Navigating Sexual Racism in the Sexual Field: Compensation for and Disavowal of Marginality by Racial Minority Grindr Users in Singapore

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This study investigates racialized sexual desires of Grindr users in Singapore, a multiracial East Asian society. We found that users are continually pigeonholed into racial categories tethered to stereotypes, hierarchizing users such that the Chinese majority are considered more desirable. Users employ race labels to communicate racial membership, circumnavigating Grindr’s preset ethnic categories. Users also creatively appropriate interface affordances to enforce racialized preferences; this includes a preoccupation with verifying racial identities, especially through photos. Racial minorities strategically respond to sexual racism by negotiating for Chinese majority membership, emphasizing the cosmopolitan self over the ethnic self, and/or reframing the situation to disavow victimhood.

This research counterbalances the ethnocentric focus of existing sexual racism literature on white-centric contexts by applying sexual fields theory to multiracial East Asia, yielding meaningful theoretical contributions. We also foreground the importance of considering internal dispositions of feelings and attitudes as situated resistance against sexual racism on Grindr.

Lay summary
This article explores how sexual desires of Singaporean users on Grindr (a gay dating app) are socially conditioned to include racial preferences, which in turn constitutes sexual racism. This research is important as it examines the complexities of sexual racism within a multiracial and postcolonial East Asian context, balancing the existing scholarly focus on sexual racism in Western societies. Our interviews with Grindr users in Singapore revealed that users tend to slot themselves (and others) into racial categories that appear fixed and linked to racial stereotypes. This allows a pecking order to emerge, such that the racial majority (Singaporean Chinese users) are generally seen as most desirable. Race is therefore one important dimension of the interactions on Grindr. If racial identity is not immediately obvious on app profiles, users often seek to find out the racial identities of other potential partners by, for example, requesting photos to make guesses about their race. We also studied the responses of racial minorities to sexual racism. These strategies include trying to present a Chinese or Chinese-mixed racial identity, emphasizing an identity that is globalized rather than ethnic, and reframing their situation to disavow their victimhood.

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It all goes down to the preference (…) most people prefer Chinese (…) people tend not to look at other races (…) also like Chinese people tend to look better? I’m not sure (…) they just look better. ("Wei Jie," 25, Chinese, Grindr user)

On Grindr, a mobile dating app for same-sex attracted men, not everyone is seen as equally desirable. Relative to the social context, there is often a pecking order (Green, 2015)—for example, fit men are often preferred over overweight men, masculine over feminine, cisgender over transgender. Similarly, certain races are seen as less attractive than others (Callander, Holt & Newman, 2016; Shield, 2019). Such racialized preferences are often rationalized as a person’s right to freely choose their sexual and romantic partners (Daroya, 2018). But scholars have theorized racialized sexual preferences as a form of racism—sexual racism—because, collectively, such preferences lead to inequalities where racial minorities are automatically seen as less attractive (Green, 2015; Shield, 2019).

New research on online sexual racism is opportune, since dating apps have drastically altered the way individuals seek intimacy (Chan, 2018; Conner, 2019). These apps increase the options that individuals have when sourcing for suitable relationship partners (Hobbs, Owen & Gerber, 2017). The usage of dating apps is especially salient for non-heterosexual individuals, since it is harder for them to find each other offline (Gudelunas, 2012). A study of 198 countries found that in general, almost one in two homosexual individuals use dating apps, as opposed to around three in 10 heterosexuals (Clue & Kinsey Institute, 2017). Existing research on dating apps for same-sex attracted men have largely focused on their purpose of use (Gudelunas, 2012; Van De Wiele & Tong, 2014), user interactions (Blackwell, Birnholtz & Abbott, 2015; Corriero & Tong, 2016), and social relations (Chan, 2018; Race, 2015). Yet, discrimination on same-sex dating apps remains insufficiently researched, as noted by Conner (2019) and Van De Wiele and Tong (2014). This study hence focuses on same-sex attracted men, which includes gay and bisexual men.

While dating apps bring about more romantic possibilities, users who do not fit the norms of attractiveness often feel like they cannot reap these benefits (Hobbs et al., 2017). Existing sexual racism literature within same-sex dating apps has focused on Western contexts; for example, these have examined how racial minorities in Australia cope with online sexual racism (Callander et al., 2016), how discursive strategies can legitimate racialized sexual preferences (Daroya, 2018), and how interface features like drop-down menus condition the way users in Europe think about race (Shield, 2019). Yet, two aspects remain understudied in the current literature (a) how online sexual racism manifests in non-Western contexts, and relatedly, and (b) the potentially diverse and context-specific ways racial minorities cope with sexual racism. Indeed, non-Western contexts remain understudied within lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) communications literature (Chan, 2017).

Addressing the two research gaps, this study uses sexual fields theory (Green, 2015) to explore sexual racism within interactions of Grindr users in Singapore, a socio-political context considered to be both distinctly Asian and greatly influenced by Western approaches to modernization (Ang & Stratton, 1995). Therefore, findings here are likely to have meaningful implications for both Western and Asian contexts. This research fills the noticeable void in current literature on sexual fields and...
sexual racism in a non-Western context, yielding major theoretical contributions. Firstly, the findings show that the way sexual desires are structured within this sexual field results in races being arranged in a hierarchy of desirability, as users use race labels specific to Singapore society and linked to stereotypes. Local (Singaporean) Chinese users occupy the hegemonic center—they are generally considered most desirable and are least likely to experience racial fetishism. Secondly, the constant need for users to verify the race of other users, especially through interactions and/or photos, adds a new dimension to existing scholarly accounts of how technical features can structure user interactions. In particular, photos play a dual role in the verification of race and the social conditioning of racialized desire. Lastly, we reveal that racial minority users respond to sexual racism through the following strategies—negotiating for Chinese majority racial membership, emphasizing the cosmopolitan self while downplaying the ethnic self, and/or reframing the situation to disavow victimhood. This analysis in turn foregrounds the importance of considering the way users internally orientate themselves in tandem with their external self-presentation; for example, shifting one’s attitudinal orientation can be a form of situated resistance against the hierarchy.

Literature review

Dating apps for men seeking other men and Grindr

Mobile applications designed for men seeking other men primarily for sexual or romantic engagements (which includes gay and bisexual men) are increasingly popular (Wu & Ward, 2018). Gudelunas (2012) highlights the importance of such online networks, which allow same-sex attracted men to easily engage each other in conversations about sex and sexuality. Wu and Ward’s (2018) meta-analysis of same-sex dating app literature reveals a split between studies on user interactions versus social structures. The former analyzes communicative practices at a micro level (Wu & Ward, 2018), such as self-presentation. For example, Blackwell et al. (2015) note that Grindr users present different aspects of themselves to different audiences. Relatedly, users’ information-seeking behaviors can give them a fuller picture about others, depending on how much uncertainty they can accept (Corriero & Tong, 2016). The latter group (research on social structures) focuses on how social relations remain stable and take on structural qualities (Wu & Ward, 2018). For instance, Race (2015) argues that technical features of dating apps have the power to organize social relations between users, by influencing their sexual desires and practices (Race, 2015). Dealing uniquely with questions about racial hierarchy, our research builds upon these two research trajectories to elucidate relations between social structures and user interactions by using race as an analytical lens, which remains under-studied in existing LGBTQ communications literature (Chan, 2017).

To understand how race factors into same-sex online dating and sex-seeking, this research examines the Singapore context, in which whites are not the numerical majority. In Singapore, Chinese are officially classified as the racial majority (about three in four residents) while Malays, Indians, and other races are classified as minorities (Singstat, 2019). This multiracial composition makes Singapore ideal to study how users in non-Western societies relate to race on dating apps. This article focuses on Grindr as it is the most widely used dating and sex-seeking app for same-sex attracted men in Singapore, with about “50,000 monthly active users” (Tan et al., 2018, p. 534). Additionally, Grindr is very popular internationally, with about five million users in 190 countries (Conner, 2019), and has been researched widely.

Users utilize Grindr for many purposes, including sex, friendship, networking, and romance (Van De Wiele & Tong, 2014). Because Grindr displays profiles based on geographical proximity, it
encourages nearby users to meet more quickly (Duguay, 2017), which makes it conducive for casual sex. Users interact with others by accessing profiles from a grid of thumbnails that lists users nearby; they create profiles where they can upload photos, list demographic information, and write an introduction (Gudelunas, 2012). The process of sifting through profiles to browse other users is aptly described as “window shopping”—following a logic of consumption (Raj, 2011), where users are commodified and evaluated based on discrete traits they display on their profiles (e.g., age, height, race). By providing preset categories for profile information and preference filtering, Grindr’s interface preconditions users’ desires by providing cues as to what users should look for in a “desirable” partner (Conner, 2019; Shield, 2019). Therefore, Shield (2019) argues that Grindr’s interface inherits cultural biases from the social context of its development within the United States, which are then reproduced when transposed to other geographic and social locales.

However, as of August 2020, Grindr users cannot filter other users based on ethnicity. This feature was removed in response to Black Lives Matter movements in several Western countries (Hunte, 2020). However, users can still list their ethnicity through a drop-down menu when crafting their profiles, containing a fixed list of options: Asian, Black, Latino, Middle Eastern, Mixed, Native American, South Asian, White, and Other. As Grindr was originally developed to cater to a U.S. audience, these preset categories broadly mirror race categories used by the U.S. Bureau of the Census (Shield, 2019). Therefore, these categories are highly unlikely to adequately represent racial identities in Singapore since the racial composition is different. Race is not a set of universal categories; instead, a nuanced understanding of race must consider specific societal contexts.

Race and sexual racism

Defined most generically, race may be considered “a concept that signifies and symbolizes sociopolitical conflicts and interests in reference to different types of human bodies” (Winant, 2000, p. 172); as such, race often has to do with social difference tethered to human bodies (e.g., skin color). This article uses the lens of critical race theory to examine race (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), from which we draw several key ideas. Firstly, race is not a biologically determined trait but differences rendered intelligible and made salient through social relations (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Secondly, racism—which includes the perception of superiority of certain races over others—is an everyday occurrence that affects the lived experiences of marginalized racial groups. Even if racism does not manifest as explicit hostility, it can still cause suffering and disempowerment for racial minorities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Thirdly, listening to the voices and experiences of marginalized racial minorities is crucial to understanding and combatting racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Relevant to the Singapore context, Ang (2018) notes how cultural differences between local and migrant Chinese in Singapore take on a racial character as migrants are discursively linked to a racial enclave, which borrows the colonial logic of racial othering. This shows that race often comprises labels of convenience to make sense of—and control—social difference, corroborating the idea that meanings of race labels are highly specific to societal contexts in which they are circulated (Shield, 2019). Regardless of context, critical analyses of race share an attention to power disparities. For instance, “whiteness” may be described in terms of privileges and social capital that bodies inherit based on various factors—e.g., certain looks, mannerisms, and lineage—that enables them to be seen as “white” by society (Raj, 2011).

A person’s race often affects their ability to find romantic and sexual partners. For example, people who can pass as “white” in Western societies are privileged in that they are generally considered more attractive by default (Raj, 2011). This is a form of sexual racism, which Silvestrini (2020) defines
as the differential treatment of prospective sexual or romantic companions based on race. This is linked to ethnic stereotypes and white-centric beauty standards reinforced by popular culture. Race is often a needlessly large focus in dating, causing racial minorities to feel uneasy and self-conscious, since they are often treated differently after revealing their race (Silvestrini, 2020). Existing studies on sexual racism in same-sex online dating have also found that racial minorities are often caught between two undesirable situations—they are either considered less attractive by default and have greater difficulty finding partners, or they are greatly desired by some in ways that reduce their identities to racial fetishes (McGlotten, 2013; Raj, 2011; Shield, 2019). Racial fetishism herein means that racial minorities are not valued as complex individuals but only as stereotyped traits of their race (e.g., black people as hypersexualized), and can thereby feel very dehumanizing (Shield, 2019). Whether characterized by aversion or fetish, racialized sexual preferences are not innocuous as they are often founded upon the racial prejudices that animate other forms of covert and overt racist practices, which also often manifest alongside sexual racism (Callander et al., 2016; Shield, 2019). As such, sexual racism can be considered a subset of everyday racism.

In Singapore, the state administers the population through its Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others (CMIO) model of multiracialism, which inherits colonial racial distinctions used to administer people in colonial-era Singapore according to essentialist racial discourses (e.g., Malays as lazy natives) (Goh, 2008). Through the CMIO model, the Singapore state mobilizes cultural identities of each racial group to construct and control a multiracial national identity; however, this requires cultivating a society that approaches race as fixed identities and resists its mutability (Ang & Stratton, 1995). This broader socio-historical context readily affects how same-sex sexual desires are conditioned in Singapore. For example, the Chinese gay man is the predominant image and hegemonic center of Singapore’s LGBTQ community, sidelining perspectives and interests of queer racial minorities (e.g., Malays and Indians) who do not occupy this center (Yue & Zubillaga-Pow, 2012). Relatedly, Prankumar, Aggleton and Bryant (2020) recently found that young gay, bisexual, and queer Indian men, as the racial minorities, face significant sexual racism and are often associated with negative stereotypes.

**Sexual fields theory**

To better understand sexual racism in Singapore, this research uses sexual fields theory (Green, 2011; 2015) to understand how interactions between Grindr users can reinforce social structures that condition individuals’ sexual desires. According to this approach, a sexual field may be identified where potentially diverse individual expressions of sexual desire are organized in a somewhat stable way when considered collectively (Green, 2015). Each actor has his own sexual preferences and tastes that—overlapping with those of other actors within specific physical or virtual sites (e.g., Grindr in Singapore)—give rise to social structures that shape individual sexual desires. This leads to certain types of actors being seen as more desirable than others—i.e., they have more sexual capital within the specific sexual field (Green, 2011). For example, Green (2015) highlights how traits considered attractive on a Christian dating site would be considered very differently in a gay bar frequented by “bears” (i.e., bulky, hairy men). Nevertheless, sexual capital can coincide with larger cultural and economic capital in society (Green, 2015).

While actors are constrained by structures of desire, they also have the power to negotiate where they stand in the sexual field through self-presentation (Green, 2011). Actors have some agency to present themselves in accordance with what is generally seen as desirable within a sexual field, i.e., *playing the game*, which can increase their sexual capital (Green, 2011). This means that actors must know the rules of the game specific to the sexual field they are operating within, which includes...
understanding its hierarchies of attractiveness and how to perceive their own (and other actors’) levels of attractiveness (Green, 2011). Racialized structures of desire may therefore manifest as hierarchies of some races being considered more attractive than others—hierarchies which are communicated by actors to each other within the field (Green, 2015). Therefore, this research examines sexual racism in Singapore’s non-Western context by considering the Grindr community as a sexual field and explains how the Grindr interface (as the virtual site of this field) allows users to communicate these hierarchies to each other through user interactions. To do this, we ask:

**RQ1:** How are users arranged in different tiers of desirability specific to race in this sexual field (i.e., Grindr in Singapore)?

**RQ2:** How is this arrangement sustained by interactions between users?

Interestingly, existing studies that apply sexual fields theory to online sexual racism hint at the need to account for political contestation within sexual fields (Daroya, 2018; Han & Choi, 2018). Although sexual fields theory emphasizes how users may increase their desirability through self-presentation (thereby acquiescing to social norms), it is also important to explore how these norms are legitimated in the first place—and whether they can be contested. Daroya (2018) finds that racialized desires within the sexual field are legitimated by white users through discourses that imply the neutrality of their racial preferences. For example, they rationalize their rejection of racial minorities as an innocuous outcome of their right to free choice (Daroya, 2018). Conversely, the question of how racial minorities can resist the racial hierarchy should be further explored. Han and Choi (2018), noting instances where minorities confront racism, call for more research on how sexual fields may also function as “sites of resistance” (p. 159).

### Strategic responses to sexual racism

Given the salience of racial categorization in Singapore (Chua, 2003; Goh, 2008) and the socio-historical differences in how Singapore has dealt with the concept of race, racial minorities’ responses to sexual racism in Singapore may differ from findings by existing studies in Western countries such as the United States (e.g., Choi, Han, Paul & Ayala, 2011; Conner, 2019; Han & Choi, 2018; McGlotten, 2013), Australia (e.g., Callander et al., 2016) and United Kingdom (e.g., Jaspal, 2017). For example, Singapore’s history lacks an equivalent of the U.S. civil rights movement. Instead, Singapore’s state-sanctioned racial discourse often revolves around race being a potential flashpoint for conflict, with the need to avoid repeats of 1960s racial riots frequently raised as justification for the strict management of racial matters by the state (Chew, 2018). This arguably coincides with a culture of reluctance to discuss racial issues and a reduced perception that racism remains an important problem (Chew, 2018). Therefore, it is likely that racial minority users in Singapore may use varied strategies when responding to sexual racism.

Scholars have studied various responses to sexual racism; these can be organized into externally focused strategies (e.g., self-presentation and confrontation) and internally focused ones (e.g., coping and adjusting one’s attitudinal disposition). One type of externally directed response is the use of self-presentation strategies. This is premised on Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgically constituted self—depending on the situation, individuals calibrate, select, and display different facets of identity. One approach that some minorities use is to present themselves to “fit existing racial stereotypes” (Han & Choi, 2018, p. 154) and thereby “fulfill fetishized sexual desires” (p. 154). This aligns with what sexual fields theory deems as learning to play the game (Green, 2011). However, racial minorities do not only use self-presentation strategies to align with existing norms of attractiveness. Some
use self-presentation to affirm their racial identity on their own terms. For instance, Jaspal (2017) notes that the ability to curate their profiles empowers racial minorities on Grindr to portray their racial identities in inventive ways. Another type of externally oriented strategy is actively confronting racist individuals. For example, some racial minorities reprimand or argue with others who hold racially discriminatory views, trying to change these views (Choi et al., 2011; Conner, 2019), while others use sarcasm and humor to subvert sexual racism (Conner, 2019). Some racial minorities also respond aggressively when facing online sexual racism. Such retaliatory measures are not merely outbursts of frustration but attempts to challenge the notion that minorities can only remain helplessly silent (Callander et al., 2016).

Conversely, internally focused strategies include coping strategies that racial minorities use when facing sexual racism. As Callander et al. (2016) note, these “rely on men modifying their own practices and perceptions rather than requesting or insisting upon changes in the practices of others” (p. 15). For example, minorities avoid environments where sexual racism is prevalent, and find solace and support from others, such as people who might be in similar situations (Callander et al., 2016; Choi et al., 2011). Some minorities brush off the marginalization that they feel: seeing sexual racism as inevitable, they do not take it as a personal insult (Choi et al., 2011). While “coping” is one way of describing internally focused strategies, we may also consider how different attitudinal and affective “orientations” that an individual may have toward experiences of sexual racism can open and close different sets of possibilities in social action. McGlotten (2013) writes that being optimistic is not to be naïve or willfully blind to sexual racism; instead, “optimism” is a disposition that allows racial minorities to imagine possibilities outside of the existing racial hierarchy, which in turn denaturalizes the hierarchy.

This diversity of strategies, both externally and internally directed, has two key implications for sexual fields theory. Firstly, it shows that self-presentation strategies do not exhaust how racial minorities can respond to the racial hierarchy in the sexual field. Secondly, strategies need not acquiesce to existing norms of desire and may instead question the legitimacy of these norms. To answer Han and Choi’s (2018) call for more research on how sexual fields may also function as “sites of resistance” (p. 159), we ask:

**RQ3:** What strategies do racial minority users in Singapore employ in response to the existing hierarchy in the sexual field (i.e., Grindr)?

**Methodology**

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted in English with 24 Grindr users living in Singapore from December 2019 to February 2020 (English is one of the four official languages recognized in Singapore, along with Chinese, Malay, and Tamil). Interviewees aged between 21- and 47-years-old. They identified ethnically as Chinese (n = 8), Malay (n = 5), Indian (n = 5), Chinese-Thai (n = 2), Chinese-Eurasian (n = 1), Filipino-Indian (n = 1), Burmese (n = 1), and white (n = 1). Additionally, they identified their sexual orientations as gay (n = 22), queer (n = 1), and bisexual (n = 1); their self-identified gender identities are male (n = 22), non-binary (n = 1), and non-conforming (n = 1). Therefore, this research focuses predominantly on Grindr users who identify as cisgender gay men.

Participants were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling, through word-of-mouth, social media, an online forum, and advocacy groups. Users were considered eligible if they had used
Grindr in Singapore for at least three months, opened the app to interact with other users at least once a week, and did not know any of their interviewers beforehand. The team of interviewers comprised two cisgender Chinese men (of whom one identifies as gay) and one cisgender Chinese woman. At least two interviewers were present during the interviews, with one being the primary interviewer while the others take notes. At no point did any interviewee mention the interviewers’ ethnicity or gender.

Interviews lasted between one to two hours, and respondents were paid S$30. All 24 interviews were coded and analyzed using the Constant Comparative Method (Glaser 1965). Researchers discussed at various points throughout the analysis process to disambiguate and clarify categories and cross-checked codes to ensure that data was not abstracted in an unsubstantiated way. Abstractions made were grounded in language lifted directly from interviewees. The coding process continued until categories had been theoretically saturated. Quotes are pseudonymized to protect the respondents’ identities. Where the interviewee’s language was potentially unclear, researchers re-engaged the respondent to clarify points of ambiguity.

**Results**

To answer RQ1 and RQ2, this study investigates the structural and interactional features specific to this sexual field. Then, it elucidates strategies that racial minorities employ in response to the existing racial hierarchy to answer RQ3.

**Understanding the sexual field of Grindr in Singapore**

In RQ1, we ask how users are arranged in the racial hierarchy. The interviews show that race is indeed a large focus within interactions and users perceive race as an unambiguous, objective hierarchy. Most respondents use Grindr’s interface for racial categorization and have largely internalized the existing racial hierarchy. They mentioned that local Chinese are generally seen as most desirable by Singapore’s Grindr community, followed by whites, Malays, and Indians. RQ2 asks how this hierarchy is sustained by user interactions. The results showed that, unique to this sexual field, the preoccupation with racial profiling shapes racialized desire: users interpret races as rigid categories with seemingly essential characteristics informed by racial stereotypes. This is expressed in the interaction pattern of racial verification (a) blunt inquiry of race, and the use of pictorial evidence, and (b) visual pre-eminence in racial verification.

**Race as an unambiguous, objective hierarchy**

Structurally, multifarious expressions of ethnic identity are reduced to definitive race labels (e.g., “Indian”) functioning as succinct, exhaustive pieces of information to determine a person’s attractiveness. The normalized use of such labels on the interactional level sustains, structurally, a seemingly objective racial hierarchy that shapes users’ desires towards different races. This logic of unambiguous classification is evidenced in how users generally have very specific and rigid mate selection criteria, leaving little room for ambiguity. “Siva” (28, Indian) notes that “[users] are very specific with what they are looking for (…) if you do not belong to those demographics or preferences, then you’re immediately shut off.” This specificity may be encouraged by Grindr’s interface (e.g., fixed options on drop-down menus). Representing people through neatly organized variables reinforces the appeal of pigeonholing individuals into clear categories—the convenience and efficiency of sifting through many profiles for one’s own goals (“Keith,” 31, Chinese). Users use Grindr’s interface
creatively to enforce their racialized preferences, while users often internalize the racial hierarchy and minorities “cross-check” their identities against racialized preferences of other users.

**Use of interface affordances for racial categorization**

The ethnicity drop-down menu available to Grindr users in Singapore contain the same categories listed in the United States (e.g., white, black, Asian). Therefore, interviewees noted that Grindr’s ethnicity drop-down menu is less applicable in Singapore because most Singaporean residents would only fit into either “Asian” or “South Asian” (“Jun Kai,” 28, Chinese). “Bruce” (24, Chinese) notes that “South Asian” might be interpreted as Indian. However, most people who choose to disclose their racial identity often use race labels contextualized to Singapore (e.g., “local Chinese”) within open-ended sections of their profile (Jun Kai, 28, Chinese).

Race labels seem to act as catch-all designations to represent diverse individuals under categories tethered to common racial stereotypes. Such categorization is applied predominantly to racial minorities (e.g., Malays and Indians), wherein they are not seen as individuals with varying traits but straightforward specimens of their race. This is evidenced by how “Arun” (22, Indian) is regularly asked “Indians are very hairy, right?” in online conversations. Interestingly, whites remain highly desired within Singapore’s Grindr community despite being a numerical minority. However, despite being relatively sought after, stereotypes remain salient in the characterization of white people—such as being dominant, sexually penetrative, and promiscuous.

Some people tell you (…) you’re lucky because you’re white, and you get the guys (…) then there’s the other end of that spectrum as you will get people using it as a judgement. And just assuming because I’m white, I’m a slut and I’m fucking everything. (“Eric,” 38, white)

Users also employ race labels to enforce their racial preferences. It is not uncommon to find “whites and Chinese only,” “no Malays,” “no Indians” (“Yusuf,” 28, Malay) written upfront on profiles. Other users employ more inventive methods, given the lack of an ethnicity filter on Grindr. For example, one Chinese respondent uses Grindr’s block function as a “manual filter” to remove profiles that appear Indian from his visual feed. As “Jian Hao” (31, Chinese) puts it, “every time I see an Indian profile, first thing I do is block the person (…) so that I only see people that I want to see.”

**Internalization of the racial hierarchy**

Owing to the obsession with racial profiling, some racial minorities proactively cross check their racial identity against preferences, aligning expectations early to avoid conversations that might otherwise be bound for rejection. Bruce (24, Chinese) mentions that “[racial minority users] will say things like, ‘If you’re not okay, just block me, it’s okay.’ Then they will keep asking, ‘Do you mind if I’m Indian?,’ ‘Do you mind if I’m Malay?’” Such instances reveal how minorities have internalized the racial hierarchy, evidenced by the insecurity expressed. Interactions like these also cement the idea within the broader user community that racial minorities are less desirable because of their race, thereby influencing the sexual preferences of users as such interactions become commonplace. Since users are conditioned to think of race as a straightforward hierarchy of internally homogeneous categories, they thus see it as an attribute to be verified accordingly.

**Verification of race as an interactional preoccupation**

On the interactional level, users continually attempt to evaluate the authenticity of race labels disclosed by others—especially since users can never be sure if Grindr profiles are representative of people offline. For example, users use display names (among other cues) to infer race, such as when
“someone has a more Malay-sounding name” (Siva, 28, Indian). Two recurrent types of user interactions include demanding point-blank for a user’s racial identity and using photos to verify race.

**Blunt inquiry of race**
Occasionally, users directly demand to know the race of their interaction partners. This sometimes happens within the first few messages. “Tommy,” a self-identified Filipino-Indian respondent, shared how he was quizzed on his race in a point-blank manner.

> I think 60% or 70% of (...) the first conversation starters are “Are you mixed?,” “What race are you?” (...) “Are you Malay?,” “Are you Chinese?” (...) [The user] goes like, “Oh cos you know usually Indians are like this (...) Pinoy are like this (...) Chinese are like this (...) you don’t fall into any category.” (Tommy, 23, Filipino-Indian)

Respondents (like Tommy) who appear racially ambiguous or have biracial identities are seen as suspect as they cannot be immediately profiled. Verification is regarded as important because stereotypes attached to race labels function as preconceptions for evaluating a user’s attractiveness. Blunt inquiry of race is also used to satisfy sexual desires driven by racial fetish.

> There was this guy (...) he’s a Japanese American (...) [he asked me] “Oh, so you’re Indian, right?” [I responded], “Yeah, I’m Indian” (...) [I thought] maybe [he asked] because he’s just interested to know my culture (...) [but then he asked] “even though you’re a Singaporean, you’re an Indian, right?” I just felt as though he is into me because he just sees me as this exotic person. (Arun, 22, Indian)

**Visual pre-eminence in racial verification**
Among all possible means of race verification, pictorial evidence is regarded as the most authoritative standard to verify user’s racial membership. This is partly influenced by the centrality of photos in Grindr’s interface, evidenced in Chan’s (2018) finding that two thirds of U.S. users regard photos as the most crucial part of profiles. Consequently, face and body pictures are often seen as socially mandatory, where a “no pic no chat” social norm prevails—such that “initiating contact on Grindr without a face pic is like applying for jobs without a resume” (Jun Kai, 28, Chinese). Profiles without pictures tend to be seen as suspect, even if these users have disclosed their race.

> One time where I didn’t put my profile picture on Grindr, but I’ve put my race and then some guy texted me, “Oh, usually like Indian people are (...) not really good looking, so you better show me your picture, or else I’m going to report you.” (Tommy, 23, Filipino-Indian)

Given that race is a construct that embodies more than just physical appearance (e.g., lineage, culture), attempts to reduce racial identity to the visual raise tensions if a person’s physical looks fail to match how different races stereotypically look.

> I do not want to put “Eurasian” over there in the app because I obviously don’t look Eurasian in the app in my photos first (...) The way I look and the way I identify do not seem to match. (“Herbert,” 47, Chinese-Eurasian)

This mismatch discourages Herbert from putting a race label that fits how he actually identifies. However, other users whose photos do not match stereotypical racial appearances may see it as even more important to emphasize their racial identities through race labels, especially if their race commands more sexual capital. As Jun Kai (28, Chinese) observes, “a lot of Chinese who may look a bit
not Chinese, I see quite common they will specifically put 'local Chinese' [on their profiles].” Although photos are seen as the gold standard for verifying users’ race, they are paradoxically fallible. So long as a user is bent on misrepresentation, he can edit his photo heavily or use someone else’s picture, as respondents have noted (“Fandi,” 32, Malay). Despite this awareness, pictorial verification remains an obsession on Grindr.

**Negotiating the racial hierarchy: strategies used by racial minorities**

Answering RQ3, this study finds that racial minorities use various strategies in response to racialized sexual preferences. These strategies may be organized into three broad approaches: (a) negotiating for a desirable Chinese majority racial membership, (b) emphasizing a cosmopolitan self while downplaying the ethnic self, and (c) reframing the situation to reject a marginal status. Broadly, the first two types of strategies co-opt the existing racial hierarchy, where racial minorities attempt to negotiate for more sexual capital by presenting themselves in ways that aligns with existing norms of attractiveness. In other words, users are trying to “compensate” for their racial marginality. In contrast, the third type (reframing the situation) tends to question the legitimacy of the racial hierarchy, since it involves users’ explicit or tacit disavowals of their marginal position within the sexual field. Importantly, such disavowal of victimhood is distinct from a desire to compensate for marginality.

**Negotiating for (Chinese) majority racial membership**

One approach that racial minorities use to increase their sexual capital is negotiating their membership within the hegemonic racial category (i.e., local Chinese), often by emphasizing a mixed racial identity. For example, one respondent, who identifies mainly as Malay and not biracial, noted that his past attempts to emphasize his Chinese lineage on Grindr helped him avoid rejection.

> My great-grandfather is actually Chinese (…) I made it a point to tell people that (…) then they wouldn’t view me as 100% Malay, but you know, Chinese-ish (…) they are more willing to give it a go and have that conversation. (“Ismail,” 29, Malay)

Ismail also observed that other “Malay guys [would] outrightly say that they are mixed,” identifying these as attempts by minorities to “bend the truth a bit” when disclosing race. This shows that some users, who appear racially ambiguous, strategically emphasize a racial identity seen as more desirable. Other respondents also mention that presenting a Chinese-biracial identity allows minorities “to go up the hierarchy” (“Abdul,” 27, Malay). Interestingly, this strategy also appears to be useful for users who identify as Chinese but do not look stereotypically Chinese and must therefore proactively display the race label “local Chinese” on their profiles. At least in early stages of interaction, racial verification on Grindr centers around race labels, pictures, and names. Therefore, this strategy is also seemingly a way for users to manage and coordinate their racial self-presentation across these modes.

**Emphasizing a cosmopolitan self while downplaying the ethnic self**

Another strategic approach is the presentation of a more Westernized identity through the emphasis of cultural capital, while actively downplaying traditional ethnic aspects of identity, which may in turn be linked to other forms of intersectional marginality (e.g., social class). “Kumar,” an Indian respondent, mentioned the importance of using good grammar, witty profile descriptions, and being aware of global cultural references like “RuPaul’s Drag Race.” Though he does not believe in denying his racial roots, he emphasizes the importance of transcending stereotypes, which he sees as reflective of unattractive traits that many Indian users have. Interestingly, Kumar does this by distancing
himself from other Indian users who fit these stereotypes. While he does not openly criticize these minorities, he rejects them if they approach him on Grindr.

Doesn’t help that they have kind of refused to play the game as well (….) if your photo is of you, just coming out of the temple with the ash and everything (…) you should know that it’s not gonna fly (…) You have to kind of understand how to assimilate (…) it feels like a lot of them don’t know how to do that (…) it’s also the social circles you mix in (…) and your interests and things. (Kumar, 27, Indian)

Kumar’s perception that other Indian users have low sexual capital is tied inseparably to their education and social class. He distinguishes himself from what he calls Indians from “neighbourhood schools” (as opposed to “elite schools”), as they do not have the right form of “cultural exposure.” Ismail (29, Malay) also echoes that “in my race, there are the modern Malay. I feel like I fall into that (…) we drink, we are able to integrate (…) People who are ‘Anglo’ (…) versus those who are not.” Racial minorities, like Kumar and Ismail, who distance themselves from other minorities who lack these privileges, negotiate their standing in the sexual field by co-opting the existing racial hierarchy—in other words, by seemingly “reproducing” sexual racism within their racial group (as broadly defined).

Reframing the situation to reject a marginal status
A third umbrella of strategies is characterized by racial minorities rejecting their marginal status in the racial hierarchy (be it consciously or tacitly). This does not necessarily mean that racial minorities are openly challenging the status quo or that their strategies automatically subvert existing social structures. However, these strategies involve a reframing of the situation by racial minorities that may open new possibilities to denaturalize the hierarchy. In some respondents, this reframing involves a self-awareness about the inherently problematic nature of racial classification; for others, how they perceive and respond to the racial hierarchy undergoes a reorientation that is tacit and less self-aware.

A quintessential strategy involves the rejection of victimized status when confronted with racial discrimination. Yusuf (28, Malay) says “I don’t see it as a loss (…) it helps me to filter out people that I don’t have to spend my energy on.” This may be a way to dismiss negative effects that sexual racism has on him (Choi et al., 2011). Users also reject the victimized status in the face of racial fetishism. Arun, an Indian respondent, dislikes being fetishized over racial stereotypes (e.g., Indians being hairy) but does not always reject these sexual advances or see them as automatically demeaning.

I am aware of how they are exoticizing my body (…) me being aware itself is enough for me to not be exoticized by them (…) if I hadn’t known (…) I’m being naive, I’m being deluded. But the very fact that I know, “hey (…) you’re doing this because you feel I’m exotic, right?” (…) that’s really me putting up a resistance. (Arun, 22, Indian)

Some respondents block users who seek to verify their race (“Mohammed,” 21, Malay) or who display their racial preferences on their profile (Ismail, 29, Malay). Others attempt to destabilize racial stereotypes, which in turn de-racializes social difference. By first self-reflexively convincing himself that there is nothing shameful in honestly affirming one’s racial identity, Siva (28, Indian) can then present himself externally in ways that challenge the norm of racial stereotyping.

I have to represent myself well, because I’m not only representing myself, I’m also representing the Indian community, in that I’m here to squelch your stereotypes. And I can only do
that if I’m being honest with myself. So that’s where the full disclosure comes in (…) I’m not going to [conceal] my ethnicity, because I’m proud of it. (Siva, 28, Indian)

While being critically self-aware about sexual racism helps to prompt reorientation, it does not always require self-awareness. Sometimes, self-awareness is itself an outcome of privilege, such as access to education (e.g., the case with Arun, a liberal arts student). However, others, like Ravi (31, Indian), demonstrate that racial minorities have tacit understandings and responses to sexual racism; they can reframe the situation even if they do not verbalize it with the same level of conceptual awareness. When asked which race is most desired by users in the Grindr community, unlike others, Ravi thinks that “Indians and Malays get a bit higher chances than the Chinese (…) based on their features and (…) physical attributes,” as he notices many Chinese, Malay, and white profiles stating preferences like “I’m only looking for Indian hairy guys for good sexual moments.” He also notes that users tell him that “Indian guys got big dicks so it’s good to have a good session with Indian people.” His idea that Indians are most desired stems from what respondents like Arun would recognize as racial fetishism; yet, Ravi does not appear to recognize that sexual attention can be racially demeaning. However, Ravi also mentions incidents when his own race can greatly reduce his attractiveness and this has propelled him to reorient his own desire in an unexpected way—planting the seed for a strict preference for his own race.

Experienced [racism] before in my life, so I don’t like [it] (…) very pain, you know (…) So from there, I wake up and tell myself I’ll just go for my own race. I don’t like to talk to other people [of different races] (…) [when] I went out with a Chinese guy [in the past] (…) he says “you’re so black, you’re so ugly, your face looks like a turtle.” (Ravi, 31, Indian)

Discussion

Since existing literature on sexual racism is predominantly centered on Western contexts, little is known about non-Western settings, which may have different racial compositions and hierarchies. Furthermore, strategies undertaken by racial minorities in non-Western contexts to respond to sexual racism remain understudied. Therefore, this research seeks to counterbalance the ironically ethnocentric focus of existing sexual racism literature on white-centric contexts by examining the sexual field of Grindr users in multiracial Singapore. This research finds that users’ sexual desires are socially structured in a way that produces a hierarchy where racial minorities (non-Chinese) are predominantly seen as less desirable. Users are habituated to verify the racial identities of other users, especially through photos. We then identify three types of strategies racial minorities use in response to this sexual racism: negotiating for Chinese majority racial membership, emphasizing the cosmopolitan self over the ethnic self, and reframing the situation to disavow victimhood. This research provides three major theoretical contributions: (a) foregrounding the nuanced presence of racial hierarchy and sexual racism in an East Asian sexual field, (b) explicating how interactions and photos facilitate the verification of race and social conditioning of racialized desire, and (c) revealing and substantiating the importance of internal dispositions as a situated form of strategic resistance when confronting sexual racism.

Firstly, this research foregrounds how sexual racism on Grindr happens in Singapore’s multiracial East Asian context, which greatly contributes to extant literature on sexual racism. We found that, within the sexual field of Grindr in Singapore, users are continually pigeonholed into racial categories tethered to stereotypes, maintaining a hierarchy with local Chinese users at the top and certain racial
minorities at the bottom (e.g., Malays and Indians). This racial hierarchy has been internalized by both the racial majority and minorities in the sexual field, thus reinforcing the fixity of racialized sexual preferences. These findings echo online sexual racism findings in Western societies (e.g., Raj, 2011; Shield, 2019)—except that “white” is replaced with “Chinese” as the hegemonic center—thus corroborating research on same-sex sexual racism in Singapore (Prankumar et al., 2020). Transposing “offline” race labels onto Grindr, Singapore users communicate and authenticate race labels intrinsic to Singapore, such as “Chinese,” “Malay,” and “Indian.” Sometimes, race labels are further qualified with a marker of nationality, such as “local Chinese.” Using the word “local” enables Singaporeans to distinguish themselves racially from migrants. This corroborates the racialization of differences between locals and migrants in Singapore (Ang, 2018), showing that sexual racism goes beyond skin color. Interestingly, whites are still seen as more desirable than other colored racial minorities (e.g., Malays and Indians). This may be because “whiteness” remains valorized in Singapore—after all, cosmopolitan culture, which borrows heavily from white culture and aligns with Singapore’s internationalization goals, is highly regarded in Singapore (Yeoh, 2004). However, white users in Singapore continue to face racial fetishism and may perhaps be considered more desirable only when they acquiesce to certain stereotypes (e.g., being dominant, penetrative, promiscuous). As such, white bodies are still “marked” in Singapore and do not pass as racially neutral, unlike in Western societies (Raj, 2011). Conversely, we found no evidence from our interviews that local Chinese users face de-meaning stereotypes linked to their race. This corroborates Yue and Zubillaga-Pow (2012) observation that local Chinese occupy the hegemonic center in Singapore’s LGBTQ community.

The findings also show that users creatively use interface affordances (e.g., photos, display names, block function) to communicate racial membership and/or enforce racialized preferences. This allows them to circumnavigate the preset ethnicity options “Asian” and “South Asian” in Grindr’s drop-down menus, which are too broad to have discriminating power in Singapore society. Researchers have argued that allowing users to search or filter for ethnicity encourages discriminatory racialized preferences, thus exacerbating sexual racism (Hutson, 2018). Therefore, Grindr’s decision to remove the ethnicity filter (Hunte, 2020) is arguably a positive development. However, as Shield (2019) warns, removing ethnicity filters and drop-down menus alone may not actually eliminate sexual racism. This research agrees with this warning, and highlights that drop-down menus are just one part within an ecosystem of interface affordances that contextually shape user interactions in ways that perpetuate sexual racism.

Secondly, the finding that users are preoccupied with the need to verify race through interactions, especially photos, enriches the current understanding of the relationship between sexual racism and technical features of Grindr (e.g., Conner, 2019; Hutson, 2018; Shield, 2019). The dual role of photos in verification and social conditioning has not been fully explored in existing literature on sexual racism. As such, this article answers Van De Wiele and Tong’s (2014) call for more research on how technological features relate to discrimination on Grindr, by fleshing out how photos condition user interactions and perpetuate sexual racism. Photos do not merely evidence but reinforce stereotype-driven correlations between race and physical appearance in users’ minds.

As Mowlabocus (2010) notes, the process of verification through face pictures is integral to social acceptance within the dating app community. Accordingly, the current findings show that users who do not fit stereotyped looks have to continually manage tensions with other users that threaten to invalidate their original sense of racial identity. This is akin to the disjuncts between prescribed race labels in preset drop-down menus and the complex user identities that exceed these labels (McGlotten, 2013; Shield, 2019). Jaspal (2017) notes that online interaction offers users some freedom in how they can present themselves racially. However, we argue that photos can act as a constraint on
this freedom, since users’ self-disclosed racial identities are scrutinized heavily should their pictures fail to align with how their race is stereotyped to look. Hence, photos are not just straightforward authentication tools but features that condition racialized sexual desires through ritualized interactions of pictorial verification.

Lastly, this research advances sexual fields literature by showing that racial minorities respond strategically within the sexual field not just through self-presentation, but also by orienting their embodied feelings and attitudes (which are not necessarily conscious and rational) in response to sexual racism (McGlotten, 2013). We argue that internal orientations must be examined alongside external strategies like self-presentation, because they set the conditions of possibility for externally presenting social practice, and vice versa. We found that racial minorities either orient themselves towards their marginality as something they must compensate for or something that they disavow.

If racial minorities are oriented towards compensating for marginality, they may tend towards negotiating a racial majority membership or emphasizing a cosmopolitan (contra ethnic) persona. Corroborating Prankumar et al. (2020) findings on Indian gay, bisexual, and queer men in Singapore, the current findings show that some racial minorities strategically increase their cultural capital to increase their attractiveness as a response to sexual racism. We found that racial minorities present themselves as cosmopolitan by leveraging cultural capital, e.g., English education, global savviness (Yeoh, 2004). This allows them to de-emphasize racialized aspects of their self-presentation, since the cosmopolitan persona is ideologically constructed as transcendent of racial classification (Chua, 2003; Yeoh, 2004). Although whites are not the numerical majority in Singapore, the global hegemony of “whiteness”—described aptly by Raj (2011) as an “inherited system of privileges” (p. 7)—reintroduces itself in Singapore through the image of the Westernized and educated global citizen. We argue that the performance of cosmopolitanism (as an expression of idealized “whiteness” within a Chinese-centric society) is not just self-presentation, but also an attitudinal disposition that produces distances (i.e., emphasizes social differences) between bodies, as “whiteness” does in Western contexts (Raj, 2011). When minority race respondents Kumar and Ismail enact the cosmopolitan persona, the self-presentation aspects cannot be separated from the orientation that incites them to distance themselves from other racial minorities who fail to perform this ideal persona.

Conversely, racial minorities who are oriented towards disavowing racial marginality may reframe the situation in their minds, which propels them towards different trajectories of action, such as questioning the legitimacy of stereotypes and re-tuning their racialized sexual desires. Prankumar et al. (2020) mentioned that some of their respondents “described forcing themselves to develop a liking for other Indian men” (p. 11) in response to sexual racism. Our research independently corroborates that this does indeed occur, reflecting one facet of the identified disavowal strategy. In alignment with Han and Choi (2018), we argue that by adopting a critical attitude toward their own internalized racism, some racial minorities reject the idea that members of their own race (and other racial minorities) are less desirable—potentially planting the seed for broader changes in the sexual field. Therefore, embodied feelings and attitudes are not inert but can create new possibilities for social action (McGlotten, 2013).

Furthermore, as Peter (2003) notes, strategies of resistance may appear superficially as acquiescence to the status quo. To avoid overlooking these situated forms of agency and thinking of racial minorities as being helpless within the sexual field, analyses must consider contextual factors that shape how resistance manifests. Relatedly, we caution against taking active confrontation, such as anti-racist speech (Callander et al., 2016; Shield, 2019), as the strategy of resistance par excellence. Notably, there were largely no mentions of actions confronting racism during the interviews. This makes sense within the Singapore context, as Chew (2018) notes an unwillingness amongst most
Singaporeans to discuss issues of race and racism out of the fear of stirring unwanted tensions in society. This may be compounded by a chilling effect caused by instances where well-meaning attempts to call out covert racism have resulted in legal sanctions under laws set up to mitigate inter-racial conflict. For example, a parody video made by local influencers Preeti and Subhas Nair calling out brownface (racial caricature) was banned by the government (Oh, 2019). Singapore’s socio-political environment seems to condition residents to understand racism only through the lens of inter-racial conflict, rendering everyday racism that involves racial disparities unintelligible (Chew, 2018). Lazar (2017) also notes how the mainstream LGBTQ community in Singapore tends to co-opt discourses on racial harmony so as to avoid controversy, rather than highlight the intersectional marginalization faced by non-Chinese queer people. So, Singapore users may feel less equipped to actively challenge everyday racism (including sexual racism) on Grindr. Emphasizing that situated forms of resistance should not be overlooked, this research thus provides a contextually situated response to Han and Choi’s (2018) prompt to examine how sexual fields can act as potential “sites of resistance” (p. 159).

Limitations and further research

Due to the topic’s sensitive nature, there might have been a selection bias resulting from possible differences between our participants and those who might not have been comfortable participating. Future research may address these issues by replicating this study with a more representative sample. Future research can also triangulate the current interview findings with other methods such as quantitative content analysis of user profiles and virtual ethnography, which can further enrich the understanding of the sexual field. Further, this research focused on Grindr users only. Studying other dating apps—e.g., Blued, which caters more to Mandarin speaking audiences (Jing & Yu, 2018)—may reveal differences in racialized structures of desire and offer more insight into whether and how sexual racism manifests among racial minorities users in East Asia. As many respondents also mentioned using multiple dating apps, future research may also study how respondents “platform-swing” (use a variety of apps simultaneously) (Tandoc, Lou, & Lee, 2019) to circumnavigate encounters with sexual racism. Finally, we recognize that our study is limited to the experiences of cisgender gay men, who make up the bulk of our respondents. Future research should examine online sexual racism experienced by other groups within the LGBTQ+ umbrella (including same-sex attracted women and gender-diverse people), who remain understudied in the literature.

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Conflict of Interest

The funder did not play any role in the research process. All the authors have no conflict of interest to disclose.
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