

The Coloniality of Dating Apps: Racial Affordances and Chinese Men Using Gay Dating Apps in Sydney

RODRIGO PEREZ TOLEDO¹

L. L. WYNN

Macquarie University, Australia

Mainland Chinese and Australian Chinese men's experience of using gay dating apps in White-majority Sydney is one in which their physical appearance and cultural norms are reinforced as markers of difference and marginality. Although Blued, Grindr, and Jack'd approach race differently, they are all organized through a colonial discourse of race, allowing users *racial affordances* to contact users of some races over others. They promote users' racial self-identification through drop-down menus or through users reading other user's statements ("I like Asian" or "Into Western guys only") and thus facilitate users' apprehension of colonial racial categories and the reproduction of negative stereotypes toward other minoritized racial groups. Dating apps officially aver that there is no sexual racism, only individual "preferences." We place our interviews and ethnographic data in dialogue with decolonial scholarship to demonstrate how gay dating apps reinscribe on their users colonial discourses that naturalize and hierarchize biological differences.

Keywords: coloniality, gay, gay dating apps, China, Australia

Liao is a 26-year-old Chinese international student in Sydney. Liao uses "Tinder, Bumble, Grindr, Hinge, and Blued in that strict order" because he is not interested in meeting other Chinese men but rather "men from other backgrounds." Liao is aware that apps have different purposes: Tinder is mostly used by "Westerners looking for dating or hookups," while Grindr and Blued are "for casual sex," mostly used by "Westerners and Asians," respectively.

Although Liao initially said "men from other backgrounds," it later became clear that he meant White men. Liao has very clear intentions in terms of the contacts and race he desires: He wants long-term

Rodrigo Perez Toledo: rodrigo.pereztoledo@hdr.mq.edu.au

L. L. Wynn: lisa.l.wynn@gmail.com

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relations with White men (see also Wu, 2020; Wu & Trottier, 2021). Despite his efforts, Liao laments that his desires are unrequited by White men and ventures that they did not like him because he was not like other "submissive Asians who accept everything." Liao is "another type of guy," not the one who says, "Thank you" and takes "whatever is given to them." Liao believes there is a division between the "typical Chinese students" who do not "step out of their bubble" and him, a "multicultural, bilingual hybrid," as he proudly describes himself. This belief has led Liao to avoid friendships and potential sexual encounters with other Chinese or Asian men because there is "too much physical similarity" and "too little spiritual similarity." Liao thinks there is a strong connection between race and character that justifies why Asians are not seen as attractive in Sydney's gay community: For Asians to be attractive, they need the looks and the attitude. One alone is not enough. Fortunately for him, he asserts, the assumed connection between race and character is not inescapable: Individuals can work against their racial and cultural background to become gay and "multicultural, bilingual hybrids," just like Liao did.

Liao's fantasies are populated by bodies that hold little resemblance to the image the mirror shows him. The most evident difference is race, a category that Liao and many other gay men have constructed as central to their sexuality and desires. Despite being crossed by racial categories, Liao and many other research participants do not disregard them bluntly. Some try to adapt to racial requirements; some try to diminish the traits that mark them as Asians; and others reproduce the same racism by ascribing to themselves and other minority groups the same traits ascribed to them by the White majority. In the gay scene, no one escapes the idea of race.

As Liao's story shows, race is a powerful organizer of people's lives and interactions. In this article, we explore how colonial understandings of race pervade the dating apps that gay Mainland Chinese and Chinese Australian men use in Sydney. Chan (2017a) argues that race is an absent debate in communication studies focused on LGBT+ populations; when the category appears, it is used as a predictor rather than an analytical lens. In this sense, we organize this article following decolonial scholarship because it considers the idea of race as constitutive of modernity/coloniality. When gay men acquire the race category through gay dating apps (Shield, 2019), they become colonial beings and create others as colonial beings, reducing them to their race and associating specific social and psychological traits. While colonial understandings of race are multiple and shifted historically (just as our research participants' understandings of race are also complex, multiple, and shifting), at their core is the idea of race as a way to organize and hierarchize human beings. Gay dating apps are colonial because they fundamentally premise upon, reinforce, and reproduce the colonial construction of human beings as members of races.

The Coloniality of Race

Coloniality is a form of domination that started in the late 15th century with the arrival of Europeans in Abya Yala, now called the American continent (Quijano, 2007). For Quijano (2007), this colonial expansion inaugurated modernity/coloniality and one cannot exist without the other. Coloniality comprises the imbrication of race and capitalism on a global scale. Race is an invention that Europeans created when they arrived at Abya Yala and encountered its inhabitants. It "was constructed to refer to the supposed differential biological structures between those groups" (Quijano, 2000, p. 534). Europeans grouped American inhabitants based on their physical differences in the pejorative category of "Indians," producing new

"historical social identities" (Quijano, 2000, p. 534). Before the European invasion of Abya Yala, physical differences were noticed and relevant to identifying different populations, but it was in contact with the so-called "Indians" of the Americas that the concept of race acquired its modern meaning: a hierarchy to justify the domination of certain populations (Quijano, 2000). Shortly after nominating the "Indians," "Blacks" and "Asians" followed suit (Quijano, 2000, p. 534).

Quijano (2000) argues that race was understood as "a supposedly different biological structure" used to differentiate non-Europeans from Europeans (p. 534). Western Europeans considered themselves a distinct group, and through a Eurocentric perspective of knowledge that saw distinct physical features as a natural explanation for sustaining colonial relations, they created a new identity, placing themselves at the top of the civilizational hierarchy. This project was originally supported by early elaborations of the science of anthropology and its construction of a universal timeline of social evolution mapped out onto racial groups around the world. For Quijano (2000), racial categories allow Europeans to distinguish themselves and reinforce their centrality through the denial of others as humans and their location in the periphery. Race is the "basic experience of colonial domination" (Quijano, 2000, p. 533) and granted "legitimacy to the relations of domination imposed by the conquest" (Quijano, 2000, p. 534). Through the myth of race, Europeans explained why some races were "underdeveloped" and justified the acts of "superior" races that inflicted violence on inferior cultures to modernize them.

About the globalization of capitalism, Quijano (2000) proposed that the acquisition of gold, silver, and other commodities provided Europeans "a decisive advantage" (p. 537) compared with the rest of the world and facilitated the establishment of the first global system that Europeans controlled. The fact that commodities were obtained through slavery had a pivotal meaning for Europeans beyond mere financial benefits. For Europeans, slavery cemented the idea that they were superior to the enslaved populations and that, therefore, they could decide over the lives of *others* who were partially human or not human at all. "Inferior races" were not worthy of payment; "waged labor was the whites' privilege" (Quijano, 2000, p. 539). Quijano (2000) proposes that racism and capitalism have been "structurally linked and mutually reinforcing" (p. 536) to create a "new cognitive model" (p. 552) that hierarchizes biological differences. This model—the coloniality of power/knowledge—has been used to control the activities and knowledge of non-European populations. Although colonialism formally ended with the independence of the colonies (with some ongoing exceptions), coloniality persists in the continued imbrication between the profits of global capitalism and the idea of race: "A new technology of domination/exploitation, in this case race/labor, was articulated in such a way that the two elements appeared naturally associated" (Quijano, 2000, p. 537). As Quijano (2007) argues, "Coloniality thus became the cornerstone of a Eurocentered world" (p. 45).

The fertile lens of coloniality has been used to study several spheres of contemporary life, although most of the scholarship has concentrated on Latin America. Kao (2021) analyzed the coloniality of queer theory, Lugones (2008) the coloniality of gender, Maldonado-Torres (2007) the coloniality of being, Quijano (2000) the coloniality of power/knowledge, and Wynter (2003) the coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom. According to Maldonado-Torres (2007),

The coloniality of power refers to the interrelation between modern practices of exploitation and domination; the coloniality of knowledge refers to the role of epistemology and the production of knowledge in the reproduction of colonial regimes of thought; therefore, the coloniality of being refers to the lived experience of colonization and its impact on language. (pp. 568–569)

The coloniality of being normalizes the modern/racial categories imposed on other populations from the 15th century onwards.

The insights of these decolonial scholars show how colonial constructions of race persist and permeate the experiences of dating app users who are constructed as colonial beings through gay dating apps' obsession with race, reflecting the way coloniality normalizes and radicalizes biological differences through the historical and ongoing category of race as "the basic experience of colonial domination" (Quijano, 2000, p. 533). Research participants are colonial beings in the sense that they have been created and recreated, by others and by themselves, as "Asians" or "Chinese"—racial colonial categories—rather than as people. Having acquired colonial understandings of race, they reproduce them toward other minoritized populations.

This is not to say, however, that men who hold colonized understandings of race will always operate through such categories, or that they are colonial beings in their totality. As Dussel (1985) argued, colonized cultures hold understandings and behaviors, which he dubs "exteriority," that have "been partly colonized, but most of the structure of their values has been excluded—*disdained, negated, and ignored*—rather than annihilated" (Dussel, 2012, p. 41). By using gay dating apps, men acquire and reproduce a colonial understanding of race that they subsequently apply to themselves and others, effectively creating themselves and others as colonial beings. Understandings of race in present-day China are influenced by European ideas from the 18th and 19th centuries (Dikotter, 1995), and when research participants are in China, they consume American culture through shows like *Queer as folk* (Hockin, MacLennan, & Postoff, 2000). that reproduces the idea of urban, upper-middle- or high-class Whiteness as the equivalent of gayness (Han, 2007). These influences are reformed and reconfigured in new ways when they use dating apps, which become arenas where they engage, deploy, apprehend, and resist these exterior ideas of race.

Racism in Australia

Studying sexual racism online cannot overlook the conditions and understandings of race and racism in the physical world (Callander, Holt, & Newman, 2012). Race and racism have been topics of great concern in Australia since British settlers arrived in 1788. Their arrival inaugurated discussions about how to exist with (and conquer) the Indigenous population and the place of non-Indigenous and non-Anglo populations in a country that, from its inception, was imagined as a racially secure enclave (Karskens, 2010). Because distance to Britain and proximity to Asia, non-White populations settled in Australia despite British settlers' historical and ongoing efforts to exclude them. Hage (2002) proposed that the British settlement in Australia created a "White colonial paranoia," experienced as a sense of fragility and constant threat to Whiteness and Australianness, fueled by awareness of the dispossession of Aboriginal land, the vastness of Australia, and the enormous distance to Britain (p. 418). For Hage (2002), the switch to multiculturalism as

a national policy in the 1970s marked a pause in Australia's "White colonial paranoia" (p. 418), which Tascon (2004) considers an expression of the coloniality of power/knowledge.

Race, exclusion, and the continuity of coloniality in Australia play out in different ways in different communities. Insight into this political-social-historical dynamic can be gleaned through the autobiographical writings of Asian-Australian gay men who have recounted their experiences of racism in the gay community. Chuang (1999) reflected on the Whiteness of the gay community and the tokenization of some Asian men who found they could make their otherness "palatable" (p. 37) by turning their bodies muscular. From Chuang's (1999) accounts of personal ads in gay publications in the mid-1980s and 1990s to Ayres' (2008) account of being Chinese in a gay club in the early 1980s and his insight that "being physically desirable is closely related to being socially desirable," to the experiences of research participants 40 years after the events, Chuang recounts that it is apparent that race is a category that has profoundly organized the interactions of Asian-Australian gay men (p. 90). Caluya (2008) proposes that the gay scene in Sydney is experienced as a "racially striated sexual space" by Asian-Australian men who are reduced to their race (pp. 287-288). These historical insights into Asian-Australian gay men set the context for understanding the place of gay dating apps in the intimate lives of gay Asian Australians in the 2010s and 2020s.

Race Research on Dating Apps

Dating apps are smartphone applications that allow users to contact other users with similar interests, including, but not limited to, dating and sexual encounters. Dating apps have become one of the most common tools for those privileged to afford smartphones and reliable Internet connections (Chan, 2021). Judging by their membership growth (detailed later), these apps are becoming increasingly common and relevant for men who like men.

Race and racism in dating apps among gay men has become the source of lively academic debate in recent years. Some users assert that, as individuals, they are entitled to (dis)like a person based on their personal preferences (cf. Conner, 2022), while others argue that racism is a common experience for non-White men in the gay community that cannot be solely explained through ideas of preference (Callander et al., 2012; Callander, Holt, & Newman, 2016). Consensus has emerged that race is a social organizer in dating apps (Callander et al., 2016), not least because ideas of gayness have been constructed by and for White, cisgender, and heteronormative men (Conner, 2022; Han, 2007). Indigenous Australians report an abrupt lack of interest, and even derogatory comments, once they reveal their indigeneity to their previously potential sexual partners (Carlson, 2020). Online dating sites reinforce hegemonic ideas of masculinity (Gagné, 2022) and sexuality (Baudinette, 2019), such as the attractiveness of athletic bodies. This constitutes the successful performance of gay identity (Conner, 2019) by "white supremacist socialities" (Seitz, 2018, p. 148) that are reproduced by White users and racialized subjects. For instance, Grindr reproduces the ideas of a successful (self-)performance of gay identity by reinforcing the hierarchy of sexual desirability based on physique, age, and race, while, at the same time, advocating for a more inclusive LGBTQ+ community. In Grindr's panopticon-like (Conner, 2019) interface, users strive to embody desirable characteristics to attract more attention, which Conner (2019) dubs "hypersexualized and heteronormative performances" (p. 6).

Callander and colleagues (2012) found that non-White users are more likely to introject the ideas of race on themselves in online forums, and in a 2015 study, the same authors found that users expressed racist views online because they held these views in real life; online interactions are aligned with specific social and cultural values (Conner, 2019). Dating apps' iterative interests in race (Callander et al., 2016) are the heirs of modernity's obsession with race as a social marker to organize and differentiate populations. After comparing previous studies, Chan, Cassidy, & Rosenberg (2021) note that inclusionary preferences are more common in Jack'd and that the prevalence of both statements has remained steady, which shows that users are following the guidelines of dating apps on the correct ways to voice their racial interests. They also note that, contrary to previous scholarship, research participants did not consider White users as their first option in the racial hierarchy, which may be related to Jack'd's lesser emphasis on race and its promotion as a very diverse dating app.

Much as previous research has been dedicated to exploring White-oriented sexual racism, it is important to note that sexual racism may take other forms. For instance, Prankumar, Aggleton, and Bryant (2020) found that, in Chinese-majority Singapore, Chinese men simultaneously fetishize and disparage Indian men. Similarly, Ang, Tan, and Lou's (2021) research shows that users identify sexually desirable users based on their race, which contributes to racialized sexual preferences. They concluded that racialized subjects try to compensate for their supposed shortcomings by presenting as cosmopolitan, or they reject their racialization by contacting users from the same race to show their sexual desirability.

Methodology

The online sphere presents specific challenges for academic research. Research in the virtual world is not a neutral activity because the valuation of online and offline activities is imbued with a subcultural logic of meanings and connections (McGuire, 2018). Direct interaction in dating apps requires a thoughtful approach to ethical research practice since app users look to meet potential partners rather than be part of academic research (Atienza, 2018).

After clearing the ethics research guidelines, Rodrigo created profiles in Blued, Grindr, and Jack'd that contained his name, face picture, and a short introduction (see Figures 1–3):

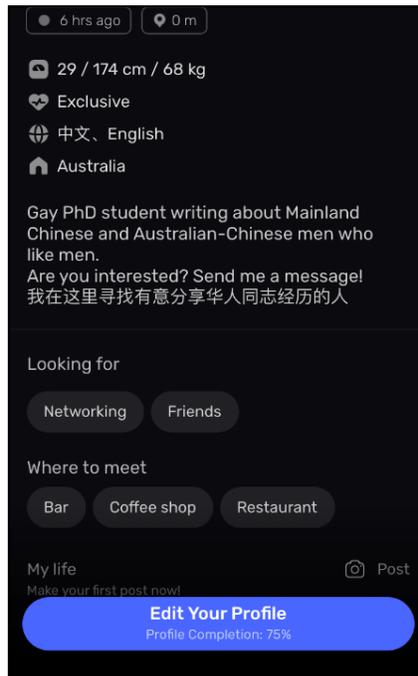


Figure 1. Blued profile.

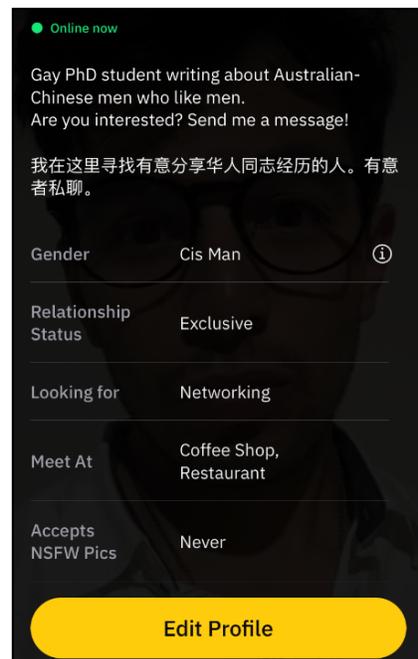


Figure 2. Grindr profile.



Figure 3. Jack'd profile.

These profiles were the only recruitment instances. After being contacted by other users, Rodrigo quickly introduced his academic interests and stated that he was not pursuing nonacademic interactions (Atienza, 2018). Rodrigo interviewed participants over lunch or dinner, hoping to keep the interactions as informal as possible and emphasize his interest in their own meaningful social worlds rather than prioritizing a pre-set, formal interview process. In the first meeting, Rodrigo introduced the research and sought verbal consent (Wynn & Israel, 2018). Rodrigo interviewed 21 middle-class men: four Australian-born and 17 Mainland Chinese, aged 25 to 42 years old. Six participants disliked Asian men for casual sex and relationships and were only interested in White partners. The remaining participants did not have a particular preference. Rodrigo did not record the interviews; instead, he jotted down important phrases and ideas, which he subsequently coded in his field notes.

Apart from the interviews, Rodrigo also employed ethnographic modes of inquiry and found that the research participants similarly experienced racism offline in places like saunas. Men visited certain saunas and avoided others, because they were not only interested in meeting certain races but also anticipated how their races would be received by sauna patrons. Asian men who liked Asians visited a specific sauna; the Asian men who liked White men dealt with the problem of visiting the sauna that catered to Asian customers and either “competed” with other Asian men for the attention of the White patrons or chose to visit the sauna that did not attract Asian men and instead risked being “invisible” (Perez, 2023). L. L. Wynn was Rodrigo’s research supervisor. Rodrigo conducted fieldwork and the interviews, and together with L. L. Wynn, discussed and interpreted the research findings.

For this research, we studied men who use Blued, Grindr, and Jack'd. These gay dating apps operate similarly: they show users a grid of 50–100 profiles listed by geographic proximity and allow users to establish synchronous and asynchronous communication (Wu & Trotter, 2022). Blued is a China-based "gay social app" with 40 million users worldwide (Blued, 2022, para. 2). Initially, Blued was a "single-feature location-based" app, and now is "a multipurpose digital platform" (Wang, 2020, p. 504). Grindr is one of the most famous gay dating apps that advertises itself as "the largest social networking app for gay, bi, trans and queer people," with around 11 million monthly users in 190 countries (Grindr, 2022, para. 3). Both the specialized literature and research participants identify Grindr as an app that attracts mostly Western users.

Jack'd is a dating app advertised as the "most diverse community for gay, bi, trans, and queer people around the globe," with 5 million users in 180 countries (Jack'd, 2022, para. 1). According to Chan and colleagues (2021), one of the most important differences between Jack'd and other dating apps is that Jack'd addresses race: "The app's marketing approach suggests users are likely to have signed up for this platform on account of having preferences that are more diverse, or which sit outside traditional versions of homonormative attractiveness to begin with" (p. 3941).

"I Use Tinder, Bumble, Grindr, Hinge, and Blued in That Strict Order": The Racial Affordances of Dating Apps

As this research has demonstrated, dating apps offer more than just the possibility of sexual encounters through geolocative technology. They also organize and present users in terms of physical characteristics, including colonial racial categories. We therefore propose the term *racial affordances* to refer to the ways that specific apps make users' races available, consumable, and reproducible.

Gibson (1979) initially defined affordances from an ecological psychology perspective as opportunities offered by the surrounding environment. In media and communication research, Schrock (2015) defined communication affordances as "an interaction between subjective perceptions of utility and objective qualities of the technology that alter communicative practices"; affordances are made up of subjective perceptions and objective facts (p. 1238). For Evans and colleagues (2017), affordances refer to the "multidimensional relationship between the object or technology and the user, and how that relationship offers possible (and actual) outcomes" (p. 39).

Several scholars have studied the affordances of dating apps. Pruchniewska (2020) conceptualized them as the possible actions facilitated by the features of an app. Chan (2017b) identified five affordances that differentiate dating apps from websites: mobility, proximity, immediacy, authenticity, and visual dominance, while Wu and Ward (2020) identified four additional affordances: communicative synchronicity, user identifiability, sexual availability, and stranger connectivity. These affordances can be related to the purpose of the interactions that are negotiated and managed by users whose interests are not static but relational (Chan, 2018). In her analysis with a specific focus on race, Tanner (2023) concluded that "inter- and intraracial dating intentions are indeed supported when mediated by the actualization of mobile dating application affordances" (p. 12).

We propose that dating apps offer racial affordances to their users (see also Cirucci, 2017) by disclosing their race and determining the race of other users. In a broader sense, these affordances make races easily identifiable, consumable, and reproducible. Users use these racial affordances to achieve various outcomes, such as meeting users from other races, engaging in inter- and intraracial dating, and ultimately reinforcing colonial racial understandings that position users as colonial beings. Racial affordances pertain to the potential range of partners that individuals of a particular race may encounter in apps. Our empirical data suggest that users who like Asians prefer using Blued, while those who like Whites and other non-Asian men tend to gravitate toward Grindr. However, this racial distribution does not guarantee that users will exclusively meet men from certain races using Blued, Grindr, or Jack'd. Rather, it is a process in which men ponder other users' characteristics and decide whether they are worth meeting. To meet up—the desirable outcome—both parties must agree. As Treem and Leonardi (2012) highlight, research on social media should not solely focus on specific platforms and technologies but on the “types of communicative practices that various features afford” (p. 178). In this case, our focus extends beyond a specific dating app to encompass the larger colonial racial understandings that govern these platforms, granting users racial affordances to connect with other men.

Evans and colleagues (2017) propose three threshold criteria to ascertain whether an affordance can be considered as such: It is neither the object nor a feature of the object; it is not an outcome; and it is variable. These criteria uphold the idea that “affordances are a relational construct that sit[s] in between—but do not determine—objects and outcomes” (p. 41). About the first criterion, we propose that disclosing someone's race is facilitated in many different instances (official forms, censuses, or social media), but it is not an object in itself. About the second criterion, we argue that racial disclosure is not an outcome; instead, it facilitates many outcomes as we have described (meeting users from other races, inter- and intraracial dating, and ultimately reinforcing colonial racial categories). About the third criterion, variability is evident in the multiple ways users explicitly disclose their race or interest in other races. These methods include drop-down menus, the “about me” section, usernames, profile pictures, and the race filter, which allow users to conveniently hide or exclude profiles that do not align with their specific racial interests. However, even without the race filter—only available in Jack'd—users can read other users' race and racial interests in their “about me” sections. Even if users do not disclose their race in drop-down menus—and are therefore uncategorizable by the race filter—they can state their racial affiliation and interests in the “about me” section, usernames, and profile pictures.

Racial affordances were experienced and strategically used by the research participants. For example, 30-year-old Xue did not like Asian men but said he uses Blued for the “few Caucasians who like Asians here.” For Xue, it was worth having a Blued profile because White users in Blued were looking for Asian partners; in Grindr, Xue needed to verify whether users held any negative views against Asians before contacting them. Similarly, 25-year-old Feng used Blued to facilitate contact with non-Asian men who liked Asian men. Other participants, like 38-year-old Ezra, did not know Blued; instead, Ezra used Jack'd because he noticed there were more Asians there. This racial affordance, however, posed a problem because he found that “there's too much competition.”

Liao's case clearly demonstrates how research participants learned the racial affordances of dating apps. Liao hierarchized the use of dating apps in a very “strict order”: he was a frequent user of the apps

that allowed him to contact White men and was less likely to use apps that facilitated contact with Chinese or Asian men. Other participants, such as 42-year-old Sam, who self-defined as “sticky rice” (an Asian man mostly or solely attracted to other Asian men), no longer used Grindr because “it has become very White” and used Jack’d instead. Similarly, Baudinette (2019) found that users chose some dating apps over others because they knew that some apps attracted Asian/Japanese users while others attracted Westerners.

Dating app users are aware of the racial affordances of dating apps and through their personal statements, reinforce the traits associated with their already assumed races. A Grindr Asian user stated in his profile, “I like Asian but other races welcome to message me,” while a European-Australian user provided guidelines for which users should contact him: “You should be under 28, Asian/Latin/Black, skinny, slim, fit/muscular.” White and Asian users alike use racial categories to define themselves, to describe (un)desired others and to link personality traits with physical characteristics: in Grindr, a White user mentioned “Into Western guys only!”

Racial categories have contributed to the shorthand that individuals use to articulate sexual identities and identify their sexual interests. These categories have become so ubiquitous that they are part of a shared vocabulary for dating app users. For example, one user introduced himself as “100% Potato Queen” (an Asian man attracted to White men) in comparison to another user who introduced himself as “80% Sticky Rice.” Despite Grindr’s claim that only articulating positive, desired traits will act against racism, strategies of inclusion are, in fact, exclusionary.

Of Course, I Say I’m Asian! I do it to Save us Time

Rodrigo asked 37-year-old Sui if he stated that he was “Asian” in his faceless Grindr profile: “Of course I say I’m Asian! I do it to save us time.” Sui reckons that if he does not disclose this information from the beginning, the interlocutor may say “‘bye’ and ghost you or block you,” even if “everything is going well.” In this section, we analyze the role of gay dating apps as facilitators of user’s self-racial identification through two processes: users choosing their ethnicity in drop-down menus or reading other users’ statements (“I like Asian” or “Into Western guys only”) and reacting accordingly. In the following section, we analyze how research participants associated negative stereotypes with, and imposed them on, minoritized populations following colonial racial understandings.

Research participants have been racialized as Chinese, or Asian more generally, and many have had internalized racial hierarchies and strove to distinguish themselves from them. For instance, Feng and 26-year-old Ming assumed that their *Chineseness* was a demeaning factor vis-à-vis their desired sexual partners—White men. Ming concluded that to compensate for his racial shortcomings, working out was the “only option to make myself attractive,” as, he lamented, he lacked a “masculine face,” something that made Asians “attractive.” As Han (2015) has pointed out, these actions tend to reproduce negative stereotypes against certain communities and reinforce the idea that certain individuals can just become desirable in the gay community if they work out: They can be attractive *despite* their Asianness. Further, the underlying assumption is that Asianness requires extensive effort to overcome its negative connotations; as Han and Choi (2018) state, “race seems to trump all other characteristics” (p. 148).

Grindr suggests that users may wish to identify their "ethnicity" or "racial identity," helpfully suggesting as possible categories, "Asian, Black, Mixed, Caucasian, Latino, etc." (Grindr, n.d.). Race is, thus, just one among many sets of typologies that are central to self-identification and the expression of desire on gay dating apps. (Even when users choose not to disclose their race, they are nevertheless interpellated by other users who either identify their own race or specify the race(s) they desire to interact with.) Race is a category of identity with a much longer colonial pedigree that is externally imposed and internalized in complex ways. For most Chinese and Chinese-Australians, race on dating apps is a powerful typology through which they apprehend their own position in Anglo-dominated Australia, internalize and justify or reject racism (their own and others'), and grapple with an array of stereotypes and characteristics associated with Chineseness.

Personality, Mental Traits, and Socioeconomic Status

Participants often voiced their ideas and concerns about racial differences. For example, 29-year-old Shang mentioned that he does not like other Chinese because "they are very sticky." He has experienced that they want to be "friends or have a relation," while he only wants to have sex. Similarly, 30-year-old Qiang mentioned that he does not usually contact Chinese individuals because they are "too much drama," and Ming avoids Asians in general because they are "too competitive." Sui does not actively avoid Chinese men, and responds if an Asian man contacts him and may agree to meet him, but Sui prefers to meet other men: "it's not that I don't like Chinese," but since he is in Australia, he wants to "be with Whites." He "can meet Chinese when [he] return[s]" to China.

Decolonial scholars have described how biological differences were constructed as one of the most solid pieces of evidence to sustain colonialism because they indicated distinct stages of "development" that ended in Western modernity. A clear example of the apprehension of colonial understandings of race is Ming, who imposed colonial categories on others and on himself and linked them to personality and mentality aptitudes. Ming did not like South Asians because they were "short, poor, have dark skin," and are "less intelligent." Likewise, he did not like Chinese men because they were "too competitive," and he would need to "prove" that he was "intelligent and successful." Although Ming's comments target different characteristics, this shows that he is not attracted to East or South Asians. In contrast with Ming, 30-year-old Wen mentioned that he did not consider Whites as his first option, and instead preferred brown-skinned men. Whether in a positive or negative fashion, the assumed logical unfolding between race and personality shapes the research participants' attraction to certain men.

Research participants consistently mentioned physical and personality differences between Asians and non-Asians—a group that, for them, mostly comprised Westerners and, to a lesser extent, Latin Americans and South Asians. They often associated negative characteristics with Asians while evaluating Whites in positive or neutral terms. For example, 35-year-old Luo, who concentrated on mental characteristics, said he prefers Western European older partners because they are more mature, "spiritually and mentally equilibrated." When Rodrigo asked Luo if he would find attractive an Asian man with the mental and emotional characteristics he likes, Luo replied, laughing, "they don't exist." Participants like Luo thus assumed that race is inextricably linked to personality and way of life by an inevitable will that can hardly

be escaped. They used their cases to exemplify how, through work and dedication, they have expanded their cultural horizons despite their race but disdained the possibility of other Asians doing the same.

“One Less Dickhead to Deal With”: Individual Preferences

Another strategy through which dating apps reinforced the colonial discourse of race is reproducing the idea that there is no sexual racism, but only individual preferences that every user is entitled to (Conner, 2022). Dating apps have thus created strategies to inform users about the proper forms of expressing their “taste.” One such strategy is *Kindr*. Launched in 2018, *Kindr*—a Grindr initiative promoting users to build “a kinder Grindr”—encourages users to “Express yourself, but not at the expense of someone else” and to report discriminatory behaviors because “your voice [can] call out prejudice and spark change” (Kindr, 2022, para. 5). While recognizing that discrimination is a problem in the gay scene, *Kindr*—a platform available only in English—recognizes that “everyone is entitled to their opinion. Their type. Their tastes. But nobody is entitled to tear someone else down because of their race, size, gender, HIV status [or] age” (Kindr, 2022, para. 4). This strategy reduces harassment to individual acts rather than a constitutive part of our lives, characteristic of modernity. Aligned with *Kindr*’s understanding, Grindr updated its Community Guidelines, asking users to share “what you are into, not what you aren’t” (Grindr, 2022). *Kindr*’s rationale follows what Chan and colleagues (2021) dub “positive statements” (p. 3942) that, on the one hand, argue that physical attraction is a matter of “personal preferences” while ignoring the fact that “racialized stereotypes and hierarchies” exist (Riggs, 2013, p. 774), and on the other hand, emphasize the centrality of race (see also Callander et al., 2012).

For Qiang and many other research participants who did not visit gay clubs and saunas and who did not tell their schoolmates or colleagues about their sexuality, dating apps offered one of the only possibilities for interacting with other same-sex-attracted men. However, dating apps do not escape the social structures prevalent in Australian society. Qiang found it hard to connect with men from different backgrounds through Blued and Grindr. It was, he said, “very difficult” to meet other guys on Grindr. Despite Australia being “multicultural,” Qiang had trouble meeting men from “other backgrounds. Especially”—he argued—if they were “White and hot.” This difficulty led Qiang to stop using Grindr and use Blued instead. Like many other research participants, he wanted to meet White men for casual sex and created a Grindr profile to do so, only to find out that the users he liked were not attracted to Asians in general.

Participants knew that preference for White men was common in Australia’s gay scene, although they rarely considered it racism and talked about individual preferences instead. For example, when Qiang contacted other users, he would send them his face picture in a private message but would say he was “not very popular” because when he sent his face picture, “they don’t reply.” Qiang wondered if they were not interested in him “personally or in Asians generally,” leading him to think that “maybe it is sex discrimination” because, he believed, White men can “pick from other people.” However, Qiang, who does not “want to be a racist,” was applying a similar rationale to South Asian men, whom he avoided because “they don’t smell good.” After saying that, Qiang quickly clarified that this was not “their problem, but mine...” and then explained that if these men were “hot, then it doesn’t matter.” Qiang described his own racial preferences as an individual problem, and then, to prove that he was not a racist, he declared that if

South Asian guys were hot (muscular or fit, tall, and masculine—homonormative), then he liked them (see also Prankumar et al., 2020).

Similarly, Sui argued, "I wouldn't call it racism," but most White guys "prefer other Whites or Latinos," reducing racism to a matter of personal preference. Aligned with *Grindr's* assumptions, the research participants recognized the potential of personal agency "to call out prejudice and spark change" (Grindr, 2022, para. 5) instead of understanding race as central to dating apps and modernity overall. This led men like Ezra, who was born in Australia, to think that in Australia, you "may discriminate against me," but "I choose how to feel," effectively transferring the burden of dealing with racism from modernity to individuals, from the discriminator to the individual discriminated against. When a user blocks or ghosts Ezra, he thinks, "One less dickhead to deal with." Although Ezra has come across many "dickheads," he believed discrimination was more common in Australia than in any other country.

Ezra and Sui experienced their preference for White men differently. While Ezra thought White's preference overseas was not as strong as it was in Sydney, Sui thought this was the same, but none of them considered this racism but rather an individual choice. Other men like Qiang said, "I don't want to be racist," and finished their sentences by saying that they did not like South Asians or Black men. Perhaps they were afraid of calling White preference racism because they themselves had acquired and reproduced the same colonial understandings of race and could be considered racist too. Others, like 25-year-old Ling, "prefer men to be straightforward" and stated their "distaste for Asians right away" to avoid confusion or awkward encounters. Whatever the case, as 40-year-old Xin considered, even if it is a "preference," men should be more "careful with their language" because the way they express it "is hurtful." For Xin, sexual racism was in itself problematic and potentiated when users blatantly expressed their racial preferences.

Race is central to gay dating apps and affects how users identify themselves and others (Callander et al., 2016) and how they present, potentiating their desirable characteristics and minimizing the negative aspects (Chan, 2016; Shield, 2019) that tend to reinforce racial stereotypes (Han, 2007). Phua and Kaufmann (2003) found that gay men were more likely to approach potential sexual partners based on their race, and that they were more likely to disclose their racial background in comparison to heterosexuals. Aligned with neoliberal conceptions of multiculturalism, men in Australia justify their sexual racism through the idea of personal preference (Callander et al., 2012; Riggs, 2013).

Conclusions: The Coloniality of Dating Apps

Dating apps facilitate colonial discourses of race by asking users to identify their race in drop-down menus and read other users' racial interests, as well as through racial affordances. Race is a central organizing feature of dating apps; therefore, dating apps are colonial from their inception. Grindr's first release in 2009 suggested that users identify by race, a category that has experienced little change during Grindr's lifespan (Shield, 2019). Dating apps' approaches to race have been challenged by their users, leading dating apps to adopt a non-racist policy and to Grindr deleting, in 2020 following the #BlackLivesMatter movement, the race filter that allowed users to only see users from a desired race. While the change in policies and guidelines may act to hinder users who hold racist views from openly expressing them, they have not eliminated the category of race from the dating apps, since race remains not only a

popular descriptor in profiles but is actually suggested as an appropriate descriptor by Grindr (n.d.), and there is no penalty applied to users who express racism (Riggs, 2013).

The coloniality of dating apps does not reside only in the race filter. As Conner (2022) has persuasively argued, rather than fighting discrimination, dating apps are in fact vehicles for reproducing such behaviors. As we have argued through our case studies of Chinese and Chinese Australian gay dating app users, dating apps exist, represent, and reinforce a reality—modernity/coloniality—constituted by race. At best, they facilitate and at worst, they force users to identify with a race either by the drop-down menus or by reading personal statements in users' profiles ("Prefer Asian," or "Into Western guys only"). Although some users do not identify with a racial category in the drop-down menu or in the "About me" section, they are reminded of their race when they see other users' profiles stating their attraction or repulsion to a specific race; they are affected by these statements. Following Maldonado-Torres' (2007) analysis, through the use of dating apps, these men become colonial beings because they impose racial categories on themselves and others. For example, users choosing a dating app that attracts Westerners over others is an active decision to target a certain group or avoid another that has been normalized by the racial affordances of dating apps. Our analysis of the strategies of gay Chinese and Chinese Australian dating app users illustrates that they are acutely aware of these racial affordances. They use them to identify potentially desirable partners, but they also describe the complicated ways that they experience, or avoid, racism from other users of the apps.

Race is a "structural feature of the app[s]" (Conner, 2019, p. 5) that organizes them in their totality. Blued, Grindr, and Jack'd allow users to disclose their race by drop-down menus or by typing some text where they can—and often do—disclose their racial preferences. As Chan and colleagues (2021) propose, premium Jack'd users can check other users' profiles and see how often they talk to a specific racial group and therefore ascertain whether they have a chance to connect with that specific user. Dating apps are organized through ideas of race that have been apprehended by users who make use of racial affordances (Chan et al., 2021). This is one of the ways that race is a central tenet of modernity that creates social identities (Quijano, 2000).

By denying or overlooking the idea of racism, men not only leave the racial hierarchy constitutive of modernity untouched; they actively reproduce it, as we saw in Liao's, Qiang's, and Ming's negative comments about South Asians. Research participants reject calling others racist, hoping that they themselves will not be identified as such. For instance, Luo disliked Black men but argued that it had "nothing to do with racism." Despite being rejected by their race, sometimes in a very explicit manner, the research participants believed that it was just a matter of personal preference and not structural racism. They pondered ways they could change their situations by improving their self-presentation by becoming more muscular, changing their haircuts, or dressing better, but they did not reckon that it was their race that was disparaged, and that in many interactions, they were reduced to their race.

Gay spaces are constructed through "a network of gazes and discourses" (Yu & Blain, 2019, p. 287) that decides the mobility of racialized gay men. Dating apps are no different because online spaces exist in and through real-life dynamics (Conner, 2019; Yu & Blain, 2019); "new technologies, ironically, have reinforced existing cultural practices" (Conner, 2019, p. 20). Physical appearances are of utmost relevance

in the gay community, and dating apps provide users the opportunity to present themselves in ways that they consider will be more attractive (Chan, 2016; Shield, 2019). Being more attractive means being White, cisgender, masculine, and muscular—homonormative ideals, argue Chan and colleagues (2021).

Despite users' denial that dating app users are racist, our research clearly demonstrates the coloniality of gay dating apps in their organization of identity in terms of race. First, dating apps ask users to identify with a specific race—even if the concept of race is extraneous to them—through drop-down menus, or through interactions with other users who state "I like Asian" or "into Western guys only" that lead users to identify themselves and others through the lens of race. Second, dating apps disregard racism as a structural problem of modernity and instead promote the idea of users' right to a specific "taste." When racist harassment does happen, the apps suggest that users use their individual voices to generate change, promoting individual action and resilience instead of systemic change—a narrative that users like Ezra have already introjected. Finally, dating apps operate through racial affordances, facilitating users who want to contact users of specific races. Research participants, and users in general, are so aware of the racial affordances of dating apps that, even if they are not interested in meeting other Chinese men, they use the dating apps that attract Chinese men hoping to find the "few Caucasians who like Asians," as Xue mentioned. Users, aware of these racial affordances, decide which apps to use depending on their (un)desired partners. Dating apps thus facilitate the creation of colonial beings who have apprehended colonial understandings of race.

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