

“Looking for north Europeans only”: Identifying Five Racist Patterns in an Online Subculture

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This article identifies and provides examples of five recurring speech patterns on dating platforms that users might experience as racist and/or xenophobic. Empirical material comes from over 3000 Copenhagen-based profile texts on Grindr and PlanetRomeo—two platforms that cater primarily to men seeking men—as well as from interviews with twelve recent immigrants to the greater Copenhagen area who use these platforms. Theories of everyday racism (Essed, 1991), sexual racism (Callander, 2015), and entitlement racism (Essed, 2013; Essed and Muhr, 2018) informed the formulation of these five patterns, which I identify as the following: persistent questions about the origins of people with migration background; racial-sexual exclusions; racial-sexual fetishes; conflation between (potential) immigrants and economic opportunism; and insults directed at immigrants based on race, nationality, or religion. As an exploratory study, this article mainly serves to inform readers of the various ways immigrants and people of color can experience racism and xenophobia while participating in online sexual and social networking platforms; but secondly, the chapter archives the mercurial and fleeting (albeit historically embedded) discourses on these platforms for future researchers interested in comparing racisms over time and across cultures.

Introduction

While conducting research on immigrants’ experiences with Grindr¹ in the greater Copenhagen area, I changed the headline on my researcher profile to ‘Race and racism’. In this profile, I identified

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¹ Grindr is a smartphone-based app used primarily by gay and bisexual men, and some trans people. Grindr was founded in 2009—and thus preceded Tinder, the app to which it is often compared—and the interface has changed very little since then: (1) a user makes a profile with one photo, a handful of drop-down menus and about 50 words; (2) the user is presented with a grid of the 100 closest users (or 600 on the paid version) who are listed in order of their exact proximity via geo-location (GPS); (3) the user engages in private chats and sends text, photos, and locations. Unlike on Tinder, users do not “swipe left/right” to find matches or reject users. As of 2017, Grindr claimed to have 3 million daily users who averaged an hour a day on the platform (Grindr, 2017). Anecdotally, I can wager that Grindr is the most

myself as a gay researcher from New York City who seeks to speak to people who are ‘new in town’ about their positive and negative experiences on Grindr, and said that I welcomed conversations with users about their experiences with racism on Grindr and other similar socio-sexual media.² One Asian (immigrant) user wrote to say that racist interactions—such as being rejected on account of race—were part of the daily experience of Grindr and related apps. Yet I also received messages like those from white, Danish ‘Bo,’ who wrote to share his opinion that racism was ‘no problem at all’ on Grindr, and advised that I did not interpret the ‘ordinary rudeness’ that pervaded Grindr culture as ‘racism.’³ Thus this explore the mechanisms at play when Grindr users try to talk about racism in Denmark, and then identifies five types of racism in a the context of a Danish online sub-culture.

Since I did not define racism in the profile, Bo’s response provides insight into a Danish interpretation of the word. While I delve further into the theoretical material later, I emphasize now that *experiences with racism* do not always go hand-in-hand with the offender’s *intention to offend*. In her research on transnational adoption in Denmark, professor (of gender and race in Scandinavia) Lene Myong dissects this complex relationship while introducing the reader to ‘Sam’, who is Asian and adopted, and who relayed a story about her mother’s use of an outdated racial epithet:

Sam explains that the word... irritated her, even though she knows that her adoptive mother did not intend anything racist with the term. ... [When Sam confronts her mother, the mother] doesn’t understand at all why Sam has raised the question.... A small division arises... on the one hand, [Sam] had to give her adoptive mother credit that there was no racist intent, and on the other hand, [Sam] experienced discomfort with the word... [Myong, 2009: p. 224]

In a Danish context, racism is often understood with regard to hurtful intent; thus, it becomes impossible for Sam’s mother to comprehend that her (speech) act could be criticized as racist (p. 225). Returning to the scenario imagined by Bo, a (white Danish) user might not have any intention to be racist, but a user (of color) might experience an interaction as racist. If one were to seek a compromise, then one is confronted with the paradox of *racism without racists*, a concept critiqued by sociologists in the U.S. for decades (e.g. Massey et al., 1975; Bonilla-Silva, 2003/2010). Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva critiques how personal preferences—such as white families preferring certain

popular networking platform for gay men in Copenhagen, but many also use similar apps—like Scruff, Hornet, or the mainstream platform Tinder—as well as (older) websites like boyfriend.dk and PlanetRomeo, the latter of which also has a geo-locative app. PlanetRomeo is actually not too popular in Denmark (and thus all Danish users had a free premium account from 2013-2016), but I include PlanetRomeo in my research because many people who are ‘new in town’ use this platform, as they arrive from areas where PlanetRomeo is more popular. PlanetRomeo was founded in 2002 and allows for comprehensive user profiles with unlimited photographs and answers to over three-dozen drop-down menus and check boxes. Unlike on Grindr, one can easily view profiles of users around the world.

² I define the terms ‘socio-sexual media’ and ‘Grindr culture’ in Shield, 2018.

³ All names have been replaced with another name that is similar to the original: Danish names replaced with Danish; Anglo named with Anglo; Arabic with Arabic, and so forth.

neighborhoods for their schools—cannot be separated from larger racist structures; similarly on Grindr, one cannot separate recurring discourses about race—such as racial-sexual exclusions or fetishes—from Danish popular, political and media depictions of people of color and migrants. In addition to the work of Myong and Bonilla-Silva, this article proceeds with a look at three critical race theories that help identify the types of speech acts that are experienced as racist or xenophobic on Grindr (and related platforms) in Denmark; these theories are everyday racism, entitlement racism, and sexual racism.

Theoretical Framework

Everyday racism and entitlement racism in Europe

Professor (of race and gender) Philomena Essed and her concept of *everyday racism* have inspired many critical race studies in Europe, including Myong’s dissertation. Published shortly after Essed received her PhD from the University of Amsterdam, *Everyday Racism* and *Understanding Everyday Racism* emphasized that careful attention to everyday and subtle forms of racism are central to understanding systemic racism in a given culture (Essed, 1990; Essed, 1991). Inspired by intersectional work within black feminism in the U.S. and Europe—including Audre Lorde and Gloria Wekker—Essed emphasized the gendered and sexualized aspects of racism.

To provide a recent example of a European study framed around everyday racism: Paula Mulinari conducted twelve interviews with waitresses of color in Malmö, Sweden, about their everyday interactions with their customers. Due to the culture of their service work—which requires friendliness and small-talk in exchange for a tip—the women endured, though sometimes protested, ‘everyday racist practices’ (Mulinari, 2017: p. 12), such as answering persistent questions about their ethnic and/or migration backgrounds, or about their hair. Mulinari defended her frame of everyday racism with the following:

...[In Sweden,] there is a tendency to recognise racism only in its extreme forms, rendering invisible those unremarkable and routine ways through which racism is reproduced. [Everyday racism] expresses the current and systematic practices: those defined by hegemonic discourse as normal, natural and right (not the exceptional expressions of violent racism)... (Mulinari, 2017: p. 3)

As the socio-political context is similar in Denmark, I too emphasize that certain behaviors that might seem ‘routine’ and ‘normal’ for white Danes can also be experienced as racism.

In the past four years, Essed has also theorized *entitlement racism*. Entitlement racism often takes the form of offensive statements that one defends as merely ‘speaking one’s mind’ about immigrants,

ethnic minorities, and minority cultures (Essed, 2013: p. 62; Essed, 2016; Essed and Muhr, 2018). Entitlement racism must be understood in relation to a backlash against anti-racism (i.e. as overly ‘politically correct’; see e.g. Marselis, 2016) and in a European political climate that is increasingly hostile to Islam and Muslims in Europe.

Both everyday racism and entitlement racism, particularly in Europe, relate to white ‘claims of innocence’ with regard to culpability for constructing modern racism (e.g. in the Netherlands: Essed and Hoving, 2014; Wekker, 2016; Balkenhol and Duyvendak, 2016). In the Netherlands, for example, many white Dutch downplay, or even claim ignorance of, national histories of settler colonialism abroad, of the Netherlands’ leading role in the Atlantic slave trade, or of the recentness of Europe’s (supposed) retreat from hegemonic notions of racial difference and white superiority. With this historical amnesia, some white Dutch denounce other cultures, religions or races as inferior without connecting these denunciations to historic cultural encounters.

Historical amnesia in Denmark relates to ignorance about Denmark’s colonization of especially West Africa and the Caribbean, of its supporting role in the Atlantic slave trade, and of Danish and Swedish advancements in racial hierarchy ‘science’ and racial eugenics (Blaagaard and Andreassen, 2012; Keskinen and Andreassen, 2017), as well as of deportation and imprisonment of Roma (Shield, 2017a: 25). There were no public monuments in Denmark acknowledging the country’s role as a slave-trading nation through 2017⁴, and Danish imperialism was absent from the mandatory public-school curriculum of most adults (Marselis, 2008; Blaagaard and Andreassen, 2012). Furthermore, many Danish discussions of racial difference are obscured by the white majority’s insistence on its own ‘colorblindness,’ or its supposed neutrality on race issues (Myong, 2009; Vitus and Andreassen, 2015: p. 7; Andreassen and Ahmed-Andresen, 2014; in Norway: Svendsen, 2014), which is belied by the constant political and media attention to those with ‘non-Western’ immigrant backgrounds.

Mattias Danbolt applied the concept of entitlement racism to his study of the 2014 ‘racist gummy’ debates in Denmark, that is, debates about changing of the design of racialized cartoon faces in a popular snack. In response to a call to boycott the Haribo Skipper Mix, one politician printed a letter in a local Jutland newspaper rallying Danes to ‘fight the political correctness that assaults freedom of expression and common sense in every way’ by filling their shopping carts with this particular gummy snack, as well as any other products that might be deemed politically incorrect. Danbolt argued this call-to-action cannot be untied from ignorance of Denmark’s colonial past and

⁴ Until the ‘I Am Queen Mary’ statue was erected in March 2018: see Martin Selsoe Sorensen, ‘Denmark Gets First Public Statue of a Black Woman, a “Rebel Queen,”’ *The New York Times* (31 March 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/31/world/europe/denmark-statue-black-woman.html>

from popular discursive connections between anti-racism and the loss of freedom of speech, and thus represents entitlement racism.

Finally, as this research is situated in an online environment, it engages also with literature on racism’s visibility online: in the comments sections of news sites (e.g. in the United States: Steinfeldt et al., 2010; or in Denmark: Andreassen, 2013), in gaming cultures (Nakamura, 2014; also 2002), on university list-serves (e.g. in South Africa: Durrheim et al., 2014), on social media (e.g. in Europe: Titley, 2014), by white supremacist groups (e.g. in the United States: Daniels, 2009), and in the presentation of information on news and popular culture sites (Brock, 2009). Additionally, there are some exemplary pieces of scholarship that work at the intersection of race, migration status, sexuality and online media studies—Gosine, 2007; Kuntsman, 2009; Boston, 2015; Dhoest, 2016; Dhoest & Szulc, 2016—and inspired me to ask how online media play into constructions of race, and how immigrants and people of color experience race online.

Sexual-Racial Preferences and Sexual Racism

Racial-sexual preferences on dating platforms have been debated heatedly in and outside academia for decades. A 2003 study of gay men’s online dating ads in the U.S. found that racial-sexual preferences—whether for homogamy, for 1-3 specific races, or for all races—were not limited to one racial group, but could be found in white, black, Latino, and Asian men’s ads (Phua and Kaufman, 2003). Yet although the authors did not refer to homogamy as ‘racist’—and indeed, they sympathized that many men preferred homogamy due to a desire for a shared language or cultural background—they also emphasized, ‘[P]references for homogamy are sometimes structurally reinforced through lack of exposure to people of different cultures and xenophobia’ (984). Yet ultimately, the authors hesitated to conclude that racial-sexual preferences were ‘racist.’

A 2011 study of Australian gay men’s attitudes toward race in partner selection, and race in general, asserted that white men’s racial-sexual preferences tended to correspond to ‘racist attitudes more broadly’; in other words, racial-sexual attraction was not ‘solely a matter of personal preference’ but linked to ‘generic racist attitudes’ (Callander et al., 2015). The authors used the term ‘sexual racism’ in the title of their article. Although they were not the first to use the term, they were the ‘first to quantify attitudes relating to online sexual racism and the ways in which these attitudes relate to racism in general’ (Callander et al., 2015: p. 1999).

Popular media has also confidently labeled racial-sexual preferences as ‘sexual racism.’ To detail just one recent example: *The Daily Show* in the U.S. aired a segment entitled ‘Sexual Racism: When Preferences Become Discrimination,’ which focused on mainstream dating platforms like OKCupid,

which itself had reported that heterosexual African-American women and Asian-American men received lower response rates than other users. Racial-sexual preferences, the reporters argued, were the product of predominantly white media representations of beauty, virility or sexual health (Williams and Chieng, 2016). ‘One of the first Tinder messages I ever got,’ an African-American woman shared, ‘was, “Did you know that 90% of black women have herpes?”’ (This is false.) This message suggests that some users’ presumptions about race and sexuality negatively affect their willingness to date people of other backgrounds.⁵

Methods of Data Collection

In order to acquire empirical data about racist discourses on dating platforms primarily for gay men, I read an estimated 6,000 Grindr profiles and over 500 PlanetRomeo profiles of users based in (or sometimes passing through) the greater Copenhagen area⁶ in 2015-2017, which I analyzed for discursive patterns about race, migration status, nationality, ethnicity or religion. As this article is part of ongoing research, I have detailed my methodological practices elsewhere with regard to data collection practices, ethical considerations, and self-reflection as ethnographer (Shield, 2017b: p. 246; Shield, 2018: pp. 152-153). In short: I treat the online platforms as field sites for virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000; Markham, 2013), where I can observe how participants self-present textually and visually, and also how texts change over time. I avoid providing personal identifying material when describing or quoting members of the field, except with explicit permission.

Additionally, I have conducted interviews with sixteen men aged 20-50 from China, Iran, Egypt, Turkey, Indonesia, Iraq, and Nigeria among other countries (including those that interviewees asked not to share).⁷ Details about interviewee recruitment and the processes of conducting interviews have also been published elsewhere (Shield, 2017: p. 246; Shield, 2018: pp. 152-153). In short: I recruited interviewees directly through Grindr by identifying myself as a researcher looking to speak to anyone ‘new in town’ about several topics, including racism and xenophobia online. My profiles were in

⁵ There are many other examples specific to gay dating patterns; in 2015, a British gay magazine focused on ‘Racism and the Gay Scene,’ and reported that one-quarter of its white readers had no qualms listing ‘No Blacks’ or ‘No Asians’ on dating profiles (*FS*, 2015). And since 2011, users of gay online platforms have posted screen-caps of profiles with racial (and other) exclusions, and offensive private messages, to the blog *Douchebags Of Grindr*; the phrase has since become a Facebook group, and a recurring hash-tag on Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram.

⁶ As Grindr is location-based, I collected (i.e. saved screen shots of) profiles from various locations around Copenhagen. The majority of profiles came from those based in, or passing through, Copenhagen city center, but I also gathered profiles from areas outside of the city, including the Høje Taastrup suburb and the Northwest suburb; for the purposes of this study, ‘greater Copenhagen area’ also includes Malmö, Sweden, where some of the users and interviewees were based. I used both Grindr’s free and paid versions at various stages of the study. Screen shots of profiles are stored on a locked computer and will never be shared.

⁷ The first is a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) country; the interviewee asked that I do not specify more.

English with a short summary in Arabic, and included a photo with my face. Some interviewees were familiar with Grindr before moving to Scandinavia, and even used it in countries where homosexuality is illegal; others learned about Grindr from other gay men in Europe (Shield, 2017b: p. 252).

Networking platforms primarily for gay men are often called ‘dating’ or ‘hook up’ apps (Shield, 2018: 151). While it is true that most users seek erotic and romantic encounters, my research shows that many users—particularly tourists, immigrants, and foreign students—use the platform also for platonic and logistical purposes, including finding friends, roommates, apartments, and local information (Shield, 2017).

Drop-down Menus and the Logics of Racial Difference

In her 2002 study of race and racism online, Lisa Nakamura brought attention to one particular technological trend: the pervasiveness of race/ethnicity drop-down menus on profiles sites (Nakamura, 2002: 101-135), which simplified the diversity of identities and brought attention to race as a defining feature of the virtual self. Even today, race/ethnicity drop-down menus persist, despite the boom in digital photography that facilitates the sharing of ‘face pics’ on profiles.

‘Ethnicity’ drop-down menus vary from platform to platform, which is *a priori* evidence that racial categories are arbitrary (see Table 1). Many platforms use the term ‘ethnicity’ as shorthand for ‘ethnic background,’ but the drop-down options encourage identification by *race*, not *ethnos*: Scruff, for example, offers the option ‘Multi-racial’.

<i>Platform</i>	Grindr	Scruff	PlanetRomeo	Qruiser
<i>Origin</i>	U.S.A., 2009	U.S.A., 2010	Germany, 2002	Sweden, 2000
<i>Category</i>	‘Ethnicity’	‘Ethnicity’	‘Ethnicity’	‘Looks and origin’
<i>Options (listed in order as presented on platform)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Asian •Black •Latino •Middle Eastern •Mixed •Native American •White 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Asian •Black •Hispanic/Latino •South Asian (formerly Indian) 	On website: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Caucasian •Asian •Latin •Mediterranean •Black •Mixed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •north european •western european •central european •mediteranean [sic] •eastern european •asian •indian

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •South Asian •Other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Middle Eastern •Pacific Islander •White •Native American •Multi-Racial 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Arab •Indian 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •african •middle eastern •south american •other
Languages offered	2	14	22	6

Table 1: Ethnic/racial drop-down menus on four platforms primarily for gay and bisexual men (and LGBTQ people in general, for Qruiser). Identifying with this menu is optional on all four platforms.

A platform's drop-down menu options reflect the racial logic and history of the culture from which it developed. Grindr and Scruff were developed in the United States, and thus the creators felt that 'Black' and 'White' were two obvious ways for individuals to identify. Indeed, these categories have historical antecedents, and continue to be used on official documents like the Census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). On the German website PlanetRomeo, however, people can identify as 'Black' or 'Caucasian,' but there is an additional option for 'Mediterranean' users, likely for those from southern Europe (and not the Middle East and North Africa; see below). PlanetRomeo's division between northern and southern Europeans reflects a postwar Northwest European logic, whereby labor migrants from southern Europe (e.g. Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Yugoslavia) were seen as cultural and even racial outsiders (e.g. Krane, 1979; Shield, 2017a; Chin et. al, 2009). And on the Swedish platform Qruiser, this racial logic is further divided, as users can define as northern European, western European, central European, eastern European, or Mediterranean. Note also how Qruiser's category, 'looks and origin', elides regional origin and presumed phenotypic difference.

Continuing on this subject, Grindr and Scruff provide an option for—and thus exclude from the 'White' category—those who identify as 'Middle Eastern'; and PlanetRomeo provides an option for—and thus excludes from the 'Caucasian' and 'Mediterranean' categories—those who identify as 'Arab.' These divisions are noteworthy as both 'White' and 'Caucasian' often include Arab, Middle Eastern, and Mediterranean people; for example, the U.S. Census Bureau defines 'White' as anyone 'having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa' (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). The exclusion of 'Middle Eastern' and 'Arab' users from the categories of 'White' and 'Caucasian' reflects the political climates in both the United States and Europe, where politicians (among others) depict those with roots in Muslim-majority areas as continuously foreign or unfit for integration. (Further, one should note that 'Middle Eastern' and 'Arab' are not

interchangeable, as the latter is an ethno-linguistic group that excludes Iranians and Turks, among others.)

Grindr, Scruff, PlanetRomeo, and Qruiser not only define racial differences via their drop-down menu options, but they export their racial logics internationally. In Denmark—which does not collect statistics about race—many are unaccustomed to defining their race anywhere except for on these platforms. Nicholas Boston has shown that these drop-down menu options affect the ways users discuss race in the online subculture: a Polish immigrant in the U.K., active on PlanetRomeo, advertised his preferences ‘for South Asian..., Arab, black, and mixed-race’ men, borrowing English terms directly from PlanetRomeo’s drop-down menu (Boston, 2015, pp. 304-5). Racial/ethnic drop-down menus can teach a particular racial logic to users unaccustomed to dividing diverse populations in the same manner.

Five Patterns of Racism on Grindr

Most Grindr users who engaged the ‘Race and racism’ researcher profile assumed that ‘racism’ related foremost to racial-sexual exclusions (i.e. the second item on the list above). A few addressed intentionally insulting communiqués (i.e. the fifth item). Yet interviewees also addressed other discursive patterns during our conversations on racism on Grindr. We turn now to five patterns of racism on Grindr in the greater Copenhagen area, as identified by my interviewees and/or during my analysis of transcribed interviews. Table 2 summarizes the data presented for the remainder of the chapter:

<i>Critical race theory</i>	<i>Racist pattern</i>	<i>Example</i>
Everyday racism	Persistent questions about origins	‘Where are you <i>really</i> from?’
Sexual racism	Racial-sexual exclusions including notions of ‘ugliness’ and (STI) ‘cleanliness’	‘No Asian pls!!!’
Sexual racism	Racial-sexual fetishes	‘Rice queen’
Entitlement racism	Conflation of nationality and economic opportunism including associations with sex work	‘Guys from Ghana, I’m not sending you any money’

Entitlement racism	Insult based on race, country of origin, religion	‘Fuck [your country], fuck Islam and fuck you’
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Table 2: Five patterns of racism on Grindr and PlanetRomeo in the greater Copenhagen area

1. Persistent questions about origins

In the aforementioned study of waitresses of color in Malmö, Mulinari acknowledged that customers’ repetitive questions about origins could be seen—in the customers’ minds—as mere curiosity or small-talk. But in many cases, the waitresses felt pigeon-holed by these questions: ‘I could be dying or got the Nobel Prize, and the only thing that they could have in their minds is to know where I come from’ (Mulinari, 2017: 8). Some of her interviewees resisted the questions by answering ‘my mother’s belly’ or that they had just come ‘from the kitchen’; and the Swedish-born women often answered with the hospital name in Sweden. But especially the Swedish-born women knew their answer could lead to the next question: but where are you *really* from? Mulinari identified the repetitive question of the origin of people of color as a ‘strategy of denial and displacement’ of Swedishness from the bodies of people of color (ibid.).

In my interviews, Ali from Iraq addressed this topic most explicitly, saying that although people did not ask him about his ‘race,’ they often asked the question, ‘Where are you from?’ Ali had grown sick of the question, and usually tried to avoid it: ‘I [just] say: Why does that matter? If you need to know what languages I speak, ask me that instead’ (Shield, 2017: p. 248). One user mixed up Iraq and Iran, and when Ali corrected him, the user wrote, ‘What’s the difference?’

Future research with Danish-born Grindr users of color would likely reveal that repetitive questions about origins in this online subculture are experienced as racist, as they expose users’ assumptions between whiteness and Danishness (Myong, 2009; Myong, 2011; Adeniji, 2014). However, because my interviewees were all recent immigrants, many felt that questions of national origins were merely small talk: “I don’t mind at all,” said Christina (who is Asian) on the topic.

2. Racial-Sexual Exclusions

When asked about racism on Grindr, many users immediately addressed the topic of racial-sexual preferences: ‘The first thing I think of is “No Asians, no Indians,”’ said Ali from Iraq. Viktor, a white Dane, also went in this direction: ‘The only actually real racist thing I have seen here is the “NO ASIAN” “NO BLACKS” statement.’ In fact, some Grindr users combat statements about racial-sexual preferences in their own profile texts: ‘If your profile includes stuff like ‘no Asians, no blacks...’ or any stupid sh*t... DON’T talk to me.’ This was the announcement on Abdul’s profile that initially caught my attention when we first connected.

In collecting and cataloguing thousands of Grindr profiles, I have ‘only’ located a dozen or so users who explicitly state racial exclusions—e.g. ‘No Asian pls!!!’—or who sought white homogamy: ‘Looking for north Europeans only.’ But in the context of Danish ‘colorblindness,’ one can assume that many white Danes who prefer homogamy do not bother stating it. Interviewees relayed that they were rejected for race-related reasons often in one-on-one chats, and wagered that (their) race also factored into many of the conversations they initiated that ended in silence.

Caleb—originally from China—was insistent that racial-sexual preferences were always racist. His PlanetRomeo profile explicitly stated that ‘Dating based on racial preferences is racist,’ and he linked to a blog post on the subject (Shield, 2017: 255). Caleb’s position aligns most closely with the arguments about sexual racism made by Callendar et al. Related, Christina noted the racist connotations of being called ‘ugly,’ and Nir echoed this sentiment when he recounted that a white Dane on Grindr was ‘basically getting disgusted over seeing my face and body pics, claiming I shouldn’t even be on Grindr for looking so unattractive.’ An African interviewee brought up another related topic: being associated with sexually transmitted infections such as HIV; he expressed that Scandinavians ‘see a black person and [think] he has HIV; that is the mentality.’

But others—including Ali, Viktor, and Abdul—felt that having racial-sexual preferences was not racist, but that stating these preferences could be. As Abdul shared:

There’s a big difference between racism and ‘you’re not my type.’ You know? It’s just the way people express it. I find it very offensive if someone’s writing, ‘no Asians’.... When it comes to ethnicity I find it very offensive to write that.... If someone who is not your preference is texting you, you can just ignore them, or say ‘Sorry, it’s not a match.’ ... [Users often ignore or reject me] but I wouldn’t call it racism. It’s hard to say. Maybe I’m just not his type, or he’s just... looking for someone else.

In a strikingly similar way, Viktor also said he found it ‘offensive’ when people wrote racial-sexual exclusions on their profiles (and vowed that he ‘would never write something like that’) but then also expressed internal conflict on the matter:

Is it racism to follow one’s sexual preference? ... Personally, I’m not into Asians and black people, not because I do not like them as people, but because they don’t turn me on sexually. On the other hand, I find Caucasian and Arabic types sexually very attractive. Am I a racist?⁸

⁸ Note: as I have only recently included informal chats into my empirical material, I am still answering some ethical questions about informed consent. All users responded to a profile that said, “...if you are interested in contributing to my research, please write!” But for my own conscience, I seek to acquire consent from those I quote via a private message.

Viktor immediately linked racism on Grindr to racial-sexual preferences; however, he defended these preferences and tried to decouple them from racism, thus illustrating another example of ‘racism without racists.’ Abdul felt that empathy should prevail when crafting one’s socio-sexual networking profile:

What if someone [who is not my type]... wanted to text me, but he read something [exclusionary] in my profile? I would be bothering him without even knowing it. I could be asleep and bothering him. The way to avoid that is just not to write it.

Yet one of Abdul’s proposed strategies—merely ignoring someone—could also be experienced as racism. As a socio-sexual networking platform, Grindr is a space where many users (also) seek platonic and logistical relationships (Shield, 2017b; Shield, 2018); with this in mind, being ignored (or told ‘I’m sorry, you’re not my type’) would mean rejecting the possibility of even meeting for coffee or beer because of race.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that racial-sexual exclusions are not unique to Denmark (or places where research on this topic is usually conducted, such as the U.S., U.K., Australia). Abdul crafted his anti-racist profile while still living in the Middle East, where he observed and grew tired of (usually Arab) men’s exclusionary messages about race and body types. Yet after moving to and traveling around Europe, Abdul decided to maintain his anti-racist profile because he continued to encounter exclusionary profile texts in almost every European city he visited.

3. *Racial-Sexual Fetish*

Caleb not only discussed how racial-sexual *exclusions* were racist, but also racial-sexual *fetishes*. Caleb reacted to messages from guys who were ‘into Asians’ with discomfort: ‘I never respond to those requests, I feel a bit offended, honestly. Whenever I meet someone, I prefer that they also date other races.’ This sentiment was shared by another Asian-identified Grindr user whose profile text addressed ‘rice queens’ (often white men who have a sexual fetish for Asian men) by saying: ‘BTW [by the way] rice queens scare the shit outta me, so pls [please] stay away.’

The dehumanizing aspects of racial fetishes was analyzed a decade ago when researchers of race and (heterosexual) online dating profiles in the U.S. identified a problematic pattern in white users’ profile texts seeking black matches: food metaphors, particularly about ‘dark chocolate’ and ‘brown sugar’ (Owens and Beistle, 2006). The authors argued that these terms dehumanized and fetishized brown bodies, rather than giving the intended effect of playfulness. These discourses found a new platform on Grindr, prompting Canadian author Jamie Woo in 2013 to write an ‘Open Letter to Grindr

Users: I Am Not Rice, He Is Not Curry’ (Woo, 2013). Woo specifically attacked users who referred to East Asians as ‘rice’ and South Asians as ‘curry,’ either in racial-sexual exclusions or fetishes.

Like racial-sexual exclusions, racial-sexual fetishes can also be linked to misinformation or stereotypes, and can show a lack of familiarity with another racial or ethnic group. These preferences can reinforce arbitrary distinctions or personality stereotypes, and can hearken to centuries-old notions of racial difference and hierarchies. To return to the discussion of intent: users who state racial-sexual preferences likely do not intend to offend, but this can be the result.

In Denmark, it is uncommon for profiles to use food metaphors, or to state explicitly a preference for a racial group (e.g. for Asian for Middle Eastern guys), but it is not unprecedented: one white Danish user who sought white homogamy added ‘no offense to other flavours tho.’

4. Conflation of nationality and economic opportunism

Christina, who is a transgender woman, expressed frustration that Grindr users frequently assumed she was a sex worker. Christina tied this foremost to being Asian: Danes associated countries like Thailand and Cambodia with prostitution, she said, and might perceive of her as a person from these countries and thus a sex worker. But this ethno-racial stereotype was exacerbated by her gender. As a trans woman, she had to deal with issues of racism, sexism, and transphobia, which often intersected, such as when she was called a ‘lady boy,’ a term she loathed partly for its dismissal of her gender identity (as a woman), and partly for the term’s discursive connections to sex work.⁹ That being said (about sexism), one of my male-identified interviewees also remarked that a stranger on Grindr called him a ‘Turkish prostitute’ before blocking him entirely (Shield, 2017: 244).

The recurring association between some foreigners (often of specific nationalities) and economic opportunism (e.g. sex work, marrying for documents, etc.) is what I call the ‘No Ghana Guys’ pattern of racist exclusion (explained below). This pattern differs from racial-sexual preferences partly because the dismissal is not expressed in terms of race (but rather nationality), and partly because these statements are directed at *global* users who initiate correspondence on platforms like Romeo, which (unlike Grindr) facilitate contact between users across continents. Scholars have noted how websites like PlanetRomeo allow users to ‘travel’ to gay metropolises across the globe to chat with

⁹ I will add, however, that another feminine Asian Grindr user in the greater Copenhagen area does use the display name “lady boy,” so opinions on this term are personal.

locals and speculate about a potential move (Boston, 2015: 306-8; Shield, 2017b: 252).¹⁰ But one must also pay attention to the backlash that such ‘travelling’ might provoke.

On PlanetRomeo, dozens of users have become so enraged with messages from the developing world that try to prohibit people from specific countries from contacting them. I noticed this first with several profiles about ‘Guys from Ghana,’ so I decided to search the keyword ‘Ghana’ among PlanetRomeo profiles in Denmark in 2015. Over two-dozen profiles with exclusionary messages appeared, such as the following:

...GUYS FROM GHANA I’M NOT SENDING YOU ANY MONEY, SO DON’T BOTHER WRITING ME!!!...

...And people from Ghana who want to marry me: I wish you all the best, but I am NOT going to pay for your fares or visa to Europe, and I don’t want your eternal and faithful love...

...All of you people from Africa (Ghana), who only wants to beg for my money in ANY way: STAY AWAY!!!!...

In defining entitlement racism, Essed underscored that ‘the core of racism is the humiliation of the “other”’ (Essed, 2013: 74). Essed observed that Europeans increasingly made ‘bold’ statements directed at minority groups without the ‘I don’t mean to sound racist, but...’ disclaimer that she grew accustomed to hearing in the 1990s; and they defended their statements as ‘just telling it like it is’ (Essed, 2013: 62). But in tandem with a ‘European culture of entitlement’ (74), certain speech acts quickly evolved from freedom of speech to the freedom ‘to offend and to humiliate’ (62).

One can re-read the previous PlanetRomeo profile texts as speech acts that might be defended as mere ‘truth telling.’ More so, a handful of related profiles were deliberately insulting:

...Ghana, Benin, everybody from Africa, Philippines, Romania, Bulgaria and Russian guys, who is only looking for money and an easy lifestyle: ALL OF YOU STAY OUT!!! Send no messages cause I am not interested in supporting you and for family. Gold diggers...

...If you’re messaging me from Ghana, Russia, The Philippines (or some other godforsaken country), chances are you’ve got something ridiculous to say and I WON’T be remotely interested...

The flippancy with which these profile texts prohibited communication from users based in the ‘non-Western world’ helped to define these speech patterns as a recurring form of racism on socio-sexual

¹⁰ International messages with requests for assistance immigrating to Europe, often sent from men in sub-Saharan Africa or southeast Asia, are common to many European users’ experiences on PlanetRomeo. My PlanetRomeo interviewees received (and usually ignored) these messages monthly, but were unsure whether these messages came from real people who were desperate to leave their countries of origin, or if they were robot profiles that trick naïve users into divulging bank account or other personal information. Additionally, one white Dane told me it is possible to “travel” on Grindr using a software that redirects one’s GPS; he wrote that he got very angry when he found out that people were contacting him from Asia or other parts of the world.

platforms. These speech patterns have real effects for those who are, or who are perceived to be, immigrants or potential immigrants from the developing world.

5. Insults about Race, Religion, Nationality

With respect to ‘intent,’ I reiterate that most of the above racist patterns have grey areas: not everyone who asks ‘Where are you from?’ or who states ‘I’m into Asian guys’ intends to offend, but these patterns can be experienced as racism depending on the contexts. Thus, this final category lumps together the many unambiguous, intentionally hurtful comments directed at immigrants and people of color with regard to their race, ethnicity, nationality, and religion.

‘Fuck [your Arab country], fuck Islam, and fuck you!’ This was a private message that Abdul received on Grindr during his first year living in the greater Copenhagen area. Abdul also spoke generally about other offensive messages that a handful of locals had written him: some spewed ‘brainwashed media things’ about religion and terrorism, for example, in ways he found to be offensive. But Abdul shrugged off these tirades: ‘I can’t say that people are racist here [on Grindr] because that [only] happened two or three times in two years.’ In other words, Abdul could stomach a few online insults per year in exchange for the positive benefits of using Grindr.

A Danish-born guy with Iraqi roots shared another example: ‘Go and fuck kids in your country!’ someone wrote on Grindr, thereby linking him to the homosexual pederasty observed in some gender-segregated cultures, even though the Iraqi-Dane had never lived outside of Denmark. A Bosnian-Swede shared that he encountered a profile that ended (in English) with ‘Not into Muslims.’ The Swede reflected:

I mean, ‘no Middle Eastern guys’ can just be a preference, if a guy doesn’t like hairy guys for example. However, ‘no Muslims’ implies that this guy has prejudice against everyone having a certain religion, which has nothing to do with preference in bed. Just being racist.¹¹

Yusuf from Egypt was called an ‘idiot’ and a ‘taxi driver’, and received a strange ‘slave joke’, all via Grindr since he moved to the greater Copenhagen area in 2014 (Shield, 2017: 253). Nir, originally from Indonesia, received three offensive messages from 2014-2016, including an anonymous message (on another gay platform) with ‘stereotypical allegations of what being Asian and Muslim entails’. Other incidents around the world have attracted media attention: in Australia, for example, a university student with Yolngu (indigenous) roots posted screen-caps of Grindr messages asking about his ‘wog’ and ‘bush’ background (Verass, 2016; re-posted on dozens of blogs).

¹¹ The rest of the profile was written in Russian, so the Gothenberg-based user was likely an immigrant or tourist himself.

Most of my interviewees downplayed their experiences with racism, and categorized the culprits as a few bad apples. Yet as this analysis has shown, these seemingly isolated incidents repeat and repeat; when looked at with a broader lens, these repetitions add a gloomier cloud over the everyday communications on socio-sexual networking platforms.

Final Thoughts

The five patterns outlined in this article are not exhaustive, and more could be said about the various ways everyday racism, entitlement racism, and sexual racism affect users' experiences on Grindr. Another topic that I have glided past is anti-racism on Grindr profiles in Scandinavia (Shield, 2017: pp. 253-255; Shield, 2018: pp. 157-158), which tend to address issues of racism, sexism, and body normativity from an intersectional perspective.

Another important element of this study is the 'crushing objecthood' that an immigrant or person of color feels when encountering racism: Frantz Fanon defines this as the feeling of embodying one's race and all the stereotypes linked to that race in a particular cultural encounter (e.g. of being the object of 'Look a Negro!'; Fanon 1986 [orig. 1952]: p. 109). Similarly, Andil Gosine articulates the 'burdens' associated with embodying race within gay men's online cultures, and Shaka McGlotten points to (white) assumptions regarding the 'political or physiognomic affinities' with blackness on gay profile platforms. All of these examples emphasize how race 'fixes' onto people of color (e.g. in gay men's online cultures).

One common thread linking the five patterns identified in this article is that they all seek to create borders in a virtual world. These borders can be national or racial, and can have consequences for LGBTQ-identified immigrants in Copenhagen, among others. As scholar Sara Ahmed wrote on queerness and exclusion:

...[Q]ueer bodies have different access to public forms of culture, which affect how they can inhabit those publics. ... I have felt discomfort in some queer spaces, again, as a feeling of being out of place. ...[T]he discomfort is itself a sign that queer spaces may extend some bodies more than others... At times, I feel uncomfortable about inhabiting the word 'queer,' worrying that I am not queer enough... or am just not the right kind of queer. (Ahmed, 2004: 151)

LGBTQ subcultures like bars, organizations, or social circles might include certain groups more than others—i.e. white, middle-class young Danes vs. immigrants and people of color—but further and related, LGBTQ identities and feelings of belonging might also include certain groups more than others. Racism on Grindr, PlanetRomeo and related platforms foments discomfort in yet another

queer subculture. By Ahmed’s logic, unease within Grindr culture could translate to immigrants’ and people of color’s unwillingness to engage and identify with other LGBTQ subcultures.

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