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Sexual Positioning and Race-Based Attraction by Preferences for Social Dominance Among Gay Asian/Pacific Islander Men in the United States

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Abstract

For gay men in the United States, race/ethnicity has been demonstrated to factor importantly into sexual preferences, and race-based beliefs regarding certain racial groups are prevalent within the gay male community. For gay men of color, such beliefs may differentially influence their sexual preferences. Yet, little is known about the social-psychological factors underlying differences in sexual preferences among gay men of color. The present study examined how personal preferences for social hierarchy and dominance may explain variations in sexual positioning preferences, and how this relationship may be further qualified by their race-based sexual attraction among gay Asian/Pacific Islander (API) men. A total of 141 API gay men were recruited to participate in an online survey. Measures assessed participants' sexual positioning preferences, race-based sexual attraction, and preferences for social hierarchy or social dominance orientation (SDO). Self-identified tops scored higher on SDO than bottoms or versatiles. Participants attracted to non-API men scored higher on SDO compared to participants attracted to API men and participants who reported no race-based attraction. Finally, a significant two-way interaction indicated that tops attracted to non-API men scored the highest on SDO, and bottoms with no race-based attraction in men scored the lowest. Race/ethnicity is a prominent factor in sexual attraction and sexual positioning preferences among gay men, and one's proclivity for social hierarchy and dominance explains differences in sexual preferences among API gay men. By demonstrating how API gay men negotiate sexual preferences, present findings help elucidate existing race-based sexual dynamics within gay male culture.

Keywords

Social dominance orientation; Race-based attraction; Sexual positioning; Asian/Pacific Islander gay men; Sexual orientation

Introduction

There is a body of work demonstrating the prominent role that race plays in the sexual preferences of gay men living in the United States (e.g., Ibañez, Van Oss Marin, Flores, Millett, & Diaz, 2009; Paul, Ayala, & Choi, 2010; Reif, Huang, Campbell, & Catania, 2004; Williams, Wyatt, Resell, Peterson, & Asuan-O'Brien, 2004; Yoshikawa, Wilson, Chae, & Cheng, 2004). For example, in a sample of 1,142 men who have sex with men in San Francisco, Raymond and McFarland (2009) found evidence of sexual preferences by race/ethnicity, with White and Hispanic, non-Latino men regarded as more sexually desirable relative to Asian and Black men. Other research has shown that gay men of color are particularly aware of this hierarchy of sexual attractiveness within the gay male community (Han, 2008; Poon & Ho, 2008; Wilson & Yoshikawa, 2004). The impact of these race-based sexual preferences and beliefs on gay men of color and how they negotiate sex has been a focus of much research attention and debate. For example, studies have documented the prevalence of race-based stereotypes, such as those of Asian/ Pacific Islander (API) men as exotic and subordinate sexual “bottoms”(e.g., Han, 2009), that may place gay men of color at power disadvantage within sexual relationships (Crawford, Allison, Zamboni, & Soto, 2002; Diaz, Ayala, Bein, Henne, & Marin, 2001; Wilson & Yoshikawa, 2004), while other studies show evidence of resilience despite such negative stereotypes (Chae & Yoshikawa, 2008). To date, few empirical studies have examined reasons underlying differences in sexual preferences among gay men of color.

Indeed, examining the sexual preferences among men of color may reveal important social psychological mechanisms underlying how sex is negotiated within a context where their sexuality is devalued. For gay API men in particular, preferring White sexual partners while perceiving one's group to be devalued by Whites was associated with higher levels of unprotected anal sex with non-primary partners, compared to API men who perceived group devaluation but who were primarily attracted to non-Whites (Chae & Yoshikawa, 2008). These findings suggest that it is not only dominant groups who may internalize negative views of API men, but API gay men may also internalize such views to influence their own sexual preferences and behaviors. API gay men who internalize anti-Asian views may negotiate their sexuality in terms of prevailing beliefs about their group and be likely to prefer the “bottom” sexual positioning (Choi, Operario, Gregorich, & Han, 2003; Nemoto et al., 2003; Wei & Raymond, 2011). On the other hand, it is conceivable that some API men may reject such race-based notions about their group. For example, API gay men who possessed greater pride in their group despite anti-Asian sentiments demonstrated significantly lower levels of sexual risk compared to those who internalized derogatory views regarding APIs (Chae & Yoshikawa, 2008).

These results suggest that differences in API gay men's sexual preferences may be explained by the extent to which API gay men accept or reject prevailing notions about their racial group. A social psychological construct that explains variability across individuals' proclivity to accept or reject prevailing negative views about their group is social dominance orientation (SDO). SDO represents individuals' “degree of preference for inequality among social groups” (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). At its core, SDO represents an individual's proclivity for social hierarchy and dominance. One's preferences for social

hierarchy and dominance should also explain why, for example, some API gay men would likely accept negative views about certain racial groups—including their own—while other API gay men would reject those views. Individuals who are dominance oriented will tend to favor hierarchy-enhancing beliefs, such as prevailing negative views about certain racial groups, while those lower on SDO will tend to favor egalitarianism and beliefs that attenuate social hierarchy (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Pratto & Hegarty (2000) found that people's SDO levels were positively correlated with their endorsement of characteristics that enhanced gender-based inequality among heterosexual sexual partners. For example, high-SDO women preferred high-earning, high-status male partners more than low-SDO women (Pratto & Hegarty, 2000). In another study, Rosenthal, Levy, & Earnshaw (2012) found that the more heterosexual women endorsed traditional gender norms and beliefs, the more likely they were to believe that men should dominate sexually; the less likely they were to express sexual self-efficacy; and the less likely they were to consider using female condoms.

The Present Study

Individuals who accept the prevailing status quo notions may be likely to internalize race-based notions about their group and to accept existing hierarchical social roles and dominant-subordinate relationships. The present study aimed to understand sexual preferences of API gay men using SDO, and posited that SDO should explain variability in two dimensions of sexual preferences among gay men: sexual positioning as “top,” “bottom,” or “versatile,” and race-based attraction (Moskowitz & Hart, 2011). Because SDO reflects personal preferences for social hierarchy and dominance, level of SDO should correspond with sexual positioning preferences, with those preferring the top sexual positioning scoring higher on SDO than those preferring other or no sexual positioning. Research on SDO would also suggest that, while some API gay men may internalize negative views about their group and judge non-API men as more desirable than API men, others might reject these race-based notions. Thus, level of SDO should explain differences in race-based sexual attraction. API gay men who are attracted to non-APIs should score higher on SDO (i.e., be more likely to accept race-based notions of sexual attractiveness in the gay community) compared to those attracted to APIs and have no race-based preferences in sexual partners. Finally, the relationship between sexual positioning preferences and SDO should be qualified by race-based attraction. Since high-SDO men who are attracted to non-APIs should be most likely to prefer hierarchical social roles and relationships, level of SDO should vary accordingly with sexual positioning hierarchy only among those attracted to non-APIs. That is, among API men most likely to endorse the dominant-subordinate roles in sexual positioning, SDO should be higher among tops then decrease accordingly from “bottom” to “versatile” to “these labels do not apply.” Conversely, among those attracted to APIs and those without race-based attraction who should be *least* likely to prefer hierarchical social roles and relationships, level of SDO should not vary according to the positioning hierarchy.

Method

Participants

API gay men were recruited between February and July 2011. We used several strategies to recruit participants. Study announcements with a link to the online survey site were posted on the websites of health-care and/or community-based organizations that serve the API and/or gay communities. National and local community organizations with gay male API membership were identified and contacted for help in disseminating the study information to their membership listservs. Community events where API gay men frequented were identified (e.g., annual “Pride” event), and flyers with a link to the online survey were distributed; from these networking opportunities, more contacts and venues were identified. Participants who provided informed consent and completed the survey were asked to refer other API gay men to the study, and other members of the community were also asked to distribute study details through their personal social networks for an additional incentive. At the completion of the study, each participant received a \$45 gift card and was entered into a lottery for an electronic device. The university institutional review board approved all study procedures.

Potential participants were referred to an online survey, which took an average of 36 min to complete. A total of 556 individuals visited the online survey site, of which 374 individuals consented to and completed the survey. Of these 374 individuals, 141 met inclusion criteria and were included in the final analyses. Participants were eligible if they (1) reported being at least 18 years old at the time of the study, (2) identified as male and API, and (3) reported ever having had sex with men. Individuals were ineligible due to race ($n = 45$), sex with women only ($n = 8$), identifying as female ($n = 3$), duplication ($n = 3$) or “spam” ($n = 174$).

Measures

Sexual positioning was assessed using the following item: “Which of the following statements do you think best describes you sexually?” Participants indicated their response from a list of four options: “I am a top,” “I am a bottom,” “I am versatile,” and “These labels don’t apply to me.” This item has been used as valid indicator of sexual positioning in previous studies of gay men/MSM (Hart et al., 2003; Wegesin & Meyer-Bahlburg, 2000).

Sexual attraction was assessed using one item, based on Chae and Yoshikawa (2008): “I am most sexually or physically attracted to [Asians, Blacks, Latinos, or Whites].” A response option for indicating no race-based preference (“I have no race-based preference”) was included.

SDO (Pratto et al., 1994) refers to individuals’ proclivity for social dominance and represents the degree to which individuals endorse group-based hierarchical relationships and believe group-based social hierarchies to be legitimate (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). SDO is an individual difference variable that has been demonstrated to have high construct validity across nations and cultures worldwide (e.g., Lee, Pratto, & Johnson, 2011). The measure was validated with over 18,000 individuals across 45 samples from 11 nations to understand the psychology of group dominance underlying “the nature and dynamics of group-based social inequality” (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Items included, “Some groups of

people are simply inferior to other groups” and *“It’s OK if some groups have more of a chance in life than others.”* Each of the 16 items was rated on a 7-point Likert scale, where 0 = *Strongly disagree* to 6 = *Strongly agree*. Higher scores indicated stronger preferences or proclivity for social hierarchy and dominance. The measure demonstrated good internal consistency and reliability with the current sample (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.91$).

Data Analyses

To examine whether sexual positioning differed by participant characteristics, chi square tests of independence were performed (where expected cell counts were sufficient). To test the second and third hypotheses, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed with 135 participants with complete data to examine whether SDO varied as a function of sexual positioning (top, versatile, bottom, do not apply) and race-based attraction (API men, non-API men, no race-based preference).

Results

The mean age of the sample was 27.26 years $SD = 6.05$. Participants reported residing across regions of the United States, with over 90% of the sample resided in metropolitan cities with some of the nation’s largest API populations (New York City, San Francisco, and Los Angeles). Key demographic information was obtained at screening (Table 1). Across race-based sexual preferences, 55 (39%) participants reported being most sexually attracted to Asians, 47 (33%) reported no race-based preferences. Among 39 (28%) men reporting attraction to non-API men only, 22 reported attraction to Whites only, 12 to Latinos, and 5 to Blacks. Chi square tests of independence found no significant differences in sexual positioning by participant characteristics.

Table 2 presents the results supporting the first and second hypotheses. There was a statistically significant main effect of sexual positioning on SDO, $F(3, 123) = 3.00, p < .05$. Self-identified tops ($M = 2.55$) preferred social hierarchy significantly more so than bottoms ($M = 2.06$), versatile ($M = 2.04$), and those for whom labels “do not apply” ($M = 1.76$). Post-hoc comparisons using Tukey HSD revealed significant differences between tops and versatile ($p = .04$), and between tops and those for whom labels “do not apply” ($p = .03$). In addition, there was a statistically significant main effect of race-based attraction on SDO, $F(2, 123) = 3.48, p < .05$. Participants attracted to non-API men ($M = 2.35$) preferred social hierarchy significantly more than API men attracted to other API men ($M = 2.18$) and those without race-based preferences in men ($M = 1.81$). Post-hoc comparisons using Tukey HSD revealed the difference between participants attracted to non-API men and those with no racial preferences ($p = .03$).

Table 2 also presents the results supporting the third hypothesis. There was a statistically significant two-way interaction between SDO and race-based sexual attraction, $F(6, 123) = 2.67, p < .05$, such that SDO was highest among tops most attracted to men of races other than their own ($M = 3.73$), and lowest among bottoms with no race-based preferences in men ($M = 1.96$). As shown in Fig. 1, differences in SDO by sexual positioning were least apparent among those who reported within-group sexual attraction. In contrast, differences between sexual positioning were sharpest among those attracted to a race other than their

own or who reported not being attracted to any particular race. For example, SDO was the highest among API men who reported being tops and who were most attracted to non-API men. In contrast, SDO was lowest among API men who reported being bottoms and did not express any race-based attraction.

Discussion

The present study examined how personal preferences for social hierarchy and dominance underlie sexual preferences in a group of racial minority gay men in the United States. Two dimensions of sexual preferences, sexual positioning and race-based attraction, were examined vis-à-vis SDO in a sample of API gay men. First, the main effect of sexual positioning on SDO indicated that a stronger preference for social hierarchy and dominance was associated with preferring the top sexual positioning compared to preferring “bottom” or “versatile.” Conversely, preference for social hierarchy and dominance was weakest among API gay men who rejected sexual positioning labels (choosing the option, “These labels do not apply to me”). These results suggest that preferences for sexual positioning that may entail hierarchical sexual roles corresponding with one’s general preferences for social hierarchy. Second, the main effect of race-based sexual attraction on SDO indicated that a stronger preference for social hierarchy and dominance was associated with attraction to non-APIs (i.e., Blacks, Latinos, and/or Whites) compared to API men most attracted to other APIs. Among API men with no race-based preferences, preference for social hierarchy and dominance was the weakest. Finally, the significant interaction between sexual positioning and race-based attraction indicated that the relationship between SDO and sexual positioning differed depending on whether men had any race-based preferences for sexual partners, and if they did, whether they were attracted to members of their own racial group (APIs) or non-APIs. Support for social hierarchy and dominance from high to low corresponded with one’s sexual positioning preferences, but only among those attracted to non-APIs. That is, sexual positioning preferences for top, bottom, versatile, or none corresponded with decreasing preferences for hierarchy and dominance only among those who would likely embrace hierarchical roles in the first place. For those who are likely to reject hierarchical roles and relationships (i.e., those attracted to APIs or reported no race-based attraction), sexual positioning preferences did not vary by SDO.

These patterns of relationships highlight the social psychological processes involved in how API gay men negotiate their sexual preferences. For racial minority men who encounter negative sentiments toward their racial group within the gay community, their own personal proclivity for social hierarchy or egalitarianism matters in whether they accept or reject such notions to influence their sexual preferences. The current results are consistent with prior work using SDO to explore sexuality and partner preferences as a function of personal proclivity for social hierarchy and dominance (Pratto & Hegarty, 2000; Rosenthal et al., 2012). As shown in this study, preferring the top sexual positioning to other positioning was associated with higher SDO scores indicating stronger preferences for social hierarchy and dominance relative to preferring the bottom or versatile positioning. Consistent with past work, repudiating sexual positioning (i.e., electing “these labels do not apply to me”) was associated with the lowest SDO scores indicating a lack of preference for hierarchical, dominant-subordinate relationship structures.

By demonstrating how SDO explains differences in sexual preferences, the present study introduced this social psychological individual difference variable as an elucidating factor in understanding sexuality among gay men. Results provide insights into how differences in individuals' sexual preference might be influenced by their social contexts and, in turn, how these differences might relate to enacted behavior within these contexts. Individuals who prefer social hierarchy will likely employ strategies, roles, and stereotypes that enhance hierarchy and maintain the status quo, whereas individuals who oppose hierarchy are likely to enact strategies, roles, and stereotypes that *attenuate* hierarchy and reject the status quo (e.g., Lee et al., 2011; Lee, Pratto, & Li, 2007; Pratto et al., 1994). Thus, because high-SDO individuals are those who tend to endorse social hierarchies, high-SDO API gay men should be expected to internalize and prefer roles, behaviors, and beliefs that maintain race-based social hierarchies. These men may prefer to socialize within non-API (e.g., Black, Latino, and/or White) social networks and thus be isolated from other API gay men. Because low-SDO individuals prefer egalitarian relationships, low-SDO API gay men should be expected to actively reject roles, behaviors, and beliefs that maintain race-based social hierarchies. Instead, low-SDO API gay men might actively engage in alternative strategies to build resiliency, empowerment, and community affirming of their group (e.g., Choi, Han, Paul, & Ayala, 2011).

Limitations

There were several limitations to the current study. First, one measurement limitation was related to preference for “non-API” partners, which obscures potential differences associated with preference for White, African American, and Latino sexual partners. Second, our sexual positioning variable measured the way men labeled themselves in terms of their positional identity, but this can certainly be different from their actual behavior. Indeed, self-reported bottoms were the smallest group, suggesting that there may be discrepancies in labeling and sexual behavior. The cross-sectional design of the study did not allow for the examination of actual sexual behaviors regardless of sexual preferences. Finally, participant was recruited using non-representative sampling. Future research focusing on sexual preferences with larger, more nationally representative API gay men samples is warranted to replicate and extend this pattern of findings.

Future Research

By drawing upon decades of research on intergroup relations, the current work offers insights into racialized sexual dynamics within gay male culture in the United States. Our findings concerning SDO and race-based sexual attraction highlight the importance of understanding racial dynamics and their link to power concerning sexual negotiation for a particular group of gay men of color. Results would suggest that high-SDO API men might be more likely to reject other API men and to associate with non-API men. High-SDO men may also be more likely to engage in the top role within sexual positioning, although it is unclear what sexual positioning high-SDO API men might engage in with non-API partners. Future work should extend current findings to examine the specific race-based sexual partnerships and positioning behavior among high- and low-SDO API men in order to better elucidate processes that may place them at a power disadvantage within sexual relationships

with other men and to consider the implications of such work for HIV risk reduction strategies.

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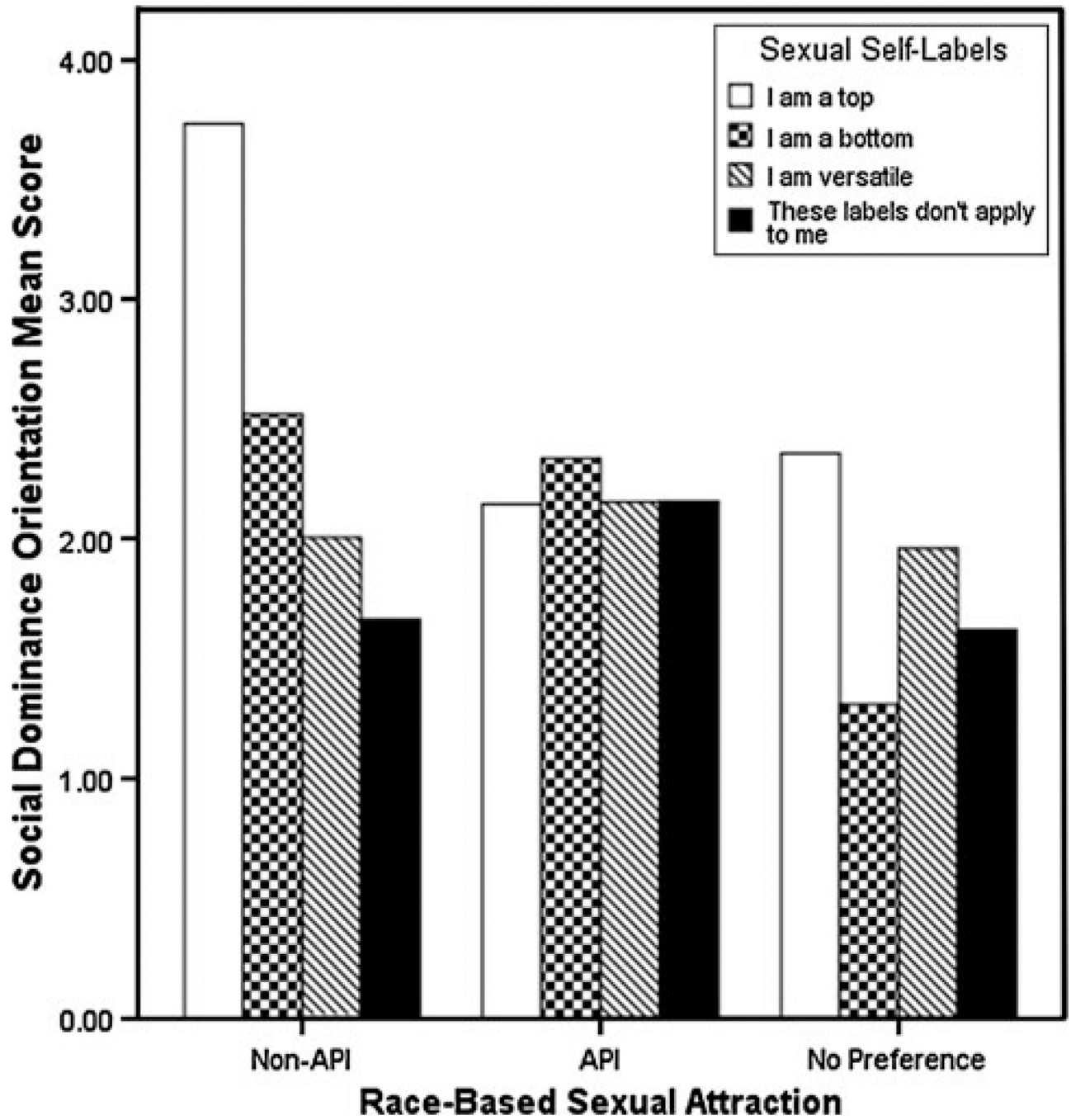


Fig. 1. Social dominance orientation by sexual positioning, race-based attraction ($n = 135$)

Table 1Participant characteristics ($n = 141$)

	<i>n</i>	%
Age (years)		
18–24	55	39
25–34	68	48
35–48	18	13
Ethnic backgrounds		
East Asian	58	42
Southeast Asian	51	37
Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander	11	8
Mixed	11	8
South Asian	7	5
Annual income		
\$15,000	50	36
\$15,001–\$35,000	24	17
\$35,001–\$75,000	36	26
\$75,001–\$115,000	16	12
>\$115,000	8	6
Education level		
No or some college	41	30
Associate's, Bachelor's degree	49	36
Graduate training, degree	48	35
Country of birth		
U.S.-born	120	87
Foreign-born	18	13
Ever tested for HIV		
Yes	124	90
No	14	10
Know HIV serostatus		
Yes	113	82
No or not sure	25	18
Sexual self-label		
Top	23	17
Versatile	75	54
Bottom	27	20
Do not apply to me	13	9
Race-based sexual attraction		
Asian/Pacific Islander men	53	38
No race-based preference	47	34
Non-Asian/Pacific Islander men	38	28

Table 2

Test of mean differences in social dominance orientation by race-based attraction and sexual positioning ($n = 135$)

Factor	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
Sexual positioning	3	3.00	.03	
Top ($n = 21$)				2.55 _a (1.17)
Versatile ($n = 74$)				2.06 _b (0.90)
Bottom ($n = 27$)				2.04 _a (1.03)
Do not apply ($n = 13$)				1.76 _b (0.65)
Race-based sexual attraction	2	3.48	.03	
API ($n = 53$)				2.18 _c (0.95)
Non-API ($n = 36$)				2.35 _c (1.07)
No race-based preference ($n = 46$)				1.81 _d (0.85)
Two-way interaction	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	
				Race-based attraction
		API <i>M (SD)</i>	Non-API <i>M (SD)</i>	No preference <i>M (SD)</i>
Sexual positioning × race-based attraction	6	2.67	.02	
Top		2.14 (0.87)	3.73 (1.09)	2.36 (1.43)
Versatile		2.15 (0.95)	2.00 (0.83)	1.96 (0.92)
Bottom		2.33 (1.19)	2.52 (0.99)	1.31 (0.37)
These labels do not apply to me		2.16 (1.20)	1.67 (0.64)	1.62 (0.25)

Non-API includes Black, Latino, and White men. Means in the same column within each factor that do not share subscripts differ at $p < .05$ in the Tukey HSD comparison

API Asian/Pacific Islander, *M* mean, *df* degrees of freedom, *F* *F*-test, *p* *p* value