

Visible but Invisible: Chinese International Students' Experience of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Academic Institutions' Support

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Abstract

This study applies the hermeneutical phenomenological approach, guided by Critical Race Theory, to explicate a nuanced understanding of the way Chinese international students' racial identity shapes the challenges that they faced during the pandemic and their experience of academic institutions' support during this time. The current study highlights the pervasive anti-Asian racism that directly and indirectly contributed to the negative experiences of Chinese international students studying in Canada during the pandemic. The findings also highlight the lack of support from academic institutions, despite the rising anti-Asian racism faced by this group of students. Furthermore, this study calls attention to the consideration of race in developing support programs for racialized international students. Recommendations for universities to better support international students in general are developed.

Keywords: anti-Asian racism, Canadian universities, Chinese international students, covid-19 pandemic, critical race theory

Introduction

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, there has been a sharp increase in anti-Asian racism in Canada that is often accompanied by the scapegoating of Chinese people for the spread of the coronavirus (Jeung et al., 2020; Kong et al., 2021). This has placed Chinese international students (CISs) in a precarious situation, as they face the double threats of the coronavirus and intensified anti-Asian violence (Ge, 2021; Litam, 2020; Lou et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2020). While existing research has primarily focused on the mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on CISs (Litam, 2020; Ma & Miller, 2021; Nam et al., 2021; Zhai & Du, 2020), there has been limited attention paid to the role of

CISs' racial identity in shaping their experience of the pandemic and academic institutions' support in the Canadian context. The current study aims to address this gap in the literature by investigating the lived experiences of CISs during the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada. Specifically, the study seeks to understand the ways CISs' racial identity influences the challenges they faced during the pandemic and their experience of academic institutions' support. Through this inquiry, the study aims to provide insights into ways that academic institutions can create a more inclusive environment for international students in general. The findings of this research are expected to contribute to a deeper understanding of the ways that racial identity and racism shape CISs' experience during the pandemic. By providing recommendations for academic institutions to better support racialized international students, the study aims to help create a more inclusive and equitable environment for all international students.

Literature Review

Anti-Asian Racism during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 outbreak has not only created a global health crisis but has also given rise to a racial justice crisis. As China is believed to be the first place where the coronavirus was detected, derogatory and hateful anti-Chinese rhetoric such as “bat-eaters” and “chingchong” that discriminates against Chinese people have proliferated since the outbreak (Borja et al., 2020; Jeung et al., 2020; Tahmasbi et al., 2021). Additionally, the use of “Chinese virus” and “Kung-Flu” by former U.S. President Donald Trump further fueled the racist attacks on Chinese people, and made them scapegoats for the spread of the coronavirus (Borja et al., 2020; Gao, 2022; Litam, 2020; Yao & Mwangi, 2022). Due to the conflation of nationality with race, discrimination towards Chinese people has turned into racism towards Asian people more broadly (Gao, 2022; Li & Nicholson Jr., 2020). Hate crimes against Asians and anti-Asian racism rose significantly in the West during the pandemic. In Canada, anti-Asian hate crimes increased by 532% in 2020 (CSHE, 2021), and it continued increasing in 2021 (Balintec, 2022; Passafiume, 2022). A similar pattern is also found in the United States (CSHE, 2021), the U.K. (Schumann & Moore, 2022), and France (Wang et al., 2021). Asians, especially Chinese people, in the West experience a ‘double pandemic’ where they face the threats of the coronavirus and increasing racist attacks (Lou et al., 2022; Starks, 2021; Zhang et al., 2020). The dual crises highlight the significant roles that race and racism play in European-dominant societies. Furthermore, the rising anti-Asian racism in North America creates complex challenges for Chinese international students (CISs).

Chinese International Students' Experience of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Research on Chinese international students' (CISs) experience of the COVID-19 pandemic in North America highlights the prevailing mental health issues they experience as a result of the complex difficulties they face. As Chinese people are seen as primary carriers of the coronavirus, CISs experienced intersectional marginalization during the pandemic due to their race and citizenship status, and they are socially excluded, discriminated against, and verbally and physically assaulted in their host communities (Ge, 2021; Litam, 2020; Nam et al., 2021; Tang & Flint, 2022; Zhai & Du, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). Researchers in both Canada and the United States have found that racism and xenophobia experienced by CISs during the pandemic have led to a high prevalence of psychological distress among this student group (Ge, 2021; Litam, 2020; Nam et al., 2021; Zhai & Du, 2020). In addition to the experiences of discrimination, studies on other stressors faced by CISs during the pandemic have emphasized their negative impact on CISs' mental health. For example, CISs were worried about their family's health during the early stage of the outbreak, and later for their own health and safety (Ma & Miller, 2021; Zhai & Du, 2020). In addition, CISs experienced COVID-related financial issues (Firang & Mensah, 2022; Ma & Miller, 2021; Zhai & Du, 2020), travel restrictions (Ma & Miller, 2021; Zhai & Du, 2020), and academic pressure that create added layers of stress in their life abroad (Ge, 2021; Nam et al., 2021; Tang & Flint, 2022). While racial discrimination has been identified in a considerable amount of literature examining the experiences of CISs during the pandemic, the focus on race as a central theme is limited, especially in the Canadian context. As racial discrimination towards people of Asian descent has been prevalent in Canada during the pandemic (Balintec, 2022; CSHE, 2021; Passafiume, 2022), understanding CISs' experiences through a critical race perspective is important and necessary as it recognizes the significance of race in shaping individuals' experiences. Furthermore, the intersectional challenges that CISs experienced during the pandemic highlight the urgency for academic

institutions to provide care and support for this student group in Canada and beyond.

Academic Institutions' Response to Anti-Asian Racism during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Research on academic institutions' internationalization strategy has critiqued the unequal relationship between academic institutions and international students. In Canada, international students are seen as a means of boosting revenue, global ranking, and campus diversity by academic institutions (Buckner et al., 2020; Guo & Guo, 2017; Yao & Mwangi, 2022), and a component of Canadian economic development and skilled labor force by the federal government (Guo & Guo, 2017; McCartney, 2021; Scott et al., 2015). However, despite the cultural, racial, linguistic, and institutional barriers that international students face, they are not recognized as an "equity-seeking" group by academic institutions and are left out of institutions' support policies (Chen & Zhou, 2019; Guo & Guo, 2017; Tamtik & Guenter, 2020; Tavares, 2021). Moreover, research has pointed out the lack of consideration for international students' race and experiences of racial discrimination in institutions' equity and inclusion policy (Buckner et al., 2021; Jiang, 2021). This unequal relationship demonstrates the ways that academic institutions benefit from the inclusion of international students on campus while overlooking the barriers and challenges that they face, thereby highlighting a critical gap in universities' support for international students. In their research on institutions' response to anti-Asian racism during the COVID-19 pandemic, Tang and Flint (2022) emphasized this gap by revealing institutions' lack of consideration of Chinese international doctoral students' race and the racial discrimination they face. Other than Tang and Flint's (2022) study, research on institutions' response to anti-Asian racism during the pandemic is limited. Given CISSs' susceptibility to racism during the pandemic, research on CISSs' experience of racism and institutions' response to anti-Asian is needed to better understand international students' experience of race and racism and institutions' role in sustaining the unjust racial status quo (Buckner et al., 2021). By shedding light on these issues, the current study provides important considerations for academic institutions to critically evaluate and improve their support strategies for international students.

Theoretical Framework

Critical race theory (CRT) was developed during the 1970s in the U.S. in response to the erosion of civil rights era advances and the emergence of covert racism that continue the oppression of people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT highlights the centrality of race and racism in people of color's lives in a racialized society, and investigates the way that racial power differentials are produced and maintained within various socio-economic and political structures to perpetuate the subordination of people of color (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Although originally developed in the U.S., CRT has been expanded across disciplines and national borders (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Moreover, a number of researchers (Buckner et al., 2021; Guo & Guo, 2017; Nam et al., 2021; Tang & Flint, 2022; Yao et al., 2019) have effectively applied CRT in studying international students' experiences in predominantly white institutions and societies, which demonstrates the malleability of CRT and supports its application in the current study. As the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated anti-Asian and anti-Chinese racism in Canada (Kong et al., 2021), it further justifies the application of CRT in researching CISSs' experience of the pandemic and academic institutions' support during the same period. Specifically, the data collection and analysis process in the current study draws on the foundational CRT tenets that underline the pervasiveness of racism in a racialized society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) and the issue of interest convergence in which advances for racial justice often coincide with the interest of the dominant racial group (Bell, 1980).

Methodology

The current study is guided by the hermeneutical phenomenological approach that is interested in a nuanced interpretive understanding of certain aspects of the human experience through "borrow[ing] other people's experiences and their reflections on their experiences" (van Manen, 2016, p. 62). As a qualitative research method, hermeneutical phenomenology intends to make visible the previously invisible significance of a lived experience, and it aims to move beyond the conceptual understanding of a phenomenon and bring up a fuller interpretive understanding of "some aspect of the lifeworld" (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 2016). In applying this approach, the researcher aims to explicate a nuanced understanding of CISSs' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic through their individual interpretations. Notably, hermeneutical phenomenology does not assume that the meaning of human experiences can be generalized, and it maintains the awareness that the meaning of a lived experience is always more complex than what is interpreted by the individual and the researcher (van Manen, 2016). As such, by applying the hermeneutical phenomenological approach in this study, the researcher does not intend to produce a final or full description of CISSs' experience; rather, the researcher

aims to gain a deeper understanding of (1) the way that CISSs' racial identity impacts their experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and (2) their perception of academic institutions' support in the Canadian context.

Participants

Approved by the McMaster Research Ethics Board (MREB), 14 Chinese international students from mainland China were recruited via social media posts and snowball sampling. The inclusion criteria for participants included (a) being a Chinese international student in Canada with a study permit; (b) enrolled in a university in Ontario, Canada between the year 2020 to 2022; and (c) stayed in Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic for at least one semester. Potential participants were provided with detailed information regarding the research, and screening questions were used to assess their eligibility for the study. To protect participants' confidentiality, pseudonyms were used throughout the recruitment and data collection process, and the names of academic institutions were not collected. Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 24, and they are currently working towards bachelor's and master's degrees. Not by design, among the 14 participants, 1 self-identified as male, and the rest self-identified as female.

Data Collection

Data was collected in two stages. First, one-hour-long, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom. One month after the individual interviews, 11 participants returned for the follow-up focus group interviews for member checking to improve the trustworthiness of the findings. Every participant provided informed consent prior to each data collection stage. Both English and Mandarin Chinese were used in the interviews depending on participants' own level of comfort to ensure a rich description of their lived experiences (Vagle, 2018). The semi-structured interview questions explored the ways that participants' racial identity impacted their experience studying in Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic and their thoughts on universities' support for the challenges they faced during this time. Participants received a \$25 e-transfer for each interview they participated in.

Data Analysis

Guided by van Manen's (2016) hermeneutical phenomenological approach, data in this study is analyzed with the "holistic – selective – detailed" framework to identify relevant themes of the phenomenon. First, the interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the researcher attended to each transcript with a holistic perspective to look for the essential meanings of the entire text (van Manen, 2016). Second, the transcripts were read several times in a selective manner to look for statements or phrases that seemed revealing about CISSs' experience during the COVID-19 pandemic (van Manen, 2016). At this stage, a short list of initial categories was developed to describe the data. Third, the researcher conducted a series of line-by-line readings to examine what each sentence might reveal about CISSs' experiences (van Manen, 2016). The initial categories were revisited, modified, and expanded into a list of non-overlapping meaning units during this process for a deeper understanding of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Finally, the meaning units were grouped into broader themes that are essential to CISSs' lived experiences. Mandarin transcripts were translated into English for analysis and coding.

Results

The findings illuminated five major themes that address race-related challenges that CIS faced during the pandemic and their experience of universities' support during this time. In terms of challenges related to CISSs' racial identity, (1) encounters with racial discrimination, (2) anxiety with mask-wearing, and (3) emotional distress due to rising anti-Asian racism are commonly experienced among participants. As for participants' experience with academic institutions' support for race-related challenges, they often (4) felt ignored and (5) not understood by the institutions.

Encountering Racial Discrimination

As the scapegoating of Chinese people for the spread of the coronavirus triggered a new wave of anti-Asian racism (Kong et al., 2021; Tahmasbi et al., 2021), most of the participants were aware of the rising hostility towards Asian and Chinese people in the West. Half of the participants had personally experienced overt and covert racial discrimination such as verbal assaults, microaggression, and Othering, which essentialized their identities and served to rationalize the discrimination against them (Said, 1979). Lily, Coco, and Kelly experienced overt racism during the pandemic where

strangers verbally assaulted them due to their Chinese identity. Lily was told to “go back to [her] country” by a stranger on the street, and Coco was verbally abused by a stranger in the supermarket. Kelly also had a racist encounter in early 2020 when she was shopping at a local supermarket wearing a mask, and she shared:

“So a guy just came up to me and said, ‘you guys brought this virus into our country, why are you wearing this? Are you trying to kill all of us?’ That was so mean. I was so upset that day.”

The experience of covert racial discrimination was more prevalent among the seven participants. Some participants stated that they had experiences where no racist language was used, but the situation made them feel uncomfortable. For example, Yang shared one of the uncomfortable incidents that he experienced in early 2020:

Like in the supermarket people sometimes fight for stuff, like sanitizer or something, and then, one time there weren’t many left, and then when it was my turn, he didn’t give it to me, but gave it to a local Canadian instead... it makes me feel really... like I feel really nervous at that time.

The covert discrimination toward Chinese people during the pandemic is also observed by one of the participants, Emily, as she recounted one of the negative experiences she had during the pandemic:

I think last year oh, no, in January, there was a time when I am driving out alone, wearing a mask, and there was a person just shouted at me saying ‘why are you wearing a mask? You are in your car.’ Yeah, I think that person shouted at me, probably like, I’m Asian or I’m Chinese.

Moreover, Lily and Missy experienced microaggression from peers in early 2020. Some of Lily’s classmates called the coronavirus the ‘Wuhan virus,’ and it made her feel “uncomfortable.” She elaborated on this experience when one of her classmates showed her videos about the meaning of the ‘Wuhan virus’ on YouTube:

Like a YouTube video people make fun of it, like in that video, it shows how COVID started, and they make a lot of jokes about Wuhan from that time. But what I see on the internet, like I see in China, how Chinese people get together to defy COVID and a lot of people support the fight themselves, and I do feel bad about that.

Another participant, Missy, also had a similar experience with one of her classmates, where discrimination was passed on in a “humorous way” when the classmate shared a piece of COVID-related news article with her:

She just like saying a lot of... I don't know, you know they have those news articles, that might be rumors. I don't... I can't tell the validity. But they're just using the news to say things against us, in kind of like a humorous way, to say something about China and to your face. And I don't know what their ... like what their means of that. I don't know if they did it on purpose, it just feels like they're using it against you.

Notably, two participants, Alex and Jenna, expressed that they have not experienced any form of racial discrimination during the pandemic; however, they both consider themselves to be “lucky” to have no such experience, which implies that they are aware of the racist environment in Canada.

Worried about Mask-Wearing

Due to the association of the coronavirus with masks and Chinese identity, mask-wearing adds another potential source of discrimination for participants. Although many participants expressed their fear of the coronavirus, the association of the coronavirus with masks and Chinese identity made some of them feel “weird” when being the few Chinese people who wear masks, especially in the early stage of the COVID-19 outbreak. For example, Vivian shared:

Like, people are not going to comment, like all my classmates are nice, they're not going to comment on you wearing masks. But... as a minority you just... You're just afraid. Sometimes they have a look at you, and it may not be anything negative, but you just think oh, are they thinking that I'm weird or whatever?

Participants were paying close attention to anti-Chinese discourse online. For example, Vivian and Kelly noticed that Chinese people are blamed for the coronavirus online and it contributed to the increasing hostility towards Chinese people and mask-wearing. Moreover, the proliferating anti-Chinese discourse online made Elaine worried about potential racist attacks when wearing a mask:

I think it would make me feel uncomfortable seeing so many comments online ... that saying like, why people are still wearing masks or why Chinese people are still wearing masks or why Canada become China, you know, I've seen comments like that. So, it, yeah, it will affect my mood sometimes to think like ... if I would get attacked because I'm wearing a mask, so, that happens.

Sharing a similar concern towards racist attacks when wearing a mask, Jenna shared:

I feel like people on like, buses or subways, they're still like I would say like most people are still wearing masks. So... I'm not kind of like ... I'm not going to be like an obvious target when I was wearing a mask on the bus or on the subway. So... but, it's because like, speaking on the street, yes, there's a risk that somebody's just gonna laugh at you or saying like, like, you know, pointing out your mask and say something really offensive. So, I'm worried about this a lot.

Although a few of the participants attributed their uncomfortableness with mask-wearing to cultural differences, many participants felt that mask amplified their outsider identity during the COVID-19 pandemic, and it becomes a potential source of racial discrimination and emotional distress. Additionally, participants also experienced emotional unrest when seeing frequent news about violence and racism towards Asian and Chinese people during the pandemic.

Emotionally Distressed due to Anti-Asian Racism

Vicarious racial distress related to the rising anti-Asian racism was commonly experienced among participants. Some of them felt “afraid” and “terrified” when they saw the news about violence against Asian and Chinese people. For example, Yang expressed that the rising violent incidents towards Chinese people in Toronto in early 2020 made him “feel quite terrified”, and as a Chinese international student, he felt that “it can be really stressful during that time.” Similarly, Alex expressed it is “always terrifying to see the things about China on Twitter,” because “there are always like, hate comments,” and these comments can sometimes make her feel “really anxious.” The “fear” of racism is also experienced by Elaine when she saw anti-Chinese remarks online, as she elaborated:

On those social media platforms, you can easily see that people just saying something about mask or something about COVID. The comments are all like Chinese virus, blah, blah, blah, something like that [...] And also, I think, it's, it's kind of like you have always heard about it, but you probably never faced it. But you have the fear for that. So, I think that's kind of the experience for me.

Other than emotional distress, some participants also shared that they tried to go out less during the pandemic due to the rising number of violent and racist incidents targeting Asians and especially Chinese people. For example, Lily shared:

[...] at that time, I was really scared and there was a time that I was afraid of going out, because I saw on the news that some Chinese Americans were stabbed on the street. And my parents were also worried about me when they saw news like this.

Similarly, Kelly shared the vicarious trauma that she experienced during the pandemic and her subsequent behavioral change for self-protection:

I think once there was a guy, was a... I think a Chinese guy got killed because of racism, there was the news, and I actually got trauma because of that news. There's um one kind of trauma you get when you see somebody else facing a very difficult or a terrible event, you will feel very scary thoughts, and I got trauma, and I locked myself in my condo for 3 days (laughs).

Feeling Ignored by the Institution

Although anti-Asian discrimination was exacerbated during the pandemic, most of the participants stated that their university did not respond to or issue any statement regarding the rising anti-Asian racism, nor did they offer any support for Chinese international students who were vulnerable to racism during the pandemic. For example, Missy noted the university's lack of recognition of anti-Asian racism:

When they [the school] talk about something like racial discrimination or something, they never really focused on Asian or especially Chinese people. Like, this is a big topic, but they just somehow missed out, like, were ignored and just going through, you know...for this huge group is going through a hard time, especially during the pandemic. They're not given enough resources or not enough... they're not given any resources or any special considerations towards us. For example, I never have an email saying let's stop the Asian hate, well, let's stop the Chinese hate, or let's just stop saying the word like 'Wuhan virus' or something like that. So they never discriminate against us, but they don't offer any support. So, I think that's basically bias.

Notably, a few participants expressed that racism towards Asian people does not get as much attention compared to other racial minorities in the university. For example, when talking about school's lack of support towards CISs who might experience discrimination during the pandemic, Elaine expressed that "because we're Asians, so we just did not get a lot of ... we just don't get as much attention as we want." Moreover, Vivian shared:

I think university... I don't think they, they showed like, they specifically say that, um, stop Asian hate. I don't think they say that. That's also um... yes, this is, this is like, maybe this is a thing because they will, they will say that um... compared to other races, like they will say this is a Black community, Black pride month. I'm not sure about the name, but they will speak it out. But I'm pretty sure I don't see any type of support specifically about Asians, yeah, so this should be a problem also.

Not Understood by the Institution

As illustrated earlier, participants experienced mental and emotional distress during the pandemic; however, many of them chose not to seek mental health support from their institutions because of the perceived institutional barriers such as the lack of consideration of their identity and the challenges they face in support programs. For example, Vivian has experienced "mental stress" due to academic stress and the lack of social interaction during the lockdown. When talking about her preference of not seeking help from school due to perceived cultural differences, she elaborated:

So, there is an option. I just... for me, I just didn't use their help. I know there is an option available... So, one thing is about, I think specifically about our identities. because we are Chinese international students, that's like, actually, there's a lot of stuff that I... I assume that because they won't understand and that this is like, my assumption. I'm not saying they're not professional. Yeah. But just... I think, in my opinion, they won't understand.

Other than cultural difference, language difference was also a perceived barrier in help-seeking, for example, Sophie explained that she did not go to school for help for her emotional distress during the pandemic because English is not her first language, and when she "feel(s) distressed, stressful, [she does not] know how to describe it in a very comfortable way." Max described her frustration in using school mental health support due to perceived language and cultural differences as well:

My university can provide students with mental health care...like on... applications, they can call or chat with a psychologist, um...but there, there are few Chinese counselors, there are, but just maybe 2 or 3.... So, when I talked to ... when I talk to the counselor in English, I don't know... I just don't know how to express properly, and just like... so, maybe there's some.... and also, the cultural difference, they cannot understand where we lived before.... So.... They don't know all the situation... it's so difficult for us, especially as a first-year student.

Yang, however, expressed that the generalized support offered by the school does not address the difficulties that CISs face, and it discouraged him from seeking wellness support from school:

Support from school... Actually, there are... just, at that time, the school has support, but it did not provide the kind of one-on-one, specific... well, like for Chinese international students, many faculties or staff in the school they might not really have much of an understanding of China and Chinese culture, yeah. So, I feel that the help provided by the school is not very helpful to me, and I'm not the target... the services are not designed for me.

Yang also mentioned the institution's generalized wellness support showed their lack of understanding of what CISs were going through:

So, many of the supports and services from school are, um, the same as what domestic students will receive, so this is... and the locals also don't really understand international students' situation at that time, especially their situation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, the school doesn't seem to understand the situation that Chinese people are being discriminated against during the pandemic, and I think this has a big impact on... like, there is no specific guidance and planning, just really... really general stuff.

Sharing a similar sentiment towards the school's support, Missy remarked:

Although I understand that international students are a big proportion of school, so [school] would generalize them, but then still, they have to, you know, I think they didn't do the research very well. So, they don't really understand what the students are going through.

The institutions' lack of consideration for international students' diverse backgrounds and identities in their wellness support programs rendered CISs' marginal identities and their experiences of discrimination invisible. Additionally, it perpetuated the marginalization of international students of color in academic spaces.

Discussion

The current study explored the challenges that CISs encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic and their experience of institutional support with a specific focus on their racial identity. The findings highlighted the pervasive anti-Asian racism through blatant verbal assaults, microaggression, and Othering that both directly and indirectly contributed to CISs' negative experience studying in Canada during the pandemic. Despite the rising anti-Asian racism facing CISs, academic institutions' support for their experience of marginalization was largely absent. Institutions did not consider CISs' race in their experience of the pandemic, and their program support lacked the consideration for cultural, institutional, and linguistic barriers that discourage CISs' from seeking support and perpetuate their marginalization during the pandemic. The findings also expanded CRT in its theoretical value in that they provided evidence for the pervasiveness of racism and the issues of interest convergence and White domination in a global context. In the following, I discuss the findings in relation to the CRT framework. Specifically, I highlight the way that CISs became the highly visible Other during the pandemic troubles Canada's welcoming multicultural image; and the way that institutions render CISs' experiences of racism and racial discrimination invisible by ignoring CISs' race in support programs.

In CRT, racism is seen as pervasive and an ordinary part of the experience for people of color in White-dominant countries (Delgado & Stefancic, 2007). Moreover, because racism is embedded in different levels of systems and structures to maintain the unjust racial status quo, racism impacts racialized individuals in covert and pervasive ways that are difficult

to detect and address (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). In the current study, the pervasiveness of racism is exemplified through the multiple implicit and explicit expressions of racism that participants experienced at the individual level through verbal assaults and microaggressions, and at the societal level where they are scapegoated for the spread of the coronavirus. CISs are highly visible to racist attacks and marginalization during the pandemic due to their perceived proximity to the coronavirus (Jeung et al., 2020; Zhai & Du, 2020). Notably, research on Chinese international doctoral students' experience of the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S. by Tang and Flint (2022) found similar results regarding the common experiences of racism among CISs. The similarity of CISs' experience of racial discrimination in the Canadian and the U.S. context highlights the pervasiveness and centrality of race and racism that render racialized international students the visible Other in White-dominant societies (Yao et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the pervasive racist experiences that CISs encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic troubles Canada's image as a welcoming multicultural country. Multiculturalism is an official policy adopted by the Canadian government in 1971 aimed to promote and preserve cultural diversity, and it has earned a positive reputation for Canada as a welcoming Western nation that is "innocent of racism" (Dua et al., 2005, p. 1). For critics, multiculturalism did not change the reality of marginalization for people of color in Canada, and it has been deployed as a mechanism to maintain the unjust racial status quo (Dua et al., 2005; Lee & Johnstone, 2021). Moreover, the myth that Canada is "innocent of racism" also prompted the illusion that racism in Canada is not as bad as its neighbor down south (Houshmand et al., 2014). This myth is confronted by the participants' experiences of racism and the high rates of anti-Asian hate crimes during the COVID-19 pandemic when anti-Asian hate increased by 530% in four of Canada's largest cities (CSHE, 2021). The intensified anti-Asian racism in Canada during the pandemic illuminates the invisible racial hierarchy that underpins the Canadian social structure, and it troubles the image of a nice, multicultural Canada. Furthermore, the invisible racial hierarchy underlying Canadian multiculturalism reflects the transnational context of White domination, highlighting the broad relevance of the CRT beyond the U.S. Specifically, CRT provides a helpful framework in understanding racialized populations' experiences of racism in Canada, as well as the experiences of racialization and racism encountered by international students, such as CISs, in the higher education context.

Although beyond the scope of this study, the findings also offer insights into the development of a more nuanced CRT that acknowledges the varying experiences of racism among different racial groups. Additionally, the experiences of racialization and racism among CISs in Canada challenge the black-white binary in the racial discourse and supports the transnational contexts of racism outlined in Asian Critical Race Theory (AsianCrit). AsianCrit emphasizes how historical and present global racial, political, and economic relations shape Asian Americans' experiences of racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Iftikar & Museus, 2018). The transnational context in AsianCrit is particularly relevant in understanding how historical anti-Asian racism in Canada, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act (1923) and the Japanese internment camps during World War II (Adachi, 1991), as well as present-day political tensions with China, such as the extradition case of Huawei's executive Meng Wanzhou in Vancouver and the detention of two Canadian citizens in China (Bogerd, 2020). These examples shape the experiences of racism faced by CISs during the COVID-19 pandemic. In sum, the intensified anti-Asian racism experienced by CISs during the pandemic highlights the pervasive racial hierarchy in Canada, and CRT provides a valuable perspective in understanding and addressing the experiences of racism among migratory racialized populations in Canada and beyond.

In addition to the pervasiveness of racism, participants' experience of academic institutions' wellness support underlines the issue of interest convergence and the domination of White norms in Canadian academic institutions. The interest convergence feature in CRT proposes that the support that marginalized groups receive is often incentivized by the advancement of the dominant groups' self-interest (Bell, 1980). The perceived lack of understanding and consideration of CISs' identity from academic institutions experienced by participants during the pandemic suggests that international students of color are welcomed and visible to the institutions insofar as they help boost institutions' profit and increase the academy's image of diversity (Tamtik & Guenter, 2020; Tavares, 2021; Yao et al., 2019). However, when it comes to support programs and policies, racialized international students' experiences of marginalization and racism are often invisible to the institutions (Buckner et al., 2021; Jiang, 2021; Yao et al., 2019). This is exemplified in the findings where participants feel discouraged in seeking institutional support for their well-being because the services are not designed with CISs' identity and unique needs in mind. Furthermore, the lack of consideration of racialized international students' marginalized identities in universities' support programs illuminates the invisible domination of White norms in academic institutions (Buckner et al., 2021; Tamtik & Guenter, 2020), and the centrality of race in shaping their experiences in predominantly White spaces (Yao et al., 2019). As a result, CISs face a conflicting experience where their racialized identity

makes them visible to marginalization, yet institutions' lack of consideration of their race in support programs renders their experiences of marginalization invisible. This raises questions about institutions' complicity in perpetuating White domination in academic spaces and Canadian society more broadly, and it highlights the need to acknowledge and address the experiences of marginalization and racism among international students of color. Thus, the issues of interest convergence and the domination of White norms in CISs' experiences of institutional support during the COVID-19 pandemic underline the relevance of CRT in the higher education context as a useful lens to better understand and address the experiences of racialization and racism faced by international students in Canada.

Conclusion

By applying CRT framework, the current study illuminates the complex challenges that CISs experienced during the pandemic due to their racial identity and the lack of support from academic institutions. Moreover, by shedding light on CISs' experiences of marginalization in the higher education context, the study highlights the importance of recognizing international students' marginalized identities and experiences of exclusion in supporting their overall well-being. The presence of international students creates the image of an inclusive and diverse campus; however, inclusion does not mean equity (Abrams & Moio, 2009), and the integration of international students on campus does not mean they receive the care and support that they need and deserve. To live up to their commitment to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, universities need to first recognize the centrality of race and racism that shape racialized international students' experience in Canada. In addition, universities must be aware of the ways that they reproduce the unjust racial hierarchy in Canada and perpetuate the marginalization of racialized international students by ignoring their race and experiences of racial discrimination. When international students' race and experiences of racism are ignored by universities, it creates institutional barriers for CISs who are trying to make sense of their race in a transnational space and to process their experiences of racism (Buckner et al., 2021). As such, it is important for universities to not only recognize international students' race and their experiences of racism and marginalization but also include this understanding in their official policy and strategies for student support (Yao et al., 2019). The results in this study should not be generalized to represent the experiences of all CISs; rather, they are to add nuance to the understanding of this group of students and their needs.

The researcher proposes the following four recommendations for universities to start imagining and creating an inclusive and supportive environment for international students with marginalized identities. First, as race shapes international students' experiences studying overseas, universities should include anti-racism resources in their orientation process to help international students, especially those from a racially homogenous society, to better navigate experiences of racialization and racism. Additionally, providing anti-racism resources to international students can help make visible the invisible mechanisms of racism, and give international students the language to talk about their experiences of racism, which validates their experiences and empower them to confront and resist the perpetrators (Litam, 2020). Secondly, universities should adopt a holistic perspective in providing support for international students that involves the understanding of the different systems that marginalize students and those that can offer support. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, universities could have raised awareness among staff, faculties, and students on the complex challenges facing CISs to show solidarity and support from different levels within the institution. Third, universities should create channels for international students of color to report and seek counseling for their experiences of racism, especially at times when they are vulnerable to racial discrimination and exclusion, to promote a sense of safety and belonging during a time of crisis (Nam et al., 2021). Finally, in terms of support programs, universities should recognize that international students (Chinese or otherwise) come from diverse backgrounds with unique needs (Yao et al., 2019), and they should work with international students in support program development to center the services around their needs and promote a sense of belonging (Chen & Zhou, 2019; Tamtik & Guenter, 2020).

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