

Racialised bodies on Grindr

Exploring the experiences and identities of East and South East Asian (ESEA) bodies on Grindr

Summary

Through seven enhanced narrative interviews with gay ESEA men, this study aims to explore the experiences and identities of ESEA men on Grindr. The study involved elements of coproduction and participatory “walkthrough” methods in its data collection, where it worked collaboratively with participants to generate knowledge and data. Findings demonstrated a variety of experiences; it addresses conflicting narratives that assume negative experiences, the complexities of erotic capital in assuming positive experiences, and finally, neoliberal subjectivities inflecting sexual spheres. Overall, this study unveils counter-narratives to the socially patterned experience of gay ESEA men and outlines the complex interplay of structure and agency in forming their identities.

Background

Literature regarding the intimacies of gay ESEA men depicts a socially patterned experience characterised by exclusion, tropes and sexual racism. The COVID-19 pandemic heightened Sinophobic tensions and racialised stereotypes for ESEA individuals online. However, this study examines the extent to which this has influenced experiences and the subsequent interplay of structure and agency in forming their identities.

Methods

The study sampled seven gay ESEA men through social media and local organisations. It employed the use of online narrative interviews and walk through methods. Research practices also involved participatory methods and critical reflexivity to enhance rapport. Analysis took the form of thematic analysis.

Findings & Discussion

Findings demonstrated a variety of experiences; however, what was consistent was the shift towards the obfuscation and discreetness of sexual racism on Grindr. It was also apparent that participants were placed in a racial hierarchy of desire, ultimately assigning varied levels of erotic capital leading to exclusion or fetishisation. Whilst some internalised the negative rhetoric leading to racial self-hatred, there were also counter-narratives where the white-centric notion of desire had little influence on participants’ identities. Neoliberal conceptions of sexuality influenced perceptions, where sexuality became more individualised, thus diminishing the significance of sexual racism, perceiving it as a personal preference rather than racist. Many participants also rejected notions that whiteness was a central characteristic of their sexual desires, arguing the personalities or sexual interests of potential romantic and sexual partners were more important. Lastly, participants’ bodies were oriented in and by space. Participants created racialised queer spaces through the embodiment of their ethnic identity on the dating app but were also racialised by users where their bodies were deemed to deviate from the norm due to the space they inhabited and thus marked as a minority. Many participants noted that the UK presented new challenges and tensions due to cross-cultural differences, including communicative practices and body capital. As a result, participants partook in methods of managing the self to “play the game” to negotiate the sexual field and manage hegemonic systems of judgement. Overall, this study unveils counter-narratives to the socially patterned experience of gay ESEA men and outlines the complex interplay of structure and agency in forming their identities.



University of
Sheffield

Sheffield
Methods
Institute

Adam H G Chen
MA Social Research
ahgchen1@sheffield.ac.uk
ahgchen.uk