A Portfolio for the Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology (DPsych)

A qualitative study exploring experiences of racism in British Chinese individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to the six individuals who participated in my study, entrusting me to tell their stories. And to the participant in my client study, who shared his most vulnerable moments in therapy.

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For my Apor, Pik Wan Mo.

Preface

This introduction provides an overview of the contents within this DPsych in counselling psychology portfolio, comprising a research study, a publishable article, and a clinical case study. Each component of this portfolio is interwoven by the overarching themes of stigmatisation, marginalisation and identity. Together, the pieces collectively interpret the experiences of marginalised minorities, and reflect on the lived experiences of these individuals.

The first piece presented in this portfolio is a qualitative research study using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to investigate racism towards British Chinese individuals during the global COVID-19 crisis. The motivation for this research stemmed from the unique timing of the DPsych programme during an exceptional historical period, coupled with the researcher's personal connection to the phenomenon. Starting the DPsych course in September 2020, shortly after the COVID-19 outbreak in March, provided a unique opportunity to examine COVID-related racism in real time. This study attended to the immediate relevance of the topic, enabling exploration of racism during an unprecedented global event and addressing a significant gap in the literature.

The themes explored in this study include the perception that racism is an unavoidable part of life in the UK and a sense of indifference from others. Participants reported that the pandemic reignited childhood experiences of discrimination and struggled with a conflict between perceiving COVID-related racism as shocking and unjust, versus finding some justification in the blame and aligning with discriminatory views. Expressions of internalised discrimination and stigmatisation were also evident. Additionally, participants expressed a desire to have handled COVID-related racism more effectively, saw the pandemic as an opportunity for personal growth and educating others, and highlighted the lasting impact of

COVID-19 on their identity, view of others, and sense of belonging within their community and broader society.

The second component of the portfolio is the publishable article, which presents the key findings from the aforementioned research study for the journal *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. This article aims to disseminate the insights gained from the research to a broader academic audience, highlighting the experiences and psychological challenges faced by British Chinese individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic. By focusing on these first-hand accounts, the article highlights the significant implications for counselling psychology, particularly in addressing the specific needs of marginalised racial groups during times of crisis. The journal *Qualitative Research in Psychology* was chosen for several reasons. Firstly, the researcher believed the current study aligned well with the journal's mission to seek "innovative and pioneering work that moves the field forward" (Taylor & Francis Group, 2024). Additionally, the journal's valuing of smaller scale, qualitative accounts and featuring of research using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis made it an ideal venue for the research findings.

The clinical case study offers an in-depth analysis of a therapeutic session with a transgender individual diagnosed with borderline personality disorder (BPD). This case study not only delves into the therapeutic relationship and process, but also explores the intersectional marginalisation experienced by the client. The label "borderline" is stigmatising, and individuals with BPD often suffer from high levels of self-stigma (Grambal et al., 2016; Livingston, & Boyd, 2010). Personality disorder diagnoses pose additional challenges for young adults who are still exploring their self-concept, with labels becoming integrated into their developing identity (Watts, 2019).

In this case study, themes of identity and stigma are explored, particularly as they related to the client's developing self-concept and gender identity. Following the ethos of counselling

psychology, which values each individual's uniqueness, and guided by the British Psychological Society (2019) recommendations, I recognised the importance of acknowledging the distress and adverse effects of social stigmatisation and discrimination often experienced by gender, sexuality, and relationship diverse clients. I adopted an affirmative stance towards these differences, remaining aware of the negative societal attitudes surrounding shame and stigmatisation, as well as my own reactions in the therapeutic work. The client's experiences of mental health diagnosis stigma, and their related challenges are also critically examined. Through this case study, the portfolio further emphasises the importance of understanding and addressing the complex nature of marginalisation in therapeutic settings.

Each piece in this portfolio contributes to a comprehensive understanding of how stigmatisation and marginalisation affect individuals on multiple levels. By examining racial discrimination, stigma associated with mental health diagnoses, and the complexities of gender identity, this portfolio aims to inform and enhance counselling practices. Through rigorous research, dissemination, and clinical application, this body of work aspires to foster a more inclusive and empathetic approach within the field of counselling psychology.

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PART A: RESEARCH THESIS

Abstract

This study investigates the experiences of racism among British Chinese individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic. Six participants aged 26-30 were recruited through Facebook forums and snowball sampling. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted in the summer of 2022. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, four main themes emerged: (1) the perceived inevitability of racism in the UK and societal indifference; (2) the immediate shock of COVID-19-related racism; (3) the process of coming to terms with these experiences; and (4) the pandemic's ongoing impact on identity and belonging. The findings reveal that COVID-19 reawakened childhood feelings of marginalisation and created internal conflict between recognising the wrongness of racism and feeling it was justified. Participants also reflected on coping mechanisms, seeing the pandemic as an opportunity for personal growth and education, and discussed the role of bystanders in shaping their perceptions of racial incidents. The study explores the impact of COVID-related racial discrimination and internalised stigmatisation, using Asian Critical Race Theory and Co-Cultural Communication Theory to illuminate the complexities of identity and societal expectations. Overall, this research enhances understanding of British Chinese experiences during the pandemic and advocates for systemic changes to challenge inequality and promote social justice.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review is comprised of four components. The first section will explore the various theoretical frameworks and theories of racism, blame and stigma. An overview of stigma in historical infectious diseases, including past pandemics and epidemics will follow. The second section will focus on the context of COVID-19, the global and political impacts, physical and mental health effects of COVID-19 discrimination, and the media's role in negative racial depictions. A review of the literature on COVID-19 discrimination involving the role of bystanders and vicarious trauma are examined. Thirdly, intersectionality of gender, age, class, and sexual orientation are examined in relation to COVID-19 racism to explore the intersection of oppressive social identities. Factors impacting sense of belonging during COVID-times are also explored, including experiences of Asian communities, international students, immigrants, family units, and responses to COVID-related racism. In the final section an overview of the gaps in the literature are identified, a rationale for the current study is provided, and relevance to the field of counselling psychology is explored.

1.1. Definitions of terms

The terms "COVID" and "the pandemic" are used interchangeably and refer to the period of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, between 2020-2023. Race is defined as "the idea that people can be divided into different groups based on physical characteristics that they are perceived to share, such as skin colour, eye shape, etc., or the dividing of people in this way," (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024). Notably, race is widely recognised to be a cultural and social construction, rather than an objective truth (Berger, & Luckmann, 1967; Tate, 1997). Racism can be defined as prejudicial thoughts, behaviours or actions based on race, including racial microaggressions which are the everyday slights, insults, behaviours and invalidations that communicate hostility both verbally and nonverbally (Sue et al., 2007). Ethnicity refers to a large group of

people who share aspects of their identity, such as culture, language, history, religion and traditions (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024). Much of the literature into COVID-19-related discrimination refers to that experienced by the Asian race, whereas some studies have examined the specific experiences of distinct Southeast Asian ethnic groups, including Chinese. Therefore, reference to both race and ethnicity are used as appropriate throughout this review. To avoid confusion between the Chinese ethnic group, and Chinese citizens or residents of China, the terms “individuals from the Chinese ethnic group,” or “individuals of Chinese ethnicity” are used instead of “Chinese people."

1.2. Stigma in historical infectious diseases

Examining the past and how stigma has manifested in notable infectious diseases throughout history is crucial for comprehending complex, historical societal responses. Making sense of infectious diseases is theorised to stem from socially constructed beliefs that serve to delineate and differentiate the ingroup from the outgroup (Joffe, 1999). Across various pandemics and epidemics, including SARS, H1N1, MERS, Zika, HIV, and Ebola, stigmatisation has been closely associated with attributions of responsibility to outgroups, often based on cultural disparities like differences in hygiene standards (Washer, 2004) and dietary practices (Joffe, & Lee, 2004; Stürmer et al., 2017). This phenomenon is thought to aid individuals in making sense of the complex and often distressing circumstances surrounding epidemics (Nelkin, & Gilman, 1988).

Research on past infectious disease outbreaks highlight their association with a range of adverse psychological responses, including increased distress, anxiety, and fear (Wasim et al., 2022), as well as heightened attitudes of mistrust and hostility (Williams, & Gonzalez-Medina, 2011). Moreover, outbreaks have been linked to 'othering' behaviours (Banerjee et al., 2020; Dionne, & Turkmen, 2020; Gilles et al., 2013; Reny, & Barreto, 2020; Saeed et al., 2020; Sabharwal et al., 2022), and the proliferation of xenophobic or racist sentiments,

contributing to societal divisions and stigma (Bhanot et al., 2021; Duan et al., 2020; Zay Hta et al., 2023; Gilmore, & Somerville, 1994).

The historical context of stigmatised infectious diseases provides insights into the formation and perpetuation of attitudes, informing current interventions (Baldassarre et al., 2020). For example, diseases like HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases have long been linked to moral judgments, prejudice and blame towards homosexuals and those who engage in frequent sexual relations (Crandall, 1991; Herek, & Glunt, 1988; Logie, 2020; Parker, & Aggleton, 2003). Similarly, Ebola has been linked to fear and discrimination toward African immigrants in various European countries, perpetuating a portrayal of African cultures as primitive, uncivilised and threatening (Prati, & Pietrantoni, 2016; Stürmer et al., 2017).

Similarly, the 2003 SARS pandemic led to fear and discrimination against Chinese and Asian communities (Keil, & Ali, 2006; Person et al., 2004), highlighting the vulnerability of minority groups to stigmatisation during disease outbreaks. Comparative studies across historical pandemics and COVID-19 reveal consistent patterns of minority groups being at higher risk of stigmatisation, emphasising the need for targeted interventions (Saeed et al., 2020; Zay Hta et al., 2023). Zhu et al. (2022) compared stigma from COVID-19 with previous pandemics, including SARS, Ebola, AIDS, and influenza, across emotional, cognitive, motivational, and social dimensions. Their findings revealed the public held more negative attitudes toward individuals associated with COVID-19 compared to all other infectious disease pandemics.

The naming of infectious diseases has also been scrutinised for its potential to fuel stigma (Fischer et al., 2019; Schein et al., 2012; World Health Organization [WHO], 2015). Terms like "Spanish flu" and "China virus" have been criticised for attributing causality to specific populations, leading to social stigma (Barrett, & Brown, 2008; Hoppe, 2018). In the case of

COVID-19, terms like "China virus", “Asian virus” and "Wuhan virus" were believed to fuel stigma (V. Huynh et al., 2022; Noel, 2020, WHO, 2020a). The impact was deemed significant enough for WHO to issue official guidance on COVID-19 naming (2020a), aimed at addressing and preventing stigma towards China and individuals from the Chinese ethnic group. Despite this, one study suggested the mere use of place-specific names associating the virus with China may not directly influence negative attitudes alone, indicating a deeper, more nuanced relationship around COVID-19 stigma (Masters-Waage et al., 2020).

1.3. Theoretical frameworks of racism, blame and stigma

This section will outline some of the theoretical frameworks of racism, blame, and stigma, and link these to literature from the COVID-19 pandemic. These frameworks are crucial for understanding the complex social phenomena of blame assignment and discriminatory behaviours. They serve as a basis for examining the mechanisms and effects of racism in society, offering various perspectives on how these issues operate and affect individuals and groups.

1.3.1. Attribution Theory

Attribution Theory is a framework that explains how individuals interpret and make sense of the causes of behaviour and events. Outlined by Heider (1958), Jones (1972), and Weiner (1974, 1986), the theory explores the process by which individuals attribute causes to outcomes. It considers both internal and external factors in constructing causal explanations for events (Jones, 1972). The theory posits that misattributions can lead to biases, blame, and prejudice across diverse societal contexts (Weiner, 1974). However, it has been criticised for not adequately recognising cultural, social, and historical factors that influence attributions (Semin, 1980). During the COVID-19 pandemic, Attribution Theory has been employed to analyse prevalent patterns of blame assignment.

A scoping review by Sharma et al. (2022) examined the use of Attribution Theory in understanding the psychological factors associated with health-related behaviour and outcomes during the pandemic. The review highlighted how attributing the virus to the East Asian sociodemographic group perpetuated unfounded associations, promoting stigmatisation and discrimination based on both personal and situational factors. The surge in anti-Asian hate incidents has reinforced the narrative of the Asian minority group as threatening outsiders (Li, & Nicholson, 2021; Lo et al., 2022; C. Wang et al., 2021; Wing, & Park-Taylor, 2022). This narrative is believed to have intensified and prolonged discrimination against Asians during the COVID-19 pandemic (Tessler et al., 2020).

1.3.2. Social stigma

Stigmas are noted to be the foundation for social categorisation, whereby individuals classify themselves and others into ingroups and outgroups based on shared characteristics or differences (Turner et al., 1987). This categorisation fosters intergroup competition, often leading to preferential treatment of ingroup members while marginalising those in the outgroup, in accordance with social identity principles (Stets, & Burke, 2000). Implicit racial biases and stereotypes, operating at an unconscious level, significantly shape behaviours toward outgroups (Kurdi et al., 2019). Additionally, the use of pronouns such as "we" and "them" further reinforces ingroup-outgroup dynamics (Greenwald, & Banaji, 1995). Social identity and social cognition theories offer valuable frameworks for examining how Asian groups are perceived amidst the COVID-19 stigma context. Research by Roberto et al. (2020) indicated that in situations where ingroup members lacked pertinent information about the COVID-19 virus, trait-based attributions were drawn from existing social categories and stigma associated with the outgroup, including those infected by, or connected to the origins of the virus.

Goffman's (1963) Social Stigma Theory has emerged as a pivotal framework in COVID-related literature, aiding in the comprehension of how Chinese individuals navigated stigma, power dynamics, and identity management during the pandemic (e.g., Ma, & Zhan, 2022). According to this theory, stigma arises from a discordance between an anticipated social identity and the actual perceived identity, which is viewed as deviating from societal norms. Investigations into COVID-19-related racism have also drawn upon the Model of Stigma Communication (R. Smith et al., 2007). This model identifies stigma communication as containing cues that differentiate and categorise individuals into distinct social groups, insinuate responsibility for belonging to such groups, and link these groups to both physical and social hazards (R. Smith et al., 2007). Longitudinal media coverage analysis of the COVID-19 virus has allowed researchers to examine the characteristics of stigmatising messages, including dissemination and responses on platforms like social media (e.g., R. Smith et al., 2023).

1.3.3. Integrated Threat Theory

Stephan and Stephan's Integrated Threat Theory (1993, 1996, 2000) suggests negative attitudes directed at outgroup members arise from various sources, including intergroup anxiety, negative stereotypes, and both realistic and symbolic threats. Realistic threats are perceived as endangering the material or economic interests of the ingroup, while symbolic threats entail differences in morals, values, beliefs, or attitudes (Croucher, 2017). Researchers have applied Integrated Threat Theory to comprehend instances of discrimination against Asians during the COVID-19 crisis, attributing such behaviour to the ingroup's perception of threat and moral difference from the outgroup (e.g., Croucher et al., 2020; Demirtas-Madran, 2020; B. Kim et al., 2022; Ma, & Ma, 2023). The circular nature of the model has been identified as problematic though, in that perceived threats inevitably result in prejudice, but also the outcomes of that prejudice itself can prompt increased perceived threat (Stephan, & Renfro, 2016).

1.3.4. Co-cultural Communication Theory

Co-cultural Communication Theory, developed by Orbe (1996, 1998), aims to explain communication dynamics between dominant and marginalised groups within society. The foundation of this theory lies in the idea that a particular co-culture, namely that of European-American heterosexual middle- or upper-class males, has attained dominant status within various societal institutions such as political, corporate, religious, and legal sectors (Orbe, 1998). It acknowledges that individuals from marginalised groups often have to navigate dual cultural identities, necessitating a delicate balance between their own cultural norms and values, and those imposed by the dominant culture. This theory highlights the significance of recognising and respecting these dual identities in communication interactions. Within the context of Western societies, Co-cultural Communication Theory offers valuable insights into the experiences of marginalised Asian groups, particularly concerning their encounters with and responses to COVID-19-related discrimination (e.g., Jun et al., 2021; Ji, & Chen, 2023).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the theory has been instrumental in understanding how Asian individuals have navigated the heightened racial tensions and discrimination. For instance, Jun et al. (2021) found that Asian individuals employed various communicative strategies, such as assimilation, accommodation, and separation to cope with the increased stigma and bias. These strategies reflect the complexities between maintaining one's cultural identity and adapting to the dominant culture's expectations. Ji and Chen (2023) further illustrated how the pandemic exacerbated challenges for Asian communities, forcing individuals to confront and negotiate their dual identities more frequently and intensely.

1.3.5. The Culpable Control Model

The Culpable Control Model (Alicke, 2000), speculates that assigning blame often stems from cognitive biases rather than genuine accountability. Control and intent are considered to play pivotal roles in determining culpability. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the origin of the virus in China precipitated a climate of blame and apprehension towards individuals of Chinese descent, leading to the collective scapegoating of this ethnic group (J. Huang et al., 2023). The model adds another layer, however, by emphasising the role of perceived control and responsibility in attributions of blame. It suggests that when individuals perceive that a person or group has control over the factors leading to a negative outcome, they are more likely to assign blame. This aligns with social identity and social cognition theories in that it acknowledges the influence of group memberships and stereotypes on perceptions, and it offers a specific explanation for how blame is assigned in situations where controllability is perceived. For COVID-19, this may have included commonly held views that the virus was spread in Chinese wet markets and through the consumption of bats and dogs (J. Huang et al., 2023).

1.3.6. Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a framework for understanding how race intersects with power dynamics, shaping societal structures to privilege White people while disadvantaging non-White groups (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado, & Stefancic, 2000). Asian Critical Race Theory (AsianCrit) extends CRT to focus on Asian groups, examining how systemic racism uniquely affects them within their historical, cultural, and social contexts (R. Chang, 1993). Mechanisms like the Model Minority Myth (MMM) and the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype (PFS) sustain White dominance and systemic inequities (R. Chang, 1993).

Racism, within this framework, perpetuates systemic oppression (Tate, 1997), a perspective applied to understanding racial discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lei, & Guo, 2022; K. Liu et al., 2022; Walker, & Anders, 2022). The pandemic exacerbated historical

racial inequalities, with U.S. media representations contributing to stigma and discrimination against Asians, impacting their communities and businesses (Walker, & Anders, 2022).

The PFS portrays Asians as perpetual outsiders, regardless of citizenship (F. Wu, 2002), affecting feelings of belonging and psychological adaptation (Q. Huynh et al., 2011). Daley et al. (2022) found that Asians were consistently viewed as foreign, with heightened blame on China for the pandemic increasing this perception. The MMM, depicting Asians as highly successful, has been linked to mental health issues, anxiety, stress, microaggressions, and strained inter-minority relations (Chou, & Feagin, 2015; Nicholson, & Mei, 2020; C. Wang et al., 2021). During the COVID-19 period, internalised MMM beliefs were found to reduce recognition of anti-Asian racism (Yi et al., 2023), aligning with Racial Triangulation Theory, which suggests Asians are positioned in the middle of a racial hierarchy which undermines their awareness of racial injustices (C. Kim, 1999)

While PFS and MMM originated in the U.S., these concepts extend to the UK, though sociocultural factors influence perceptions of Asian groups differently (Kawakami et al., 2021; Goh, & McCue, 2021). However, both nations view Asians as perpetual outsiders and high-achieving minorities (Q. Huynh et al., 2011; R. Chang, 1993; Gillborn, 2008). CRT and AsianCrit face limitations, including potential essentialisation of racial issues and overlooking intra-group diversity, which may perpetuate stereotypes (Hylton, 2012; Shih et al., 2007). Recognising these limitations is crucial for enhancing their effectiveness in addressing the unique challenges faced by Asian groups (Museus, & Iftikar, 2013; Teranishi, 2002).

Overall, these theories offer valuable explanations for discriminatory behaviours between individuals and groups during COVID-19. Attribution Theory explains the assignment of blame for the virus's origin, often unfairly targeting Chinese communities. Social Stigma Theory reveals how negative labels and stereotypes exacerbate discrimination, whereas Integrated Threat Theory shows how perceived threats can fuel xenophobia. Co-cultural

Communication Theory highlights how marginalised groups resist dominant narratives, and The Culpable Control Model links perceived control and blame, clarifying the unjust responsibility placed on Chinese individuals. Critical Race Theory, particularly AsianCrit, examines systemic and intersectional racism, emphasising historical and structural factors in current anti-Asian sentiments. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for analysing and addressing racism during the pandemic.

1.3.7. Racial trauma

Racial trauma refers to the cumulative impact of racially motivated traumatic experiences, which can have long-lasting effects on both physical and mental health (Cénat, 2023; Alvarez et al., 2016). This trauma often leads to internalised racism, where individuals from marginalised racial groups begin to adopt and internalise the oppressive beliefs and attitudes of the dominant culture (Bivens, & Potapchuk, 2005). Such internalisation reinforces systems of oppression and privilege, while also undermining resilience and psychological wellbeing (David et al., 2019). According to the race-based traumatic stress theory (Carter, 2007), racial discrimination acts as a significant stressor, similar to post-traumatic stress, with profound negative impacts on the wellbeing and coping mechanisms of those who experience it. Recent studies, such as Zhou et al. (2022), have applied the racial trauma framework to explore the effects of COVID-19-related racism, revealing elevated levels of post-traumatic stress symptoms among people of colour, including Asians, compared to their White counterparts. These findings highlight the pervasive and damaging effects of racial trauma in the context of both everyday discrimination and global crises.

1.4. COVID-19 context, global and political impacts

The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified existing racial disparities and catalysed two significant racial justice movements, notably the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 and

Stop Asian Hate in 2021. These movements have drawn widespread attention to systemic racism (Fan, 2022), promoting solidarity in advocating for racial justice causes (Addo, 2020; Elias, 2020). Ethnic minority communities, particularly Black, Latinx, and Asian groups, have faced heightened discrimination and hate incidents during the pandemic, reflecting entrenched racial disparities. Research in the UK has highlighted the disproportionate impact on minority groups, with reports indicating increased fines and discrimination compared to White counterparts (Gray, & Hansen, 2021; Busby, & Gidda, 2020). Asians, in particular, have been subjected to pervasive stigmatisation globally throughout the pandemic (Inman et al., 2021; Miconi et al., 2021; Pan et al., 2021b; Wong-Padoongpatt et al., 2022).

Political dynamics have played a significant role in shaping responses to racial discrimination during the pandemic, particularly in the United States. Studies have shown a correlation between support for the Republican Party and anti-Asian discrimination, with Republican legislators demonstrating less concern or engagement in addressing COVID-related discrimination compared to their Democratic counterparts (Abascal et al., 2023; Arora, & Kim, 2020; Lantz, & Wenger 2023). Former President Donald Trump's rhetoric has been linked to an escalation of anti-Asian prejudice, highlighting the influence of political leadership on societal attitudes (Gutierrez et al., 2022; Le et al., 2020; Reny, & Barreto, 2020), and signifying entrenched cultural and political attitudes toward foreigners (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; He, & Xie, 2022; Kim, & Tummala-Narra, 2022; Louie-Poon et al., 2022; McGarity-Palmer et al., 2023). Notably, past U.S immigration laws such as *The Chinese Exclusion Act 1882* have been referenced to have influenced perceptions of Chinese in the U.S as outsiders (Le et al., 2020; Sabharwal et al., 2022), and intensified the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype. Gao (2022) also documented instances where political commentators used COVID-19 to scrutinise and criticise aspects of Chinese culture.

The politicisation of immigration and border control in the UK, notably exemplified by the 2016 Brexit referendum has contributed to steady rises in xenophobic attitudes and

discrimination against ethnic minorities (Abranches et al., 2020; Achiume, 2018; Virdee, & McGeever, 2018). This has resulted in widespread racism, revealing and amplifying existing discrimination among ethnic minorities in Britain (Booth, 2019). These patterns align with UK crime statistics, indicating a consistent rise in racially motivated hate crimes annually from 2016 to 2018 (Home Office, 2018). Hate crimes towards ethnically Chinese individuals also surged dramatically during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Reported incidents in London increased by over 11 times during the three-month period following the virus outbreak in 2020, compared to the same period in 2019 (Metropolitan Police, 2021). These alarming trends were not isolated to London, but were pervasive across the nation and over an extended duration. UK police records indicated a sustained increase ranging from 70% to 100% in racial hate crimes against East Asians for the ten months following February 2020 (Carr et al., 2022).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Asian individuals were recorded to have encountered pervasive racial stigmatisation across 173 countries (Dye et al., 2020), reporting significant global shifts toward more negative societal sentiments (Ng, 2021). Globally, incidents of anti-Asian racism during COVID-19 have been extensively documented revealing widespread shifts in attitudes (Nguyen et al., 2020), some including: Australia (Ballantyne, & Giarrusso, 2023; Ke et al., 2023; Tan et al., 2021), New Zealand (Jaung, 2022), Chile (Chan, & Montt Strabucchi, 2021), Canada (Lei, & Guo, 2022; Lou et al., 2023; L. Yang et al., 2022), China (Lin et al., 2021; Gu et al., 2022; C. Wang et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2021), Germany (Scholaske, 2022; Koller et al., 2021), Indonesia (Prawira et al., 2023), Mexico (Sanchez-Rivera, 2020), the Netherlands (Ming, & De Jong, 2021), and the United States (C. Kim et al., 2023; Karandikar et al., 2023; Lim et al., 2023). These accounts emphasise the far-reaching global impact of COVID-related anti-Asian racism, and the clear need to have conducted research in this topic across the world.

1.4.1. Health impacts

The coronavirus disease, impacting over 775 million people globally has resulted in a staggering toll of over seven million deaths (WHO, 2024a). Despite its pervasive reach across 229 countries and territories, research consistently highlights the disproportionate physical impact of the virus on ethnic minorities, with reports indicating heightened risks of infection, hospitalisation, and mortality among Black, Asian, and other ethnic minority populations compared to White counterparts (Aldridge et al., 2020; Farquharson, & Thornton, 2020; Kirby, 2020; Zhou et al., 2022). Public Health England (2020) revealed ethnic minority groups faced more than four times greater risk of mortality from COVID-19 compared to British White individuals. Additionally, evidence suggests that both biological and social risk factors contributed to the heightened vulnerability of ethnic minority communities contracting the virus (Phiri et al., 2021). Understanding these disparities further demands recognition of the pervasive influence of systemic racism in shaping access to healthcare and socioeconomic conditions.

The impact of COVID-19-related racial discrimination on the health of Asians has been extensively investigated and is consistently documented to be correlated with a myriad of adverse effects (Ho, & Çabuk, 2023). These include reduced life satisfaction and self-esteem (Bresnahan et al., 2023; J. Chen et al., 2020; Litam, & Oh, 2022), heightened levels of mental distress (Y. Liu et al., 2020; Gover et al., 2020), increased sleeping difficulties (Lee, & Waters, 2021), anxiety, depression (Cheah et al., 2021; Y. Chen et al., 2021; Ermis-Demirtas et al., 2022; J. Huynh et al., 2023), and suicidal ideation (Lozano et al., 2022; Prawira et al., 2023).

Additionally, physical symptoms such as headaches, fatigue (Litam, 2020; Ong et al., 2022), and decreased work performance (Ho, & Çabuk, 2023; Huang, & Tsai, 2023) have been reported. Notably, even non-direct manifestations of racism, including COVID-related collective racism experienced by the Asian community, were linked to detrimental effects on

both mental and physical health at the individual level (McGarity-Palmer et al., 2023). Understanding these impacts is crucial for comprehending the enduring effects of chronic stress on the wellbeing of both individuals and communities, extending far beyond the initial spread of the virus.

1.5. The role of the media

An ‘infodemic’ has been defined as an overflow of both accurate and inaccurate information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak, which is noted to provoke confusion and promote distrust in health authorities (WHO, 2020b, 2024b). The COVID-19 infodemic posed significant challenges with regard to conflicting information, which was further exacerbated by social media and internet use spreading harmful messages about Asian and Chinese ethnic groups (WHO, 2020a). Misinformation surrounding COVID-19 has been linked to compromised social distancing, mental health strain, and increased hate crimes towards Asians (Bell et al., 2021).

The media has emerged as a pivotal influencer in shaping the negative portrayal of China and individuals from the Chinese ethnic group during the COVID-19 pandemic. Biased media coverage has been implicated in fostering racial prejudice and stigmatisation against Asians throughout this period (Cho et al., 2021). Globally, media outlets have been observed to depict China as a threat (Ittefaq et al., 2022; Kimura, 2021), assign blame to individuals of Chinese ethnicity for the virus (Kania, 2022; H. Lu et al., 2021), vilify China's response to the pandemic (Zhang, & Xu, 2020), and sensationalise the consumption of exotic animals as unhygienic or barbaric (Kania, 2022; Pietrzak-Franger et al., 2022; Wang, & Santos, 2022b). Furthermore, media reports have been noted to propagate themes opposing Asian immigration and fostering heightened negative sentiments toward Asian communities (Santia et al., 2022).

Contrastingly, mainstream newspapers in the UK, U.S, and China have been identified as platforms for disseminating content aimed at combating racism against individuals of Chinese ethnicity during the pandemic (Ittefaq et al., 2022). Similarly, analyses of news articles in Canada revealed a surge in activism against anti-Asian racism throughout the pandemic (MacNab, 2021). However, heightened media consumption in the U.S has been significantly linked to an increased perception of threat, greater intentions to perpetrate attacks, and a decreased inclination to assist individuals of Chinese ethnicity (Ma, & Ma, 2023). These studies indicate the powerful influence of media consumption in shaping widespread public attitudes and behaviours during crisis situations, and highlights the critical importance of considering media narratives for mitigating prejudice and discrimination.

1.5.1. Social media and hate speech

Several studies have investigated the complex relationship between social media, COVID-19-related racism, and its repercussions. Since the pandemic's onset, there has been a surge in hateful online discourse targeting Asians and Chinese individuals, exacerbating racial stigmatisation and anti-Asian sentiment (Costello et al., 2021; He et al., 2020; Hswen et al., 2021, 2022; Kumble, & Diddi, 2021; Lloret-Pineda et al., 2022; Willnat et al., 2023). Adolescents in the U.S reported a significant increase in cyberbullying since the start of the pandemic, with Asian adolescents experiencing a threefold rise in discrimination during COVID-19 compared to the previous year (Patchin, & Hinduja, 2023).

Language use in online forums has been a central focus for understanding social interactions and hate speech during the pandemic. Quantitative analyses of social media platforms have revealed strong associations between COVID-19, Asians, and hate speech (Dubey, 2020; Hohl et al., 2022; Jin, & Tay, 2023; Pei, & Mehta, 2022; Shimizu, 2020; Sylvia Chou, & Gaysynsky, 2021; Toliyat et al., 2022). Exposure to COVID-19-related social media use and online discrimination has also been linked to various adverse mental health

outcomes, including depression (Pan et al., 2021a), lack of belonging (Kamp et al., 2022), diminished life satisfaction, and anxiety among Asians (Shin et al., 2023; N. Yu et al., 2020). Notably, online racism was associated with poorer mental health outcomes than offline racism during the pandemic (Lu, & Wang, 2022). It is important to recognise, however, that correlation does not equal causation, and there is a need for qualitative accounts to provide valuable insights in these cases.

A study by Sakki and Castrén, (2022) employed a critical discursive approach to identify themes of depersonalisation and dehumanisation through association of Chinese individuals with terms such as "monstrous," "threat," and "immoral". Twitter discourse surrounding keywords like "Chinese," "China," "Asians," and "virus" exhibited similar stigmatising, negative connotations from 2020 to 2021 (Costello et al., 2021). Similarly, inductive thematic analyses of social media comments identified themes of othering and depersonalisation related to Chinese food, nationalism, religion and gender (Desmarais et al., 2023).

Fan and colleagues (2020) quantitatively analysed over 3.4 million tweets on Twitter in 2020, discovering over 25,000 instances of hate speech. Anti-Asian sentiments were also scrutinised by Hswen et al. (2021) in tweets before and after Donald Trump's use of the phrase "Chinese Virus" in March 2020. Analysis of over 1 million hashtags revealed that anti-Asian sentiment surged in the week following the use of this hashtag, with over 50% of analysed posts that contained "#Chinesevirus" also containing anti-Asian messages. These findings corroborate research by Budhwani and Sun (2020), who found Twitter to have perpetuated COVID-19 prejudice, noting an increase in stigmatising tweets in all 50 U.S states.

Correlations between online and offline behaviours have been recognised, with higher numbers of hateful online posts originating from cities with higher levels of reported hate crimes against Asians (B. Kim et al., 2022). Real-world experiences of racism have been

associated with reduced emotional responses in individuals who frequently encountered online media racism during the pandemic (Chiang et al., 2023). Moreover, it has been suggested that individuals who engaged in online activism against racism may have been spurred by social media use to engage in further offline activism (Y. Lee et al., 2022). Yet amidst adversities, online platforms have emerged as vital spaces for Asian communities to unite, share experiences, and promote supportive online environments (Abidin, & Zeng, 2020; Jacques et al., 2023; Lloret-Pineda et al., 2022; Wang, & Catalano, 2023). These results are in line with Resilience Theory (Garmezy, 1991), outlining how positive factors can mitigate and shield against the adverse impacts of risks (Tong et al., 2022; Masten, & Reed, 2002).

These studies have emphasised the impact of social media on shaping attitudes, behaviours, and mental health outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic. The escalation of online discrimination and hate speech targeting Asians fuelled online hate, racial stigma, and exacerbated mental health challenges. The correlation between online and offline behaviours further highlights the interconnectedness of virtual and real-world experiences of racism. Amidst these adversities however, online platforms have also emerged as vital spaces for Asian communities to immerse in supportive environments.

1.6. Bystanders and vicarious discrimination

The role of bystanders in hate crimes has been extensively studied, revealing their significant impact on victims' experiences. On one hand, bystander non-involvement has been documented to be perceived as complicity in discrimination (Keel et al., 2022), while bystander involvement to offer aid or intervene can be interpreted as an expression of solidarity. Research suggests that bystander intervention in confronting COVID-19 stigma and discrimination is associated with a reduction in online public expressions of racism (Ho et al., 2020).

Investigations into the impact of COVID-related anti-Asian discrimination on bystanders consistently reveals detrimental effects on psychological wellbeing. Studies by Hahm et al. (2021) and Macaranas et al. (2023) indicate that vicarious COVID discrimination led to heightened psychological distress. This distress may manifest through increased depression, anxiety (Chae et al., 2021; T. Liu et al., 2022), or disruptions in sleep quality (Dhanani et al., 2022; Yip et al., 2024). Asian Americans who observed racism directed towards their ethnic community during the pandemic reported heightened levels of race-based stress symptoms, even after controlling for direct encounters with discrimination (Eltohamy et al., 2023). Additionally, research suggests that instances of vicarious discrimination are significantly associated with distress, irrespective of whether the observer shares the same racial identity as the victim (Gies et al., 2023; Hamilton-Moseley et al., 2023).

1.7. Intersectionality

Research has been conducted into the intersection of pandemic-related discrimination with various social identities such as gender (Ang et al., 2023; Gao, & Sai, 2021; P. Wang, 2021), age (Liang et al., 2022; Ramirez et al., 2022; Robinson-Lane et al., 2022; Q. Wang et al., 2021; Wong, & Wing, 2023), class (Watson et al. 2020), and sexual orientation (Riggle et al., 2021), revealing the deepening of pre-existing social inequalities and systemic discrimination.

For instance, Wong and Wing (2023) investigated the intersectionality of gender, age, and race among U.S Chinese immigrant women, revealing a transition from subtle to overt discrimination amid the pandemic. There were increased evident instances of hate, microaggressions, and heightened concerns for physical safety during, rather than prior to the pandemic. Internalised racism was also found to be more prevalent among older

Chinese immigrants. Ang et al. (2023) analysed data from 20 Asian women residing in Australia during COVID-19, revealing participants had felt a distinct lack of attention for gender discrimination due to their experiences of racial discrimination, leading to challenges in making sense of these encounters. Personal narratives from Gao and Sai (2020) further accentuate the intersectional gender inequalities faced by Chinese women in the UK.

Ageism and racism against individuals of Chinese ethnicity also intensified during COVID-19, impacting factors such as immigration status and family roles (Q. Wang et al., 2021). Liang et al. (2022) explored the discriminatory experiences of older U.S Chinese immigrants throughout the pandemic, finding that participants adopted disengagement coping strategies to manage negative psychological impacts, including avoidance behaviours, rationalisation, and reduced social involvement. Similarly, Robinson-Lane et al. (2022) revealed disparities in the quality and duration of care received by older ethnic minority adults compared to their White counterparts during the COVID-19 period.

Riggle et al. (2021) employed a descriptive phenomenological approach to examine the perspectives of ethnic minority, non-heterosexual women to understand their experiences during the pandemic. Participants reported changes in their life perspectives following the pandemic, with many expressing a sense of disconnection from the LGBTQ community, attributing lockdown isolation as more challenging due to the community's closeness. Ethnic minority participants reported heightened social awareness regarding race, and narratives identifying inequalities between White and ethnic minority experiences of the pandemic. The intersectionality of pandemic-related discrimination with various social identities features an exacerbation of deep-rooted disparities by COVID-19. From shifts in discriminatory experiences among immigrant women, to disparities in healthcare and social support for older ethnic minorities, the pandemic has noticeably magnified pre-existing inequalities across multiple dimensions.

The COVID-19 pandemic also exacerbated challenges between class and race, posing a significant threat to the wellbeing of working-class people of colour, by heightening their vulnerability during crises (Watson et al., 2020). Systemic barriers are identified to perpetuate an inability to cope with such disasters, and communities of colour are reported to face higher risks of poor health, unequal health outcomes and mortality rates (Watson et al., 2020). There is also recognition of the additional obstacles for those on lower incomes in accessing health care needs, such as inadequate access to transportation (Waite et al., 2020), which further perpetuates existing inequalities.

1.8. Sense of belonging in COVID-19 times

The experiences of Asian communities, international students, immigrants, and adoptees offer valuable insights into the dynamics of belonging amidst the COVID-19 pandemic across familial, community, and societal levels. An overview of the literature in these areas follows.

1.8.1. Impact on and within communities

Discrimination against Asians, including East and Southeast Asian minority groups frequently misidentified as Chinese, has been extensively documented (Yeh, 2020). This widespread misidentification has led to a generalisation of prejudice and stereotyping against minority Asian ethnicities, often collectively grouped and blamed for the global health crisis (Gies et al., 2023; Gray, & Hansen, 2021). Such responses have even resulted in instances of intra-racial discrimination among minority Asian groups and public assertions of differences (S. Choi, 2021). Consequently, numerous articles have highlighted the need for the disaggregation of Asian subgroups to better recognise the diverse impacts of COVID-19 on specific groups within the broader Asian community (Jin et al., 2023; Okazaki et al., 2022).

Studies have documented the importance of community organisations and networks in providing resources, solidarity, and a sense of belonging amidst increased discrimination and social isolation (Nguyen et al., 2020). Yet, Asian American communities have encountered sociocultural barriers that hinder their adherence to protective COVID-19 measures, including language proficiency, distrust of governmental and health authorities, fear, social stigma and exposure to misinformation (J. Cheng et al., 2022). Notably, individuals residing in small Asian communities, defined as those with less than 5.7% Asian population, have reported higher incidences of COVID-related racial discrimination compared to regions with a larger Asian population in the United States (M. Kim et al., 2022).

The act of wearing facemasks early in the pandemic became stigmatised as it was frequently perceived as suspicious or criminal, perpetuating division and 'othering' (Ma, & Zhan, 2022). This has been closely associated with Asian and Chinese communities (Choi, & Lee, 2021). However, Mamuji et al. (2021) identified mask-wearing to be among the earliest proactive initiatives undertaken by the Chinese diaspora community in Toronto, contributing significantly to the management of the virus spread and protection of the wider society.

Interestingly, while COVID-19 initially brought Asian communities together, there are indications of within-community discrimination that emerged as well. Asian individuals diagnosed with COVID-19 reported facing discrimination from Asian friends and family members within their social circles, possibly driven by concerns about reinforcing external stereotypes of Asians as virus carriers (W. Chen et al., 2022; Viladrich, 2021).

1.8.2. Asian international students

The experiences of Asian international students living abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic have been well studied, particularly in North America (e.g., Bresnahan et al., 2023; Catungal, & Tungohan, 2021; Teng et al., 2023; J. Yu, 2022), and Western Europe, such as Portugal (França et al., 2022). Research has demonstrated increased discrimination faced by Asian international students and links to the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype to have increased internalised racism (H. Cheng et al., 2022). Increased anxiety and fear have also been associated with reluctance to seek psychological support (Haft, & Zhou, 2021).

Experiences of Asian international students in the U.S have been examined with varied findings. Hwang et al. (2024) used a descriptive phenomenological approach, finding positive pandemic experiences served as coping mechanisms, leading to shifts in self-perception. Similarly, Gibson et al. (2023) reported that Chinese international students experienced shifts in identity, internalised racism, and increased advocacy and empowerment in response to pandemic challenges. Dong et al. (2023) used a thematic analysis to identify isolation, lack of belonging, and safety concerns. Concerns relating to immigration status were also reported in a number of studies (Anandavalli et al.,2020; Koo et al., 2023; Williams et al., 2023). It is important to recognise that international student experiences rely on various factors, such as the duration of stay, size of the institution, resources, location, and the network of fellow Asian international students. These variables may account for some of the variation in findings.

1.8.3. Asian immigrants

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Asian immigrants of Western countries reported a heightened sense of discrimination, resulting in feelings of alienation and fear (Stolte et al., 2022). Instances of increased hostility, racism, xenophobia and discrimination have been well documented compared to the pre-pandemic period, contributing to elevated levels of hypervigilance, stress and anxiety (Sims et al., 2022; Stolte et al., 2022). Research on Asian

immigrant groups have explored how cultural and linguistic barriers intersect with experiences of discrimination, shaping individuals' sense of belonging within their communities (Yen et al., 2021).

Research conducted by S. Wang et al. (2021) examined the impact of migratory status, nationality, and age on experiences of COVID-19-related racism among French Chinese citizens and migrants. Their analysis revealed variations in the perceived extent and intensity of racism based on respondents' birthplace and citizenship status. Significant denial of racism was indicated in Chinese migrants that had lived in France for a long period, whereas young skilled migrants acknowledged considerable racism during this period. Newbold et al. (2022) also examined differences between Asian Canadian immigrants and Canadian-born Asians. Their findings indicated that immigrants were twice as likely as Canadian-born Asians to fear racism during the pandemic. Both studies accentuate the importance of immigration status, citizenship, and experience of living in another country upon the perception of discrimination within Western countries.

1.8.4. Family units

Exploring COVID-related racism's impact on identity negotiation, sense of belonging, and family relationships has been a key focus. Studies on Chinese adoptees in U.S families reveal shifts in identity and belonging. Wing and Park-Taylor (2022) used phenomenological analysis to examine Chinese adults born in China and raised by White U.S families. They found changes in perceptions of physical and psychological safety, fears of judgment, and a lack of belonging. Adoptees experienced a societal shift from being seen as the "model minority" to a racial threat, facing challenges navigating racial discrimination and cultural heritage. This led to a heightened sense of perpetual foreignness and deep reflections on belonging, adoption, and birth parents, with some detaching from their Chinese identities.

The study was limited by its all-female sample though, excluding intersectional experiences involving other identities.

Asian individuals, including international students, immigrants, and families, have faced complex interactions of discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic. The literature evidences how Asians were often collectively blamed for the pandemic, leading to intra-racial discrimination and stigma. Despite community support, barriers like language proficiency and distrust were found to impact adherence to protective measures, especially in smaller Asian communities. Asian international students experienced heightened discrimination and internalised racism, affecting mental health. Experiences for Asian immigrants varied depending on factors such as immigration status and nationality. Overall, there is a clear and intricate relationship between discrimination, belonging and identity among Asian communities during the pandemic.

1.9. Responses to COVID-19 racism

Research on coping strategies in response to COVID-19-related racism has yielded diverse findings. Some studies, such as Oh et al. (2023), have reported positive adaptations to stress, including enhanced relationships and deeper perspectives on life. However, contrasting results have emerged, indicating that coping with racism-based stress during the pandemic have exacerbated mental health challenges (Edara, 2020; Nie, 2023; Yan et al., 2022). For instance, Keum and Choi (2022) found depressive symptoms relating to COVID racism were associated with increased alcohol-related coping among adolescents. Additionally, lower levels of social support during COVID have been linked to heightened anxiety and depression (Y. Li et al., 2022), particularly when individuals had difficulties communicating the impact of discriminatory experiences to others (Woo, & Jun, 2021).

In exploring race-based stress during the pandemic, J. Yang et al. (2022) identified several themes, including the portrayal of Chinese cultural practices as abnormal, feelings of alienation among Asian diaspora living in Western countries, and the invalidation of inter-ethnic Asian differences. The study further highlighted the perception that ‘all Asians’ were blameworthy or infected with the virus, and the dichotomy of Asian healthcare workers being viewed as both heroes and virus carriers.

Ponder et al. (2023) examined coping strategies during the pandemic through a focus group with 17 Asian Americans. They found that some individuals strengthened their coping mechanisms, such as reading, exercising, self-reflecting, and meditating, while others resorted to unhealthy habits like overeating and excessive television watching. Notably, younger participants identified therapy as essential for managing isolation, mental wellbeing, and other pandemic-related stressors. Similarly, Wang and Santos (2022a) qualitatively examined the social support experiences of 193 Asian Americans following COVID-19-related racism. Their findings revealed harmful responses to anti-Asian racism that varied by race: White peers often denied or couldn't relate, while victim-blaming occurred among both White and non-Asian people of colour. Additionally, Asian peers tended to encourage silence and minimisation of racial encounters. These findings indicate that while responses varied across races, they were generally unhelpful or damaging to Asian victims.

While some studies have demonstrated positive adaptations and resilience to COVID-related stress, others have highlighted increased difficulties in connecting with others. Asian and Chinese communities have faced discrimination within their social circles, from other ethnic minority groups, and from broader society. Research on support following discrimination has often combined various sources into one category, limiting detailed understandings of individual responses (Wang, & Santos, 2022a). Studies have emphasised the overall importance of social support systems, including therapy, as crucial resources for managing

pandemic-related stress. These insights accentuate the need to understand the pandemic's impact on the wellbeing of Asian individuals affected by COVID-19-related discrimination.

1.10. Qualitative accounts of British experiences

Several qualitative studies have examined the lived experiences of British ethnic minorities during the COVID-19 pandemic, primarily recruiting Black and Black-White mixed participants (e.g., Burgess et al., 2022; Lee, & Wong, 2024; Lenoir, & Wong, 2023). Mahmood et al. (2021) explored COVID-19's impact on British community leaders from Black, Asian, and other minority ethnic groups (BAME) using phenomenological analysis. However, the study's lack of East Asian participants—who were among the most targeted and impacted during the pandemic (Strassle et al., 2022)—limits its insights. Additionally, the broad racial classifications used weakens the findings, as Mahmood et al. revealed significant variations in pandemic experiences among different ethnicities grouped under BAME. While these studies provide valuable insights into the challenges faced by broad racial minority groups during COVID-19, they do not focus on the experiences of the single, targeted ethnic group that was held responsible for the virus (Choi et al., 2023), as this study aims to do.

This literature review highlights a significant gap in qualitative research focusing on British Chinese individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic. Only two studies have addressed this topic: Yen et al. (2021) explored Chinese migrants' experiences during lockdowns using thematic analysis, revealing a paradox where coping strategies provoked hostility from the host community. Similarly, Al-Talib et al. (2023) conducted a thematic analysis on the experiences of COVID-19 racism among 16 British Chinese individuals, identifying themes around assignment of blame for the pandemic, and intensifying hostility towards the Chinese community. Despite these insights, there is a clear need for more in-depth, qualitative studies that exclusively examine the experiences of British Chinese individuals. Notably, no

phenomenological approaches have been employed to capture the nuanced, lived experiences of this group. The proposed study aims to fill this critical gap by using a phenomenological approach to provide a deeper understanding of the unique challenges faced by British Chinese individuals during the pandemic, thereby addressing an urgent need in the existing literature.

1.11. The current study

1.11.1. Rationale

This literature review highlights the global pervasiveness and enduring impact of racism against Asians and Chinese individuals, demonstrating significant mental and physical health repercussions. The necessity to address these deeply entrenched issues is underscored by their lasting effects on individual welfare and community resilience worldwide. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, British Chinese individuals faced unique challenges exacerbated by widespread racial discrimination, stigmatisation, and blame. This period, spanning from 2020 to 2023 and continuing to have lasting impacts, fundamentally altered perceptions and interactions with these communities, intensifying existing racial inequities.

The literature reveals that negative connotations and stereotypes of Asian and Chinese people persisted long after the initial association with the SARS-CoV-2 virus outbreak in 2020. Living with these entrenched negative perceptions has had profound implications. Consequently, there is a critical need to comprehend the lived experiences of British Chinese individuals during this period to inform interventions aimed at addressing and mitigating the adverse effects of racial discrimination. This study seeks to fill this gap, providing essential insights into the unique challenges faced by this community and contributing to the development of effective support strategies.

Aspinall (2020) posited that the tendency to group ethnic minorities in Britain together can oversimplify and homogenise people from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, rather than acknowledging and honouring their individual identities. Consequently, while there is considerable research on racism experienced by Black, Asian, and minority ethnic groups collectively, the findings may lack specificity and applicability to individual ethnic groups. Specifically, there has been a tendency to categorise Chinese individuals within the broader racial classification of Asian. While this categorisation may seem logical given the extension of racism from Chinese to other Asian ethnic groups, it is essential to recognise and appreciate the rich diversity across the 48 countries of Asia. Failing to do so risks implying that all Asian experiences are the same, thereby disregarding the unique complexities of each ethnic group (Flores, & Huo, 2012). In addition, it has been noted that while many other Asian ethnicities also encountered COVID-related discrimination, it often resulted from misidentification (J. Huang et al., 2023).

There is a critical need for new qualitative research to explore the lived experiences of Chinese individuals during the pandemic in the UK, addressing a significant gap in the literature. The current research aims to highlight the specific experiences of an ethnic group often overlooked due to its inclusion within a broader racial category, and amidst a staggering and prolonged rise in racism directed towards the British Chinese community. Combining insights from this exploration would not only enrich the existing literature but also offer valuable contributions towards understanding and addressing COVID-related racism and its effects within the UK context.

While numerous studies have examined COVID-racism in the United States, the focus has predominantly centred on Asian Americans within the socio-economic and political context of the U.S. This focus has often been framed within the context of the Republican political party's stance or cultural attitudes towards foreigners, shaped by societal perceptions and

historical immigration laws. Additionally, existing qualitative inquiries have mainly captured experiential accounts during the early stages of the pandemic, indicating the need for a more comprehensive exploration spanning across the COVID-19 period.

Conducting research within the UK context offers a unique opportunity to unravel the socio-cultural dynamics and systemic factors influencing experiences of racism among British Chinese individuals. By situating these experiences within the broader societal landscape, the current study aims to generate findings that not only contribute to understanding the impacts but also challenge discriminatory attitudes and encourage social justice efforts for British Chinese individuals and communities. Consequently, undertaking an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis on COVID-racism in the UK is crucial for advancing our understanding of this intricate phenomenon, which has had unprecedented impacts on hundreds of thousands of British Chinese individuals over the last four years.

1.11.2. Application to counselling psychology

Research on racism in varying contexts holds significant implications for the field of counselling psychology. Not only by contributing to a deeper comprehension of mental health impacts and informing the exploration of coping mechanisms, but also by supporting advocacy for social justice and inclusion (The British Psychological Society [BPS], 2021a; American Psychological Association [APA], 2019).

Racial discrimination is extensively documented as having profound effects on both physical and psychological wellbeing. Studies have consistently highlighted its association with heightened levels of stress, depression, and anxiety (Gee et al., 2007), as well as trauma-related symptoms (Harrell et al., 2003; Pieterse et al., 2012), psychotic experiences (Oh et al., 2014), and risks of various physical conditions including cardiovascular diseases, cancer, diabetes (Lewis et al., 2015), and increased vulnerability to mental disorders (Wallace et al.,

2016). The COVID-19 pandemic, with its unparalleled scale and impact, presents a novel context for examining racial experiences, thereby offering valuable insights into the unique challenges and stressors faced by individuals during this period. This in turn can inform interventions aimed at supporting mental wellbeing (Kamp Dush et al., 2022), and mitigating adverse effects (Misra et al., 2020).

Moreover, psychologists bear a responsibility to champion social justice (BPS, 2021a), and are responsible for conducting and disseminating research that advances the welfare of racial and ethnic minorities (APA, 2019). Core ethical principles outlined by both the BPS (2021a, 2021b) and APA (2019) emphasise the importance of social justice, diversity, and inclusion, emphasising the need to establish trust, promote justice, and uphold individuals' rights and dignity. APA's "*guidelines on race and ethnicity in psychology"* (2019) advocates for the cultivation of racial and ethnocultural responsiveness in psychological practice, emphasising the value of culturally informed research on underrepresented racial and ethnic groups.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the BPS issued additional guidance for its members, highlighting the significance and urgency of addressing the needs of marginalised communities. This is evidenced in documents such as "*Considerations for people from minority groups in the COVID-19 pandemic"* (2020a) and "*Racial and social inequalities: Taking the conversations forward"* (2020b). Furthermore, Meyer and Young (2021) have published "*Best practice recommendations for psychologists working with marginalized populations impacted by COVID-19"*, urging a focus on developing deeper understandings of racial trauma impacting minorities during this time.

Recent guidance for clinical and counselling psychologists also encourages the consideration of racial and ethnic distress in formulating and working with impacted individuals. The Power Threat Meaning Framework (Johnstone, & Boyle, 2018) is a

psychological model for identifying and understanding patterns of emotional distress by considering societal contexts including power imbalances, social inequalities, and cultural norms. It highlights racism as a significant source of distress, influencing individuals' identities, power and meaning. This accentuates the importance of racial trauma within counselling psychology, and the current applications for understanding these impacts.

Considering all aspects of this literature review, exploring COVID-related racism is crucial for understanding the unique societal interactions in the UK that led to widespread emotional distress among British Chinese individuals during this period. This research is highly relevant to the field of counselling psychology and addresses a notable gap in the literature. Further, the timing of this research project presents an invaluable opportunity to explore this phenomenon in depth.

1.11.3. Research question

How have British Chinese individuals experienced racism during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK?

2. METHODOLOGY

This chapter will present the methodology used to conduct the current research. Firstly, the aims and research question are stated, followed by the rationales for employing a qualitative, and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. An overview of theoretical foundations, including the phenomenological, hermeneutic, and idiographic positions adopted by the researcher are included, and an exploration of the ontological and epistemological positionings ensue. This is followed by an exploration of the researcher's reflexivity, examination of validity and quality measures, and descriptions of the data collection and analysis procedures. Lastly, ethical considerations are addressed.

2.1. Research aims

The aims of the current study are to better understand the lived experiences of COVID-19-related racism towards British Chinese individuals in the UK, by exploring how individuals have experienced and made sense of racial discrimination following the outbreak of COVID-19 in March 2020.

2.2. Rationale for a qualitative perspective

Qualitative research attempts to interpret and make sense of "phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them," (Denzin, & Lincoln, 1994, p.2) and can provide a detailed frame of reference of an individual's unique perception (Madill, & Gough, 2016). Qualitative perspectives are valuable for inferring meanings formed though racial encounters, thereby allowing access to the "multiple truths operating around race and racism" (Quraishi, & Philburn, 2015, p.65). Moreover, it has been noted that a significant and highly valued component of research into racism explores the relationship between race, subjectivity and

'lived experience,' which can only be achieved using a qualitative method (Gunaratnam, 2003).

The research question is imperative in informing the choice of methodology, as it reflects the type of data being sought and the intentions of the research (Willig, 2022). The current study's research question aims to explore 'what it is like' to have experienced the phenomenon of racism during the COVID-19 pandemic by asking *how* British Chinese individuals have experienced this. A qualitative methodology is therefore the most suitable approach for generating the type of knowledge required to answer this question and meet the study's aims of exploring the subjective meaning, sense-making, and interpretations of these lived experiences.

Qualitative approaches can provide detailed and in-depth understandings into an issue, and empower participants by giving them a voice (Brookman-Byrne, 2020). In recent years both the APA and BPS have identified the increasing need and importance of qualitative psychological research into racism. The APA's "*2023 Trends Report"* recognises a demand for research questions that "consider historically marginalized groups and the entire human experience," by using qualitative approaches to discover unheard experiences and constructs (Santoro, 2023, p.49). Furthermore, it has been indicated that quantitative methods may even be potentially harmful to marginalised populations by limiting the opportunity to explore their perspectives (Arellano, 2022). Similarly, in more recent years the BPS have also advocated for qualitative research methods to help challenge prevalent and damaging views held on racial differences by opening a discourse into how race is perceived, understood and experienced as more than simply a means of categorisation (Goodman, 2015).

A mixed methods approach could also offer benefits by integrating the depth of qualitative data with the breadth of quantitative data, providing a more comprehensive understanding of

the phenomenon (Creswell, & Plano Clark, 2018). While qualitative research offers deep insights, its findings are often limited in generalisability. A mixed methods approach could address this by capturing data from a larger sample, making the results more broadly applicable to the British Chinese population (Tashakkori, & Teddlie, 2010). Yet in studies around race and racism, the rich, nuanced nature of qualitative data might be diluted by combining this with quantitative findings, potentially skewing the understanding of lived experiences (Johnson, & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Ultimately, the choice to adopt a purely qualitative approach was driven by the research aims and prioritisation to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

2.3. Rationale for Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study aims to gain insight into a particular phenomenon by examining individuals' lived experiences and how they have made sense of what they have experienced. IPA research is concerned with examining and capturing a detailed understanding of how people interpret major life experiences and the significance of these lived occurrences (J. Smith et al., 2022). It has been identified as a methodology that is especially useful for exploring topics that are "complex, ambiguous and emotionally laden," (Smith, & Osborn, 2015, p1.). IPA requires an exploratory research focus on particular people in a particular context, and of a matter that is important to them (Larkin, & Thompson, 2012). These aims are applicable to the objectives of the current study: to examine a significant and meaningful life experience – incident(s) of racial discrimination; in a particular group of individuals – British Chinese people; and in a particular context – the COVID-19 global pandemic, in the UK.

A number of other qualitative methods were considered for this study before determining IPA as the most suitable. Grounded theory (Glaser, & Strauss, 1967) was considered on the basis it prizes interpretation of individuals' experiences of a particular phenomenon and

categorises these on meaning. Grounded theory studies are interested in the generation and development of theory and theoretical frameworks, and as such are often used for examining social processes (Willig, 2022). This application focuses on theory development grounded in the data collected, rather than imposing preconceived theoretical frameworks onto the data. Therefore, application of grounded theory may generate theories or explanations emerging from participants' experiences (Glaser, & Strauss, 1967). Thus, this approach may have facilitated a more contextual understanding of racism experienced by British Chinese individuals during the pandemic by considering the sociocultural, historical, and political context in which the experiences occurred, and the underlying factors contributing to the social issue of racism.

However, it has been suggested by Willig (2022) that research questions that aim to explore the nature of experience do not necessarily result in an explanation or generation of a theory in the way that grounded theory might expect. It also seems that an explanatory, theory-seeking framework such as grounded theory would not the best suited approach for answering the current study's research question of *how it has felt* to experience the lived phenomenon. Employing a grounded theory approach might instead offer a 'mapping' of the social process of racism in the context of the pandemic; highlighting consequences and generating potential causes, rather than focusing on participants' internal worlds (Willig, 2022). While this may offer valuable insights, it is not the aim of the current research to attain such an outcome.

Discourse analysis, including discursive psychology and Foucauldian discourse analysis were also considered. Discourse analysis focuses on the exploration of language usage as a means of constructing and understanding individuals' social realities (Willig, 2022). These methods are predominantly concerned with the function and consequence of communication (Potter, & Wetherell, 1987). It is noted that discursive psychology in particular is suitable for identifying interpretative patterns in speech that are used to create social action and

maintain existing structures of power and inequality (Potter, 2012; McMullen, 2021). Consequently, application of discourse analysis might have offered exploration into how participants use language to construct and describe their experience of the social disparity of racism in the context of the pandemic. In this case however, individuals' beliefs, emotions and attitudes would be comprehended from the social practice of the interaction (Wiggins, 2017), rather than from *within* the individual, which is fundamentally what the current study aims to examine.

Within phenomenological methods, descriptive phenomenology was also evaluated as a potential option. A descriptive phenomenological approach would have focused on identifying common shared aspects of the research topic solely on an objective, descriptive level (Giorgi, & Giorgi, 2003). As such, descriptive phenomenology is not concerned with the researcher's interpretation or experience, but requires a conscious separation of the researcher's personal attitudes and knowledge about the phenomenon under investigation (Moustakas, 1994). In contrast, the co-construction of meaning between researcher and participants in IPA, referred to as the 'double hermeneutic' (J. Smith et al., 2022), was considered valuable for generating meaning from the data. IPA was considered the most suitable phenomenological approach for exploring participants' sense-making of racism during the COVID-19 pandemic from within the historical, cultural and social context of those experiences.

2.4. Theoretical foundations of IPA

IPA has been fundamentally informed, developed and directed by ideas and philosophies within phenomenology, hermeneutics and ideography (J. Smith et al., 2022). The key concepts of which are explored further below.

2.4.1. Phenomenological position

Husserl (1927) regarded phenomenology as the examination of human experience and study of the essential qualities of an experienced phenomenon. He distinguished the difference between an individual's 'natural attitude' of everyday existence, and the specific adoption of a 'phenomenological attitude,' which involves reflective consciousness of the perception of a phenomenon (J. Smith et al., 2022). Phenomenological inquiry can then be understood as the consciousness of an individual's experience of the world; Husserl proposed preconceptions, prejudices and prior understandings and history must be "bracketed off" in order to achieve such a perspective. By separating our own biases and presumptions, Husserl suggested the very essence of a phenomenon would be revealed by exposing the 'taken-for granted' "lifeworld" (Husserl, 1970, p.128), whilst surpassing personal and contextual factors (Eatough, & Smith, 2017).

Husserl's view of phenomenology has been widely criticised for being too abstract, and the notion of detaching from existing knowledge considered unachievable (Spinelli, 2005). Heidegger (1962) developed on Husserl's phenomenology and questioned the prospect that knowledge can exist outside of interpretation. For Heidegger, phenomenology aims to explore significant structures of lived experience and adopts the perspective that humans are inextricably connected to the world. He proposed that individuals are unable to detach from the pre-existing context of culture and systems of meaning-making (Cooper, 1996). From Heidegger's perspective, a person is always 'person-in-context,' as there must be consideration of how an individual is making sense of the perspectives, expectations and societal practices around them (Tomkins, 2017). In this regard, bracketing was considered impossible for Heidegger, due to an inability to remove presuppositions from the studied phenomena. In relation to IPA, Heidegger's writings encourage IPA researchers to anchor their perspective in the lived experiences of objects, connections, individuals and language (Tuffour, 2017).

Merleau-Ponty's (1962) perspective aimed to understand the world as an embodiment of human experience, and offered a view of humans as embedded within a world of objects, language, culture and relationships. In essence, Merleau-Ponty suggested an interconnected relationship between the perceiver and the perceived, and placed particular emphasis on the body for experiencing and interacting with the world (J. Smith et al., 2022). Similarly, Sartre (1956) commented on the existence of a 'self' not as pre-existing or fixed, but rather engaged with the world "in the process of becoming," (Kierkegaard, 1974, p.79, as cited in J. Smith et al., 2022). Sartre's work provides IPA researchers with a comprehensive perspective on how phenomenological analysis of human experience should be conducted existentially and within the realms of personal connection and social interactions.

The works of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre have evolved IPA's hermeneutic stance and encouraged exploration and investigation into the lived experience of participants (J. Smith et al., 2022). These more contextual, holistic developments in phenomenology contrast from Husserl's earlier descriptive, theoretical stance by focusing on elements of existentialism and embodiment (Tuffour, 2017); yet the importance of the experience of living, perspective and meaning underly all phenomenological perspectives. IPA draws these together in an interpretative attempt at understanding particular individuals' relationships to the world by focusing on a particularly meaningful occasion or occurrence in that person's world (J. Smith et al., 2022).

2.4.2. Hermeneutic position

Hermeneutics relates to the theory of interpretation and the practice or art of interpretation or meaning (Dallmayr, 2009). IPA has developed from the works of influential philosophers on hermeneutic phenomenology. Schleiermacher (1998) wrote about the requisite of interpretation relying on "a receptivity for all other people," (p.92, as cited in J. Smith et al., 2022) based on the idea that individuals 'carry others' within themselves. The unique

interpretative position of IPA therefore allows for deeper meaningful insight of participants' accounts by adding an additional layer of exploration. J. Smith et al. (2022) note that the opportunity for this level of analysis is reliant on shared commonalities between the interpreter and individual being interpreted.

The hermeneutic circle is significant in hermeneutic theory and in IPA for understanding how the 'part' and the 'whole' can impact understandings of one another (Langdridge, 2017). The IPA researcher engages in a double hermeneutic (J. Smith et al., 2022), wherein they interpret the participants' own interpretation of their experiences. This places the researcher in a pivotal position for analysing and understanding the participants' experiences. Consequently, the researcher naturally delves beyond surface-level meanings, aiming to uncover deeper interpretations by discerning implicit messages. This approach aligns well with the hermeneutic circle theory, which emphasises the dynamic interplay between the 'part' (the interaction with participants) and the 'whole' (the researcher's knowledge and experience). Within the context of IPA, the 'part' signifies the engagement with participants in a research endeavour, while the 'whole' represents a combination of the researcher's knowledge and experiences (Tuffour, 2017).

Also central to the hermeneutic position is the role of, and attainability of bracketing in phenomenological research. Heidegger (1962) asserted that bracketing one's preconceptions is not only impossible, but also any attempts to separate human experience from their context and situatedness in the world contravenes the fundamental position of 'being-in-the-world.' Gadamer (1960) also supported the notion that presuppositions cannot be sectioned off, and stated the importance of personal awareness of biases, so "the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings," (Gadamer, 1960, p.269, as cited in Finlay, 2014). IPA considers these positions and views bracketing as partially achievable, placing emphasis on the importance of the researcher's reflexivity and interpretative process (J. Smith et al., 2022).

2.4.3. Idiographic position

IPA is considered inherently idiographic because it focuses on meticulously analysing each phenomenon being studied (Eatough, & Smith, 2006). It emphasises the need for detailed examination of each individual case, before widening analysis cross-case to generate broader conclusions and interpretations. IPA's idiographic nature encourages researchers to demonstrate a commitment to examining 'the particular' (J. Smith et al., 2022), meaning the detail of each subjective account of a phenomenon of interest. Consequently, the value of individual case studies and smaller samples is recognised, as IPA requires small, homogenous samples that are purposively selected to reflect the accounts of particular people, in a particular context.

2.5. Ontological position

Ontology refers to the study of being, the nature of what exists, and how these can be known by questioning what it is to "be," and to be a human being at all (APA, 2018a). Willig (2022) stipulates the ontological position is a crucial starting point for any research project, as it is imperative that the researcher interrogates what assumptions they hold and fosters an awareness of how this might impact the study. The ontological position of the researcher in this project most closely aligns with critical realism.

Critical realism posits that direct access to an objective 'reality' is impossible as reality is formed and exists within social structures and contexts, influenced by beliefs and values (Archer et al., 1999). It acknowledges that reality occurs independently of our perceptions, and therefore multiple versions of a phenomenon may exist (Maxwell, 2012). A critical realist ontology therefore aims to capture an understanding of participants' personal and subjective realities of their worlds (Willig, 2022), whilst simultaneously recognising the existence of an

objective reality of racial discrimination and prejudice. This approach contrasts from realism, which proposes an objective universal reality exists and is discoverable through research – and relativism which proposes no absolute, objective truth is ascertainable.

Critical realism maintains that all human activity occurs within a context of pre-existing social structures (Lewis, 2000), 'inherited' from historical human existence and passed into present-day practice (Bhaskar, 1986; Archer, 1995). Race and racial categorisations are also recognised as socially constructed and influenced by historical and political contexts (Bonham, 2023). Hence, utilisation of a critical realist position can recognise the multifaceted nature of racism as an issue influenced by social, cultural, economic and historical contexts that have interacted over time to perpetuate racist beliefs, practices and systems (Quraishi, & Philburn, 2015).

2.6. Epistemological position

Epistemology is concerned with the nature, scope and origins of human knowledge, and includes the study of knowledge acquisition, production and validation (APA, 2018b). The epistemological position is fundamental in informing the methodology, framing the research and generating an approach to discover the information (Silverman, 1993). The epistemological position of the researcher in this project most closely aligns with a constructivist stance.

Constructionism rejects the idea of an objective 'truth,' and views knowledge as being built from contextual resource and through the interaction of an individual's existing knowledge and beliefs, as well as social, historical, political and cultural perspectives operating within that context and time (Berger, & Luckman, 1967; Moon, & Blackman, 2013). A constructionist approach to social problems aims to understand mechanisms behind the emergence of particular social issues and involves examining the contextual backdrop within

which these concerns arise. In essence, the construct of social problems occupies a pivotal position in constructivism (Best, 2018).

Context is especially important in understanding the experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, as it is a unique, global event set within an unprecedented social and historical context. Importantly, the constructivist position assumes that individuals create different meanings of the same phenomena depending on how each person engages with and understands their world (Crotty, 1998). As the British Psychological Society stated: "Pandemics are not just physical problems. They imply social, cultural, political and psychological processes, which are further complicated by existing social disparities and longstanding systemic and structural racism," (BPS, 2020a).

Both critical realism and constructivism are well matched to a phenomenological methodology. The constructivist position is fundamental to a phenomenological approach as it postulates that while researchers can 'interpret' meanings from presented 'realities,' there will always be a level of co-construction between researcher and participant in the process. This is indicated in the double hermeneutic that is present in IPA research (J. Smith et al., 2022). In line with this, an interpretative position has been adopted as opposed to a descriptive phenomenological approach, as there is no assumption that participants' accounts can be portrayed purely descriptively. These views align with the researcher's personal position that it is impossible to remove our own experiences about the world and phenomenon being studied, and indeed a contribution of the researcher's own knowledge, beliefs and interpretations are valuable and central to an interpretative phenomenological position (Willig, 2022).

In summary, critical realism acknowledges the existence of an objective reality, while constructivism highlights the social construction of knowledge and the subjective nature of human understanding. The current study adopts a critical realist ontological perspective to

understand underlying structures and causal mechanisms that influence events and phenomena, whilst employing a constructivist epistemological lens to explore how these structures are socially constructed, and how different perspectives shape our understanding of reality. Although critical realism and constructivism can be viewed as offering different dimensions of understanding reality, together they can provide a more comprehensive, nuanced view of the complex phenomenon of racism during the COVID-19 pandemic, by acknowledging both the objective and subjective aspects of knowledge and reality.

2.7. Reflexivity

Reflexivity refers to the deliberate, contemplative approach taken by a researcher to recognise how their inquiries, methods, and personal standpoint might influence psychological insights derived from the research (Langdridge, 2017). It is connected to the researcher's capacity to create and convey thoughtful judgments about the research, whilst also evaluating how subjectivity and context might impact the study (Finlay, 2002). Throughout the current research, the researcher actively engaged in personal and methodological reflexivity; the former focused on examining how personal values might have impacted the research, and the latter addressed the potential influences of the chosen research method on outcomes. The researcher’s personal reflexivity is an essential part of the topic selection process because pre-conceptions, values, beliefs, interests and experiences may all influence the process (Finlay, 2002). Methodological reflexivity is noted as important in qualitative research for considering the possibilities of knowledge production, and contemplating the framing of what is being studied and how this will be evaluated (Whitaker, & Atkinson, 2021). An examination of both follows in more detail.

2.7.1. Personal reflexivity

The topic was chosen based on the researcher's own interests and personal links to the research phenomena. As a biracial person of Chinese and White descent, I have personal lived experiences of Chinese racism and an acute awareness of how the pandemic impacted members of the British Chinese community. Being half Chinese has provided me with a unique perspective of racism in the UK. At times, especially during my childhood I experienced racial discrimination and harassment because of my Chinese phenotype. These experiences lessened with age as I learned how to change my appearance and hide or lessen my physical Chinese characteristics, but the feeling of not belonging never truly subsided. When the COVID-19 pandemic happened, I experienced a heightened awareness of my Chinese identity and a sense of injustice, helplessness and frustration for my community. I heard many first-hand accounts of COVID-related racism, and felt strongly that these views had not been sufficiently recognised or represented in the literature at the time.

Researchers who share aspects of their identity or experiences with research participants are considered to assume an 'insider' role (Styles, 1979). This position is associated with both strengths and challenges; for example, suggestions that the researcher may experience possible confusion and 'role conflict' (Adler, & Adler, 1987), yet conversely Dwyer and Buckle (2009) suggest an insider role may result in more transparent, detailed data due to participants feeling more able to be open with the researcher. Reflecting on my own responses and feelings were certainly helpful for fostering an awareness of my preconceptions that might have impacted the research. I endeavoured to remain attentive to this throughout the project, especially during the interviews (Alase, 2017), and was cautious to ensure a level of neutrality – to the extent that this is possible in IPA research. One means of doing this was by keeping track of my personal reflections in a reflective diary. I also continued to attend personal therapy which allowed space for reflection, exploration and processing of my insights, including how the research had impacted upon me.

2.7.2. Methodological reflexivity

IPA operates under the assumption that language provides participants with the necessary means to convey their experiences effectively, relying on the accuracy of language representation (Willig, 2022). However, it is important to note that language has also been acknowledged as a tool for constructing reality rather than describing it (Potter, & Wetherall, 1987). This raises concerns about the suitability of participant narratives within IPA, suggesting that it may not always capture the raw experience of the phenomenon, but rather a constructed version of it. Consequently, Willig (2022) suggests that IPA should only be used if participants are capable of articulating their experiences in accordance with the requirements of the method. Four of the participants in the current study were born in Asia and learned English as a second language. This may have impacted on their abilities to authentically communicate their thoughts, feelings and experiences in English, and this is a recognised limitation of the study.

It is noted that the credibility of qualitative data stems from its ability to "record the world through the eyes of the individuals... instead of presenting it through the lens of the researcher," (Ratner, 2012, p.373). Research conducted in the language of the researcher, and not the first language of the participant has therefore been criticised for being less trustworthy (Verma et al., 2023). Proficiency of language used in the interview is thought to significantly influence both the quality of the interview and the data obtained (Baumgartner, 2012). Furthermore, understanding and interpretating the significance that individuals attribute to their experiences is an essential role for an IPA researcher. It is therefore imperative that the researcher has good comprehension of participants' experiences, and language inevitably plays an important role in this comprehension.

Consideration of language proficiency and issues of communication were not factored into the development of the study. During interviews, it was apparent that two participants had difficulty understanding some of the more abstract questions, such as "how do you make

sense of these experiences?" As such, the researcher had to re-phrase some questions and explain meanings, which may have limited the participants' comprehension or interpretation of the questions being asked. The researcher did however maintain an awareness of body language during the interviews, and remained cognisant to search for possible alternative meanings during the analysis process. It is also worth noting that all participants in this study self-selected and volunteered, indicating their eagerness, preparation and proficiency for sharing their lived experiences using the English language.

2.8. Assessing validity and quality

Qualitative research is frequently criticised for its perceived lack of scientific rigor (Mays, & Pope, 1995), concerns about reproducibility, generalisability, and researcher bias (Silverman, 2013; Wertz, 2011). Yet, the growing acceptance of qualitative methods and diverse research methodologies within psychology are noted to offer avenues for exploring social justice issues, whilst also maintaining rigorous scientific knowledge (Wertz, 2011). The aims of the current study were to examine the experiences of individuals during a global health pandemic, and give a voice to their subjective accounts. Within the current study, adherence to quality assessment principles from Yardley (2000), Levitt et al. (2018), and Nizza et al. (2021) were followed to ensure robustness of the research standards and outcome, which is examined in more detail

It is also acknowledged that qualitative researchers inevitably bring themselves, their preconceptions and experiences, to the data analysis (Willig, 2022). In IPA the influence of the researcher's preconceptions on data interpretation is acknowledged and recognised to be managed through reflexivity (J. Smith et al., 2022). Consistent with IPA's idiographic valuing of individuals' experiences, the aim of the current study was not to form reasons or create broad generalisations about the experiences of British Chinese individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, utilising an interpretative approach, IPA research aims to

provide an understanding of a particular group of people, within a particular context, by blending their personal perspectives with the researcher's own interpretations.

As with all IPA studies, the notion of generalisability presents somewhat of a paradox, since participants are selected based on their unique experiences and perspectives, rather than to serve as ‘representatives’ of the broader population (Peat et al., 2018). Thus, it is acknowledged that whilst a different researcher and different participants may likely have yielded different findings, this is not necessarily a limitation of the method. J. Smith et al. (2022) note how insights from IPA studies can be generalised cautiously by situating findings within context, and relating them to existing knowledge. This acknowledges the potential for forming cautious generalisations, while emphasising the importance of contextual grounding (Harré, 1979).

Maxwell (1992) illuminates a stance on validity in qualitative research well:

> [It] does not depend on the existence of some absolute truth or reality to which an account can be compared, but only on the fact that there exists ways of assessing accounts that do not depend entirely on features of the account itself, but in some way relate to those things that the account claims to be about. (Maxwell, 1992, p. 283).

An overview of the validity assessments used in the current research follows.

2.8.1. Validity in qualitative research

Attention to quality and validity was a priority throughout this research, guided by Yardley (2000) and Levitt et al. (2018). Yardley’s four key principles for ensuring quality in qualitative

research—sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance—were central to this study.

Sensitivity to context can be considered an awareness of language, cultural, historical and social factors occurring at the time the research was conducted, as well as the influences of these factors on the participants' and researcher's beliefs, expectations and objectives (Yardley, 2000). Moreover, sensitivity to context indicates an awareness of the research topic's existing literature, the sociocultural background of participants, and the power imbalance between researcher and participants. As context is the central focus of the current study, it has been largely considered, as well as meanings attributed from participants' sociocultural backgrounds. Attentiveness to existing literature is evidenced by the extensive literature review, including careful consideration of the contexts of previous infectious disease pandemics. Lastly, consideration of the impact of the researcher's own beliefs, expectations and objectives have been addressed in the personal reflexivity section.

Yardley (2000) proposed commitment and rigour as being associated with sustained engagement in the research topic, immersion in the data and thoroughness of the data collection and analysis. It is noted that the researcher's intuition and imagination in the analysis can be counted as rigour (Cooper, & Stephenson, 1996). Yardley (2000) also acknowledged quality of constructed narratives to evidence transparency and coherence. Consequently, the current study aimed to deliver a good standard of reporting, indicated by persuasive narratives and an attempt to create meaningful interpretations. Coherence is noted to include the appropriateness of fit between the research question, philosophical positioning and research method. Arguably, this is evidenced in the current study by the detailed explanation and justification for the researcher's choices and positionings, as well as thorough documentation of the research process.

2.8.2. Validity in IPA research

Levitt et al. (2018) also created an assessment of standards for determining validity in qualitative research called the JARS-Qual (2018). This was applied and exemplified within an IPA methodology by J. Smith et al. (2022), to demonstrate the operationalisation of JARS-Qual standards specifically in IPA. Notably, J. Smith et al. (2022) highlight the importance of methodological integrity, and suggest the ability to "reflect upon any consultation or collaboration processes which informed the development of the work," (p.150) as one example of how this might be achieved in an IPA study. This has been demonstrated in the current study by exploration of the double hermeneutic and reflexivity of the researcher, including acknowledgement of the researcher's own knowledge and presuppositions of the research phenomena. J. Smith et al., (2022) proposed the creation of a table or figure as a valuable means of illustrating the entire analysis in addition to the narrative analysis. This has been completed within the current study using a diagrammatic overview of the Group Experiential Themes (GETs) (figure 1. in the analysis section), and a more detailed table of the GETs including participants' quotes and evidence of where this can be found on individual transcripts (appendix G).

Additionally, Nizza et al. (2021) outlined criteria specific to IPA to indicate markers of high-quality IPA research. In synopsis, four criteria were identified: constructing a compelling unfolding narrative; developing a vigorous experiential and/or existential account; close analytic reading of participant's words; and attending to convergence and divergence. Within the current study, the researcher maintained cognisant of these principles to ensure good adherence to these standards. For example, attendance to convergence and divergence can be recognised by examining both the idiographic content of individual participant experiences, as well as contributions to the wider Group Experiential Themes (Nizza et al., 2021). In the current project, attempts have been made to provide detailed readings of how different participants have demonstrated distinct elements of the same GET by drawing upon unique individual contexts to inform these interpretations (J. Smith et al., 2022).

2.9. Data collection

2.9.1. Sampling

While there is no definitive sample size in IPA research, J. Smith et al. (2022) indicate a range of between six and ten interviews as advisable for professional doctorates, to account for time and additional commitments. Due to the emphasis on quality and richness of the individual accounts, working with a smaller sample size allowed for the in-depth exploration and detailed reflection that is required for an IPA study. Participants were recruited using a purposive sampling method to access the target population. Four initial participants were recruited via these means, and from there a snowball sampling technique was utilised to access and recruit a further two eligible participants using referrals. All recruited participants were asked to pass on information about the study to members of their network who may be eligible and interested in participating.

2.9.2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were set in order to ensure sample homogeneity and were determined in line with the aims of the study—that is, participants were required to have similar lived experience of the phenomenon being studied. The inclusion criteria required participants to be British citizens, which for the purpose of this study was defined as somebody eligible to hold a British Passport. Participants were required to be of Chinese ethnicity, which for the purpose of this study was defined as both parents being of Chinese ethnicity. Lastly, the inclusion criteria required participants to have experienced some form of racism during or related to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as racial discrimination, verbal abuse, harassment or aggression. This was determined by participant self-identification, and was required to have occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic period, from March 2020 up

until the point of interview. Exclusion criteria precluded individuals under 18 years of age for ethical reasons.

British citizenship was listed as an inclusion requirement due to a vital aspect of the research focusing on identity, sense of belonging and meaning associated with being British and being subject to racial discrimination within the UK. For these reasons, citizenship was an important factor for determining participants had lived and been immersed in British culture. The definition of British citizenship was taken from the GOV.UK website (2024), and includes individuals born in the UK, as well as individuals born overseas with British parents, those who have immigrated and become naturalised, and also individuals who had lived permanently in the UK for a minimum of 5 years. This allowed for a more diverse definition of the term 'British' to include participants who had lived their whole lives in the UK, as well as those who had immigrated.

Ethnicity was determined on the requirement that both parents were from the Chinese ethnic group, and this was set for a number of reasons. While the study would have been relevant and indeed important had the criteria expanded to include individuals from a mixed ethnic background or ethnicities from other East or Southeast Asian origin, the intended data sought to better understand the experiences of individuals from the Chinese ethnic group specifically. Chinese people were phenotypically identified and blamed for COVID-19 (Choi et al., 2023), and although it is well documented that many other ethnicities from Asian origins also suffered discrimination, it seems this was commonly a result of misidentification (J. Huang et al., 2023). Similarly, although individuals from a mixed ethnic background might have feasibly contributed, the study was intentional in exploring meanings around identity. Therefore, it was important to examine the understandings of Chinese individuals, where being Chinese was the sole lived experience instead of part of an experience or identity.

2.9.3. Recruitment

Participants were recruited through online advertisements (appendix A), posted on relevant online social media networking sites. These included Facebook groups, forums and communities including: British Chinese Network, British Born Chinese, The British Chinese Society, London Chinese Community, and British Chinese in the Midlands.

Individuals who expressed interest in participating were sent a participant information sheet (appendix B), and communication was made to confirm their suitability and eligibility under the inclusion criteria. Respondents were asked to confirm that they were over 18 years of age, that they were eligible to hold a British passport, that both parents were of Chinese ethnicity, and to confirm that they had experienced some form of racism during or related to the COVID-19 pandemic (since 2020). A total of six individuals expressed interest in participating, four from the online advertisements and a further two from referrals of the initial cohort. All six respondents met the inclusion criteria as outlined, and were emailed a provisional interview date and the participant consent form (appendix C). The interview date was purposely scheduled for at least one week after the email date, to allow respondents sufficient time to consider the information and make an informed decision on their participation.

All six interviews were held within a period of three months from the first advertisement posting, throughout the summer of 2022. Online advertisements remained active on all social media pages for the purpose of recruiting up to a further four participants, until the stage of analysis allocating Group Experiential Themes. Additional participants would have been accepted up to this point, but it was deemed not feasible to add additional data into the study beyond the point of determining shared group themes. Although additional participants were unable to be recruited, J. Smith et al. (2022) emphasise the importance of not equating higher numbers of interviews with “better work,” due to successful analysis requiring

substantial time and reflection, and larger data sets potentially inhibiting this by compromising on quality (p.47).

2.9.4. Participants

Of the six participants recruited, there were four females and two males. All participants were between 26-30 years of age at the time of interview. Two participants were born in the UK, and the other four had immigrated from China (including Hong Kong).

Table 2: Participant information

Pseudonym	Gender	Age at time of interview	Birthplace	Years living in the UK
Ada	Female	26	Hong Kong	13
Mia	Female	28	Hong Kong	8
Li	Female	29	UK	29
James	Male	27	UK	27
Selena	Female	28	China	17
Daniel	Male	30	Hong Kong	5

The demographic composition of social media users and their networks is a recognised limitation of the recruitment method in this study. Participants fell within the age range of 26 to 30 years, which does not represent older individuals within the British Chinese community. Additionally, two participants grew up in the UK, while four were born abroad and immigrated later in life, adding variability to the sample. Yet despite this, national statistics indicate the sample is fairly representative of the Chinese population in the UK, most of whom are born outside the country (Office for National Statistics, 2020).

Homogeneity in an IPA sample is crucial for examining variability within the data and valuing differences that emerge from experiences of the phenomenon (J. Smith et al., 2022). In

other words, divergence is equally as important as convergence in an IPA study, which can be obtained through homogeneity (Miller, & Minton, 2016). The current study conformed to the lower range of the ideal sample size for an IPA doctoral study, as outlined by J. Smith et al. (2022). Although the sample of six participants allowed for a detailed focus on the data set, the researcher's ideal sample and initial goal for the study sat within the mid-range, at eight. Additional accounts would have resulted in further detail in the exploration of this complex phenomena, which would have increased the validity of the findings.

2.9.5. Semi-structured interviews

IPA research is committed to the detailed examination of what an experience is like and how an individual has made sense of this, and in-depth interviews are often the best means of accessing such accounts (J. Smith et al., 2022). Semi-structured, one-to-one interviews provide the opportunity for participants to communicate their experiences, thoughts and feelings freely, which is favourable for producing a rich first-person account that is necessary for an IPA methodology. Interviews are also beneficial for promoting rapport between participant and researcher and can help participants feel heard when sharing their stories. It is noted that semi-structured one-to-one interviews are the most frequently used (Willig, 2022), and preferred means of collecting the type of data needed for IPA (Reid et al., 2005).

Data was therefore collected using semi-structured, one-to-one interviews using the online video communication platform Microsoft Teams. The decision to conduct interviews online was predominantly influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic which not only impacted practical arrangements, but also had implications for the safety of both the researcher and participants. However, it is relevant to note that online data collection has been credited with helping to create a 'nonthreatening' environment for participants, which can provide a sense of comfort when exploring sensitive topics (Creswell, 2013). This is especially pertinent because of the sensitive and potentially distressing interview topic of racism. In addition, it is

noted that as IPA studies are concerned with examining significant existential issues, particular considerations should be made to accommodate participants' comfort and wellbeing where possible (Pietkiewicz, & Smith, 2014).

Before each interview began, participants were given the opportunity to re-read the participant information and consent forms, and to ask any questions. The researcher then took the opportunity to check that signed participant consent forms had been returned and stored securely on the computer. Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes each, and were audio recorded through the online platform Microsoft Teams and also on an encrypted recording device as a precautionary measure.

The interviews were conducted in a relaxed style which loosely followed a predetermined interview schedule, consisting of seven questions and potential follow-up prompts (appendix D). The schedule was created in line with guidance from J. Smith et al. (2022), which involved examples of the typical phrasing of questions ideal in an IPA study. The researcher also sought feedback from their supervisor and peer group on the DPsych course, which resulted in changes to the phrasing of questions, as well as the order.

The interviews were guided largely by participants' responses, with prompts being used to guide participants into further detail and examination of their experiences. The interview schedule was particularly useful for ensuring all questions addressed aspects of the research phenomenon, and were open-ended, expansive and neutral. Preplanning the questions in advance also allowed the researcher to be more attentive in the interview to content being shared. In line with recommendations from J. Smith et al. (2022), a "funnelling" technique (p.57) was used which placed 'scene-setting' questions at the beginning in the hope that participants could become comfortable talking, followed by more sensitive, specific topics later in the interview.

Interviews were transcribed from the recordings verbatim, including some non-verbal features of the interaction that provided additional context, for example pauses, utterances such as laughter and sighs, and communicative body movements such as shrugs. Transcripts were line numbered, double spaced and margins were maximised for ease of coding. All identifiable data from participants were removed and names were replaced with pseudonyms. Recordings were initially stored on a password protected computer, as well as the researcher's City University OneDrive account as a precautionary measure. Following completion of transcriptions, recordings from the computer, encrypted device and OneDrive account were deleted, and transcripts were moved onto the password protected computer and OneDrive account for storage.

2.10. Data analysis

Although it is acknowledged that there is no 'prescriptive' analytical method in IPA (Reid, 2005), the guidance outlined by J. Smith et al. (2022) succinctly summarises the commonly used processes for examining data at this stage, which proved incredibly helpful for the novice IPA researcher. This study therefore followed guidance from J. Smith et al. (2022) on how to conduct the analytic process.

The first stage of analysis was to familiarise and immerse myself in the data by repeatedly listening to recordings and reading through transcripts. At each opportunity of reading and listening to the data, explorative insights and responses were annotated in the margins of the transcript. This has been defined as "anything of interest" by J. Smith et al. (2022), and might include for example interpretations, linguistic observations, abstract concepts, metaphors, associations, descriptive content and idiosyncratic phrases or patterns in speech. The transcripts were annotated using different colours to indicate various different features (appendix E). Importantly, exploratory noting is expected to feature "more

hermeneutic and reflective work" (J. Smith et al., 2022, p.79), that goes beyond simply the descriptive.

The next stage of analysis involved constructing statements about the participants' experiences based on the exploratory notes and original transcripts. The aim of this stage was to consolidate the most important information into concise statements whilst maintaining complexity to capture and summarise the participants' experiences. Willig (2022) suggests this phase is important for creating a more interpretative perspective, where the researcher adds their own reading whilst also remaining grounded in the data. Smith and Osborn (2015) also highlight the need for the researcher to continually refer back to the transcript during this stage, as a way of ensuring statements are based on what participants actually reported. This process involved a fair amount of refining; it required continual revisiting and rephrasing of the statements, as well as reflecting that they were aligned with the participants' own accounts.

Following the generation of individuals' experiential statements, a search for connections and associations between the statements occurred. To achieve this, experiential statements were printed, separated, and placed in a large space so they could be organised spatially and clustered accordingly (appendix F). Statements were dispersed randomly in the space and considered on an individual basis and with equal importance, before being grouped conceptually. Statements were clustered on the meanings of participants' accounts, which were visited and revisited again over time. Statements were continually moved around to ensure connections were most accurately mapped, and those that did not fit into developing groups were then discarded. This process refined the scope and enabled more distinct group identities to emerge. Following guidance from J. Smith et al. (2022), the researcher aimed to hold recollections of each participant in mind during this process, to ensure groupings reflected their personal accounts.

Clustered statements were subsequently named based on common features, resulting in Personal Experiential Themes (PETs). The PETs related directly to the participants' experiences and were characteristic of, and distinct to each individual participant. PETs indicated a general overarching theme, and were often comprised of various, more specific sub-themes. PETs and sub-themes were created using various methods; at times a larger cluster of statements would be divided into smaller, more precise collections which resulted in sub-themes. At other times, smaller, highly-related yet specific themes were brought together to create a broader PET whilst maintaining individual sub-themes. Once completed, a table was generated for each participant which contained the PETs, sub-themes and direct quotations as evidence. Data from each participant was analysed using the aforementioned process, until all six participants had their own table of Personal Experiential Themes, sub-themes and accompanying quotations.

In the final stage of analysis, all PETs for participants were compared to create a set of Group Experiential Themes (GETs). Distinctions and similarities between PETs were identified by searching for separate and shared qualities of the experienced phenomena between participants. Again, this was achieved by utilising a large space to display the Personal Experiential Themes for all participants, which allowed for ease of arrangement and to take a 'bird's-eye view.' Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) note the importance of the researcher moving between the emic and etic perspectives at this point, that is, considering the participant's world, whilst also interpreting the data through a psychological lens and drawing on professional knowledge to aid understanding of the research phenomenon. This was achieved by frequently revisiting the transcript to confirm groupings were aligned with individual's stories. Once the higher level GETs and sub-themes were generated, a name was chosen for each to represent the shared quality of the theme.

The GETs, including sub-themes and evidential quotations for each participant were then tabulated (appendix G), providing an overview and cross-case synthesis of all six

participants' data. The GET table was particularly useful for providing an overall account of the analysis by displaying what participants had actually said next to the interpreted qualities and features drawn from the data by the researcher. This arguably evidences the "process of intersubjective meaning-making" of participant and researcher that is the double hermeneutic (Larkin, & Thompson, 2012, p.103).

Saturation in IPA research has been identified as the point at which themes begin to consistently emerge from the data, alongside a consensus in the participants' views (Saunders et al., 2018). It is contended whether saturation is a typically a goal in IPA research, with the focus instead on obtaining "full and rich personal accounts" (Hale et al., 2007, p. 91). In the current study, saturation was determined by the emergence of recurrent themes, and when the data was deemed to have sufficiently answered the research question. Additional participants may have brought more diversity to the GETS, and it is recognised that another researcher with another set of participants would likely have resulted in variation in themes as well.

2.11. Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted on 28th March 2022 by the Psychology Research Ethics Committee at City University of London (appendix H). Every step of the research process was conducted in adherence with the "*BPS Code of Human Research Ethics"* (BPS, 2021a), the "*Code of Ethics and Conduct"* (BPS, 2021b), and "*Guidance on Conduct and Ethics for Students"* (HCPC, 2016). In accordance with these ethical codes, the researcher endeavoured to demonstrate respect for the autonomy, privacy and dignity of the participants at all times, whilst also identifying and minimising the potential for harm. Measures were therefore implemented to ensure ethical considerations were taken at every opportunity throughout the research process: when informing participants of the nature of the study; in the gaining of informed consent; informing participants of their right to withdraw;

treating individuals with respect and sensitivity, prioritising their well-being; ensuring participants were appropriately debriefed; and ensuring participants had information to access emotional support following interviews. These measures are explored in further detail below.

2.11.1. Informed consent

A participant information sheet (appendix B) and participant consent form (appendix C) was sent to each participant at least one week prior to their scheduled interview. An opportunity for clarification and questions was also allocated before the commencement of each interview, to ensure participants possessed all sufficient information to make an informed choice on their involvement in the study. The participant information sheet clearly outlined: the purpose and aims of the research project; method of data being collected; expectations of participation including time commitment; data storage and privacy including duration; confidentiality and anonymity including limitations; possible benefits and risks of participation; the opportunity to withdraw without adverse consequence; the opportunity for data to be destroyed on request within a specified time condition; contact details of the university, researcher and supervisor of the study including for the purpose of complaints.

The participant consent form contained statements about understanding (“I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information sheet for the above-named study”), and consent was obtained by asking participants whether they agreed to participate on these terms (“I agree to take part in the above-named study”). Written, informed consent was obtained via the signing of the participant consent form.

2.11.2. Confidentiality and data protection

Participants were informed that confidentiality would only be broken if the researcher deemed there to be risk of serious harm, or where there was a legal obligation to do so, for example evidence of terrorist activity. Data obtained from participants were stored securely on a password protected computer and the researcher's City University OneDrive account. OneDrive is a secure, online file-storing system that is accessible only to the researcher through their City University account and password. During the transcription stage all identifiable data were removed, and a pseudonym was allocated to each participant which was used in all proceeding reference to the individual and their data.

In line with City University of London's research guidelines, interview transcripts may be stored securely for up to ten years, but all other data pertaining to the study is to be destroyed. An exception was made for participants personal contact information, which was retained only where the individual indicated they would like to be informed of the results of the study, and had explicitly consented for their personal contact information to be stored for this reason on the participant consent form (appendix C). In these cases, personal data were stored securely on a private password protected computer accessible only to the researcher, under a password protected word document, where the password was different from that of the computer.

2.11.3. Managing distress and avoiding harm

All psychological research with humans carries potential risk of harm, and it is the duty of the researcher to identify and minimise these risks and manage participant distress wherever possible (BPS, 2021a). Recounting experiences of racial discrimination, and during a global pandemic, has the potential to cause emotional distress as it is conceivable that feelings of anger, anxiety, shame or sadness may be invoked. For these reasons, the researcher remained cognisant and implemented all necessary precautions to minimise risks.

Firstly, the participant information sheet (appendix B) plainly specified the research focus and the expectation for participants to speak in detail about their experiences of racism. It also clearly states that participants have the right to withdraw at any time during the interview process without adverse consequence, and remain able to withdraw their data up until the point it has been anonymised. Participants were also reminded of their right to withdraw at any time and without reason prior to the commencement of the interview.

Due to the semi-structured interview approach, there was a need for some prompting and probing which was handled as sensitively as possible by the researcher. The opportunity for a short break was offered to each participant during the interview, and the researcher attempted to monitor participants' distress levels at all times. Although it was not ultimately required, the researcher also planned for the event that distress levels became increasingly elevated. If the researcher became concerned that a participant was experiencing undue stress, the procedure was to first ask the participant whether they wished to continue. If the participant agreed to continue, but the researcher deemed the stress level as disproportionate through, for example indications in body language, crying, heavy breathing etc. the researcher planned to stop the interview in the interest of avoiding further distress.

2.11.4. Debriefing

Upon completion of the interview process, participants were asked how they found the study and whether they had any questions. A debrief information sheet (appendix I) containing the aims of the study and details of relevant counselling support and services were provided to ensure psychological support contacts were accessible to the participants. Although it was not ultimately required, the researcher had also planned to send a follow up email to signpost additional resources to any participant that appeared to experience undue stress. Contact details of the researcher and research supervisor were also included in case

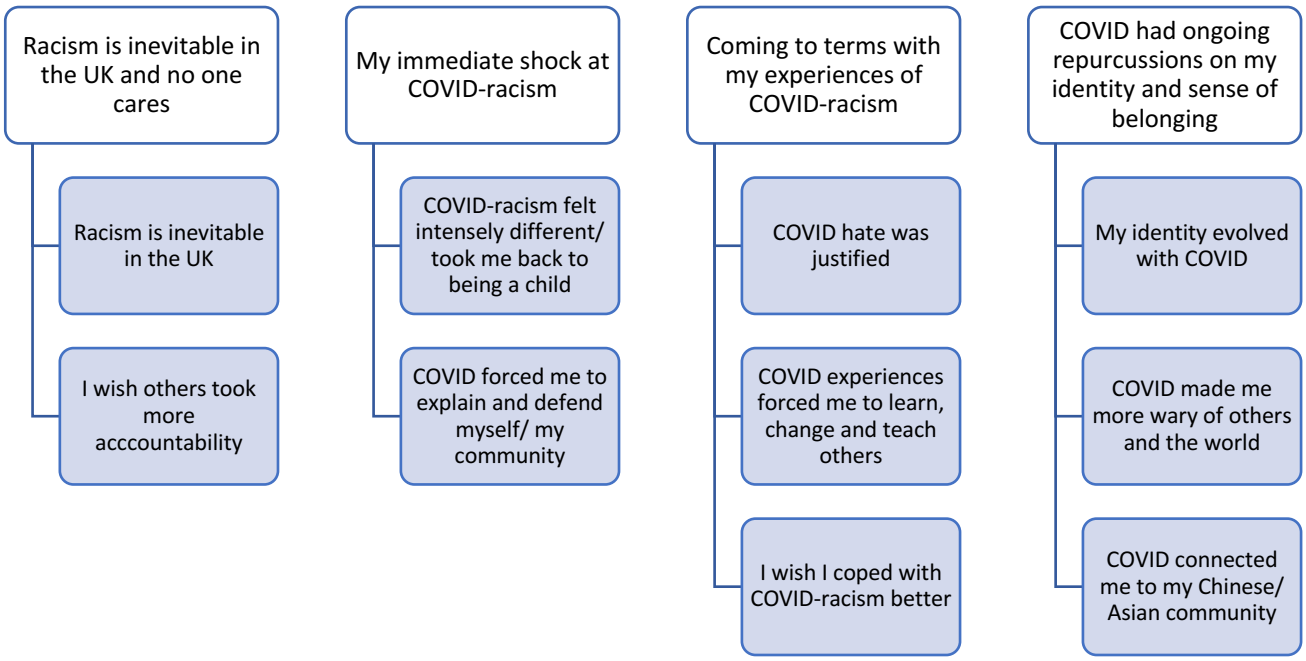
participants wished to withdraw their data, express queries or concerns about the research, or in cases of complaints.

3. ANALYSIS

This chapter aims to present a detailed and systematic summary of the interpreted themes of the participants' lived experiences. In line with guidance on IPA analysis, particular efforts have been made to strive for a balance of convergence and divergence; an exploration of the ways that participants' experiences were comparable, and also varied (Allan, & Eatough, 2016; Nizza et al., 2021; Pietkiewicz, & Smith, 2014). Direct quotations from transcripts have been included to support and evidence interpretations being made (J. Smith et al., 2022), and claims are posited tentatively to promote transparency and remain close to participants' perspectives (Larkin et al., 2011). All six participants were included across themes, and particular attention has been paid to ensure each individual's voice has been represented.

A total of four Group Experiential Themes were identified, and within these a further ten sub-themes (see figure 1). These GETs include: *racism is inevitable in the UK and no one cares; my immediate shock at COVID-racism; coming to terms with my experiences of COVID-racism*; *COVID had ongoing repercussions on my identity and sense of belonging*.

Figure 1: Group Experiential Themes



3.1. GET 1: Racism is inevitable in the UK and no one cares

This theme revolves around the acknowledgement of cultural influences and the significant impact of others on experiences of racism in the UK. It emphasises participants' recognition of the broader UK societal context including cultural norms and attitudes, which appear to have shaped encounters with racial discrimination. The theme provides a general sense of living in the UK, including pre-COVID experiences spanning across the lifetime and in various cities. Although some participants did relate their experiences to the COVID-19 pandemic, most accounts provide a broad overview which sets a backdrop and gives context to the environment in which participants experienced racism during COVID. Within this theme, there was also an awareness of the role of others, including friends and bystanders in these experiences. The overwhelming sense was that others did not care enough, or do enough to intervene or prevent racism from occurring. These factors have not only shaped

participants' expectations, but also influenced how they interpret and respond to incidents of racial discrimination. Moreover, they seem to have impacted participants' broader beliefs about the societal acceptance of racial behaviours in the UK.

3.1.1. Racism is inevitable in the UK

A recurring sub-theme emerged around the perception that racism is an unavoidable aspect of life for British Chinese individuals. This theme is marked by innate feelings of despair and frustration, alongside a sense of helplessness in bringing about change or foreseeing different treatment. For some, there was a resigned acceptance of this harsh reality. Many recounted instances where discriminatory experiences were brushed off as mere 'jokes' or 'banter,' conforming to prevalent Western societal norms that downplay the severity of these encounters. Furthermore, there is recognition of the difficulty of navigating an environment where racism is not just prevalent but also has a large emotional toll. Some participants also shared their initial optimism for change when moving to different regions of the UK, only to be met with disappointment upon realising the seemingly inevitable widespread presence of racism in British society.

Ada reflected on her expectations of a Western society:

> *I think coming to a Western society you're always aware that there is going to be some kind of racism happening. I mean there are microaggressions that happen sometimes in a bantry way where "oh you guys eat dog" or, you just, just little things like that…Yeah comments, that are very very stereotypical, or they mimic what Chinese language sounds like. So there's always microaggressions around that, but you kind of expect that*. (Ada, p.19)

Ada's use of *"always"* in acknowledging racism reflects her enduring sense of caution. Notably, she seemingly downplays instances of 'banter,' describing them as *"just, just little things."* This language choice diminishes the gravity of the comments, suggesting a passive acceptance. Her repetition of *"just"* indicates a need to soften the impact of her message, possibly to anticipate or mirror the previous dismissive responses she has received others. Ada's repetition of *"very"* in *"very, very stereotypical"* hints at an underlying frustration with the unacceptable nature of this behaviour, yet it seems she feels unable to articulate this directly. Instead, by intensifying the adverb "*very,"* Ada subtly emphasises the extreme stereotypical nature of the comments, revealing disapproval in a manner that is both assertive yet passive.

Similarly, Li spoke about living in a constant state of unpredictability:

> *So yeah, I I guess it just puts me on edge and it just makes me a very anxious person. Uh, yeah, because [racism] can just happen all the time being here.* (Li, p.13)

Li's reference to *"being here"* indicates her view of being in the UK as temporary, as if it were a passing visit away from her own home. There is a coldness and detachment for Li that the UK is not associated with the warmth and familiarity of a home, communicating the distance that she feels living here. Her position that this makes her *"a very anxious person"* implies an enduring and absoluteness to this feeling, such that it has impacted her complete sense of self. This is opposed to a more fleeting experience, which might have instead been communicated by stating "it makes me feel anxious."

There also appeared a similar sense of unpredictability for Selena:

> *You never know who will say these things to you, like it could be anyone that you're walking past, and they will just go out their way to like try and shit on your day.* (Selena, p.6)

Selena's phrase *"shit on your day"* conveys an intentional and deliberate targeting. This choice of language suggests a deeply personal impact, indicating that the experience goes beyond mere inconvenience. The implication that racism can come from anyone at any time suggests a heightened sense of vulnerability, which speaks to the pervasive nature of racism in the UK and its capacity to intrude on Selena's daily living. She elaborated on this:

> *There's just like every now and then, it just happens. And I'm just like, I just see it, I don't see it as normal, but I kind of just be like, "yeah, it's nothing new, you know, whatever."* (Selena, p.6)

While Selena initially asserts that she doesn't view racism as normal, there is a sense of resignation in her message. There is an acceptance of racism as an inevitable aspect of her lived experience, and a dismissiveness that indicates a tendency to downplay the impact of this. This could stem from a coping mechanism developed over time from facing racism repeatedly. She later commented:

> *Like [racism] you know, it's normal to hear this kind of shit all around because people wanna say what they wanna say.* (Selena, p.10)

Selena's differentiation between racism and *"shit all around"* that people say suggests a nuanced perspective on the severity and acceptability of discriminatory language. There seems to be a distinction in her mind between explicitly racial remarks and the general discourse she encounters daily, reflecting a sense of resignation towards the inevitability of encountering offensive language in these surroundings. She continued:

> *People can be as passive as they like with their racial comments, or they can be as horrible as they like with their racial comments. It's just depends how they feel.* (Selena, p.22)

By describing racial comments as falling on a spectrum from passive to overtly hostile, Selena highlights the normalisation of racism within the UK environment. The notion that perpetrators can freely express racism based on fleeting feelings reflects an imbalance of power where they hold authority over the nature and intensity of the discrimination she encounters. Selena therefore acknowledges a perceived powerlessness to expect anything different from living in the UK.

A similar attitude was reflected by Mia:

> *“Oh, it is what it is.” Like, yeah, I'm in UK. I am a minority, so it's just something I have to deal with.* (Mia, p.12)

Mia’s statement encapsulates a tone of passive acceptance of the norm. By framing racism as an unavoidable aspect of her lived experience as a minority, Mia implicitly acknowledges the systemic nature of discrimination and the limited agency she feels to challenge it. Her assertion that racism is something she simply has to *"deal with"* reflects a pragmatic yet disheartening acceptance of this. These echoes sentiments expressed by Selena and Li, indicating a shared sense of despondency in confronting racial discrimination in this context. She expressed further:

> *Mostly I just feel like unwelcome. And, and especially during the pandemic, I felt like, why am I here? Like, why am I in UK? And I kept thinking “oh maybe I can just leave and then I can be happy again.”* (Mia, p.8)

Mia's reflection portrays the pandemic as a catalyst for prompting her to question her sense of belonging in this country. Her contemplation of leaving the UK as a means to regain happiness is suggestive of the profound impact of the racial discrimination on her mental state, and the lengths she would go to escape this suffering. Her notion of seeking happiness elsewhere therefore acknowledges her emotional distress as caused solely by her current environment, and speaks to her longing to escape the hostility of this setting.

In comparison, James spoke about a prior sense of hope and optimism that London might have been different from the Northern UK city he grew up in:

> *Since moving to London, it felt like I was finally in a place where I didn't have to deal with that sort of rubbish. You know the sort of childish mentality, the sort of just blatant racism, ignorance and I thought "oh ok, there's so many people here, nothing's gonna happen now" like "this is, this is a different world," like "it's so many more people, so different, so diverse."* (James, p.8)

James's narrative unveils a sense of anticipation and optimism for his relocation to London, fuelled by the prospect of escaping the pervasive racism he encountered in his previous city. His perception of London as a beacon of diversity and acceptance represents a stark difference from the discriminatory attitudes he endured in his upbringing. By characterising London as *a "different world"* full of diversity, James reveals a hopeful belief that this change in environment could be the change needed to finally escape living with racism. His hope that attitudes in London would differ from those prevalent in the north of England indicates his desire to challenge the notion of racism as an inherent trait in British society. London therefore represented a symbol of progress and inclusivity for James, offering the promise of a more harmonious coexistence among other *"diverse"* individuals like him. Inevitably then,

there is a disappointment in his realisation this was not the case, as he stated immediately after:

> *But yeah, as soon as all this [racism from COVID] happened and just the feeling of people being unnecessarily aggressive towards you […] it just made me feel really sad again, really.* (James, p.8)

James's shift from initial hopefulness to despair occurs following his experiences of racism in London, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. His description of feeling the encounters were *"unnecessarily aggressive"* reflects a sense of betrayal and disappointment. His realisation that London was no different from his previous experiences in the UK evokes a sense of resignation and defeat. The repetition of the word *"really"* in his expression of sadness suggests depth in the emotion and finality in his acknowledgment of the prevalence of racism in British society.

A similar sentiment was also described by Selena, as she explained the hope and optimism London once represented for her:

> *So and then I go into London […] and then I found was that "ok, this is nice, safe space", like London's normally quite welcoming and, you know, it was the first place I lived when we moved here, so I always felt comfortable and not felt to made be made like feel any different. […] But then since when [racist incidents from August 2020] became more aggressive and more like in your face, I started losing a little bit of faith in humanity because I was like, "London is supposed to be like one of the most diverse cities."* (Selena, p.19)

In an almost identical manner to James, Selena described her once held wish that London could symbolise a place of hope and change. Her narrative provides an

illustration of the emotional journey from hopefulness to despair, with her initial perception of London as a *"nice, safe space"* reflecting a deeply held wish for the city to embody diversity and acceptance. In this sense, London would offer an escape from the discrimination she encountered elsewhere in the UK, where she could finally feel embraced and secure. Her use of the phrase *"supposed to be"* further indicates her initial anticipation for positive change in London, which is met with disappointment at the realisation this was untrue.

Lastly within this theme, it felt important to acknowledge that for some, the impacts of childhood experiences of racism influenced perspectives as adults. Accounts provided by James and Li offer recollections of encountering racism from a young age, emphasising a troubling acceptance that such experiences are not only commonplace, but perceived as being almost inevitable within the UK context.

James described:

> *Racism is all I've ever known, one my earliest memories […] And like, there's just a lot of stuff a lot of the time.* (James, p.11)

> *One of my earliest memories is just being beaten up like in primary school.* (James, p.11)

James's acknowledgment that racism is *"all I've ever known"* speaks volumes about the profound and enduring impact of racism on his sense of normality, and sets a precedent for his encounters as an adult. Similarly, Li's recollection of experiencing racism from the age of four demonstrates the sad reality that racial prejudice has been prevalent throughout her life in the UK:

But my first experience of racism was when I was four. (Li, p.10)

I grew up with these [racist] comments, you know, or varying degrees of these comments, I guess. (Li, p.13)

The matter-of-fact tone adopted by both James and Li suggests a desensitisation to the emotional impact of racism, which is perhaps indicative of a coping mechanism developed over years of enduring discrimination.

3.1.2. I wish others took more accountability

This sub-theme considers participants' perceptions around the role of bystanders in instances of racism, particularly their failure to assume accountability. Participants voiced feelings of frustration and disappointment towards onlookers, the broader public, and even personal acquaintances who witnessed racial discrimination but chose not to intervene. In comparison to their own experiences of victimisation, some participants expressed a strong disconnect to those who stood by. There was also acknowledgement of diffused responsibility, and how onlookers exhibited a lack of concern for the impact of their inaction. Additionally, there was a prevailing sentiment that such behaviour fosters passive acceptance of discriminatory practices, thereby trivialising the issue and unfairly shifting the burden solely onto the victim.

Li explained:

When [racism] happen[s] and people don't say anything you just feel really isolated because you feel like you're the only person that's like seeing the problem just being gas lit the whole time without anyone being there to defend

you other than yourself, so you're just fighting your own battles, basically. (Li, p.10)

The term *"gas lit"* encapsulates the disorienting nature of Li's experience, with the inaction of others forcing her to question and doubt her own lived reality. By describing herself as *"the only person"* attuned to the gravity of the situation, Li indicates a disconnect between her perception of reality and the indifference of those around her. The absence of support from bystanders also intensifies her sense of isolation, which goes beyond the immediate impact of the incident. Their failure to intervene not only magnifies the sense of injustice, but also reinforces the burden placed solely on Li, intensifying the emotional and psychological effects. Doubting her own reality is evident through Li's interview, she also recounted discriminatory comments that occurred in front of her partner and two male friends:

[…] it just made it even more isolating because then I was just like "did I just hear that…? Is that my…? I just, am I going crazy?!" Like "everyone's ok with this?" as in like, if I wasn't in the room would they all just like perpetuate that narrative and would continue to just like have conversations like that without calling any each other out because there was like three White men and me. (Li, p.8)

The questioning of her own perception (*"did I just hear that…?"*) reflects Li's struggle to reconcile the blatant injustice with the lack of response from others. This examination of reality echoes her earlier sentiment of feeling *"gas lit,"* as she struggles with the incongruity between her own values and the complacency of her peers. Her partner and friends, being three White men, amplify a power dynamic by highlighting their potential role in challenging racial narratives. Li's expectation that they should intervene and 'call others out' highlights her belief that everyone has a shared responsibility to prevent the continuation of racism. However, their silence further

accentuates her isolation, as she confronts not only the racism itself but also the failure of those in positions of privilege to utilise their power. Further accounts from Li also mentioned the significance of the presence of White people:

> *I was obviously very sad because everyone around me was White and they didn't see it as an issue […] They were like "oh you know, I don't, I don't think he's racist cause he's got like a Japanese wife. So like he's not racist." Or like things like "oh, you know he didn't mean it, like you know, I don't think like that," was the first thing that came out of their minds rather than kind of saying like "oh", you know, "oh my God, I'm so I'm so like gutted that that happened."* (Li, p.3)

Li's account illustrates a sense of sadness, isolation and confusion which is exacerbated by the dismissive responses of those around her. The tendency for others to defend, excuse or minimise the actions of the perpetrator instead of offering empathy and support to Li indicates the extensive normalisation of racism. This not only undermines Li's experience, but also reinforces a collective camaraderie among White individuals, who prioritise solidarity with one another over acknowledging the harm inflicted upon Li.

The immediate reflex to dismiss or downplay the racism, such as attributing innocence based on personal relationships (*"he's got like a Japanese wife"*), or asserting the unintentional nature further isolates and invalidates Li. Instead of expressing condemnation of the racist behaviour, those around her default to minimising its significance, leaving Li to reason with the impression that her experiences are unworthy of acknowledgment. At her most vulnerable state she is met with further marginalisation; she cannot escape the view that racism is somehow excusable due to the attitudes of those around her. Her frustration is echoed again:

> *It's like why? Why? Why are people not being held accountable, or at least being told that that's not right and that?* (Li, p.8)

Li's exclamation summarises her deep frustration at the lack of accountability for racism. The repetition of *"why?"* conveys her disbelief and a demand for justification, as if questioning societal and moral principles. Her frustration stems from the perceived failure of individuals to acknowledge an injustice. Furthermore, Li's reference to adults needing to be explicitly told right from wrong indicates her doubt in the morals of those around her. This sentiment reflects a broader frustration with the apparent lack of caring in those who fail to condemn racism.

Likewise, Ada referenced the idea of right and wrong, and her expectation that adults should know better and do more:

> *[…] when I was younger, looking back at when I was bullied as a kid, they were just kids, you know. They're not to know any difference perhaps, or you know, you tell a kid what's right and wrong, but sometimes with adults, you don't really expect that. So you kind of just expect people to be respectful and be kind and things like that, and you don't really tell an adult what's right and wrong, in comparison to a child.* (Ada, p.11)

Ada's reflection juxtaposes her experiences of childhood bullying with her observations of adult behaviour, highlighting a contrast in expectations of moral responsibility. By likening adults who lack respect and kindness to children, Ada also implies an evaluation of their maturity and moral development. This comparison suggests a belief that adults should possess self-awareness, empathy, and respect; her disappointment stems from an expectation that they should inherently grasp the importance of this

without needing to be explicitly taught. Similar sentiments were also apparent for Selena, as she recalled her thoughts towards bystanders:

> *I think it's what's hard to accept is the bystanders […] you want someone to be like "this is not ok." You know, it could be anybody because every time when this is happening, most of the time there are bystanders around. They see it happening, they can hear what they're saying. They kind of just look and be like "ooh, there's some drama going on." And then after that they just get on with the rest of the day. Like no one asks if you're ok.* (Selena, p.13)

By characterising the incident as mere *"drama"* from the perspective of onlookers, Selena highlights the trivialisation of her encounter and deep disconnect. *"Drama"* implies a sense of entertainment or amusement for bystanders, emphasising their detachment from the severity of the situation. Further, her acknowledgment that bystanders are often present during these encounters adds an additional layer of disappointment that they could have intervened but chose not to. There is also a frustration that bystanders are able to swiftly move on with their day, seemingly unaffected by the incident, which appears to induce envy in Selena. In a comparable manner to Li, it seems Selena was desperately hoping for someone to intervene and call racism out as being 'wrong':

> *When it comes to British people, I don't think, they're just like "we are aware that [racism is] going on" and people who are like not racist or however they identify themselves, they're like "no, we know it's wrong" and like "you shouldn't have to go through that," but that's where it ends. It doesn't go any further than that.* (Selena, p.9)

Selena's perspective emphases her frustration with the lack of meaningful action taken by British individuals in response to racism. There is a disconnect between the sentiment of racism being wrong, and action to change this. For Selena then, acknowledgement without tangible efforts made to address the racism are not enough. By generalising her critique to encompass *"British people,"* Selena suggests a collective accountability across the entire British population.

She recounted another experience:

> *[My English friends say] "we would never do that to you." And I was like, "I know but people do do that, you know, other people will." So, it's very I think it's very like, there's like still a disconnect.* (Selena, p.8)

Selena's frustration originates from a sense of invalidation and dismissiveness in her friends' responses. The disconnect she perceives lies in their failure to acknowledge the systemic nature and impact of racism. Their assertion that they would never act in a racist manner conveys a dismissiveness at the prevalence of racism in British society, despite her attempts to convey her lived experience. Additionally, Selena's interchangeable usage between British and English suggests a conflation of national identity with cultural attitudes towards racism.

3.2. GET 2: My immediate shock at COVID-racism

This theme highlights participants' shock and disbelief in response to encounters of racism during the COVID-19 pandemic. It emphasises the distinctive nature of COVID-related discrimination and its profound impact on participants' sense of self, belonging and wellbeing. Within this overarching theme, a spectrum of contrasting emotions emerged, carrying sentiments of anger, frustration and confusion, as well as distrust and uncertainty of

how to process these experiences. Sub-themes include the perception that these experiences were intensely different to other encounters with racism or adult life events, and a perceived imperative to defend oneself and one's communities.

3.2.1. COVID-racism felt intensely different/ took me back to being a child

This sub-theme features participants' perceptions of the distinct qualities of COVID-19-related racism compared to other encounters of racism in adulthood. Within their narratives, participants conveyed a heightened sense of aggression and fear, often accompanied by an indescribable quality to these experiences. Moreover, they observed a notable shift from individual targeting to a more collective form of discrimination. Many participants also drew parallels between their encounters with COVID-19-related racism and childhood experiences of discrimination or bullying, characterising them by similar levels of triviality, immaturity or ignorance. Further, participants articulated a sense of danger and imminent threat, expressing a suddenness to these encounters which built fear for their personal safety, and a profound sense of helplessness to manage the situation.

Selena reflected on her encounters of COVID racism:

> *The racism before [the pandemic] was slightly more just like comments, but then it started to become more aggressive and I think it didn't click until probably, it always sinks in only a couple days later after the incident happens. So I never really... because you're kind of just floating in it for the first, like 24 hours. Then next day you wake up and you realise like that actually was a bit more aggressive than needed.* (Selena, p.21)

Selena's description of initially perceiving racist incidents as mere *"comments"* indicates a normalisation of this behaviour, possibly also due to the frequency of occurrences. Her

metaphor of *"floating in it"* for the first 24 hours highlights a state of emotional disorientation or dissociation, which may serve as a coping mechanism to shield herself from the emotional trauma. Moreover, Selena's framing of racism *as "a bit more aggressive than needed"* implies a desensitisation to lower-level instances of racism. There also seems to be an internal conflict between the societal normalisation of racism, and Selena's experience of COVID-racism as inherently unjust.

She continued, comparing the difference between COVID-racism and pre-COVID experiences:

> *I never felt any different until like the pandemic […] The [incidents] that are like pre-pandemic, they're all like very joking, they don't mean it in like a malicious way. They might sound stupid and ignorant, but maybe that's just how they are and they just, you know, people are different, they don't all get educated on different races. But then, the pandemic ones then, that definitely makes you feel like you don't belong here. Yeah. So it pretty much went from like child's play to like, serious*. (Selena, p.26)

Selena's description of pre-COVID racism as seemingly innocuous is encapsulated in her analogy *"child's play"*. Her dismissal that these resulted from ignorance further suggests a prior level of tolerance around discriminatory behaviours, whereas pandemic-related encounters were interpreted as deliberate, targeted and personal. Selena's emphasis on feeling like she *"doesn't belong"* in this context highlights the depth of the impact of these experiences, and is suggestive of a rift in her sense of identity and belonging from her environment.

Ada also reflected on differences in COVID-racism:

> *I understood why people felt like that, but it just seemed like a really immature small-minded way to think. Ah, it doesn't, it hasn't happened to me ever since, and the only other time I was, I would say bullied, was when I was younger in school in terms of the way I look, so to have something similar happen during my adulthood was really strange.* (Ada, p.5)

Ada's comparison to being bullied at school elicits a sadness and a sense that perhaps she had hoped to leave those feelings behind her. There is a slight shock and unexpectedness in her account, indicating a sense of disorientation and disbelief at finding herself once again subjected to discrimination in her adult life. She later confirmed that being discriminated against as an adult was unfamiliar for her until COVID:

> *[…] through my adult experience [my Chinese identity] was always really welcomed, and my Chinese identity everyone was always interested in […] And as an adult I finally felt really really proud of it. To then feel secluded again during the pandemic was really upsetting.* (Ada, p.17)

The contrast between Ada's newfound pride in adulthood, and subsequent sense of seclusion during the pandemic emphasises the abruptness and intensity of this shift. The isolation that resulted from the pandemic represents a rupture in Ada's sense of belonging and acceptance that had taken so long to develop in her adulthood. This inevitably leads to a sense of disappointment as she finds herself back in a heightened state of vulnerability, reminiscent of her childhood. Ada's use of the term *"secluded again"* indicates this regression and cyclic nature. The pandemic therefore highlighted this fragility in Ada's identity and brought to light her reliance on external sources to validate her sense of belonging.

James also likened COVID experiences to being a child:

> *[The pandemic] kind of brought back this fear […] So it was hard. It was hard to think about it from that aspect. And yeah, so it it's kind of it just more stressed, but it was weird that it was the same feeling as like back when I was a child.* (James, p.14)

The fear James speaks of appears intertwined with a sense of vulnerability, echoing feelings of being excluded and a sense of powerlessness. The phrase *"it was hard to think about it"* conveys the difficulty James faces in confronting these resurfaced emotions. It is possible there are unresolved issues from racism originating from these earlier years that are painful for James to touch on. By stating that the feeling is *"stressful to experience,"* James acknowledges the significance of his childhood emotional wounds in influencing his present state. Additionally, by likening himself to a child, James conveys a loss of agency and control, which may emphasise his experience of the disorienting nature of the COVID period. He mentioned this same fear again:

> *Then I also felt this weird, I don't know. I had this all of a sudden, I had this fear […] And like I just couldn't get that out of my head. And so yeah, the whole pandemic has just been… it's probably pushed me back.* (James, p.16)

James describes a sudden onset of fear and helplessness, suggesting an overwhelming and unexpected emotional experience. This feeling of being unable to shake off the fear hints at a sense of being trapped or engulfed by it, like a cycle of distressing thoughts. His reference to being unable to get the feeling of fear out of his head reveals the persistent, intrusive and inescapable nature of the experience. The statement *"pushed me back"* also conveys a sense of regression, implying a return to

a more vulnerable or less empowered state. It is possible this regression may present as a decline in his ability to cope with his emotions effectively. This feeling of helplessness is evidenced again, accompanied by shock and acknowledgement of its impact on James' self-esteem:

> *I thought I'd like left it all behind, you know, like, shut the door. Done. But since the pandemic everything just being brought back out and then this feeling of insecurity is back […]* (James, p.23)

James reflected more on the targeted quality of the pandemic racial experiences:

> *It kind of just felt like there was a weird target on us […] And it was like, I've seen stuff before, but nothing like this where just the sight of like an Asian person would cause people to react in such a childish way.* (James, p.4)

Like Selena and Ada, James explains differences of COVID-19 incidents by drawing parallels to childlike behaviour. This contrast not only emphasises the irrationality and immaturity of the responses, but also highlights a sense of disbelief at their occurrence. His remark about having *"seen stuff before"* further implies that the nature and intensity of the discrimination faced during the pandemic stand out even in the context of his many prior experiences with racism. He continued:

> *You know that just that feeling of people looking at you in this way that you're like dirt, or like just so different that they don't wanna deal with you? It was the same feeling. Yeah. It was weird. I think that's what put me off the most. And, and stress me out the most because I didn't, it felt like I didn't know when something was gonna happen again.* (James, p.13)

There is an unpredictability and indescribability to James's feelings, and he again reiterated the weirdness he felt. His equating the looks to *"like dirt"* conveys a deep sense of disgust and contempt, highlighting the dehumanising nature of the discrimination. There is also a volatility and vulnerability to the experience, indicated by *("I didn't know when something was gonna happen again"*), which insinuates a constant state of hypervigilance needed to maintain James's safety during this period. James's description of COVID-experiences as weird or odd are repeated throughout his narrative, conveying a sense of surrealism and disbelief at the magnitude of the discrimination:

> *The microaggression stuff, it's just really odd looking back. And just small moments of like people, just the way people looked at me […] I just keep remembering little moments.* (James, p.26)

James's use of *"odd"* accentuates a dissonance between the seemingly underrated nature of microaggressions, and their significant impact on him. Although he describes only *"little moments"* of being subjected to judgment, these are remembered vividly which highlights the enduring emotional impact.

Mia also portrayed COVID-racism as feeling intensely different:

> *[Before the pandemic, racism] didn't feel as scary. And because I was thinking, "oh maybe they're just being a bit stupid." Whereas during the pandemic it feels more um… like fearful. Just because I don't know if they will do something to me because of it.* (Mia, p.12)

Mia's pause before *"like fearful"* suggests a moment of reflection, as she considers the intensity of her emotions and searches for the words to capture her experience. The

choice of the word *"fearful"* conveys a strong sense of apprehension and unease, indicating Mia's heightened awareness to potential danger during the pandemic. Further, Mia's use of *"they"* in "*I don't know if they will do something to me"* is suggestive of a more threatening perception that there are numerous perpetrators or groups of them, as opposed to individuals or one-off incidents. The grouping also indicates a generalised responsibility across the general population. In a relatable manner to James, Mia depicts a persistent sense of uncertainty and personal unsafety. Additionally for Mia, COVID racism reinforced her existing feelings of unwelcome and unbelonging:

> *I felt frustrated and also like I wasn't welcomed. And, like I know it's silly and it's like really stupid of them to do it, but then still, because already there is some level where I don't feel welcomed. [I felt] mainly just, just like angry and frustrated, but also bit helpless like, I know I can't really do anything about it.* (Mia, p.4)

While Mia acknowledges the irrationality of the discriminatory behaviour through use of terms like *"silly" and "really stupid"*, her feelings of frustration and helplessness suggests an ongoing struggle with belonging. Mia's feelings of unwelcome pre-date the pandemic, but appear to have been largely exacerbated by these circumstances. Mia's sense of helplessness around her ability to change this situation also reflects a tone of resignation. She elaborated further on how her general perception of racism has changed since the pandemic:

> *Because before [the pandemic] I always just think if only if it's aggressive then it's racist. Or if it's quite obvious then it is racist. And worse, now I realise it can manifest in many ways, and even when people don't really realise.* (Mia, p.10)

Mia's reflection reveals a shift in recognising more subtle displays of discrimination, such as microaggressions. The acknowledgment of racism occurring *"even when people don't really realise"* suggests a disconcerting recognition of Mia's heightened sense of vulnerability. COVID therefore challenged her previous understanding of racism, and conveying a sense of seclusion by enhancing feelings of loneliness of having to deal with these experiences by herself.

Li also described how her pandemic experiences were different from other racial experiences:

> *But yeah, it definitely, it's definitely shaking me because I think prior to [COVID], like say in school or university or meeting people on the street where you experience racism, I guess yeah, you deal with that a certain way. But then since [COVID], when it starts to hinder not just social, but in work as well, it feels like all-encompassing and just feels like you have no outlet anymore and you have no control.* (Li, p.20)

Li's reflection on her experiences of racism during the pandemic also reveals a notable shift in both the nature and intensity of the discrimination. The use of phrases such as *"all-encompassing"* and *"no outlet anymore"* conveys a sense of overwhelming helplessness and lack of control. The shift to the present tense in *"it's definitely shaking me"* indicates an ongoing and enduring impact that continues to affect her daily life. Li's acknowledgment of her previous strategies for coping with racism implies a sense of resilience and agency in navigating these experiences. However, the ineffectiveness of these strategies in the context of the pandemic highlights the intensity of the discrimination she faced, leaving her feeling unable to cope. She continued:

> *I think when I was younger and prior to the pandemic, I felt attacked more so as an individual, […] whilst during the pandemic it felt more like an attack on our community.* (Li, p.23)

Li's narrative highlights the shift from individualised to collective experiences of racism during the pandemic. However, her close connection and identification with members of her community appear to have contributed to a heightened sense of inescapability around COVID-related racism. The interconnectedness of the community appears to have further amplified the impact of discrimination Li experienced, not only personally, but also through witnessing the impacts all around her. This sense was elaborated further:

> *So in in in essence it felt like during COVID we [British Chinese and Asian communities] all shared a lot of trauma. Even if I didn't experience it, I would see it in like the group. So it heightened the intensity of it because it felt like even if you weren't, if it even if it wasn't happening to you, it was happening to your friend. Because intensified all the feelings, I guess.* (Li, p.26)

Li's phrase *"shared trauma"* conveys a sense of communal suffering within the British Chinese and Asian communities. This highlights the unique bond created through shared experiences of discrimination. However, Li's constant exposure to accounts of racism seem to have heightened her emotions, leading to an increased awareness of vulnerability from COVID which was unlike any other racial encounter experienced before.

3.2.2. COVID forced me to explain and defend myself/ my community

This sub-theme captures participants' need to defend, protect, and validate their identities, cultures, and at times, communities. The pandemic triggered a defensive reaction in some participants, pushing them to fend off false assumptions and misconceptions linking the

COVID-19 virus to their ethnic backgrounds. Some participants exhibited a passionate commitment to defending Chinese and Asian communities, aligning themselves closely with the collective interests of these groups. Conversely, others deliberately distanced themselves from any affiliation with China, Chinese society, or related communities. On the other hand, some participants exhibited a clear sense of blame, which appears to have been motivated by self-preservation and the desire to distance themselves in order to assert their own innocence.

Selena's narrative reveals a profound anger and frustration stemming from others' false assumptions about her nationality and the associated blame placed upon her for the spread of the virus. Throughout her interview, there is a persistent need to defend herself and distance herself from any perceived association with China, reflecting an inherent sense of injustice:

> *And the thing is, I'm not even from China, but no one ever sees you like that anyway.* (Selena, p.2)

> *But, the amount of times I've been tempted to just print a T-shirt that says "I'm not from China."* (Selena, p.6)

> *[…] half the time the reaction I wanna give is that "I'm not even from China. I just look like them. But I'm not even from there."* (Selena, p.11)

Repetition of the phrase *"I'm not from China"* stresses Selena's relentless efforts to assert her identity and reject the unwarranted blame upon her. Her desire to print a T-shirt explicitly stating her non- Chinese nationality reflects a compelling need to overtly and publicly denounce any association with China. This reflects not only her frustration but also her determination to challenge the false assumptions and stereotypes from others. However,

beneath Selena's efforts to distance herself are hints of internalised racism and blame, by the suggestion that if she was from China, the racial abuse would be viewed as warranted. The use of *"them"* to refer to Chinese nationals and absence of acknowledgment of her own Chinese ethnicity (*"I just look like them")* suggests a subtle distancing and depersonalisation, indicating a degree of disdain or contempt towards those associated with China. This internalised racism reflects the broader societal stigma and scapegoating of Chinese individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic.

She also commented on how the pandemic prompted her to explain and defend different aspects of herself:

> *[…] it does hurt because someone just that you don't even know just wants to say these hurtful things to you or just can't believe the fact that English is your first language, or that you've grown up here, that you're a British citizen. It's like they're still trying to push us out. And that's how I feel like inside, that there's a lot of them out there that still don't think that we belong in this country, even though if we were born here or have grown up here.* (Selena, p.10)

Selena's narrative exposes her hurt and frustration arising from others' refusal to acknowledge her identity and belonging in the UK. The pandemic appears to have intensified these feelings by evoking a sense of hopelessness and powerlessness, and her insistence on justifying her identity and belonging reflects an innate need to assert her place in society and counter these assumptions. Her claims of English being her first language and her status as a British citizen highlight Selena's efforts to affirm her connection to the UK, and challenge these narratives. The ominousness in her tone *"there's a lot of them out there,"* conveys a sense of vulnerability and apprehension, highlighting the pervasive nature of discrimination and the constant need to defend herself.

Ada voiced a related attitude:

> *It was just a bit hurtful I guess because I was brought up here, I live here, my home is here, I haven't been back to China for the last 5-6 years. I'm just as in the dark as everyone else who was here, but just because I look oriental doesn't mean it's necessarily gonna come to me first or I've already got it.* (Ada, p.3)

Ada expresses a sense of hurt at being unfairly targeted, despite her deep-rooted connection to, and upbringing in the UK. The comparison Ada draws between herself and *"everyone else"* in the UK serves as a justification for her unaccountability and underlines her efforts to assert her belonging in society. By emphasising her UK residence and lack of recent travel to China, Ada seeks to rationalise that she is no more to blame for the spread of the virus than any other individual. Yet this in itself feels inherently blameful; it is as if the duration of time she has spent away from China signifies her blameworthiness for the COVID-19 virus. Her use of the term *"oriental"* to describe her appearance reflects a further detachment and disassociation from being Chinese. By framing her identity in terms of appearance rather than ethnicity, Ada distances herself from her Chinese heritage, perhaps as a means of deflecting blame and avoiding the prejudices associated with being ethnically Chinese. She added:

> *I kinda felt like I needed to explain myself. Like I kinda felt like I needed to go up to these people and be like "look, I know I'm oriental, but I live here, I've not been back to China. Like you can hear it in my voice, I haven't grown up there, I've grown up here." Just yeah, just to explain myself but obviously I was aware that I might be jumping to conclusions, […] but that's how it made me feel, it just made me want to explain myself, like I'd done something wrong or something.* (Ada, p.5)

There is a tentativeness to Ada's assertions, as evidenced by her repetition of *"kinda"* which signifies a lack of confidence. However, this is immediately juxtaposed with the directness of her idea to approach strangers to explain her dissociation from China, highlighting the importance she places on asserting her identity and innocence. Ada's need to prove herself is emphasised by her consideration of the various ways she could demonstrate her disassociation from China, such as her lack of a Chinese accent. This suggests a strong awareness of prejudices associated with being ethnically Chinese, and a desire to distance herself from these. In a similar way to Selena, there is an underlying message: "I am no different from you." Ada again uses *"oriental"* to describe herself in relation to COVID-19 experiences, as opposed to Chinese. This may indicate a subtle admission of guilt or responsibility, as she aligns herself with a broader label. Interestingly, she does refer to herself as *"Chinese"* and *"British born Chinese"* in other parts of her interview not pertaining specifically to COVID-19. For example, she introduced herself by stating:

> *I identify as a BBC, British born Chinese*. (Ada, p.1)

Therefore, her use of the term *"oriental"* may feel more distant and less directly associated with the stigma and blame attributed to Chinese individuals during the COVID pandemic. This may allow Ada to navigate her identity in a way that feels more controlled, safer and more acceptable by creating distance between her and 'problem' of the COVID-19 virus. Reference to looks is mentioned again in Ada's interview, as she related this to her experiences of having to explain and justify herself:

> *You know, if I if I looked English it wouldn't, it wouldn't have happened I don't think, and it would have made a difference. However because of genetics I just look oriental even though I live, work and have my home here. So it isn't any*

different to any other Western person or ethnic minority who live here, it's just because I look oriental. (Ada, p.8)

Ada continues to justify all the ways in which she is similar to British people and dissimilar from Chinese people, in a sensed tone of desperation to overcompensate for being *"oriental."* Her protestation that physical looks are the only difference between her and *"any other Western person"* indicates her strong identification with British culture and her desire to distance herself from the stigma associated with being ethnically Chinese. Ada's assertion that she is different solely because of genetics reflects a sense of powerlessness and frustration at being judged and discriminated against based on factors beyond her control. Her need to explain herself is evident and repeated through her interview:

And for someone to make, someone that you don't know to make a judgement on that, which is why I said I felt like I need to explain myself. If I explained my background, then perhaps they would understand and be like "oh yeah, you've got nothing to do with it just like me." But because I look oriental, you know they don't know whether I might be on holiday here or I'm travelling back and forth, or you know, what my purpose is here, so that's why I felt like I needed to explain why I'm here. (Ada, p.9)

Ada's need to explain herself reflects an imperative desire to counteract others' assumptions. This drive emphasises the compelling need for others to recognise her innocence, and is suggestive of Ada's longing for acceptance and validation within British society. There are also implications on Ada's self-esteem; it seems likely that her desperation to be seen as 'the same' as everyone else reveals a low self-confidence and perception of her self-worth as lacking.

Daniel also recounted the impact of having to defend himself, yet he expressed an additional awareness and protectiveness over to his community that others did not:

> *So you know, it hasn't really left me a scar or anything, but it definitely has made an impact on me and all sorts of people making jokes about, you know, eating bats, et cetera, et cetera […] that definitely makes me feel really, really uncomfortable and making me feel the need to justify myself and my ethnic group to them that this is not true.* (Daniel, p.4)

Daniel's reference to racism 'not leaving a scar' could initially be read as a minimisation of the impact; he perceives injury to count only if it leaves a visible mark. Though, his follow up statement *"but it definitely has made an impact on me"* signals a shift which highlights his recognition of the impact and equating the racism to a physical scar with a lasting impact, only *within*. As Daniel speaks about the impact of this, he shifts to the present tense (*"makes me feel"*) indicating that this is an ongoing struggle for him. Consequently, the episodes of racism (*"made an impact"*) when they occurred in the past, yet the emotional impact has persisted, resulting in the continual need to justify and explain himself and his ethnic group to the present day. Daniel's perspective as a representative or spokesperson for his ethnic group also reflects a collectivist standpoint, wherein he feels a duty to challenge harmful stereotypes and misconceptions about his community.

He continued to elaborate on how COVID caused him to become defensive of his Chinese culture and protective of potential slander:

> *During COVID was the time that I would say I was defensive. That's that that's the word to justify, right. Like, that's the way to say my feeling, it wasn't just pure anger and you know, sadness or whatever it was just, I was just being defensive.*

> *“Hey, it's not it's not my fault, it's not our fault.” That's really the message I was trying to trying to get across to people who, you know, behave in a certain way or even when somebody makes a joke about it.* (Daniel, p.7)

By describing himself as defensive, Daniel highlights an instinct to protect himself and his community from blame and prejudice following COVID. Recognition of core emotions *“anger”* and *“sadness”* did not feel sufficient to capture Daniel’s complex mixture of emotions and compelling drive to protect his community. Furthermore, his use of the collective voice *"it's not our fault"* reflects a broader sense of shared responsibility within his community and tendency to view the group as inextricably linked with his own personal motivations. He continued with this point:

> *You know, it's very simple. And I get very sensitive about it. I'm like, “hey, look, stop. Listen, I need to tell you this. It's not our fault, it has nothing to do with bats.” […] You have people like, “hey, man, it's just a joke. It's just the joke, you know? It's not, it's not that deep,” but it's deep. It's deep for me. Yeah, and I feel I feel the need to defend myself, you know, in those cases.* (Daniel, p.8)

Daniel's frustration and sensitivity towards the minimisation of racist messages as *"just a joke"* reflects an intense emotional response to the discrimination inflicted on his community during the pandemic. His direct and assertive language, characterised by phrases like *"stop. Listen. I need to tell you”* signals his unwavering commitment to defending his community. Daniel's acknowledgment that others may perceive these comments as insignificant or trivial (*"it's just a joke")* contrasts sharply with his own perspective of these messages as deeply hurtful. This highlights the disconnect between Daniel’s lived experiences of marginalisation, and the perceptions of those who may not have experienced racial discrimination. The fluctuation between using an

individual (*"I")* and collective (*"our"*) voice further emphasises the shared experience of the pandemic within Daniel's community and a united response. He continued:

> *I think until this day, you know, if somebody says those jokes to me, my response is still being defensive. But they will be, there is definitely more, you know, like aggression rather than shock nowadays compared to, you know, during COVID.* (Daniel, p.8)

Daniel's response to jokes reveals a shift in his emotional reaction over time. While he continues to feel defensive, he also notes the greater sense of aggression present compared to shock during COVID. The COVID-19 onset allowed Daniel to process his experiences, leading to a deeper understanding of the harm caused by these jokes and comments. The persistence of these remarks has likely contributed to his growing frustration and anger, as he acknowledgment of the shift from shock to aggression, suggests a heightened sense of empowerment and assertiveness in confronting discrimination. While he may have initially been taken aback by such remarks, he now responds with a greater determination to challenge harmful stereotypes and defend his community against prejudice.

Daniel also recalled an interaction where he was asked about Chinese people eating bats:

> *And I had to explain to them, nobody eats bat. That's a that's a rumour. You know, like nobody eats bats in China. […] Right. So even though the accusation of us eating bats is not true, but it made me feel more, you know, conscious about my diet. You know, what do we eat? What's different to the Western world? Is it, is it like, are we, you know, are we eating the things that's not acceptable? You know, what is acceptable? What is not acceptable? So that that*

> *made an impact on me in terms of like sometimes I'm not even willing to eat some Chinese food in, in public places where I don't feel, you know, it's accepted by the British public*. (Daniel, p.3)

Daniel's immediate response to correct the misconception that *"nobody eats bats in China"* indicates his steadfast commitment to challenging these narratives, in order to defend his community's reputation. Despite this, the accusations left Daniel feeling more conscious about his Chinese diet and cultural practices, prompting him to question what is considered *"acceptable"* in British societal norms. This appears to have heightened Daniel's awareness of cultural differences; his reluctance to publicly consume the Chinese food he once took pride in reflects his firmly established fear of judgment and social seclusion. Moreover, his desire to conform to British standards denotes the pressure experienced to present as 'tolerable' and conform to the dominant culture, indicating a strong perception of being judged and shamed for cultural associations and 'nonacceptable' choices. For Daniel then, to defend the image of China and British Chinese people is in the interest of defending himself on an individual level.

In comparison, Li referenced a difficulty in others being unable to relate to her experiences, and the role that COVID played in highlighting this to her:

> *Through COVID [my Scottish boyfriend] would try and like kind of give people the benefit of the doubt, but that's because he's never had to put a wall up or he's never had to defend himself of being Asian.* (Li, p.15)

Li's reflection on her experiences during COVID-19 reveals an overwhelming sense of frustration and bitterness stemming from the need to constantly defend her identity as an Asian individual. The phrase *"defend himself of being Asian"* highlights the inherent

struggle and perceived burden of existing as a person of Asian descent in a society where racial prejudice and discrimination are prevalent. The notion of having to put up a *"wall"* to protect oneself suggests a constant state of vigilance and self-protection against the pervasive lived experiences of racism. This burden is further exacerbated by the lack of understanding or empathy from Li's Scottish boyfriend, who is not able to relate to her discriminatory racial experiences. COVID therefore forced Li to realise she was constantly defending herself for simply "*being"* in this way, and seems to have come to this realisation only through experiences within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.3. GET 3: Coming to terms with my experiences of COVID-racism

This theme carries introspective qualities, where participants contemplated their encounters of COVID-racism, striving to unpack the complexities of these experiences. Within this theme was a range of encouraging and also critical reflections, including: acknowledgment of the motivations and experiences of those perpetuating racism during this period; an exploration of opportunities for personal and collective growth arising from the circumstances; and the unparalleled challenges of processing and coping with COVID-related racism. Some participants shared a sense of sympathy and responsibility for others while holding a more critical self-view, whereas others perceive their journey of personal development through the pandemic as a testament to their resilience and adaptability, viewing this as an achievement in itself.

3.3.1. COVID hate was justified

This sub-theme portrays a prevailing sense of empathy toward the people of the UK and a nuanced comprehension of some of the discriminatory attitudes directed towards Chinese individuals amid the pandemic. There is a sense of connection, understanding and an

alignment with these perspectives, with participants demonstrating a tone of acceptance regarding the perceived logic and justifiability of prejudice within the context of COVID-19 origins and circumstances. These positions are coupled with sympathy and a recognition of the lived experiences of fear, anger and confusion that were prominent within Western societies during this period. Furthermore, participants demonstrated a notable tendency to align with judgemental perspectives around certain cultural practices originating from China, such as the wet markets and alleged consumption of exotic animals, resulting in responses of shame.

Daniel explained:

> *With COVID, right. Continuing from what I said about the media coverage about, you know, eating bats and linked to COVID, Wuhan virus, Kung flu, et cetera, et cetera […] all these things really like almost made it justifiable to hate Chinese. That's very different with pre COVID time. Pre COVID time we are the, you know, we're always seen as the model immigrant. Like we're the ones that behave. We we're always perceived as ones that behave well, that does not cause any violent crime, that that's always the high achievers in the society […] So the hate towards us back then was always unjustified. There was never a justified reason to hate us.* (Daniel, p.6)

By acknowledging that COVID narratives *"almost made it justifiable to hate Chinese,"* Daniel demonstrates an understanding of the way misinformation and stereotypes fuelled hate. His expression carries a sense of empathy for individuals in the Western world and recognition of the potential validity of their feelings of hatred. There is also a sense of shame over reports of Chinese people eating bats, with the message that it *would* be acceptable to hate people from a culture that *could* engage in this behaviour. This is evidenced again later when he states:

> *A lot of people see [COVID] as, you know some nasty foreign stuff that come from, you know, bat-eating people that impacted the higher society of the world.* (Daniel, p.9)

The view of COVID being "s*ome nasty foreign stuff"* reflect a strong derogatory and xenophobic attitude. Daniel's phrase *"higher society of the world"* juxtaposed with *"bat-eating people"* emphasises a dichotomy between the perceived sophistication of Western societies, and the primitiveness of China. By framing the virus as originating from a 'lower' or 'lesser' group associated with culturally inferior and unhygienic practices, Daniel suggests an understanding of how perceptions of the virus were associated with notions of cultural superiority and inferiority. Although he does not explicitly agree with this notion, Daniel's rationalisation of the fearful, anti-Asian responses demonstrate understanding and consideration of the perceived threat during this time.

Daniel also commented on the justifiability of racism before, and after COVID:

> *I encountered racism before [COVID] as well. You know, it was just dumb things. Like, "get out of the country you chink." You feel the confidence to almost swing back at them, you know, shout back at them, you know, because you feel their anger, their attitude is unjustified. And after COVID afterward, you know, the media said, you know, and even though knowing it first hand, what they said is not true, you know, the rumours are not true. But it almost made me feel it's justifiable. You know the hate towards Chinese, you know, like we, it almost feels like we made the people in this country go through COVID. You see what I mean? Cause it did come from China. It did come from China. And the world has*

suffered for three whole years because of COVID, you know, lockdowns et cetera, et cetera. (Daniel, p.6)

There is a stark contrast in Daniel's perception of the justifiability of hate since COVID. Despite acknowledging the rumours as false, Daniel still demonstrates a sense of internalised guilt and accountability. It appears he is conflicted by the logical knowledge of rumours being untrue, and the emotional response of feeling fault nonetheless. It appears the association between his Chinese heritage and the origins of the virus elicited this strong sense of responsibility. Daniel mentions the suffering caused as further reason to rationalise, and possibly pinpoint accountability for the severity of the situation. There is a sense of obligation to assume responsibility for the fact that he is associated with, and therefore partially to blame for the world's *"three whole years"* of suffering. Daniel interchanges between his own individual perspective and a collective mindset, stating *"we"* created this problem whilst knowing he had no personal involvement.

He continued:

And with this ridiculous link of bats or whatever, it made every one of us, I think it probably, you know like same for a lot of other Chinese people that they feel, you know "did we?", this question in their head did you know "did my people actually cause this?" "Was it was it something that's in my culture?" for example the wet market, right? Maybe it's not bats, but the wet market is definitely something to be blamed which which we took pride in, you know, which a lot of us took pride in, that that's what you get the freshest fish. That's what you get the freshest of everything. We took a lot of pride in that and and you know […] the wet market is celebrated […] And that cost the world three years of suffering. (Daniel, p.6)

Daniel's reflection on the attribution of blame for COVID-19 reveals an internal conflict. His expression of disbelief and dismissiveness towards the *"ridiculous link"* of Chinese people consuming of bats is accompanied by a deeper, unsettling uncertainty about his own cultural identity and its perceived implications. The question that lingers in Daniel's mind—*"did my people actually cause this?"*—captures this pervasive doubt. Despite his rational dismissal of the unfounded associations to bats, there remains a lasting doubt around the culpability of his 'people'. Daniel's reference to the wet market as a cultural practice perceived to be morally questionable further complicates his position. For Daniel, the wet market was once a source of pride and celebration within Chinese culture, yet he is now confronted with the realisation that it is now associated with widespread moral judgement and the COVID-19 virus. His acknowledgment of cultural pride is therefore juxtaposed with this recognition of the global impacts of the virus and a sense of moral responsibility. This notion was repeated again through his interview:

> *But [COVID] just you know, made me think quite a lot about, you know, for example what I said about the wet market, my culture, you know, the virus itself and "was my people really the one's to blame?"* (Daniel, p.8)

This again signifies the doubt and guilt held within Daniel's mind. It conveys an uncertainty which might be linked to the feelings of insecurity Daniel experienced during the pandemic. COVID led to deep reflections around the implications of Daniel's role, identity and level of responsibility. He relayed how he had been impacted since COVID with these questions in mind:

> *So nowadays, if somebody shouts at me, I, you know, whatever, you know racism related to COVID. You know there there's an element in me that almost don't feel confident enough to fight back to that because, you know, we are*

linked to it, but in some sort of ways you feel the pain that the racist person was feeling, because you felt the same pain. You see, that's a fundamental difference there that I don't know how to, you know, like, you know, even get out of this this mind set or this thinking although knowingly I was not the person to blame, you know. But that was something that's associated with my people. (Daniel, p.7)

Despite Daniel's rational understanding that he was not personally to blame, he seems conflicted by a sense of collective accountability of association with *"[his] people"*. He portrays a feeling of shared pain and understanding with those who express racist sentiments, viewing their actions as coming from mutual suffering. This empathetic response results in a self-sacrificing attitude, wherein Daniel allows himself to become a target of racism as a means of empathetically absorbing the anger and frustration of others. There is also a desperation in his struggle, which is highlighted by his admission of feeling trapped within a mindset that he is unable to escape. Despite his logical understanding of his innocence, there is a deep emotional attachment to his cultural identity and its implications on his experiences of COVID racism. For Daniel then, the inner conflict results from identifying with the justification of hate, and empathising deeply with both sides which symbolise the different parts of his identity.

Ada also draws similarities to rumours and misinformation as a means of justifying discrimination towards Chinese people during the pandemic:

I could understand the logic in terms of, you know maybe I'm more prone to [COVID-19] or something like that. (Ada, p.3)

So earlier when I said I can understand the logic is, where there was so many rumours going around, and there were so many things that were unconfirmed and the public announcements were, kind of wishy-washy, rumours start

> *happening kinda like Chinese whispers, "oh, it's because they ate bats," or "it's lab grown" or "it's part of a conspiracy theory," there were so many different rumours happening so I can see why people were afraid.* (Ada, p.7)

Ada, similarly to Daniel, also perceived a comprehendible link between fear, misinformation and empathy. Her acknowledgement of the uncertainty and confusion from public announcements and rumours reflects a deep empathy for others by recognising legitimate concerns that drove widespread fear and panic. Despite her acknowledgement of the rumours being false, she too conveyed a sense of understanding as to why they gained attention and why people harboured fear and suspicion towards Chinese individuals during this time. While Ada expresses empathy for those who were fearful, there is an underlying implication that the hate directed towards Chinese people may be somewhat justified due to the plausibility of the rumours.

3.3.2. COVID experiences forced me to learn, change and teach others

This sub-theme considers the perspective that the COVID-19 pandemic presented a unique opportunity to educate, develop, learn and grow. This view expands beyond the individual level, as participants also reflected on the chance to teach and change those around them. Some participants expressed an inner self-reflection that occurred during and following their COVID experiences or racism, framing these as mostly positive and rewarding consequences that originated from the negativity of discriminatory encounters. For some, there was gratitude for this insight, a sense of development and growth, and some participants also expressed newfound roles of responsibility for teaching others to achieve a goal for the greater good. There were also realisations of internalised emotions, and an awareness of the opportunities presented by the pandemic to unite a community and finally address the ongoing problem of Chinese and Asian racism in the UK.

Mia considered what she learned about herself from the COVID pandemic:

> *I think I've had quite a lot of time to sit and reflect and think about [the COVID-racism I experienced]. And I also learned more like vocabularies and like, like things that I would normally think it's ok when it's not. So I yeah, I had a lot more time to learn more about it and learn why I'm feeling certain ways.* (Mia, p.5)

Mia's mention of *"learned vocabularies"* suggests a process of development, where newly acquired knowledge has enabled her to express and better understand herself. The pandemic circumstances forced Mia to examine her own beliefs and reactions, leading to a deeper comprehension of her internal and emotional responses to racism, allowing her to recognise and challenge notions she once considered acceptable. This is supported further when she stated:

> *Before [the pandemic], I would say "oh, maybe it's my problem. It's my race, it's my identity that's causing this problem." Whereas now I can see it, it's like "no, it's not me, it's you. It's, it's your ignorance that's making me feel this way." This came about through learning and kind of understanding what's ok and what's not.* (Mia, p.9)

Mia's proactive research and introspection seem to have resulted in a newfound sense of confidence and empowerment. Her previous responses to racism emphasise strong elements of self-blame and criticism, indicating her underlying low self-esteem. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic appears to have catalysed a transformation in Mia's mindset. Her initial tendency to internalise problems and view herself as inherently flawed highlights the significant progress in her self-valuing since the pandemic began. This shift represents a thoughtful re-evaluation of her self-worth

and heightened level of self-awareness. She reflected further on how communicating with others who had similar experiences helped her to conceptualise her own feelings and foster this self-acceptance:

> *I had access to online and I began speaking to people in the same situation as me and I started to be able to, like understand why I was feeling a certain way and it's only really through that that I started to understand all of my internal racism that I never realised I had.* (Mia, p.2)

Mia came to the realisation of her underlying internalised racism only through interactions that arose from the pandemic. There is a sense that suddenly, all those years of putting herself down, blaming, and feeling as if she were problematic were understood from this new perspective. Her reference to her *"internal racism"* signifies this critical moment of self-awareness. By acknowledging the presence of these unconscious biases within herself, it seems as if she confronts an uncomfortable truth about her own role in perpetuating feelings of discrimination. She then references the role of the UK context in prompting these inner feelings:

> *Since I've moved to UK and I just thought, I always thought oh it's social anxiety. But then it's, yeah, it's only through that and through COVID that I realised it wasn't just social anxiety. Yeah, it's kind of this…, yeah, it's like internal racism that I kind of put on myself and, and that's when I realised oh there's a lot more to that.* (Mia, p.3)

Mia's revelation of her internalised racism represents a moment of clarity, relief and gratitude that *“only through”* reflections of COVID experiences was she able to finally recognise this. Her acknowledgment of this as something she *"put on herself"* suggests a newfound sense of ownership over her identity and experiences. In this

sense, COVID essentially lead Mia to learn about herself, and understand why there had always been more to her anxious feelings since being in the UK.

James also described how COVID provided an opportunity for his own self-reflection:

> *[The pandemic] brought up a lot of questions I think for myself […] You know, there's a lot of talks about like mental space and prioritising that.* (James, p.24)

> *And it's difficult I think to get into that space and cause I'm trying to, especially when [COVID] kicked off, I was trying to change myself to being more of a discussion-based rather than physical. Which I was used to so I'm trying to change my outlook and discuss like, why they think this and try and talk to people about these things.* (James, p.10)

In a similar sense to Mia, James describes a need to understand more about his *"mental space"* following COVID, and how he might learn and improve from these experiences. He acknowledges his typical urge to respond to racism physically, but demonstrates a proactive commitment to self-improvement and personal growth by consciously seeking to alter this outlook and response. This shift demonstrates James's prioritisation of his emotional wellbeing and using adversity for self-development and inner reflection. His emphasis on engaging with others to understand differing perspectives also highlights his commitment to learning and willingness to challenge his own preconceptions.

Selena shared her experiences of self-reflection and development:

> *And if I'm not sure, I'll just do my own research or ask questions because asking questions doesn't mean you're stupid, it just means that you're willing to learn*

> *and like, broaden your horizons. So there's a lot of self-reflection going on since all the hate crimes happening and talking to different type of people and so on.* (Selena, p.21)

Selena's account unveils a proactive approach to self-education, growth and a tone of responsibility for one's own learning. Her determination to develop knowledge reflects a dutiful commitment to expanding her understanding and differing perspectives. By emphasising the importance of "*broaden[ing] your horizons*", Selena denotes curiosity and inquiry as essential components for tackling hate crimes and other racial injustices.

Selena also described a further desire to educate others:

> *I'm never really want to like, push it in people's faces and be like "you need to be aware of this," because I'm not the type of person that's like that, but if they really want to I'm more than happy to like tell them about [COVID] or like, help them understand better and educate them.* (Selena, p.8)

Selena's statement reflects a balance between assertiveness and respect for individual choice. While she expresses a reluctance to forcefully impose upon others, her willingness to facilitate understanding and teach others is also evident. The use of phrases such as *"never really want to push it in people's faces"* and *"not the type of person that's like that"* suggests a conscious effort to avoid confrontational or aggressive tactics. Her eagerness to educate others about COVID-racism implies a strong sense of personal responsibility though, likely due to her lived experiences and drive to push for positive change.

Li also voiced her perspective that COVID presented an opportunity for learning that was not previously available:

> *I felt like for me [COVID] was finally a chance to, like, scream and shout about [Chinese racism] that [has] been going on for decades. Because people didn't feel like they had the opportunity or the platform before… it felt like there was a rage. Which is a good thing because they had to happen, but it was sad because it felt like people were pushed to do these things, like pushed to start really going, you know, aggressively tackling it, you know?* (Li, p.3)

There is a sense of relief in Li's account, with an emphasis on *"finally"* having the opportunity to address this long-awaited opportunity from the pandemic. There are also feelings of pent-up frustration being released; Li's use of *"rage"* evokes imagery of a collective outcry finally being unleashed. The comment that it *"had to happen"* also implies a pressure that was building and ready to burst. This sense of relief and empowerment is immediately contrasted by a sadness that people felt *"pushed"* to aggressively tackle racism. It is evident that Li's view is that aggression should not have been needed to address this important and longstanding issue in the first place.

She reflected further on the impact of her COVID experiences:

> *Obviously, there's a lot of like I think time has passed. I think I was very, I was very dark and deep and very traumatised, like, say two years ago or a year ago.* (Li, p.18)

Li's reflection indicates acknowledgment of her personal growth over time. Her description of being *"very dark and deep and very traumatised"* during the COVID period accentuates the profound emotional impact of her pandemic experiences.

However, Li's use of the past tense in describing this period suggests a sense of distance and perspective gained over time, and suggestion that she has since undergone a process of healing. Thus, her acknowledgment of transformation from a state of trauma to a more introspective self reflects learning and change precipitated by her COVID experiences.

In addition, Daniel expressed a strong desire to educate others following COVID:

> *So since the COVID, you know racist events which I experienced right […] I feel the need to change people's perception. You know, to educate people on things. For example as of the wet market and COVID the origin of COVID […] I'm still trying to educate people on a lot of things and in terms of behaviour* (Daniel, p.11)

Daniel's reflection highlights a deep sense of responsibility and commitment to advocacy in response to COVID-racism. Unlike other participants, Daniel's motivation appears deeply rooted in a desire to rectify the negative impact of the pandemic on the reputation of British Chinese people in the UK. His emphasis on the need to change people's perceptions and educate them on the origin of COVID-19 and wet market demonstrates his determined sense of justice and a compelling need to tackle misinformation and prejudice. Daniel perceives himself as uniquely positioned to challenge *"wrong"* or misinformed perspectives, adopting a leadership role in driving these changes with the goal of promoting a more inclusive and tolerant environment. He expanded on his reasons for this:

> *For a lot of people, I represent British Chinese. I represent Chinese people, you know you take away the British part, you know, I represent my entire ethnicity. So I need to behave in a responsible way. So ok, maybe some people have*

> *negative perception of us, they will start to change. And for people who have positive perception of us will always continue to have the positive perception.* (Daniel, p.11)

Daniel reflects an overwhelming sense of responsibility and duty in representing an entire ethnic group. The notion of being held to a higher standard due to this role implies a willingness to prioritise the welfare and reputation of the community over his personal interests. His drive to 'be better' therefore stems from his values, morals and behaviours being inextricably tied to Chinese people, and the demand to consider the sake of the 'greater good'. Thus, COVID heightened Daniel's awareness of behaving responsibly and prompted a need to model respectable behaviour in order to 'undo the damage' caused. This is reiterated again in his interview:

> *So since COVID I put in a lot of active effort to educate people, to follow the laws and regulations of this country […] and behave responsibly. So that that's something I've been actively engaging and I whenever I see someone do like, you know, especially if it's Chinese person doing something wrong, I'm much, much more keen to correct them and make sure the perception of us is right. And that impact, it's not just me, it's also across my friends*. (Daniel, p.13)

Daniel's efforts to educate others and uphold societal regulations reflects a heightened awareness of responsibility following COVID. There is a deep appreciation for his duty to this cause, as Daniel considers teaching Chinese people to present 'the right' image as aligned with the best interests of the wider British Chinese community. Daniel's urge to achieve this for the sake of common good and benefit to his community is clearly evident. His suggestion *"it's not just me, it's also across my friends"* also indicates that this commitment is shared among other British Chinese individuals and viewed as collectively important following their experiences of COVID-19.

3.3.3. I wish I coped with COVID racism better

This sub-theme delves into participants' responses, coping mechanisms and processing strategies following racial experiences associated with COVID-19. Participants communicated coming to realisations of the indescribable and incomparable nature of these encounters, often recounting them as unlike anything previously experienced with hindsight. Many also expressed a deep regret over their handling of the situations, reporting feelings of being caught off guard and experiencing shock, disbelief, or feeling that they would react differently now. Additionally, there was an acknowledgment of the unwarranted aggression and hostility inherent in COVID-related racism, which appears to have significantly impacted upon participants' abilities to comprehend and process these experiences.

Mia's reflections on her experiences of COVID-racism are tinted with regret for not having done more:

> *I feel like I want to do something about it. And a lot of times when things happen to me, I kind of freeze. And I just kind of let it slide sometimes, but then afterwards I get quite annoyed at myself for not saying something about it or not doing something about it.* (Mia, p.8)

Mia's use of the present tense in *"I feel like I want to do something about it,"* suggests an ongoing sense of motivation to address the injustices. However, she also openly acknowledges her tendency to *"freeze"* in the moment, which subsequently leads to feelings of frustration and self-criticism. Mia's reluctance to confront issues is accompanied by a sense of regret, which is suggestive of her view of herself as unable to effectively cope with challenging situations. This sense of inadequacy may contribute to feelings of frustration and disappointment, and there is also an apparent

lack of self-empathy, evidenced by her failure to recognise her reactions as normal and understandable responses to stressful situations.

James referenced a similar feeling:

> *Talking about [COVID] is very odd. I don't know how else to describe it really… Yeah, it's a tough one because sometimes I wish I did something.* (James, p.16)

James's description of COVID as *"very odd"* suggests a struggle to articulate his feelings, perhaps indicating a sense of discomfort or unease with the topic. There is a difficulty in expressing the complexity of his emotions surrounding COVID, hinting at a deeper, perhaps unspoken layer of internal conflict or confusion. James also portrays a sense of dissatisfaction with his behaviour through this period. The pause before expressing this sentiment may also suggest a moment of hesitation or reluctance to confront his feelings of powerlessness, as well as a potential discomfort with admitting his own vulnerability or shortcomings. He elaborated further:

> *I don't think I can [make sense of racism during COVID], that's my problem, I don't know how to make sense of them. And it's, I think for me it's easier to make sense of physical stuff because it's just a reaction. But when this sort of very deep, over- like overbearing, it's like someone's constantly got their hand over your head and ready to just like push you down. And I don't, I don't know. I don't really know yeah how to process it all or think about it and it also feels like some people have got that on you now. Like since then it's like a thing that people can just bring up if they wanna put you down even though it has nothing to do with you.* (James, p.18)

The imagery James uses here - likening the experience to someone constantly holding their hand over his head - evokes a visceral sense of suffocation and powerlessness. This imagery suggests a pervasive sense of dominance and control exerted over him, like being submerged underwater and unable to breathe, desperate and vulnerable. Moreover, James expresses a profound sense of frustration and helplessness, as he contends with the feeling that others might use the pandemic as a tool to perpetuate discrimination and belittle him. The notion that people could *"bring up"* COVID-related racism to put him down indicates his view of racism being weaponised to maintain power dynamics and injustice. These thoughts could symbolise the suffocating feeling James expressed feeling from the pandemic.

Ada reflected on similar sentiments of frustration:

> *I've never really thought about [how the pandemic made me feel], I just kind of, it was just kind of a passing thought or a passing event, and then, just kind of leave it be. But yeah it's, it's upsetting and like I said I never thought I would want to explain myself for something that isn't necessarily to do with me, so that part really… umm what's the right word? It really, frustrates me.* (Ada, p.7)

Initially, Ada acknowledges a tendency to minimise the significance of her COVID-related experiences, describing them as *"a passing thought or a passing event."* This suggests a lack of active reflection or processing on her part, perhaps due to shock or a sense of detachment from the situation. The tone carries a slight sense of remorse that the more was not done at the time to better process or cope in these instances, and she recognises that this was due to not ever fathoming that she would have to encounter what she did.

Selena also reflected on how she had been coping since COVID:

> *I've also been trying to process things a little bit better, not just brush aside that kind of like, the feelings that you get from it, but it was so different and I didn't know how […] I find that probably the best way to just get on with it is to get on with it and just let yourself feel like this for a little bit […] but it stays for a couple of days and then you'll forget about it and then all of a sudden like something will trigger it and you're like "that happened." So I think mentally it does affect me in the long term as well.* (Selena, p.11)

For Selena, there is also a sense of uncertainty expressed in her admission that she *"didn't know how"* to navigate her feelings initially, suggesting a struggle to find effective ways of coping. She also appears to adopts a somewhat dismissive attitude towards her experiences, telling herself to *"just get on with it"*. This perhaps reflects a tendency to downplay the significance of her emotions and minimise their long-term effects, possibly as a coping mechanism to avoid feeling overwhelmed. Nevertheless, Selena acknowledges the persistent nature of her emotions, noting that they can be triggered unexpectedly. This recognition of the lasting impact potentially suggests a growing awareness of her need for ongoing self-care and support for these experiences. She continued to explain:

> *But I still feel different, everywhere. Since [COVID] experiences make you feel even more different and, yeah, not like anyone. It made me more aware, but then also in strange ways isolated, even though you are like embraced in the community.* (Selena, p.18)

Selena's reflection captures a paradoxical emotional experience from her encounters during COVID-19. On one hand, she acknowledges the support and solidarity she received from her community, indicating a sense of belonging and connection.

However, this is juxtaposed with a persistent feeling of difference and isolation, suggesting a deeper, more profound internal struggle with identity and belonging. Additionally, the phrase *"experiences make you feel even more different"* suggests that the pandemic acted as a catalyst for exacerbating pre-existing feelings of difference and otherness in Selena, and this is emphasised again by her assertion that COVID made her *“more aware”.*

Li also described her experience of coping with COVID-discrimination:

> *It's weird because you're like, if you think about the comments that were made, you're like, whoa. Because I do still see myself as British Chinese but it’s… just weird.* (Li, p.13)

Li's reflection reveals a re-evaluation process of her sense of self and British Chinese identity, resulting from the pandemic. Her initial disbelief and shock upon reflecting on the severity of the comments suggests she had not fully comprehended their impact until now. Her use of *"whoa"* conveys a sense of astonishment at this realisation, indicating a present moment awareness of the severity of the situation, much like Ada. Li’s acknowledgment that she still sees herself as British Chinese despite these unsettling experiences reflects a commitment to her identity, but following this with *"but it’s… just weird"* suggests a lingering sense of uncertainty or unease. This may be the result of a dissonance between her self-perception and the external perceptions reflected in the racist comments.

3.4. GET 4: COVID had ongoing repercussions on my identity and sense of belonging

This theme is centred on topics of association, belonging and identity. Within this overarching theme, sub-themes emerged around the dynamics of evolving identities, the perception of others and the world, and the establishment of connections within communities amidst adversity brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants' narratives suggest shifting perspectives around self-concepts, including interpretations of how transformations have occurred alongside developments in time and with opportunities for self-reflection. Notably, there were apparent changes in participants' perceptions of themselves, their relating within the world, and the inherent beliefs around the motivations and intentions of others. Interpersonal relationships and the importance of social connection were also noted as impactful on participants' sense of belonging and interpretations of the world in the wake of COVID-19.

3.4.1. My identity evolved with COVID

This sub-theme examined detailed accounts of participants' perceptions of their identities, exploring what it means to exist with various components that comprise their sense of self, both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. While some participants approached this topic with a positive, harmonious and accepting outlook, others conveyed feelings of conflict or confusion regarding their identities or sense of belonging. Explorations centred on the integration of cultural, societal, and familial influences that contributed to shaping participants' self-conceptions. Some participants noted self-realisations and discoveries stemming from the pandemic, leading to major shifts in how they perceived themselves. For certain other individuals, the pandemic served to heighten particular aspects of their identities, either by strengthening or diminishing specific qualities, and by recognising coherence and conflict.

Selena considered her self-view, and how this had been impacted by COVID:

> *[Being British Chinese] is kind of bridging like a diaspora. Like individually I think growing up half of my life here and not abandoning my Chinese roots and getting to know more of it. I found that quite important since about like the second lockdown last year.* (Selena, p.1)

The term *"bridging"* conveys a connection of two separate, isolated parts brought together by a middle ground. This suggests a deliberate effort to reconcile different aspects of Selena's identity and the significance of bringing these together. It is also possible that her use of the term *"diaspora"* indicates research into this position and an interest in better understanding her experiences. Her assertion of *"not abandoning"* her Chinese roots highlights her steadfast commitment to preserving her cultural identity. Additionally, the timing of her reflections coinciding with the second lockdown implies COVID discriminatory experiences may have prompted this profound search around Selena's identity and sense of belonging. This is reaffirmed again later in the interview:

> *I kind of was very like disconnected from that Asian part of me until when the pandemic started happening, I realised I actually didn't care about history of my family or my heritage, and I started taking more interest and I think it's very nice to be able to like connect that for myself.* (Selena, p.18)

Selena's reflection on her prior disconnection from her Asian heritage suggests a reflective shift, accompanied by a tone of regret for not having noticed sooner. There is slight shock through the use of *"actually",* indicating a very stark departure from her current thinking. The adjective *"nice"* used to describe this newfound connection suggests a genuine sense of fulfilment. The meaning of Selena's history, family and heritage hold more significance now, and it feels as though these realisations could only have occurred through the very specific and intense experiences of COVID-19 racism. Selena's addition that she connected that *"for*

myself" emphasises a personal gain and fulfilment resulting from this situation fuelled by the pandemic.

Daniel also described his perspective of his identity:

> *To be honest, regardless of what my passport says right like, there's always two parts of my identity. So one is obviously British, you know the society, the values which I believe in, and you know where I live, where I grew up and as well as China because I know when I was very young age I grew up in China there are relatives still there. So it doesn't really impact my sense of identity. I always feel like there's two parts of it to me. The Chinese side, as well as the as the British side. So there's definitely two parts and I don't think there's any conflict of the two. You know, the matter of fact that I believe, you know, like they kind of complement each other in a lot of areas. So I'm happy. I basically embrace both sides.* (Daniel, p.1)

Daniel's assertion that *"there's always two parts of my identity"* conveys a sense of permanence, reflecting a deeply ingrained awareness that has been built over time. By framing his identity as comprised of *"two parts,"* Daniel not only acknowledges the complexity of his background, but also implies a sense of coherence and harmony in their coexistence. This is supported by his claims of being happy and embracing of their differences. He continued:

> *There there's a lot of meaning of being British Chinese, right, so as the name suggests, British Chinese as the part of the, you know, like the big family, the multi-culture, the family of UK. But also I remain my Chinese identity, you know, which is not a conflict to the UK side, you know I accept and you know truly*

> *believing all the values of that the British society holds but you know I remain still, I can keep hold of my heritage and culture as being Chinese.* (Daniel, p.1)

Daniel's reference to "*the big family, the multi-culture, the family of UK"* encapsulates a sense of belonging, connection and inclusivity within the broader British society. This portrayal emphasises an openness to diversity and multiculturalism, which feels important to Daniel's identity. His insistence on maintaining his Chinese heritage demonstrates a commitment to preserving his cultural roots and traditions, and through phrases such as *"remain"* and *"keep hold of,"* Daniel expresses a deliberate effort to preserve these aspects, whilst integrating into British society. He elaborated:

> *I'm not discrediting any side. I think both are very important […] so that that's why I said, you know, they complement each other the British side and the Chinese side. And together, forms me as my identity, you know.* (Daniel, p.2)

For Daniel then, to discredit any one side is to reject a part of himself; he cannot separate the two because they are two parts of a whole that form his sense of self. Daniel displays a confidence and certainty around these assertions early in the interview, but later comments on how different parts of his identity were brought into question by the impact of the COVID pandemic:

> *I sometimes feel like I don't belong anywhere. So my sense of myself, as I said before at the very beginning, I always believe in almost I always believe in two parts of me; the Chinese side as well as the British side, right. For COVID you know, like that that made me question my Chinese side and everything on the Chinese side, but I, you know, in terms of racism that made me question a lot about my Chinese-relating in the COVID time.* (Daniel, p.10)

This emphasises a starkly conflicting view for Daniel, from accepting and embracing both parts of his identity, to doubting and feeling disconnected from his Chinese side. The pandemic catalysed deep interrogations into Daniel's sense of self, resulting from being less able to relate to his Chinese identity and perhaps feeling less pride in this part of himself. This may have led to feelings of shame or embarrassment, forcing Daniel to question his previously firm and positive self-view. This all demonstrates the profound impact COVID-19 had on Daniel's perception and the stability of his identity.

Mia also reflected on her identity and conflicting dynamics within this:

> *And for as long as I've been here I kind of wanted to reject being associated with being British. And even living here, because I really wanted to like… keep my identity. And because with Britain I always associate racism, and I always feel like I wouldn't fit in, so yeah. So I always try to reject that and so I always want to retain being Chinese.* (Mia, p.1)

Mia's narrative unveils a strong internal conflict between embracing a British identity and maintaining her existing Chinese identity. In contrast to Daniel's view of harmonious coexistence, Mia perceives these identities as fundamentally incompatible; to accept one is to reject the other. Rejecting a British association stems from her deeply ingrained perception of Britain as synonymous with racism, exclusion and a sense of not belonging. Her adamant refusal to align herself with this then reflects her aversion to being associated with oppression and discrimination. The absoluteness of her statements—*"I always associate [Britain with] racism," "I always feel like I wouldn't fit in," "I always try to reject," "I always want to retain being Chinese"*—stresses the strength of her resistance to adopting a British identity. It seems this resistance serves as a protective mechanism, shielding her from the perceived harm and distress associated with accepting being British.

Moreover, Mia's use of *"for as long as I've been here"* and *"even living here"* conveys a sense of temporariness and detachment from Britain as a place of belonging. This suggests a reluctance to acknowledge Britain as her home and exhibits her ongoing struggle to reconcile her cultural identity with her lived experience in a discriminatory society. The past tense in *"I really wanted to like... keep my identity"* hints at a perceived loss, suggesting that despite her efforts, she may have been unable to resist this. She later elaborated further on changes originating from COVID:

> *I feel quite lost without [my sense of identity] and for a while I did feel quite lost because while I was rejecting being British, I was also rejecting being Chinese and just, just through, like internalised racism, I wanted to be as disassociated as I can. Just, just so no one can really stereotype me or I can't give the satisfaction of like, oh this is "oh you're Chinese, therefore you are this way." So I, I really tried to… Yeah, I really tried to dissociate myself with that. And it's only since COVID in the last year or two that I I'm starting to really like embrace my identity again.* (Mia, p.2)

Mia's description of internal conflict is driven by an attempt to avoid discrimination, yet there is also a recognition of the impossibility of rejecting just one side. She appears to arrive at the realisation that the two are interconnected through circumstances arising from COVID. In a way, by avoiding giving others the power to stereotype her, Mia was inadvertently internalising and perpetuating harmful discriminatory thoughts towards herself. The pandemic therefore prompted Mia to re-evaluate her relationship with her identity, leading her to move away from rejecting herself, towards a newfound acceptance of both sides. This appears to carry a sense of liberation for Mia that had not been felt since moving to the UK, in her comment of being able to finally embrace herself once again.

Mia also commented on how others have perceived her:

> *One of my colleagues said “oh don’t worry, I always forget that you’re Asian anyways, I think you’re British,” and like, “don’t worry, you’re not that Asian.” And I was really taken aback I was. But to me in my mind, I was like, “but I am not, I’m not British” […] And it’s like I, yeah, I feel, upset by the comment, but I don’t understand why.* (Mia p.5)

Mia's recounting of these remark reveals a dissonance between external perceptions of her identity and her own internal sense of self. The comment, *"don't worry, you're not that Asian,"* reflects a reductionist view of Mia's identity, suggesting that her level of Asian-ness is somehow quantifiable and subject to judgment, similar to saying “you’re not *that* undesirable.” This remark implies a hierarchical ranking of identities, with British being perceived as more desirable or acceptable than Asian. However, Mia holds the opposite view; her refusal to identify with being British seemingly stems from a fear of her negative associations to Britishness, suggesting a deep discomfort with adopting an identity that contradicts her lived experiences and self-view. Mia's confusion and upset comes from the dissociation between how others perceive her and how she identifies herself, which appear to have exacerbated feelings of being misunderstood and unseen.

Ada communicated her outlook on her identity:

> *I identify as a BBC British born Chinese. Obviously I don’t look English I look Chinese however because I was brought up here I speak English fluently as part of my mother tongue and equally I’ve been brought up in the Western education system and I have English friends so all of that definitely shapes my identity.* (Ada, p.1)

By referring to herself as a BBC, Ada acknowledges the encompassing of both her Chinese heritage and British upbringing. However, there is a notable emphasis on her alignment with English cultural norms and practices, suggesting a strong sense of belonging and identification with English culture. Her comment that she *"looks Chinese however"* appears to downplay the significance of her ethnicity in shaping her identity, instead focusing on the cultural and social aspects mentioned. She later reflected on her sense of self in relation to the pandemic:

> *When I was younger, I wasn't very confident or comfortable in my own skin. Then since being around other adults that accepted me and working for like 6-7 years, so I've built like 6-7 years-worth of confidence and proudness in my identity. So when the pandemic happened, I wasn't embarrassed or ashamed to be Chinese. Cause I'd already, I already built up that confidence and I already I was already comfortable in my own skin. However, if I hadn't built that up, I would probably be really embarrassed still.* (Ada, p.18)

Ada's awareness of the years spent building her confidence are noted to have influenced her experiences through COVID by enabling her to be more resilient and surer of herself. The prior acceptance and support she received over the 6-7 years therefore lay a foundation of confidence that helped her navigate challenges brought about by the pandemic. Ada's assertion that she was not embarrassed or ashamed to be Chinese during this time, despite the ongoing racism speaks to her resilience and strength cultivated prior to this. However, her acknowledgment that her experience of COVID would have been different had she not built up this confidence accentuates the fragility of her self-confidence as contingent on external validation.

James on the other hand acknowledged changes in his identity since experiencing racism and aggression through COVID:

> *The identity thing I think is only actually gone stronger in terms of wanting to be, or accepting my Chinese side, my Asian side. I think since you know all that like weird COVID racism and aggression, I think I think, yeah, I've just more wanted to move more towards actually accepting the culture, being Asian. Because I'm like, I don't, I don't actually care like. Uh, I don't know. It's kind of one of those where it's just highlighted more of the things where I actually do appreciate about Asia and my Chinese identity, I guess so it's actually made me want to embrace it more.* (James, p.20)

James's reflection that COVID-related racism had prompted him to move towards accepting his Chinese identity reflects a significant shift in his perspective. However, the reluctance and uncertainty conveyed in his language marked by phrases such as *"I think I think, yeah," "Uh, I don't know,"* and *"I guess,"* suggests an internal struggle between acknowledging the value of his Chinese identity and fully embracing it. These tentative expressions may indicate the tentative nature of his embrace and suggests a hesitancy to fully commit, perhaps stemming from a fear of vulnerability or uncertainty about what acceptance of a Chinese identity really means.

3.4.2. COVID made me more wary of others and the world

This sub-theme describes shifts in participants' perceptions of and interactions with others during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Several participants noted changes in their beliefs regarding the inherent moral 'goodness' of individuals, as well as shifts in their perceptions of the behaviours and motivations of others. There was a prevalent sentiment of experiencing a loss of hope or faith in humanity, coupled with a heightened sense of caution regarding personal safety. Participants reflected on how the pandemic had influenced their

dispositions, noting a tendency towards a more cynical or pessimistic worldview. Additionally, two participants highlighted the intersectionality of oppression related to gender and race, emphasising feelings of wariness and distrust in their surroundings. Lastly, expressions of self-doubt, suspicions toward others and an overarching attitude of vigilance stemming from interactions during and after the pandemic were evident among participants.

A shared attitude among participants expressed a loss of belief, hope or trust in the moral goodness of people resulting from COVID-19 racism. James reflected:

> *I kind of like I lost all faith in government. I lost all faith in a system like in a general system, and then there was a bit of like, sadly, also a bit in humanity.* (James, p.24)

James's expression reflects a sense of disappointment and despair. The extremeness and intensity of James's feelings suggest a deeply-felt sense of betrayal that authorities did not take more action to address racism and protect those in need. His loss of faith in humanity signifies a broader sense of despair, signifying a belief of deeper moral failing within wider society. He explained further:

> *But yeah, as soon as all this [racism from COVID] happened and just the feeling of people being unnecessarily aggressive towards you […] it just made me feel really sad again, really.* (James, p.8)

For James, there is a recognition that some level of aggression may be expected and tolerated, but the intensity or frequency of the pandemic encounters crossed this line. It seems that prior to COVID, James perceived there to be a justified level of hostility, which speaks to his internalised acceptance of racism within this context. The intensified aggressiveness of COVID-related encounters therefore appeared to

exacerbate feelings of sadness and injustice, indicating a change from his previous tolerance of discriminatory behaviour.

Very similar sentiments were also communicated by Selena around the 'unnecessariness of aggression' from COVID-19, and a loss of faith in people generally:

> *At first you know you don't experience so many racial hate crimes before the pandemic, and like the occasional people taking the piss out of you, like harmless borderline, just racism. […] But then since when they it became more aggressive and more like in your face, I started losing a little bit of faith in humanity […]* (Selena, p.19)

Selena's acknowledgment of pre-COVID racism as *"harmless borderline, just racism"* also highlights an acceptance and normalisation of discriminatory behaviour. This language implicitly minimises the severity and impact of the encounters, suggesting a desensitisation to discrimination. However, the aggressive racism encountered during COVID led Selena to not only realise the severity, but pushed her to the point of altering her perception of human nature altogether.

She elaborates further on how COVID-racism made her more cautious of others:

> *I've always been a bit of like a sceptic, or a bit more pessimistic than the usual person, like not having expectations, so you're never disappointed kind of thing, that kind of mindset. But I also know it's not healthy to always be like this, so I try to always reflect a bit more often on things. And ever since COVID it changed, changed my view of people a lot. I find it so hard to give them the benefit of the doubt.* (Selena, p.19)

Selena demonstrates self-awareness through active reflection of her thoughts, hope and a willingness to improve and understand what is *“healthy”* in her view of others. However, her experiences of the pandemic seem to have pushed her further from this position; there is a heightened sense of wariness, distrust and suspicion in response to these encounters, which confirm her original pessimistic disposition. She confirms this again later in the interview:

> *But with COVID it makes me see people differently. Like it definitely makes me more wary, which is not exactly the best because sometimes it makes it hard to trust people and their intentions. So it keeps your guard up a little bit […]*
> (Selena, p.23)

Selena reveals a struggle between her innate desire for trust and connection, and a heightened wariness of others resulting from her COVID experiences. The indication that she wished she could trust people more sits alongside an apparent awareness of how this could impede her relationships and relating to others. Her realisation of this (*"not exactly the best,"*) demonstrates a conflict between her instinctual response to protect herself, and her longing for genuine connection with others. However, the need for self-preservation is greater; her knowledge of what people are capable of and first-hand COVID experiences overrule any hope of viewing others as trustworthy. This cautiousness is echoed in other parts of her interview:

> *You still feel very like, a bit scarred inside because you don’t know when it will stop, and ever since COVID, I don’t think it will stop.* (Selena, p.10)

Selena's description of *feeling "scarred inside"* captures the enduring emotional impact of her experiences with racism, suggesting profound and lasting psychological injury.

Scarring conveys a sense of permanence and irreparable damage, highlighting the trauma and pain resulting from repeated encounters of discrimination. Furthermore, not knowing when it will stop emphasises a pervasive sense of uncertainty, despair and hopelessness with a tone of resignation following the COVID pandemic to hope for change.

Ada, like Selena and James, also expressed an impression that the level of COVID-racism was ‘unnecessarily aggressive’:

> *I feel like that kind of aggression is just unnecessary, so it has made me see the world differently, and it’s scary.* (Ada, p. 12)

Ada's acknowledgment that the aggression she experienced during the pandemic was *"just unnecessary"* is suggestive of her recognition of the disproportionate and unjustified intensity of COVID racism. Comparably to both Selena and James, it appears Ada had previously tolerated less overt forms of discrimination. The term *"it's scary"* encapsulates Ada's emotional response to the heightened aggression and conveys a sense of vulnerability and fear. This suggests a shift in her worldview towards perceiving the world as a more threatening, hostile and fearful place. She expanded on how the pandemic also changed her wariness of others:

> *[COVID] made me think of people as being capable of a lot more than on the surface. It’s it definitely, so with my experiences and watching the news and social media, it’s made me be more aware of my surroundings. Like if I was, prior to COVID, going out for me I would mainly be aware of my safety as a woman, you know […] but after the pandemic I’m more aware of what I look like as well, the fact that I’m oriental.* (Ada, p.12)

Ada's acknowledgment of people as *"capable of a lot more than on the surface"* feels ominous and demonstrates a perception of others as potentially deceptive or misleading, resulting from her COVID experiences. There is also a shift in Ada's awareness of her personal safety from a gendered perspective, to reflect a newfound consciousness of her racial identity. This indicates a sensitivity to her identity and a resigned acceptance of her disadvantaged position within society. She reflected further on this:

> *Yeah I never really thought like being oriental would, I don't know I guess be of an issue or detriment, but now I think of that as well. Like, "where am I going?" "Is there going to be any issues because I'm oriental?" Whereas before would be a case of, I'm a woman, so there's certain things you just need to be aware of, but now I'm aware of things from a racial perspective as well.* (Ada, p.13)

The term *"detriment"* suggests a recognition of the potential harm, damage or disadvantage associated with Ada's *"oriental"* identity, highlighting her view of discrimination having irrevocably impacted her sense of safety in the world. This revelation signifies a transformation in Ada's perspective of her intersecting gender and racial identities, and the unique challenges this presents on her interaction with her environment following the pandemic.

A similar view was also shared by Selena:

> *Being a person of colour and also female, we have a lot to watch out for, and especially since the pandemic when it comes to racism and also like sexual harassment.* (Selena, p.5)

Thus, since COVID, both Ada and Selena have a heightened sense of caution with regards to intersectional gender and racial discrimination. There is a guardedness to both their views of others impacting their personal safety. Having *"a lot to watch out for"* conveys a sense of Selena's perpetual vigilance and constant need to be alert to potential threats and dangers. There seems to be recognition of pre-existing societal inequalities, plus how these have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Selena's tone of acceptance of these additional challenges may therefore stem from her prior lived experiences of oppression and a feeling of familiarity.

Li reflected on changes in her perceptions of others since COVID:

> *And so then you just start to really question your capabilities in general, like no matter where you go […] COVID definitely has changed the way I perceive everything around me basically. Definitely I struggle to... I'm not a, I'm not a pessimist per say. I'm still, I still have, like, a lot of optimism, but like, I definitely do like if I see a situation where umm, something like that, there's like question marks over things like that, I do generally gravitate towards not giving people the benefit of the doubt.* (Li, p.21)

Li's account reflects an internal sense of self-doubt, with her admission to questioning her capabilities implying an inherent uncertainty of her own worth. Li also evidences a profound shift in her perception of the world and the inherent untrustworthiness of others. It is possible that these may have resulted from repeated exposure to racial discrimination through the pandemic period, leading to constant disappointment and betrayal. Despite Li's assertion of her general inclination towards optimism, there is a tone of reluctance to let her guard down following COVID, in a clear need to protect herself from further harm. Li also identified the frequency of incidents during COVID as having an impact and contributing to these feelings:

> *[Racist incidents] can feel like it's happening like very close to one another, and very frequent. That's when you, yeah, you start to feel very disheartened.* (Li, p.21)

Li's feeling of disheartenment arises from an overwhelming sense of powerlessness and vulnerability from COVID encounters. The relentlessness of these incidents left Li feeling overwhelmed and defeated, with little opportunity to regain hope or confidence in others. It seems as if there was no opportunity for healing or to rebuild trust in between occurrences, resulting in a perpetual cycle of discrimination that reinforced Li's negative beliefs about human nature and the likelihood of change.

A similar attitude of self-doubt resulting from COVID was expressed by Daniel:

> *So, you know, like, ever since [COVID] when somebody you know, like a complete stranger does anything negative to me, like for example on the streets of London, which happens a lot, right, you know, random people screaming at me and people walking past. Now you don't know what mental state they're in or whatever, right, but there will always be a question in my head, "Is this guy doing this because I'm Chinese?" "Is it because of my ethnicity he's shouting at me?" Yeah. So, so that was another impact COVID had on me that was quite lasting and now and you know, every single time when that question arises in my head I need to think twice, you know, about a lot of things, right.* (Daniel, p.5)

Daniel's reflection highlights the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in heightening his awareness of his surroundings, safety and perception of his racial identity. The pandemic appears to have introduced a layer of doubt and suspicion into his interactions with others, resulting in a constant sense of vulnerability, uncertainty and

wariness. Daniel's description of needing to *"think twice"* every time to question their motives suggests a continuous and tiring evaluation process in response to these encounters. This speaks to the enduring impact of COVID-related racism on Daniel's worldview.

3.4.3. COVID connected me to my Chinese/ Asian community

Participants reflected on how the COVID-19 pandemic promoted a deeper connection to their Chinese and Asian communities. There was a shared sentiment of experiencing a newfound sense of belonging and self-identification within these communities, and joy of being part of something bigger. Some participants described a journey from initial adversity from COVID to a phase of collective empowerment and celebration. Reflections also centred on the potential for resilience, growth and close connection amidst these collective challenges. Themes of belonging, coping through connections, the therapeutic nature of sharing experiences, and the empowerment of activism and shared community involvement emerged. Participants also emphasised the transformative influence of shared experiences; the profound impact of feeling understood and being able to relate to others during the challenging COVID times.

Daniel shared his experiences of COVID pushing him to become more involved within his community:

> *When you're after the COVID racism, so for me, I felt the need to, you know, be more actively involved in my community to make sure that, you know society is right for this. You know, like so we don't experience more racism, it's important for me.* (Daniel, p.13)

Daniel's reflection highlights his proactive response to COVID racism, demonstrating a heightened sense of responsibility and commitment to creating a fairer society. This drive appears to come from Daniel's recognition of the importance of collective action in addressing and preventing racism and a need to protect those in his community. His actions reflect a sense of duty and responsibility towards preventing further discrimination, and his engagement with his community seems to reinforce this.

Li also described how the pandemic pushed her towards community connection:

> *It wasn't until I started connecting with people over the pandemic like other British Asians whether they're London-based or not. But because my background is like I grew up in a take away a Chinese take away, there is a certain generation of children that that also did. And so, it's almost like trying to find each other again and like long lost family almost. And so, yeah, I choose to spend more time with those guys now because there's just a lot of shared experiences.* (Li, p.18)

Li's description reveals a sense of camaraderie and shared identity through shared cultural experiences. The analogy of *"long lost family"* evokes a deep and familiar bond that goes beyond acquaintanceship. There is an instinctual sense of belonging and connection among these individuals who have grown up in similar contexts. The shared experiences run so deep they feel known, accepting and supportive, just like family. The reference to growing up in a Chinese takeaway further highlights the unique, formative experiences that shape their shared identity, promoting a sense of kinship and understanding among those who have had similar cultural upbringings.

For Li, despite being strangers, the shared features of childhood, age and cultural identity act as powerful foundations for building meaningful connections. The phrase

"almost like trying to find each other again" suggests a mutual recognition and longing for connection among each other. There is a sense of inevitability and certainty in Li's description, as if the bonds of shared identity and experience are so strong that they are bound to find one another eventually. Yet, it took the pandemic and shared experience of COVID-related racism to push Li towards seeking these connections. She goes on to state:

> *I felt more empowered [compared to pre-COVID], I guess or more passionate towards doing more community work and more umm, activist work. Because actually I felt I know I felt like it was like something that we needed to do together as a united front […] It felt it felt shift, but also it felt umm like a call to action as a group of people rather than being just singled out for the fact that you were Chinese. And because I connected with all these other people, it felt like I had people to talk to about this kind of stuff. Like so, yeah it was like isolating but now I feel better for it because I I've connected with other people.* (Li, p.23)

Li's recognition of a *"call to action"* suggests a shared understanding among individuals within the community over the need to address racism together. This collective response highlights the *"shift"* that Li refers to, moving from feeling isolated and singled out as an individual, to finding strength and solidarity in support others. Connections formed with others during the pandemic appear to have provided a sense of validation and support, enabling Li to engage in meaningful discussion towards positive change. She continued:

> *But then, as I said, there was that kind of like a unified front […] the rage kind of ended up making people like, act on it together. And that's where there's like groups like BC [British Chinese], like BSA [British South Asian], BA [British Asian] network, ESA [East south Asian] sisters […] So there was a lot of people,*

> *like, started to vocalise their experiences and their emotions and start putting together resources to help each other cope better. So in respects it was bad, but it was also like a lot of good came out of it and we're on that other kind of side of it now that we're kind of trying to continue that and like celebrate it and help each other.* (Li, p.26)

The use of *"rage"* is indicative of the intense, uncontrolled anger felt within the community in response to the experienced injustice of COVID racism. The intensity of this response seemed to activate the need for these various, specific support networks. Li therefore acknowledges that whilst her original experience of COVID racism was one of adversity, it resulted in mutual support between various Asian ethnic groups, highlighting the importance of cultural identity and solidarity in responding to discrimination within the context of British society. She summarises how her community assisted her coping during this time:

> *Yeah, so I think I think I've coped as best as I could by wanting to share like nice things with other people and like remind us that we were actually like great people, despite all the shit that was being said about us. And so that I think that was good. And yeah, I found I found a community which is really nice and trauma bonding, basically.* (Li, p.18)

Li uses the term *"trauma bonding"* to refer to the bond created from shared traumatic experiences of racism by members of her community. There is an emotional connection and shared empathy for what one another have experienced, providing a special understanding and appreciation. Li also demonstrates a keen desire to counteract negative narratives during COVID times through acts of kindness and affirmations. In this way, Li contributes to a communal sense of belonging, resilience

and solidarity which appear to have helped her cope with the challenges of racism during this period.

A similar sentiment of finding connections and building therapeutic support during the pandemic was expressed by Selena:

> *I think also like one of the positive things that came out of COVID was meeting more people and like within the ESEA [East Southeast Asian] community that like me, where they understand what it's like to not really fit in anywhere […] they know how you feel to be an immigrant in this country or just made to feel different. I think that's how I coped, just by talking about [racism] [with ESEA/ diaspora friends] […] yeah, that feels a little bit better to like get it out there, talking to people that would understand how it would feel like to be made to be different. It's like there was like group therapy for racism.* (Selena, p.11)

Comparably to Li, Selena also mentions the positive outcome of a community being brought together by the negativity of COVID. For Selena, connecting with others within the ESEA community served as a coping mechanism for dealing with the discrimination. In this way, sharing her experiences and feelings with those *"that would understand"* helped to alleviate the emotional burden and provide a sense of validation. Selena's analogy of *"group therapy for racism"* highlights the therapeutic nature of these open and supportive interactions, and the collective processing of shared experiences in a safe and healing way.

James reflected on his experience of finding belonging within his Asian community following COVID:

> *I've surrounded myself in this really nice Asian community, which makes me feel more Asian and more at home even though we're in London […] I've put myself in a better space rather than necessarily the situation itself getting better.* (James, p.15)

James's reference to feeling *"more Asian"* by being part of this community conveys his deepening sense of belonging, despite the non-conducive setting of London. He acknowledges that while the external circumstances may not have changed, his deliberate choice to immerse himself in this supportive community have proven highly beneficial for his mental wellbeing. This also reveals a new level of proactiveness that was not present in James prior to COVID, possibly having resulted from the intensity of his COVID experiences. For James then, engagement with his Asian community had a huge impact on his resilience, mental strength and overall identity. He reflected further on COVID impacting his general Chinese identity:

> *The identity thing I think is only actually gone stronger in terms of wanting to be, or accepting my Chinese side, my Asian side.* (James, p.20)

It seems that prior to the pandemic, James was less inclined to embrace his cultural heritage, but challenges of COVID-19 resulted in a newfound sense of acceptance, pride and connection to his Chinese and Asian roots. James's involvement in the Asian community clearly played a pivotal role in this process, providing him with a supportive environment where he feels validated and understood. As a result, James demonstrated increased confidence and security in his identity, recognising the importance of embracing all aspects of who he is.

4. DISCUSSION

This chapter aims to expand upon the identified themes from the analysis section, by situating the findings within the context of theoretical frameworks and psychological literature. An overview of the findings will be presented and linked to appropriate theories, followed by a critical discussion which will examine the strengths and limitations of the study including methodological, procedural, personal and epistemological reflexivity considerations. A discussion of the relevance to the field of counselling psychology will be detailed thereafter, and potential implications for practice will conclude the chapter.

4.1. Overview of findings

This research investigated how six British Chinese individuals made sense of their experiences of racism in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis revealed several common themes from participants' accounts. These included the perception that racism is an inevitable part of living in the UK and that others do not care. COVID-19 also evoked childhood memories of exclusion and otherness. There was a conflict between viewing COVID-related racism as shocking, unjust, and ‘wrong,’ versus seeing the blame as justified and aligning with discriminatory views. Participants also expressed a desire to have coped more effectively with COVID-related racism and viewed the pandemic as an opportunity for personal growth and education. Furthermore, participants reported more cynical worldviews following the pandemic and noted ongoing repercussions on their identity and sense of belonging, both within their community and in wider society.

4.2. Belonging

The theme of belonging emerged as a central aspect in the current study, highlighting its universal significance among participants. Belongingness, defined as the recognition and

acceptance of an individual within a group (Anant, 1966; Hagerty et al., 1992), represents a fundamental human need to establish and maintain social connections (Maslow, 1954). This need was prominently reflected in participants' efforts to cultivate meaningful ties within their Chinese and Asian communities. Participants discussed how their sense of belonging evolved during the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasising how these new connections allowed them to redefine their self-identities, recognising the personal significance and value this brought. Conversely, the absence of belonging is associated with feelings of isolation and distress (Goodwin et al., 2010), adversely affecting wellbeing (Allen, 2019; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). This was evident in participants' perception of the UK as a racist environment, which commonly led to feelings of isolation, anxiety, and apparent challenges in coping with COVID-19-related discrimination.

Participants shared reflections on how their sense of belonging evolved during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many noted the profound impact of racial incidents during this period on their self-perception, their place in the world, and their relationships with others. Within Chinese and Asian communities, there was a strong sense of solidarity, understanding, acceptance, and belonging. Participants highlighted how these newfound connections allowed for a redefinition of their self-identities, acknowledging the personal significance and value this brought to their lives.

4.3. Stigma and internalised stigmatisation

Stigmas play a central role in social categorisation, defining distinctions between ingroups and outgroups based on shared traits or differences (Turner et al., 1987). According to social identity principles, this categorisation fuels intergroup competition by favouring ingroup members while marginalising those in the outgroup (Stets, & Burke, 2000). Greenwald and Banaji (1995) noted the use of pronouns like "we" and "them" to reinforce ingroup-outgroup dynamics. In the current study, three participants—James, Li, and Daniel—used "we" to

denote their position within the marginalised British Chinese outgroup. Interestingly, Selena oscillated between using "we" to refer to both the British Chinese outgroup and the British ingroup, signalling her perceived alignment with both groups. Conversely, Ada wholly identified with the British ingroup, using "we" to denote her ingroup membership and “them” to refer to the marginalised British Chinese group. This demonstrates differing alignments of social identities and perceived traits among the participants.

Goffman (1963) theorised that stigma becomes internalised when individuals face persistent stigmatisation from others, resulting in a disconnection between the social identity an individual anticipates, and the identity they perceive others attribute to them. He stated:

> “The stigmatized individual tends to hold the same beliefs about the identity that we do. [This may cause him] to agree that he does indeed fall short of what he really ought to be. Shame becomes a central possibility.” (Goffman, 1963, p.7).

The findings of the current study reveal instances of internalised stigma among participants concerning the negative associations between COVID-19 and Chinese individuals. Several participants expressed disapproval and assigned blame to China, its people, and Chinese cultural practices, leading to evident attempts to distance themselves from the shame associated with these perceptions. Some participants even rationalised the hate they encountered during the pandemic, aligning with Western viewpoints that label certain Chinese cultural practices as 'wrong'. Notably, Daniel expressed a willingness to endure racism post-pandemic to make amends for perceived shortcomings and internalised shame associated with his connection to COVID-19. Mia also recognised and labelled her own internalised racism, acknowledging that she had perpetuated these feelings of discrimination since moving to the UK.

Stigma communication theories offer valuable insights into the formation, management, and perpetuation of stigma through communication channels. The findings of this study highlight the significance of stigma communication theories in understanding how stigma is formed and maintained through these channels. R. Smith (2007) introduced a model consisting of three key elements: the characteristics of stigma messages, cognitive and emotional responses evoked by these messages (such as anger, disgust and fear), and their influence on shaping stigmatising attitudes. Expanding upon Smith's model, Meisenbach (2010) further categorised stigma management strategies based on whether individuals accept or challenge societal perceptions and personal beliefs regarding stigmatisation (O'Shay et al., 2023).

Meisenbach (2010) outlined three responses to internalising societal stigmas: acceptance, avoidance, and proactive change. Mia and James exemplified acceptance, integrating the stigma into their identities and forming community connections. Conversely, Selena distanced herself from the stigma, while Ada employed avoidance tactics by aligning closely with ingroup perspectives and using distancing language. Lastly, Meisenbach (2010) proposed that individuals who accept their association with the stigma but seek to change its societal perception may employ techniques to mitigate the stigma's impact. Daniel demonstrated this response by seeking to change societal perceptions of the stigma associated with COVID-19, aiming to restore the image of the British Chinese community. These findings highlight the complex ways in which individuals negotiate and communicate stigmatised identities.

4.4. Theories of intergroup relations

Intergroup theories highlight the role of power dynamics and dominance in shaping intergroup hostility and racial conflict. Social Identity Theory, outlined by Tajfel and Turner (1986), suggests that individuals perceive themselves as part of social groups and can

categorise others as ingroup or outgroup members based on racial identity. It identifies patterns of intergroup discrimination and prejudice arising from ingroup favouritism, driven by social comparison and the desire for positive differentiation from outgroups (Ellemers, & Haslam, 2012). Optimal Distinctiveness Theory, proposed by Brewer (1991), expands upon Social Identity Theory by proposing that social identity balances the need for similarity to others with the need for differentiation. Accordingly, minority groups often offer both a sense of similarity among members and differentiation from the majority, leading to strong social identification and group loyalty.

In the current study, participants expressed a strong sense of community, connection, and belonging within Chinese and Asian groups. Li noted the emergence and reinforcement of distinct sub-groups within these communities during the pandemic (e.g., BSA, BA, ESAS), which promoted solidarity through shared experiences of COVID-related racism. These findings support Brewer's (1991) proposition that minority groups achieve a delicate balance between similarity and differentiation, leading to strong intergroup connections. Furthermore, several participants expressed a compelling urge to defend the social identity of their racial and ethnic group, as evidenced in the theme *COVID forced me to explain and defend myself/my community*. This observation underscores the importance of individuals not only perceiving themselves as individuals but also as members of a collective social group, as outlined in Social Identity Theory. Li captured this sentiment effectively:

> *I think when I was younger and prior to the pandemic, I felt attacked more so as an individual, […] whilst during the pandemic it felt more like an attack on our community.* (Li, p.23)

This highlights the significance of COVID-19 in influencing and strengthening social identity and group membership, illustrating the intricate dynamic between individual and collective identities through adversity.

Social Dominance Theory, proposed by Sidanius and Pratto (1999), offers a framework for understanding the formation and perpetuation of social hierarchies within society. These hierarchies, based on factors such as race, nationality, and socioeconomic status, are reinforced through the legitimisation of cultural beliefs by dominant groups. These so-called 'legitimising myths' justify the position of dominant groups, perpetuating hierarchies and reinforcing beliefs through socialisation. These hierarchy-enhancing myths are maintained through the promotion of "first-worldism," the implicit view that the lives, rights, and concerns of middle-class members of the 'first world' come first, often to the exclusion of those from the 'second' and 'third' worlds (Pratto, & Stewart, 2011, p.2).

Narratives from the current study highlighted the persistence of harmful stereotypes, legitimising myths, and value judgments concerning China and Chinese people. For instance, participants referenced prevalent beliefs in the UK that associated COVID-19's origin with a foreign society characterised as unclean, immoral, and inferior. Daniel recalled the widely held notion of the *"higher society of the world"* being affected by *"some nasty foreign stuff [from] bat-eating people"* (p.9).

Furthermore, these sentiments resonate with principles outlined in the Integrated Threat Theory (ITT) (Stephan, & Stephan, 1993, 1996, 2000). ITT posits that negative perceptions of outgroups can arise from perceived symbolic threats, including disparities in morals, values, beliefs, or attitudes (Croucher, 2017). Thus, widespread perceptions of China and Chinese people as threatening—attributed to differences in values and attitudes, such as the consumption of bats—perpetuated fears during the COVID-19 period. Some participants expressed alignment with these views, implying that COVID-related racism was somewhat justified and understandable due to their perception of questionable morals and values associated with Chinese cultural practices, even though they acknowledged that bat-eating was merely a rumour. These findings support ITT and demonstrate the significant influence

that symbolic threats have on perceptions and behaviours, to the extent that even outgroup members believed and agreed with these views, knowing fully and logically that they were false.

4.5. Co-cultural Communication Theory

Co-cultural Communication Theory, developed by Orbe (1996, 1998), addresses the challenges faced by marginalised groups in balancing their own cultural identities with those imposed by the dominant culture. The theory recognises that individuals from co-cultural backgrounds must adjust their communication to navigate power differentials inherent in society. Within this framework, assimilation involves adopting the norms, values, behaviours and communication patterns of the dominant culture. It is often driven by the desire for acceptance, social integration and to address discrimination, so that co-cultural groups can thrive within the dominant societal structure (Orbe, 1998).

Evidence of assimilation emerged in the current study, as participants shared their experiences of navigating both Chinese and British cultures and identities. Daniel and Ada both described a seamless integration of these identities prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, experiencing a sense of unity between British and Chinese cultures. However, for Daniel, this balance shifted during the pandemic, leading him to question his Chinese heritage and adopt a stronger alignment with the dominant British cultural norms and values. For example, he expressed heightened consciousness around Chinese foods that are viewed as unusual or unacceptable in British culture, demonstrating public conformity to dominant British norms:

> "*So even though the accusation of us eating bats is not true, but it made me feel more, you know, conscious about my diet. You know, what do we eat? What's*

different to the Western world? Is it, is it like, are we, you know, are we eating the things that's not acceptable? You know, what is acceptable? What is not acceptable? So that that made an impact on me in terms of like sometimes I'm not even willing to eat some Chinese food in, in public places where I don't feel, you know, it's accepted by the British public." (Daniel, p.3).

Mia, on the other hand, appeared to initially resist embracing the dominant British culture out of fear of losing her Chinese identity. This resistance intensified amid the COVID-19 crisis, highlighting her struggle to reconcile her cultural identities. Mia's dilemma resonates with Orbe's (1998) observation that pressure to conform to the dominant culture can lead to feelings of alienation and internal conflict, as evidenced by her sense of disorientation while grappling with the rejection of both British and Chinese identities: *"[…] for a while I did feel quite lost because while I was rejecting being British, I was also rejecting being Chinese"* (Mia, p.2). These accounts exemplify the prioritisation of cultural ideologies among dominant groups in the UK, leading to internalised oppression, the loss of cultural identity, and ultimately contributing to the marginalisation of British Chinese individuals.

4.6. Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory also acknowledges the intersection of race with other social identities, recognising its deep impact on individuals. In the current study, Ada and Selena reflected on intersecting oppressions related to their race and gender, which were amplified during the COVID-19 period. Both participants expressed a heightened awareness of having "more" to navigate than others following COVID, illustrating their recognition of the intersection of these identities. These findings support suggestions that the intersecting identity of gender may further intensify COVID-related racism experiences, which aligns with findings from Ang et al. (2023), who studied the intersection of racism and sexism in Asian women during the

pandemic. Their analysis identified a lack of recognition around the extent of racism faced by Asian women, and how experiencing both sexism and racism together complicated understandings of these COVID-related experiences, preventing change of this treatment.

Asian Critical Race Theory (R. Chang, 1993) addresses the pervasive racial discrimination experienced by Asians, perpetuating stereotypes of the model minority and perpetual foreigner. These stereotypes are believed to marginalise Asians, contributing to hate crimes, discrimination, and violence—issues that were starkly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic (Li, & Nicholson, 2021; C. Wang et al., 2021). R. Chang (1993) identified the detrimental impacts of these stereotypes on the mental wellbeing of Asians, through exclusion and denying their identity, whilst also impeding efforts for racial justice advocacy within Asian communities.

4.6.1. The Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype

In the current study, participants shared their experiences of living in the UK, often expressing persistent feelings of being outsiders, particularly within the theme *racism is inevitable in the UK*. While their experiences were not exclusive to the COVID-19 period, they provided insight into the enduring sense of being perpetual foreigners in this environment, and context for the COVID-related encounters. Persistent questioning of participants' belonging was identified as a recurring theme, exhibited through the attitudes of others. The concept of the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype (F. Wu, 2002) vividly illustrates this phenomenon; regardless of citizenship status or nationality, ethnic minorities often find themselves perceived as perpetual outsiders in predominantly White societies (Q. Huynh et al., 2011). In the current study, despite being British citizens with every right to reside in the UK, participants recounted countless instances where they were made to feel like foreigners who did not belong.

Zhu and Li (2016) pinpointed specific dynamics in everyday interactions that fuel inherently discriminatory attitudes and the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype. Examples include questions like "where are you *really* from?" and displaying confusion or disappointment when responses do not align with expectations. This resonates strongly with many participants' accounts, particularly Selena's experience of encountering disbelief regarding her English proficiency, upbringing in the UK, and British citizenship. The perpetual foreigner narrative is encapsulated in her description:

> *[…] someone just that you don't even know just wants to say these hurtful things to you or just can't believe the fact that English is your first language, or that you've grown up here, that you're a British citizen. It's like they're still trying to push us out. And that's how I feel inside, that there's a lot of them out there that still don't think that we belong in this country, even if we were born here or have grown up here* (Selena, p.10).

These findings reflect the difficulty faced by individuals who wish to integrate separate national and ethnic backgrounds into a unified identity (Q. Huynh et al., 2011).

4.6.2. The Model Minority Myth

The Model Minority Myth is the Western stereotype that portrays certain minority groups, including British Chinese (Gillborn, 2008), as highly successful (Chan, & Wang, 1991). The MMM is known to downplay the existence of systemic barriers while placing blame on individuals for perceived failures. It is noted that individuals often internalise this stereotype, feeling pressured to meet expectations. Additionally, the MMM is thought to inhibit recognition of structural racism and undermine efforts to promote racial justice within Asian communities (R. Chang, 1993). In the current study, Daniel specifically reflected on the prevalent perception of Chinese individuals in the UK as *"the model immigrant […] always*

perceived as ones that behave well, that does not cause any violent crime, that's always the high achievers in the society" (p.6). This notion aligns with the concept of the Model Minority Myth, and was portrayed positively by Daniel; he emphasised the importance of restoring the image of British Chinese individuals to this perceived ideal following the damage caused by COVID-19. This demonstrates how the MMM is considered positively even by those within the marginalised minority, creating further barriers such as feeling pressure to conform to unrealistic expectations, and not receiving support for challenges faced. These results also align with findings from Yi et al. (2023), that internalisation of the MMM may result in a reduced ability to identify COVID-related discrimination.

4.7. Racial trauma

Racial trauma is defined as the collective impact of traumatic experiences related to race (Cénat, 2023), leaving enduring effects on both physical and mental health (Alvarez et al., 2016). Internalised racism arises from this trauma, where individuals from racialised groups adopt the viewpoints of the dominant culture (Bivens, & Potapchuk, 2005). This perpetuates systems of oppression and privilege while hindering resilience (David et al., 2019). The race-based traumatic stress theory (Carter, 2007) further identifies racial discrimination as a major stressor, comparable to post-traumatic stress, which detrimentally impacts the wellbeing and coping strategies of those targeted. In the present study, participants vividly expressed their distress and the challenges in processing encounters with COVID-related racism. Many struggled to articulate and make sense of their experiences, conveying feelings of detachment. For instance, Selena's description—*"you're kind of just floating in it for the first, like 24 hours"* (p.21)—illustrates the dissociation commonly associated with stress and post-traumatic stress symptoms. Participants also reported enduring shifts in their perceptions of others and the world around them, as well as regret for not handling COVID-related racism differently, all of which are associated with traumatic experiences.

The term ‘collective trauma’ refers to the psychological reactions to a shared recollection of a distressing incident experienced by a specific group (Hirschberger, 2018). COVID-19 has caused collective trauma among Asians and other marginalised people of colour (Watson et al., 2020). In the current study, shared experiences and mutual support within Chinese and Asian communities highlighted the human need for recognition and acceptance through shared hardship. These sentiments were succinctly captured by both Li and Selena:

> *And yeah, I found a community which is really nice and trauma bonding, basically.* (Li, p.18)

> *It’s like there was like group therapy for racism.* (Selena, p.11)

This aligns with understandings of collective trauma, which recognise how trauma fosters a shared identity, helps people find meaning while dealing with adversity, and enhances sense of belonging (Hirschberger, 2018).

4.8. Bystander apathy

The bystander effect, also known as bystander apathy (Darley, & Latané, 1968) is a phenomenon indicating that individuals are less inclined to assist a victim in the presence of others. Darley and Latané (1970) outline three factors contributing to bystander apathy: diminished personal responsibility in the presence of more bystanders, apprehension about potential negative evaluation when offering aid, and the belief that others' lack of assistance implies the situation is not truly an emergency. Research demonstrates that in typical scenarios, bystanders are more inclined to help individuals they perceive as sharing similarities with themselves, such as race (Levine et al., 2002; Saucier et al., 2005).

The current study emphasised the critical role bystanders play in racism and in individuals' experiences of racial discrimination. Participants expressed disbelief, shock and sadness at facing racial discrimination in the presence of passive witnesses who chose not to intervene. There were strong feelings of frustration that bystander inaction often led to further isolation, and a shared anger that action was not taken. Some participants interpreted the lack of inaction as equal to, and part of the experience of the racial incident itself. For example, Selena explained:

> "*I think it's what's hard to accept is the bystanders […] you want someone to be like "this is not ok." You know, it could be anybody because every time when this is happening, most of the time there are bystanders around. They see it happening, they can hear what they're saying. They kind of just look and be like "ooh, there's some drama going on." And then after that they just get on with the rest of the day. Like no one asks if you're ok."* (Selena, p.13).

Bystander non-involvement is not only interpreted as complicity in racism, significantly impacting the victim's experiences by heightening feelings of exclusion and rejection (Keel et al., 2022), but also appears to complicate and intensify the individual's processing and experience of the incident.

4.9. Critical discussion

This section will examine the methodological, procedural, personal and epistemological reflexivity of the research, followed by a discussion of the relevance to the field of counselling psychology, and implications for future research and practice.

4.9.1. Procedural reflexivity

On reflecting on the interview procedure, there is recognition of the difficulty in balancing the position of an IPA researcher alongside the urge to respond compassionately and assume a more therapeutic position. I initially had difficulty negotiating this, realising I had to 'park' prior learnings from the DPsych by moving away from the role of a counselling psychologist, and altering my automatic responses in those moments. This was particularly challenging given the sensitive nature of the topic, my own relating to the material, and the emotional recollections I was hearing about individuals' distressing experiences. I noticed that for some participants, less structure was needed to elicit rich information, and in these cases I adapted my approach to adopt a more relaxed style using the interview schedule. On the other hand, some participants appeared to benefit from slightly more structure and explanation, and the sequence of questions was changed in some interviews to allow for the best natural flow, based on their responses.

After the first two interviews, feedback from my supervisor highlighted that I was responding more as a therapist than a researcher. I reviewed the recordings and transcripts, and from the third interview onwards, I adopted a more inquisitive stance instead of an empathic one. I noticed that at times, I made interpretations of the participants' accounts, which I recognised was not ideal and endeavoured to eliminate this. Thus, the later interviews resulted in richer detailed accounts, aided by my changed interaction style and own learned comfort of sitting with longer periods of silence. In line with guidance from the BPS (2011) on conducting IPA interviews, I strived to achieve a "careful balance between guiding and being led," (p.1) and to not impose my own understanding of the phenomenon on participants' narratives (J. Smith et al., 2022).

4.9.2. Personal and epistemological reflexivity

J. Smith and colleagues (2022) highlight a common influence upon IPA research topics, wherein researchers often find themselves intimately connected to the communities under

investigation or personally influenced by the experiences of their family and friends. The researcher from the current study was no exception, being surrounded by Chinese family and friends who had directly encountered instances of racism stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. As a biracial individual of Chinese and White descent, the researcher also assumed an insider position (Styles, 1979), drawing from personal encounters with racism, albeit not specifically in the context of COVID-19. This alignment of identity and lived discriminatory experiences played a pivotal role in shaping the decision to investigate this particular phenomenon.

While the adoption of an insider stance can indeed hold certain advantages such as pre-existing understandings of the intricacies within the research domain, it also exposes potential challenges with role ambiguity (Adler, & Adler, 1987). The close proximity between the researcher and phenomenon being studied has been acknowledged to potentially hinder critical reflexivity by leading to inadvertent misinterpretation of participants' narratives (Dwyer, & Buckle, 2009). I made the decision not to let the participants know about my ethnicity prior to the interviews, but was willing to share more about my connection to the phenomenon and racial background upon completion of interview. This helped to ensure I remained firmly within a researcher role, rather than drawing the spotlight onto my own experiences and connection to the research phenomenon.

Throughout the research process, I became increasingly aware of my own history of ‘racial passing,’ a practice where individuals present or enhance their membership to a specific racial group to gain social advantage or avoid discrimination (Robinson, 1994). Racial passing can involve altering one's appearance, behaviour, or identity (Kennedy, 2001) and has been observed in Asian-White biracial individuals (Black, 2015). These realisations led me to reflect more deeply on the dynamics of racial categorisation, identity, and power within society, and on the privilege of being able to consciously ‘alter’ myself to escape racial

persecution while balancing two identities. A particular quote from Selena's interview also stayed with me:

> *I found especially within the British community or like my friends, even those that are like mixed, they're like their mum is Chinese and their dad is White, they don't have any idea about their Asian side.* (Selena, p.22)

Her example described me exactly; a biracial person with a Chinese mother and White father. I recalled in that moment the distinct feeling of being 'called out,' as if I was an imposter that had no idea about my Asian side. Until this point, I had considered myself to be a complete insider in this research, but Selena's comment prompted reflection on what it is have a 'full' Chinese lived experience. In retrospect, it seems that over the course of the research project, my experience of taking an insider and outsider position fluctuated. Initially, I felt more aligned with the insider perspective, but as the project progressed, I aligned more closely with the outsider stance. Ultimately, I remained aware of both positions throughout the research process.

Eid and Parker (2023) highlight that biracial individuals often struggle to fully embrace either racial background, leading to a sense of misalignment and impacting their sense of belonging. Additionally, Albuja et al. (2019) note that biracial individuals frequently experience identity invalidation, where they are seen as not fully belonging to any racial group, particularly by monoracial individuals. These findings resonate with my own experience of never fully belonging to either 'side' and the challenges in connecting with monoracial individuals.

Notably, several participants asked why this research topic had been chosen and expressed surprise and joy that Chinese experiences were being investigated. This reaction highlights the general neglect of research on Chinese and Asian racism. It aligns with the concept of

Racial Triangulation Theory (Kim, 1999), which positions Asians between White privilege and Black oppression, often leading to their experiences being overlooked or dismissed. This prompted me to reflect on the underrepresentation of Asians, particularly Chinese individuals, in research. This underrepresentation is reported to result from perceived inequitable access to services and research opportunities, leading to marginalisation and exclusion (Farooqi et al., 2022). Additionally, Asians often face particular difficulties in participating in research due to language barriers (T. Chang et al., 2015) and higher mistrust of research and consent procedures (Y. Liu et al., 2019). These factors may explain the challenge of recruiting more than six participants in the current study.

To effectively address historical and cultural obstacles of ethnic minorities including Asians in research participation, researchers are encouraged to provide participants with clear research objectives. This is recognised to mitigate potential misunderstandings and suspicions, which in turn facilitates better recruitment and retention (Farooqi et al., 2022). Upon reflection of the current study, it is believed transparency of the research aims and objectives were demonstrated clearly across the participant information sheet (appendix B), consent form (appendix C), and debrief form (appendix I).

4.10. Relevance to counselling psychology and implications

This study investigated the racial experiences of six British Chinese individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK, offering significant implications for the field of counselling psychology. The findings highlight the unique psychological challenges encountered by this demographic, such as the internal conflict between recognising COVID-related racism as unjust, while grappling with societal pressure to conform to discriminatory views. Participants also expressed a desire for alternative coping strategies, alongside ongoing effects on identity, belonging, and the development of more cynical worldviews. These insights are crucial for practitioners aiming to sensitively address the specific needs of British Chinese

individuals in post-pandemic therapy sessions, fostering a deeper understanding of the pandemic's psychological impact on this community. The study highlights the importance of developing culturally sensitive approaches that are finely tuned to the unique experiences of British Chinese clients, enabling more effective therapeutic support.

While the research is rooted in the specific context of the British Chinese community, it also emphasises broader themes relevant to ethnic minorities more generally. The complex interactions between race, ethnicity, culture, and mental health are particularly salient. By acknowledging the multifaceted identities and experiences of their clients, psychologists can tailor support more comprehensively, ultimately enhancing therapeutic outcomes. The study suggests that within therapy sessions, practitioners may encounter clients who are torn between their personal beliefs about racism and societal pressures to conform. Understanding these internal conflicts and the desire for different coping mechanisms can guide practitioners in developing interventions that resonate more deeply with their clients' values. Additionally, by recognising the ongoing repercussions on identity and belonging, therapists can create a safer and more validating environment for clients to explore and process these complex emotions.

Counselling psychology, with its strong foundation in multicultural competence (Heppner et al., 2000), is particularly well suited to address these issues and advocate for anti-racism initiatives (Hage, 2003). The findings from this study can inform the development of targeted training programmes for practitioners, such as integrating anti-racism training into counselling psychology education and professional development. This training is vital for helping practitioners recognise and address systemic racism and discrimination within therapeutic settings. Moreover, the study encourages practitioners to advocate for policy changes that tackle racial disparities in mental health services and to contribute to ongoing research into the racial impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. By integrating these insights

into practice, counselling psychology can continue to advance its commitment to social justice and multicultural competence (APA, 2019).

In line with professional practice guidelines (APA, 2019; BPS, 2005), and by emphasising the importance of engaging with subjective accounts, this study contributes meaningfully to both research and clinical practice. It also advances the discourse within therapeutic settings and broader societal contexts (Douglas et al., 2016). The findings provide unique insights for psychologists working with British Chinese clients and communities impacted by the pandemic, encouraging more culturally sensitive and effective approaches as society moves forward from COVID-19.

Finally, the research accentuates the need for stronger legal protections against hate crimes and discrimination, advocating for reforms that enhance the enforcement of anti-discrimination laws and the introduction of specific legislation targeting racial hate crimes (Chakraborti, & Garland, 2012). Additionally, it emphasises the importance of inclusive policymaking, urging policymakers to consider the unique impacts of their decisions on minority communities. Engaging directly with these communities through advisory councils or working groups can lead to fairer policies that better reflect their needs (Crenshaw, 1991). Disseminating the findings is essential for lasting impact, with plans to publish in an academic journal and present at research conferences. These efforts aim to drive meaningful changes in practice and policy, leading to stronger protections and support for British Chinese individuals.

4.11. Future research

Future research should explore the accounts of British Chinese individuals in the period following the COVID-19 pandemic to gain varied perspectives over time and examine the long-term impacts of COVID-19. Additionally, research could delve deeper into the nature of

belongingness and its significance within British Chinese communities. Understanding belonging and its interaction with coping mechanisms and mental health could provide valuable insights for interventions aimed at promoting resilience and wellbeing. Further investigation into the dynamics of stigma and internalised stigmatisation is also warranted, focusing on the underlying mechanisms driving these processes and their implications for individual and collective identities.

There is a pressing need for research examining the intersectionality of race, gender, and other social identities in shaping the experiences of British Chinese individuals during the pandemic. The current study's participants were all aged between 26 and 30 years, indicating the potential for further exploration with older generations, or a broader age range. This could lead to increased diversity in themes. This is particularly significant as older Chinese generations have exhibited heightened levels of internalised racism during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ang et al., 2023), and are noted to have employed different coping strategies compared to younger generations (Liang et al., 2022). Conversely, some older Chinese migrants have reportedly denied the existence of COVID-related racism, while younger migrants have been more readily able to identify and discuss these experiences (S. Wang et al., 2021). Therefore, age appears to influence the perception of discriminatory experiences, emphasising the importance of further understanding these accounts.

4.12. Conclusion

This study is one of the very few qualitative explorations into the specific encounters of discrimination among British Chinese individuals during the global COVID-19 pandemic, from 2020 to 2022. Conducted during a pivotal period in history, it captures exclusive, first-hand accounts from six individuals shortly after experiencing discrimination, yet still within the exceptional COVID-19 period. This approach allowed participants to reflect on their experiences without reliance on memory, enriching the depth of their reflections while also

providing time for effective contemplation of their encounters. Considering participants' immediate reactions and subsequent reflections, this study offers a rare and unparalleled understanding of individuals' experiences during this unprecedented time. The findings revealed well-established internalised racism, desires for alternative coping mechanisms, increased cynical worldviews following COVID, and enduring impacts on participants' sense of identity and belonging within the UK, as well as Chinese and Asian communities.

The findings from this project aim to contribute to the growing body of literature on this topic, enhancing our understanding of the COVID-19 global pandemic and its detrimental impacts on British Chinese individuals. Additionally, the study advances our understanding of racism and its effects on mental wellbeing more broadly. It is hoped that these insights will inform future research and interventions, promoting awareness and thereby enhancing resilience and wellbeing within affected communities. Ultimately, this research emphasises the urgent need for culturally sensitive mental health practices and policies that address and mitigate the long-lasting effects of racism, paving the way for a more inclusive and equitable society.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Online recruitment advert

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH INTO HOW BRITISH CHINESE INDIVIDUALS HAVE EXPERIENCED RACISM DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN THE UK

Research looking for individuals of Chinese heritage (both parents of Chinese ethnicity) and British Citizens (eligible to hold a British Passport), who have experienced some form of racism related to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as racial discrimination, verbal abuse, harassment or aggression.

As a participant in this study, you will be invited to share your experiences of racism during the COVID-19 pandemic in an informal interview expected to last approximately 60 minutes. It will involve talking about any experiences of COVID-19-related racism and what this means to you.

By contributing to this project, you will help provided valuable information into the understanding of British Chinese individuals' experiences of COVID-19-related racism.

For more information about this study, or to volunteer to participate please contact Kelsey Hyde, Trainee Counselling Psychologist at: Kelsey.hyde@city.ac.uk

Research supervisor: Dr Kate Scruby. Email: Kate.scruby@city.ac.uk

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through the Psychology Research Ethics Committee, City University of London.

If you would like to complain about any aspect of the study, please contact the Secretary to the Senate Research Ethics Committee on 020 7040 3040 or via email: Anna.Ramberg.1@city.ac.uk

City, University of London is the data controller for the personal data collected for this research project. If you have any data protection concerns about this research project, please contact City's Information Compliance Team at dataprotection@city.ac.uk

Appendix B: Participant information sheet

Title of study: ***A qualitative study exploring experiences of racism in British Chinese individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK.***

Ethics approval code: ETH2122-0322

Name of principal researcher: Kelsey Hyde **Email:** Kelsey.hyde@city.ac.uk

We would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether you would like to take part, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully and ask if anything is unclear or if you would like more information. You will be emailed a copy of this information sheet to keep.

What is the purpose of the study?

This study seeks to better understand the experiences of COVID-19-related racism towards British Chinese individuals in the UK. The aim of this research is to explore how racial discrimination may have impacted individuals of Chinese heritage following the pandemic outbreak in March 2020. This study forms part of a thesis for the Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology at City University London, and is intended to run until September 2023.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited to participate in this study as you have told the researcher you are British (you are entitled to hold a British passport), and self-identify as being of Chinese heritage (both parents are of Chinese ethnicity). You are also over the age of 18 and have told the researcher that you have experienced some form of racial discrimination, verbal abuse, harassment or aggression following the outbreak of COVID-19. Please inform the researcher if any of these details are inaccurate.

Do I have to take part?

Participation in this study is voluntary and you can choose not to participate in part or all of the project. You can withdraw at any stage of the project without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way up until the data has been anonymised. You can avoid answering questions that you feel are too uncomfortable or intrusive without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do

decide to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw up until the data has been anonymised, after which point it cannot be withdrawn. If you wish to withdraw your data and are unsure about whether it has been anonymised yet, please contact the researcher on the above listed contact details.

What will happen if I take part?

If you wish to take part you will be invited to attend a one-to-one Zoom/ Microsoft Teams interview expected to last approximately 60 minutes. The interview will be semi-structured, so there will be six or seven open-ended questions which are expected to lead onto further topics. You will be encouraged to take the lead in sharing your experiences. The interview will be audio recorded, all recordings will be made on an encrypted recording device and transferred to a password protected computer for storage. Recordings will be accessible only to the researcher. After the interview recordings will be transcribed, replacing any identifying or personal information with pseudonyms to ensure your identity remains anonymous. The data, including direct quotations will then be analysed using an Interpretative Phenomenological approach. This involves looking at your insights and how you have made sense of your experiences. The study is expected to last until September 2023 and transcripts will be kept securely at City University London for up to 10 years following completion of the study.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

Due to the nature of the topic, it is possible that exploring personal encounters of racism may involve some emotional upset. If this was to occur, we could stop discussing anything that feels uncomfortable to you, and can take a break from the interview at any stage. Also please remember your participation is voluntary and you are able to withdraw at any stage.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

This is an opportunity to share your views and experiences of racism during the COVID-19 pandemic and may provide a space to be listened to and reflect on what this has meant to you. You will also be contributing to research on an important topic that seeks to give Chinese individuals a chance to speak openly about racism, which will contribute to knowledge on the topic, benefit the field of counselling psychology and possibly benefit future service-users.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

All information you disclose will be treated confidentially. All recordings will be accessible only to the researcher and stored securely on a password protected computer until they are destroyed at the end of the study. Confidentiality will only be broken if the researcher feels

there is risk of serious harm either to yourself or others, or where the researcher is legally obliged to do so. All identifying or personal information will be replaced by pseudonyms in order to maintain anonymity. Your contact details will not be shared with any third parties and future use of personal contact information will be used only if you express interest in being informed of the results of the study once completed.

Data privacy statement

City, University of London is the sponsor and the data controller of this study based in the United Kingdom. This means that we are responsible for looking after your information and using it properly. The legal basis under which your data will be processed is City's public task.

Your right to access, change or move your information are limited, as we need to manage your information in a specific way in order for the research to be reliable and accurate. To safeguard your rights, we will use the minimum personal-identifiable information possible (for further information please see https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-data-protection/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/lawful-basis-for-processing/public-task/.

City will use your name and contact details to contact you about the research study as necessary. If you wish to receive the results of the study, your contact details will also be kept for this purpose. The only people at City who will have access to your identifiable information will be the researcher, Kelsey Hyde. City will keep identifiable information about you from this study for up to 10 years after the study has finished.

You can find out more about how City handles data by visiting https://www.city.ac.uk/about/governance/legal. If you are concerned about how we have processed your personal data, you can contact the Information Commissioner's Office (IOC) https://ico.org.uk/.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The findings of this study will be written up as part of a thesis for a Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology. The findings may also be included in various future academic publications. All details, including direct quotations from interviews will be listed under a pseudonym to maintain anonymity. There will be no identifiable or personal information in the final thesis or any other publications, so there will be no way for readers to identify you. If

you would like to be sent the results of the study, please inform the researcher and consent to your contact details being kept for this purpose on the 'participant consent form.'

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been approved by Psychology Research Ethics Committee, City.

What if there is a problem?

If you have any problems, concerns or questions about this study, you should ask to speak to a member of the research team. If you remain unhappy and wish to complain formally, you can do this through City's complaints procedure. To complain about the study, you can phone 020 7040 3040. You can then ask to speak to the Secretary to Senate Research Ethics Committee and inform them that the name of the project is:

A qualitative study exploring experiences of racism in British Chinese individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK.

You can also write to the Secretary at:

Anna Ramberg
Research Integrity Manager
City, University of London, Northampton Square
London, EC1V 0HB
Email: [redacted]

Further information and contact details

Researcher: Kelsey Hyde. Email: Kelsey.hyde@city.ac.uk

Research Supervisor: Dr Kate Scruby. Email: Kate.scruby@city.ac.uk

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Appendix C: Participant consent form

Title of study: ***A qualitative study exploring experiences of racism in British Chinese individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK.***

Ethics approval code: ETH2122-0322

Name of principal researcher: Kelsey Hyde **Email:** Kelsey.hyde@city.ac.uk

Please initial box

1.	I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information sheet for the above-named study. I have had had the opportunity to consider this information and to ask questions about what is involved. I have been given a copy of this consent form to keep for my records.	
2.	I understand that my participation is voluntary, that I can choose not to participate or to withdraw at any stage without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way.	
3.	I agree to the interview being audio recorded. I understand that any information I provide is confidential and that no identifiable personal information will be published or shared with third parties. I understand that the original recordings will be accessible only to the researcher, and transcripts will be stored securely at City University London for up to 10 years before being destroyed. I understand information I provide will be used as part of the researcher's doctoral thesis in counselling psychology and a pseudonym will be used when referring to this information, including direct quotations, as a way of maintaining anonymity.	
4.	I agree to City University London recording and processing this information about me. I understand that this information will be used only for the purpose(s) explained in the participant information sheet and my consent is conditional on City university complying with its duties and obligations under the General Data Protection Regulation (1998).	
5.	I agree to take part in the above-named study.	
6.	I would like to be informed of the results of this study once it has been completed and understand that my contact details will be retained for this purpose.	

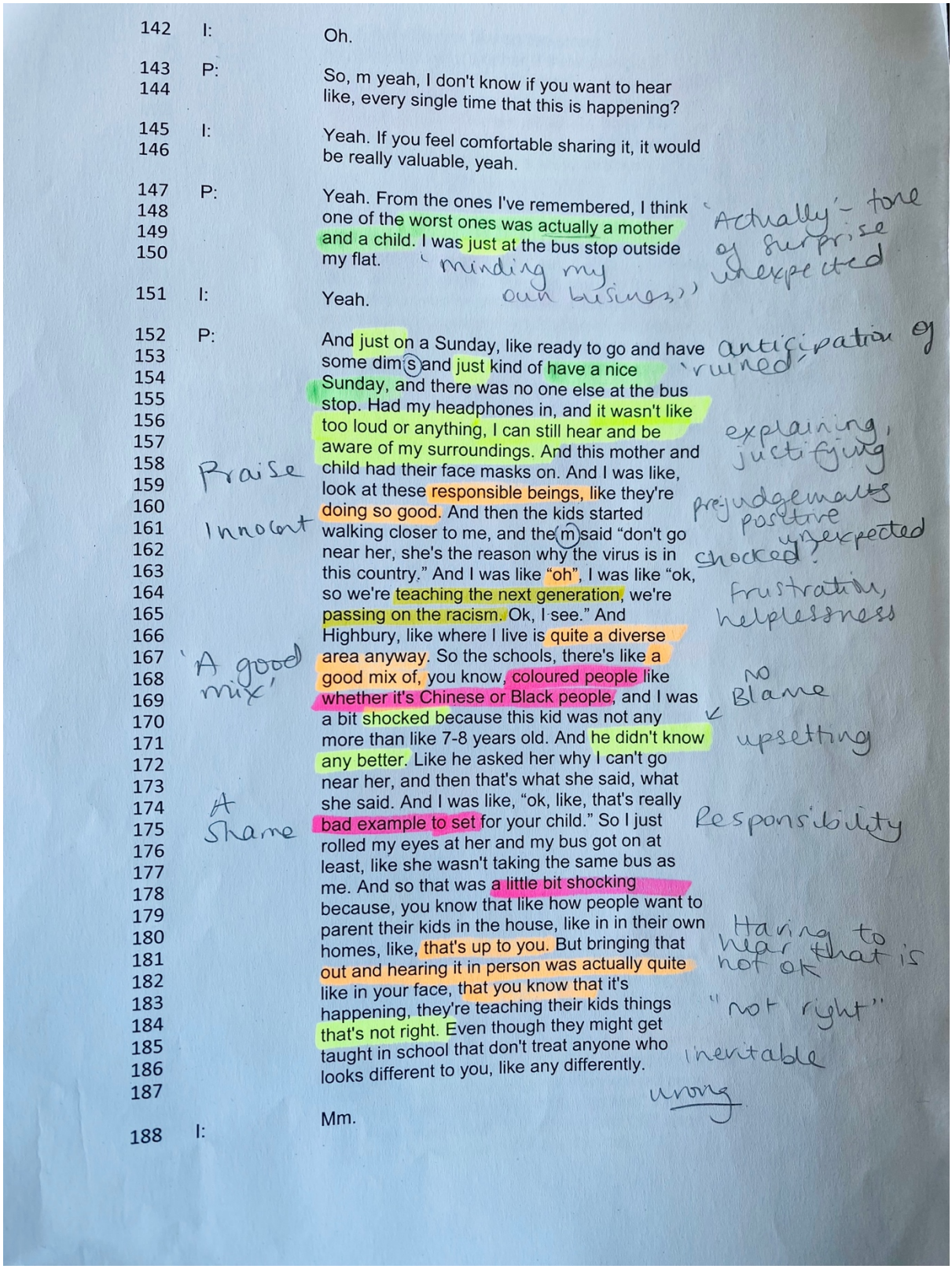
Name of Participant	Signature	Date
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date

Appendix D: Interview schedule

Interview questions

1. What does it mean to be British Chinese to you?
    - How important is this to your sense of identity?
2. Can you tell me about the different experiences of racism during the pandemic? Please describe in as much detail as possible.
    - What was that like for you? How did you feel? What did you think?
3. What was it like for you at the time? And now?
    - How did you respond? How have you coped? What has that felt like?
4. How do you make sense of these experiences?
    - What does that mean to you? Can you tell me more about that?
5. Are there any ways these experiences have impacted the way you see yourself, the way you see others and the world around you?
    - Has it changed your lifestyle/ your relationships with others at all?
    - Any changes to your sense of self/ identity, or the world?
6. If relevant: Can you tell me about any experiences of racism prior to the pandemic? I'm wondering if these experiences felt the same or different from the racism you experienced during the pandemic?
    - If so, how is it different? Can you explain that further?
    - If it is the same, how is it the same?
7. Is there anything you would like to add to help me better understand your experiences?

Appendix E: Sample of individual participant transcript analysis



142 I: Oh.

143 P: So, m yeah, I don't know if you want to hear
144 like, every single time that this is happening?

145 I: Yeah. If you feel comfortable sharing it, it would
146 be really valuable, yeah.

147 P: Yeah. From the ones I've remembered, I think
148 one of the worst ones was actually a mother
149 and a child. I was just at the bus stop outside
150 my flat. 'minding my own business'

151 I: Yeah.

152 P: And just on a Sunday, like ready to go and have
153 some dim(s) and just kind of have a nice
154 Sunday, and there was no one else at the bus
155 stop. Had my headphones in, and it wasn't like
156 too loud or anything, I can still hear and be
157 aware of my surroundings. And this mother and
158 child had their face masks on. And I was like,
159 look at these responsible beings, like they're
160 doing so good. And then the kids started
161 walking closer to me, and the(m) said "don't go
162 near her, she's the reason why the virus is in
163 this country." And I was like "oh", I was like "ok,
164 so we're teaching the next generation, we're
165 passing on the racism. Ok, I see." And
166 Highbury, like where I live is quite a diverse
167 area anyway. So the schools, there's like a
168 good mix of, you know, coloured people like
169 whether it's Chinese or Black people, and I was
170 a bit shocked because this kid was not any
171 more than like 7-8 years old. And he didn't know
172 any better. Like he asked her why I can't go
173 near her, and then that's what she said, what
174 she said. And I was like, "ok, like, that's really
175 bad example to set for your child." So I just
176 rolled my eyes at her and my bus got on at
177 least, like she wasn't taking the same bus as
178 me. And so that was a little bit shocking
179 because, you know that like how people want to
180 parent their kids in the house, like in in their own
181 homes, like, that's up to you. But bringing that
182 out and hearing it in person was actually quite
183 like in your face, that you know that it's
184 happening, they're teaching their kids things
185 that's not right. Even though they might get
186 taught in school that don't treat anyone who
187 looks different to you, like any differently.

188 I: Mm.

'Actually' - tone of surprise unexpected

anticipation of 'ruined'

explaining, justifying

Praise

Innocent

prejudgements positive unexpected

shocked

frustration, helplessness

'A good mix'

No Blame

upsetting

A Shame

Responsibility

Having to hear that is not ok

"not right"

inevitable

wrong

P: Yeah normally it's like on the street, occasionally, so it's either, I think being a person of colour and also female, we have a lot to watch out for, especially when it comes to racism and also like sexual harassment. So sometimes I get like two in one and I'm like, "wow, that's that's, that's a lot to deal with."

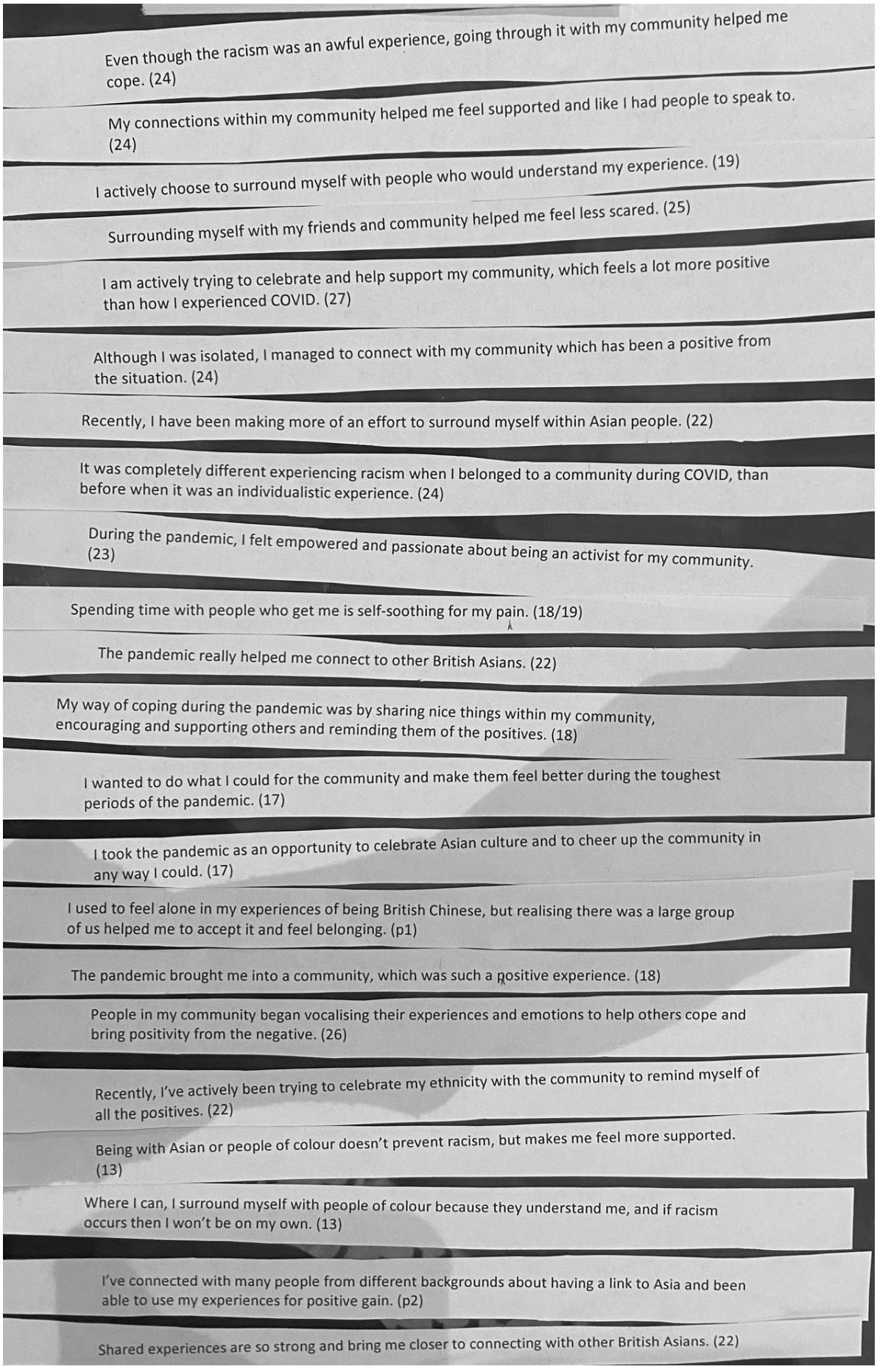
I: Mm.

P: Some yeah, it's just most of the time people come out their way to like, say things and I think like, "why? Why can't you just say it to the people that you're with, like at a distance. So I don't have to hear that you're being, you know, not a nice person?" And once I was on at Camden Station on the platform waiting for my train. I had the mask on, headphones in and I was reading a book at the same time, literally not paying attention to anything, and I heard like this drunk group of like, I don't know early teens or maybe like almost their 20s or something. They were like quite drunk and I was like, "ok, it's just, you know, them having fun." And I heard one of them said like "oh, don't worry guys, like I've tested negative" and stuff like that. And I was like "lol, really funny, maybe it's just that conversation." And that same guy walked down the platform, I can see my my peripheral vision, comes up to me and waves his hand like in front of me as I'm reading my book, to get my attention and I had my headphones in and I was like, "I can still hear you." And he just said like, "just wanna let you know that I've like, tested negative. I don't have COVID or anything" and I was, and I just said to him "good for you."

I: Mm.

P: And then he was just like, "Um, I don't know about you though. Like, are you sure you're, like, safe to even be out?" And I was like, "what does that even mean? I know what you're implying, but like, do you really like, is there nothing else you can say?" Like covid's been a thing for like 2 years now, it's kind of getting old for you to like, say the same things. And like, I'm getting so tired of hearing it. But they're just ignorant and uneducated and that's just how it is unfortunately for some of them. So I kind of just, and then he just laughed and then walked away and went back to his friend he was like "oh did you hear what I said? I told her I didn't I?" and I was like, "yeah, you definitely told me

Appendix F: Sample of clustered experiential statements



Appendix G: GET table

Pseudonym	Quote	Page
GET 1: RACISM IS INEVITABLE IN THE UK AND NO ONE CARES		
1a. Racism is inevitable in the UK		
James	*Since moving to London, it felt like I was finally in a place where I didn't have to deal with that sort of rubbish. You know the sort of childish mentality, the sort of just blatant racism, ignorance and I thought "oh ok, there's so many people here, nothing's gonna happen now" like "this is, this is a different world," like "it's so many more people, so different, so diverse."*	8
	But yeah, as soon as all this [racism from COVID] happened and just the feeling of people being unnecessarily aggressive towards you […] it just made me feel really sad again, really.	8
	Racism is all I've ever known, one my earliest memories […] And like, there's just a lot of stuff a lot of the time.	11
	One of my earliest memories is just being beaten up like in primary school.	5
Selena	*People can be as passive as they like with their racial comments, or they can be as horrible as they like with their racial comments. It's just depends how they feel.*	22
	You never know who will say these things to you, like it could be anyone that you're walking past, and they will just go out their way to like try and shit on your day.	6
	There's just like every now and then, it just happens. And I'm just like, I just see it, I don't see it as normal, but I kind of just be like, "yeah, it's nothing new, you know, whatever."	6
	Like [racism] you know, it's normal to hear this kind of shit all around because people wanna say what they wanna say.	10
	So and then I go into London […] and then I found was that "ok, this is nice, safe space", like London's normally quite welcoming and, you know, it was the first place I lived when we moved here, so I always felt comfortable and not felt to made be made like feel any different. […] But then since when [racist incidents from August 2020] became more aggressive and more like in your face, I started losing a little bit of faith in humanity because I was like, "London is supposed to be like one of the most diverse cities."	19
Li	*I grew up with these [racist] comments, you know, or varying degrees of these comments, I guess.*	13
	But my first experience of racism was when I was four.	10
	So yeah, I I guess it just puts me on edge and it just makes me a very anxious person. Uh, yeah, because [racism] can just happen all the time being here.	13

Ada	*I think coming to a Western society you're always aware that there is going to be some kind of racism happening. I mean there are microaggressions that happen sometimes in a bantry way where "oh you guys eat dog" or, you just, just little things like that…Yeah comments, that are very very stereotypical, or they mimic what Chinese language sounds like. So there's always microaggressions around that, but you kind of expect that.*	19
Mia	*Mostly I just feel like unwelcome. And, and especially during the pandemic, I felt like, why am I here? Like, why am I in UK? And I kept thinking "oh maybe I can just leave and then I can be happy again."* *"Oh, it is what it is." Like, yeah, I'm in UK. I am a minority, so it's just something I have to deal with.*	8 12
1b. I wish others took more accountability		
Li	*It's like why? Why? Why are people not being held accountable, or at least being told that that's not right and that?* *When [racism] happen[s] and people don't say anything you just feel really isolated because you feel like you're the only person that's like seeing the problem just being gas lit the whole time without anyone being there to defend you other than yourself, so you're just fighting your own battles, basically.* *And then what was worse was that my partner and my partner's friend almost like were waiting for something to happen. They didn't like, jump to say, like, "oh, maybe you shouldn't say things like that." They actually just tried to diffuse the situation by just continuing the conversation so […] it just made it even more isolating because then I was just like "did I just hear that…? Is that my…? I just, am I going crazy?!" Like "everyone's ok with this?" as in like, if I wasn't in the room would they all just like perpetuate that narrative and would continue to just like have conversations like that without calling any each other out because there was like three White men and me.* *My Direct Line manager was like basically, chanting like racist chants and like pulling his eyes and doing all that kind of stuff, like during a Christmas event and I was obviously very sad because everyone around me was White and they didn't see it as an issue […] They were like "oh you know, I don't, I don't think he's racist cause he's got like a Japanese wife. So like he's not racist." Or like things like "oh, you know he didn't mean it, like you know, I don't think like that," was the first thing that came out of their minds rather than kind of saying like "oh", you know, "oh my God, I'm so I'm so like gutted that that happened" rather than saying things like that they were like quick to defend him because he was my manager. He was like higher position and then yeah, so I just felt like it was a bit of a losing battle.*	8 10 8 3
Ada	*That's what more it's made me realise. Cos when I was younger, looking back at when I was bullied as a kid, they were just kids, you know. They're not to know any difference perhaps, or you know, you tell a kid what's right and wrong, but sometimes with adults, you don't really expect that. So you kind of just expect people to be respectful and be kind and things like that, and you don't really tell an adult what's right and wrong, in comparison to a child.*	10

Selena	*When it comes to British people, I don't think, they're just like "we are aware that [racism is] going on" and people who are like not racist or however they identify themselves, they're like "no, we know it's wrong" and like "you shouldn't have to go through that," but that's where it ends. It doesn't go any further than that.* *I think it's what's hard to accept is the bystanders […] you want someone to be like "this is not ok." You know, it could be anybody because every time when this is happening, most of the time there are bystanders around. They see it happening, they can hear what they're saying. They kind of just look and be like "ooh, there's some drama going on." And then after that they just get on with the rest of the day. Like no one asks if you're ok.* *[My English friends say] "we would never do that to you." And I was like, "I know but people do do that, you know, other people will." So, it's very I think it's very like, there's like still a disconnect.*	9 13 8
GET 2: MY IMMEDIATE SHOCK AT COVID-RACISM		
2a. COVID-racism felt intensely different/ took me back to being a child		
James	*The microaggression stuff, it's just really odd looking back. And just small moments of like people, just the way people looked at me […] I just keep remembering little moments. The problem is, there wasn't many big moments of it in advance. I guess, like there wasn't huge aggressive, like scary moments, I guess. And it's just the amount of microaggressions that really sent home how problematic the situation was.* *kind of just felt like there was a weird target on us […] And it was like, I've seen stuff before, but nothing like this where just the sight of like an Asian person would cause people to react in such a childish way.* *Then I also felt this weird, I don't know. I had this all of a sudden, I had this fear […] And like I just couldn't get that out of my head. And so yeah, the whole pandemic has just been… it's probably pushed me back.* *I thought I'd like left it all behind, you know, like, shut the door. Done. But since the pandemic everything just bought being brought back out and then this feeling of insecurity is back.* *You know that just that feeling of people looking at you in this way that you're like dirt, or like just so different that they don't wanna deal with you? It was the same feeling. Yeah. It was weird. I think that's what put me off the most. And, and stress me out the most because I didn't, it felt like I didn't know when something was gonna happen again.* *[The pandemic] kind of brought back this fear […] So it was hard. It was hard to think about it from that aspect. And yeah, so it it's kind of it just more stressed, but it was weird that it was the same feeling as like back when I was a child.*	26 4 16 23 13 14
Mia	*[Before the pandemic, racism] didn't feel as scary. And because I was thinking, "oh maybe they're just being a bit stupid." Whereas during the pandemic it feels more um… like fearful. Just because I don't know if they will do something to me because of it.*	12

	I felt frustrated and also like I wasn't welcomed. And, like I know it's silly and it's like really stupid of them to do it, but then still, because already there is some level where I don't feel welcomed. [I felt] mainly just, just like angry and frustrated, but also bit helpless like, I know I can't really do anything about it. *Because before [the pandemic] I always just think if only if it's aggressive then it's racist. Or if it's quite obvious then it is racist. And worse, now I realise it can manifest in many ways, and even when people don't really realise.*	4 10
Ada	*I understood why people felt like that, but it just seemed like a really immature small-minded way to think. Ah, it doesn't, it hasn't happened to me ever since, and the only other time I was, I would say bullied, was when I was younger in school in terms of the way I look, so to have something similar happen during my adulthood was really strange* *They were just a lot more mature, and these issues that I experienced as a kid, were just not there. So through my adult experience [my Chinese identity] was always really welcomed, and my Chinese identity everyone was always interested in […] And as an adult I finally felt really really proud of it. To then feel secluded again during the pandemic was really upsetting.*	5 17
Selena	*I never felt any different until like the pandemic […] The [incidents] that are like pre-pandemic, they're all like very joking, they don't mean it in like a malicious way. They might sound stupid and ignorant, but maybe that's just how they are and they just, you know, people are different, they don't all get educated on different races. But then, the pandemic ones then, that definitely makes you feel like you don't belong here. Yeah. So it pretty much went from like child's play to like, serious*. *The racism before [the pandemic] was slightly more just like comments, but then it started to become more aggressive and I think it didn't click until probably, it always sinks in only a couple days later after the incident happens. So I never really... because you're kind of just floating in it for the first, like 24 hours. Then next day you wake up and you realise like that actually was a bit more aggressive than needed.*	26 21
Li	*But yeah, it definitely, it's definitely shaking me because I think prior to [COVID], like say in school or university or meeting people on the street where you experience racism, I guess yeah, you deal with that a certain way. But then since [COVID], when it starts to hinder not just social, but in work as well, it feels like all-encompassing and just feels like you have no outlet anymore and you have no control.* *I think when I was younger and prior to the pandemic, I felt attacked more so as an individual, […] whilst during the pandemic it felt more like an attack on our community.* *So in in in essence it felt like during COVID we [British Chinese and Asian communities] all shared a lot of trauma. Even if I didn't experience it, I would see it in like the group. So it heightened the intensity of it because it felt like even if you weren't, if it even if it wasn't happening to you, it was happening to your friend. Because intensified all the feelings, I guess.*	20 23 26

2b. COVID forced me to explain and defend myself/ my community		
Daniel	*So you know, it hasn't really left me a scar or anything, but it definitely has made an impact on me and all sorts of people making jokes about, you know, eating bats, et cetera, et cetera […] that definitely makes me feel really, really uncomfortable and making me feel the need to justify myself and my ethnic group to them that this is not true.* *During COVID was the time that I would say I was defensive. That's that that's the word to justify, right. Like, that's the way to say my feeling, it wasn't just pure anger and you know, sadness or whatever it was just, I was just being defensive. "Hey, it's not it's not my fault, it's not our fault." That's really the message I was trying to trying to get across to people who, you know, behave in a certain way or even when somebody makes a joke about it,* *You know, it's very simple. And I get very sensitive about it. I'm like, "hey, look, stop. Listen, I need to tell you this. It's not our fault, it has nothing to do with bats." […] You have people like, "hey, man, it's just a joke. It's just the joke, you know? It's not, it's not that deep," but it's deep. It's deep for me. Yeah, and I feel I feel the need to defend myself, you know, in those cases.* *I think until this day, you know, if somebody says those jokes to me, my response is still being defensive. But they will be, there is definitely more, you know, like aggression rather than shock nowadays compared to, you know, during COVID.* *And I had to explain to them, nobody eats bat. That's a that's a rumour. You know, like nobody eats bats in China. […] Right. So even though the accusation of us eating bats is not true, but it made me feel more, you know, conscious about my diet. You know, what do we eat? What's different to the Western world? Is it, is it like, are we, you know, are we eating the things that's not acceptable? You know, what is acceptable? What is not acceptable? So that that made an impact on me in terms of like sometimes I'm not even willing to eat some Chinese food in, in public places where I don't feel, you know, it's accepted by the British public*.	4 7 8 8 3
Ada	*I just felt like I had to explain myself, whereas when you're a kid you don't really understand it. Whereas when you're an adult, I just felt like I needed to explain myself.* *I kinda felt like I needed to explain myself. Like I kinda felt like I needed to go up to these people and be like "look, I know I'm oriental, but I live here, I've not been back to China. Like you can hear it in my voice, I haven't grown up there, I've grown up here." Just yeah, just to explain myself but obviously I was aware that I might be jumping to conclusions, […] but that's how it made me feel, it just made me want to explain myself, like I'd done something wrong or something.* *You know, if I if I looked English it wouldn't, it wouldn't have happened I don't think, and it would have made a difference. However because of genetics I just look oriental even though I live, work and have my home here. So it isn't any different to any other Western person or ethnic minority who live here, it's just because I look oriental.*	6 5 8 9

	And for someone to make, someone that you don't know to make a judgement on that, which is why I said I felt like I need to explain myself. If I explained my background, then perhaps they would understand and be like "oh yeah, you've got nothing to do with it just like me." But because I look oriental, you know they don't know whether I might be on holiday here or I'm travelling back and forth, or you know, what my purpose is here, so that's why I felt like I needed to explain why I'm here. *It was just a bit hurtful I guess because I was brought up here, I live here, my home is here, I haven't been back to China for the last 5-6 years. I'm just as in the dark as everyone else who was here, but just because I look oriental doesn't mean it's necessarily gonna come to me first or I've already got it.* *But yeah it's, it's upsetting and like I said I never thought I would want to explain myself for something that isn't necessarily to do with me, so that part really… umm what's the right word? It really, frustrates me.*	3 7
Li	*Through COVID [my Scottish boyfriend] would try and like kind of give people the benefit of the doubt, but that's because he's never had to put a wall up or he's never had to defend himself of being Asian.*	15
Selena	*And the thing is, I'm not even from China, but no one ever sees you like that anyway.* *But, the amount of times I've been tempted to just print a T-shirt that says "I'm not from China."* *[…] half the time the reaction I wanna give is that "I'm not even from China. I just look like them. But I'm not even from there."* *[…] it does hurt because someone just that you don't even know just wants to say these hurtful things to you or just can't believe the fact that English is your first language, or that you've grown up here, that you're a British citizen. It's like they're still trying to push us out. And that's how I feel like inside, that there's a lot of them out there that still don't think that we belong in this country, even though if we were born here or have grown up here.*	2 6 11 10
GET 3: COMING TO TERMS WITH MY EXPERIENCES OF COVID-RACISM		
3a. COVID hate was justified		
Ada	*I could understand the logic in terms of, you know maybe I'm more prone to [COVID-19] or something like that.* *So earlier when I said I can understand the logic is, where there was so many rumours going around, and there were so many things that were unconfirmed and the public announcements were, kind of wishy-washy, rumours start happening kinda like Chinese whispers, "oh, it's because they ate bats," or "it's lab grown" or "it's part of a conspiracy theory," there were so many different rumours happening so I can see why people were afraid.*	3 7

Daniel	*With COVID, right. Continuing from what I said about the media coverage about, you know, eating bats and linked to COVID, Wuhan virus, Kung flu, et cetera, et cetera […] all these things really like almost made it justifiable to hate Chinese. That's very different with pre COVID time. Pre COVID time we are the, you know, we're always seen as the model immigrant. Like we're the ones that behave. We we're always perceived as ones that behave well, that does not cause any violent crime, that that's always the high achievers in the society […] So the hate towards us back then was always unjustified. There was never a justified reason to hate us.*	6
	A lot of people see [COVID] as, you know some nasty foreign stuff that come from, you know, bat-eating people that impacted the higher society of the world.	9
	I encountered racism before [COVID] as well. You know, it was just dumb things. Like, "get out of the country you chink." You feel the confidence to almost swing back at them, you know, shout back at them, you know, because you feel their anger, their attitude is unjustified. And after COVID afterward, you know, the media said, you know, and even though knowing it first hand, what they said is not true, you know, the rumours are not true. But it almost made me feel it's justifiable. You know the hate towards Chinese, you know, like we, it almost feels like we made the people in this country go through COVID. You see what I mean? Cause it did come from China. It did come from China. And the world has suffered for three whole years because of COVID, you know, lockdowns et cetera, et cetera.	6
	And with this ridiculous link of bats or whatever, it made every one of us, I think it probably, you know like same for a lot of other Chinese people that they feel, you know "did we?", this question in their head did you know "did my people actually cause this?" "Was it was it something that's in my culture?" for example the wet market, right? Maybe it's not bats, but the wet market is definitely something to be blamed which which we took pride in, you know, which a lot of us took pride in, that that's what you get the freshest fish. That's what you get the freshest of everything. We took a lot of pride in that and and you know […] the wet market is celebrated […] And that cost the world three years of suffering.	6
	But [COVID] just you know, made me think quite a lot about, you know, for example what I said about the wet market, my culture, you know, the virus itself and "was my people really the one's to blame?"	8
	So nowadays, if somebody shouts at me, I, you know, whatever, you know racism related to COVID. You know there there's an element in me that almost don't feel confident enough to fight back to that because, you know, we are linked to it, but in some sort of ways you feel the pain that the racist person was feeling, because you felt the same pain. You see, that's a fundamental difference there that I don't know how to, you know, like, you know, even get out of this this mind set or this thinking although knowingly I was not the person to blame, you know. But that was something that's associated with my people.	7
3b. COVID experiences forced me to learn, change and teach others		
Selena	*I'm never really want to like, push it in people's faces and be like "you need to be aware of this," because I'm not the type of person that's like that, but if they really want to I'm more than happy to like tell them about [COVID] or like, help them understand better and educate them.*	8

	I posted it on my stories to raise awareness that these things are happening and that it's not finished just because COVID is calmed down. *And if I'm not sure, I'll just do my own research or ask questions because asking questions doesn't mean you're stupid, it just means that you're willing to learn and like, broaden your horizons. So there's a lot of self-reflection going on since all the hate crimes happening and talking to different type of people and so on.*	9 21
James	*The pandemic] brought up a lot of questions I think for myself […] You know, there's a lot of talks about like mental space and prioritising that.* *And it's difficult I think to get into that space and cause I'm trying to, especially when [COVID] kicked off, I was trying to change myself to being more of a discussion-based rather than physical. Which I was used to so I'm trying to change my outlook and discuss like, why they think this and try and talk to people about these things.*	24 10
Daniel	*So since the COVID, you know racist events which I experienced right […] I feel the need to change people's perception. You know, to educate people on things. For example as of the wet market and COVID the origin of COVID […] I'm still trying to educate people on a lot of things and in terms of behaviour* *For a lot of people, I represent British Chinese. I represent Chinese people, you know you take away the British part, you know, I represent my entire ethnicity. So I need to behave in a responsible way. So ok, maybe some people have negative perception of us, they will start to change. And for people who have positive perception of us will always continue to have the positive perception.* *So since COVID I put in a lot of active effort to educate people, to follow the laws and regulations of this country […] and behave responsibly. So that that's something I've been actively engaging and I whenever I see someone do like, you know, especially if it's Chinese person doing something wrong, I'm much, much more keen to correct them and make sure the perception of us is right. And that impact, it's not just me, it's also across my friends*.	11 11 13
Mia	*I think I've had quite a lot of time to sit and reflect and think about [the COVID-racism I experienced]. And I also learned more like vocabularies and like, like things that I would normally think it's ok when it's not. So I yeah, I had a lot more time to learn more about it and learn why I'm feeling certain ways.* *Before [the pandemic], I would say "oh, maybe it's my problem. It's my race, it's my identity that's causing this problem." Whereas now I can see it, it's like "no, it's not me, it's you. It's, it's your ignorance that's making me feel this way." This came about through learning and kind of understanding what's ok and what's not.* *I had access to online and I began speaking to people in the same situation as me and I started to be able to, like understand why I was feeling a certain way and it's only really through that that I started to understand all of my internal racism that I never realised I had.* *Since I've moved to UK and I just thought, I always thought oh it's social anxiety. But then it's, yeah, it's only through that and through COVID that I realised it wasn't just social anxiety. Yeah, it's kind of this…, yeah, it's like the internal*	5 9 2 3

	racism that I kind of put on myself and just how I feel around like a group of British people. I can feel a bit small. And, and that's when I realised oh there's a lot more to that	
Li	*I felt like for me [COVID] was finally a chance to, like, scream and shout about [Chinese racism] that [has] been going on for decades. Because people didn't feel like they had the opportunity or the platform before… it felt like there was a rage. Which is a good thing because they had to happen, but it was sad because it felt like people were pushed to do these things, like pushed to start really going, you know, aggressively tackling it, you know?* *Obviously, there's a lot of like I think time has passed. I think I was very, I was very dark and deep and very traumatised, like, say two years ago or a year ago.*	3 18
3c. I wish I coped with COVID racism better		
Mia	*I feel like I want to do something about it. And a lot of times when things happen to me, I kind of freeze. And I just kind of let it slide sometimes, but then afterwards I get quite annoyed at myself for not saying something about it or not doing something about it.*	8
James	*Talking about [COVID] is very odd. I don't know how else to describe it really… Yeah, it's a tough one because sometimes I wish I did something.* *I don't think I can [make sense of racism during COVID], that's my problem, I don't know how to make sense of them. And it's, I think for me it's easier to make sense of physical stuff because it's just a reaction. But when this sort of very deep, over- like overbearing, it's like someone's constantly got their hand over your head and ready to just like push you down. And I don't, I don't know. I don't really know yeah how to process it all or think about it and it also feels like some people have got that on you now. Like since then it's like a thing that people can just bring up if they wanna put you down even though it has nothing to do with you.*	16 18
Selena	*I've also been trying to process things a little bit better, not just brush aside that kind of like, the feelings that you get from it, but it was so different and I didn't know how […] I find that probably the best way to just get on with it is to get on with it and just let yourself feel like this for a little bit […] but it stays for a couple of days and then you'll forget about it and then all of a sudden like something will trigger it and you're like "that happened." So I think mentally it does affect me in the long term as well.* *But I still feel different, everywhere. Since [COVID] experiences make you feel even more different and, yeah, not like anyone. It made me more aware, but then also in strange ways isolated, even though you are like embraced in the community.*	11 18
Li	*It's weird because you're like, if you think about the comments that were made, you're like, whoa. Because I do still see myself as British Chinese but it's… just weird.*	13
Ada	*I've never really thought about [how the pandemic made me feel], I just kind of, it was just kind of a passing thought or a passing event, and then, just kind of leave it be. But yeah it's, it's upsetting and like I said I never thought I would*	7

	want to explain myself for something that isn't necessarily to do with me, so that part really… umm what's the right word? It really, frustrates me.	
GET 4: COVID HAD ONGOING REPERCUSSIONS ON MY IDENTITY AND SENSE OF BELONGING		
4a. My identity evolved with COVID		
Mia	*And for as long as I've been here I kind of wanted to reject being associated with being British. And even living here, because I really wanted to like… keep my identity. And because with Britain I always associate racism, and I always feel like I wouldn't fit in, so yeah. So I always try to reject that and so I always want to retain being Chinese.* *I feel quite lost without [my sense of identity] and for a while I did feel quite lost because while I was rejecting being British, I was also rejecting being Chinese and just, just through, like internalised racism, I wanted to be as disassociated as I can. Just, just so no one can really stereotype me or I can't give the satisfaction of like, oh this is "oh you're Chinese, therefore you are this way." So I, I really tried to… Yeah, I really tried to dissociate myself with that. And it's only since COVID in the last year or two that I I'm starting to really like embrace my identity again.* *One of my colleagues said "oh don't worry, I always forget that you're Asian anyways, I think you're British," and like, "don't worry, you're not that Asian." And I was really taken aback I was. But to me in my mind, I was like, "but I am not, I'm not British" […] And it's like I, yeah, I feel, upset by the comment, but I don't understand why.*	1 2 5
James	*The identity thing I think is only actually gone stronger in terms of wanting to be, or accepting my Chinese side, my Asian side. I think since you know all that like weird COVID racism and aggression, I think I think, yeah, I've just more wanted to move more towards actually accepting the culture, being Asian. Because I'm like, I don't, I don't actually care like. Uh, I don't know. It's kind of one of those where it's just highlighted more of the things where I actually do appreciate about Asia and my Chinese identity, I guess so it's actually made me want to embrace it more.*	20
Selena	*[Being British Chinese] is kind of bridging like a diaspora. Like individually I think growing up half of my life here and not abandoning my Chinese roots and getting to know more of it. I found that quite important since about like the second lockdown last year.* *I kind of was very like disconnected from that Asian part of me until when the pandemic started happening, I realised I actually didn't care about history of my family or my heritage, and I started taking more interest and I think it's very nice to be able to like connect that for myself.*	1 18
Ada	*I identify as a BBC British born Chinese. Obviously I don't look English I look Chinese however because I was brought up here I speak English fluently as part of my mother tongue and equally I've been brought up in the Western education system and I have English friends so all of that definitely shapes my identity.* *When I was younger, I wasn't very confident or comfortable in my own skin. Then since being around other adults that accepted me and working for like 6-7*	1 18

	years, so I've built like 6-7 years-worth of confidence and proudness in my identity. So when the pandemic happened, I wasn't embarrassed or ashamed to be Chinese. Cause I'd already, I already built up that confidence and I already I was already comfortable in my own skin. However, if I hadn't built that up, I would probably be really embarrassed still.	
Daniel	*There there's a lot of meaning of being British Chinese, right, so as the name suggests, British Chinese as the part of the, you know, like the big family, the multi-culture, the family of UK. But also I remain my Chinese identity, you know, which is not a conflict to the UK side, you know I accept and you know truly believing all the values of that the British society holds but you know I remain still, I can keep hold of my heritage and culture as being Chinese.* *To be honest, regardless of what my passport says right like, there's always two parts of my identity. So one is obviously British, you know the society, the values which I believe in, and you know where I live, where I grew up and as well as China because I know when I was very young age I grew up in China there are relatives still there. So it doesn't really impact my sense of identity. I always feel like there's two parts of it to me. The Chinese side, as well as the as the British side. So there's definitely two parts and I don't think there's any conflict of the two. You know, the matter of fact that I believe, you know, like they kind of complement each other in a lot of areas. So I'm happy. I basically embrace both sides.* *I'm not discrediting any side. I think both are very important […] so that that's why I said, you know, they complement each other the British side and the Chinese side. And together, forms me as my identity, you know.* *I sometimes feel like I don't belong anywhere. So my sense of myself, as I said before at the very beginning, I always believe in almost I always believe in two parts of me; the Chinese side as well as the British side, right. For COVID you know, like that that made me question my Chinese side and everything on the Chinese side, but I, you know, in terms of racism that made me question a lot about my Chinese-relating in the COVID time.*	1 1 2 10
4b. COVID made me more wary of others and the world		
James	*I kind of like I lost all faith in government. I lost all faith in a system like in a general system, and then there was a bit of like, sadly, also a bit in humanity.* *But yeah, as soon as all this [racism from COVID] happened and just the feeling of people being unnecessarily aggressive towards you […] it just made me feel really sad again, really.*	24 8
Selena	*At first you know you don't experience so many racial hate crimes before the pandemic, and like the occasional people taking the piss out of you, like harmless borderline, just racism. […] But then since when they it became more aggressive and more like in your face, I started losing a little bit of faith in humanity […]* *I've always been a bit of like a sceptic, or a bit more pessimistic than the usual person, like not having expectations, so you're never disappointed kind of thing, that kind of mindset. But I also know it's not healthy to always be like this, so I try to always reflect a bit more often on things. And ever since COVID it*	19 19

	changed, changed my view of people a lot. I find it so hard to give them the benefit of the doubt. *But with COVID it makes me see people differently. Like it definitely makes me more wary, which is not exactly the best because sometimes it makes it hard to trust people and their intentions. So it keeps your guard up a little bit […]* *You still feel very like, a bit scarred inside because you don't know when it will stop, and ever since COVID, I don't think it will stop.* *Being a person of colour and also female, we have a lot to watch out for, and especially since the pandemic when it comes to racism and also like sexual harassment.* (	23 10 5
Li	*And so then you just start to really question your capabilities in general, like no matter where you go […] COVID definitely has changed the way I perceive everything around me basically. Definitely I struggle to... I'm not a, I'm not a pessimist per say. I'm still, I still have, like, a lot of optimism, but like, I definitely do like if I see a situation where umm, something like that, there's like question marks over things like that, I do generally gravitate towards not giving people the benefit of the doubt.* *Obviously, there's a lot of like I think time has passed. I think I was very, I was very dark and deep and very traumatized, like, say two years ago or a year ago. So I think I've, I feel much better now about it. And I can look at it and talk about it objectively.* But yeah, it definitely, it's definitely shaking me because I think prior to [the pandemic], like say in school or university or meeting people on the street where you experience racism, I guess yeah, you deal with that a certain way. But then since [COVID], when it starts to hinder not just social, but in work as well, it feels like all-encompassing and just feels like you have no outlet anymore and you have no control. *[Racist incidents] can feel like it's happening like very close to one another, and very frequent. That's when you, yeah, you start to feel very disheartened.*	21 18 20 21
Daniel	*So, you know, like, ever since [COVID] when somebody you know, like a complete stranger does anything negative to me, like for example on the streets of London, which happens a lot, right, you know, random people screaming at me and people walking past. Now you don't know what mental state they're in or whatever, right, but there will always be a question in my head, "Is this guy doing this because I'm Chinese?" "Is it because of my ethnicity he's shouting at me?" Yeah. So, so that was another impact COVID had on me that was quite lasting and now and you know, every single time when that question arises in my head I need to think twice, you know, about a lot of things, right.*	5
Ada	*And when it, you know, when I saw the racial abuse happening and it happening to me, it didn't make me feel any different about my identity. If anything, it just made me look at the world, it made me see the world differently and made me see human behaviour differently.* *[COVID] made me think of people as being capable of a lot more than on the surface. It's it definitely, so with my experiences and watching the news and social media, it's made me be more aware of my surroundings. Like if I was,*	19 12

	prior to COVID, going out for me I would mainly be aware of my safety as a woman, you know […] but after the pandemic I'm more aware of what I look like as well, the fact that I'm oriental. *I feel like that kind of aggression is just unnecessary, so it has made me see the world differently, and it's scary.* *Yeah I never really thought like being oriental would, I don't know I guess be of an issue or detriment, but now I think of that as well. Like, "where am I going?" "Is there going to be any issues because I'm oriental?" Whereas before would be a case of, I'm a woman, so there's certain things you just need to be aware of, but now I'm aware of things from a racial perspective as well.*	12 13
	3c. COVID connected me to my Chinese identity and community	
Li	*It wasn't until I started connecting with people over the pandemic like other British Asians whether they're London-based or not. But because my background is like I grew up in a take away a Chinese take away, there is a certain generation of children that that also did. And so, it's almost like trying to find each other again and like long lost family almost. And so, yeah, I choose to spend more time with those guys now because there's just a lot of shared experiences.* *I felt more empowered [compared to pre-COVID], I guess or more passionate towards doing more community work and more umm, activist work. Because actually I felt I know I felt like it was like something that we needed to do together as a united front […] It felt it felt shift, but also it felt umm like a call to action as a group of people rather than being just singled out for the fact that you were Chinese. And because I connected with all these other people, it felt like I had people to talk to about this kind of stuff. Like so, yeah it was like isolating but now I feel better for it because I I've connected with other people.* *But then, as I said, there was that kind of like a unified front […] the rage kind of ended up making people like, act on it together. And that's where there's like groups like BC [British Chinese], like BSA [British South Asian], BA [British Asian] network, ESA [East south Asian] sisters […] So there was a lot of people, like, started to vocalise their experiences and their emotions and start putting together resources to help each other cope better. So in respects it was bad, but it was also like a lot of good came out of it and we're on that other kind of side of it now that we're kind of trying to continue that and like celebrate it and help each other.* *Yeah, so I think I think I've coped as best as I could by wanting to share like nice things with other people and like remind us that we were actually like great people, despite all the shit that was being said about us. And so that I think that was good. And yeah, I found I found a community which is really nice and trauma bonding, basically.*	18 23 26 18
James	*The identity thing I think is only actually gone stronger in terms of wanting to be or accepting my Chinese side my Asian side.* *I've surrounded myself in this really nice Asian community, which makes me feel more Asian and more at home even though we're in London […] I've put myself in a better space rather than necessarily the situation itself getting better.*	20 15

Daniel	[*When you're after the COVID racism, so for me, I felt the need to, you know, be more actively involved in my community to make sure that, you know society is right for this. You know, like so we don't experience more racism, it's important for me.*	13
Mia	And it's only the last year or two that I I'm starting to really like embrace my identity again. And that really helped [me cope].	2
Selena	*I think also like one of the positive things that came out of COVID was meeting more people and like within the ESEA [East Southeast Asian] community that like me, where they understand what it's like to not really fit in anywhere […] they know how you feel to be an immigrant in this country or just made to feel different. I think that's how I coped, just by talking about [racism] [with ESEA/ diaspora friends] […] yeah, that feels a little bit better to like get it out there, talking to people that would understand how it would feel like to be made to be different. It's like there was like group therapy for racism.*	11

Appendix H: Ethics approval letter

Dear Kelsey

Reference: ETH2122-0322

Project title: A qualitative study exploring experiences of racism in British Chinese individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK

Start date: 28 Mar 2022

End date: 30 Sep 2023

I am writing to you to confirm that the research proposal detailed above has been granted formal approval from the Psychology committee: medium risk. The Committee's response is based on the protocol described in the application form and supporting documentation. Approval has been given for the submitted application only and the research must be conducted accordingly. You are now free to start recruitment.

The approval was given with the following conditions:

• Please correct the name of the ethics committee on the PIS to: "Psychology Research Ethics Committee, City .... "

Please ensure that you are familiar with City's Framework for Good Practice in Research and any appropriate

Departmental/School guidelines, as well as applicable external relevant policies.

Please note the following:

Project amendments/extension

You will need to submit an amendment or request an extension if you wish to make any of the following changes to your research project:

- Change or add a new category of participants;
- Change or add researchers involved in the project, including PI and supervisor;
- Change to the sponsorship/collaboration;
- Add a new or change a territory for international projects;
- Change the procedures undertaken by participants, including any change relating to the safety or physical or mental integrity of research participants, or to the risk/benefit assessment for the project or collecting additional types of data from research participants;
- Change the design and/or methodology of the study, including changing or adding a new research method and/or research instrument;
- Change project documentation such as protocol, participant information sheets, consent forms, questionnaires, letters of invitation, information sheets for relatives or carers;
- Change to the insurance or indemnity arrangements for the project; • Change the end date of the project.

Adverse events or untoward incidents

You will need to submit an Adverse Events or Untoward Incidents report in the event of any of the following:

a) Adverse events

b) Breaches of confidentiality

c) Safeguarding issues relating to children or vulnerable adults

d) Incidents that affect the personal safety of a participant or researcher

Issues a) and b) should be reported as soon as possible and no later than five days after the event. Issues c) and d) should be reported immediately. Where appropriate, the researcher should also report adverse events to other relevant institutions, such as the police or social services.

Should you have any further queries relating to this matter, please do not hesitate to contact me. On behalf of the Psychology committee: medium risk, I do hope that the project meets with success.

Kind regards

Andreas Jarvstad

Psychology committee: medium risk

City, University of London

Appendix I: Debrief information sheet

Title of study: *A qualitative study exploring experiences of racism in British Chinese individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK.*

Ethics approval code: ETH2122-0322

DEBRIEF INFORMATION

Thank you for taking part in this research study. In contributing to this project, you have provided valuable information into the understanding of British Chinese individuals' experiences of COVID-19-related racism. In studying these unique and detailed accounts of racism, this research seeks to better understand the subjective first-person insights of racism towards British Chinese individuals within the context of the global pandemic in the UK.

If participating in this research has raised any issues or you would like to access support and/or counselling please contact your GP. Additionally, please find a list of support lines and websites that might be helpful for further information:

- The Samaritans: Confidential, emotional support for whatever you are going through. Call 116 123 (24/7). www.samaritans.org.uk
- Stop Hate UK: Confidential support to those affected by hate crime and discrimination. http://www.stophateuk.org/
- Victim Support: Emotional support for victims of crimes. Call 0808 168 9111 (24/7). www.victimsupport.org.uk
- Counselling Directory: Directory for counsellors, psychologists and psychotherapists. www.counselling-directory.org.uk

We hope you found the study interesting. If you have any other questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact us at the following:

Researcher: Kelsey Hyde Email: Kelsey.hyde@city.ac.uk
Research Supervisor: Dr Kate Scruby Email: Kate.scruby@city.ac.uk