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What is This?

Online Dating and Mating: The Use of the Internet to Meet Sexual Partners

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Australia has experienced a large increase in Internet usage, and online dating is used for seeking romantic and sexual partners. Using a qualitative approach, 15 people who use online dating took part in in-depth, online chat interviews. Nearly all participants used multiple dating sites to seek partners and making use of email, chat and webcam to engage with, assess, validate and qualify their potential sexual partners. They would "filter" the identity of other online daters before taking further actions. They used an array of filters and filtering processes to determine when and how they might progress to face-to-face meetings with these other online daters, and if and how there might be sexual outcomes from these meetings. Participants filtered using the text, photographs, chat, and webcam opportunities available online, and followed progressive personalized steps in communication and engagement in the lead-up to meeting other online daters in person.

Keywords: *Internet; interviews; qualitative methods, general; research, online; sexuality; relationships*

Information technology has been used to assist with finding and matching new partners since the 1960s, when the first attempts were made to match individuals from data they provided from completing questionnaires (Hardey, 2002). The Internet has become a common tool used to seek friends and romantic and sexual partners (Baker, 2005; Cooper, Mansson, Daneback, Tikkanen, & Ross, 2003; Daneback, Mansson, & Ross, 2007; Davis, Hart, Bolding, Sherr, & Elford, 2006a, 2006b; Hardey, 2004; Whitty & Carr, 2006). A large amount of the early literature concentrated on presenting the use of the Internet among gay men and men who have sex with men (MSM; Bolding, Davis, Sherr, Hart, & Elford, 2004, 2005; Bull, McFarlane, Lloyd, & Rietmeijer, 2004; Davis et al., 2006a, b; McFarlane, Bull, & Rietmeijer, 2000; Ross, 2005; Ross, Rosser, & Stanton, 2004; Weatherburn, Hickson, & Reid, 2003). A study of men who use gay chat rooms carried out by Tikkanen and Ross (2000) showed that it was a fairly common experience for these men to meet offline sex partners through their use of the chat rooms.

There has been some research, however, concerning the use of the Internet to meet sexual partners outside the domain of gay men and MSM. A large U.S. study (Cooper et al., 2002) found 9.8% of the people using the Internet for online sexual activities were using it to find people to date, and 9.8% were using it to facilitate offline sexual activities. In a large Swedish study of online sexual activities (Cooper et al., 2003, p. 282), it was found "that both men and women use the Internet to the same degree in looking for love contacts, flirting, reading erotica, chatting with people with the same interest, and buying sex products." There were gender differences in the online sexual activity most often undertaken; for men the most common activity was viewing erotica and for women it was staying in contact with an existing sex or love partner (Cooper et al., 2003). Daneback (2006) interviewed 26 people and found that many of the participants had offline meetings for sexual or romantic purposes with people whom they had met online. An online questionnaire conducted in Sweden in 2002 (Daneback et al., 2007) revealed that 45% of women and 55% of men used the Internet for sexual purposes, and of these, 40% of the women and 35% of the men reported they had met some offline sex partners online. Baker (2005) and Whitty and Carr (2006) examined romance and commitment among online users. In her work, Baker (2005) followed online users' relationships from early attraction to meeting offline, and examined intimate outcomes. Whitty and Carr (2006) suggest that online dating offers users a potentially more playful space than the offline world, but it can be problematic

when individuals venture too far into the world of fantasy in Internet dating. Recently, Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs (2006) conducted a qualitative study, interviewing 36 people about how they managed their self presentation in online dating to find romantic partners.

Most of the research to date has been undertaken in Europe and the U.S., although there has been some research carried out in Australia (Barraket & Henry-Waring, 2004; Smaill, 2004). It is difficult to determine the actual number of Australians using online dating, as research results vary, but all research indicates increasing numbers of people are using the Internet as a method for seeking partners. The results of a ninemsn survey published in February 2004 showed that 22.5% of the 13,000 respondents thought online dating was a good method for meeting potential partners; 16.5% had actually used online dating to make first contact with a potential partner; and 5.8% had met their current or most recent partner this way (ninemsn, 2004). An Australian telephone survey found that 78% of Australian adults had used the Internet and that 13% of them had used the Internet to form social relationships online (Hardie & Buzwell, 2006). Of the 13% who used the Internet to form social relationships, 79% reported that they used the Internet to make new friends, and the remaining 21% reported using the Internet to form online romantic relationships (Hardie & Buzwell, 2006).

In one year, an Australian commercial dating site, RSVP, saw a 95% increase in membership (Dudley, 2004). Memberships on RSVP have now exceeded 1,120,000 (RSVP, 2007). We tracked the membership numbers of the Web sites referred to in this article as Adult Play and Date (APD) and FindADate (FAD) [fictitious names]. Over a period of 115 weeks, there were an average of 6,806 new profiles on APD each week; and on FAD there were an average of 4,288 new profiles each week over a period of 61 weeks.

As the use of the Internet for meeting romantic and sexual partners has dramatically increased in Australia, it is important that more research regarding how people in general attempt to find sexual partners on the Internet needs to be carried out so that we might have a better understanding of sexual behaviors among Australian online daters. In this article, we attempt to address this gap in the literature. We explore the ways a group of people in Australia use online dating, how filtering and identity were important aspects of participants' experiences of online dating, and how they managed the processes that led to sexual encounters. The article is based on our research exploring wider issues associated with online dating and sex, with issues of risk and online dating having been presented elsewhere (Couch & Liamputtong, 2007).

Filtering and Identity: Theoretical Framework

We situate this article within the framework of "filtering" theorized by Davis and colleagues (2006a). According to Davis et al. (2006a, p. 459), "the use of the Internet can be addressed in terms of engagement with self-construction, trust and security." This is referred to as "filtering" (Davis et al., 2006a, p. 464; see also Hardey, 2004). It is a way, in Goffman's terms (1983), for "quiet sorting" of potential sexual partners. Filtering, as Davis et al. suggest (2006a, p. 464), "allows systematic arrangement of sexual encounters, revealing the production of sexual culture in the action of users"; text and image are used to portray sexual identity and are central to the filtering process. It also provides "some assumptions about their prospective partners and the sexual action that might take place" (p. 465). Hardey (2004) also suggests that online dating can be protective, as it can be used to protect "risks to self-identity." The flirting that might precede meeting in person can assist in checking preferences to avoid surprises and disappointment with offline meetings (Whitty, 2004; Daneback, 2006). Thus, online dating might be seen as "a kind of 'hyper' sorting of interactional life" (Davis et al., 2006a, p. 465). In a sense, filtering "implies self-construction," as a sexual "profile has to be carefully assembled to reflect e-dating desires" (Davis et al., 2006a, p. 465). Ellison et al. (2006, p. 430) suggest that online daters engaged in "strategies designed to circumvent the constraints of the online dating environment while exploiting its capacities," as they try to optimize their self-presentation through the greater control that the Internet and online dating could offer. The creation and editing of personal profiles, how online daters balance accuracy with self-promotions and desirability, and how they establish their credibility online are important components of self-presentation.

Online dating negotiates identity. The filtering of identity is, therefore, a process of "interpretation and self-construction" (Davis et al., 2006a, p. 466; Hardey, 2004). As Davis and colleagues suggest in their study (2006a, p. 466; 2006b), identity, including appearance, personality, sexual tastes and preferences, and risk management constitutes part of the interpretation of

online profiles, and this acts as the basis for filtering. Online daters desire to learn more about the appearance and intentions of other online daters, so they will not be too disappointed when meeting offline. As such, the "true" identity of the other is important to online daters (see Whitty, 2007). It is suggested that online daters endeavor to provide accurate online self-presentation (Ellison et al., 2006; Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006), as the intended outcome of online dating interaction is to meet in person.

Identity is comprised of the online users and their potential daters (Hardey, 2004; Davis et al., 2006a). In Davis et al.'s (2006a) study with gay men in London, the men attempt to present themselves well to attract their online daters. Whitty (2007) contends that online daters attempt to be creative with the presentations of self on online dating sites, although for some, this can be restrictive. We suggest in this article that filtering and the presentation of self to attract a sexual partner is an essential part in online dating behavior.

Methodology

In this article, we focus on the way our participants used the Internet to meet potential sexual partners. The data collection method used was qualitative and ethnographic, with online in-depth interviews conducted via instant messaging. This process was important to the project, as qualitative methods are useful and appropriate when describing and seeking to understand people (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). It allowed us the opportunity to probe and seek clarification from participants and it allowed participants to articulate their lived experiences and to participate in a two-way conversation about these experiences. From the first author's own immersion in the world of online dating, and discussions with other online daters, it was apparent that instant messaging was a very common form of communication among online daters when getting to know one another online, and as such could offer a mode of communication relevant and appropriate for interviewing online daters. The relative anonymity offered by instant messaging can also offer benefits when researching in areas that might involve private or stigmatized behaviors or activities that individuals might not feel comfortable discussing face to face, such as sexual behaviors. Compared to face-to-face interviews or questionnaires, data collected online might be less inhibited and affected by social desirability (Tatano Beck, 2005). It has also been suggested that conducting

synchronous research online, such as focus groups or interviews, can support research methods that challenge the power dynamics inherent in traditional research methods, and that the online environment can increase confidence compared to face-to-face interactions (Fox, Morris, & Rumsey, 2007).

Sample

Participants in this study were recruited online through snowball sampling from contacts the first author had made through her personal use of online dating Web sites. Snowball sampling is regarded as a useful sampling strategy for participants who might be hard to reach directly, but might be well networked (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). This was appropriate for the project as the interviews were going to explore sexuality and sexual behaviors, and because generally there is some stigma surrounding the use of online dating Web sites, which was magnified during the project because of Australian media coverage of the Maria Korp case (a case of a Melbourne woman who was strangled and kept in a car boot, and who later died. The case and the media surrounding it were strongly associated with online dating and the Internet as methods for meeting sexual partners, and one of the sites we were hoping to recruit from). We acknowledge that there are limitations with snowball sampling and that the use of snowball sampling might have introduced distinctive characteristics into the sample, with the initial participant shaping the structure of the rest of the sample (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). For this project, the first author's own personal use of online dating (OD) might have shaped the resulting sample structure. This type of sampling often leads to an homogenous sample (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005).

Hamilton and Bowers (2006, p. 825) suggest that researchers should "select the most appropriate Internet site to place an announcement of the study." This will assist in recruiting the most appropriate individuals for involvement. But such announcements need to be approved by a site's owner or moderator(s). We endeavored to broaden opportunities for participation by posting on the community noticeboard of the ADP Web site, but our posting was denied, which might have been a result of the negative publicity the Web site and others like it were receiving during the study and during the aforementioned Korp case.

To be included in the study, a potential participant had to have used online dating as a method for seeking

partners and/or sexual interaction. Inclusion was also dependent on the participant having access to free chat software such as MSN Messenger© or Yahoo Messenger©, as chat software was the medium used for conducting the in-depth online interviews. All interviews were conducted on MSN Messenger©, as all participants approached used this software program.

Our initial intention was to interview people who were users of the adults-only dating Web site ADP, because of the sexual focus of this Web site and hence its potential greater relevance to public health. Through the interviews, it became apparent that all participants were also either current or previous users of additional online dating Web sites. The FAD Web site was commonly referred to by several of the participants. This is a Web site more focused on friendship and short- and long-term romantic relationships.

We approached 22 possible participants. Of these, we conducted online interviews with 15 individuals; another six people indicated interest in participating at the initial approach, but did not appear online again concurrently with the interviewer and so could not be interviewed. Only one person declined outright to be interviewed, as she requested payment for her involvement and payment was not available to participants in this study.

Of the 15 participants interviewed, there were 11 males, who all identified as "straight" or heterosexual. Nine of these males were single, and one male was married. One male noted that he was attached when interviewed, but was single when he had been using online dating (he had met his current partner online). There were four female participants, of whom one participant was married, two were single, and one categorized herself as "sort of single." One female participant considered herself straight, two considered their sexuality as "straightish" or bi-curious, and the married female participant noted her sexuality as bisexual. Participants' level of education ranged from some high school to PhD level. Eleven participants were from metropolitan areas and four were from regional areas of Australia. Seven participants identified themselves as Australian, four as some form of European descent, three generally as Caucasian (White), and the ethnicity of one participant was unknown.

The sample size was small (15 participants), but as the data obtained was rich and allowed the desired analyses to be undertaken, it can be deemed large enough for the purposes of the project (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). However, we acknowledge that a larger sample size might have revealed some additional findings.

Interviews varied in duration from one to three hours. These were text-based, real-time interviews, in which we typed questions to the participant and the participant typed his or her responses. Each interview was conducted as a "private" chat; that is, only the participant being interviewed and an interviewer were present in the chat space where the in-depth interview took place. The study was approved by the La Trobe University Faculty of Health Science Faculty Human Ethics Committee.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. This form of analysis allows for inductive interpretation of the data, while also considering pre-existing theory (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). The analysis began inductively with open coding. This allowed us to explore the data as we were collecting it, and to define the units of analysis, such as key issues, topics, concepts, and actions (Ezzy, 2002), allowing the codes to emerge from the data (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). It also allowed us to adjust the theme list to further explore issues and refine the methods by which we explored certain topics.

Results

During each interview, we explored how and why the person used online dating. This included asking how they were introduced to online dating, what their reasons were for using it, their patterns of use, and what influenced their usage. There is some use of symbols, abbreviations, and emoticons in some of the quotes, as all participants used these to express emotions when chatting and to increase typing speed.

The Use of Online Dating

Reasons for and Patterns of Use

The reasons participants gave for using online dating were varied, and included seeking a soul mate, seeking sex, looking for fun, relaxation, to ease boredom, or because it seemed like an easy way to meet people. For most of the participants, changing personal circumstances provided the impetus for using online dating. These included being very busy at work, most friends becoming partnered, having children and not being able

to go out as much as previously, separating from a partner, moving to a new city, or a partner becoming sick and unable to be sexually active.

One male participant used online dating as one, not the only, method of meeting potential partners:

> It is a different medium . . . . I do not just date online but [it] is another option just in case others do not work.

For our married female participant, the move to online dating was a way to meet sexual partners and was the result of a long and difficult process of adjusting to her partner's illness:

> Well, as you know my hubby got sick, we went for years trying to adapt . . . mechanical sex, chemical assistance etc. It was very frustrating because he was in pain so in the end he suggested I allow myself to play with other people.

For two male participants, the difficulty of most of their friends being partnered was an influence. One said, "My friends were mainly partnered, no one to go to pubs with and you feel embarrassed to go by yourself, as I think I look like a married guy."

The length of time that participants had been using online dating ranged from two months to four years. In terms of current usage, the amount of time spent each week was quite varied, with one participant noting that he only spent 30 minutes a week, "generally just reading, not sending messages," to another who said it "has been quite a bit since changing to FAD, say two hours a day." In addition to online time, this participant had also spent 15 hours of that week on actual person-person dates.

The frequency and intensity with which participants online dated was affected by their experiences of online dating as well as external influencers, such as forming a new relationship or the amount of free time available. For one male participant, his increasing familiarity with and exposure to the explicit content of ADP resulted in him having less desire to use the Web site as he became sated with its content. A female participant decided to close her membership when she had established enough contacts who interested her.

As noted previously, there are differences between online dating sites, with some focusing strongly on sex and others on friendship and romantic relationships. All of the participants had used more than one online dating site to meet people. At the time of interview, some participants were using multiple sites, whereas others had changed their use to specific sites according to what needs they were hoping to have met, such as sexual titillation, sex, or finding a long-term partner. One male participant was very clear when he discussed his reasons for using two different sites:

> FAD is a very clean site with genuine people, ADP is full of people (or more than half of them) wanting casual sex . . . FAD was to meet a genuine partner, ADP was to have some fun . . . . Spent most of my time [on ADP] just looking at their rudie pics and viewing their profiles . . . Only met people from FAD.

What Participants Think About Online Dating

For all participants, there were aspects of online dating that they particularly liked and disliked, and which influenced the ways in which they used online dating. Participants noted various good things about online dating: the ability to search for potential contacts and dates at their leisure; a way to pass time; quick and easy; meet great people and made good friends; and rejection at first contact is not as personal. For one participant, her experiences had been overwhelmingly positive:

> [used online dating for] sex mainly but it has led to friendships and love too . . . yep it's been great. For me its access to a larger number of people in safe environment . . . ohhh that's the thing . . . . out of all the contacts I've made . . . . and there was over 100,000 at ADP for me last year, only three experiences have been bad.

Nearly all participants noted the worst thing about online dating was the lies and number of people using fake profiles and/or misleading pictures. One participant was more reflective of the deceit and lies which might be encountered online, recognizing that other online daters were trying to balance "accuracy and desirability in self-presentation" (Ellison et al., 2006, p. 425):

> [Deceit and duplicity] is normal in most people. Some people call it spin. It is normal for most people to act in their own interests. All's fair in love and war. Those of us who try to be honest in their approach have a hard time convincing people that we are not telling fibs. Some are so sure of their own spin they believe it themselves there are varying degrees, but most try to put a favourable face on themselves.

The nature of the Internet means that it is very easy to contact and engage with people who are physically located a long distance from the user. But as the

intention of online dating is generally for users to meet up with people they have made contact with through a Web site, geographic location has some impact, although this differed among the participants interviewed. When questioned about the importance of physical location and proximity, the responses were varied. Some participants explained that the people they would potentially meet needed to live within a certain geographic proximity to their own location, as outlined below by a male participant:

> Geography is important. 30 minute drive is enough for me-21 sets of traffic lights max. I used to see someone who lived in Frankston-35-40 minute drive-too far. If it's interstate, then all you have is a fun-time buddy, that's no relationship . . . I do like the within 5km of St Kilda which I can flag on FAD.

However, other participants did not find this an issue and arranged to meet people when they were travelling interstate. For one participant and his wife, trips interstate provided new opportunities to meet people. Some of the participants noted the ease and speed of meeting people online to date and have sex with. When asked why he used online dating, one participant's succinct answer was for "sex." He also liked the speed and convenience. He compared using online dating for sex to the supermarket, where one can go and choose what one needs or wants to buy:

> To me its a bit like shopping at [local supermarket] . . . you just look what's on offer and go for it! . . . If I like I ask them if they want to meet! If they say yes, we meet then we fuck. Simple.

Through his use of online dating, he had met approximately 40 women and had sex with all of them.

Our married male participant noted that online dating allowed him and his wife to search for people at their leisure, without the concerns of managing one-way attraction in a club:

> You get to search for people at your own leisure and try to find what appeals to you, rather [than] having hassles in clubs where the girl wants the guy only or other way round . . . [it is] easier than getting ready and going out and no pressure.

"Filtering": Screening Online Contacts

All participants had methods to filter people they encountered through online dating. Some of the filtering methods were simple assessments of attractiveness and geography and physical proximity. Other filtering methods involved following a clearly defined process of communication, interaction, and assessment before a physical meeting would take place. Filtering was a key way in which participants managed risk.

What are People Looking For?

In determining whom to meet, the importance of physical attractiveness and establishing a rapport was common to most interviews, as exemplified by this male participant who looked for "pics and conversational skills. If they're as dumb as dog shit, then they can tell their story walking!" A good sexual encounter for him came from "a person I click with, and chemical reaction. You both have to be relaxed"; a bad sexual encounter was when "someone has little experience and doesn't know what they like and don't like."

Another participant noted that online dating allowed the user to check out and screen potential candidates without having to commence dialogue:

> silent screening, don't have to get drunk and sleep with everyone just to find out there was some horror that you missed :)

The "Filtering" Process

As noted previously, it was very common for participants to raise concerns about the deceitful behavior they had encountered in their use of online dating. Participants' experiences and concerns included physical descriptions being inaccurate, photos being misleading, lies about gender, and people lying when chatting online. To ameliorate and manage these concerns, having a process to qualify other online daters was important and common to all participants, although the methods of assessment and qualifying varied between participants.

Online daters provide physical descriptors of themselves by ticking various boxes when establishing their profile(s), such as eye color, hair color, physique, ethnicity/nationality, and providing details of other descriptors like height and weight. Nearly all participants noted physical attraction was important to them when meeting people online with the view to then meeting offline. The provision of photos (or "pics") or webcam being available for viewing was very important to most participants for this assessment.

A female participant was emphatic that photos were needed, but then conceded there was someone she was chatting with whom she would make an exception for:

Yes Yes Yes Yes . . . [I] won't meet anyone anymore without a recent picture . . . . OH there's one guy I want to meet I saw a photo of him a long time ago. I've asked him to meet for coffee . . . We've talked for ages . . . . around 4months. On the phone . . . . sexiest voice I've ever heard . . . . . . just want to put a face to the voice . . . . saying coffee because of the NO PRESSURE thing . . .

Additionally, some participants noted that seeing another online dater on webcam was useful for assessing their veracity and watching their responses to see if they would respond truthfully to questions, as noted by these two male participants:

[I] noted he liked web cam for looks predominantly but you can see their facial expressions and that can be useful.

I was intending to use msn to see people on their web cam . . . Initially it was to confirm that they are the person they say they are, meaning, a woman must be a woman.

Other participants had a fairly standard process they followed from initial contact to deciding to actually meet, as one female participant explained:

I make them talk to me on MSN first, then I get them to show me web cam so I can see their facial expressions - I'm a very good BS [bullshit] reader . . . Well if I like them and they look straight down the line . . . I'll give them my mobile number and text for a while, then they always suggest meeting.

Assessing authenticity was important in filtering other online daters. Another participant's process involved carefully assessing what an individual noted in his or her profile:

Cross referencing the stats with the statements, seeing what is being left out, the kind of interests they claim and key words such as play, have a good time, clichés obvious male fantasy stereotypes etc.

Again, participants were making extensive use of the text and images available through their online communications to filter, assess authenticity of identity, and determine who they would meet.

Self-Confidence

Several participants felt quite self-confident in their ability to identify other online daters who were

lying and deceitful. As noted above, for several participants, their ability to determine this was sometimes aided by the use of a webcam. Other participants simply noted that they felt confident in their own abilities to identify lies and liars:

people that lie . . . there are a lot . . . not that I spend too much time with them . . . I'm getting pretty good at it [figuring out the liars and bull shitters]

When our married male participant explained his general concerns about people lying, he noted that for him and his partner:

. . . through discussions we can work out who is genuine and not. Also when we went to a couple of parties the people that have sent u pics look nothing like their pics . . .

From Online Connections to Real World Meetings

Similar to the filtering processes outlined above, there were processes and steps which most participants followed when making decisions about whether to progress their relationships from purely online communications to in-person meetings.

Virtual and Non-Virtual Interaction and Communication

After making contact via a Web site, the majority of participants commenced their interaction via email and online chat. One participant explained he would "chat online, chat on the phone, meet for a coffee, lunch, dinner, drink–whatever." Similarly, another participant tended to start communication through email, move to a phone call and then possibly meet in person, noting a dislike for ongoing email correspondence:

I want to send an email, then phone and if that lasts more than an hour, then I want to meet. Too many want to send 100 emails-emails tell you nothing about the person at the end of the day . . . . .people generally know within 20 seconds of meeting the person.

He also noted that the process of meeting people involved interacting with a number of people at any one time, assessing them and deciding whether someone was particularly nice and at what stage his interaction with others would cease:

BUT . . . . people are like I am . . . juggling a few at a time, and everyone has a few choices and its all about timing . . . A bit of a numbers game, everything happens for a reason. You're suddenly with someone nice and the others drop off automatically . . . to me anyway-I didn't have to go and say "Dear Jane" I can't see you anymore . . .

In contrast, one female participant had a different process; she spent time in the Web site group chat room and from her interactions there decided if she wanted to communicate further:

> . . . I have never gone through profiles to see what I like. I only look at them [profiles] if they are funny in the chat room or if they message me. If I like what I see/hear I will say hi in chat room or maybe wink them.

Meeting in Person

The triggers to meeting an online contact were varied among participants and included having access to the other person's photos, developing a rapport via chat or email, being mentally attracted to them, and the ability to have sex quickly.

Most participants outlined a standard process they followed in managing and progressing their online contacts. The process allowed them to qualify potential candidates and provided opportunities to control how the situation played out. One participant liked to meet during the day in public places to minimize safety concerns and because it also gave him an easy way to escape. Similarly, another participant's process of meeting also allowed for a quick exit—by only meeting for coffee, the initial meeting could be kept very brief if it did not meet his expectations or if it raised any concerns. In contrast, for another male participant the process of moving from online communication to a physical meeting was a simple process without having too much concern about potential sexual partners:

> If I like I ask them if the want to meet! If they say yes, we meet then we fuck. Simple. No mess, no fuss! . . . I have a very high libido . . . I like to fuck a lot . . . every night if I can find someone willing!

This description of his approach to meeting people through online dating portrays the potential speed by which people can engage in sex with people they have met online. For some participants, an initial meeting with someone they have contacted through online dating was a meeting to determine compatibility; yet for others, if all went well, it would progress to sex at the first meeting.

Another participant's description of his first date from ADP demonstrates that meeting people from this site was not only about fast sex, but could also involve some romance and tête-à-tête:

> It was my first date with ADP in January. I went all out, invited her over for dinner BBQ'd eye fillet and nice salad. All perfect . . . She was really nice actually and I still think she is a nice person . . . things went well and we went to bed, my first time back in the cot for about 4 months.

From Dating To Mating

Sexual Outcomes From Meetings

There was diversity among the sexual outcomes of online dating. Some participants had sexual encounters with all of the people they met from online dating, whereas others had slept with a fifth to a quarter of the people they had met in person.

Of the participants interviewed, the number of meetings from online dating varied. One female participant had only four meetings from online dating in two years, compared with another female participant who estimated she had met at least 260 people from online dating in two and a half years. The woman who had four dates had sexual interaction from one of these four dates; for the woman who had 260 dates, all except two of these dates resulted in sex. The difference in the number of meetings between these two participants highlights that peoples' outcomes from online dating vary greatly, according to their needs and methods of use.

At the time of the interview, one male participant had been using the Internet for online dating for two years. He had met 40 women and slept with all of them. "I'm going to hell for it aren't I! ☹" He noted that he was having more sex because of online dating, and was "surprised my dick hasn't fallen off yet!" Another male participant had sex with approximately 12 of the 30 people he met through online dating; he thought this was quite a lot and attributed his behavior to a "phase":

> [met] I think around 30, maybe . . . sexual interaction - it would be about 12 (although I'm not sure if that is a accurate representation as I went through a bit of a sexual experimentation phase which has greatly increased that figure).

Sexual Behaviors and Experiences

As part of the interview process, we endeavored to discuss sexual behaviors and activities with each participant. Some participants were very comfortable talking about their sexual experiences, likes, and dislikes, very openly. However, a couple of participants were less receptive. One participant openly described what he likes sexually:

> I have a very high libido, I like 2 fuck a lot-every night if i can find some willing! And with the right girl, I like it dirty too-cumming in mouth, on face, anal, spanking, stuff like that.

When questioned further on what types of sexual activities he liked to participate in, he noted, "intercourse, oral, anal (if I'm allowed) spanking, toys . . . 3somes . . . ."

A female participant described herself as very open-minded with regard to sexual experiences:

> hmmm not really group sex I guess. I'm very open-minded. have done 3[some]. Group, no . . . but I would never look for it. I have done both [mmf and ffm] in the past. Not into [anal]-it ouched me when I tried. Hahahahaha. Toys yes. Not really into any fetishes as such . . . tried lots with a long term boyfriend from years ago . . . . . but just open to anything. meeting someone new its not like I think . . . oooh yeah, piss on me babeee . . . hahahahahah !!!!! I'm not into it.

Meeting people from online dating and having sex with them involved issues other than just physical attraction and rapport. It seems that social acceptance played some crucial role in the participants' behaviors. One participant suggested that it was the potential risks and dangers associated with sex that makes it exciting:

> If sex was safe both physically and emotionally it would be an everyday thing. Involve the risk of unwanted pregnancy, STD and emotional loss then the risk is greater and the tragi-comedic elements are heightened . . . The danger is what makes it fascinating . . . Too safe and it's just as Marcus Aurelius the Stoic put it: as friction stimulating ejaculation enabling procreation, an animal aspect of humans (a stoic philosopher and Caesar as well).

Sexual Networks, Expanding Connections, and More Sex

Online dating Web sites and online dating can allow for people to extend the number of people they meet and engage with sexually. Four of the participants noted they had been to ADP drink nights. These are social nights organized by users of the ADP Web site as a way to create an offline meeting environment with other people who use the Web site. The events are advertised on the Web site community board and people RSVP to attend and pay a fee to attend on the night. One participant, for example, noted the ADP drink nights as an avenue for increasing potential sexual contacts. She also noted what methods she had used for meeting people to have sex with in the last 12 months:

> some have been the traditional way-going out - 80% would come from the net, and some are from friends.

In terms of the people she has met through friends, these were friends she had had previous sexual encounters with: "people that I've played with before."

In contrast, another female participant had no interest in attending the ADP drink nights, as she thought such events defeated the whole purpose and experience of using online dating:

> I had one guy tell me about how people off ADP are meeting at a nightclub or something and asked if I was going. I thought what's the use of that = isn't the distant thing of the Internet is what people are after at the start? If I wanted to go to a club and pick someone up I'd do it.

When asked if she thinks she has more sex as a result of her online dating use, she replied, "most definitely, yes." One male participant, when asked if he thought online dating facilitated more sex, noted:

> I think if you look for it, or approach it that way, then yes it can, especially for people who might be shy to meet people offline. Plus, I think, yet again, the anonymity of being online allows people to speak their thoughts more openly (which I see as one of the benefits as well in online communications) . . . it's not a direct correlation, but if that is what they are looking for, then yes.

Discussion

Our study adds to the limited literature on the issues of online dating and sexual behaviors by providing some insights into on online dating among a group of men and women living in Australia. There are several important issues emerging from the study and we discuss these issues here. The use of the

Internet, as Davis and colleagues suggest (2006a, p. 459), is related to the "engagement with self-construction, trust and security" (see also Ellison et al., 2006; Gibbs et al., 2006). This is the "filtering" process (Hardey, 2004; Davis et al., 2006a, p. 464). Our participants ensured that they filter their daters before moving on to meeting in person to pursue sexual encounters. It is a way for "quiet sorting" (Goffman, 1983) of their potential sexual partners by our participants.

With online dating, ambiguity plays a crucial part. Our participants expressed great concerns about this drawback and attempted to ensure that deceit was not possible or was minimized as much as possible. Although this might be frustrating, as Davis et al. (2006a, p. 473) have found in their study with gay men in London, the participants in our study were also "interested in sifting out the reality constructing properties of the Internet, in the effort of making it work for them in their sex lives." They were not interested in "exploiting the virtual" but more so in using the virtual to meet sexual partners.

We have found that online dating negotiates identity. Among the participants in our study, the filtering of identity is a process of "interpretation and self-construction" (Davis et al., 2006a, p. 466; Ellison et al., 2006; Gibbs et al., 2006). They attempted to establish the identity of their potential daters in several ways, including checking photographs, chatting online, corresponding via email, or talking via webcam. The participants developed their own ways to filter the identity of their potential online daters and some of the methods that our participants employed involved following a clearly defined process of communication, interaction, and assessment before a physical meeting would take place. Filtering of identity was used by the participants to manage risk with the hope that this would lead to offline dates with better outcomes.

As Hardey (2004) and Davis and colleagues (2006a) argue, identity is comprised of the online users and their potential daters. We found that the participants were concerned about how to present their own identity to attract their sexual partners, although this was not extensively emphasized as in Davis et al.'s study with gay men in London (2006a), who showed that these men try to present themselves well to attract their online daters. The emphasis of our participants was more on the physical attractiveness of their potential online daters, but they would provide photos and sometimes webcam to provide reciprocal validation of themselves to others.

Existing research has indicated that the Internet facilitates increased numbers of sexual meetings (see Bull & McFarlane, 2000; Cooper et al., 2003; Bull et al., 2004; Hardey, 2004; Ross et al., 2004; Ross, 2005; Daneback, 2006; Davis et al., 2006a, b; Ellison et al., 2006; Gibbs et al., 2006; Daneback et al., 2007). In their study with gay men in London, Davis et al. (2006a, pp. 462-463) found that online dating is "a kind of information-technology 'bricolage' or DIY practice mobilised inside, and helping to extend, the sexual practice of gay men." Online dating allows "the connection and circulation of the sexually interested." We have also found in this study that the Internet and online dating allows for greater connectivity between people, providing the opportunity for enhanced social and sexual networks. These enhanced networks can also be increased by some of the "real-world" social events organized by some online dating Web sites. Additionally, some participants spoke of how they introduced their own online dating contacts to other online dating contacts, further extending their networks and their potential range of sexual contacts. The participants in our study described their own and others' increasing sexual networks and the speed and convenience at which they could acquire new sexual partners as a result of their online dating use. Online dating allowed them to filter and to find other like-minded people who are seeking similar sexual experiences. It also allowed some people to connect across wide geographic distances and then to meet up for sex. As such, online dating allowed people to extend their sexual networks and to potentially increase their rate of partner change. There is the possibility that there might be online daters who could be considered core group members; that is, individuals who have high rates of partner change. There is some theoretical evidence to suggest that core group members might be important in maintaining the endemic prevalence of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in populations (Garnett & Anderson, 1993).

Research about sex and the Internet tends to suggest that "it is a boundless, virtual space with both great potential and inherent danger" (Davis et al., 2006a, p. 459). Some research undertaken into the behaviors and outcomes of people who use the Internet to seek sexual partners has found it is a risk environment for STIs, as it can act as a rapid, efficient medium for arranging sexual contact. This, in turn, might result in more efficient STI transmission (Bull & McFarlane, 2000; McFarlane et al., 2000; Bull, McFarlane, & Rietmeijer, 2001; Kim, Kent, McFarlane, & Klausner, 2001; Rietmeijer, Bull, &

McFarlane, 2001; Wang & Ross, 2002; Ashton et al., 2003; Bolding et al., 2005). But a more recent study (Daneback et al., 2007) did not find any increases in the prevalence of STIs among people using the Internet to find sexual partners. The participants in our study realized some "danger" in online dating, but they also talked about the "sensational aspects of the day-to-day experience" of online dating (Davis et al., 2006a, p. 459; see also Griffiths, 2001). They developed their filtering and other processes to control (or minimize) "danger," and to maximize the potential positive outcomes. To the participants, the danger was there, but they were confident that they could control or manage it in their online dating experiences.

Although online dating can be used to facilitate meetings for sex (Elford, Bolding, & Sherr, 2001; Cooper et al., 2002; Hardey, 2004; Ross et al., 2004; Davis et al., 2006a, b; Ellison et al., 2006; Gibbs et al., 2006), it is not perceived as a replacement for face-to-face meetings (see Tikkanen & Ross, 2000; Cooper et al., 2002, 2003; Daneback, 2006). Like the participants in Davis et al.'s study (2006a), our participants used SMS text messaging and telephone calls to organize meetings. Thus, online dating here is different from much of the intended use of the Internet; that the two parties will not be known face-to-face and hence anonymity can be maintained (Liamputtong, 2006). To our participants, face-to-face meetings were essential as a pre-requisite for sexual interactions and any relationships which might follow.

We conclude that online dating allows our participants to have opportunities to manage their online contacts and plan prospective meetings before sexual interactions. As such, online dating can offer valuable health protection, as "it allows users to predetermine safer sex" (Davis et al., 2006b, p. 165). This study has provided some insights into the emerging ways in which people are seeking casual and long-term sexual partners through the use of the Internet. The increasing numbers of people using the Internet for dating and to seek sexual partners suggests that there is room for further research in the area. As with all technology, online dating and the ways in which online daters use technology to facilitate relationships will change as the technology evolves and as online dating becomes more common and socially acceptable. Health researchers need to keep abreast of these uses of technology and the social phenomenon of online dating to maintain an understanding of how people might choose to romantically and sexually interact and the possible health outcomes arising from these interactions.

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