EDUCATION REVISITED:

MATE PREFERENCES AMONG CANADIAN-BORN AND CHINESE IMMIGRANT ONLINE DATERS by

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Education revisited: Mate preferences among Canadian-born and Chinese immigrant online daters

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Abstract

Existing quantitative research shows that people tend to partner with someone of a similar educational level. However, quantitative measurements are not sufficient to capture how individuals perceive the significance of education in potential partners. This study draws on interviews with 26 Canadian-born and 24 Chinese immigrant online daters to examine individuals' perceptions of education in their search for partners. The findings show that, although education mattered to some participants, Canadian-born participants articulated their educational preferences for potential partners in less culturally overt ways than Chinese immigrants did. Canadian-born daters often framed their educational preferences as preferring intellectual compatibility, whereas Chinese immigrant daters used higher education received in North America to predict cultural capital specific to the host country. While participants who valued education emphasized its signaling effect in assuring cultural matching and intellectual compatibility, there were also participants who deemed higher education unimportant. Chinese immigrants' indifference to education reflected the devaluation of immigrants' academic qualifications as human capital in the Canadian labor market. Meanwhile, Canadian-born participants who rejected a "snobby" view of education and success valued an omnivorous taste of intelligence; in doing so, they formed symbolic boundaries that effectively discounted the educational achievements and experiences of non-Canadian-born "others." This research contributes to the literature by uncovering new forms of status memberships that result from nuanced evaluative distinctions.

Lay Summary

This study investigates how individuals perceive education in dating and how they make sense of their educational mate preference nowadays. Drawing on interviews with online daters in Vancouver, I find that Canadian-born participants and Chinese immigrants articulated the significance or, surprisingly sometimes, the insignificance of education in different ways. While Chinese immigrants' views of a partner's education mostly manifested their needs of gaining cultural resources and social mobility, Canadian-born participants had more "privilege" to be more culturally blind and less instrumental. For Canadian-born participants, using education to evaluate potential partners was seen as "snobby", elitist, and exclusive; they valued diverse forms of intelligence instead. However, in doing so, Canadian-born daters discounted immigrants' educational achievements and experiences. This study calls for attention to the emerging evaluative distinctions of how immigrant "others" and Canadian-born persons view education in romantic relationships as well as the implications for symbolic status differentiation and inequality.

Preface

This study draws interview data from a larger project on the topic of online dating in Canada led by Principal Investigator Dr. Yue Qian. This thesis, though based on the larger project, is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Siqi Xiao.

As the principal investigator, Dr. Yue Qian designed the larger project including its major topics and sample size. Dr. Yue Qian's project was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada Insight Development Grant. This larger project was approved by the University of British Columbia's Research Ethics Board [certificate # H18-01952]. I was hired by Dr. Qian to assist this SSHRC-funded project. As a research assistant, I contributed to the larger project by translating and pretesting the survey instrument for quantitative data collection, drafting and revising bilingual qualitative interview guides, recruiting qualitative interview participants, conducting 44 interviews, and writing reflection notes for most of the interviews I conducted.

I gained approval from Dr. Yue Qian for using this dataset to write my MA thesis. Dr. Yue Qian supported the early development of this project when I was writing my proposal. I decided the subsample for this study and developed theoretical framings independently. I conducted data analysis and writing alone. Dr. Amin Ghaziani's qualitative class guided the formation of the first draft manuscript. Dr. Yue Qian, Dr. Sinikka Elliott. Dr. Elizabeth Hirsh and Dr. Gerry Veenstra offered suggested edits that helped improve this thesis. None of the text of the thesis is taken directly from previously published or collaborative articles.

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Dedication

The thesis, though not perfect, is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Sinikka Elliott, who, though no longer with us, continues to inspire me with her rigorous methodology and impactful research, her activist spirit and feminist philosophy, as well as her dedication to the students she mentored or simply came across. She taught me to question the epistemology underpinning our research and writings. She challenged me to write with greater agency and give voices to the participants and communities. She broadened my vision of sociology and scholarly activism. I forever thank Sinikka for her unwavering support for my intellectual curiosity, activism, and well-being; for her belief in my ability to be a thoughtful and successful researcher. I couldn't complete this degree without her support.

Sinikka, you are gone but your unparalleled mentorship and your belief in me have made this journey possible. You are — always — in my heart. And, I will never ever write your name wrong

Introduction

Mate preference has a logic. In our daily lives, we often regard this logic, the reason why we prefer romantic partners with certain characteristics like education, as either common-sense or idiosyncratic. Yet a growing body of research shows persistent "educational homogamy": people tend to partner with someone of a similar educational background, regardless of whether they search online or offline (Blossfeld, 2009 for review; Lewis, 2016; Skopek, Schulz, & Blossfeld, 2011). In Canada, 54% of couples had same-level education in 2001, representing a 12-percentage-point increase since 1971 (Hou & Myles, 2008). As education is associated with occupational success and reflects cultural resources, increased homogamous educational pairing signifies intensified social boundaries between groups of people with different socioeconomic statuses (Lichter & Qian, 2019). As an agentic component of mate choice, mate preference is thus essential to our understanding of boundary-making and how social inequality may be reproduced or ameliorated through mating and family formation.

The study of mate preference has overwhelmingly relied on quantitative data. Education is a central variable in these studies, which assumes that differences between levels of education reflect socially significant distinctions. As a result, "increases in homogamy rates can be interpreted as indicators of social closure" (Schwartz, 2013, p.517). However, as many countries have experienced higher education expansion, the value of a college degree has changed in the labor market (Gerber & Cheung, 2008; Asadullah & Xiao, 2020) as well as in the dating market (Xiao & Qian, 2020). Measuring education solely in vertical, quantitative terms (i.e., the level of education or years of education) is not sufficient for capturing how people perceive the value, quality, and significance of education. Moreover, statistical renderings often obscure how people

make sense of their educational mate preferences and the multivocal meanings they attach to education. Therefore, while quantitative studies have yielded powerful insights on the trend and pattern of educational homogamy, this article picks up the call for more qualitative analyses of educational mate preferences (e.g., Xiao & Qian, 2020).

By formulating and talking about our preferred ideal potential mates, individuals participate in the process of meaningfully constructing symbolic boundaries between what we do or do not desire. Thus, drawing on the theoretical concept of symbolic boundaries, this study analyses in-depth interviews with Canadian-born online daters and Chinese immigrants in Vancouver to understand how individuals perceive education in their search for romantic partners. Rather than focusing on which level of education that individuals preferred, my objective is to closely engage with styles of talk (Swidler, 2001), processes of meaning-making (Ghaziani, 2009), and the evaluative distinctions (Lamont, 1992) of ideal educational mate preference among online daters. By describing the various meanings that individuals mobilize, I show distinctive symbolic pathways that Chinese immigrants and Canadian-born persons took as they explained how education mattered to them.

Defining education-specific mate preferences and the (un)stated assumptions

Researchers have conceptualized mate choice or mate selection as an outcome of individual preferences, controls from third parties such as religious groups, family or the state (Schwartz, 2013), and structural opportunities of meeting someone at a certain point in people's life courses (Blossfeld, 2009; Kalmijn, 1998). Personality and psychology scientists who study mate preference use the concept to describe self-reported ideal partner traits or standards (Li et al., 2013; Eastwick, Finkel & Eagly, 2011). In sociological quantitative studies, mate preference

often appears together or is interchangeably used with mate choice. Due to a lack of data that can distinguish the structural availability of potential partners and individual preferences, mate preference is often lumped together with opportunities of exposure, making it hard to discern the role of mate preference in assortative mating (Lichter & Qian, 2019; Schwartz, 2013).

To isolate mate preferences from structural exposure and third-party controls, recent studies have exploited quantitative data from online dating platforms, for example, user profiles, interactional data (i.e., who interacts with whom and frequency of interactions), and matching data (i.e., who matches with whom) to demonstrate that individuals tend to initiate conversations with and reply to someone with a similar education (e.g., Lewis, 2016; Lee, 2016; Skopek et al., 2011; Hitsch, Hortaçsu & Ariely, 2010). Although this approach has shed great light on the pattern of whom individuals chose to date online, underlying this line of work is an assumption that how individuals *choose* whom to date at an early stage of the mating process reflects what individuals *prefer* and vice versa. Research has also shown that through tailored marketing, client pre-screening, and similarity-driven algorithms, dating platforms structurally promote educational homophily among online daters (Xiao & Qian, 2020; Finkel et al., 2012; Heino, Ellison & Gibbs, 2010; Lee, 2016; Skopek et al., 2011). Although using quantitative data from dating platforms helps researchers to gain a crucial understanding of the matching patterns, it is still limited to isolate mate preference from mate choice.

In explaining why people tend to partner with others with similar educational levels, scholars argue that this phenomenon can be a result of both matching and competition mechanisms. The matching hypothesis suggests that preference for people with similar values and lifestyles helps individuals ensure cultural compatibility and long-term stability between partners (DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985; Kalmijn, 1994). Whereas the competition hypothesis

suggests that individuals prefer someone with equal or better socioeconomic resources to maximize the collective power as a couple in status-competition (Skopek et al., 2011; Kalmijn, 1998). Within the competition framework, the logic of education-specific mate preference relies on the assumptions that individuals are rational actors and education is an enduring indicator of cultural resources (DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985) or a proxy for long-term earning potential (Blossfeld & Timm, 2003; Oppenheimer, 1988).

As Canada, like many other countries, has experienced higher education expansion and an increased proportion of college graduates (Chow & Guppy, 2021), the changing value of a college degree warrants more investigation in the mating realm (Schwartz, 2013). According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's report (2020), more than 60% of individuals aged between 25 and 34 had post-secondary degrees in Canada. In Vancouver, one of the most highly educated cities in Canada, 73% of individuals aged between 25 and 64 had post-secondary credentials (Statistics Canada, 2017). Among those with post-secondary credentials, about 63% had at least a bachelor's degree. Given the commonality of a college degree, scholars found that there is an increasing emphasis on the quality of education in the labour market (Gerber & Cheung, 2008). In the United States and Korea, the prestige of universities is an increasingly salient predictor of occupational and social status (Rivera, 2011; Davies & Hammack, 2005; Jung & Lee, 2016). Elite firms used super-elite (top-four) university prestige to screen candidates' resumes and determine potential employees' cultural fit with a white, upper-middle-class ideal (Rivera, 2010; 2011). In Canada, the signaling effect of university prestige in the labour market is less pronounced as compared to in the United States. Elite majors, especially the ones that lead to lucrative fields (e.g., engineering and business), offer greater payoff in the labour market than university prestige alone (Davies & Hammack, 2005). Recent qualitative

research further demonstrated that Chinese online daters assumed having a bachelor's degree was a default mating criterion; the perceived prestige of the alma matter where potential partners received their bachelor's degree, which sometimes trumps a master's or Ph.D. degree, becomes a new signal of dateability and thereupon a marker of social status (Xiao & Qian, 2020). The shifting evaluation of education in the workplace and the dating market presents an urgent need for scholars to account for the novel meanings of education in the context of educational expansion.

Preference in between: Culture and agency

This paper is not the first to examine mate preferences in online dating and its implications for marriage, social boundaries, and inequalities. A burgeoning number of studies have explored mate preferences from the perspectives of economics, psychology, and sociology (e.g., Hitsch, Hortacsu & Ariely, 2010; Li et al., 2013; Lee, 2016;). Building on existing literature, I examine mate preference as the traits that participants desire their ideal partners to have. Mate preference hence reflects individuals' ideals, which may or may not guide social actors to pursue potential romantic partners who are closest to their ideals (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008).

To fully understand mate preference, we must first examine the concept of preference. Though preference has a seemingly individualistic characteristic, sociologists have long argued that preference is eminently cultural. However, different theorists hold varying views on the dynamics between culture, agency, and practice. Hence, these perspectives offer distinctive ways to conceptualize preference. From a Bourdieusian perspective, preference is taste, a by-product of habitus (Schmitz, 2017). Habitus can be understood as the deep-rooted disposition molded by

culture, structures, and social processes (Bourdieu, 1984; Power, 1999). Because habitus is so internalized and embodied within individuals, it continues to shape and reproduce how people think and evaluate, consciously or unconsciously (Bourdieu, 1984). As taste requires an accumulation of cultural capital, it serves to delimit, "identify and even sustain social boundaries" in often covert ways (Veenstra, 2010, p.86).

Although exponents argue that "habitus shapes and produces practice, but does not determine it" (Power, 1999, p.50; Yang, 2014), the impact of habitus on conscious or unconscious preference has been criticized for being too determinist (Yang, 2014; Lizardo, 2014). Swidler, instead, suggests that culture influences individuals' actions not by determining them but by offering a "toolkit" (or repertoire) of cultural resources, such as, "symbols, stories, rituals, and worldviews"; it informs how we respond to things and thereupon the actions we take (Swidler, 1986, p.273). Facing different situations, people can draw on and construct a "strategy of actions," which she elaborated on as the ways people manage to organize their life "within which particular choices make sense, and for which particular culturally shaped skills and habits are useful" (p. 276). Individuals also mobilize cultural meanings or repertoires to talk about love and to "justify a given way of life." (Swidler, 1986; 2001, p. 30; Vaisey, 2019). Preference, in this framework, is a result of a pragmatic and feasible choice of available cultural meanings to fit people's actions (Swidler, 2001).

Preference in between: Discourse and practice

Additionally, there is an ongoing debate around whether researchers can capture "real" mate preferences through stated preferences either in written or verbal formats as well as whether stated preferences guide actual mating practices (Qian & Lichter, 2019; Schmitz, 2017).

Underscoring the debates are the struggles to discern the relationship between what is said (i.e., discourse) and what is done (i.e., practice; Ihre & Wandel, 2014; Jerolmack & Khan, 2014; Mathieu 2009; Giddens, 1979), and how what we said influence our actions. While recognizing that there is a critical gap between discourse and practice, Ihre and Wandel's (2014) project, which concerns gender inequality in finding the "right match" in the management context, opens up new opportunities to interpret people's stated preference in regard to their ideal romantic partners as something that is in between discursive consciousness and practical consciousness.

Drawing on Mathieu's work (2009), Ihre and Wandel use "discursive consciousness" to conceptualize "the way interviewees talk and express themselves according to their values and beliefs" and "what they say they actually do in practice" to analyze "practical consciousness" (2014, p.5). Whereas "practical consciousness" evinces the "tacit stock of knowledges" of the social systems that individuals can skillfully enact but not necessarily have the capacity to deliberate (Giddens, 1979, p.5; as cited in Mathieu, 2009), "discursive consciousness" involves "deliberated awareness" of the knowledge of systems and the capacity to express it at the discourse level (Mathieu, 2009, p.180). Departing from Giddens' theorization, Mathieu argues that interview accounts can engage both "practical consciousness" and "discursive consciousness." By examining statements at the two levels of consciousness and contrasting the said and the done, Mathieu (2009) advocates that we can expose the critical gaps between what is said and what is done and discover opportunities of learning and social change (Ihre & Wandel, 2014).

Moreover, I extend this conceptual distinction between practical consciousness and discursive consciousness by incorporating more cultural meanings with a deliberate attempt to bring in and potentially bridge the debates of culture and practice. *Discursive preference* denotes

how speakers expressed their preference according to their values and beliefs. I use *practical preference*, instead, to describe how individuals said what they preferred in practice, which might be consistent or inconsistent with their values and beliefs. Whereas discursive preference evokes discursive consciousness and captures how individuals mobilized available repertoires to make sense of their preferences, practical preference implies habits that are appropriate to context and seamless to perform (Turner, 2018; Shatsky, 2001; as cited in Mathieu, 2009) or their taste by default (Bourdieu,1989), one which people feel is so natural that there is no need to justify (Ihre & Wandel, 2014).

Since I use interviews to analyze the two levels of preference and consciousness, both concepts are examined based on what participants said in interviews. Indeed, the difference between these two concepts can be confusing. However, the key distinction between the two concepts is the degree of awareness and "discursive penetration" (Mathieu, 2009, p.179), videlicet, the speakers' capability to draw on values, beliefs, and their discursive knowledge of the social system, knowingly, in their narratives. As I will show later in the result section, the former can reflect the latter, but it can also be distinguished from the latter due to reasons such as social desirability and unconsciousness of their actual preference. Analyzing the unconscious or deliberately expressed preferences of individuals and the inconsistency between discourse and practice is critical to understanding how people mark boundaries and how they reinforce or resist existing inequalities (Mathieu, 2009; Giddens, 1979).

An alternative framework: Stated preference as sources of symbolic boundary

Preferring whom to date and talking about one's ideals is a complex cognitive task. When a seemingly "natural" practice is questioned, we can anticipate that deliberated awareness will be

actuated (Mathieu, 2009). This, in turn, engages a process of meaning-making, evaluating, and constructing symbolic boundaries. Different from the concept of a social boundary, which is often measured by intermarriage rates in demography, symbolic boundaries are the "conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices…" (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, p.168). There are three configurations of symbolic boundaries, which I argue, are fundamental to the analysis of educational mate preference.

First, individuals are consistently engaging in the practice of boundary-making in complex cognitive processes where they evaluate, form, and express their cultural preferences (Puetz, 2018). Second, meanings, conceptions, evaluative strategies (Lamont, 1992), and styles of talk (Swidler, 2001) constitute key symbolic resources activated by individuals, which reflect the mechanism of producing cultural membership and group boundaries. Third, the significance of symbolic boundaries, including the cultural, socioeconomic, and moral ones, varies by nation, culture, and space (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). For example, Lamont (1992) found that the salient cultural boundary among the college-educated, white, upper-middle-class in France, which is determined by education, intelligence, refinement, and cosmopolitanism, has lost its strength in North America where socioeconomic boundaries and anti-cosmopolitanism are more pronounced. Another thread of work suggests the "cultural omnivore" thesis, that is, some high-status individuals, instead of exclusively participating in elite high culture, are participating in various popular culture and increasingly appreciate "a taste for everything" (Warde, Wright & Gayo-Cal, 2007, p.144; Veenstra, 2010). As Veenstra elucidates (2010, p.103), "the cultural omnivore thesis suggests that elites can be distinguished from members of lower classes by the breadth and variety of their preferred cultural tastes and practices rather than by possession of some specified set of highbrow tastes." Both lines of work have challenged the prevalent

preconceptions that overemphasize the relationship between educational attainment, social status, and high culture. They also have provided a more nuanced understanding of how education plays a role in boundary-making.

Symbolic boundary is thus a fertile theoretical tool to examine the way people create "others" and solidify the cultural distinction between "them" and "us" in their talks about education and the ideals of romantic partners. Additionally, because "immigrants are also likely to transport symbolic boundaries from one cultural context to another" (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, p.186). Applying symbolic boundaries to the analysis of the preferences of immigrants and native-born spouses will help clarify the cross-cultural differences in how symbolic boundaries work (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). Nevertheless, there is virtually no empirical research extensively using it to examine educational mating (Lewis, 2016). The symbolic boundary-making between local-born Canadians and foreign-born immigrants merits more investigation.

Methods

Unlike most studies that rely on quantitative methods when studying educational assortative mating, I draw on the unique strengths of in-depth interviews to analyze how Chinese immigrants and Canadian-born individuals perceive potential partners' education in their search for partners. Interviews provide several methodological advantages. They enable researchers to access non-verbal cues and feelings that evince cultural schemas (Pugh, 2013; Brodyn & Ghaziani, 2018); explore how people engage in the process of meaning-making (Lamont & Swidler, 2014); and assess how individuals mobilize these available resources or repertoires (Swidler, 2001).

Vancouver is one of the biggest census metropolitan areas (CMA) in Canada and home to over 260,000 immigrants in 2016 (Statistics Canada, 2016). Its ethnocultural diversity, the high proportion of college graduates and immigrants make Vancouver an ideal site for my study of educational mate preferences. As British Columbia continues to attract international newcomers with its culturally diverse protocol, more than 80 % of recent immigrants in British Columbia resided in the Metro Vancouver area (NewToBC, 2018). Immigrants and second-generation immigrants consisted of 66% of Vancouver's population in 2016 (Arora, 2019). Despite its growing diversity, immigrants continue to face barriers in achieving occupational success. Statistics show that university-educated immigrants are often overqualified in the Canadian job market: In 2016, "58.0% of Vancouver's recent immigrants between the ages of 25 and 64 had a bachelor's degree or higher" (p.13), which was about 8% percentage-point higher than the proportion of their Canadian born counterparts (NewToBC, 2018). However, in the labour market, immigrants with a university degree from outside Canada were much more likely than

Canadian-borns to work in occupations that only require a high school diploma or less (Arora, 2019). Such a gap in educational returns between immigrants and Canadian-born residents urges me to pose a particular question: how is education evaluated between immigrants and Canadian-borns in the dating and marital realm? In addition, in a multicultural mosaic, how do individuals evaluate and talk about a potential partner's education in their search for partners?

To study individuals' perceptions of educational mate preference, I draw on interviews with 26 Canadian-born online daters and 24 Chinese immigrants, among whom 23 are cismen and 27 are ciswomen. Of the Canadian-born online daters, 12 are Asian Canadians, including 10 Chinese Canadians, nine self-identified as Caucasian while the other Canadian-born participants had biracial or multiracial identities. The 50 interviews belong to a larger project of 65 interviews with online daters, led by principal investigator Yue Qian. Due to the scope of the larger project, all participants were engaged in different-sex relationships. For this study, I only include participants between 20 and 41 years of age and who are either unmarried or married for the first time, as their experiences differ from people who are in an older cohort and/or who re-enter the marriage market after divorce (Sassler, 2010).

This study focuses on Chinese immigrants for two reasons. First, Chinese immigrants are the largest visible minority and immigrant group in Vancouver (Statistics Canada, 2016). The proliferation of street signs and store labels in Chinese around the city indicates their large influence on the city. But language barriers and poor economic prospect, coupled with "the devaluation and denigration of their Chinese educational qualifications and prior work experience" (Guo, 2013, p.182) have hindered their integration into social and economic life in Vancouver (Guo & DeVoretz, 2006). As an important aspect of social integration and immigrant assimilation, the experiences of foreign-born Chinese immigrants in dating are seldom

documented, yet it is crucial to understand. The second reason is that both interviewers self-identify as Chinese. Our shared ethnicity, social networks, and language allowed us to recruit Chinese participants using snowball procedures.

The strength of the sample lies in its diversity in terms of online daters' geographic locations, neighborhoods, ages, and immigrants' ages of coming to Canada (see Table 1). To achieve a diverse sample, various recruitment strategies were used. Bilingual advertisements were posted on several online forums and off-line community boards in the greater Vancouver area. In addition, personal connections and participant referrals were used to help recruit participants. The interviews ranged from 2 to 4.5 hours. All the interviews were audio-recorded with the respondents' consent and transcribed verbatim.

Of the 50 interviews drawn on in this study, I conducted 35 interviews. The remaining 15 interviews were conducted by the principal investigator of the larger study of which this is part. For those who agreed to meet for an in-person interview, we encouraged respondents to select a convenient meeting place where they felt comfortable to discuss their online dating experiences. Meeting locations were generally semi-public spaces, such as coffee shops and public libraries. Only a few participants met the interviewers at a private office. During the interviews, we asked about their experiences of online dating, including what they were looking for in potential partners, their romantic relationship history, their social networks in Vancouver, and their ideals for future life.

Table 1. Sample Demographics

	Canadian-born (*N* = 26)	Chinese immigrants (*N* = 24)
Age		

20-24	6	2
25–29	8	10
30–34	9	8
35–41	3	4
Age of coming to Canada		
1-14	NA	9
15-20		6
21-25		9
Educational Background (Highest degree or in progress)		
High school	1	0
College/training/some post-secondary	3	0
Bachelor's degree	14	15
Master's degree/JD/MBA	7	8
Doctoral degree	1	1
Chinese post-secondary education only	NA	1

At the time of the interview, I was a Chinese female international student who had a similar or lower educational degree than most participants. The other interviewer is also an Asian woman and was an assistant professor in a prestigious university. Both researchers' positionality can impact participants' feelings around social desirability and willingness to share their mate preferences regarding education, ethnicity, and local-versus-foreign-born status. Moreover, the negotiation of meanings between cultural insiders and outsiders was constant throughout the varied interviews conducted. Chinese immigrant participants sometimes assumed a consensus on their perception of education thus leaving out information that "everyone knows" (as cited in Ryan & Bernad, 2003, p.93; Spradley, 1979). For non-Chinese Canadian participants, there were a few times I found myself asking questions in a preconceived narrative structure that was inconsistent with theirs, causing confusion (Riessman, 1987). In this case, I invited respondents to clarify their meaning and thoughts. As I embraced the inherent collaborative and interpretive nature of interviewing, I scrutinized the reflexive process by writing memos on how my

subjectivities shaped interviewing (Charmaz, 2014; Pugh, 2013; Holstein & Gubrium, 2002), as well as the schematic and cultural assumptions underlying participants' occasional laconic expressions (Pugh, 2013; Ryan & Bernad, 2003).

I incorporated multiple coding strategies to analyze the data. Though qualitative analysis is never a linear process, there are three major stages of my analysis. First, I read the relevant transcripts line by line [1] and produced over 280 initial codes in MAXQDA. Meanwhile, I created a "case-by-attribute matrix," wherein I listed interview cases as rows and put participants' attributes, and stated dating preferences as columns, to better facilitate a holistic investigation (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and systematic comparisons (Deterding & Waters, 2021). Secondly, following Ghaziani (2014), I retroductively coded the dataset again by identifying keywords. My codes focused on indicators of the importance of education in dating (e.g., deductive codes that referenced cultural capital or cultural matching) along with evidence that challenged those sentiments (e.g., inductive codes of resistance or indifference in using education to evaluate a prospective partner). This process helped me to reduce the full transcripts to coded segments of text. In the third stage of analysis, I focused on analyzing patterns among the coded segments of text, writing notes on the margin while constantly comparing the text assigned to the same code (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). I now turn to my findings.

[1] Since this study is part of a larger study on other topics related to dating and the interviews were semi-structured by different topics, so I read relevant chunks of interview transcripts line by line but had to skip some parts that were irrelevant to my research study. I also had to skip some parts with missing words, but I listened to the original audios to check what was missing if the content was relevant to the current study.

Findings

How does education matter? Between discursive and practical consciousness

About half of the respondents, including 13 immigrant online daters and 14 Canadian-born online daters, have either *explicitly* preferred someone of a similar educational background or suggested that they partner, almost, *by default* with someone of similar education. Educational homophily, participants asserted, allowed them to have better conversations with partners, share interests and be compatible. Consistent with existing literature, education is seen as a highly recognizable "badge" (Kalmijn, 1994, p.427; Andrade & Thomsen, 2019) that summarizes and signals a variety of shared cultural resources that were deemed essential for high-quality, fun conversations, thus vital for romantic relationships (Xiao & Qian, 2020). Yet, the ways that Chinese immigrant online daters and Canadian-born online daters explained why similar education is important when selecting a partner diverged. Chinese immigrant online daters more often emphasized the role of education in acculturation and integration to the receiving country to justify their preference of someone who has similar North American educational background. In contrast, Canadian-born online daters more frequently referred to a seemingly culture-blind logic, drawing on cognitive and intellectual compatibilities to explain the significance of education in their search for a potential partner. Below, I discuss each logic in turn. Together, they showcase the differing analytic architecture that supports educational homophily in dating preferences.

Cultural matching: The importance of North American Education as cultural capital

Preferring someone of a similar education helps online daters to effectively filter and match with someone who shares cultural outlooks (Xiao & Qian, 2020). In particular, for Chinese immigrant online daters who have received post-secondary education in Canada, having a North American educational background ensures shared ideologies and cultural capital that signify a similar level of assimilation to western culture. When I asked Apple (Chinese immigrant, 29-year-old, female) about an immigrant man she met via online dating, without prompting about education, she replied, "He didn't have educational background here [in Canada]." She feared that if a male dating candidate did not receive education in Canada his views would be incompatible with hers. She had a bachelor's degree in Canada. She expressed her concern as follows:

> "At 29 years old [referring to the man's age], your perspectives probably were already formed. It's hard to be changed here again, so I think [having] education here [in Canada] is quite important."

She further explained, "I came here when I was 19, when my world views haven't been determined yet, [so] I might have been westernized a bit more [than him]."

It was easy to assume and ask, as we did so, if a potential partner's immigrant status mattered for our Chinese immigrant participants. Nevertheless, not all immigrant participants have requirements for their partner's immigrant status. For example, both Francis (Chinese immigrant, 25-year-old, male, BA), and Melody (Chinese immigrant, 29-year-old, female, MBA) stated that whether a potential partner was immigrant or not was not important; rather, having education in North America or "in the West" mattered. If someone has only grown up in the mainland [China], their mindsets and ways of thinking would be different [than mine] and

it's hard to accept that," said Melody, who looked for "lots of [similar] views and concepts, so it's fun to chat" in a partner. To support her claim, Melody offered an additional example of how some older Chinese immigrants without western education had "bad habits" such as "throwing garbage and paper he used for blowing his nose outside the car window." Melody's example demonstrated that having a North American educational background was perceived not only as a "badge" that signifies shared ideologies but also culturally refined manners in the host country.

Furthermore, several Chinese immigrant participants emphasized the significance of education as a proxy for English proficiency and the ability to socially integrate into Canadian society. Nina (Chinese immigrant, 32-year-old, female, BA) preferred a potential partner who had a higher educational degree than hers, ideally, a master's degree. When asked if she had any preference for a potential mate's alma matter, she responded,

> "I don't care about that [university's prestige]…for Chinese like us, anyone who can speak English is good…because we can speak English, so if you can use English to text message, communicate, or go shopping…don't ask me to order food for you in restaurants, I think it's already good."

By referring to "Chinese like us", Nina's remark implies a collective experience as Chinese immigrants living in English-speaking urban Canada wherein English is deemed as the most important skill and cultural resource. Research shows that English proficiency is commonly used to signify a degree of acculturation among immigrants (Lee & Kye, 2016). North American education was thus used by Chinese immigrant online daters like Nina to assess potential partners' degree of acculturation in the receiving country.

Melody (Chinese immigrant, 29-year-old, female, MBA) had rather strict criteria for an ideal partner: he must have a Ph.D. degree. During the interview, she mentioned twice, "I think I

am very satisfied with someone who has a Ph.D. degree." Consistent with her stated preference, Melody declared that she had dated three Ph.Ds. While Melody appreciated the proximity of a Ph.D. degree to stable income, the instrumental value of education (Melton & Thomas, 1976) alone did not explain its glaring significance for Melody. By comparing people with doctorate degrees with other well-earned professions, such as insurance seller and real estate broker, she favored individuals with Ph.D. degrees,

> "For socializing, English, [the way they] dress, their learning ability is relatively fast, they can integrate into society. Moreover, when someone with a Ph.D. degree finds a job in society, there is a certain degree of transparency. The profession has credibility. So I think I am very satisfied with Ph.D.s."

In Melody's narrative, she used a doctorate to infer "credibility" over other professional occupations. In other words, education was used to assess potential partners' competence in obtaining status membership in the receiving country.

Moreover, having similar education, a bachelor's degree at least, sometimes was perceived by female participants to ensure compatible liberal views and gender ideology. The story of Sally, a 26-year-old Chinese immigrant woman who came to Canada as a young child, is an exemplary case. Sally would not date "basic people." An ideal partner for Sally must "understand concepts of feminism and intersectional feminism." Having a bachelor's degree is a must as it not only showed his cognitive ability to organize, plan, execute, and think critically, but it also showed that "you get to meet a lot of people from different places in the world, so you understand the world a little bit more." Besides, going to school shows "you care about learning," Sally further explained. "Because I'm still learning, I learn things every day, I'm always reading articles. So I need to be able to talk about things with the person that I'm having

conversations with," she said. Two assumptions attached to education underlie Sally's narrative. On the one hand, higher education is assumed to socialize students with diverse and liberal views (Kingston et al., 2003), thus is believed by our participants to contribute to a different set of cultural capital compared to individuals without a bachelor's degree. On the other hand, due to the selection process of individuals with similar qualifications and hobbies at the institutional level, university is by design a perfect place for meeting someone alike, hence, educational and cultural homogamy (Blossfeld, 2009) are at play. Sally also has a bachelor's degree. For Sally, participating in a bachelor's degree indicated that one might share her values regarding the significance of "learning" and "reading." The ability of learning and reading are often recognized as "cognitive ability" (Kingston et al., 2003), notwithstanding, the style of learning is also a key cultural resource (Kalmijn, 1991). Sally further required her ideal partner(s) to be in the field of arts or humanitarian studies. As an Asian woman, she was deeply aware of gender inequality, racial oppression, and intersectionality. Thus, she needed someone who "[is] able to listen to me, talk about it, and see things from a perspective from someone that's not them."

The evidence I have presented supports the notion of educational homogamy, where people partner with someone of a similar education (Blossfeld, 2009) and theories of cultural matching, which suggest that people partner with someone with a similar set of cultural resources (DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985). For these Chinese immigrant participants, their educational mate preference *in discourse* was consistent with their preference *in practice*. To put it in perspective, Chinese immigrant participants who stated that they preferred someone of a similar or better North American higher education, used the logic of cultural matching to explain their educational mate preference. This discursive articulation mirrors their practical consciousness correspondingly. As immigrants, they believed that a shared North American educational

background is instrumental in signaling a similar degree of acculturation and socialization for immigrants in the host country (Lee & Kye, 2016). It is also notable that among this group of immigrant online daters, more female participants mobilized this discourse of cultural matching than male participants. Particularly, as women preferred men who were socialized with feminism and egalitarianism, a North American university education was a sign of consciousness of gender equality.

Culture-blind? "Just" an indicator of cognitive and intellectual compatibility

The way Canadian-born online dater participants talking about their educational preferences, compared to their Chinese immigrant counterparts, seemed to be less straightforward but more incongruous, less degree-specific, and less culturally salient. First, when it comes to educational mate preference, I witnessed incongruity between what Canadian-born participants said according to their values and beliefs and what they said they actually preferred. Additionally, many Canadian-born respondents did not specify what levels of education they hope their potential partner to have. Rather, they liked to refer to "some post-secondary education", a phrase that was rarely used by Chinese immigrant online daters, to describe their expectations for an ideal partner to have a university degree, in progress or above. Second, when explaining why they thought education matters when choosing a mate, education was believed to have what researchers called as cognitive effect. According to Kingston et al. (2003), the "cognitive effect" pertains to the acquisition of specific skills and personal qualities. When asked why education matters, many respondents referred to the cognitive effect of education, including skills such as the ability to critically think, to speak, to reason, to set goals, manage time, and organize, as well as personal qualities such as self-confidence. While this set

of meanings was mainly adopted by Canadian-born online daters, some Chinese immigrants who moved to Canada during their childhoods, such as Sally mentioned in the last section, also used education as a signal of acquired skills when describing their mate preferences. What distinguished Chinese immigrants and Canadian-born online daters most were that Canadian-born online daters heavily cited intelligence in their narratives regarding educational mate preferences, whereas, Chinese immigrants rarely did. The following section will discuss the incongruity and discourse of intellectual compatibility in depth.

Some Canadian-born respondents implied that they almost by default partnered with someone of an advanced educational degree in previous relationships. Yet they avowed they were not aware of such preference until asked about their ideals around education during the interview. For example, Kaycee, a 32-year-old, Canadian-born Chinese online dater who had a master's degree at the time of the interview looked back at her past relationships and said,

> "I'd like to say no that I don't but I probably do. I mean in the sense that I feel like all of my previous partners have been like…had a Ph.D. and I have a master's degree. So I don't look at it that closely but I think it's just—it's been a pattern that the men that I have been interested in generally have a more higher education."

After pausing for some time, a moment of realization arose. She clarified, "actually I don't know if I have gone on any dates with someone who just has a high school education, to be honest with you, I'm trying to think back and I don't think so." "I'd like to say no" signifies something that might discursively sound better to the interviewee. Whereas, "but I probably do" and "to be honest with you" signifies a practical consciousness of what she actually did. In this sense, Kaycee's preference for someone with a more advanced degree such as Ph.D. in her past relationships was like a habit, a consistently patterned preference that could go unrecognized if

she did not look at it closely. By postulating it was “just” a “pattern”, Kaycee tried to rationalize it as something that happened to be rather than something intentional, not culturally nor structurally informed.

Some Canadian-born participants explicitly expressed their preference for education in dating. Haley (25-year-old, female, BA in progress) was born in Canada and self-identified as Canadian and South African. At the time of the interview, she was in her second year of university. She deliberately shared that she cared about education when using online dating apps. She found the dating app OkCupid interesting because there is lots of information about education, books people read, and the potential dates’ humor on online daters’ profiles which she could use to determine if individuals were intellectually compatible with her and hence attractive or not. When I probed what kinds of education she would look for in her ideal partner, she avowed,

> “I struggled with that, because I feel *a bit snobby* if I’m filtering people out because of their education. But I find that I do get along better with people who have a bit higher education. Intellectual stimulation is definitely important to me, so I like my partner to challenge me in that way, and education is a way of having a bit more insight into seeing if that’s possible.”

“Snob”, according to Cambridge Dictionary, describes “a person who respects and likes only people who are of a high social class or a person who has extremely high standards who is not satisfied by things that ordinary people like.” An internet search would show that the term “snobby” is often used as a synonym of arrogant, hubris, condescending, patronizing, and socially exclusive. The discourse of “snobby” thus implies elite status and exclusivity (Peterson & Kern, 1996). For Haley, “filtering people out because of their education” was seen as

something offensive and perhaps against her values. In fact, Haley had been on dates with people with different education. But "ideally", she said, she would prefer going out with someone with "a master, or Ph.D., or med school or law school, something like that." Haley's remark showcased a conscious struggle between what she deemed as "snobby" — a value judgment— and what she said she felt like preferring.

According to the discursive and practical consciousness framework, when what does not feel right is questioned, one tends to "deliberate over it employing discursive consciousness" (Mathieu, 2009, p.180). Upon realizing that she might have an unconscious taste for individuals with an advanced degree, some Canadian-born participants provided detailed accounts to justify her preference using language such as "not necessarily" while accounting for alternative views of education. For example, Ella (Canadian-born Chinese, 24-year-old, MA in progress) felt that she was not "necessarily looking for someone with a particular education level", but she realized that all her close friends were "very academic." She further explained, "part of me was aware of that I know, I'm very interested in meeting people from all walks of life -- it's good for me to obviously learn more about everyone and different people's perspectives, so I was open to it, but…" Ella's narrative reflects a discourse of inclusivity and diversity. It also evinces a discursive consciousness of what she thought as "good for me [her]". Although she tried to be open-minded according to her values, she found herself inclined to cluster with individuals who were "very academic" —a practical preference—-after being asked about her mate preference. In the gap between the discursive and practical preference, Ella was not sure what caused such preference. Following the "but", she admitted, "but I'm not sure how much of it was a subconscious bias towards people who have done postgraduate or other higher education."

Haley also further explained why she preferred someone with an advanced degree regardless of her "struggle": education, for her, was seen as a proxy of intellectual stimulation in romantic relationships. Later in the interview, Haley explicitly acknowledged that education was not a necessary condition for intellectual compatibility, but she still treated education as a sufficient means to predict intelligence. As Haley said, she did "not necessarily prefer" someone with a master's degree, but she found that it is "an indicator of their ability to meet me [her] on the same intellectual level." She reflected on the alternative hypothesis regarding the (dis)linkage between education and intelligence when she purported that,

> "Although people without that education can also do so, and I recognize that, but it's just a filter to help me decide."

"It's *just* a filter" turns out to be a common discourse in online dating: minimizing the preference of education in romantic partnerships as merely a filter, a widespread marketplace metaphor (Heino, et al., 2010; Xiao & Qian, 2020). She then provided an account of the ordered evaluative process of online profiles: if intelligence or ability to talk about the things she enjoyed discussing came up in the profiles, she would use intelligence and cognitive ability to evaluate the person behind the profile; if there was no clear indicator of intellectual compatibility in the profiles, she would fall back on education because, again, "it's just one element that would give me a clue."

By focusing on cognitive effects, intellectual stimulation, and compatibility, Canadian-born online daters gave a detailed account, consciously or unconsciously, to justify their previously unrecognized educational preference without blatant cultural references. However, as I will explain later in the next session, how individuals evaluate and define intelligence varies. Some of my participants, such as Haley, also used humor to detect intelligence. Humor is often taken for granted as an indicator of intelligence in respondents' narratives and has been seen as a

by-product of "large brain and general intelligence" in psychology (Li et al., 2009, p.923). However, it is a culturally specific phenomenon (Friedman & Kuipers, 2013) which contradicts the seemingly culture-blind discourse in Canadian-born participants' narratives. Moreover, as Marcus (Canadian-born, 32-year-old, male, diploma), a self-identified Jamaican and French interviewee, who realized later in his dating practice that he found a partner's education matters for intellectual compatibility, explained,

> [Education matters] "not in a sense that you're dumb but just like…I have a way of thinking and it was heavily shaped by my university, by my education so I know I need someone who can keep up. It doesn't mean that you have to be university-educated, it just means you have to have critical thought, you have to be engaged in conversations in more than just the surface and have a healthy debate which really could only come from an equal footing…"

At the first glance, educational qualification, for Marcus, was a sign of cognitive ability; yet, educational qualification was also implied as a "certificate of cultural competence" that requires and guarantees the holders to be conversant with types of accumulated values and skills with respect to his culture (as cited in Garnett, Guppy & Veenstra, 2008, p.145; Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu argues that educational credentials, as institutional cultural capital, can be used to recognize and objectify the stocks of cultural capital; individuals with the same cultural capital are thus able to recognize each other (Bourdieu, 1998; Bourdieu, 1986). Therefore, Marcus's narrative underscores the shared cultural capital that intellectual compatibility requires, demonstrating that intellectual compatibility is not only a cognitive matter but also a cultural one.

When reaching the same conclusion that education matters, Chinese immigrant online daters and Canadian-born online daters activated different reasoning in their narratives: while the former relied on cultural-matching rhetoric, the latter employed intellectual compatibility-centered framing. Some Canadian-born participants articulated their educational mate preferences in a less culturally salient way, the association between intelligence, ways of thinking, humor, and cultural taste (Bourdieu, 1984; Lamont, 1992), however, presents a caveat. Intellectual compatibility, which is often recognized as a cognitive effect of education in participants' narratives (Kingston et al., 2003), nevertheless involves another form of cultural matching when used by online daters to justify their preferences for someone who had some post-secondary education. Moreover, when discussing their educational preference, Canadian-born participants' responses implied a gap, sometimes even a struggle, between discursive consciousness (what they expressed according to their values and beliefs) and practical preference (what they said they actually preferred).

Education does not always matter anymore…?

I started with the question of why education matters as examined in previous sections, but the "unpattern" (Miles & Huberman, 1994), or "surprise" (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) in the interviews directed me to also ask why education does *not always* matter. Fifteen participants, including eight Chinese immigrants and seven Canadian-born online daters deliberately expressed that education did not matter, while seven participants did not mention education in their discussion of ideal partners. Among those who mentioned education in their narratives, although both Chinese immigrant online daters and Canadian-born online daters suggested that a university degree or above was *not* a good indicator of occupation and success, Chinese immigrants and Canadian-born online daters reached the seemingly similar conclusion through drastically different forms of reasoning. The following two sections elaborate on this distinction.

Education re-valued: via the lens of social mobility and human capital in the host country

This reasoning device centers around the notion of human capital and social mobility. It was used to directly reject the significance of education among Chinese immigrant online daters. Having at least a bachelor's degree (and above) was considered *not important* in partner searching for six Chinese immigrant online daters, they said because a university degree or above is *no longer* a good indicator of occupational success and hence social mobility in the Canadian labor market. When I asked Peter, a 31-year-old male Chinese immigrant online dater if he would care about a potential partner's *xueli* (educational background in Chinese), he answered: "I don't care." He raised his voice and vehemently followed up,

> "Who care about education in Canada? … Academic qualifications are not useful here [in Canada]. And, if you can climb up in a foreign company, he will give you further training."

Even though Peter didn't explicitly compare his educational preference to those in China, the way Peter quickly posed a rhetorical question with a raised tone after my question about education implied that there was a default cultural assumption which Peter supposed that I, as a Chinese international student, might have. By asking the question "who cares about education in Canada," he wanted to challenge the pre-conceived significance attached to education among Chinese individuals. His remark, albeit not plainly, demonstrated a shift between what was commonly deemed as valuable in China and what was not deemed as valuable after he relocating to Canada. For Peter, the instrumental value of education in terms of its return in the labor market, particularly, the chance to "climb up" was more significant than other meanings associated with "academic qualifications". Instead, getting a job in a local non-Chinese company was more important. Therefore, education was not an essential factor when choosing a potential mate.

This is consistent with existing research that argues racialized, foreign-born immigrants and socio-economically disadvantaged groups tend to be more sensitive to the financial needs of a family and economic future opportunities (Boyd & Yiu, 2016; Melton & Thomas, 1976). Additionally, research also shows that immigrants' education is devalued and underutilized in the Canadian labour market (Anisef, Sweet & Adamuti-Trache, 2008; Reitz, 2001). In 2006, newly arrived immigrants' higher levels of education, as important human capital, "did not translate into a greater likelihood of finding employment" (Anisef et al., 2008, p.4). However, emphasizing the perceived insignificance of higher education did not mean that Peter did not

care about education at all. It was until our later conversation that he revealed he could not accept anyone who only had high school diplomat and mobilized Chinese logic of *men dang hu dui* (matching doors and parallel window, a Chinese concept commonly used to suggest status compatibility) to explain that one must have similar, or in his words, at least “not too far-apart” educational backgrounds to date. Therefore, his preference for education in dating manifests the “stock of knowledge” (Mathieu, 2009. P.179) of both the Chinese tradition on cultural homogamy (Xiao & Qian, 2020) and his lived knowledge and experience of the Canadian system, where immigrants’ education is often not deskilled, de-credentialized, undervalued and underutilized (Guo, 2009; Guo & DeVoretz, 2006).

Similarly, while William (Chinese immigrant, 30-year-old, male, BA) and I were discussing the significance of education in his dating experience, William suddenly shifted the topic and said “I just want to say that work is more important. In fact, our academic qualifications are not so important.” His usage of “our” further suggested that his judgment of whether education is valuable in dating is not simply personal, but something related to the shared Chinese immigrant identity between him and I. By using transitional devices such as “in fact,” he provided a cue for something of greater significance as he continued, “getting [profession-related] certificates is even more important.”

Additionally, in this social mobility reasoning narrative, respondents often mobilized comparative devices to indicate changes in preferences. For example, Coco, a 29-year-old Chinese immigrant woman who came to Canada at 22 years old and held an MBA degree, did not mind if someone did not have a bachelor’s degree, because “it has something to do with this person's choice.” Studying certificates related to occupation was fine for her ideal partner. When I asked Coco about the educational background or occupation of someone whom she has dated,

she cannot remember his educational background, suggesting a practical consciousness of something that was taken for granted. Before we ever discussed her mating criteria, she said, "I am not sure if he has a bachelor or higher education background. To put it bluntly, I don't care much about the educational background *anymore*. As long as you can do it, and if you can adapt to your normal work, I don't particularly care about this, nor did I say that you must find a doctoral student, these are not accountable."

Without eliciting or probing, Coco mobilized the common classificatory framework to describe someone's educational background (e.g., "a bachelor or higher") in her response. The remark "nor did I say that you must find a doctoral student", in particular, signifies a popular discourse of educational preferences that she has heard of. As readers might recall, Melody's narrative regarding finding a Ph.D. student as an ideal partner mirrors the discourse that Coco conveniently took on. Through invoking these discourses which are possibly popular among other Chinese immigrants, she further dismissed them as "not accountable" in her current circumstances.

It is important to pause and notice that though both male and female Chinese immigrants uttered that they did not put significance on their heterosexual partners' academic degrees, as most occupations that only require certificates to succeed tend to be more lucrative when they are male-dominated, "certificates have limited labour value for women" (Carnevale, Smith & Gulish, 2018, p.27; Barbulescu, 2021). Additionally, foreign-born visible-minority women are "triply disadvantaged" in the Canadian labour market (Boyd & Yiu, 2016). It is unclear that if female participants and male participants can benefit the same with a professional certificate in the dating market.

Although these participants still assumed that some degree above a high school diploma was a default mating criterion, my findings suggest that when immigrants relocated to another society, there was a comparative sense between what was deemed valuable and what is no longer valuable in new social conditions. This comparative practical consciousness manifests an adjustment of the cultural repertoires and apprehension of the systems they had to navigate, allowing them to shift their evaluative frameworks to view education differently. Such shifts helped immigrants to fit their preferences to the new structural conditions in the receiving country.

Condemning educational snob, an omnivorous taste of intelligence

We have already seen the "snobby" discourse among Canadian-born online daters who struggled with its exclusivist nature and issues of social desirability but eventually embraced using education as an indicator of one's intellectual and hence dating compatibility. This discourse appeared again among the narratives of Canadian-born online daters who disagreed with using education to evaluate potential partners. The second path of reasoning, adopted by Canadian-born participants, detoured around education and strived to make distinctions between *a snobby view* of *education* and an *omnivorous taste* of intelligence. Instead of directly explaining why education does not matter, respondents emphasized the value of intelligence and intellectual compatibility. Moreover, for Canadian-born participants who did not regard having at least a bachelor's degree (or above) as important in a potential partner, they resisted a culturally snobby view of education and intelligence which equals education with intelligence. Instead, they demonstrated an *omnivorous taste* wherein they valued various sources of intelligence.

How do we define intelligence at all? The term intelligence is widely used but hardly defined. Research shows that individuals' definitions of intelligence can vary a lot (Limeri et al., 2020). As mentioned in the previous section, respondents used some post-secondary degrees to foresee intelligence and intellectual compatibility without specifying what intelligence means. Yet, participants' narratives demonstrated the polysemy and multivocality of intelligence that individuals could activate when evaluating a potential partner. These various forms of intelligence included loosely categorized cognitive attributes (i.e., critical thinking, curiosity, and the ability to learn), habitual intelligence (i.e., good habits), emotional intelligence, artistic intelligence (e.g., art, creativity), academic intelligence (e.g., analytic ability), literacy (e.g., reading and writing) and street smartness.

Given the multitude of available and often antagonistic meanings, defining intelligence or smartness requires constant judgment and is thus eminently cultural. While some participants valued the depth and complexity of knowledge as indicated by academic intelligence, some participants valued worldly and diverse knowledge that a potential partner encompasses. Moreover, respondents sometimes compared culturally available meanings associated with intelligence and downplayed certain attributes, in order to establish the significance of a specific kind of intelligence that they favored in a potential partner. For instance, Camille was a female 24-year-old online dater who identified herself as "Caucasian Canadian" and had a college diploma at the time of interview. When I asked Camille if education mattered to her, she answered indirectly by pointing out its ambiguous relationship with education: "intelligence mattered to me, sometimes it is correlated to education, but not always." She further explained what "intelligence" meant to her, "it's like defining confidence…I want to be able to talk about what's happening in the world. Like a general awareness of different concepts - not necessarily

knowing super in-depth." By comparing intelligence with confidence, Camille suggested that this preference was something idiosyncratic and vaguely defined. Furthermore, she deliberated on the definition of intelligence with the notion of "general awareness" of various ideas in contrast with the discourse of academic profundity. Without me probing further, she continued to explain what she—did not consider—as intelligent, "so, it doesn't have to do with education level, but someone interesting without a fancy degree…I don't think it's using big words. I think the smartest people are those who can take complex terms and say it simply." Camille's remark suggested that there was a common discourse that she heard of, which I term as "snobby view of education", that associates intelligence with "fancy degree". For her, real smartness meant that someone could break down the academic complexity to something simple and acceptable. Similarly, Elleanor, a 34-year-old Canadian-born Chinese online dater with a bachelor's degree did not care about education in a potential partner. She used humor and witty responses to evaluate a person's smartness. As demonstrated in her quote "I'm not talking about the smart [in] that they know everything, cause that's not the kind of smart I value," the concept of smartness or intellectual compatibility is subjectively and relatively defined, thus requiring respondents' cultural judgments.

The story of Sam provided a similar but more extreme case. Sam was a 22-year-old and receiving his post-secondary education at the time of the interview. He was born in Canada and self-identified as "white Caucasian". He mentioned that he heard of some dating sites/apps that required online daters to have a Ph.D. degree and chuckled "so elitist." I was curious about the app, so he told me that his mother's friend was using a dating app which only allows people with Ph.D. degrees to join. He continued, "I'm like, 'if you're so obsessed with education that you only think you can be in a relationship with someone who's as intellectually successful as you

are in terms of academics, that's pretty pathetic in my opinion." He laughed again and continued with a contemptuous tone, "that's discounting so many aspects of a personality, and saying you're more interested in a piece of paper than someone's, you know, anything else." In Sam's remark and my interaction with Sam, there was a strong "pathetic" judgment for people who he thought were obsessed with using education, a "piece of paper" to evaluate whether potential partners are "intellectually successful."

By invoking popular practices (in Sam's case, people using education solely to evaluate intelligence) and other perceptions of intelligence (in Camille's case, fancy degrees and complexity) to condemn them, respondents constructed a symbolic boundary of what is valuable and what is not. An educational snob is deemed "pathetic" whereas *an omnivorous taste of intelligence* is superior. Research shows that omnivorousness is closely related to "multicultural tolerance" and open attitudes to all walks of life (Warde, Wright & Gayo-Cal, 2007). One possible explanation for this preference of omnivorous taste of intelligence is that Canadian-born online daters might consider a diverse appreciation of different kinds of education as the "righter" practice in Vancouver's multicultural context, whereas a snobby view of education is seen by Canadian-born participants as less desired. However, such symbolic boundary can effectively dismiss the immigrant daters' concerns regarding mobility in the labour market as well as their preference of someone with a North American bachelor's degree which conceived as a signal of cultural assimilation for immigrants.

Discussion and Conclusion

In the light of the expansion of higher education, credential inflation, and devaluation of immigrants' human capital (Schwartz, 2013; Veenstra, 2010; Guo & DeVoretz, 2006; Anisef, Sweet & Adamuti-Trache, 2008; Reitz, 2001), this article has addressed one key question: how do individuals perceive education in dating nowadays? Drawing on interviews with online daters in Vancouver, I analyzed individuals' meaning making of education when searching for a potential partner and how they made sense of their educational mate preference. My answer is complex yet simple: education still matters, but in a more nuanced way. Despite sharing similarities in terms of preferring educational homogamy in practice, how education matters or, sometimes not, diverges between Chinese immigrants and Canadian-born online daters. I have showcased the differing symbolic architectures, at both discursive and practical consciousness levels, that support educational homophily in dating preferences as well as its implication on boundary-making along the foreign-born immigrants versus local-born line.

In general, participants who vouched for education as an important trait to be considered of a romantic partner emphasized its signaling effect in assuring cultural matching (DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985) and intellectual compatibility. Chinese immigrants, in particular, explicitly used North American university education as a proxy of cultural capital, for example, English proficiency and degree of acculturation, that are specific to the host country (Lee & Kye, 2016). Differing from the cultural-matching reasoning adopted by Chinese immigrant online daters who preferred someone with similar North American education, Canadian-born participants tended to discuss their preference of education in a seemingly culture-blind language, centering around the cognitive effect of education and intelligence. Additionally, when being asked about their

educational mate preference, some Canadian-born participants activated their practical consciousness and then recognized their habits (Schatzki, 2001) in dating highly educated individuals who have a similar or better degree.

A closer examination of what participants stated according to their values and beliefs in contrast with what they said they actually preferred revealed consistency between discursive preference and their practical preference among Chinese immigrant participants, whilst incongruity among Canadian-born participants. Instead of seeing the inconsistency between what is said in interviews and what is done as fallacious (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014), exposing such gaps opens vistas for reflection and learning (Mathieu, 2009). In this case, the gap in Canadian-born participants' responses gives us a glimpse of the "struggle" that many individuals might experience: a "struggle" between what was discursively criticized as "snobby", elitist, and exclusive (Peterson & Kern, 1996) and what turned out be a seemingly natural proclivity, a taste by default (Bourdieu, 1989), or in Giddens' words, "inclination" (1979, p.79). It purports a space for both participants' and my conscious reflexivity and, theoretically, possible changes (Ihre & Wandel, 2014; Yang, 2014). Despite reflection and struggles with social desirability, the Canadian-born participants in this study who almost preferred highly educated romantic partners by default, used language such as "not necessary…but" and "just a filter" in interviews to justify such practical preference, thus engaging in accounting for and reproducing existing inequalities (Giddens, 1979). Nevertheless, as Ella (Canadian-born Chinese, 24-year-old, MA in progress) did honestly point out, the gap between her discursive preference (i.e., being open to all walks of life is better for her) and practical preference (i.e., proclivity to date and cluster with highly educated) could stem from "a subconscious bias towards people who have done postgraduate or other higher education." Essentially, this honest recognition of a gap at both consciousness and

action level signifies individuals' capacity for discursively penetrating (Giddens, 1979; Mathieu, 2009) or even challenging the structurally and habitually shaped meaning systems; but it also opens a question of agency: how much does agency matter in shaping habitual behavior patterns that are knowingly contributing to structural inequality?

Surprisingly, higher education was, sometimes, deemed not important. This "unpattern" (Miles & Huberman, 1994), or "surprise" (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) has ignited some of the most thought-provoking insights that this study offers, among which, the salient snob-versus-omnivore discourse is most intriguing. The narratives of Canadian-born online daters who struggled with using education as a predictor of one's intellectual and therefore dating compatibility have shed light on the perceived undesirability of "snobby" mate preference. Yet, this snob-versus-omnivore discourse only occurred in Canadian-born online daters' narratives but was not mentioned at all among Chinese immigrants. When explaining why education is not important for an ideal partner, Chinese immigrants mainly mobilized a human capital and social mobility narrative without activating other sources of justification. Canadian-born online daters, however, did; they activated alternative narratives centred around cognitive intelligence or sense of humor and favored an omnivorous taste of intelligence while condemning the "snobby" mate preference, which perceives education as a signal of intelligence and wherefore dateability.

At the core of my observations is a constant process where participants drew symbolic boundaries between what is valued and what is not while articulating their educational mate preferences. Participants had different opinions on if intelligence can be predicted solely by education. In addition, intelligence was defined in often oppositive and binary terms. For example, one can define intelligence as academic smartness or street smartness, as in-depth or wide knowledge, as the ability to conduct complex or straightforward communications. This

"depth" – versus – "breadth" discourse echoes the "snobby" – versus – "omnivore" thesis. Among the Canadian-born online daters who opposed using education to imply intelligence valued various sources and types of intelligence, "breadth" is valued, "depth" is less desired; "omnivore" is superior, "snob" is lesser.

However, the disapproval of the aristocratic view of education among Canadian-born online daters does something unjust to the immigrant daters' experience and their needs for local academic qualifications which were believed to help them overcome language barriers and to gain necessary cultural capital (Blossfeld, 2009) as well as human capital to succeed in unfriendly or even biased job market (Anisef, Sweet & Adamuti-Trache, 2008). Yet, immigrants face the dilemma where their academic qualifications were often undervalued and underutilized compared to their Canadian counterparts (Anisef, Sweet & Adamuti-Trache, 2008; Reitz, 2001). Privileging omnivorous taste of intelligence while dismissing aristocratic view of education also ignores the fact that education continues to serve as a basis of class inequality (Chow & Guppy, 2021) and obscures the tightened social stratification resulted from educational homogamy in Canada (Hou & Myles, 2008; Schwartz & Mare, 2005).

My findings also demonstrate that educational mate preference might not always be a rational decision based on how to maximize gains from partnering with someone with similar cultural or socioeconomic resources (Blossfeld, 2009; Lewis, 2016; Schwartz, 2013) or always highly predictable based on habitus (Bourdieu, 1989). Instead, the educational mate preference expressed by my participants, rather than simply habitual tastes, can involve consciousness, which reflects practical knowledge of structural conditions as well as available cultural resources in the social systems they live in or relocate to (Lamont, 1992; Lamont & Molnár, 2002). Chinese immigrant online daters who revalued education's significance in a good job neither in

finding a potential partner are great examples here. These immigrants moved to a society where education is no longer perceived by local-born Canadians a sole predictor for "high status" (Lamont, 2010, p.5), at least symbolically. In addition, they learnt how the new system works, that is, immigrants' advanced degrees are devalued (Guo & DeVoretz, 2006) whilst technical training certificates seem to better warrant job opportunities among local-borns (Arora, 2019). In the processes of relocation and adaption, the Chinese immigrants interviewed in the study adjusted how they evaluated potential partners to fit the new social conditions (Swidler, 1986).

This research is nevertheless limited in its population generalizability and strength to analyze racial and gender dynamics in educational preferences. In the spirit of what Brodyn and Ghaziani (2018) call the "generalization of ideas," I offer one final thought from my findings: living in a multicultural society might offer a plethora of alternative meanings at individuals' disposal to reflect on and to mobilize in conversations and dating, but it does not mean that all values and preferences are equally treated. It is how individuals draw the meanings, as a manifestation of their evaluative distinctions, were shaped by available cultural resources as well as their social conditions or barrier. My findings support Lamont's critique on Swidler's cultural toolkit theory, boundary patterns are not only determined by cultural toolkits (Swidler, 1986), "but also by the conditions that increased the likelihood that one would use some repertoires rather than others" (Lamont, 2010, p.7). While Chinese immigrants' discursive preferences, which stemmed from their practical knowledge, mostly manifest their anxiety and instrumental needs (Melton & Thomas, 1976) for acquiring cultural and human capital, Canadian-born participants had more "privilege" to be less culturally salient, more reflexive on intellect, and withal, less capital-dependent. In another word, it takes more privilege to not use education to gain cultural capital, being it discursively or practically.

This research has animated a few interesting questions worthy of future exploration. Though my findings imply that there could be a boundary shift among Chinese immigrants' educational mate preferences when they relocated to Canadian society, longitudinal qualitative studies are needed to examine how immigrants' educational mate preferences change after relocation (Lamont, 1992). Additionally, as lucrative fields are more likely to be dominated by men, how male and female online daters' professional certificates are evaluated as an indicator of desirability in heterosexual courtships deserve a closer examination. Moreover, although participants' narratives showcased a potential looser connection between higher education and high status at the discursive, symbolic level, my findings eventually suggest that both Chinese immigrants and Canadian-born online daters were preferencing someone alike in terms of education as well as evaluative frameworks. This contradiction raises a question about the mechanisms of how such symbolic differences transform to solidify, challenge or dissolve social stratification (Lamont & Molnár, 2002); its implication for racial-ethnic relations also awaits exploration. Especially, it would be valuable for future research to study how the "snobby" – versus – "omnivore" discourse intersects with racial-ethnic and gender dynamics.

In sum, this research contributes to the existing literature in three ways. First, building on and synthesizing various scholars' work on culture, agency, and practice, my research has enriched our understanding of educational mate preference by investigating the similarities and differences among Chinese immigrants and Canadian-born online daters. The meanings individuals attached to education are not always uniformed but have nuanced and even antagonistic variations that are shaped by immigrants and Canadian-born participants' contexts and positionalities. Chinese immigrants were more likely than Canadian-born online daters to view the significance of education through the lens of cultural and human capital, whereas

Canadian-born participants used a more culture-blind and omnivorous logic to talk about education. Associating higher education with high status and romantic desirability was considered somewhat "snobby", elitist, and exclusive by the Canadian-born participants. Second, my empirical findings suggest that liking or choosing someone who has a certain educational background to chat, which is often used in quantitative studies, does not always entail people's fully aware, agentic preference. It may reflect one's habitual practical preference that often goes unrecognized. But sometimes the act of liking someone with certain level of education may not reflect their preference at all; online daters might perceive education as unimportant in their partner search. Third, this study has provided rare insights into the literature on status acquisition and educational mate selection by using a relatively less explored theoretical tool, namely symbolic boundaries, to analyze educational mate selection preferences. I have shown that educational mate preference could be a source of evaluative demarcation. Canadian-born online daters who disparaged using education as a yardstick of success and desirability formed symbolic boundaries that effectively discounted the educational achievements and experience of foreign-born "others." This research thus contributes to uncovering the nuanced evaluative distinctions that could engender new dynamics of status differentiation between immigrants and Canadian-born persons.

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