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'Straight-ish': agency, constraints, and the linguistic negotiation of identity and desire in online personal advertisements among men seeking men

Chris VanderStouwe

Abstract

Despite a robust literature on agency in language, gender, and sexuality research, constraints on agency as seen through multiple layers of identity, conflict, or construct are less clearly discussed. Through an analysis of straight-identified men seeking other men on a popular internet personal advertisement forum, I examine the language that individuals posting in men-seeking-men online personals employ to balance a self-presentation as a straight male while simultaneously seeking same-sex partners. To do so, I build upon current conceptualisations of agency to focus on the linguistic manipulation and negotiation of the constraints to their agentive abilities to construct identities and desires. These discursive negotiations serve to separate one's identity from one's desires in terms of space, time, and agency and create a nuanced understanding of these men's sexuality.

KEYWORDS: AGENCY; CONSTRAINT; IDENTITY; DESIRE; MSM

Introduction

In early 2014, I was browsing a gay male dating site out of both of personal and research based curiosity. I clicked on one profile that had caught my interest due to the fact that his username showed up in a list of 'last visits',

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a notification which shows he had recently viewed my profile. I replied by sending him a quick message. He sent a message back, and a conversation began that quickly developed into discussing whether a potential physical encounter could be arranged. At this point, he responded, 'Well, I think our friend circles are a little close'. When I asked how we knew each other – names were never exchanged during this interaction, and commonly aren't at this point – his response was simply, 'I'm 90 per cent straight and the other 10 per cent I like to keep a secret', and although I had responded to that statement, our conversation ended there, with him ceasing to reply further.

Contemporary trends in popular representations of sexuality – especially among and in reference to millennials – have begun to explore non-exclusively heterosexual conceptualisations of sexual identity. Viral media articles and op-ed pieces have sprung up with claims that surprising numbers of straight men' have had same-sex encounters, espousing a representation of younger millennials coming of age as a generation who is rejecting identity labels entirely. Frequently discussed primarily in reference to younger adults, this trend is often framed among liberal outlets as unsurprising and natural, with frequent allusions to Kinsey-scale ideas of sexuality. Despite these and other popular claims of reimagined sexualities, however, dominant ideologies about sexuality, sexual identity, and acceptable expressions of such concepts remain both rigid and naturalised, as seen in other work on the ideologies of straight-identified men interested in other men (e.g. VanderStouwe 2016). For many individuals, such ideologies play a critical role in constructions of sexual identity amid desires often seen as disparate to those identities. This paper presents an analysis exploring linguistic patterns among a group of self-identified straight men in online personal advertisements seeking other men. For these men, popular ideologies of allowable expressions of sexuality remain present and pervasive, insisting on dominant labels of sexual orientation even amidst their own rejection of such labels. Influencing their linguistic constructions of sexuality, identity, and desire are myriad factors, including factors of space (both private and public) and time, as well as constraints on agency both internal and external that guide them. These factors will be explored in the data that follows to illustrate their influence on the negotiation and creation of these individuals' sexual selves.

Background

Agency in linguistic anthropology

A robust literature exists on agency in linguistic anthropology (e.g. Ahearn 2001; Duranti 2004), defined as 'the socioculturally mediated capacity to

act' (Ahearn 2001), and featuring discussions about what agency entails, where it is located, and what limitations may exist on it in varying social contexts. Work in feminist studies and feminist linguistics has also taken up agency as a point of analysis (e.g. Davies 1991; Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000; Arnold 2015) especially as it relates to minoritised groups and attempts at gaining or reclaiming agency in settings where norms inherently provide agency for certain groups at the expense of others, scholarship of which is also recently seen in studies within language, gender, and sexuality (e.g. Zimman 2010, 2014; Gaudio 2014; Mills and Jones 2014).

Here, I build upon current discourses of agency to explore a dialectic between agents and constraints on agency, focusing not only on the constraints themselves, but crucially on the linguistic manipulation and negotiation around such constraints to achieve a means to an end. It is important to recognise that agency is always subject to constraints, as agents are always acting within a social, cultural, and/or institutional structure that guides their capacity to act. However, by highlighting the constraints faced, and the often multi-faceted and complicated nature of both the constraints themselves and the manipulation and negotiation that individuals undergo in their employment of agency, we can come to a more nuanced and contextualised understanding of what agency is and how it should be viewed and theorised.

The data presented here aim to contribute to this theorisation by examining constraints on agency seen through the linguistic negotiation of identity and sexuality among a particular group of men seeking men who identify themselves as straight while simultaneously seeking physical encounters with other men.

Language use in Internet dating

Linguistic inquiry regarding internet-based language has proliferated since the boom in popularity of internet sites for personal use and the creation of smart phones and phone-based applications, pioneered by David Crystal through his now long-standing research on internet language and new media (Crystal 2001, 2011). Expanding on this foundational research on digital language and social media's role in creating and maintaining personal relationships, there is a growing body of work that focuses specifically on interactions and language surrounding the now ubiquitous phenomenon of internet dating. Much of the early research on digital dating expanded on previous research on advertisements in print form (e.g. Bruthiaux 1994; Coupland 1996; Shalom 1997; Thorne and Coupland 1998; Lester and Goggin 2005), to examine specifically digital forms of dating and intimacy within the heterosexual marketplace (e.g. del Teso-Craviotto 2006, 2008; Mortensen 2010, 2015a, 2015b; Gershon 2010a, 2010b).

Scholars in queer linguistics have engaged directly with internet dating and cybersex spaces as well (e.g. Jones 2005; King 2011). Within this increasing research on digital dating spaces, both internet and smartphone based, for men who have sex with men, the focus is most frequently on issues of race (e.g. Rega 2013; Birnholtz et al. 2014; Fitzpatrick et al. 2015), disease prevention and sexual health (e.g. Rice et al. 2012; Landovitz et al. 2013; Phillips 2013; Haimson et al. 2014), and hyper-attention to masculinity by men in dating interactions (e.g. Robinson and Vidal-Ortiz 2012; Baker 2013; Bogetic 2013; Jørgensen 2015). Importantly, while some use an analysis of language as a means to understand these concepts (e.g. Rega 2013; Phillips 2013; Baker 2013; Bogetic 2013), others either employ broader understandings of discourse or discuss social issues from other fields of inquiry in analysing these topics.

Each of these studies has made a contribution to our understanding of the social issues that arise in spaces dedicated to dating in the digital world. However, in such research, categorisations of sexual identity are frequently treated as given: That is, it is assumed that men on dating sites marketed toward gay men self-identify as gay. The only exceptions are found in research focused on sexual health, where the clinical label Men Who Have Sex with Men (MSM) is used instead. The assumption of a static sexual identity in some studies and conversely its clinical erasure in others becomes problematic when considering the proliferation of posts that include mentions of straight identity, having girlfriends, not being out, having a bisexual identity, and so on. Moreover, previous research on digital dating examines real-time interactional spaces, such as chat rooms and phone apps with interactive chat functions; less is known about the planned discourse that is possible in ad-based dating sites. With these considerations in mind, this paper uses publicly available online personal advertisements from the popular online classified website Craigslist to explore the conflicting intersections of desire and identity among men who do not identify as gay but nevertheless post advertisements seeking men for sexual acts. Based on the following analysis, I argue that language is used in such ads to negotiate desire and identity around primarily social and ideological constraints on individual agency based on expected gender and sexual roles, with tropes of space and time revealing divergences and reconciliations between portrayals of public identity and professed sexual desires.

Men Who Have Sex With Men

Work in linguistic anthropology, queer studies, and other related fields has explored straight-identified men who engage in non-heterosexual sex acts

broadly under varying labels including MSM, which stands for ‘men who have sex with men’ (e.g. Boellstorff 2011; Bogetic 2013). The concept of men who sleep with men but do not identify as gay is not a particularly new one, with common usage in the medical field and HIV/AIDS advocacy groups, though it is less commonly seen in fields such as linguistics and linguistic anthropology. The classification emerged in the 1980s as a result of the HIV/AIDS epidemic as medical/clinical terminology to expand the reach of the medical community on those who were most at risk for contracting HIV, by describing individuals based on practices, not on reported desires or identities such as ‘gay’ (Boellstorff 2011). In studies that focus on MSM as a categorisation, the role of agency in constructions and portrayals of identity is not as salient of a factor. Sexuality is often examined in terms primarily of practices and actions, and downplays the link between identity and sexual activity. MSM in an American context is predominantly a clinical term used to describe the action of patients regardless of their self-identity, removing agency completely.

Work has begun to move past MSM as simply a clinical referencing only sexual practices and not formations of social and cultural identities. For instance, Jane Ward has also done extensive work on similar populations of men, referring to the practice as ‘dude sex’ (Ward 2008, 2015). In her analysis, dude sex is employed by white heterosexual men as a way of solidifying a more authentic and natural sense pairing whiteness with heterosexuality that differs from racialised understandings of MSM practices involving men of colour. She further argues that dude sex and down low sexual practices should not be seen in traditional terms as being ‘closeted gay’ for participating in same-sex sexual activities, but rather that while ‘some men who have sex with men prefer to do so within gay/queer cultural worlds, others (such as the ‘straight dudes’ described here) indicate a greater sense of belonging or cultural ‘fit’ with heterosexual identity and heteroerotic culture’ (Ward 2008:416), a facet of identity construction also illustrated in the data below.

In the context of internet personal advertisements, while MSM and dusesex are not terms employed or discussed among those posting ads themselves, these phenomena are informative in understanding the ways that people who would clinically or analytically fall within this category construct their own identities and desires through language. Thus while I investigate issues of identity and desire of individuals who would conceptually fall within the MSM categorisation, I argue here for a more nuanced and complex understanding of individuals’ conceptions of their own identities and desires through an understanding of the role of agency, space, and time in these formulations.

Data and methods

In online advertisements, including those presented here today, language becomes the primary means through which individuals seek to achieve their goals of finding other individuals with whom to engage in same-sex sexual encounters, linking together the importance of a self-presented identity or identification with their underlying desires, in this case that of a straight presentation of the self coupled with desire for those of the same sex.

The last two decades have witnessed a proliferation of online sites and smart phone applications geared toward gay men designed for meeting, dating, and hooking up. Even before the advent of online resources aimed specifically toward gay men, however, online personal advertisements began popping up as early as the late 1990s through the popular website Craigslist. Established in the San Francisco Bay Area in 1999, Craigslist sites are now available throughout the world as the internet-based equivalent of a newspaper classified section. Craigslist features city-specific web pages that offer products and services of all kinds, including housing, personal ads, and jobs among other categories and subcategories. In the personals section, forums include 'platonic' searches, 'missed connections', 'casual encounters', and several options for seeking romantic partners based on the poster's own gender and the gender of the person(s) being sought (Figure 1).

The screenshot shows the Craigslist website for the San Francisco Bay Area. The header includes the Craigslist logo and a search bar. The main content area is divided into several sections: 'community' (activities, artists, childcare, general, groups, pets, events), 'housing' (apts / housing, rooms / shared, sublets / temporary, housing wanted, housing swap, vacation rentals, parking / storage, office / commercial, real estate for sale), 'jobs' (accounting+finance, admin / office, arch / engineering, art / media / design, biotech / science, business / mgmt, customer service, education, food / bev / hosp, general labor, government, human resources, internet engineers, legal / paralegal, manufacturing, marketing / pr / ad, medical / health, nonprofit sector, real estate, retail / wholesale, sales / biz dev, salon / spa / fitness, security, skilled trade / craft, software / qa / dba, systems / network, technical support, transport), 'personals' (strictly platonic, women seek women, women seeking men, men seeking women, men seeking men, misc romance, casual encounters, missed connections, rants and raves), and 'discussion forums' (1099, gifts, pets, apple, haiku, philos, arts, health, politic, atheist, help, psych, autos, history, queer, beauty, housing, recover, bikes, jobs, religion, calahe, inkae, rdn). The sidebar on the left contains links to 'post to classifieds', 'my account', 'search craigslist', 'event calendar', 'help, faq, abuse, legal', 'avoid scams & fraud', 'personal safety tips', 'terms of use', 'system status', 'about craigslist', 'craigslist is hiring in sf', and 'craigslist blog'. The sidebar on the right lists 'nearby cities' including bakersfield, chico, fresno, gold country, hanford, humboldt, inland empire, klamath falls, las vegas, los angeles, medford, mendocino co, merced, modesto, monterey, orange co, redding, reno, roseburg, sacramento, san luis obispo, santa barbara, santa maria, sf bay area, siskiyou co, stockton, susanville, ventura, visalia-tulare, yuba-sutter, and 'us cities' and 'us states'.

Figure 1: Craigslist homepage.

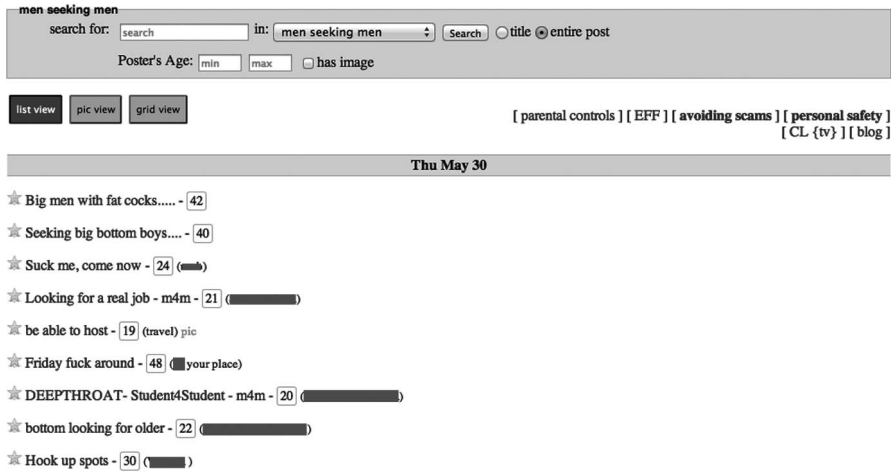


Figure 2: Men Seeking Men personals page.

The data set for the analysis in this paper come from a local Craigslist forum for an area in central California that I refer to as Mission City, which is posted inside the ‘men seeking men’ forum of the personals section (Figure 2).¹ The forum is designed primarily for dating or romance but is frequently used for posts about sexual encounters as well. By choosing to focus specifically on the men-seeking-men forum of Craigslist, I seek to examine a forum that carries an implicit ideological assumption that a poster’s sexual interest is primarily or exclusively in other men, as opposed to casual, one-off encounters. Moreover, issues of identity and commodification of the self, which have been detailed elsewhere (VanderStouwe 2016), are more visible in this particular forum, because more negotiation of the self is necessary in a space where encounters are framed as potentially less fleeting and more intimate. As Gershon (2010a) points out, different forms of new media foster different types of interaction; in a forum such as men seeking men, which allows for more anonymity than many dating sites that require a log in and user screen name, and forces a ‘first impressions’ approach to self-presentation – posters get only one chance to make an impression – constructions of both identity and desires as well as commodification of the self are especially salient points of inquiry.

This analysis is situated ethnographically in the online community of Mission City. The region, though relatively urban, is isolated geographically from other areas of the state by topography and rural, agriculturally robust areas that create a unique sociocultural environment distinct from the state’s larger urban metropolitan areas. The LGBT community, though

vibrant, does not have the benefit of a dedicated space (such as a gay bar or neighbourhood) around which to congregate, forcing community members to negotiate and create more temporary spaces for themselves. This is a relatively recent development, as in decades past, several gay bars were in operation in Mission City, with the last one closing in 2008, although a 'gay night' continues to be held every Sunday night at a bar in the downtown area of the city. Attempts to open new bars for a gay-identified clientele have been unsuccessful, in part due to a common belief among local LGBT community members that such establishments are no longer necessary because they can now 'go anywhere and be accepted'. Among those who feel that gay spaces are no longer necessary due to a general atmosphere of social acceptance, it is common to assert that we are living in a 'post-gay' era; this attitude can be found not only in popular discussions (e.g. Aguirre-Livingston 2011, who terms the phenomenon 'post-mo', short for 'post-modern homo'), but in academic research as well (e.g. Alderson 2005; Ghaziani 2011; Ng 2013). Critics in turn claim that these arguments rely on a sense of social privilege, homonormativity, and neoliberalism that guides individuals' feelings that gay men and lesbians are increasingly accepted, largely due to their desire to be seen as 'normal' and just like everyone else (read: heterosexuals).

The 'post-gay' atmosphere in Mission City similarly depends on privilege and feelings of social acceptance, especially among LGBT locals, who are often older and more wealthy than their counterparts among university students and lower-middle-class and working-class Latinos. This has led to a division between the more affluent, established LGBT populations who feel they are accepted anywhere and both the Latino communities that are often underrepresented in LGBT spaces and the often-younger queer crowds that work to create safe spaces for themselves on and off campus in both public and more private settings. These safe spaces are reserved for those who do not 'pass' in their daily life as someone who might just 'happen to be gay' but is otherwise accepted or unmarked in a dominant public setting (VanderStouwe 2015). The dichotomous population has led to the emergence of a local LGBT culture that highly values traditional norms of gendered behaviour in everyday life, even among sexual minorities, where it's okay to be 'out' but less acceptable to 'act gay' (VanderStouwe 2015:280). As a small but robust city that itself is urbane though surrounded by rural areas, this context is a rich site for exploration due to the relatively liberal social atmosphere of Mission City coupled with the lack of easily available resources typically offered by larger metropolitan areas (e.g. Manalansan 2003; Podesva 2011; Leap 1998, 2005), which are so often the sites of queer ethnographic research.

To be included in the full data set, a posting needed to include one of four key words in the advertisement title: *straight*, *curious*, *discreet* or *DL*. Spelling variations of these terms, such as *str8* or *discrete*, were also included. Data was collected roughly weekly over a period of six months from January to June 2013, for a total of 438 posts. As this project is centrally concerned with questions of desire and identity, and ways they are linguistically negotiated when in apparently mismatched alignment, all collected data was qualitatively examined for explicit evidence of a poster exhibiting a straight identity. As *straight*, or spelling variations thereof, is the description of choice used by posters' self-identification, it is the description that I will employ here. (At no point were clinical words such as *heterosexual* used in any posts). The resulting data set comprises a total of 61 unique posters' advertisements for analysis, with several individuals posting multiple times in the set. For most of the repeats, the language was identical in each post, with any changes over time being very minor. Thus, although some of the posts in this set were repeated several times in the full data, only one instance of each is counted in the subset of data presented here.

In many posts, abbreviations are employed by posters that are commonly found in personal advertisements. Some are long-standing from the days of personal ads in newspapers that charged by character, such as 'br' for brown hair or 'bl' for blue eyes; others are more recent innovations, such as referencing drug use through the consistent capitalisation of a particular letter used to code a particular drug (e.g. 'parTy' as a reference to 'Tina', a euphemism for crystal methamphetamine). To accommodate for potentially obscure abbreviations or words used in the posts, an appendix is provided as a key to the terms and abbreviations.

Data analysis

In the analysis that follows, all of the included posts are qualitatively analysed to examine ways that individuals linguistically present themselves and their desires. While all make some explicit mention of a straight identity, the data reveal that such a distinction is not so easily distinguished. Several patterns emerge in the data that show that desire and identity are negotiated in ways that maintain an individual's self-presentation as cohesive despite ostensible contradictions from an outsider perspective. First, I illustrate ways that desire and identity work in these advertisements on different spatial and temporal planes, whereby desires are more immediately realised and restricted to specific spaces, while displays of identities are longer-lasting and manifest themselves in public, dominant spaces. Second, I examine ways that posters acknowledge or exploit the potential irony of

their straight identity in juxtaposition with their posted desires within a forum for men seeking sex with other men. Conclusively, I discuss the role of agency and both self-imposed and external constraints on these men's capacity to act in their linguistic constructions of sexual identities, desires, and their search for sexual encounters.

Action and time: the immediacy of action

In many of the posts made by the straight men in the data set, tropes of both time and space play a crucial role in their ability to construct and maintain a straight identity while exhibiting sexual interest in other men. Sexual activities being sought are constructed in temporal terms as of immediate importance, while desire is often mentioned as a more long-standing aspect of one's selfhood. In addition, desire and identity become connected in spatial terms through private versus public spaces and experiences.

Many of the straight-identified posters present their need to act upon a same-sex desire in a very short-term time frame, with frequent mentions of looking for someone in the here-and-now, as seen in the excerpts in Example 1. Each example, some of which feature repeated posts when the text provides examples of multiple phenomena presented in the analysis, presents the ad's caption and portions of the main text; any abbreviations or terms that are unclear are listed in the appendix.²

Example 1

(a) *Straight Guy here...curious – 24*

[...] jocks are + but you don't have to be one. all races welcome can only host this afternoon

(b) *I'm curious/busco un hombre discreto – 22*

Hi am 22 looking for fun right now. Im discreet straight and just curious to know what is like to be with a DL straight bro. [...] Send picture(s) and stats in first email so I know you are serious looking for now...if this is up I'm still looking for you

(c) *DL college boy wants to be your bitch – 21*

[...] I want to be have strangers' cocks shoved up my ass soon! Looking as long as this is up, hope to be violated soon :-)

(d) *DL bottom for DL top – 25*

GI DL bottom here looking for a discrete DL top. My GF is out looking to get Fucked by a hung top. Shot me stats and pics if intrested. Only safe sane ppl

(e) Straight guy wants mouth on my cock – 28

[...] I'm looking to do this ASAP! Again don't ask for pics etc. Just be ready to come over and work on my cock til you get it hard and make it explode.

In these examples, time-oriented expressions such as *can only host this afternoon* (a), *right now* (b), *soon* (c), and *looking to do this ASAP!* (e) are used to show that the poster is looking for action in the immediate present or very near future. Likewise, the mention of a girlfriend (GF) being 'out' (of the house), as seen in example 1d, implies that a sexual encounter is sought before her return. So while a poster may identify as straight – and may even mention having a girlfriend – the immediate moment presents an opportunity to act upon a desire that is otherwise unavailable for exploration. Urgency is also signalled by the use of the phrase *if this is (still) up*, seen in Examples 1b–c, as well as in many other posts; this conventional expression signals that the post will remain active only until a satisfactory response is received, at which point the post will be removed. In other words, once a sexual encounter is arranged, the poster will not seek further sexual action. The frequency of this phenomenon may be due in part to the chronological organisation of Craigslist advertisements, which post the most recent ad first and move in reverse time as the reader continues to scroll down. By stating that one is still looking if the ad is visible then shows that a post which may not be the most recently listed is still active, a pattern that is corroborated by other posters who mention that they will take their ad down once a sexual partner has been found who satisfies the terms of their desired activities.

Desire and time: lingering curiosity

As seen in the above examples, when sexual activity is discussed in these posts, immediacy is highlighted. However, when desire is more prominently discussed, the temporal dimension switches as well, with posters discussing their long-standing desires for same-sex experiences even if those desires have never been acted upon or providing a justification for why such desires have newly developed. Several posters describe a lingering curiosity that is only now being explored. In these posts, illustrations of which are seen in Example 2 below, curiosity and a desire to experiment are not spur-of-the-moment decisions, but thoughts that have been harboured for a considerable period of time.

Example 2

(a) *Curious College Boy Wants to Experiment – 22*

Been really curious lately. I love fucking my girlfriend, and she seems to really love it. I want to know what it's like to be on her end of things, and I think I might want to experiment with letting a guy pound my butt. Have to keep it DL, though. [...]

(b) *Curious first timer – 28*

Curious first timer here, never done this but have been wanting to have fun with guy. Send me your pics and stats I want to top since it is my first time let's do this today

(c) *late night curiosity – 20*

hey there straight guy looking for another guy the same. I've always wanted to experiment with another guy. [...]

(d) *DL college boy wants to be your bitch – 21*

I'm mostly straight, but am submissive and have frequent fantasies of being sexuallyhumiliated by guys and groups of guys who force me to service their cocks with my mouth and ass. I can't host, but am open to location :-)

Most of these examples feature tense-aspect markers such as *been* in Example 2a or *have been* in Example 2b, which express a long-standing desire that has not been acted upon previously. These are often also paired with expressions such as *a while*, as seen in Example 2c. That the desires are so frequently framed as inherent to the individual or as part of a long-term interest signals a complicated reality for these men, who must negotiate their desires with their continued straight identities; many of them explicitly mention their exploits with women as well.

The complexity of the intersection among identity, desires, and practices is further illustrated in Example 2d, in which the poster mentions 'frequent fantasies' involving being submissive to other men. Framing this scenario as a fantasy may signal that the idea of acting upon a desire may be more important than the sexual act itself, although such possible motivations are difficult to ascertain from the posts themselves.

Identity and space

The focus of desire around temporal dimensions in Craigslist men-seeking-men ads operates in tandem with a strong link between identity and space,

so that while desires are framed as long-standing and acting upon them is framed as time-sensitive, a straight identity is portrayed as essential for one's public, outward self-presentation, with a bending of that rigidity only allowed in an anonymous, private, safe space that permits curiosity and exploration. In the privacy of an anonymous internet space, same-sex desires and fantasy can flourish despite a public straight identity. This negotiation expands into physical spaces as well when posters describe the locations in which their desired practices may take place. Example 3 presents several posts negotiating both space and identity, including locations for meeting should the poster find someone with whom to meet up.

Example 3

(a) *DL DUDE* – 21

Straight acting dude here, I'll be at school tomorrow doing some studying. [...] Just be in decent shape, MASCULINE, and most of all; Discrete. [...] If your white and into chicks too, that's a major plus! Ideally I would prefer someone from outta town.

(b) *Straight male visiting and looking to experiment for first time* – 28

Straight male visiting town and looking to experiment for the first time. Open for almost anything as long as it's safe and discreet. You must be able to host in the area. [...]

(c) *STR8-Curious VISITING* – 26

What up. I am visiting tonight until Sunday Morning. I am 26, super dl and masc.. [...] i am athletic, good looking, can host but prefer to travel. [...]

In many of these posts, the need for a particular kind of space is framed as crucial for any action to take place. In Examples 3b and 3c, for instance, it is a critically important detail that the poster is 'visiting', allowing him the chance to act upon his desires secretly. This aspect of an ideal partner serves to reinforce a discreet or down-low presentation, allowing a potential partner to feel safe responding, with the understanding that the poster will not be known to him (or to others in the local area). The benefits of being a visitor are also reinforced in Example 3a, where the poster is 'ideally' looking for someone 'from outta town' to meet up with in order to fulfil his most important requirement: that the encounter be 'discrete' (*sic*).

Also commonly referred to in posts, as exemplified by Examples 3b–c, is the distinction between 'hosting' and 'traveling'. *To host* is a genre-specific verb meaning to have someone over to one's place of residence

for the encounter that is being sought, while *to travel* conversely means to visit the host's home or another pre-determined location. This distinction extends beyond straight-identified men seeking men; it is also a common step in the process of arranging to meet up with a potential partner among gay-identified men seeking same-sex encounters. Many of the men in the Mission City area who were looking to meet up had living situations that were not conducive to hosting, as it was quite common due to the high cost of living to share bedrooms and tight living quarters with others. As a result, posters in both this data subset and the wider corpus make mention of the host/travel distinction as a crucial component of being discreet or down low, and frequently specify that they cannot host either due to their living situation or to avoid being discovered by others. For those who are willing to host, accompanying phrases such as *must be straight acting* or *must be discreet* are common, suggesting a fear that should someone who may be interpellated (Althusser 1972) by others as gay arrive at their door, neighbours or passers-by may suspect that the host, by association, is also gay.

While discretion is often critical to these posters in their immediate search for same-sex sexual encounters, in the anonymous online spaces of these internet personal advertisements desire trumps identity in specific temporal moments. As seen in example 4 below, when the poster's girlfriend is causing annoyance, or the poster is 'horny' or wants to 'party' (a euphemistic term for doing drugs while having sex), his public identity is downplayed, set aside, or treated as irrelevant, allowing desire and sexual activity to take precedence over an outwardly straight identity.

Example 4

(a) *Str8 bro wants ass – 28*

Sunday funday. I have not cum all day and I need the release. I'm looking for a good bottom NO BEGGINERS. Know how to take a pounding and moaning is a must. HIV Negative STD free and expect the same. Stocky to Sub boy twinks welcome to reply with pics.

(b) *straight blk dude wants head – 19*

im goodlooking & currently in a straight relationship but this bitch is getting on my nerves at the moment I need a goodlooking straight acting bro to swallow my nut then I bounce [...]

(c) *Str8 Jock W/7 Inches Needs A Cock Slut To ParTy Me Out – 30*

[...] have some Tina that you want to share, and be ready to suck on my nice 7 inch cut cock. I am straight but want to parTy down with some parTy favors and pNp, watch porn and get my cock worshipped for hours.

Several of the posters in the data set (and indeed each of those in this example) present themselves as having a straight identity, especially in the title of the ad, which is used to get a potential partner to click and eventually respond. However, in these examples, despite a firm initial statement of straight identity, the advertisement text goes on to justify the poster's participation in a forum for men seeking other men. For instance, in Example 4a, needing a 'release' justifies why a 'str8 bro' is seeking a bottom (i.e., the receiving partner in intercourse). Interestingly, this poster is also familiar with terms commonly employed in gay communities such as *sub* (or submissive) and *twink*, a description for a typically hairless and thin young gay man, signifying a familiarity with the register of male-for-male personal ads and commonly used gay cultural terms more generally.

The poster in Example 4b exploits his identity in other ways, providing a justification for posting his desire for a male sexual partner by mentioning an unfulfilling straight relationship. The mention of being 'in a straight relationship' as opposed to stating one's identity outright is already a mitigation of the poster's identity as a straight man, suggesting that while he has a straight lifestyle, he is justified to seek a male partner when his girlfriend (referred to as *this bitch*) is 'getting on his nerves', allowing him the sexual activity he seeks.

'I'm not gay, but ...'

These and other mitigating factors are used to downplay the poster's publicly straight identity in order to address the immediate necessity of finding a sexual partner. In Examples 4b–c, where the poster mentions or implies a straight identity, that statement is immediately mitigated with a following clause beginning with *but* to signify the poster's awareness that what he goes on to say is not aligned with what it usually means to possess a straight identity. This negotiation between desire and identity is seen in several posters' mention of a disparity between their straight identity and their same-sex desire. The mitigation of a self-identification label through the use of the *I'm (not) X, but ...* construction then becomes a strategy for acknowledging a seeming paradox while justifying the reasons for it. This works in similar ways to the linguistic negotiation that heterosexual participants in the same-sex marriage movement must perform in justifying their participation to those who might see their identity as being at odds with the goals of the movement (VanderStouwe 2013), as well as the widespread *I'm not racist, but ...* trope among white people, as discussed by Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000). In the *I'm (not) X, but ...* construction, what is stated after the conjunction *but* is expected to appear contradictory to the statement prior to it, although the speaker's use of the construction is meant

to encourage an interpretation that although the addressee might expect those statements to seem paradoxical, they in fact are not in contradiction.

The posters in Example 4 who utilise the *I'm (not) X, but ...* construction convey an acknowledgment of the poster's identity as incongruous with their desires as presented in posting in a forum seeking sex with men. As mentioned, the *I'm not gay, but ...* statements presented here do not only show an understanding that identity and desire are different, but importantly provide a justification for why the poster is posting in this forum. Thus for the poster in Example 4c, the need to 'party' and use crystal meth (signalled by the mid-word capitalisation of the letter T and earlier in the post a mentioned desire for 'Tina', a euphemism for methamphetamines) is framed as an explanation for why he is seeking a male sexual partner. For others in the data set, curiosity or being 'horny' are used as justifications instead.

While some individuals may simply mention their straight identity and then provide a justification for their participation in the forum, others more actively negotiate and reconcile their public straight identity with their desire for same-sex sexual activity. For these posters, the label *straight* is problematised through scare quotes or hedging qualifications such as *-ish* or *mostly*, as seen in Example 5.

Example 5

(a) *Straight-ish, wanna hang out?* – 30

Clean and very dl 'straight' white guy. Looking for another guys who leads a straight life or is dl to hang out today. [...]

(b) *Straight Guy here...curious* – 24

hit me up with pics. i am black, gl and mostly straight ... so ... nothing too intense

(c) *Bi curious first timer* – 32

I would like to find a nice guy to meet up with and explore what man to man sex has to offer. I am a very good looking 'straight' guy, big but fit, [...]

(d) *Visiting, horny, discreet?* – 30

I've been thinking about getting off with a man lately ... I love women, but just been feeling like this a while ... really want to give a blow job. And maybe if you have a nice cock and I like it, you can fuck me. My ex girlfriend used a dildo on me a little bit so I think I can handle it ... [...]

In these examples, posters complicate their self-presented straight identity, suggesting not only an acknowledgment of the potential conflict between identity and desire in posting these ads, but a consciously ambiguous employment of their identity. Being 'straight-ish' (a) or 'mostly straight' (b) allows wiggle room in seeking a male partner without abandoning a self-presentation as straight and illustrates an agentic stance that creates distance from the expected gender and sexuality norms of the Mission City region while still holding on to a sense of privacy and discretion that allows these posters to navigate the expected social norms of presenting in an acceptably masculine way.

In other examples, posters complicate their identity presentation through the use of scare quotes around '*straight*' (Examples 5a,c), which similarly illustrates a self-conscious complication of the term to recognise that the poster's actions and desires do not align with what is expected from a straight identity presentation. Example 5d also shows a mitigation of straight identity in the poster's mention of loving women and having an ex-girlfriend, coupled with an admission of engaging in acts seen as potentially subversive of a normative heterosexual experience, including having a dildo used on him by a woman (which justifies why it would be acceptable for the poster to bottom for a potential male partner). In addition, these strategies reinforce the posters' need for discretion and 'closeted' desire, wherein the act of sexual activity with another man is not inherently problematic; rather, public knowledge of such desires and practices is what is avoided. By doing so, those posting in this forum, though constrained in their agentic capacity to act on their desires in particular (i.e., public) ways, are able to manipulate that constraint to their benefit through the use of anonymous, private, and safer spaces such as the Craigslist forum. In a local area that has strong normative understandings of masculinity and a queer community that reports a critical need to conform to normative gender presentations in public spaces (VanderStouwe 2015), these strategies serve a deeper purpose of protection and safety in public, suggesting that the anonymity of the Craigslist forums provides a safe space in which posters' expressions of sexual desire can be realised without fear of potential repercussions. With this in mind, it then becomes clear that issues of space in these posts do not relate only to public versus private, as the posts are all publicly available, but crucially that the anonymity offered through a website such as Craigslist offers safety to explore or engage in same-sex sexual activities.

A common strategy for ensuring that any same-sex sexual actions remain private and distinct from one's public presence is to insist on partners who also self-identify as straight (or at least 'straight-acting'). Many of those who frame themselves as straight also post that they are seeking a straight or straight-acting (or DL, or discreet) individual themselves (Example 6).

Example 6

(a) Curious – 20

I've never been with another guy before but am really curious about it. [...] I'm looking for someone who's kind of on the same page as me. I'm not looking for someone who's already out since I'm totally on the DL and want to keep it that way – You wouldn't pick up I'm into guys.

(b) hot str8 bro with big ass – 22

[...] looking for other straight acting in shape bros preferebly dudes with color
[...]

(c) late night curiosity – 20

hey there straight guy looking for another guy the same. [...]

(d) MCC DL DUDE – 21

[...] If your white and into chicks too, that's a major plus! Ideally I would prefer someone from outta town.

(e) Straight-ish, wanna hang out? – 30

Clean and very dl 'straight' white guy. Looking for another guys who leads a straight life or is dl to hang out today.

The motivation for seeking 'straight' individuals again serves both to reinforce the trope of idealising straightness and to complicate the ideologies surrounding this trope. The level of expressed desire for other like-minded individuals varies. For instance, Example 6a only states that the poster wants someone 'kind of on the same page' who isn't already out – which leaves open the possibility of non-straight-identified individuals. Others are more concerned with perceptions of sexuality, such as Example 6b, where being 'straight-acting' is sought. For others, however, being straight and seeking 'another guy the same' (Example 6c) or someone who is 'into chicks too' (Example 6d) or 'leads a straight life' (Example 6e) more directly expresses the importance of finding a partner who has a similar lifestyle to their own.

From an ideological standpoint that insists on a link between sexual identity and sexual practices, it can be seen as somewhat paradoxical for a straight-identified individual to seek other men, and especially more 'masculine' men, a commonly expressed desire. In fact, in the entire data set, only one individual specifically wanted a feminine partner to 'maybe wear

some panties, smooth? Just come in, suck me a bit, then bend over and be my slutty bitch'. The common trope of seeking out 'straight' or 'straight-acting', 'masculine' men is not limited to straight-identified men, and is often seen among gay-identified posts on Craigslist and many other dating websites (e.g. Bogetic 2013).

However, in the case of men who are straight and seeking other men who are also straight, the motivation also stems from the constraints that they have to remain anonymous or down low, as the prospect of their private sexual desires becoming public threatens to undermine their identity and public presentation of the self. Seeking others in a similar situation provides a sense of protection in the knowledge that both parties would be at risk if their actions online or in any subsequent encounter were to be exposed.

Discussion and conclusions

The examples analysed in this paper have provided a glimpse into the complications of negotiating distinctions between identity and desire in constructions of sexuality. Through multiple layers of linguistic negotiation and justification, the men posting advertisements in Mission City's Craigslist men-seeking-men forum can be seen as both working within and around constraints to their agency. There are socially imposed constraints on expected gender norms, wherein masculinity is highly valued not only in themselves, but in their partners as well. Masculinity is often laminated onto straight identity, with allowances for seeking straight-acting (or better yet, straight-looking) men to avoid 'anyone who is gay enough to risk being caught hosting'.

Also evident are individually imposed constraints, seen in posters' acknowledgement of ideologies that insist on a link between sexual identity and desires. However, for many of the men posting in the forum, the affordance of private, anonymous online spaces allows for a 'socioculturally mediated capacity to act' (Ahearn 2001:112) in those particular settings, allowing them to preserve their own public identities while exploring and possibly acting upon long-standing desires toward other men.

In addition, the tropes of space and time in the posters' negotiation of being straight and seeking sex with men eliminate issues of being out and provide a way to reconcile one's identity with one's sexual practices, or otherwise coming to terms with ideological expectations of what it means to be a man who has sex with men. Instead, the analysis shows that sexuality cannot be examined solely through the social construction of identity, the portrayal of desire, or the physical act of engaging in particular sexual activities, but must be understood by considering all of these aspects as

distinct phenomena that work both individually and together to achieve particular social and physical outcomes. As a safe space, Craigslist allows posters to explore and act upon same-sex desires that are not sanctioned in a heteronormative, heterosexual marketplace. Thus, they can maintain a straight identity in public spaces despite acting upon temporally long-standing sexual desires only in private and safe spaces that ostensibly do not match with the expected entailments of their sexual identities.

When pieced together, agency and its constraints as well as the importance of time and space play intertwined roles in the complex constructions of identity and negotiations of desire. Through a nuanced exploration of the ways constraints work upon agents in addition to the ways agents manipulate those constraints for their own purposes, we can come to a deeper understanding on the role of language in identity construction and sexuality, and critique the common ideologies that essentialise sexual roles, identity categories, and theoretical frameworks that guide our understanding of sexual selves.

About the author

Dr Chris VanderStouwe is a lecturer in linguistics and gender studies in the Department of English at Boise State University. His research lies in sociocultural linguistics, especially at the intersections of language with sexuality and identity. His work has included research on safe spaces in university settings and straight-identified men and constructions of gender and sexual identities. His current work includes projects involving queering the digital linguistic landscape and a large, long-term ethnography in a local drag performance community focusing on language and performativity within and among community members.

Appendix: Glossary of terms

420	marijuana
+	'a plus', i.e. desired (the more + signs, the more desired)
bottom	a sexual role of being penetrated (by a top)
br	brown
c	cut (i.e. circumcised)
ddf	(variation: df) drug and disease free
DL/dl	down low
fem	someone who is feminine/girly/not masculine
gl	good looking
hmu	hit me up
masc	masculine
MWM	masculine white male
parTy	the 'T' denotes the use of crystal meth (aka 'Tina')
partying	a combination of drug use (typically meth) and sex
pix/pics	pictures

pNp	'party and play' (referring to drug use and sex)
ppl	people
str8	straight
sub	submissive
Tina	a reference to crystal meth
top	a sexual role as penetrator (of a bottom)
vers	versatile (performs role of top and bottom)
WM	white man

Notes

- 1 All place names are pseudonyms to maintain poster anonymity.
- 2 All data presented in this paper maintain each author's spelling and punctuation from the original post.

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