism, $V = .023, F(4,129) = .781, p = .540, \eta_p^2 = .040$.

Figure 1

Effect of Sexual Racism on Character Evaluations and Liking



To examine each of the dependent variables in depth, 2(Sexual Orientation: gay vs. straight) x 2(Sexual Racism: yes vs. no) ANOVAs were conducted for each dependent variable. The main effect of sexual racism was significant for all four dependent variables, see Table 2. Compared to the control condition, a man who expressed sexual racism in his dating profile was viewed as less competent, less moral, less warm, and more prejudiced (Table 3). There were no significant main effects of sexual orientation nor any significant interactions between sexual racism and sexual orientation in any of the univariate ANOVAs.

Table 2

Main effect of Sexual Racism on Character Evaluations

	$F(1, 132)$	p	η_p^2
Warmth	50.730	<.001	.276
Competence	9.612	.002	.067
Morality	39.900	<.001	.231

Prejudiced	90.470	<.001	.405
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Table 3*Means by Condition*

	Control M (SD)	Sexual Racism M (SD)
Warmth	5.288 (.686)	4.034 (1.280)
Competence	4.702 (.589)	4.356 (.766)
Morality	4.723 (.570)	3.608 (1.331)
Prejudiced	2.957 (.918)	5.036 (1.502)

Liking

A 2(Sexual Orientation: gay vs. straight) x 2(Sexual Racism: yes vs. no) between-group univariate ANOVA was conducted on the aggregate liking scale. Consistent with results from character evaluations, a significant main effect of racism emerged, $F(1,132) = 50.452, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .277$. Participants liked the sexual racist perpetrator ($M = 3.018, SD = 1.305$) less than the control ($M = 4.339, SD = .823$). There was no significant main effect of sexual orientation nor was there a significant interaction of sexual orientation and sexual racism.

Exploratory Analyses*Personal Preference*

A 2(Sexual Orientation: gay vs. straight) x 2(Sexual Racism: yes vs. no) between-groups univariate ANOVA was conducted to examine whether the manipulations affected participants' beliefs about whether it was racist to express a racial preference when looking for a romantic partner. There was a significant main effect of racism, $F(1,131) = 10.831, p =$

.001, $\eta_p^2 = .076$. Participants in the racist condition were more likely to say it was racist to express a racial preference (55%) as compared to participants in the control (28%). There was no significant main effect of sexual orientation nor was there a significant interaction of sexual orientation and sexual racism.

Gender

Although no predictions were made about gender differences in responses among participants, gender was analyzed as an additional variable in an exploratory 2(Sexual Orientation: gay vs. straight) x 2(Sexual Racism: yes vs. no) x 2(Gender: men vs. women) between-groups MANOVA for the character evaluations dependent variable. Findings from this analysis should be interpreted with caution as data were collected from more women ($n = 96$) than men ($n = 40$). Consistent with previous analyses, there was a significant main effect of racism, $V = .325$, $F(4,125) = 2.728$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .325$. There was also significant main effect of gender, $V = .080$, $F(4,125) = 15.070$, $p = .032$, $\eta_p^2 = .080$. The interaction of Gender x Sexual Racism did not reach the threshold for statistical significance, $V = .067$, $F(4,125) = 2.239$, $p = .069$, $\eta_p^2 = .067$.

Next, 2(Sexual Orientation: gay vs. straight) x 2(Sexual Racism: yes vs. no) x 2(Gender: men vs. women) univariate ANOVAs were conducted for each of the dependent variables. As previously reported, the main effect of sexual racism was significant for each of the 4 character traits. The main effect of gender did not yield significant univariate results for any of the character traits.

Table 4

Gender x Sexual Racism Interactions

$F(1, 128)$	p	η_p^2
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Warmth	4.131	.044	.031
Morality	8.216	.005	.060
Prejudice	6.500	.012	.048

Although the gender x sexual racism interaction did not reach the threshold for statistical significance in the MANOVA, the univariate analyses yielded significant gender x sexual racism interactions for warmth, morality, and prejudice (Table 4). Due to the interaction, simple effects tests were conducted on each of the dependent variables. In the control group, there were no significant gender differences for warmth ($F(1,128) = 1.972, p = .163$), morality ($F(1,128) = 1.337, p = .250$) nor prejudice ($F(1, 128) = .761, p = .385$). When viewing the profile with sexual racism however, women ($M = 5.274, SE = .176$) perceived the perpetrator to be more prejudiced than men ($M = 4.362, SE = .290$), $F(1, 128) = 7.230, p = .008, \eta_p^2 = .053$. Women ($M = 3.389, SE = .144$) also perceived the perpetrator to be less moral than men ($M = 4.181, SE = .237$), $F(1, 128) = 8.157, p = .005, \eta_p^2 = .060$ (Figure 2). However, there were not significant gender differences in the warmth of the perpetrator of sexual racism, $F(1,128) = 2.159, p = .144$.

Figure 2

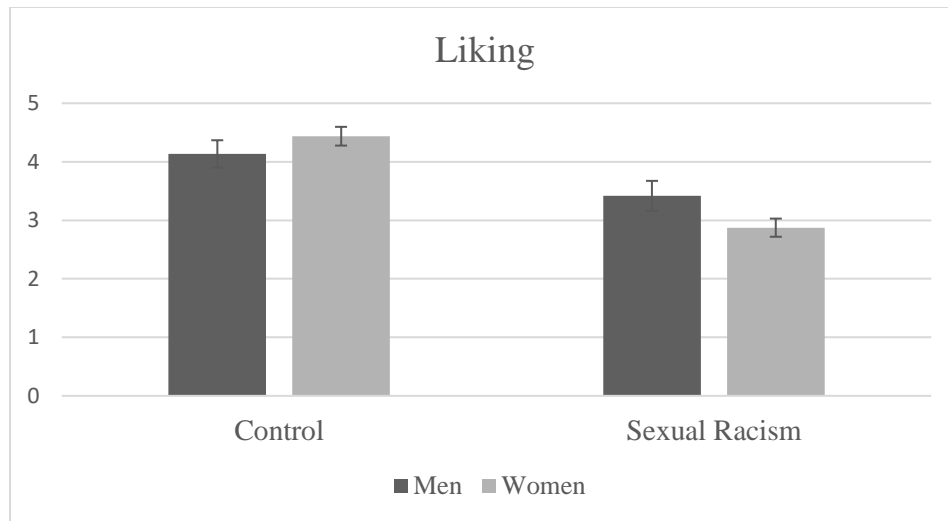
Impact of Gender on Character Evaluations of the Perpetrator



Finally, when analyzing the liking scale as a 2x2x2 ANOVA, two significant effects emerged. A significant main effect of racism, $F(1,128) = 30.722$ $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .194$, as well as a significant Gender x Sexual Racism interaction, $F(1,128) = 4.464$ $p < .037$, $\eta_p^2 = .034$. Following the interaction, a simple effects test of liking was conducted. Consistent with the findings for character evaluations, women ($M = 2.874$, $SD = 1.408$,) liked the perpetrator significantly less than men ($M = 3.419$, $SD = .877$), $F(1,128) = 3.327$, $p = .070$, $\eta_p^2 = .025$ (Figure 3). There was no significant difference in the control group, $F(1,128) = 1.318$, $p = .253$.

Figure 3

Impact of Gender on Liking the Perpetrator



Discussion

The present research offers insight into sexual racism from the perspective of participants with dominant identities. Despite most likely being the perpetrator of sexual racism compared to other racial groups, white people view perpetrators who include sexual racism in online dating profiles more negatively than those with profiles without sexual racism. In addition to discouraging racial minorities, perpetrators of sexual racism may unintentionally discourage potential matches. Sexual racism may be aimed at people from a racial minority however results from the present study indicate an overall negative impression toward perpetrators. It is notable that this is not limited to character traits related to the prejudice but impacts holistic perceptions of character including warmth, morality, and competence. In an attempt to streamline a matching process, perpetrators of sexual racism may actually hinder their matches due to overall negative attitudes toward them.

Additionally, the present research seeks to understand sexual racism from the perspective of straight participants. Most empirical research about sexual racism to date has focused on male sexual minorities both as participants and as perpetrators². Participants in

² This encompasses gay men, bisexual men, men who have sex with men, based on the language of the paper.

the present study were asked to evaluate the perpetrator's character and likeability. Rather than viewing the profile as a potential partner, the participants answered questions about the profile in a nonromantic evaluation. The liking scale suggests the negative perceptions toward a perpetrator holds true even in a nonromantic capacity, suggesting a more general disapproval of sexual racism.

Higher Moral Obligation Hypothesis

Based on previous research about the higher moral obligation hypothesis, it was predicted that participants would rate a gay man who expressed sexual racism more harshly than a straight man who expressed sexual racism. However, the present study did not provide support for the prediction, participants held a similar disapproval of sexual racism regardless of the sexual orientation of the perpetrator. This could be due to a number of factors. A key component of the higher moral obligations hypothesis is recognizing a violation of expectations. This study assumes the participants expect gay men to behave with higher morals than straight men and that seeing sexual racism on a dating profile violates those expectations. It is possible that the cues were not strong enough for participants to have expectations about how the perpetrator should behave. Additionally, Warner and Branscombe (2011) demonstrated the importance of "making meaning" of misfortune in relation to the higher moral obligation hypothesis. The present study did not relate the perpetrator's sexual orientation with any form of prior victimhood or benefit finding. It is possible that cues were not salient enough for participants to view the perpetrator with higher moral obligations.

Another reason for the nonsignificant findings could be due to attitudes toward sexual minorities at large. Improved policies and cultural acceptance in the past few decades

have shifted societal attitudes toward sexual minorities (Monteith, Deneen, & Tooman, 1996). Additionally, normative pressure to reduce prejudice against gay men may inhibit observers from disclosing negative attitudes toward sexual minorities (Pereira, Pereira, & Montiero, 2016). Given the wide spectrum of reasons, more research is needed to clarify how sexual orientation interacts with sexual racism.

“No Spice, No Rice”

The chosen phrase, “no spice, no rice – just not really into Asians”, explores sexual racism on a broader scale. Nearly all users have come across some form of racial discrimination on a dating profile (Callander et al., 2015). The discrimination, however, may vary immensely based on tone and language. Dating profiles offer an opportunity for users to show their personality in a limited number of characters. Sometimes perpetrators are direct and to the point with their language but more often the discrimination is less overt. Previous research has focused on the former, with explicit and exclusionary language such as “no blacks no Asians”, “White guys only” and “Prefer White guys” (Thai et al., 2019). The sexual racism in these instances is very clearly defined to outside perceivers. In the present research, different language was chosen to appear more realistic and less overtly racist. The phrase “no spice, no rice” attempts to undermine the sexual racism with humor. The rhyming and nonspecific language of *spice* and *rice* referring to people of Asian descent adds a certain type of racist humor to those viewing the profile. Although the phrase is absolute and exclusionary toward the targeted racial group, “no spice, no rice” does not name the target.

The second half of the phrase “just not really into Asians” was necessary for participants to recognize and contextualize the sexual racism. After piloting the profile

without the second half, many participants did not understand what “no spice, no rice” really meant. The phrase, and other examples of food indicating different ethnic groups, originated from dating apps for sexual minorities (Tamanna, 2016). The straight participants in the pilot study largely did not recognize the phrase, therefore the second half was necessary. However, with a limited amount of space on a dating profile, the additional phrase may have drawn *more* attention to the sexual racism. Specifying the racial group to clarify the statement also explicitly names Asians which may have elicited more negative attitudes toward the perpetrator. Future research should examine other phrases that are less overt. Phrases should also include perceptions of positive discrimination. Although rooted in the same principle, positive discrimination encourages people who identify with a certain racial category to match with the user (Callander et al., 2012).

Sexual racism can take on a lot of different forms based on the language and stereotypes associated with the target racial minority. The present research focused on negative racial discrimination against Asians on dating apps. As Plaut (2010) and many recent diversity scientists argue, understanding complex racial issues involves going beyond the Black/White binary. Thus, the present study offers evidence that straight, White college students disapprove of exclusionary sexual racism targeted at Asians. However, perpetrators are more likely to use positive discrimination rather than exclusion. Positive sexual racism such as “fetishization” or “exoticization” invite certain racial minorities to match without specifically excluding others. This may be more difficult for white participants to identify as sexual racism. An interesting direction would be to contrast attitudes toward negative discrimination with positive discrimination to see if attitudes toward the perpetrator changes.

Finally, it is worth discussing the global backdrop of COVID-19 amongst data collection. All data were collected in the spring 2020 after college campuses closed and cases were spiking in the U.S. Acts of racism and discrimination against Asian Americans were also on the rise during the duration of the study. Using a racist phrase specific to people of Asian descent may have elicited different reactions than at other time. Perceptions of sexual racism with other marginalized groups is necessary to confirm that the findings are not unique to Asians.

Gender and Sexual Racism

Although both men and women viewed the perpetrator more harshly than the control, preliminary data suggest there may be gender differences in perceptions of sexual racism. The significant interaction of gender and sexual racism on warmth, morality, and prejudice suggests women are more critical of the perpetrator's character than men. However, men and women both viewing the same Tinder profile of a man may not lead to a balanced outcome. Restricting the analyses to straight participants served one purpose at the cost of another. To test predictions around the higher moral obligation hypothesis, it was necessary to restrict the sample to participants with dominant groups identities. However, straight women may have different motivations when viewing the profile. Women may have been held the perpetrator to a different standard if they viewed the Tinder profile through a romantic or sexual lens, thus rating the perpetrator more critically. Alternatively, it is possible that men rated the participants more positively overall, viewing the profile favorably as a member of their ingroup compared to women (Dasgupta, 2004). To further isolate the role of gender on perceptions of sexual racism, future research should create a

controlled 2(Sexual Racism: yes vs. no) x 2(Perpetrator Gender: men vs. women) x (Participant Gender: men vs. women).

Limitations

One of the more interesting – and still unanswered – questions is how one’s personal attitudes toward sexual racism impacts their perception of someone else including sexual racism. To replicate findings from Thai and colleagues (2019), the question “do you believe it is racist to express a racial preference when looking for a romantic partner?” was included in the survey. A limitation to the study design was the effect of the condition. To avoid priming the participants with the question before seeing the profile, the question was asked near the end of the survey. Instead, the condition (sexual racism vs. control) had a significant effect on the answer to the question, therefore no further analyses were conducted. Participants in the sexual racism condition were significantly more likely to indicate it is racist to express a racial preference when looking for a romantic partner compared to the control condition. Attitudes toward sexual racism tend to correlate with general racial attitudes (Callander et al., 2015). Future research should prescreen answers to the question and then randomly assign them to group to better understand how personal attitudes impact perceptions of sexual racism.

As has been criticized in other research, a main limitation of this study was the sample, both the size and demographics. A college sample is typically younger, more educated, and more liberal than the general population. The sample could therefore be more accepting of sexual minorities and less accepting of sexual racism compared to older, less educated, and more conservative adults (Jayakumar, 2009). Specifically, samples with more negative attitudes toward gay men may lead to a harsher evaluation of the perpetrator of

sexual racism. A more representative sample in future research will lead to a better understanding of the higher moral obligation hypothesis when viewing sexual racism.

Conclusion

As sexual racism continues to be a problem in the online dating scene, the current research leads to more questions than answers. Building upon prior literature focused mainly on sexual racism in the gay community, this study examined straight people and confirmed people who include sexual racism in an online dating profile are seen more negatively across a number of character traits. Sexual orientation, across this sample, did not impact how people viewed an online dating profile. This can be an encouraging finding that reinforces a decline in sexual prejudice but must be replicated across a more generalizable sample. The findings indicate an overall negative perception toward perpetrators of sexual racism from a white sample. In addition to filtering out people of a particular race, sexual racism seems to have an overall negative impact on outsider's perceptions. Although more research is needed, the present study helps contextualize perceptions of sexual racism beyond the perpetrator and target of sexual racism.

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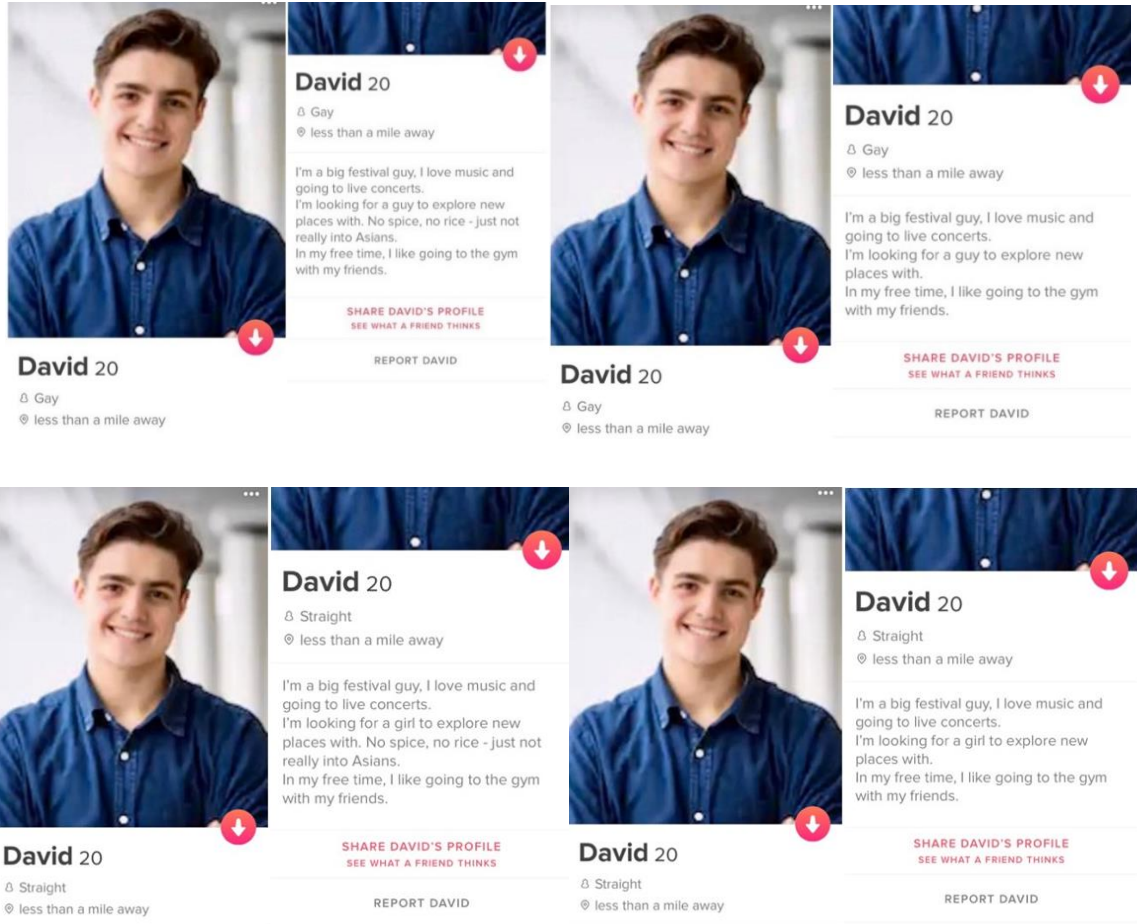
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Appendix A



Appendix B

To what extent does each word describe David?

Strongly Disagree			Neutral			Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

1. Warm
2. Racist
3. Good-natured
4. Competent
5. Confident
6. Principled
7. Competitive
8. Nice
9. Friendly
10. Trustworthy
11. Biased
12. Sincere
13. Close-minded
14. Caring
15. Ignorant
16. Fair
17. Prejudiced
18. Independent
19. Just
20. Intelligent

Appendix C

How true are the following statements?

Not True			Somewhat True			Definitely True
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

1. I think David is a likeable person.
2. I think that David is well adjusted.
3. I would highly recommend David for a responsible job.
4. I am interested in becoming friends with David.
5. In my opinion, David is an exceptionally mature person.
6. I have great confidence in David’s good judgment.
7. David would help you if you needed it.
8. Most people would react very favorably to David after a brief interaction.
9. I think that David and I are quite similar to each other.
10. I would vote for David in a class election.
11. I think that David is one of those people who wins respect easily.
12. I feel that David is an extremely intelligent person.
13. David is the sort of person whom I myself would like to be.
14. It seems to me that it is very easy for David to gain admiration.
15. David would be a good friend.

Acceptability of Prejudice

Not True			Somewhat True			Definitely True
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

1. Including a preference (height, body type, hair/eye color) on a dating profile is offensive.
2. I would date someone who put my race as a preference on their profile.
3. People have preferences in who they want to date.
4. People should be able to say whatever they want online.
5. We shouldn’t judge others based on what they say online.
6. People tend to be too P.C. these days.
7. People who exclude others on their dating profiles are prejudiced.
8. Freedom of speech is important.