From “Oh, you’re Chinese . . .” to “No bats, thx!”: Racialized Experiences of Australian-Based Chinese Queer Women in the Mobile Dating Context

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Abstract
This article explores racial exclusion, bias, and prejudice in the context of same-sex mobile dating, focusing on the experiences of a group of Australian-based Chinese queer women. Semi-structured in-depth interviews and participant observation were used to examine participants’ racialized experiences. The findings indicate that Western dating apps, such as Tinder, Bumble, and HER, served as crucial channels of these women’s interracial and intercultural encounters while living in Australia. However, they largely perceived these apps, and HER in particular, as White-dominated and ill-suited to their dating practices, thus reinforcing their sense of exclusion and ostracism. Although the participants frequently encountered subtle prejudice on dating apps, they experienced more blatant and aggressive forms of racism triggered by the COVID-19 outbreak. Multiple factors, including their language capability, the COVID-19 pandemic, and their racial, ethnic, and diasporic identities, played an intersectional role in these women’s racialized experiences. Correspondingly, the participants developed diverse interpretations of and responses to their racialized experiences. This study reveals how the anti-Asian racism in the global West permeates the realm of queer women in the context of mobile dating. It contributes to understanding the digital dating practices and racialized experiences of queer women and the broader Chinese diaspora.

Keywords
Chinese queer women, diaspora, dating apps, anti-Asian racism, intersectionality

Introduction
On an ordinary evening in early February of 2020, Jiang (24 years) was in her home in Australia using HER, an English language-based Western lesbian dating app, something she often did to pass the time. An unprompted message—“No bats, thx!”—from one of her matches—a White Australian woman—appeared on her screen. Jiang was about to ask the other user to explain the strange message when it occurred to her that it was an anti-Chinese slur; at the time, bats were suspected to be the reservoir hosts of the novel coronavirus that led to the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan, China. From Jiang’s perspective, “No bats” was a euphemism for “No Chinese.” Feeling offended and humiliated by this racial attack, Jiang instantly blocked that user and closed the app. Jiang is one of the interview participants in this study. Other interview participants who identified as Chinese queer women (here, “queer women” is used as an umbrella term to denote women who identified themselves as non-heterosexual and are attracted to women) consistently reported race-based exclusion, bias, and prejudice as part of their experience using English-language Western dating apps such as HER, Tinder, and Bumble while residing in Australia. To better understand their racialized experiences in the context of lesbian mobile dating, this study explores how these women confronted different types of racial exclusion and prejudice, while using Western dating apps to develop interracial and intercultural same-sex relationships.

Racism encountered in the context of dating, sex, and intimacy is often referred to as “sexual racism” (Callander et al., 2015; Robinson & Frost, 2018), which includes racial exclusion and racial fetishization (Callander et al., 2016; Shield, 2013). Multiple factors, including their language capability, the COVID-19 pandemic, and their racial, ethnic, and diasporic identities, played an intersectional role in these women’s racialized experiences. Correspondingly, the participants developed diverse interpretations of and responses to their racialized experiences. This study reveals how the anti-Asian racism in the global West permeates the realm of queer women in the context of mobile dating. It contributes to understanding the digital dating practices and racialized experiences of queer women and the broader Chinese diaspora.
Existing studies related to race-related discrimination in the digital dating context have primarily concentrated on heterosexual and gay male user populations (Callander et al., 2016; Carlson, 2020; Chen & Liu, 2021; Shield, 2018b; Tsunokai et al., 2014) while largely overlooking the experiences of queer women. Although the Internet has facilitated intergroup contact and prejudice reduction (Imperato et al., 2021; White et al., 2021), existing research suggests that digital platforms developed in Western contexts, including generic social media platforms (e.g., Facebook and Twitter) and those designed more specifically for dating purposes (e.g., Tinder and Grindr), are becoming sites of amplified racial bias and exclusion (Ben-David & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016; Chen & Liu, 2021; Daniels, 2013; Sharma, 2013; Yu & Blain, 2019). Again, however, this strand of research pays insufficient attention to the way Western lesbian dating platforms contribute to their users’ racialized experiences. This study thus offers insights into how Western dating apps, particularly those geared toward lesbian, bisexual, and queer women, contribute to their users’ exclusionary and prejudicial experiences.

More practically, this research reveals how the anti-Asian racism in the global West permeates the realm of queer women in the context of mobile dating. The recent Atlanta tragedy is not solely a problem for North America; rather, it should be understood in the background of the rising anti-Asian violence across the globe (Haynes, 2021). In Australia, for instance, 377 COVID-19-related racist incidents were reported to the Asian Australian Alliance between April and June 2020 (Haynes, 2021). Australia has been identified as a country where multiculturalism has long coexisted with racial discrimination (Forrest & Dunn, 2007; Y.-T. Li, 2019; Stratton, 2011). As the second largest immigrant group in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019), the Chinese diaspora and their experiences of racial discrimination have become a focus of intense research (Ang, 2001; Fitzgerald, 2006; Y.-T. Li, 2019). However, few studies have thus far examined the Chinese diaspora’s racialized experiences in the context of digital dating (Chen & Liu, 2021; Yu & Blain, 2019). Our study enriches extant literature by providing more knowledge specifically about the race-related bias and prejudice experienced by the Chinese queer female diaspora in their use of dating platforms.

In the following sections of this article, we first delve into the literature on the embedded Whiteness on digital platforms and the racial prejudice and discrimination in the digital dating context. We combine several research concepts and theories, including platformed Whiteness, subtle and blatant prejudice, and intersectionality, to form our theoretical framework for understanding Australian-based Chinese queer women’s racialized experiences on Western dating platforms. Then, we describe our data collection process, including semi-structured, in-depth interviews and participant observation. Based on the data analysis, we argue that the digital cultures facilitated by Western lesbian dating apps, such as HER, were mainly perceived as Westernized and White-dominated by the Chinese queer women in this study; this perception gives rise to their sense of exclusion. Our participants experienced both subtle and blatant racial prejudice in their use of same-sex mobile dating platforms and developed diverse interpretations of and responses to their individual experiences. Covert expressions of racial bias typically occur in their everyday intimate digital interactions, but more blatantly aggressive behavior emerged with the advent of the COVID-19 outbreak. The racial, ethnic, cultural, and diasporic identities of these women, their language capabilities, and the COVID-19 social context intersected with each other to affect their racialized experiences in the digital dating context.

**Literature Review**

**Embedded Whiteness on Western Digital Platforms**

Digital platforms with various specificities have become increasingly infrastructuralized in modern societies (de Kloe et al., 2019; Plantin et al., 2018; van Dijck et al., 2018). However, digital media technologies are not neutral; instead, scholars point out that every digital platform has its own built-in norms, logics, and governance (Gillespie, 2018; van Dijck, 2013). Most platforms that emerged from the West “tend to be created by small groups of (usually) (young) (White) (American) men” (Baym, 2015, p. 1). Therefore, developers may consciously or unconsciously bring their own Whiteness to digital platform design, which can even result in Western-centric algorithms (Kotliar, 2020). Whiteness, as Dyer (1997) suggests, is not a fixed definition but a relatively fluid “coalition with a border and an internal hierarchy” (p. 51). As racism has evolved into subtle and fluid forms in Western societies, digital platforms are becoming major sites that amplify racial bias and exclusion (Ben-David & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016; Daniels, 2013; Sharma, 2013). In her critical interrogation of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, Matamoros-Fernández (2017) proposes the concept of “platformed racism” to explain how racism has been amplified, manufactured, and reproduced by platform affordances, business models, governances, and the user cultures associated with these platforms. Whereas platformed racism prevails on general social media platforms, which are often considered as public or semi-public spaces (boyd & Ellison, 2007), dating apps such as Tinder are relatively private spaces. Because user content on dating apps is not accessible without signing onto the platform, platformed racism on these apps is less likely to be observed by people outside the user community.

Nonetheless, scholars of critical race studies and platform studies have provided insights into the Whiteness co-constructed by the designs and community cultures of Western dating apps. Duguay (2017, p. 8), for instance, perceptively observes that actors hired by Tinder’s marketing department are predominantly “young, upper class, heterosexual, white
people,” which infuses Whiteness into the “normative identities” of Tinder users. Chen (2020) argues that even in Tinder’s marketing that involves non-White models, the scripts still represent the idea of White dominance, which is similar to Willis’ (1991) observation that the “beige fashion models” in the American fashion industry “underscore white supremacy without directly invoking the dominant race” (p. 99). Another example is the self-branded “feminist” dating app Bumble, whose design encourages a stereotypical White femininity characterized as “gentle, innocent” (Willis, 1991, p. 449), and “desperate for initiating conversations” (Willis, 1991, p. 450), thus excluding non-White users from the intended users of this app (Bivens & Hoque, 2018).

Regarding digital dating among LGBTQI communities, the dominance of Whiteness is not absent from scholarly discussions. Research on gay men’s digital dating practices indicates that the White, Western-dominated understandings of gay values and identities have been inscribed on the digital infrastructures and community cultures of global English-language gay dating websites and apps (Cassidy, 2018; Light et al., 2008; Mowlabocus, 2010). Whereas Western gay digital dating infrastructures can be enablers of the “globalisation of sexuality” (Light et al., 2008, p. 311), Ferris and Duguay’s (2020) research on queer women’s use of Tinder suggests that Tinder to some extent works as the enabler of the globalization of lesbian sexuality similarly. For example, Ferris and Duguay (2020) argue that queer women on Tinder have developed a “lesbian digital imaginary” that contains shared understandings about female non-heterosexual identities, which is presented through certain cultural referents on their profiles. These shared cultural referents are quite consistent, despite the fact that Ferris and Duguay’s (2020) queer women research participants were located in different countries, including Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Moreover, Ferris and Duguay (2020) acknowledge that one limitation of their research is that only two of their participants identified as non-White. This indicates that the globalized lesbian digital dating culture is dominated by White, Western cultural referents. For instance, they note that one “popular and reliable symbol” in this lesbian digital imaginary is “the white, slender, feminine girl–girl emoji” (Ferris and Duguay, 2020, p. 497) that appears in queer women’s user profiles.

Previous work on the embedded Whiteness of platforms offers an analytical lens with which to examine the dating apps (and HER, in particular) used by our participants. In turn, our study contributes to this research area through its exploration of the platformed Whiteness experienced by Chinese queer women on lesbian dating apps.

Race-Based Prejudice and Discrimination in the Digital Dating Context

Digital technologies and diverse social media platforms facilitate electronic contact (or E-contact) and communications between people from different ethnic, racial, and cultural groups and improve intergroup harmony by reducing prejudice against sexual minorities (White et al., 2019, 2021). Dating platforms, for example, create an opportunity for users to develop interracial relationships (Ranzini & Rosenbaum, 2020). However, the cross-cultural contact in the online dating context can also increase the risk of being exposed to bias, prejudice, stigma, and exclusion. For example, a growing body of research has examined the racial discrimination encountered by people of diverse genders and/or sexualities in the context of digital dating (Callander et al., 2015, 2016; Carlson, 2020; Lauckner et al., 2019; Shield, 2018b, 2019). Although these studies have mostly focused on gay men’s digital dating experiences, the conceptual framework surrounding sexual racism is of great value to this study concerning lesbian digital dating. Sexual racism—the racial discrimination an individual experiences when seeking a date, romance, or sex (Callander et al., 2015, 2016; Robinson & Frost, 2018)—has been identified as a pattern of racist behavior commonly encountered by gay and bisexual men in the digital dating context (Callander et al., 2016; Shield, 2019). It generally takes the form of rejection or a preference for certain racial groups (Shield, 2019).

Based on the way prejudice is articulated, scholars draw a distinction between covert (or subtle) and overt (or blatant) prejudice. Pettigrew and Meertens (1995, p. 58), for example, identify blatant prejudice as “hot, close and direct” and subtle prejudice as “cool, distant and indirect.” Whereas blatant prejudice is considered to be a traditional form of racism, subtle prejudice is described as “modern racism” (McConahay, 1983; Pettigrew, 1989) or “new racism” (Barker, 1981). In addition, subtle prejudice has been described as being ambiguous, ambivalent, and unconscious in nature (National Research Council, 2004). Scholars also acknowledge blatant and subtle prejudice as two types of prejudicial behaviors commonly encountered by gay men on dating platforms. Callander et al. (2016) and Dhoest (2018), for instance, have discovered that compared with blatant prejudice, subtle prejudice is more frequently encountered by gay and bisexual men in their online dating experiences, albeit in different sociocultural contexts (e.g., Australia and Belgium). This finding directly contradicts that of Carlson (2020), who has examined Indigenous Australian gay men’s and heterosexual women’s racialized experiences on Grindr and Tinder, respectively, and argues that the racism that male and female users encounter is mostly blatant and aggressive in nature. This contrast indicates that the experience of prejudice may vary among users of different genders, sexualities, and ethnic and racial backgrounds in different sociocultural contexts (Quah, 2020).

The objective of our study is to understand Australian-based Chinese queer women’s experiences of diverse forms of racial discrimination. In this regard, the above studies on blatant and subtle prejudice provide inspirational thoughts and a useful conceptual framework for this study to compare and examine our participants’ individual experiences of racial discrimination in the digital dating context. This study will thus expand the application of the subtle and blatant
prejudice theory in examining queer women’s race-related experiences in the digital dating context.

The intersectionality theory provides an analytical framework for understanding Chinese diasporic queer women’s racialized experiences in the digital dating context. This theory, originally proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), argues that discrimination against women of color (e.g., Black women) can happen based on the intersection of these women’s multiple identities, including gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity. Intersectionality has been employed to analyze how queer migrants experience racism, homophobia, and stigma in their everyday life in the host societies. Dhoest (2020), for example, suggests that the intersection of sexual and ethnic-cultural identities of diasporic queer women in Belgium plays a crucial role in their experiences of discrimination, xenophobia, marginalization, and racism. Huang and Fang (2019) and Shield (2018a) reveal that the intersection of the sexual, racial, and ethnic identities of gay male migrants in Denmark and Canada, respectively, influence their experiences of exclusion, discrimination, and marginalization in different dating contexts. Notably, the issue of racism and discrimination against Chinese and Asian communities has become increasingly salient during the COVID-19 pandemic. By examining Asian or Chinese international students’ lived and educational experiences in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic, Zhang et al. (2020) found that the interplay of these students’ racial and national identities significantly shaped their encounters of racism, anti-Chinese sentiments, and Sinophobia. The above studies offer insights into the intersectional analysis of the experiences of exclusion, stigma, and discrimination among migrants, particularly queer migrants and Chinese migrants, in different sociocultural contexts and during the COVID-19 pandemic. By employing intersectionality as an analytical framework, this study analyzes how Australian-based Chinese queer women’s diverse identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, and diaspora), coupled with other factors, play an intersectional part in their racialized encounters on dating platforms.

Research on digital dating among Australian-based Chinese diasporas confirms the existence of race-related prejudice in this context (Chen & Liu, 2021; H. Li, 2020; Yu & Blain, 2019). Chen and Liu (2021) and Yu and Blain (2019), for example, have examined the racial prejudice experienced by Australian-based Chinese heterosexual and gay male diasporic groups, respectively, in the context of mobile dating. Both argue that despite presenting the Chinese diaspora with opportunities to have interracial and intercultural (romantic and sexual) encounters, these app-facilitated meetings also present a threat of racism. However, the details of Australian-based Chinese queer women’s experiences on Western dating or social platforms remain unclear. This work, therefore, contributes to enriching the existing scholarship on Chinese diasporic groups and queer women’s mobile dating practices as well as the broader scholarship on racial prejudice within these contexts.

Based on the research objective and existing literature, we aim to address two primary research questions in this study: How do technical design and cultural representations of Western lesbian dating apps contribute to Australian-based Chinese queer women’s racialized experiences? How do Chinese queer women encounter prejudice and discrimination in their use of Western dating apps in Australia?

Methods

Chinese queer women’s racialized experiences in the digital dating context were explored through semi-structured in-depth interviews and participant observation. Thirty-one interviews were conducted between May 2019 and May 2020. Interview participants were recruited primarily through lesbian social and dating apps, such as HER and Rela, and general social media platforms, including WeChat, Weibo, and Facebook. Twenty-two interviews were conducted through WeChat (through audio and video chats) and Zoom, whereas nine interviews were conducted face-to-face. An interview guide was developed to direct the interview topics. However, because the interviews were semi-structured, the discussions were not limited to the pre-designed interview questions but covered broad and diverse topics related to the participants’ experiences of prejudice, discrimination, and racism as dating app users.

Our interview participants ranged in age from 19 to 37 years, hailed from diverse regions of origin, including Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam, and self-identified as Chinese women. All of our participants were living in Australia at the time they were interviewed, with durations of stay varying from 7 months to 9 years. All of our participants acknowledged their same-sex attractions and desires but indicated individual preferences in using different labels to describe their identities, including bisexual, fluid, queer, lesbian, bicurious, and uncertain. Three interviewees, however, refused to use any label to identify themselves. Notably, after the formal interviews had concluded, some participants contacted the first author to share new stories regarding their digital dating experiences, which offered further crucial insights into understanding their racialized encounters when using dating apps. All of the interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese and were audio-recorded with the participants’ consent. To ensure anonymity, each participant was assigned a pseudonym, and any identifiable information was removed. The interview recordings were first transcribed to Chinese and then translated to English. The qualitative analysis software NVivo was deployed to analyze the English transcripts. Thematic analysis, which focuses on deductively identifying and analyzing themes or patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), was used to summarize and discern the primary themes of the interview transcripts.

Of particular note here is the fact that while participating in the interviews, several participants offered to add the first
author to the WeChat groups they had joined, which were mainly formed by Chinese women who were users of lesbian social apps or who were interested in queer-related cultures and issues. Because observing everyday chat group conversations would help us gain a deeper understanding of Chinese women’s dating app practices, the first author expressed her interest in joining the WeChat group called “AU Les Group-We’re here!” (ALG), which was recommended by an interview participant. However, considering that the first author’s presence in the group, her heterosexual identity, and her research purpose of joining the group could trigger discomfort among other group members, the first author asked the interview participant to communicate her interest with the ALG group members before she applied to join the group. After ensuring that the participant talked to group members and all members consented to the first author’s application, the first author joined the ALG WeChat group in November 2019. On joining the chat group, the first author revealed her identity as a heterosexual researcher, had an open conversation about her purpose for joining the group and her research project with the other group members, and indicated that she would quit the chat group at any time if she causes any discomfort and inconvenience to the members.

ALG comprised 57 members when the first author joined; it has 224 members as of the time of writing this article (May 2021). Most of ALG’s members were living in Australia, although a small number of them were in China but had future plans to come to Australia to study or work. A high level of communication and interaction was observed in ALG, with hundreds of messages typically being posted on a daily basis. The conversations in the group covered a wide range of topics (e.g., study, migration, job-seeking, love, relationships, and travel). However, for the purposes of this study, the first author primarily took note of the discussions associated with race-related issues in the digital dating context. In particular, by regularly reviewing the ALG group discussions (every 2 or 3 days), the first author noted the race-related discussions and classified them into different categories. The first category mainly includes the individual experiences of racial bias and discrimination in the use of dating apps shared by the ALG group members and the group discussions surrounding their personal sharing. The second category includes the news articles and social media topics or posts (e.g., on Weibo, Twitter, Facebook, and WeChat) concerning racist and discriminatory incidents against Chinese and Asian communities (particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic) that group members had shared and discussed within the ALG group. During everyday observation of the ALG group discussions, we paid particular attention to the way race-related topics were introduced and discussed and how group members engaged in these conversations. By doing so, we attempted to understand the types of race-related exclusion, prejudice, and discrimination Chinese women in the WeChat group encountered in their use of dating apps and how they perceived and responded to these experiences.

**Findings**

**Western-Centric Lesbian Digital Dating and the Whiteness of HER**

Launched in 2013, HER has become one of the most popular Western lesbian apps, with 5 million registered users across 113 countries (Alptraum, 2019; Google Play-HER, 2020). Apart from its Tinder-like swipe functionality, HER’s technological features mainly incorporate “Feed” (users’ posts), “Communities” (user communities based on different themes and topics), and “Events” (location-based offline and online events). When describing their experiences using HER, several interview participants consistently noted the app’s “very Western-styled” user interface as significantly different from those of its Chinese counterparts, which made them feel unfamiliar and unaccustomed to the atmosphere of the app. Jiang (24 years, student), for example, indicated that 

> It [HER] is that kind of very typical Western app. I feel I’m still not used to it, even though I have used it for some time. I always feel a bit strange when I use it, but I feel much more comfortable when I use our own [Chinese] apps.

Examining the developmental trajectory of Dattch (the original version of HER), Murray and Ankerson (2016) suggest that at the initial stage of HER’s development, the primary focus was on demonstrating the element of “White women,” for instance, in its advertisements and in-app designs. As Ang (1997) points out, “White” is not only about color but also about cultures and power relations. Our study found that HER has recently begun featuring non-White models in its promotional materials, but this marketing strategy has a similar effect to what Chen (2020) has observed about Tinder: the deliberate use of non-White models in marketing materials ironically underscores the White supremacy of Western societies. Above all, Asian women are still absent from HER’s marketing campaigns. Many of our participants noted that, based on their observation, the majority of HER users continue to be White women. As May (27 years, student) suggested,

> I can see its [HER’s] users are mostly White women. Because sometimes, even when I swiped dozens of profiles, I still failed to find someone who has the Chinese appearance. It’s very frustrating. I feel like this app is not designed for us [Chinese women], but for them [White women].

During the COVID-19 pandemic, HER organized some official online COVID-19-related events, but most of these events were held in mainstream Western societies, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. This caused some interview participants to feel a sense of exclusion and significantly reduced their interest in and desire to use HER. Feifei (25 years, student), for example, described her disappointment regarding participating in HER events:
I feel like I was one of the few Chinese women at those events, as most of the attendees were from the US and UK. I could see that they were really enjoying the events—they joked and flirted with each other and laughed together so naturally. But I feel I was more like an outsider, and it was really difficult for me to integrate into their circles and cultures.

In this regard, foregrounding the issue of HER using non-White models in its marketing material is more likely to be seen as a business-boosting tactic to establish the platform’s reputation, attract a broader and larger user population, and expand its audience market by demonstrating a friendly, tolerant, and supportive attitude toward women from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. However, our interview participants’ experiences of using HER (e.g., swiping profiles and participating in online events) showed that the lesbian social and dating cultures facilitated by HER remain prominently White-centric, triggering Chinese queer women’s feelings of being excluded and ostracized and thereby decreasing their interest in using the app.

By recognizing and acknowledging the Western-centric and White-dominated lesbian dating and social cultures on Western dating apps such as HER, participants overwhelmingly reported difficulties in engaging with the activities and cultures of Western dating platforms. Whereas this section reveals how HER’s technical design gave rise to Australian-based Chinese queer women’s experience of exclusion, the next section presents participants’ encounters with diverse types of prejudice and racism on Western dating and social platforms.

Subtle Racial Prejudice as Chinese Queer Women’s Everyday Digital Dating Experience

Most of the exclusionary and discriminatory behaviors our participants encountered on dating apps appeared to be primarily related to their Chinese racial, ethnic, and cultural background, but some behaviors also intersected with multiple factors, such as their diasporic identity, language capability, and occupation. According to the participants, these exclusions and biases were mostly experienced in a subtle and indirect way, which can be referred to as “subtle prejudice” and are characterized by cool, indirect, and ambiguous prejudicial conduct (National Research Council, 2004; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995). Despite being subtle in nature, this prejudice took multiple forms in the context of Chinese queer women’s dating app practices. For example, some exclusions were reported as being carefully and tactfully crafted expressions and behaviors aimed toward politely ending the encounters and/or relationships without causing embarrassment or awkwardness. Mixue (25 years, student), for example, described some of the race-related exclusions she experienced on Tinder and HER as “polite prejudice,” which is prejudice disguised by an outward appearance of courtesy. She indicated, “They [users of Tinder and HER] generally concluded our conversations in a very polite way. Instead of directly saying ‘I’m not interested in you because you’re Chinese’, they would give implicit hints that they were not into the Chinese.” Despite identifying this “polite prejudice” as a form of racial prejudice, most interview participants showed high tolerance for and acceptance of it by, for example, recognizing it as an effort on behalf of dating app contacts to avoid embarrassing or hurting them. This perception reinforced participants’ feeling of being treated kindly and carefully rather than discriminated against.

In contrast, another form of subtle prejudice was perceived to have been conducted in a relatively unfriendly way, including ghosting during a conversation or ignoring messages without providing any explanation, and thus tended to trigger participants’ awkwardness and frustration. Both May and Jiang, for instance, spoke about their experiences of being abruptly interrupted and/or having conversations ended when their dating contacts realized they were Chinese. May noted that after receiving the final message “Oh, you’re Chinese . . .” from one Tinder match, that user “just disappeared” and failed to reply to any of her messages. Dating app contacts “ghosting” or “disappearing” often left participants feeling confused, as they wondered about the reasons for being ignored and/or rejected. The commonly expressed confusion in this regard highlighted the ambiguity and ambivalence of subtle prejudice, thereby confirming Callander et al.’s (2016) argument that subtle racism is ambiguous in nature. Although the interview participants generally admitted that they intuitively thought that they were ignored or rejected due to their Chinese identity, they also touched upon other causes. Jiang expressed, “They ignored me probably due to many reasons, like I’m Chinese, I’m not physically attractive to them, I don’t have good English [ability], I’m only an international student, and I don’t have a stable job and decent social status.” Participants’ speculations regarding these “many reasons” thus spoke to the intersectional nature of subtle prejudice. That is, the prejudice encountered by our participants was a result of the interplay of multiple factors, including their racial, ethnic, cultural, and diasporic identities, occupation, language ability, and physical appearance.

Participants developed diverse interpretations of the subtle prejudice they had experienced in the context of dating apps. Some participants, for example, perceived ghosting and ignoring messages as expressions of race-based bias, which aligns with the findings of Callander et al. (2016) and Shield (2018a), who hold that “ignoring” other users’ likes or messages on dating sites and apps can be interpreted as a type of racial prejudice. However, several participants also indicated that they tended to perceive these behaviors as a way to show individual preference or taste. Race, from their perspective, was more likely to be an option, similar to the age, height, and weight filters that users generally set up when seeking ideal matches on dating apps. Amy (25 years, student) said, “I feel that sometimes it can be simply
understood as a sign of personal taste. There is something about race in the decision, but it’s probably nothing to do with racism.” When discussing the possible causes of the prejudicial conduct they encountered on dating apps, several participants attributed the behaviors of their dating app contacts to ignorance, curiosity, language expression, and personality, thereby tending to regard such conduct as unconscious or unintentional rather than what they perceived as “pure racism.” This aligns with Callander et al.’s (2016) finding that some gay and bisexual men are of the belief that people who exhibit this behavior are “insensitive and ignorant but not racially motivated” (p. 9).

When studying gay and bisexual men’s experiences of sexual racism online, Callander et al. (2016) have pointed out that the word “felt” was often used by their gay participants when discussing the subtle racism they encountered. Similarly, our participants frequently used the words “I guess,” “I feel,” “probably,” and “perhaps” to indicate the uncertain and ambivalent feelings of their experiences of subtle prejudice. In this regard, participants’ different interpretations toward race-related prejudice, along with the uncertainty, confusion, and ambivalence they indicated, highlighted the ambiguity and complexity of their experiences of racial prejudice in the dating app context.

As participants tended to view subtle prejudicial conducts as unconscious, unintentional, and akin to personal preference, they showed more understandable, acceptable, tolerant, relaxed, and careless attitudes toward their experiences: for example, “I’m cool with it,” “I don’t really mind,” and “It’s not a big deal.” Through interpreting our participants’ varying responses to and reflections on their experiences of subtle prejudice, we also found that compared with being rejected and ignored, Chinese diasporic queer women in this study seemed to be more concerned with the way that these behaviors were conducted and how the prejudice was articulated and expressed. For example, participants regarded “polite prejudice” as more acceptable and harmless because of its sugar-coated nature, whereas their emotions and sentiments were more likely to be (negatively) affected by prejudice without a “polite” disguise (e.g., ignoring and ghosting), as it was perceived as abrupt, unfriendly, and impolite.

Naked Racism: COVID-19 and Blatant Racial Prejudice

Although subtle racial prejudice was identified as the more frequently experienced prejudicial behavior during their dating app use, our participants also encountered “blatant prejudice,” albeit less frequently. In contrast to subtle prejudice, blatant prejudice takes the form of more direct, explicit, and aggressive prejudicial behavior (Callander et al., 2016; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995). Our analysis of the discussions in the ALG WeChat group revealed that most of the experiences the group members shared about being excluded and ostracized took place in subtle forms. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 was the turning point that drove the race-related discrimination experienced by our participants on dating apps from subtle to more overt forms. For example, in the initial stage of the COVID-19 outbreak (late January to February 2020), when coronavirus cases were reported to be primarily found in China, frequent discussions around the racialized encounters on dating apps were observed in ALG. Many group members reported experiencing more overt and undisguised forms of racial attacks than they previously had.

One night in early February, a member of the ALG group shared several screenshots of her conversation with a White Australian woman on Bumble. In the conversation, the Australian woman repeatedly referred to the ALG group member as a “Chinese virus” and asked her to quit Bumble, saying “Stop spreading your virus here!” After being posted in the chat group, the screenshots instantly triggered violent reactions and generated heated discussions among the ALG group members. Most members expressed anger and outrage toward the Australian woman on Bumble and encouraged their fellow ALG group member to “curse that woman” and “get her blocked.” Subsequent to the incident on Bumble, the group discussions turned to the Sinophobia emerging in Australia and the global context that was being fueled by the COVID-19 outbreak. This shift in the group discussion indicated that sexual racism, which generally takes place in dating and sexual contexts (Callander et al., 2015, 2016) such as dating apps, is intertwined with other types of racism, such as everyday racism (Essed, 1990) and entitlement racism (Essed, 2013). Our observation of the ALG group discussion also indicated that the WeChat group functioned as a pivotal space for its group members to openly discuss their experiences and concerns regarding racism, release negative emotions, seek social and emotional support, and form digital solidarity, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the same time, our interview participants reported encountering more direct, intentional, and aggressive forms of prejudice, such as being referred to as a “Chinese virus” in the context of dating apps owing to the COVID-19 outbreak. This echoed the findings of our participant observation in the ALG group chat. Qing (24 years, student), for example, described the overt discrimination she experienced on Tinder and HER as chiluolu de zhongzuqishi, which can be literally translated as “naked racism,” referring to the flagrant and obvious racial prejudice. Jiang’s experience of receiving the racially biased message “No bats, thx!” from her match on HER, as mentioned at the beginning of this article, is another example of so-called naked racism owing to its aggressive and blatant nature.

In addition to the open hostility and racial attacks they had received from their dating contacts, the participants encountered another form of race-related bias glossed over by curiosity and exoticism. Ailin (26 years, student) and Sara (25 years, student) both described being asked what they perceived as
“weird questions” about COVID-19 in China. Ailin was asked by one dating contact on HER whether Chinese people are obsessed with eating wildlife, such as bats and dogs, and whether she had eaten those animals. She explained,

Even after I answered her questions and clearly indicated that I didn’t want to have these conversations, she kept asking me all kinds of questions regarding China and the [corona]virus stuff by saying that she was just curious. I felt extremely uncomfortable and offended, and I think she did this purposely to insult me.

Similarly, Sara noted that some prejudicial behaviors were conducted with the “poor excuse of curiosity” and that the real intent was to denigrate China and Chinese people, which made her feel offended and angry. Participants’ experiences of different forms of blatant racism highlighted the interplay of the COVID-19 outbreak and their Chinese racial and ethnic identities, indicating that multiple factors intersect with each other to play a role in Australian-based Chinese queer women’s racialized encounters.

In comparison with subtle prejudice, “naked racism” was reported to be more likely to induce participants’ negative emotions, including embarrassment, awkwardness, anger, depression, inferiority, and a sense of being stigmatized and ostracized, owing to its direct, aggressive, intentional, and derogatory expressions. Our findings, in this regard, correspond with previous research on the effects of racial discrimination in the context of dating and intimacy on same-sex-attracted men’s mental health (i.e., these experiences can potentially lower their self-esteem and life satisfaction while exacerbating their anxiety, stress, and depression; Lauckner et al., 2019; Thai, 2020).

We also found that racialized experiences, especially those articulated in a blatant manner, gave rise to the participants’ negative perceptions and biases toward their dating app contacts from non-Chinese ethnic and racial groups (particularly White Australian women). Both our interview participants and the participants in the ALG chat group tended to develop negative perceptions of White Australian women as a result of their own experiences of prejudice from this user group; for example, they described these women as “inherently racist.” For the most part, our participants experienced isolated or limited instances of racial prejudice; nevertheless, these encounters significantly influenced their perceptions of the White Australian women community as a whole. More importantly, the perceived exclusionary and prejudicial experiences on dating apps significantly reduced the participants’ desire and interest in forming interracial and intercultural relationships in the context of mobile lesbian dating.

Chinese queer women in this study also developed diverse tactics to actively protect themselves from racial discrimination, such as disconnecting from the apps by leaving (closing their accounts on the apps) or suspending their use of the apps (e.g., uninstalling the apps), “hitting back” at the racial attacks, reporting the cases to the apps, and blocking their dating app contacts. For example, in the aforementioned incident involving the “Chinese virus” screenshots that sparked fierce discussions in the ALG chat group, some group members suggested that the member who had received the racist messages should “fight back” and report the woman to Bumble. Soon afterward, that group member shared screenshots of her replies to the messages, in which she used derogatory terms such as “ignorant idiot” to debase the woman and her White Australian ethnic background. By doing this, the group member hit back at the prejudice she had encountered in the same aggressive way. Notably, the “hit back” strategy employed by the Chinese queer women in this study coheres with what Callander et al. (2016) have identified as the “confrontation” strategy used by gay and bisexual men to tackle the sexual racism they encountered online.

Compared with the “hit back” tactic, reporting racist behavior to dating apps tended to be a less popular approach among our participants. Although dating apps such as Tinder and HER stipulate in their Community Guidelines that they prohibit or have zero tolerance for racism and racist and discriminatory behavior and encourage users to report inappropriate conduct (HER, 2020; Tinder, 2020), our participants showed their distrust of these policies and particularly perceived “reporting” as a less effective strategy. An important reason for this was that participants considered “hitting back” to be an effective way to immediately ease the negative emotions triggered by their racialized encounters. More importantly, conducting “retaliation” by hitting back also empowered participants with a greater sense of autonomy, freedom, security, and instant gratification. Reporting to the apps, however, failed to give them the similar kind of feeling, as it involves a more complicated process, labor investment, and longer waiting time. For example, several participants noted that they were required to write specific reasons and provide evidence (e.g., screenshots of problematic content) when they tried to report cases to HER, which was perceived as “extra work” that would diminish the joy of using dating apps. Lin (24 years, student) stated,

If I can solve the problem by myself [through hitting back], why I’m bothered to spend time writing a long paragraph [of reasons] and preparing pictures [screenshots]. Not to mention that I need to take a few days to wait for their investigation and reply [for my report]. Probably they would also ask for further evidences. It’s too complicated and not efficient at all.

Conclusion

Racial discrimination has become the focus of scholarly attention in the global context of the widespread uptake of dating apps. By focusing on a group of Australian-based Chinese queer women’s dating app practices, our study sheds light on the diverse types of race-related exclusion, bias, and prejudice these women encounter and experience in the context of mobile lesbian dating. Notably, the racialized encounters were mostly linked to Chinese queer women’s practices in forming interracial and intercultural same-sex relationships through
English language–based Western dating apps, such as Tinder, Bumble, OkCupid, and HER. These apps serve as crucial spaces for Chinese queer women to meet people from diverse ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds while living in Australia’s multicultural society. We take the popular Western lesbian dating app HER as a central example; the examination of the app’s technical features and design and participants’ experiences of using the app showed that although HER attempts to project an image of inclusivity, the digital cultures facilitated by the app through its multiple technical designs (e.g., events and user profiles) were largely perceived as Western-styled and White-dominated by the participants, which gave rise to their sense of exclusion and ostracism.

Subtle prejudice, which takes multiple forms including sugar-coated bias (e.g., “polite prejudices”), and prejudice without a “polite” disguise (e.g., ignoring and ghosting) were most commonly experienced by our participants in their dating app practices. However, the COVID-19 outbreak transformed the subtle forms of prejudice into more direct and intentional ones. In their studies of gay and bisexual men’s experiences of sexual racism, Callander et al. (2016) and Shield (2018a) have both pointed out that statements such as “No Asians” and “No Blacks” presented in some users’ profiles on gay dating websites and apps represented a typical form of blatant racial exclusion. Similarly, the overtly expressed exclusions and biases such as “No bats, thx!” and “Chinese virus” were identified as a commonly experienced form of racial discrimination by our participants in the lesbian dating context, which is a reflection of the more generic forms of anti-Chinese sentiments and anti-Asian racism fueled by the COVID-19 outbreak in the real world. Drawing upon the intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989), our findings underlined that multiple factors, including their Chinese racial, ethnic, and cultural identities, diasporic identity, language capability, occupation, physical appearance, and the COVID-19 pandemic, played an intersectional part in the Chinese diasporic queer women’s racialized encounters.

Our examination of Chinese queer women’s racialized experiences has revealed that the way prejudice is expressed and conducted has different impacts on their perceptions, attitudes, and understandings of their experiences. Whereas they perceived sugar-coated prejudice as more understandable and acceptable, they showed more negative emotions toward blatant racial bias. Participants’ diverse interpretations (e.g., racism, individual preference, and unconscious behavior) and reactions (e.g., accepting, ignoring, leaving, hitting back, and reporting) toward race-related exclusions indicate their different positions and viewpoints toward understanding racial prejudice, which may intersect with their different personalities, personal experiences, and understandings of dating and relationships. In this regard, our findings echo what Callander et al. (2016) argue instead of taking a single position on the articulation of racialized desires online, gay and bisexual men of color actively engage in building critical reflections and insights of the practices of other dating platform users. More importantly, our participants’ various understandings indicate the contentious, ambiguous, and complex nature of racial discrimination in the mobile dating context.

As our study only focuses on a small group of Chinese queer women in Australia, our findings have limitations in terms of understanding the racialized experiences of the broader and larger Chinese queer women’s community in the digital dating context. However, our research offers crucial insights into understanding queer women’s digital dating practices and their experiences and interpretations of racial bias, which has been largely overlooked by the existing studies that have primarily focused on the racialized experiences of gay male and heterosexual user populations. In this regard, our work contributes to enriching the existing scholarship on Chinese diasporic groups and queer women’s mobile dating practices as well as the broader scholarship on racial prejudice within these contexts. More practically, by studying a group of Chinese queer women’s racialized experiences of using dating apps, our study offers indications to dating app designers in terms of improving the diversity and inclusivity of their app design, user practices, and cultures, thereby catering to the needs of users from diverse cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds. Moreover, our study can help policymakers and sociologists better understand the Chinese queer diasporic community and the discrimination and racism they have encountered in Australia, thus facilitating policymakers in protecting the sexual and/or ethnic minority groups (e.g., LGBTQI diasporas and Asian diasporas) who have faced increased pressures and risks during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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