



Andy Quan of Sexual Racism Sux (left) urges gay lonelyhearts to rephrase personals: rather than exclude ethnic groups, he urges, state the type of man you prefer

Personal-ad activists won't swallow racism

> BY CRAIG TAKEUCHI

Say you're browsing through singles ads. Imagine that you repeatedly find profiles for people whom you find attractive and have a lot in common with, and whose requirements you satisfy. With one glaring exception. Take an ad for a guy who is handsome, sexy, and "pretty much attracted to all types of guys...except [insert your ethnicity here]". Most people would ignore it. Imagine, however, encountering numerous statements like that on a regular basis.

Numerous people don't have to imagine this. For many, it's their reality.

Although this problem is not exclusive to gay men, awareness and activism have taken root within the gay community. Instead of angrily giving up or quietly swallowing his pride, former Vancouverite and author Andy Quan sought change. Together with Australian Tim Mansfield, Quan, who currently resides in Sydney, Australia, launched the Sexual Racism Sux campaign (www.sexualracismsux.com/). The e-mail discussion group, which formed in April 2003, has just under 300 members in countries such as Australia, Canada, the USA, and the U.K. Members can also post Web banners, which link to the campaign Web site, on their personal ads.

On a visit back to Vancouver, Quan explained over coffee at Arbutus Mall that SRS seeks to get men to rephrase their ads; instead of "no whites" or "not into Indian or Middle Eastern guys", hopefuls could articulate what they prefer, such as "looking for Latino men".

Yet do these positive rephrasings merely sweep prejudices under the PC rug? Is it better for people to be upfront about their feelings? SFU women's-studies doctoral student Yuuki Hirano, who has researched North American queer personal ads, sees value in SRS's strategy but is wary of merely changing the language. Over green tea on Main Street, she cautions that paraphrasing has a lot of repercussions and "we kind of have to be careful about how to do it and for what purpose, and what effect it is going to have." She points out that this rewording is "not just manipulating language but manipulating other people too, because your real attitude is hidden". She says she thinks the expression of various viewpoints, even if negative, is important because "differences should be recognized or acknowledged."

Quan has faced similar criticism and resistance. "Somebody just wrote a while ago, and he said, 'I like what you're doing, but don't you wanna know where you stand?' But, you know, I don't wanna walk down the street and see little thought bubbles above people's heads that say 'Faggot' or 'I think you're disgusting.'" Initially, many people also misunderstood what the campaign was trying to achieve. "People felt that we were dictating to them about what their attraction could and couldn't be," he says.

Allowing offensive statements to go unchallenged, Quan adds, also affirms what is deemed acceptable. "In terms of public space and discourse, when you use language—not just 'no Asians' but negative and nasty language—it creates an atmosphere...where it grows and grows."

In an interview at a West End café, Shimpei Chihara, facilitator of Vari-Asian, a support group for gay Asian males, points out that exclusionary messages are difficult to block out. "Even if you ignore it, you still remember the words. And that really affects your self-esteem and self-image. Also, you have to be really mature to ignore it. We ignore it only because there are no other choices."

In cases such as these, Hirano does value the tempering of negative messages. "If you're always seeing 'no blacks' or 'no Asians', it creates a certain animosity. Especially for things like ads, it's almost like a chart. You see a certain number of that in a line. For the visual effect, it would work better to get rid of certain animosity."

Another debate is whether racial preferences are in fact racist. "These people who are like, 'I'm just not attracted to Asians. Why should I be? I'm only attracted to white people.' The whole crux of the argument is 'That's not racism. That's just my preference,'" Quan says.

Quan doesn't see the benefit of labelling people racist. "I'm not willing to say that that's racism. I'm not willing to say that that person will ever change. It was quite a good opportunity and place to say, 'Well, we think people's attractions change all the time, and that possibly because most of the people who say it possibly because they've never met many Asian men and have only been exposed to a predominantly white culture, maybe that's an issue they can consider.'" Accordingly, he adds that "we need more complex discussions about what that really is."

Which is where the Sexual Racism Sux steps in. As a result of the online conversations, Quan says he has noticed change. "We actually have had an effect in the last year. We've seen not only less negative language but we've seen people using the language of it [the campaign] and seeing ads that say 'I'm not racist' or 'I like guys of all races.'" Perhaps as testimony to Canadian social awareness, Quan points out that when the campaign started, "There was a disproportionate number of Canadians who signed up."

With Canadian interracial relationships leaping from 330,000 in 1991 to 450,000 in 2001 and the percentage of visible minorities tripling between 1980 and 1990, according to Statistics Canada, it's no wonder. With four out of the top five Canadian municipalities with the highest visible-minority populations right here in the Lower Mainland, colour-blind Vancouverites will have the highest number of potential dates. Those with racial hang-ups can only hope to be so lucky in love. ♦