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Effect of Sexual Racism on Partner Desirability in Gay Asian Men

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ABSTRACT

Sexual racism—including or excluding racial minority members in partner selection based on race—negatively affects Asian men who have sex with men (MSM) across various domains. The current study aims to investigate the effect of potential partners' racial preferences on desirability in Asian MSM. The relationship between sexual racism awareness and partner desirability when evaluating white partners with racial preferences was also investigated. A sample of Asian MSM ($N = 128$) responded to hypothetical online dating scenarios in which the racial background (Asian/white) and racial preference (none/Asian/white) of facial stimuli were manipulated. A two-way ANOVA with post-hoc Bonferroni analyses confirmed that, as hypothesized, among potential white partners, those that exhibited no racial preferences were most desirable, $F(1.66, 210.54) = .11.37, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .08$. Among potential Asian partners, those that preferred white men were least desirable, $F(1.82, 231.60) = 81.95, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .39$. Unexpectedly, there was no relationship evident between sexual racism awareness and desirability for potential white partners (in any racial preference condition; all $r_s < .20$). Our findings suggest that overt expression of certain racial preferences can negatively affect desirability in online dating applications.

KEYWORDS

Sexual racism; fetishization; racial exclusion; desirability; gay; Asian

Sexual racism is a widespread phenomenon that negatively affects racial minority members in gay communities. In general, racial minority members have significantly less opportunities in sexual and romantic partner selection (Han, 2007). Disadvantages in partner selection due to sexual racism can reduce self-esteem and social connectedness, impede healthy relationship seeking, prevent positive ethnic identity formation, and instill feelings of competition with other racial minority members (Han, 2015; Han, Proctor, & Choi, 2014; Nemoto et al., 2003). It is important that racial minority members are cognizant of the systemic nature of sexual racism, and thus do not internalize their disadvantaged position in partner selection. Furthermore, racial minority members can identify racially fetishizing or exclusive behavior in potential partners will be in a better position to seek healthy relationships.

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Sexual racism refers to discrimination in partner selection on the basis of perceived racial identity (Callander, Newman, & Holt, 2015;). It occurs when partner choice privileges the stereotypical racial characteristics of a majority or socially dominant group. In practice, sexual racism is the exclusion of racial minorities as potential partners, or the inclusion of racial minorities based mainly on racial fetishes (Han & Choi, 2018). Men who have sex with men (MSM) are more likely to assess the racial characteristics of potential partners, and self-describe in racial terms when dating online compared to heterosexual men (Phua & Kaufman, 2003). In Australia, racial exclusion tends to be directed at nonwhite men, mainly of Asian and Aboriginal backgrounds (Callander et al., 2015; Prestage et al., 2019).

Numerous studies—both quantitative and qualitative—have examined the racial preferences of MSM in white-majority gay communities around the world. In Australia, MSM of all racial groups prefer white partners while Asian and Aboriginal men are least desired (Ayres, 1999; Callander et al., 2015; Chuang, 1999; Prestage et al., 2019). Prestage et al. (2019) found that only 42% of Australian MSM were attracted to all racial groups. Exclusive preference toward a certain racial group was almost always directed toward whites. Phua and Kaufman (2003) examined internet dating advertisements in the United States. Asian MSM were the most likely to ask for white partners, and 31% of Asian MSM specified preference for white partners. Tsunokai, McGrath, and Kavanagh (2013) also found that Asian-American MSM prefer to date white partners over Asian partners and were also less likely to be willing to date another Asian than their heterosexual counterparts. Qualitative studies—predominantly research involving interviews with Asian MSM in western countries (hereafter referred to as Asian MSM)—support the existence of a racial hierarchy of desirability within MSM partner selection, with white men at the top and Asian men at the bottom (Caluya, 2006; Han, 2007, 2015; Han et al., 2014; Wilson & Yoshikawa, 2004). A consensus exists within gay Asian communities, that Asian MSM tend to disproportionately desire white men (Han et al., 2014; White, Reisner, Dunham, & Mimiaga, 2014). Asian MSM also exhibited a shared understanding that their “Asianness” rendered them sexually undesirable to the majority of white men (Caluya, 2006). There have been no quantitative studies examining the prevalence of sexual fetishization of Asian MSM, however, qualitative studies indicate that many Asian MSM believe that they are only considered to be attractive by a small subgroup of white men seeking to fulfil fetishized sexual desires (known within the gay community as “rice queens”) (Han et al., 2014; Wilson & Yoshikawa, 2004). Both quantitative and qualitative research on sexual racism characterize the experience of Asian MSM in partner selection as one of exclusion and fetishization.

Asian men in western gay communities often internalize racialized stereotypes about other racial groups (as well as their own), leading to a preference

for white partners (Callander, Holt, & Newman, 2012; Callander et al., 2015; Han & Choi, 2018; Poon & Ho, 2008; Prestage et al., 2019). The preference for white partners combined with the lack of marketplace demand for Asian men leads to many Asian MSM vying for the attention of relatively few white men with a preference for Asian men (Bao, 2012; Han, 2009, 2015; Nemoto et al., 2003; Poon & Ho, 2008). Furthermore, Asian MSM who prefer white partners often forgo the types of sex they wish to engage in, in favor of meeting racialized sexual expectations to gain access to white partners (Han & Choi, 2018). Research suggests that this leads to feelings of expendability, inequality, and racialized sexual objectification in relationships with white men who prefer Asian men (Nemoto et al., 2003; Phua & Kaufman, 2003). The scarcity of white men seeking Asian partners and internalized racism among Asian MSM often leads to feelings of competition between Asian MSM (Bao, 2012; Bérubé, 2001; Caluya, 2006; Han, 2007, 2009; Han et al., 2014; Poon, 2000; Poon & Ho, 2008). Asian MSM often see other Asians as competition for white men and rarely as potential partners. Poon (2000) noted that Asian MSM in his study did not question their erotic desire for white men but were concerned with white men fetishizing Asian men. Many Asian men are disdainful of other Asians who only date white men who prefer Asians, while considering their desire for white partners as fundamentally different (Han et al., 2014; Poon & Ho, 2008). A participant in Poon and Ho's (2008) study said the following regarding Asian men with a strong preference for white partners (known within the gay community as "potato queens"):

This is all about this 'potato queen' issue. Some Asian boys will go after everything that is white meat . . . It's all right to have a type but some Asian boys have gone out of control.
(p. 259)

This quote highlights a form of cognitive dissonance common among Asian MSM that desire white partners. Many Asian MSM do not find preferring white partners problematic; however, they disapprove of other Asian men who have exclusive preferences for white men. At the same time, non-desire for other Asian men is often framed in terms of "sisterhood," hinting at a reliance on feminine stereotypes to justify their preferences for white partners at the exclusion of other Asian men.

Lack of desire and feelings of competitiveness toward other Asian men can impede the formation of healthy racial and ethnic identity, important in maintaining self-esteem and self-worth for racial minority members (Chan, 1989; Chung & Katayama, 1998; Chung, Oswald, & Wiley, 2006; Han, 2015; Poon & Ho, 2008). Some Asian MSM attempt to reduce stigma by distancing themselves from "other" Asians, reconstructing their self-identity like white gay men (Han, 2007). Often this involves making distinctions between one's own physical and cultural features and perceived negative features stereotypically associated with "other" Asian men, further stigmatizing members of their

group (Han, 2007). Some Asian MSM blame “other” Asians, who are ostensibly responsible for perpetuating negative stereotypes. Poon and Ho (2008), and Han et al. (2014) both identified that many Asian MSM in the United States had negative feelings toward their Asian identity and toward other Asian MSM as a result of racialized stereotypes. Feelings of competitiveness and within-group stigmatization of Asian MSM may disrupt the formation of strong gay Asian communities. This can make it more difficult for Asian MSM to come to terms with both their same-sex attracted identity and their Asian identity, which may negatively impact psychosocial wellbeing.

Asian MSM can increase their self-esteem and mitigate feelings of marginalization within the larger gay community by increasing racial identification (Drummond, 2005; Han, 2007, 2009; Han & Choi, 2018; Han et al., 2014; Poon & Ho, 2008). Some Asian MSM choose to eschew unequal power dynamics with white partners by actively dating other Asian men and promoting alliances between Asian MSM (Drummond, 2005; Han et al., 2014). Asian/Asian relationships are seen by some as a challenge to the racial hierarchy and a form of empowerment (Poon & Ho, 2008). Others interpret them as a means of avoiding potential unhealthy power dynamics with white partners (Han et al., 2014). Men pointed to the importance of seeing Asian men with other Asian men in gay media to show Asian MSM that other Asian men are possible partners (Han et al., 2014). Indeed, recent shifts in the portrayal of Asian men in western media combined with the rise of East Asian economic and cultural power around the world may be influencing intragroup desirability and ethnic identification (Bao, 2012). Many Asian MSM noted that younger Asian men were more likely not to have racial preferences favoring white men, and have more pride in their racial background (Drummond, 2005; Han & Choi, 2018; Han et al., 2014; Poon & Ho, 2008). Some Asian men display an awareness of the detrimental effects of sexual racism and actively choose to avoid racial power dynamics by dating other Asian men or displaying racial/ethnic pride. This may be more common in younger Asian MSM due to wider sociocultural forces.

Meeting online—through internet websites or geolocate social/dating mobile applications—is the most common way for gay men to meet each other (Badal, Stryker, DeLuca, & Purcell, 2018; Paz-Bailey et al., 2017; Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). Often race becomes a social category through which online encounters are filtered, in the same manner as age, weight, or height (Robinson, 2015). In online dating, preferences for or against racial minority group members are often articulated in language revealing belief in cultural or racial stereotypes (Paul, Ayala, & Choi, 2010; Phua & Kaufman, 2003; Riggs, 2013; Robinson, 2015). More often than not, men do not communicate their racial preferences directly but by describing traits associated with the desired racial group (Robinson, 2015). Attributes such as “clean-cut,” “likes the outdoors,” and “masculine” are often used in personal preference

discourse (Robinson, 2015). These attributes do not explicitly allude to race, however, they are underpinned by cultural assumptions about men who do or do not fit the description (Holland, 2012). Racial preferences are increasingly expressed by desire or non-desire for stereotypical traits associated with specific groups, moving from explicit expressions of discrimination to more subtle forms of sexual racism (Callander, Holt, & Newman, 2016). In online partner selection, men knowingly or unknowingly exhibit sexually racist behavior by leaning on socio-historically derived stereotypes to inform their preferences. This highlights sexual racism as a subtle form of racism that goes beyond explicit exclusion and fetishization (Wade & Harper, 2019).

Callander et al. (2015) were the first to quantify the attitudes of Australian MSM toward online sexual racism. Though opinions were diverse, men in this study exhibited generally tolerant attitudes toward sexual racism online. Over 70% of the participants did not see racial discrimination in partner selection as racist but rather, a way of saving time. More than two-thirds of men in this study identified as white and viewed sexual racism more positively and multiculturalism less positively compared to nonwhite participants. Additionally, 40% of the participants were bothered by encountering racial exclusion online but most hesitated to label it racist (Callander et al., 2015). Many men who find racial preferences problematic may stop short of labeling them as racist as they are concerned with impinging on the sexual freedoms of others (Callander et al., 2016; Robinson, 2015). This is particularly true when encountering subtle or indirect sexual racism, characterized by an underlying sense of undesirability, or in the case of fetishization, a sense of objectification based on racial stereotypes (Callander et al., 2016, 2015; Han, 2007; Han et al., 2014).

Aims and hypotheses

The current study aims to investigate the effect of potential partners' racial preferences on their desirability among Asian MSM, and the role of sexual racism awareness in informing these effects. Previous studies in this area have focused on the pattern and prevalence of racial preferences in western gay communities (Paul et al., 2010; Phua & Kaufman, 2003; Prestage et al., 2019; Riggs, 2013; Robinson, 2015; Tsunokai et al., 2013). Stigma and stereotypes underlying racial preferences as well as stigma management strategies used by Asian MSM have also been examined (Caluya, 2006; Choi, Coates, Catania, Lew, & Chow, 1995; Drummond, 2005; Han, 2008, 2009, 2015; Han & Choi, 2018; Han et al., 2014; Nemoto et al., 2003; Poon, 2000; Poon & Ho, 2008; Tan, Pratto, Operario, & Dworkin, 2013; Wilson & Yoshikawa, 2004). While some research into attitudes toward sexual racism has been conducted, the effect of potential partners' racial preferences on partner desirability in Asian MSM has never been quantitatively investigated (Callander et al., 2012, 2016, 2015; Robinson, 2015).

Qualitative studies have found that Asian MSM hold generally negative attitudes toward white men that fetishize Asian men, related to unequal racial power dynamics and feelings of racialized objectification (Caluya, 2006; Han, 2009; Han et al., 2014; Poon & Ho, 2008). The effect of sexual rejection—from white partners with a preference for other white men—on partner desirability has not previously been examined, but given that attitudes toward racial exclusion are generally negative, it is expected that potential white partners that show a preference for other white men will be less desirable than those with no racial preference. Thus, it was hypothesized that participants presented with potential white partners that are seen to have racial preferences either favoring white men or Asian men will be viewed as less desirable than those with no racial preference (**H1**).

No quantitative data exist regarding the effect of potential Asian partners' racial preferences on desirability in Asian MSM. Ethnographic studies suggest that within gay Asian communities in Western countries, racial preference toward other Asian men is regarded as a challenge to the racial hierarchy, and a rejection of racial power dynamics in white/Asian relationships (Caluya, 2006; Han, 2009, 2015; Han et al., 2014; Poon & Ho, 2008). It was thought that when Asian men consider other Asians as partners, racial preference for Asians would not negatively affect desirability compared to potential partners with no racial preference. A universal theme identified in quantitative studies was the stigma associated with Asian men that date so-called “rice queens” (Caluya, 2006; Han et al., 2014; Poon & Ho, 2008). This highlights the existence of contradictory discourse within gay Asian communities; while most Asian men prefer white partners, exclusive preference toward white partners is viewed negatively (Poon & Ho, 2008). This is expected to have a negative effect on desirability, such that potential Asian partners that show a preference for white partners will be less desirable than those with no racial preference. Accordingly, it was hypothesized that participants presented with potential Asian partners that are seen to have racial preferences favoring white men will be viewed as less desirable than those with no racial preference and those with racial preferences favoring other Asian men (**H2**).

Overall, previous qualitative research discussed indicates that differences in partner desirability, due to their racial preferences, are largely socially construed (Caluya, 2006; Han et al., 2014; Poon & Ho, 2008). Many Asian MSM exhibited a strong awareness of sexual racism and racial stigma in the gay community, which informed their partner preferences (Drummond, 2005; Han et al., 2014; Poon & Ho, 2008). It was thought that participants with a stronger awareness of the negative effects of sexual racism would find white partners with racial preferences less desirable. It was hypothesized that when evaluating potential white partners with racial preferences favoring either white or Asian men, there will be a negative relationship between sexual racism awareness and desirability (**H3**).

Methods

Participants

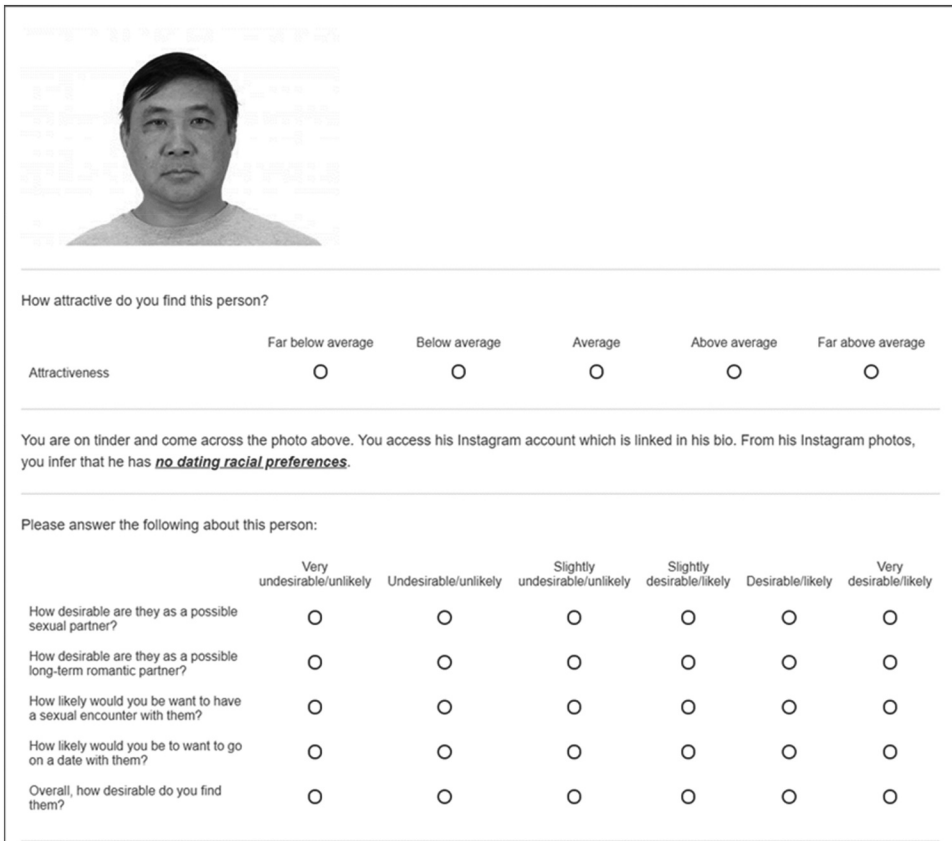
The participants were 128 Asian MSM, aged between 18 and 69 ($M = 28.29$ years, $SD = 7.77$ years). It was required that to partake in this study, participants must (a) self-identify as Asian (Australian-born or overseas born), (b) self-identify as male and same-sex attracted, (c) be over the age of 18, and (d) currently living in Australia. Participants were invited to take part in the study through advertising on social media, Grindr (a popular geosocial online dating application among MSM), as well as through LGBTI health organization networks based in New South Wales and Victoria (ACON Health and Thorne Harbor Health, respectively). No incentivization was provided for participation in this study.

Materials

Online dating scenarios

Participants completed an online questionnaire in which they were presented with a total of 12 online dating vignettes (two scenarios per each of the six conditions). Each scenario comprised a photographic target facial stimulus (male) and accompanying scenario text. Facial stimuli were taken from the Chicago Face Database and were standardized and pre-rated on attractiveness by 1087 raters. The convenience sample included 308 men and 552 women (227 did not report) from diverse racial backgrounds (516 White, 117 Asian, 74 Black, 72 bi/multiracial, 57 Latino, 18 other, and 233 did not report) (Ma, Correll, & Wittenbrink, 2015). A total of three Asian and three white men were selected on the basis that they had been comparably rated as above average in attractiveness. A further three Asian and three white men were selected on the basis that they were rated as comparably below average in attractiveness.

Scenario text asked participants to respond to the facial stimuli in the context of seeing their photograph on Tinder. The dating racial preference of the target was specified in the scenario text, which referred to photos seen on the Instagram account of the target. The racial background and racial preference of the targets were manipulated in each of the 6 scenarios (by altering visual stimuli and scenario text), such that each condition was represented by two scenarios. An example vignette is presented in Figure 1. Each condition included both an above averagely attractive and below averagely attractive target man who was either Asian or white and preferred either Asian partners, white partners, or had no discernible preference. The order of presentation of the 12 dating scenarios was randomized.



How attractive do you find this person?

Far below average Below average Average Above average Far above average

Attractiveness

You are on tinder and come across the photo above. You access his Instagram account which is linked in his bio. From his Instagram photos, you infer that he has no dating racial preferences.

Please answer the following about this person:

	Very undesirable/unlikely	Undesirable/unlikely	Slightly undesirable/unlikely	Slightly desirable/likely	Desirable/likely	Very desirable/likely
How desirable are they as a possible sexual partner?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How desirable are they as a possible long-term romantic partner?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How likely would you be to want to have a sexual encounter with them?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How likely would you be to want to go on a date with them?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Overall, how desirable do you find them?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Figure 1. Example vignette shown to participants.

Attractiveness and desirability items

Participants were first asked to rate the overall attractiveness of each target (“How attractive do you find this person?”) on a Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*far below average*) to 5 (*far above average*). This was to verify that pre-rated attractiveness ratings were similar to that of our sample (thus controlling for possible differences in target stimuli attractiveness). Participants were then presented with the scenario text in which the racial preferences of targets were specified. For example, the “no racial preference” condition scenario text read: “You are on tinder and come across the photo above. You access his Instagram account which is linked in his bio. From his Instagram photos, you infer that he has *no dating racial preferences*.” Following the presentation of scenario text, participants rated each target on five desirability items. These items were (a) “How desirable are they as a possible sexual partner?,” (b) “How desirable are they as a possible long-term romantic partner?,” (c) “How likely would you be to want to have a sexual encounter with them?,” (d) “How likely would you be to want to go on a date with them?,” and (e) “Overall, how desirable to you find them?.” All ratings were made on 6-point Likert scales from 1 (*very*

undesirable) to 6 (*very desirable*). Desirability items were adapted from Hill and Buss (2008) with the addition of item (c) (unvalidated), which was intended to measure the likelihood of wanting to engage in a sexual encounter with the target.

As the five items were highly intercorrelated—in every condition (all p 's < .001)—an overall desirability score was calculated for each of the six conditions by taking the arithmetic mean of all five desirability items. Participants were also instructed to respond to attractiveness and desirability measures as if they were single.

Sexual racism awareness

Participants were asked to self-rate their awareness of sexual racism in the gay community by responding to the single item: “How aware do you think you are of ‘sexual racism’ in the gay community?” Ratings ranged from 1 (*not at all aware*) to 5 (*extremely aware*). This question was asked after participants had responded to the vignettes.

Procedure

After being directed to the online Qualtrics survey, participants were informed that the survey would take roughly 15 minutes to complete. They then completed demographic items (age, racial background, country of birth, time spent living in Australia, etc.) before being presented with 12 online dating vignettes. For each they responded to the attractiveness and desirability items. Afterward they were asked to self-assess awareness of sexual racism.

Data analytic strategy

This study employed an entirely within-subjects 2 (“target racial background”—white/Asian) * 3 (“racial preference”—no preference/white/Asian) design, and employed a repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA). Descriptive and inferential statistics and Pearson correlations were computed. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 20.

Results

Descriptive statistics and preliminary analyses

Men rated as being either below or above average in attractiveness were chosen on the basis that they had been pre-rated as comparably attractive (respectively), and this was confirmed to be the case in the current sample with the six men rated below average all falling in the range of 1.5–2 out of 5. Similarly, the six attractive men each fell in the range of 2.8–3.4 (out of 5). Importantly, the combined

Table 1. Mean (SD) desirability of men depending on their racial background and racial preference.

Target racial background	Racial preference			Total
	Asian	White	No preference	
Asian	2.87(1.02)	1.96(.90)	2.88(.81)	2.57(.73)
White	2.46(.91)	2.44(1.07)	2.83(.84)	2.58(.72)
Total	2.66(.78)	2.20(.87)	2.86(.65)	2.57(.61)

attractiveness of men per condition was between 2.25 and 2.75 out of 5 hence conditions were similar in terms of the overall attractiveness (per condition).

Table 1 shows the average desirability scores given (per condition) depending on target racial background and their racial preference.

Inferential statistics

Initially, a 2×3 repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to determine if target racial background and/or the racial preferences of the targets affected their desirability. While there was no effect of target racial background, $F(1,127) = .02$, $p = .90$, $\eta_p^2 < .001$, racial preference affected the desirability of the target, $F(1.63, 206.35) = 42.88$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .25$. Bonferroni pairwise comparisons indicated that potential partners with no racial preference were rated as more desirable than those that had an Asian preference ($p < .001$), who were in turn more desirable than those who had a preference for white men ($p = .002$).

There was a significant interaction between racial preference and target racial background, $F(2,254) = .43.10$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .25$, thus a simple-effects analysis was conducted. Separate one-way ANOVAs for each racial background condition indicated that desirability depended on target racial preferences. For white targets, $F(1.66, 210.54) = .11.37$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$, those with no racial preference were more desirable than those with either a white preference ($p < .001$) or an Asian preference ($p = .001$). For Asian targets, $F(1.82, 231.60) = 81.95$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .39$, a preference for white partners was less desirable than both an Asian preference ($p < .001$) or no preference ($p < .001$).

Pearson correlations were performed to determine the relationship between sexual racism awareness and desirability for white potential partners across each level of racial preference. No significant correlations were found when viewing white potential partners with no racial preference, $r(126) = .09$, $p = .34$; white preference, $r(126) = .15$, $p = .09$; or Asian preference, $r(126) = .17$, $p = .06$.

Discussion

Findings from the current study

The current research investigated the role potential partners' dating racial preferences plays in informing desirability in Asian MSM. Furthermore, this

study aimed to determine whether awareness of sexual racism in gay communities was related to the desirability of potential white partners that either fetishized or excluded Asian men. As hypothesized, potential white partners were more desirable when they did not have any racial preferences (compared to Asian or white preference). Potential Asian partners that preferred white partners were less desirable than those with no preference or a preference for other Asians. Unexpectedly, correlational analyses found no relationship between sexual racism awareness and desirability when evaluating potential white partners (regardless of racial preference).

Potential white partners with no racial preferences were more desirable than those with racial preferences favoring either Asian or white men. This is unsurprising in light of previous qualitative research suggesting that Asian MSM hold largely negative attitudes toward white men with a sexual preference for Asians (Poon & Ho, 2008). Han and Choi (2018) sample of nonwhite gay men (including Asian MSM) identified that white men that preferred nonwhite partners were considered “lacking” and less desirable than other white men (in part due to the stigma from other white men associated with seeking partners lower on the racial hierarchy). The current research extends Han and Choi (2018) findings in that negative attitudes toward white men that fetishize Asians are reflected in partner selection choices, with them being significantly less desirable than white men with no racial preferences. In conjunction with past research, our findings highlight the complicated dynamic between Asian MSM and so-called “rice queens.” Many Asian MSM have an internalized preference for white partners but most white men interested in Asian men are exclusively interested in Asians, thus, Asian men seeking white partners must often “settle” for “rice queens” (and the potential negative outcomes of dating them) in order to gain access to sexual/romantic partners (Bao, 2012; Caluya, 2006; Han, 2008; Han et al., 2014; Jackson, 2000; Nemoto et al., 2003). In our study, white men with a preference for Asian men were less desirable than those with no racial preference, likely reflecting the negative attitudes that Asian MSM hold toward those that sexually fetishize them.

White potential partners that were only interested in other white men were viewed as less desirable than those with no racial preferences. This is likely due to the negative attitudes that Asian men hold toward men that sexually exclude them. Previous qualitative research has found that many Asian MSM feel unwanted as partners as a result of racial exclusion (Callander et al., 2015; Caluya, 2006; Han, 2007). Furthermore, for many Asian MSM, being at the bottom of the racial hierarchy can lead to reduced self-esteem and social connectedness, as well as acting as a barrier in relationship seeking (Han, 2007; Han & Choi, 2018; Poon & Ho, 2008). An alternative explanation for this finding is that rather than reflecting negative attitudes toward those excluding them based on race, men simply did not

wish to express desirability for people that they believed would likely not be interested in them.

When evaluating Asian potential partners, those with a preference for white men were less desirable than both those with no racial preference and those with a preference for other Asian men. Previous research has found that despite a majority of Asian MSM having a preference for white partners, most have negative attitudes toward other Asian men who only desire white partners, reflecting feelings of competition between Asian men for white partners (Caluya, 2006; Han & Choi, 2018; Han et al., 2014; Poon & Ho, 2008). This was supported by the finding that Asian potential partners that preferred white partners were the least desirable of the three racial background conditions.

While white preference for Asian partners is commonly framed in the context of racial fetishization, Asians having a relative preference for other Asians has been conceptualized by some as a challenge to the racial hierarchy and a rejection of white/Asian racial power dynamics (Han, 2015; Poon & Ho, 2008). The findings of the current study support this idea. Asian potential partners that preferred other Asians were equally desirable as those with no racial preferences and more desirable than those that preferred white men. The current study provided the literature with evidence that Asian MSM take the racial preferences of Asian potential partners into account when selecting sexual and romantic partners. Our findings reflect complex intragroup dynamics between Asian MSM in partner selection, with feelings of competition for white partners as well as racial pride and a desire to escape unequal power dynamics all potentially influencing desirability.

An unexpected finding of this study was that there was no difference in desirability between Asian and white potential partners. Past quantitative studies have found that Asian MSM generally prefer white partners over Asian partners (Phua & Kaufman, 2003; Prestage et al., 2019; Tsunokai et al., 2013). This has also been supported by qualitative research (Han et al., 2014; Poon & Ho, 2008). It is possible that limitations of previous studies may have affected their findings. For example, in Han et al.'s (2014) study, rather than report their own racial preferences, participants recounted their perception of the racial preferences of other Asian MSM. Phua and Kaufman (2003) examined internet dating advertisements from 1999, since that time, preference for white partners among Asian MSM may have changed (possibly due to increasing levels of racial identification among Asian MSM). Finally, quantitative studies, for example, that of Prestage et al. (2019) commonly rely exclusively on self-report data, which may be subject to social desirability bias. It is also possible that our findings differed from previous studies as a result of sampling bias, i.e., our sample was non-representative of Asian MSM in Australia. The study was promoted as pertaining to sexual racism and its effect on partner desirability in gay Asian men. Furthermore, many

participants were recruited via gay Asian support groups/social media pages. As a result, those participating in the study may have been more likely to be interested in the topic of sexual racism as well as having a stronger sense of racial identification (i.e., less likely to have an internalized preference for white partners) (Drummond, 2005; Han et al., 2014). The demographics of the sample may have also contributed to this finding. Overall, the men in our sample were relatively young (average age around 28), which past studies have linked to higher levels of racial identification (Han & Choi, 2018; Han et al., 2014). Most of the sample were overseas born (primarily from East and South-East Asian countries) and less likely than Australian-born Asian men to have internalized racial prejudice toward other Asian men (Tan et al., 2013).

Implications of the current study

Previous research has found that Asian MSM often experience discrimination on online dating applications as a result of overt sexual racism (Callander et al., 2016; Han, 2007; Phua & Kaufman, 2003; Riggs, 2013). An implication of this study is that on an individual level, omitting expressions of racial preferences could have potential benefits for one's desirability. At the community level, not including racial preferences across online dating platforms could also reduce feelings of exclusion and discrimination among racial minority members. Online dating applications (such as Tinder, Grindr, Jack'd, etc.) could establish guidelines prohibiting overt sexual racism (expression of racial preferences) on users' profiles to this effect. Furthermore, campaigns aimed at promoting social awareness of the negative effects of overt sexual racism could also help reduce sexual racism online. It should be noted that overt sexual racism online is increasingly considered to be socially unacceptable, and men primarily communicate their racial preferences indirectly or not at all (Robinson, 2015). Thus, while reducing overt racism on online dating applications may improve the experience of racial minority members, it does little to address the systemic issues underlying their disadvantaged status in partner selection nor alleviate the resultant feelings of invisibility and undesirability in online dating spaces.

Past literature suggests that Asian men indicating a preference for other Asian men are not fetishizing them but rather attempting to avoid potential unhealthy power dynamics by challenging the racial hierarchy (Han et al., 2014; Poon & Ho, 2008). Indeed, seeking out other Asian men as partners is a valid stigma mitigation strategy which promotes the idea that Asian men are viable partners for each other, not just competition. Given the way romantic and sexual preferences are socially derived and internalized (Green, 2008), it is not realistic that all Asian MSM can simply avoid the effects of sexual racism by seeking Asian partners. Asian MSM may mitigate the negative effects of sexual racism by increasing racial identification (Han et al., 2014). Seeking out

other Asian MSM as friends or attending gay Asian social groups could provide men with a support network of people who have experienced similar stigma due to sexual racism.

Strengths, limitations, and future directions

Previous studies have investigated the prevalence of dating racial preferences among men who have sex with men as well as its effect on racial minority members (including Asian MSM) (Paul et al., 2010; Phua & Kaufman, 2003; Prestage et al., 2019; Riggs, 2013; Robinson, 2015; Tsunokai et al., 2013). Though touched on in a few qualitative studies (Han & Choi, 2018; Han et al., 2014; Poon & Ho, 2008), this is the first experimental study to quantitatively investigate the effect of racial preferences on desirability in Asian MSM. It should be noted that a deliberate attempt was made to investigate *implicit* sexual racism rather than *explicit*, i.e. participants were made aware of the racial preferences of targets, but these were not explicitly expressed by the target. Hence, this study filled a gap in the existing literature, as it investigated what had heretofore only been assumed regarding racial preferences' effect on partner desirability. Future studies may wish to examine the effect that *explicit* expression of racial preferences has on desirability.

A theoretical limitation of this study is that we were unable to definitively explain why the racial preferences of potential partners affect desirability. Previous studies have found evidence that Asian MSM hold negative attitudes toward white men with racial preferences and positive attitudes toward Asian men that prefer other Asians (Caluya, 2006; Han, 2009; Han et al., 2014; Poon & Ho, 2008). This study found that patterns in desirability reflected these attitudes, however, as attitudes toward targets' racial preferences were not measured, no causal link between attitudes and desirability toward men with racial preferences can be assumed.

It is worth noting that the current study's sample only consisted of Asian men. As such, the findings of this study cannot be extended to non-white men of other racial backgrounds as the dynamics between different racial groups are often very different. For example, African-American MSM are fetishized (and also excluded) based on an entirely different set of racial stereotypes and are likely to have a different relationship to white potential partners with racial preferences, compared to Asian MSM (Han & Choi, 2018; Wade & Harper, 2019). As the focus of this study was an Asian sample, further research is required to understand how the racial preferences of potential partners affect desirability in men of other nonwhite backgrounds.

It is also worth noting that sexual racism awareness was measured on a single-item, self-report scale. Thus, participants may have overestimated their awareness of sexual racism leading to inflated scores on this variable (Fisher, 1993). Future studies could incorporate a validated sexual racism

awareness measure to control for bias often inherent in self report measures. Future studies may wish to ask participants to explicitly identify their attitudes toward the racial preferences of the targets in each scenario. This design would allow researchers to not only determine the effect of racial preferences and racial background on desirability but also if these effects are related to participant attitudes toward the racial preferences of each target. As this study was the first of its kind, it was important to ensure scale validity by using standardized facial stimuli, however, we recognized that the images used were not reflective of profile images typically found on online dating applications. Future studies could utilize more naturalistic/context specific target stimuli in order to increase ecological validity, and thus the generalizability of findings to the real world.

Conclusion

It was found that white potential partners with a racial preference were less desirable to Asian MSM than those with none. Asian potential partners with a preference for white men were less desirable than those with a preference for Asian men or with no racial preferences. This study expanded upon previous research, finding that the negative attitudes Asian men hold toward men with certain racial preferences are reflected in partner selection choices, though no causal link was established (Han et al., 2014; Poon & Ho, 2008). The findings of this study suggest that overt expression of racial preferences on online dating applications can in some cases, negatively affect desirability. Refraining from expressing racial preferences on online dating applications may not only be beneficial for individuals but also reduce feelings of discrimination and exclusion among racial minority members.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethical review

This study received ethical approval from the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number 14540) (Project Number: 14540), ACON Health's Research Ethics Review Committee (2019/18), and Thorne Harbour Health's Community Research Endorsement Panel (THH/CREP/19/011).

Data

Data on which this study is based can be found at https://osf.io/x6svm/?view_only=5cb50066826c44679028ca42c2d81a27

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