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Abstract

Internet use provides a vital opportunity for sexual-minority youth to learn about sexual desires and pursue partnerships otherwise publically stigmatized. Researchers, however, have portrayed the Internet as an inherently risky venue for HIV or sexually transmitted infection (STI) transmission among young gay men (YGM). We therefore investigated how YGM use the Internet during adolescence and emerging adulthood. In the course of 34 in-depth, semistructured interviews with a sample of self-identified YGM, 18 to 24 years of age, we inquired about initial experiences of online dating. We found that YGM benefit online through exploration of their sexual identities, while simultaneously encountering and negotiating sources of risk. In examining YGM’s perceptions of risk, we hope to reach a greater understanding of the opportunities for HIV prevention and health promotion among YGM.

Keywords

HIV, LGBT, sexuality, Internet, young men

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Young men who have sex with men (YMSM; ages 13-24) are at high risk for HIV infection (Centers for Disease Control, 2009). Public health researchers have suggested that the Internet may serve as a conduit of HIV risk for MSM, citing various unfavorable health outcomes for men who go online seeking sex and romance (Garofalo, Herrick, Mustanski, & Donenberg, 2007; Horvath, Rosser, & Remafedi, 2008; Ogilvie et al., 2008). Although some researchers have concluded that the Internet itself is an especially risky venue for partner seeking (Bolding, Davis, Hart, Sherr, & Elford, 2005; Kim, Kent, McFarland, & Klausner, 2001; McFarlane, Bull, & Rietmeijer, 2000), others have called for a reexamination of these earlier conclusions regarding HIV or sexually transmitted infection (STI) risk among MSM dating online (Bauermeister, Leslie-Santana, Johns, Pingel, & Eisenberg, 2011; Jenness et al., 2010; Mustanski, Lyons, & Garcia, 2011).

In contrast to the discourse on risk, the benefits of the Internet for YMSM have been largely ignored by the public health community. In a review of 15 years of research on sexuality and the Internet, Döring (2009) found a dearth of studies exploring the potential benefits of the Internet in the context of sexuality, particularly from the perspective of participants. This gap in the research underscores the emphasis on HIV risk that dominates much of the public health discourse on sexuality and necessitates investigation of the potential benefits of online dating as described by YMSM (Bauermeister, Giguere, Carballo-Diéguez, Ventuneac, & Eisenberg, 2010). Furthermore, we know very little about the meanings that YMSM themselves attribute to their online dating experiences. What risks do YMSM perceive as salient in these online contexts? How do they negotiate these risks as they transition from novices to sophisticated users of digital partner-seeking technologies? We must answer these questions in the hopes of reframing and expanding of our understanding of online risk in this population. In this article, we seek to examine YMSM's experience of online dating and consider how, if at all, their online explorations may inform innovative HIV/AIDS prevention perspectives.

As a framework for grasping the meaning of YMSM's experiences of online dating, we chose to employ sexual scripts theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Sexual scripts theory posits that individuals rely on interpersonal scripts in order to facilitate and structure sexual interaction. Actors, whose scripts necessarily change as they enter different phases of the life cycle, both shape and are shaped by these scripts. Given the emphasis on context and change over time, the notion of interpersonal scripts may be especially useful for guiding analysis of the negotiation of sexual identity in online spaces. Specifically, attention to the concept of interpersonal scripts was crucial to

our understanding of these experiences, as it allowed us to situate their narratives developmentally.

Despite a changing cultural context in which same-sex desire is slowly becoming more acceptable (Hammack, Thompson, & Pilecki, 2009), heterosexuality is nevertheless presented as the default identity in most schools and families, the two traditional institutions to which youth turn for emotional and informational support. As a result, sexual-minority youth are required to put forth exceptional effort in learning about their sexuality, in addition to reconciling themselves to the task of assuming a stigmatized identity (Boxer, Cook, & Herdt, 1999). According to Rotheram-Borus and Langabeer (2001),

In a different and more intensive manner than heterosexual youth, gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth must develop skills to judge and anticipate acceptance from peers and adults, seek information on their own regarding lesbian/gay culture, and examine their values, attitudes, and beliefs regarding sexuality and their sexual orientation” (p. 118)

Sexual-minority youth may be especially attracted to the anonymity afforded by the Internet (Chiou, 2007), as it allows them to become aware of, imitate, and refine the interpersonal scripts of others that they perceive as embodying a stigmatized identity (Ross, 2005). Consequently, exploring how YMSM repeatedly constitute and reconstitute their identities through interpersonal scripts will help us to better understand the meaning of their initial online dating experiences, and in turn how they perceive risk in these contexts.

As public awareness of risk has accelerated in recent years given the heightened exposure to media outlets by much of the population, individual responses are ever more informed by one's personal experiences and membership in cultural groups (Tulloch & Lupton, 2003). As Lupton (1999) illustrates in her work unpacking the notion of risk in a postmodern society, the perception and negotiation of risk are inextricably bound up with the management of one's identity. In the context of fear and uncertainty generated by cultural discourses on risk, individuals situate themselves with regard to these risks. Additionally, they are encouraged “from a distance” to manage their exposure to risk by engaging in preventive behaviors (Lupton, 1999). Harking back to our theoretical framework on sexual scripts, these messages are akin to *cultural scenarios*, in which meanings are understood collectively at a cultural level (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). As a cultural institution, public health conveys the message that YMSM's heightened risk online of finding themselves vulnerable to HIV/AIDS is an objective epidemiological fact, rooted in statistical models and disease surveillance systems (Lupton, 1999).

Thus, as YMSM first go online to date, the negotiation of a nonheterosexual identity is layered with meaning in regard to perceived risk. What is not clear, however, is how YMSM may privilege other perceived risks over those risks to their sexual health.

While it is not our intention to debate actual versus perceived risk in this population, we do wish to offer a more nuanced view of risk, in which the meaning of online dating experiences among YMSM is not synonymous with HIV. In the course of 34 in-depth semistructured interviews, we sought to explore the meaning of initial online dating experiences in this population. In exploring the intersection of the processes of negotiating risk and constituting one's identity, we acknowledge the efforts of queer theorists to dispense with the notion that subjects and identities are stable and therefore able to be referenced as such in the larger literature (Green, 2007); however, we bracket these concerns in favor of privileging the lived experiences of our interview participants as they wrestle with what they describe as "learning to be gay." Whereas we have referred to members of our population of focus as YMSM up to this point, as sexual behavior is used as the categorical marker in the HIV risk literature, we now make a conscious shift to using the term *young gay men* or YGM, as all 34 of our participants self-identified as gay.

The YGM who participated in our study were 18 to 24 years of age at the time of the interview. We employed our theoretical framework, which emphasizes the role of sexual scripts in negotiating identity and risk, to analyze the narratives of YGM's initial online dating experiences. We argue that the prevailing public health discourse warning of the HIV risk inherent in partner seeking online among YGM is insufficiently nuanced in that it looks beyond the ways in which these youth experience online dating. It is therefore necessary to expand our view of risk to include an examination of both the beneficial developmental processes of identity formation that may occur in these online contexts, and the perceptions and negotiations of risk as described by YGM themselves.

Method

Sample

A total of 34 self-identified YGM participated in semistructured qualitative interviews seeking to explore their use of the Internet as a dating tool and their sexual behavior. To be eligible for participation, recruits had to be between the ages of 18 and 24 at the time of the study (i.e., born between 1985 and 1991), self-identify as nonheterosexual (i.e., gay,

bisexual, questioning, etc.), and report having used a dating website in the past 3 months. Participants were primarily recruited through advertisements on two social networking sites (i.e., Facebook and Connexion), but additional flyers were posted at various local venues frequented by YGM. Promotional materials provided a synopsis of eligibility criteria, a mention of the \$30 iTunes gift card incentive, and the principal investigator's phone number to call if interested.

Social network advertisements were visible only to men who listed themselves as interested in other men, who fell within the given age range, and who resided in the United States and U.S. territories. The sample included 22 Whites, 4 Blacks, 4 Latinos, 3 Asian or Pacific Islanders, and 2 participants of mixed race/ethnicity. We recruited participants from all regions of the United States and from Puerto Rico. A third of our sample reported being in a relationship at the time of interview, and over three quarters of respondents reported having had sex with someone they met on a dating website in the past 3 months. Three participants reported being HIV positive.

Procedure

This qualitative inquiry was part of a larger study, with both qualitative and quantitative components, which sought to examine how YMSM's pursuit of romantic partners may influence their HIV risk. The study team consisted of the principal investigator (PI), one research associate who specializes in qualitative methods, and three graduate student research assistants. The research associate and two of the research assistants, all of whom are women, were chosen by the PI to interview participants. This choice was deliberate and reflected the PI's prior experience interviewing MSM. As a member of the MSM community, the PI considered the narratives would be descriptively richer if participants described their experiences to a cultural outsider, rather than relaying their experiences to another MSM who could be perceived as sharing similar cultural experiences and meanings.

The interviewers underwent comprehensive preparation in the months prior to data collection with the objective of enhancing interview skills and awareness in regard to conducting sexual health interviews. This preparation included a training session with a mental health professional with extensive experience conducting sexual health interviews with youth. Additionally, each member of the interview team conducted two face-to-face pilot interviews. Our intent was to test the interview protocol for sufficient depth and clarity, as well as our own comfort level with its content and language. For the pilot interviews, we recruited men who matched the selection criteria for

the main study. We recruited pilot participants using a convenience sample and chose to conduct these interviews face-to-face in order to facilitate a feedback discussion afterward as a group. Based on pilot data feedback, we modified and finalized our interview guide. Pilot interviews were not included in the data analyses.

The in-depth interviews were conducted over the phone in a private space designated solely for this purpose. The interviewers began by reading a detailed consent form to each participant, explaining the purpose of the study (i.e., speaking with YGM about how they use the Internet for dating) and their rights as participants. YGM explicitly consented to both the interview process and the audio recording. We used a semistructured interview guide covering topic areas such as relationship expectations, experiences using the Internet for dating, sexual behavior with partners met online, sexual roles with partners met online, and HIV prevention. More specifically, youth provided detailed narratives about the joys and challenges of past and current relationships, the profile features that spark their interest when they seek partners online, the last time they had sex with someone met online, how their anal sex behavior varies according to the partner with whom they are having sex, the pleasure of anal sex, and condom negotiations with partners. Interviews typically lasted 60 to 90 minutes, and participants were compensated for their time with a \$30 iTunes gift card. Study data were protected by a Certificate of Confidentiality. The Institutional Review Board of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, approved all study procedures.

Data Analysis

We transcribed all audio recordings into text. We then created a codebook using the interview guide as a rubric of potential themes. The codebook included themes, definitions, and inclusion and exclusion criteria. To begin, all members of the research team coded a single specified transcript and then met as a group to compare results. This triangulation process ensured the reliability of the codebook as an instrument to be consistently utilized in future coding endeavors. After this initial session, two members of the team coded each remaining transcript independently and met subsequently to resolve any discrepancies between their codes. Throughout the coding process, the research team addressed questions and concerns that arose in regard to individual codes and amended the codebook accordingly. After coding all 34 transcripts, each finalized version was entered into NVivo to allow for systematic extraction and reviewing of codes of interest.

In the course of coding the interviews, the research team was struck by the richness of the narratives elicited as participants spoke about the formative nature of their initial experiences in the online world. We therefore used NVivo to create a subset of the data corpus to analyze these narratives more fully, guided by our theoretical questions regarding processes of identity formation and perceived risk. We used thematic analysis to identify patterns in the data, which were then used to describe and interpret the data set in greater detail. We chose thematic analysis for its flexibility as an analytic tool and its compatibility with a constructionist approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Specific to the question of initial online dating experience, we asked participants to recall the age at which they first began dating online, in order to establish a temporal frame for these behaviors. The mean age of reported first experience is 17, with a range of 12 to 22 years old. It is important to note, however, that all participants provided informed consent as adults (18 and older) at the time of the interview. Participants had been using the Internet to seek out partners for an average of 5 years at the time of the interview.

Results

In the course of our in-depth interviews, participants shared a variety of narratives recounting their initial online experiences exploring and utilizing dating and hookup websites. YGM used the Internet to seek out friendships, sexual partners, and romance. Access to the Internet meant access to dialogues and encounters rarely attainable in participants' face-to-face environments. Participants also found the anonymity afforded by online interactions particularly appealing. These interactions were opportunities to internalize and test out interpersonal scripts safely by removing the dangers of rejection and stigma.

While validation and acceptance of one's sexuality were commonly touted as benefits of going online, YGM also described their disillusionment with what they deemed as an overtly sexual online atmosphere. In addition, these young men contemplated the meaning of both the sexual and romantic relationships that evolved as a result of their nascent efforts. As they transitioned from online identity experimentation to the sexual, in-person consummation of these efforts, YGM expressed anxious uncertainty over their actions. With little sexual experience or confidence, they found that the scripts they had begun to refine in their initial online experiences were often insufficient for negotiating their needs and desires with sexual partners. Over time, however, armed with more experience partner seeking and with sexual and romantic relationships, participants described their online interactions as increasingly

self-determined. Having initially used these interactions to safely explore their sexual identities, participants now reflected these well-worn scripts to more reliably and comfortably fulfill their desires.

In sum, by seeking partnerships online, participants chose to engage in a process both fraught with disappointment and ripe for self-discovery. This process left them more knowledgeable about whom and what they were seeking online and, consequently, better positioned to pursue their romantic and sexual desires.

The Meaning of Initial Online Dating Experiences

When we began exploring the narratives surrounding participants' initial online dating experiences, we quickly realized that the ways in which participants conceptualized the meaning of "dating online" did not point to a single defined event, but rather to a set of behaviors. In recalling their first instances of use, some participants granted that long before they met anyone in person, they had browsed various websites (e.g., Adam4Adam, Gay.com, Manhunt, and DList.com, to name a few), exploring the online scene by watching the conversations that transpired in the chat rooms (i.e., lurking). Others, however, went online initially with the express intention of meeting up with men from nearby areas. In proceeding in this article, therefore, we use the term *initial online dating experiences* to refer to the collection of behaviors and intentions, both sexual and romantic, that our participants engaged in when first choosing to interact with other men on the Internet.

Learning New Scripts

Certain elements particular to the online realm made it an appealing venue to search for romantic and sexual partners as YGM embarked on their initial online dating experiences. Participants told of the allure of discovering an atmosphere characterized by facility, freedom, safety, and control. Ryan (23, White, in a relationship) summarized this experience, stating,

It [the Internet] basically created a safe way to explore that world without having to expose myself. I had a single room with an Internet connection. And within a few well-placed Google searches, I suddenly had access to other people that I can chat with anonymously, and sort of articulate and express ideas and desires that I would never be able to do in a social setting.

The participants described the facility with which they were able to connect with or at least observe same-sex desiring men online. Using search engines to find the sites, and subsequently “plugging in the search criteria,” Matthew (22, White, in a relationship) spoke excitedly of being able to “come up with four or five gay boys your own age in a 60 mile radius.” For Tim (22, White, single), the Internet eliminated the cumbersome process of verifying others’ sexual orientation:

It’s so much easier to meet gay people online, like, like-minded guys, because in the real world, a lot of times, I have to be pretty closeted, and I feel like the ratio of gay to straight . . . is definitely like maybe 1 to 9 or 1 to 10. There’s extremely small numbers. And so, that definitely provides an outlet for everybody to get together and, you know, know that they’re gay and know that you’re gay, and then, you know, see if you can hit it off. . . . So, I felt like it was definitely a lot easier way of meeting other guys.

YGM repeatedly made mention of the high level of anonymity afforded by online encounters. When asked what he liked about the first online dating sites he visited, Aiden (23, White, in a relationship) replied,

Mostly that you can remain anonymous, almost entirely. Decide, you know, decide what you wanted to put on there, like stats and what you look like and stuff like that. You didn’t have to put anything else on there. You could leave it entirely blank.

Such anonymity created an atmosphere of safety and control, as young men were able to explore at a level that felt comfortable without having to divulge too much personal information.

Control over the type and amount of information that participants posted online meant that they could construct alternate identities, exploring different facets of themselves and the individuals they wished to be. With participants dating online for the first time at a mean age of 17, many of them did not meet the age requirement of some dating sites. Rather than age acting as a barrier, young men reveled in the freedom that accompanied lying about one’s age. “I just liked the fact that I could see people, they could see me. And I could talk to them without having—and I could tell them whatever I wanted without having to be really 18” (Sebastian, 18, White, single). Ryan (23, White, in a relationship) exerted a higher level of control in order to feel safe, portraying himself as a different person entirely.

I could enter into a conversation and either say as much of myself as I wanted or construct elaborate . . . false information. I used a pseudonym for the longest time. And—both out of security and not wanting to, you know, somebody asks a name and I don't, don't want to reveal it. But also just, again, sort of creating a persona that it was safe to explain with them.

At a period in their lives in which many of our participants were scrutinizing their own sexual feelings and desires, and often confronting a society that was less than accepting of them, freedom of expression in a safe, controlled environment was both refreshing and reassuring. “[Online dating] was just the novelty of being able to talk to guys without having to put too much information out there. I think it was just like a good way to transition into dating—and into being gay, really” (Brandon, 23, White, in a relationship).

Once they had begun dating online, YGM asserted that they benefited considerably from the connections made through websites and chat rooms. For many of them, these virtual networks were their first exposure to other men with same-sex desires. This introduction was an affirmation that their feelings and attractions were not singular, but rather were shared by a multitude of people. Derek (21, White, single) expressed this sentiment simply, stating, “It [going online] was just, like, fun and easy, and the people on there, there's a lot of people there that were like me.” Christopher (19, White, single) conveyed a sense of relief:

I was feeling lonely. Pretty sure. And a lot of curiosity. I mean, not many gay guys around and there's MySpace and you can search people and, “Oh look, there are more gay people around than just me.” So that was the big thing.

Peter (24, White, single) echoed Christopher, saying, “It made me feel a little less alone just knowing that these people are out there.” The chance to meet others with whom they could identify was very powerful in overcoming the feelings of disconnectedness and social isolation that led many young men to seek out online encounters in the first place. Furthermore, as Ethan's (24, White, single) comments demonstrate, a critical element of these experiences was the newfound courage that arose in online interactions:

I felt like I wasn't alone. I felt I could actually talk to people. I mean, even if I couldn't get the guts to go out and talk to people, I felt like I had friends who understood, and I'd meet people not from Idaho in some of the chat rooms and just feel not alone.

In taking the next step and initiating communication, participants came to recognize that attention from other men was a source of validation and acceptance. For Winston (21, African American, single), the confidence boost was palpable:

Well, going to these hookup sites, I am showcasing myself, my body to all these other men that are out there, and they're like, "Oh, man, you're so hot. You're so attractive. I can't—I want to lay with you. I want to be with you." And then you actually get there, and they meet you in person, it's like, "Oh God, Winston, you're this awesome guy. . . . I would love to, you know, date you. You're just, you're just my type. . . ." So, hearing all of that was an addictive drug in and of itself. It's, you know, "I'm feeling a little low right now. What can I do to pick myself up? OK. Let me go online and, you know, hear all these men that, you know, want to have sex with me. I'm feeling pretty, I'm feeling much better about myself now."

While many youth portrayed their initial online dating experiences as generally affirming, in that they were discovering virtual spaces that not only accepted but celebrated their sexual desires and identities, they also made vivid remarks regarding the drawbacks of these experiences.

Managing Uncertainty

Participants candidly expressed their disillusionment with the culture of casual sex that they found online. Beyond their disappointment at the prospect of finding men solely interested in sex, quashing any relationship potential, these young men felt some level of shock and awkwardness amidst the "in-your-face" sexual climate. Having just emerged from a long-term relationship, Caleb (22, White, single) felt especially unnerved by the emotional disconnect he experienced when first going online to date:

I did dislike it because I found that everyone on the site was just looking for sex. And the relationship that I had just gotten out of was like a four-year relationship. So, I started off very young. . . . So, the only thing I knew about, I guess, about being—I don't want to say about being gay, but the only thing I knew was relationships. I didn't know what hookups were quite yet. Like, I didn't know that people just hooked up. I always thought that you went on dates and you met people and you dated people. So, I wasn't aware of that. So, I didn't like that people were just messaging me for sex. And, you know, I was

trying to have conversations with them and they would ask me, you know, “How big are you? You know, how big is your penis? What’s your position? Do you want to come over?” I was like, “I don’t even know you.”

Caleb’s negative sentiments toward being approached explicitly for sex provide an informative contrast to those of Winston in the previous section, who relished the sexual attention he received from men online, having experienced nothing comparable in his offline world. These reactions demonstrate YGM’s varied expectations for online encounters. Furthermore, YGM’s experiences with sex and relationships *prior* to going online for the first time provide a context for their vulnerability, or susceptibility to emotional or sexual risk, once face-to-face with a partner.

The amount of time between when YGM first began exploring online and the point at which they first met up with another man, for either sexual or romantic purposes, was highly variable across participants. Once participants began meeting up with men that they had met online, however, the opportunities for sexual experiences multiplied. Several participants complained about being contacted by “older men” on various dating sites (i.e., for seeking romantic relationships) and hookup sites (i.e., for seeking sexual relationships). As an adolescent longing for what seems “normal” (i.e., having boyfriends and girlfriends), the eagerness to forge emotional bonds was at times overwhelming, resulting in unbalanced power dynamics with individuals met online.

Some of the people really gave me the creeps, I guess . . . having to deal with what some old people would say to you. . . . Well, the advances they make towards you. And I was 12, and I was saying I was 18, basically, on those sites . . . and then some people would say . . . “Do you want to fuck or do you want to do this or do that?” or “I’ll come over to your house. Let’s do this.” Whatever. . . . And then I would meet up with the person to go to a movie. And then they’d end up trying to make an advance with me, and I wouldn’t feel comfortable, but I would feel like I had to, and a lot of times, just, I just didn’t feel confident in my own self that I could handle it. . . . I wanted to, I wanted to be with them, I wanted to talk to them, I wanted to know them so much that I would do what I could to do that, you know. (Emerson, 19, White, single)

For other youth, becoming connected with the virtual world meant confronting uncertainties about sex and the types of relationships being sought.

Describing his first romantic relationship, which had been established through online contact, Michael (20, White, single) conceded,

Really, it was a learning experience more than anything. Mostly that some guys will say anything to have sex with you. . . . In the beginning, I think I was more interested in the friends than he was. And I think it was kind of like, well, he was a little pushy about it, I guess. . . . And so I kind of just gave in and, you know what, said, "I've never done it before, but what's the worst that could happen?" . . . And then [pause] then things changed because we had sex very early. Earlier than I really wanted to.

In a similar experience with his first online partner, Christopher (19, White, single) felt burdened by the sexual turn of the relationship:

We were going out, like, a week. It happened very fast. And when we met up, we hooked up, which by that, I mean, he gave me oral sex. Then I felt very guilty. And I felt like a whore. So, I called my friend and I told her that. And she said, "Oh, I'm sure it wouldn't happen again." And when it did happen again, I still felt bad. I couldn't get over the guilt of that.

Rather than experiencing a rapidly changing context of what they had perceived to be a romantic relationship, other participants' concern was the emphasis on sex as the *sole* objective, negating any chance of friendship or attachment. Ethan (24, White, single) recalled the typical course of events:

You know, it's funny, when I was 16, I ended up having a lot of sex, but that's not what I wanted. I wanted to make friends. I wanted to make a connection, but I had a lot of sex because apparently, for some reason, I was super hot at 16. I didn't think so. And I just thought it was a bit shallow. I thought, you know, it's like, "I'm here [online] to meet people. You know, we're gay, we should be trying to make friends," but everybody here is like, "Who am I going to fuck next?" And I'm like, "Come on. You know what I mean. Doesn't anyone want a friend?" And they're like, "Sure, we can hang out. We can be friends." And almost every time that would happen, they'd end up wanting to have sex. And at the age of 16, I was like, "Well, I mean, if that's, you know, if that's what you want, we can do that, too."

This representation of the online scene encountered by YGM underscores a particularly salient theme that emerged in the course of the narratives surrounding initial online dating experiences. In their urgent desire to “make connections,” YGM found themselves in a position of vulnerability. Their sexual inexperience and lack of self-confidence led them to pursue relationships in which their own needs and desires (for friendship and romance, in addition to sex) often went unmet. Hank (24, White/Native American, single) illustrated the process by which he became resigned to the notion that the Internet was a vehicle for sex, rather than the relationship for which he was yearning:

Well, I was in high school. I was in my senior year, and I was sort of just—I wouldn't say becoming aware that I was gay, but willing to sort of accept it and move on it. And I was trying—I was a virgin at the time, and I was trying to sort of have new experiences, I guess. Not necessarily lose my virginity, but I was always jealous because here were, you know, all these other kids who had, you know, boyfriends or girlfriends in school and I thought, you know, “Why can't I?” And so, initially, I had sought this [online dating] out in hopes of finding someone, ultimately, all that really found me was someone who wanted to have sex. . . . Oh, I would meet people and they would be very, very forward about having sex. . . . When I was 17, I was a virgin and I wasn't sure that was something I wanted to do. Ultimately, I did cave in and do it. And I ended up enjoying myself. And I guess I, at that point, yeah, I guess at that point, I sort of caved in to the whole idea that's what these sites were about.

Although Hank “ended up enjoying” his first sexual experiences, he reiterated throughout his interview his feelings of being “jaded” about online dating and “disappointed” at never having been able to find a romantic partner by means of his virtual networks.

In addition to “caving in” to sex before being entirely comfortable, the situational pressures that participants experienced sometimes resulted in a lack of condom negotiation. Participants spoke of engaging in early sexual exploration with partners met online and “going with the flow” (i.e., having unprotected anal intercourse), attributing these circumstances to their youth, inexperience, and desire for intimacy. Jacob (24, White, single) recounted first becoming intimate with a partner met online, whom he wanted to be what he termed his “high school sweetheart.”

We got together, and I was still learning the aspects of being gay and all of that. And, you know, growing up, I never really had the “this is what you do during sex” conversation. You know, that you had to wrap it up, that kind of thing. And it just kind of, it, you know, we were hanging out in, you know, progressed into a hookup and it was like, “Oh, OK, so this is happening (i.e., unprotected sex).” And it was just kind of, you know, it was real hot and heavy, and it just kind of ended up happening.

James (22, White, single) alluded to his sexual inexperience as contributing to his lack of assertiveness about condom use with an older partner met online. Describing an unprotected sexual encounter, he said of his partner,

He was aggressive about it, but not in a bad or forceful way. I just, [pause] he knew what he wanted. I knew what I wanted, I guess. And I mean, he was really good at it. He was a little older than I was, and I didn't feel like I had a whole lot of sex at that point.

Asked if he disliked anything about this sexual experience, James responded, “Well, yeah, because obviously, he didn't put on a condom. And I should have definitely said something more about it.” Rather than inexperience, Ethan (24, White, single) characterized his laidback attitude toward condom negotiation with an online partner as a product of his youth. “I was much younger and much more willing to just go with the flow. And the question never came up to use condoms, so we didn't.”

Overall, participants acknowledged that their first encounters with men met online made them more susceptible to sexual and emotional risks, as a result of their youth and inexperience. Going online to search for romantic and sexual partners meant entering an adult realm in which YGM found themselves on unequal footing compared to more seasoned members of the online community. Their elevated status as desired youth, tempered by awareness of their inexperience, left them both exhilarated and frightened. Yet it also provided them with skills and knowledge, which in part comprised their interpersonal scripts, to better navigate sexual and romantic relationships in the future.

Changes in Online Dating Behavior

When asked to dwell on their initial online dating experiences, participants were apt to offer additional reflections on how their own online behaviors

had changed over time. YGM spoke of feeling less afraid of meeting men in person and giving out personal information, while simultaneously being more selective about the nature of their virtual activities and personal connections. Using their prior Internet encounters as a template for future expectations, participants characterized their current consumption of online dating services as more direct and opportunistic. In contrast to the initial act of “looking around”—gaining their bearing by ostensibly piecing together their own identities and those of the communities they encountered online—participants’ virtual activities assumed a determined stance, with a previously absent clarity regarding the possibilities and limitations of the online landscape.

YGM spoke of their ability, acquired through experience, to decide more quickly whether an online conversation or relationship was worth further pursuit. Sean (22, White, single) admitted,

I guess just becoming more picky. Well, not picky, but like, sounds bad, but it’s like if I know that me and this person are going to have nothing in common, then I won’t waste my time talking to them on the site.

Echoing Sean’s increasing discernment, Derek (21, White, single) stated,

I guess I would say the big thing is I’m more opportunistic about it [online dating]. And a lot better at even like even messaging people first. Or, you know, ignoring people that I don’t want to talk to. And, like, either setting things up or shutting things down really quickly, as opposed to just sort of messaging into infinity, and then nothing ever produces itself.

In response to their earlier experiences of isolation and uncertainty, which initially drove them to engage in online exploration, some participants articulated a sense of freedom in no longer relying on the Internet for personal validation and acceptance of their sexuality. Matthew (22, White, in a relationship) justified this change, suggesting,

I think before I was using it just as a way to identify gay people. And now I live in Boston, and I don’t—I know gay people. The same things aren’t motivating me. So, I use the Internet to find, like, people with similar interests or, like, people to go out with and party.

James (22, White, single) underwent a similar transition regarding his use of online dating.

Now that I'm in college and I'm out and I've accepted a lot of things about my sexuality and who I am, I don't feel like I need the Internet as much. Because it was the only outlet I had for that. And now, you know, I can go to a bar. Or I usually just know somebody who knows somebody kind of thing.

Another emerging theme regarding changes in online dating was an increased feeling of security at both the prospect of sharing personal information on the Internet and meeting men in person. Derek (21, White, single) summed up his new attitude: "I guess I'm more adventurous and more, I don't know, a little less conservative about the way I use it [the Internet]." Brandon (23, White, in a relationship) elaborated on the changing view of posting information due to technological advances and the growing acceptability of online partner seeking.

And I think at that point, I feel like Internet dating hadn't really hit yet. So, a lot of people didn't have a lot of information up. Not many people had pictures up. And, like, being able to see what somebody looked like was more of a big deal. . . . Whereas now, you have a profile and you have your whole life, like on a freaking page. . . . But, you know, back then, like you had to have a picture of yourself and then you'd have trade. And, you know, sometimes it wouldn't work or they wouldn't—you'd send them a picture and then they wouldn't send you one back. And, you know. So, I think it was a lot sketchier.

Peter (24, White, single) described his reservations about meeting men face-to-face as shifting over time:

I think I started to kind of be able to more immediately dissect how people present themselves online and, you know, I guess, like, when I was a kid, I was more afraid of, like, meeting someone who turned out to be, like, a very old pervert who'd like kill me and murder me or whatever, and I'm less afraid of that now. . . . I guess my biggest fear went from being killed into being disappointed. And I was never killed but I'm often disappointed.

YGM's initial dating experiences online helped them come away more equipped to navigate the emotional risks that present themselves online. Emerson (19, White, single) neatly summarized how his dating habits have changed:

I still use Internet dating, but I use it in a different context. I use it, I guess I look at it with a different view than I ever did before. And I use it in a way that's going to benefit me. That's going to let me feel good myself and not use it for the reasons that I did before. You know? Looking for a relationship. I may look for a casual hookup, but I know that I can handle. I know what I want and I'm not going to put myself in a situation where it's wanting that. . . . If I feel like I'm doing this because I just want that love feeling, I just, I have to stop, and I stop myself because it's just, that's not contributing toward a healthy lifestyle, that's for sure.

Rather than continuing to use dating and hookup sites as an exploratory tool that in the past left him open to unwanted scenarios, Emerson acknowledged his present concern with maintaining "a healthy lifestyle," with online dating functioning as a means to achieve this goal.

YGM's initial online dating experiences can be characterized by a need for validation and personal connection, often accompanied by a desire to please or conform. Through time and experience, however, participants were empowered to draw their boundaries and exert more control over the nature of their personal encounters, be they romantic or sexual. As Ethan (24, White, single) declared,

It's like I'm not afraid of the fact that everybody's looking for sex online anymore. I see that, and I go, "Eh, that hasn't changed in forever." And what was it? I think I feel a little bit more knowledgeable about it because I'm like, you know, I've seen so many profiles now and I've kind of been up and out and around, and I'm like, it doesn't affect me the way it used to. And I'm a lot more comfortable telling people that I'm not really looking for sex. Because I used to be like, "Well, if that's what it takes to get attention, then, you know, that's what I'll do."

Our participants' narratives bear witness to one of the conundrums of adolescence and emerging adulthood. Lacking knowledge and experience, youth seeking validation of and information about perceived aspects of their

identity may be less able to negotiate their sexual and emotional needs. One might argue that YGM experience this more so in that they may not receive the same level of support and guidance from others when first exploring sex and sexuality as a result of continued stigma surrounding same-sex desire. Yet they gain access to important interpersonal scripts, as well as emotional benefits, by engaging in online exploration, which ultimately leaves them better equipped to navigate their social worlds with agency.

Discussion

We interviewed YGM about their initial online dating experiences, ranging from timid exploration to meeting potential partners face-to-face. Through our participants' narratives, it became clear that the Internet is a space in which YGM explore their sexual identities and negotiate risk vis-à-vis learned interpersonal scripts. When these online interactions result in face-to-face opportunities for romantic and/or sexual partnerships, the sense of security that YGM had gained online often faltered. YGM felt vulnerable to emotional risks and conflicted about the implications of engaging in sexual acts. With increased experience, however, participants resolved some of these uncertainties and perceived the Internet as a realm of opportunity when seeking romantic and sexual relationships. Consequently, researchers and practitioners must recognize that, while going online may encompass some amount of HIV risk for YGM, it also provides them with the opportunity to partake in important developmental processes. Additionally, participants emphasized their vulnerability to emotional risks of online dating—feelings of guilt, shame, longing, and fear—over any perceived risk of contracting HIV. Reframing the public health discourse on risk on the Internet to be more inclusive of these processes, as experienced by young men, is therefore crucial to HIV prevention efforts (Wolfeiler, Hecht, Raymond, Kennedy, & MacFarland, 2011).

Constituting Identities Through Interpersonal Scripts

The young men who participated in our study bear out the notion that the processes of identity formation were of particular importance in their lives, as they were often unable to explore these identities in typical adolescent social settings. Consequently, the online spaces that participants entered were akin to a newly discovered territory, distinct from anything they had previously experienced, in which they confronted the task of exploring new ways of being and doing (Ross, 2005). Online access offered YGM an

opportunity to explore their sexuality, unfettered by the stigma and constraints imposed by public self-identification. Turning to the online world as questions arose regarding their desires and attractions, YGM developed profiles for others to view, often portraying themselves in ways that they perceived as desirable (e.g., older). Consistent with prior studies (Hillier & Harrison, 2007), these findings underscore the use of the Internet as a place where youth are able to “practice” their identities, particularly if they can experiment with their identity anonymously (Valkenburg, 2005).

Participants offered a variety of reasons for going online. Yet whether the reason given was the freedom encountered via the cloak of anonymity or the experience of control wrought by illuminating particular aspects of themselves and obscuring others, the implication is the same: These young men were engaged in a process of constructing and refining their sexual identities through the online pursuit of their same-sex desires. In conceptualizing participants’ online engagement, an entire spectrum of exploratory experiences came to the fore, in which YGM were actively learning about their own desires as well as online community norms. As they first entered this environment, many of our participants were grappling with the implications of assuming a nonheterosexual identity, a process that may be distinguished from that of recognizing and enacting same-sex attraction (Blum, 1998; Boxer et al., 1999). As we have emphasized previously, interpersonal scripts served as the mechanism by which YGM were engaging in these processes of identity formation. In finding a safe place to explore, participants took note of the speech, behavior, attitudes, and expressions of others online. They internalized their observations of these online spaces and reflected back slightly altered scripts, which incorporated these normative scripts and their own attitudes and values.

When implementing their scripts online, participants described their exploratory experiences as generally safe and affirming. Yet many also raised concerns about the “in-your-face” sexual climate, or comments from “older men,” which they encountered even on sites purporting to be about friendship or romantic relationships. As YGM contemplated the meaning of this environment, as well as that of beginning to engage sexually with other men, they expressed feelings of guilt, confusion, and anxiety. The scripts that had been so readily available when chatting online suddenly seemed out of reach or incompatible to an in-person encounter; however, participants reconciled these scripts and transitioned from a period of emotional vulnerability into feeling greater self-acceptance and enjoyment of sexual pleasure. Reflecting on these transitions, YGM described themselves as becoming more “adventurous” in some areas and more “conservative” in others. Ultimately, the

participants were confident in their use of interpersonal scripts to communicate their desires online and facilitate in-person meet-ups.

Reframing Risk on the Internet

Throughout YGM's narratives regarding their initial online dating experiences and how they compare to their present efforts, participants brought up various stories related to issues of risk, fear, and safety. Consistent with prior findings (Bauermeister et al., 2010), concern for physical safety was salient in young men's first experiences meeting men in person after communicating online. Additionally, participants detailed the numerous emotional risks involved in the entire enterprise. Many had already experienced isolation and rejection in their daily lives and were therefore wary of encountering it online. Their first sexual encounters were fraught with missteps, embarrassments, and uncomfortable situations. YGM negotiated these risks in part by expressing their discomfort and in part by "going with the flow" and hoping things worked out.

It is interesting to note that throughout these narratives on online dating, very little came up about HIV risk as a concern. When recounting occurrences of unprotected sex, YGM were quick to chastise themselves for having "gone along with it," yet these instances were not central to the narratives. These results coincide with prior findings regarding MSM's condom use decisional balance (Bauermeister, Carballo-Diéguez, Ventuneac, & Dolezal, 2009), that is, that YGM's desire for sexual and romantic relationships may outweigh their concerns about HIV risk. This interpretation has important implications for both our understanding of YGM's HIV risk perceptions and prevention efforts focused on this population.

Given the complex portrait of Internet risk, in terms of both the available research and our own findings, it is important that we establish a more nuanced vision of the role of the Internet in the lives of YGM. If risk "consists of events and mechanisms that diminish the likelihood of successful development" Blum, 1998, pg.370), then online experiences cannot solely be labeled as risky, as they simultaneously promote development and enable personal growth among YGM through the processes of identity exploration and social connection. While it is important to recognize the potential for risk, and do all that is necessary to give YGM the tools to safely navigate their online experiences, we cannot ignore the myriad benefits that YGM are experiencing online, especially at a time when sexual-minority youth are still bullied at school and/or shunned by their families (Saewyc, 2011). Enormous hurdles to equality remain in place, and stigma is a daily reality for many

youth. Sexual-minority youth deserve the same opportunities for growth that their heterosexual peers enjoy through identity exploration and the establishment of social connections. By privileging risk and ignoring the function of the Internet as a significant resource for YGM, we may be neglecting pressing opportunities for HIV prevention.

In devising effective and innovative HIV prevention strategies, we must balance the potential for vulnerability that YGM face in their initial online experiences with the promotive effects of online interaction, in which their ability to overcome adversities and successfully negotiate in their own self-interest is strengthened. The YGM in our study turned to online spaces in the face of both isolation and curiosity. Recognizing this, we need to strengthen opportunities for YGM to make meaningful connections and gain a sense of community involvement online. The lack of appropriate spaces meant that some YGM entered sites nominally reserved for those over eighteen. It is therefore imperative that online spaces be created that address the needs of YGM. At present, however, few existing sites cater to same-sex attracted or questioning youth in their pre- or early adolescent years. We encourage researchers and activists to work with partner-seeking websites and consider how the development of safe online spaces may provide opportunities for youth to socialize and develop safer sex scripts when they choose to become sexually involved (Wolfeiler et al., 2011).

Conclusion

It is necessary to systematically reevaluate the factors that contribute to risk and well-being among sexual-minority youth. The mechanisms of online risk among YGM are poorly understood (Garofalo et al., 2007), and we must also discover the ways in which Internet technologies may further contribute to youth well-being. New means of virtual communication and expression are springing up as fast as intervention and prevention campaigns are developed (Winchester, Abel, & Bauermeister, 2012). No one recognizes this more acutely than youth themselves, making it imperative that they be an integral part of the process. The benefit is twofold when youth participate in developing prevention strategies: They are empowered in their own decision-making processes while simultaneously ensuring that such strategies are relevant to the focus population.

Young MSM go online for a variety of reasons, not least of which is the fact that the Internet is the medium through which youth today forge relationships and find information. The YGM in our study went online seeking connection. Some wanted relationships, others hookups, and many went to learn

more about what it means to be attracted to other men. While they often found validation and acceptance of their desires, they also faced uncertainty and emotional risk. This search for physical and emotional connection left them feeling vulnerable at times, yet they emerged with a sense of being more in control of their romantic and sexual lives. In reframing perceptions of risk among YGM and privileging benefits of online interaction alongside risk, we hope to reach a greater understanding of the opportunities for HIV prevention and the promotion of well-being among YGM.

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