

# How does racial discrimination impact users of online dating websites?

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University of Illinois social work professor Ryan Wade studies racialized sexual discrimination in the online world and the impact it has on gay or bisexual men of color who use dating websites. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

Many people go online to find their perfect match in a romantic or

sexual partner but find that racial discrimination is prevalent. Ryan Wade is a professor of social work at the University of Illinois who studies a phenomenon known as racialized sexual discrimination and how it affects the psychological well-being of gay or bisexual black men who use sexual networking apps or websites. Wade spoke recently with News Bureau education editor Sharita Forrest about the research.

## **How do you define racialized sexual discrimination and how does it differ from general racist attitudes?**

Racialized sexual discrimination is sexualized discriminatory treatment that's directed toward racial or ethnic minority groups in online sexual networking spaces. It's a multidimensional construct often grounded in social-cultural scripts or racial stereotypes, such as beliefs that [black men](#) embody hypersexual prowess or virility or that Asian men are meek or submissive sex partners. RSD may be expressed as a personal preference that's used to select or exclude potential partners of a certain [race](#) or ethnicity.

We developed two studies to investigate RSD. The first involved a series of [focus groups](#), in which gay or [bisexual men](#) of color shared their experiences with RSD. We then used those experiences to develop a quantitative scale of RSD, which we used along with other sociodemographic and psychosocial measures as part of a second, larger online study. This study included a nationally representative sample of nearly 2,000 black gay or bisexual men.

## **Does RSD occur in varying forms?**

We found in the focus groups that RSD manifested in four different domains: racialized exclusion, rejection, degradation and erotic objectification. For example, exclusion occurs when people state in their

profiles that they're "not into" people of a certain race or ethnicity, or write "I'm only into other white people."

Racialized rejection occurs during interactions, such as when a user explicitly rejects a person who has contacted them based upon their racial or [ethnic background](#). Or, recipients may ignore messages when they are contacted, and the senders assume they are being rejected based on their race or ethnicity.

Degradation is when someone makes a hostile or denigrating comment about people of particular racial or ethnic backgrounds, either on their user profile or in a private message.

Erotic objectification is when people assume others will embody a certain sexual role based upon their race or ethnicity, or when people are assumed to have specific desirable physical characteristics that are stereotypically associated with their racial or ethnic identity.

## **Does the impact differ if the person responsible was the same race or a different race than the recipient?**

After analyzing the scale, the hypothesized four-domain structure of RSD split into eight domains, largely along the lines of the racial or ethnic identity of the individuals perpetrating RSD. Black men who were objectified by white men based on physical characteristics experienced significant increases in depressive symptomatology and a significant decrease in self-worth.

When black men experienced rejection from someone of their own race or ethnic background, it also was associated with significant increases in depressive symptoms. When other black men said they only wanted to meet white people, participants talked about the unique way that

rejection hurt.

We know there are all these cultural standards of beauty that pervade these spaces and elevate whiteness as the highest form of desirability, and we found that formed another domain of RSD that we called "white supremacy." Seeing white men on these sites saying they only wanted to meet other [white men](#) significantly increased depressive symptoms in black men in the study.

## **Because people are communicating online rather than face to face, does that change the dynamic?**

In these online spaces, people might write overtly hostile things on their user profiles about people of certain races or ethnicities. When you're out and about in the world, that doesn't usually happen. That's something that's unique about the digital landscape – people write these racist things on their profiles, and you might not experience that upfront if you encountered them in a bar, for example.

These digital spaces could be exacerbating negative experiences with racism and discrimination because there's anonymity.

## **How might clinicians who work with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender populations apply these findings?**

If a practitioner is working with people of color who use these online spaces, it's important to know that they might be encountering these forms of RSD, and they may need to develop coping strategies to help.

On a community level, it's important for people to understand the scope and impact of RSD. Maybe by disseminating information about that, it

might mobilize the broader LGBT community to address this phenomenon. The Trevor Project and the It Gets Better campaign both heighten awareness of bullying and suicide among LGBT youths. I could envision a similar media campaign to bring awareness to RSD and that we need to discourage it.

## **Are any of the websites or apps addressing this type of discrimination now?**

It's well-known and talked about, but no one has really made an effort to confront it in a formal way. Grindr just started an initiative called "Kindr," which is aimed at addressing many of the stigmas that exist in the LGBT community, such as discriminating against people who have HIV, who are larger or heavier, or who are transgender.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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