



2009

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Phua, Voon Chin, Desirée Ciambrone, and Obed Vazquez. 2009. "Advertising Health Status in Male Sex Workers' Online Ads." *The Journal of Men's Studies* 17:3, 251-258. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3149/jms.1703.251>

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Advertising Health Status in Male Sex Workers' Online Ads

Abstract

This brief report examines whether male sex workers mentioned any health concerns in their online ads. The analysis uses 203 male escorts' online ads collected from America Online chat rooms in 2001/2002. The results indicate that only 25 percent of male escorts explicitly mentioned any health-related words or phrases in their ads. The results also show that whether a male escort mentioned health in their ad is correlated with the type of images they would like to portray and with the type of sex services they offer.

Keywords

male sex workers, male escorts, health, online ads, sex services

Disciplines

Gender and Sexuality | Sociology

Advertising Health Status in Male Sex Workers' Online Ads

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This brief report examines whether male sex workers mentioned any health concerns in their online ads. The analysis uses 203 male escorts' online ads collected from America Online chat rooms in 2001/2002. The results indicate that only 25 percent of male escorts explicitly mentioned any health-related words or phrases in their ads. The results also show that whether a male escort mentioned health in their ad is correlated with the type of images they would like to portray and with the type of sex services they offer.

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Individuals' concerns with sexually transmitted infections have and continue to shape their sexual behaviors (e.g., Phua, Hopper, & Vazquez, 2002). For most sex workers, engaging in sexual activities is part of their work but specific sexual acts and frequency of engagement vary depending on demand and supply. Each sexual activity carries with it the risk of contracting and spreading sexual transmitted infections (STIs). Health concerns then are part of the occupational risks. Not surprisingly then, one of the sex work research's main focuses is on health (e.g., Aggleton, 1999).

Prevention and education efforts generally inform individuals about risks associated with various activities and ways to minimize risks, provide sources of assistance and guidance, and strengthen individuals' negotiating power in sexual activities (Castaneda & Collins, 1997). However, the extent to which safer sex is practiced may be hindered by other circumstances such as drug use (Morse, Simon, & Burchfiel, 1999), violence/abuse, or by naïve assumptions of infection status based on appearances, leading to an inattention to potential risk.

While both female and male sex workers confront similar issues, the dynamics and interactions with clients vary by gender, types of sex workers, and types of sexual

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The Journal of Men's Studies, Vol. 17, No. 3, Fall 2009, 251-258.

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jms.1703.251/\$14.00 • DOI: 10.3149/jms.1703.251 • Url: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3149/jms.1703.251>



activities involved. Given that AIDS has affected the gay population to a greater extent than the straight population, we focus our research on male sex workers. In this brief report, we are interested in whether male escorts mentioned health in their online ads. We presume that male escorts would be sensitive to health issues given the context of their work and might want to reassure their clients or at least be upfront about it for the following three reasons.

First, given that male escorts' work generally entails sexual activities, one would speculate the importance of health to both the workers and their clients, especially when the gay community and men who have sex with men have been hit hardest since the inception of AIDS. Second, online male escorts can offer information on their health status without any in-person awkwardness, and therefore, potential clients could be reassured or contemplate any risks involved. Third, as these male escorts advertised online, they are likely to own a computer and are computer literate. AIDS-related information and sources are readily available online. So for these sex workers, it is not a question about accessibility and availability of AIDS-related information but whether they choose to access these online sources.

Methods and Data

Advertisements

Using Internet profiles is an established process of data collection and a legitimate source of data (e.g., Bartoş Phua, & Avery [2009] on Romanian mate selection; Phua & Caras [2008] on Brazilian and American sex workers; Kaufman & Phua [2003] on U.S. mate selection). The strengths of using Internet ads as a source of data are that they are easily accessible and provide a non-intrusive way to study taboo topics (e.g., Phua, 2002). In 2001-2002, the authors collected 203 male escort profiles from America Online chat rooms that specifically mentioned "escorts" in their name. For example, the common ones are "NYCescortsm4m" (New York City escorts men for men) and "Escortsm4m" (Escorts men for men). (Sometime in mid-2001, the names of the chat rooms no longer have "escorts" in them but "companion.") We examined summary statistics as we collected 100 ads, 150 ads, 175 ads, and 203 ads and found that the variations within our selected variables are not statistically significant between having 175 ads and 203 ads. We chose the larger sample to ensure reliability in sub-group analyses.

In this brief report, the goal is to examine whether male escorts mentioned any health related information in their online ads. We assume that the importance of health to the advertisers is reflected in the ads (e.g., Phua et al., 2002). For example, for mention of health status, we counted only when words such as "HIV," or "disease" were used. When we use quotes to illustrate our points, we do not edit them but present verbatim excerpts. We use an ellipsis in places where we truncated the quotes to highlight the relevant phrases.

Statistical Analysis

For the analysis, we performed a logistic regression to examine what factors are associated with the mentioning of health in escorts' online profile. The dependent variable is whether or not advertisers mentioned health-related words or phrases, such as "drug and disease free" or "HIV."

Preliminary results indicated four important factors that affect whether online escorts mention health: self-identified sexual roles, self-identified personas, mentions of genitalia and elaborations on interests and personalities. First, we categorized self-identified sexual roles into "tops" (i.e., those who take the insertor role in anal sex), "bottoms" (i.e., those who assume the receptive role in anal sex), "versatiles" (i.e., those who claimed to be both bottoms and tops) and those who did not mention any role. Individuals who practice receptive roles in anal sex have higher risk of contracting HIV, a major concern among online escorts, than those who are tops only. Thus, we grouped bottoms and versatiles together. We use no self-identified sexual role as the reference group.

Second, we coded self-portraits into manly personas (i.e., those who assume a rugged, muscular, jock character), boyish personas (i.e., those who exclusively offer themselves as boys regardless of their age), other personas (i.e., mainly using ethnicity to paint their portraits), and those who did not mention any portrayals. We dummy coded this variable and used no portrayal as the reference.

Third, we dummy coded those who mentioned their genitalia in reference to those who did not. Finally, we dummy coded those who elaborated on their interests or personalities in reference to those who did not.

In the following sections, we first present descriptive data on contents of the ads. Then we present and discuss the regression results.

Highlights in Online Male Escorts' Advertisements

Only 25 percent of online male escorts' ads examined mentioned health in one form or another. The following quotes illustrate the common script:

I am disease free.

Dislikes: Rimming, Unsafe sex. HIV -, u be too.

I am very down to earth, not snobbish.... Always safe ... (that is not an option).

** HIV NEG = U B 2 **

HIV negative, non-smoker, no drugs.

Healthy, discreet and safe, cute but devilish.

Most online escorts advertised their physical attributes and preferences. About 53 percent allude to the dimensions of their genitalia. Sixty percent mentioned hair, eye or

skin color, 82 percent described their body types, and 88 percent mentioned their weight and height. About 63 percent elaborated on their personality and interests. Twenty-two percent self-identified sexually as tops, 32 percent as bottoms or versatiles but 46 percent did not mention their preferences.

These attributes help concoct images of desire. Some online escorts even went further than merely providing these basic vital statistics. They also specifically designed and projected particular images of desire. About 22 percent advertised their ethnicities as the selling point or defined themselves as models, while 25 percent called themselves boys, college students or boyish, regardless of their ages. Almost 37 percent identified themselves as studs, jocks, real men and similar hyper-masculine characters. For example, one escort wrote in his profile “Bodybuilding –5’7”/ 200lbs. /29” waist/ 18” arms/ 48” chest/ 26” quads/ hard and defined body,” while another wrote “Italian stallion, smooth beefy muscular body, hard rock iron muscle, v-shaped back, 6 pack abs.” Even the mentioning of interests contributed to such image building. For example, one escort advertised “... Camping, Hunting, Rafting, Kayaking ... Climbing, Rapelling, Wrestling ... will have cabin in Montana ... very Masculine Cowboy.” Only 16 percent did not portray any type of image.

Regression Results

Online escorts, who explicitly mentioned any sexual roles, either as tops, bottoms or versatile, are more likely to mention health than those who did not. With reference to those who did not mention any sexual roles, those who identified as bottoms or versatiles are marginally more likely to mention health than those who claimed to be tops. These results indicate the positive correlation between how upfront online escorts are with their sexual activity preference and with health concerns.

Those who assumed some sort of persona are more likely to mention health than those who did not. However, the results are statistically significant only for those who self-portrayed as being boyish. In fact, “boys” are significantly more likely than any other personas to mention health in their ads.

Those who mentioned their genitalia are significantly less likely to mention health in their ads than those who did not allude to their private parts. Preliminary results (available upon request) showed that the relationship between those who mentioned their genitalia and self-proclaimed as tops is higher than that with those self-identified as bottoms or versatiles (13% versus 2%). Perhaps the perception that tops are less at risk than bottoms in contracting HIV results in lowering the necessity to mention health concerns. This result is consistent with those with manly self-portrayal. Ironically, the need to know the health status is even more important from the perspective of tops-seeking clients.

Those who elaborated on their interests and personality are more likely to mention health than those who did not. This is consistent with what Phua et al.’s (2002) findings that those who are more chatty and vocal are more likely to mention health than those who are not.

Table 1
Logistic Regression Predicting Online Escorts' Likelihood of Mentioning Health in Ads

	Coefficient	Standard error
Self-identified sexual roles (Reference: Did not mention any role)		
Self-identified top	0.91*	0.47
Self-identified bottom or versatile	1.03**	0.42
Self-portraits (Reference: Did not have any self-portrait)		
Manly self-portrait	0.48	0.57
Boyish self-portrait	1.27**	0.59
Other self-portrait	0.43	0.63
Mentioned genitalia	-0.63*	0.37
Mentioned interests	1.95***	0.49
Pseudo R2	0.15	
N-size	203	

* statistically significant at 0.1

** statistically significant at 0.5

*** statistically significant at 0.01

Discussion

The results show that online escorts do not commonly advertise a clean bill of health. In an earlier study, Phua et al. (2002) looked at mentions of health status in men's online personals by race and sexual orientation. They showed that gay men are more concerned with health than are straight men in their ads. Also, those who sought sex explicitly in their personal advertisements were more likely to mention health. A recalculation of Phua et al.'s (2002) percentages of online personals that mentioned health shows that of the 2,400 ads, 16 percent mentioned health. Among gay men's ads, 24 percent mentioned health and 8 percent for straight men. Looking at those who explicitly sought sex in the same study, the percentages of ads mentioning health are much higher: 29 percent overall, 19 percent for straight men and 36 percent for gay men. While the 25 percent among online male escorts' ads is similar to the 24 percent among gay men's ads, one would expect more online escorts to mention health in their ads, or at least, the percentage mentioning health should be closer to those who sought sex in Phua et al.'s (2002) study.

In some cases, mentioning safe sex may imply a lack of interpersonal trust, or imply having HIV instead of trying to prevent it (e.g., Diaz & Ayala, 1999; Yeakley & Grant, 1997). Noting health may be highlighting potential dangers in their trade, and

risks alienating clients by thrusting reality in their faces. Thus, online male escorts may not bring it up even if they would take necessary safer sex precautions.

Another possibility may be that sex workers accept the risk (calculated or not) as part of job. In some cases, it simply reflects a sense of fatalism regarding HIV infection (Diaz & Ayala, 1999). Some sex workers may be resigned to the contracting sexually transmitted infections as an eventuality and thus, are not overly concerned about it. Some sex workers may perceive sexually transmitted infections (may be even HIV) as a tabooed infection or nuisance rather than a life threatening disease. For some, it may even be a deliberate effort to contract diseases (e.g., Gauthier & Forsyth, 1999).

The results also suggest that portrayals of hyper-masculinity and concerns with STIs are negatively correlated. In fact, some research findings suggest that machismo and safe sex practices (at least the explicit verbalization of it) may not be congruent (Phua et al., 2002). Perhaps online male escorts construe mentioning health status as a damper to the sexy masculine images they portrayed. Phua and Caras (2008) have argued that creating a personal brand and a unique image is important to their business. Some of the portrayals include: "Tanned Toned, Rugged and very Masculine Cowboy," "Ofc Manager and ex Military & Sports Jock," "Tall, GL (good-looking) Texas man, not a boy," "Personal trainer, fitness consult, national level bodybuilder," and "Sir! To you, 100% Top, ALL MUSCLE." To be overly concerned with health may be perceived as an assault to their ruggedness and may not be consistent with their script.

The result showing marginal differences between assumed tops and bottoms begs the question whether mentioning health reflects concerns for themselves or merely assurance for potential clients. In fact, only a few ads actually request that clients be STDs-free or clean. Perhaps subsequent conversation between the two parties would deal with that issue or that providing the desired image outweighs the need to be upfront about health status.

Conclusion

Researchers find that health issues are increasingly important among gay men (Davidson, 1991; Hamers, Bueller, & Peterman, 1997). Thus, in this brief report, we focus on those men who offer sexual services to other men for money: male escorts. Specifically, we explore whether male escorts volunteered their health status in their online ads. While online escort ads are detailed in services provided and self-descriptions, only 25 percent of the 203 online male escorts volunteered any information on health.

Some sexually transmitted diseases are curable but others have dire consequences. As such, it is to the advantage of both escorts and their clients to take preventive measures while engaging in sexual activities. Making assumptions based on appearances is no longer reliable given the advent of good medicine that has successfully controlled many illnesses. However, not everyone is as candid about having sexually transmitted infections; they either simply do not know or do not wish to know they have any. Even if one volunteers his health status, it is only as updated as their last health examination. But at least it demonstrates a level of self-conscious about such issues. In some cases,

Phua et al. (2002) suggest that some individuals may view asking partners about their health status as inappropriate or distrusting. Thus, these individuals might remain mute on the topic unless their partners bring it up.

Outreach programs to online sex workers may be easier given the nature of online access than reaching other types of sex workers. With its clandestine nature of work, identifying sex workers is still a challenge. More importantly, Davies and Feldman (1999) argue that sex workers form a marginalized population of the gay community because "many feel that the existence of organized sex work in the gay community will be regarded by those who would deny civil rights to gay men and lesbians as further reason to diminish their precarious freedom under the law. Others feel that sex work has no place in the gay community since it represents a form of sexual relationship which that community seeks to eradicate" (p. 18). Whether it is a political or a moral question, such opinions would abate any efforts to allocate resources to reach out to sex workers. Further research is recommended to understand how outreach groups view various types of sex work, and how and why they prioritize outreach to this diverse population.

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