



International Student Experiences in Montreal: Comparing Racialized Asian and White European International Students

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study compares the experiences of Asian international students (from China, Korea, and India) with those of European international students who do not identify as visible minorities (from France, the United Kingdom, and the Czech Republic) at universities in Montreal. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 41 students: 31 Asian international students (27 from China, 1 from Korea, and 3 from India) and 10 European international students (8 from France, 1 from the UK, and 1 from the Czech Republic). Thematic analysis was guided by a theoretical framework focused on othering and discrimination, accounting for intersecting forms of oppression and privilege. This study intentionally contrasts the experiences of racialized international students (in this case, Asian students) with those of non-racialized international students (in this case, white European students), with particular attention to Chinese and French students, two major international groups in Quebec. While acknowledging that not all European students are non-racialized, this comparison highlights how, in the Global North, white international students tend to integrate more easily. In contrast, students from the Global South often face additional barriers such as racism, othering, and structural exclusion. Quebec provides a particularly meaningful setting due to its strong emphasis on French-language protection and its distinct model of integration (interculturalism). This context adds complexity to the experience of international students in both academic and public spaces. Findings reveal that while some Asian students reported positive experiences, others encountered racism, microaggressions, and language-based exclusion. European students did not report such experiences. The conclusion provides recommendations.

KEYWORDS

International students; Discrimination; Comparison; Montreal; Quebec; Canada.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most striking consequences of globalization is the transformation of higher education on an international scale (Wilczewski & Alon, 2023). The past two decades have seen a robust increase in the number of international students who make valuable educational and economic contributions to their host countries (McClure, 2007). However, research has highlighted the multiple challenges these students face, including language and communication difficulties, cultural and educational barriers that affect their adaptation, socialization, and learning experiences, as well as social isolation and psychological stress (Andrade, 2006; Sherry et al., 2010; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Zhang & Goodson, 2011).

Canada is a preferred destination for international students pursuing university studies. Nationally, Asian students account for the largest share of this population, while European students rank fourth by region of origin, after Asia, Africa, and the Americas (Bureau canadien de l'éducation internationale, 2024; Statista Research Department, 2024). However, in Quebec, the dynamic is different. At the university level, European students, particularly those from France, make up the largest group, surpassing Asian students, who are the second largest group (Chatel-DeRepentigny et al., 2011; ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur, 2021).

There are few studies focused specifically on European international students in Canada. Often, without recognizing the distinctiveness of their experiences, research groups them within the broader category of "international students" in the country, where language barriers and acculturation are widely discussed (de Moissac et al., 2020; Kang, 2020; Pottie-Sherman et al., 2024). For Asian international students, as this population has grown, studies have highlighted specificities in their lived experiences beyond the challenges generally associated with being an international student. The literature highlights difficulties associated with racialization and cultural integration specific to this group, including their marginalization as racialized "Others." Thus, despite their significant financial contribution to the host country, they are confronted with stereotypes and exclusion (Houshmand et al., 2014; J. Liu, 2017; Ma et al., 2020; Marom, 2022). With the advent of COVID-19, the difficulties faced by Asian international students have intensified, within a context that has exacerbated anti-Asian racism, placing them in a state of stigmatizing hyper-visibility (Catungal & Tungohan, 2021; Guo & Guo, 2021). This context has also reinforced the psychosocial impact of the pandemic on these students, compounded by media narratives that stigmatize Asia as the epicenter of the virus (Varughese et al., 2022; Wang-Dufil & Hari, 2023). Faced with these challenges, Asian international students use a variety of strategies, including forming support networks within their own communities and using university support services, when available and accessible (Houshmand et al., 2014; Khunkhun & Fournier, 2021; J. Liu, 2017).

In Quebec, few studies have focused on specific groups of international students, such as those from Asian or European countries. These studies highlight several dimensions of international students' experiences in Quebec, ranging from academic and social integration to understanding their migratory journeys. Cultural and social shock, financial challenges, and the

need to decode expected academic skills are the main challenges they face (Mäinich, 2013). In parallel, studies in Quebec explore how international students navigate their new university environment, highlighting the importance of interactions with peers and academic staff as well as participation in academic and extra-curricular activities (Frozzini & Tremblay, 2020). Beyond these aspects, migratory journeys and career plans also influence their experiences in Quebec. Many students consider their schooling in Quebec not only as an academic commitment, but also as a steppingstone towards broader career goals, whether in the context of an international career or eventual permanent immigration to Canada (Mäinich, 2013; Vultur & Germain, 2018).

Given the limitations of the current literature, including the lack of comparison between racialized and non-racialized groups of international students in Quebec, this qualitative study aims to compare the experiences of Asian international students with those of European international students who do not identify as visible minorities, both at university and in the city of Montreal, Quebec. The study allows us to report on the experiences of these two groups and, more specifically, to illustrate how and why these experiences are reported differently.

This study intentionally contrasts the experiences of racialized international students (in this case, Asian students) with those of non-racialized international students (in this case, white European students), with a particular focus on Chinese and French students, two major international student groups in Quebec (Bureau Canadien de l'éducation internationale, 2018). While acknowledging that not all European students are non-racialized, this comparison highlights how, in the Global North, white international students tend to integrate more easily, whereas students from the Global South often face additional barriers such as racism, othering, and structural exclusion (Buckner et al., 2021; Magnan et al., 2022; Stein & Andreotti, 2016). More precisely, Quebec offers a particularly meaningful setting because of its strong emphasis on French-language protection (which can lead to monolingualism and linguistic discrimination) and its distinct model of integration (interculturalism) (Djogbenou et al., 2025; McAndrew, 2016). This context adds complexity to the experience of international students in both academic and public spaces. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research question: How do the experiences of Asian international students compare with those of European international students who do not identify as visible minorities at universities and in the city of Montreal?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The following key concepts guided our analysis of the data: othering (Dervin, 2015) and discrimination (in relation to racism and microaggressions), considering the accumulation of oppressions or privileges (Gillborn, 2015). Othering refers to the understanding and treatment of the Other's difference as inferior, which generates discrimination and exclusion (Krumer-Nevo & Sidi, 2012). It is an attempt to construct difference through the stereotyping of the Other, that is, the reduction of the Other to certain characteristics perceived as natural (Hall, 1997). In addition, some bodies are considered more foreign than others (Ahmed, 2013).

Inferiorization is tied to the belief in a lack of humanity or to the demonization of certain Others (Dervin, 2015). Moreover, the analysis of difference is carried out from an intersectional perspective, that is, from the intersection of social categories (e.g., race, gender, social class) (Dhamoon, 2009), since there may be an accumulation of oppressions or privileges (Gillborn, 2015). We also point out the centrality of race in relation to other social categories because of its strength (positive or negative), due to the effects of the power of the valorization of whiteness in the world (Thésée & Carr, 2016).

Discrimination takes many forms (e.g., racial, linguistic, etc.). It broadly refers to unfair treatment based on social categories (e.g., race, language, etc.). Specifically, linguistic discrimination is the inferior treatment of certain individuals by members of the majority group based on language (e.g., accent), in which certain linguistic forms are perceived as incorrect or inferior to those of the majority group (Blanchet, 2013). Racial discrimination concerns the oppression of certain individuals due to the social construction of race, in which a racial hierarchy is established (Pérez Huber, 2010; Sleeter, 2012). According to critical race theory, which challenges dominant ideologies shaping the educational system's treatment of racism, this type of discrimination can also manifest as racial microaggressions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Solórzano, 1998). Racial microaggressions are subtle expressions of racism in the ordinary, routine activities of everyday life; they often go unnoticed and unquestioned by the majority group (Chapman et al., 2013). We are nevertheless aware of critiques of the concept of microaggressions regarding its framing, since the term “micro” can diminish the gravity of cumulative and systemic effects. More precisely, this critique comes notably from critical researchers (race, feminist, and decolonial scholars) who argue that the term can minimize the violence of everyday racism, sexism, ableism, etc. (Pérez Huber & Solórzano, 2015).

Furthermore, since we focus our analysis on what it means to be a visible or nonvisible minority, it is also helpful to consider the concept of stigmatization. According to Goffman (1986), individuals must manage stigmatization during social interactions by managing the tension between visible (or known) stigmatization (e.g., skin color) – discredited stigma – and nonvisible (or unknown) stigmatization (e.g., sexuality) – discrediting stigma. The first type of stigmatization, since it cannot be hidden, can generate tension, unlike the second type of stigmatization (Goffman, 1986). In our empirical case, Canada, including Quebec, uses the term “visible minority” as a legal and demographic category, referring to non-white and non-Indigenous people. This label visibly marks people as Others. In the case of our study, it marks them as different from the majority population of Quebec, that is, white francophones. Goffman would call this a “spoiled identity”, that is, a label that carries social negative consequences. As a discredited stigma, a visible minority is constantly on display and consequently requires management in daily life (Goffman, 1986). The label is therefore not neutral; it can reinforce power relations, especially when used by the government. This designation, far from having just a statistical purpose, serves to mark people symbolically and to reinforce stigma and exclusion (Kusow, 2004; Soares et al., 2024; Tyler & Slater, 2018).

Within this framework, our analysis intentionally adopts a binary comparison between racialized and non-racialized international students, while recognizing the limitations of these categories. We also acknowledge the socially constructed nature of labels such as “Asian,” “European,” “international student,” and “Global North/Global South.” Although these categories simplify complex identities, they remain analytically useful for examining processes of othering, discrimination, privilege, and structural inequality (Brooks et al., 2024; Madge et al., 2009; Stein & Andreotti, 2016). Binaries can obscure nuance and exclude in-between or intersectional experiences. However, when used critically, they can illuminate structural inequalities and systems of power (Ahmed, 2012; Tamtik & Guenter, 2019).

METHODOLOGY

Design

This qualitative study used a comparative design to examine the experiences of two groups of international students in Montreal: Asian international students and European international students who did not identify as visible minorities. The comparison focused on participants’ experiences within university and in the urban context, including their interactions with peers, professors, and other university professionals, their social experiences, and their experiences of inclusion, exclusion, discrimination, and belonging. The comparison was conducted between the two analytical groups rather than systematically by individual country of origin. Country of origin was considered as part of participants’ backgrounds and is reported to contextualize the sample, but it did not constitute the primary unit of comparison. Given the large number of countries of origin represented in the corpus, generalizing was not possible, especially since the comparative analysis highlighted processes of racialization common to Asian students. An analysis based on country of origin would have led to the essentialization or folklorization of these groups, which runs counter to our theoretical framework and research objective. The comparative analysis was particularly attentive to how racialization and language shaped or not participants’ experiences across the two groups.

Sample/participants

The participation criteria for Asian international students were as follows: being a Chinese, Indian, or Korean international student enrolled at a Montreal university. A total of 31 international Asian students were interviewed (27 from China, 1 from Korea, 3 from India). The participation criteria for European international students were as follows: being a European international student enrolled at a Montreal university, and not identifying as a visible minority. A total of 10 international European students were interviewed (8 from France, 1 from the United Kingdom, and 1 from the Czech Republic). This study focused primarily on Asian international students but included a comparison group of international students who did not identify as visible minorities to understand their experiences better. In line with our selection criteria and given the differing prevalence of certain nationalities in our corpus (the majority of participants are Chinese and French), it should be noted that in Canada, Chinese, Indian, and

Korean students represent the majority of international students (Bureau Canadien de l'éducation internationale, 2018). Specifically in Quebec, Chinese students make up the second-largest cohort of international students after French students (ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur, 2021). It should also be noted that there is an agreement between France and Quebec in terms of education, that is, exemption from additional tuition fees under international agreements, which helps explain the high number of students from France in Quebec. We also recognize the heterogeneity that exists in Europe. However, in this article, we aimed to compare the experiences of a group of students who may share similar privileges, notably in terms of race and language (such as those who are White and speak French as a first language, that is the language of the majority group in Quebec) with a group of students who might not experience the same privileges (such as those who are racialized and do not speak French as a first language). The binary analysis presented in this article is therefore intentional, aiming to illustrate systemic inequalities between racialized and non-racialized groups and between those who have French as a first language and those who do not.

Table 1.*Composition of the participant sample*

Analytical group	Country	n
Asian international students	China	27
	India	3
	South Korea	1
Asian subtotal		31
European international students who did not identify as visible minorities	France	8
	United Kingdom	1
	Czech Republic	1
European subtotal		10
Total		41

The unequal size of the two groups reflects the study design. Asian international students constituted the primary group of interest of this research funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)¹, whereas European international students who did not identify as visible minorities were included as a comparison group. The objective was therefore not to construct two numerically equivalent samples, but to compare the experiences reported by the primary group with those of international students occupying different racialized and linguistic positions in the same Montreal context. Participants were recruited according to the

¹*Asian International Students to Canadian Universities: Examining the Racialization of Chinese, Indian and Korean Students in Halifax, Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver and Winnipeg*, Insight Program, SSHRC (2019-2025, 306 275\$) (Principal Investigator: Jean-Michel Montsion)

eligibility criteria established for each analytical group. Recruitment was conducted through Facebook and subsequently through snowball sampling, whereby participants and contacts facilitated access to other potentially eligible participants. Selection was based on eligibility for the two analytical groups rather than on the objective of obtaining nationally representative samples. Given that this research is qualitative, neither the generalization of the results nor the representativeness of the samples was sought.

Tools of data collection

Semi-structured interviews (Barbot, 2012) were the sole data-collection instrument used in this study. Interviews were conducted via Zoom and lasted approximately one hour. Participants could choose to be interviewed in French or English according to their language preference. A semi-structured interview guide was used to ensure that common areas of experience were explored across participants while allowing them to elaborate on experiences they considered significant. The interview guide addressed the following main themes: 1) participants' experiences as international students at university; 2) interactions with peers; 3) interactions with professors and other university professionals; 4) social life; 5) experiences in the city of Montreal. These common themes provided a basis for comparing participants' accounts across the two analytical groups.

Data collection

Prior to each interview, participants consent was gathered through a written signed form. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded using Zoom. The recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim by the coauthors. Transcripts were reviewed to ensure accuracy. To protect participants' confidentiality, identifying information was removed, and pseudonyms are used when presenting participants' accounts.

Data analysis

We conducted a thematic analysis following Paillé and Mucchielli (2021). The analysis proceeded through several stages. First, the interview transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the data and to develop an overall understanding of participants' accounts. Second, meaningful excerpts were identified and coded according to their content. Codes were continuously compared within and across interviews, with particular attention to similarities and differences in the experiences reported by the two analytical groups. Third, related codes were grouped into broader analytical categories. These categories were progressively examined, compared, and refined to identify recurring patterns across participants' accounts. Finally, the categories were organized into the three recurring themes presented in the Results section. Throughout the analytical process, the research team discussed emerging interpretations and collaboratively refined the coding, categories, and thematic organization until a coherent representation of participants' experiences was achieved.

Trustworthiness of data

The trustworthiness of the study was considered in relation to credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was supported through repeated engagement with the interview transcripts, continuous comparison of participants' accounts, and collaborative discussion of emerging interpretations among members of the research team. Participants' verbatim quotations are also presented in the Results section to demonstrate the relationship between the empirical material and the interpretations developed through the analysis.

Dependability was supported by following a systematic and analytical process involving transcript familiarization, coding, comparison, categorization, and progressive refinement of the thematic organization. The research team discussed emerging interpretations throughout this process and collaboratively refined the analytical categories and themes.

Confirmability was addressed through collaborative interpretation and attention to researcher positionality. All coauthors participated in data collection and analysis. Three coauthors were doctoral students who identified as minority students in Canada in relation to race, language, and immigration status, while one coauthor was a professor in a faculty of education who identified as a white woman belonging to the French-speaking Quebec majority group. Recognizing these different social positions was important in reflecting on how the researchers' perspectives could shape the interpretation of participants' accounts.

Transferability was supported by providing contextual information about the study setting, participant selection criteria, and the characteristics of the two analytical groups. Rather than assuming that the findings are generalizable to all international students, these contextual details allow readers to assess the relevance and applicability of the findings to other populations and higher education contexts.

RESULTS

To address the research question, the analysis examined participants' accounts across recurring dimensions of their experiences, including interactions with peers and professors, experiences of inclusion and exclusion, language, discrimination, and sense of belonging at university and in the city of Montreal. The comparative analysis revealed both within-group and between-group differences. Among Asian international students, participants' accounts varied substantially: some emphasized predominantly positive experiences, whereas others described more critical experiences involving racism, microaggressions, language-based exclusion, and othering. By contrast, the European international students who did not identify as visible minorities reported predominantly positive experiences and did not report comparable experiences of discrimination. To preserve these differences while facilitating comparison across the two analytical groups, the findings are presented through three experience types: positive and critical experiences among Asian international students and adventurous experiences among European international students. Country of origin is identified throughout the presentation of

participants' accounts to contextualize these experiences, but it is not treated as an independent unit of comparison.

Positive Experience Type: for Some Asian International Students

Some Asian international students point out the positive side of their experience at university and in the city: "I find people are really good here, they are friendly. [...] I have not seen any discrimination here. [...] I hope I will get a permanent residency here. [...] Life is good here in Canada" (Pranjal, India).

The fact that Quebec is a French-speaking province also seems to them to be a positive point: "The reason why people do not usually go to Montreal is because of the French language. But I really like learning languages. [...] So, I thought that is an opportunity for me to learn French" (Pranjal, India).

The fact that Montreal is considered a bilingual city is also mentioned as a positive point: "I can say it is quite welcoming; all of Canada is known for being welcoming to foreigners. And in Montreal it is more welcoming, I would say, because it is a city that speaks both main languages" (Wei, China). They also feel that individuals belonging to the majority group are kind to them, even when they do not speak French (well); they stress however the importance of "integrating": "They are willing to speak English with me, so I feel they are very kind. Because actually I should know their language because I came to their city to integrate" (Tiange, China). These excerpts show how positive some students feel about their experience in general (at university and in the city), and how important it is for them to integrate.

More specifically, these students are satisfied with their university experience: "Everything is so good with me [...]. Whenever we have doubts, or we need help enrolling in some courses or getting things sorted for us, they help us" (Pranjal, India). They also feel that professors are available for help: "The communication, when you had a question, it would be answered, and professors were really willing to, you know, set up a meeting somewhere out of class" (Zion, India).

Regarding building bonds with peers, they feel it requires openness on their part as well: "You just have to show interest, be open to talk to people, and they will be more than happy to welcome you" (Pranjal, India). Taken together, these excerpts reflect their satisfaction with their university experience, as well as the importance they place on demonstrating an "open mind."

They also have a positive impression of their experience in the city: "People are nice. I have not had any bad experiences. People are helpful" (Zion, India).

When discussing their experience in the city, they tend to consider both their time at university and their time in the city. Some claim to have a positive experience with their professors and peers, as well as in the city: "The experience is very good because the professors are very nice, and the classmates are also very nice [...]. Even off campus, when I was on the street, I met a lot of passers-by who smiled at me" (Ziqi, China). In that sense, some claim they have had a positive experience both at university and in the city.

When confronted with potentially discriminatory situations, they tend to analyze the situation in an individualistic way, highlighting personality differences: “Some classmates are not very, very, very nice, but I do not think it is discrimination; it is their character, for everyone it is like that. It is not just me” (Jingbo, China). This individualistic view of situations is echoed when they say they just need to work harder to succeed in a second language: “If a local classmate spent an hour on an assignment, I have to spend four or five hours to do it. It is harder work. But if you make more of an effort, I do not think it is a big problem” (Jingbo, China). According to these Asian international students, the fact that they do not have a lot in common with individuals belonging to the majority group (in terms of culture, language, etc.) would explain the domestic students’ preference for working in groups with other students belonging to the majority group, rather than choosing to work with them: “They want to look for peers who are like them. For example, if my French is not good enough [...], I would not make a good teammate for them” (Jingbo, China).

These students highlighted positive experiences at the university and in the city, which can also be seen as a way of dealing with the challenges they encountered (Montsion, 2023). The challenges are evident, for example, when they mention peers who prefer not to work with them and when they emphasize the need to integrate and to have an “open mind”.

Although these accounts share some similarities with the predominantly positive experiences reported by European participants, an important difference is that Asian participants frequently framed successful integration as requiring additional individual effort, including working harder, remaining open-minded, adapting to local expectations, and improving their language skills. This emphasis on individual adaptation was considerably less evident in the accounts of European participants.

Critical Experience Type: for Some Asian International Students

Other Asian international students report experiencing racism, microaggressions, and language discrimination. They also mention feeling Othered (due to perceived differences) and lacking a sense of belonging not only at university but also in the city. For example, some report feeling insecure in the city of Montreal due to violence against Asian people during the pandemic: “I felt scared during the pandemic because there were Asian hate crimes that were going on in Montreal, and our embassy also told us to be careful because there were recent attacks. So, I just stayed home” (Yu-Jun, Korea). This excerpt illustrates racism toward Asian international students in urban spaces.

Participants tended not to use the terms racism or discrimination during their interviews. However, they did mention the term microaggressions: “She [the professor] did not want to call the names that were difficult to pronounce, which I think is a kind of, well, what is that word, microaggression, I guess. She was, like, ‘oh your name is too hard’” (Yu-Jun, Korea). They say that the discrimination they experience tends to be indirect: “It is not about the words that they say directly, because now I think no one will say it directly, but there are some actions” (Ran,

China). Across these accounts, participants emphasize the indirect nature of the discrimination they experience.

For some, the challenges they face in social interactions are more closely tied to their proficiency in the languages used by the majority group: “There are some people who don’t like to get on with these kinds of people who don’t speak English or French as their mother tongue” (Ran, China). Regarding their use of French or English, they reported experiencing no linguistic discrimination; instead, they attributed the “fault” to themselves, saying they did not speak the local languages well enough: “No, no. Maybe, maybe our English is not good enough” (Ming, China). Some students specifically mention Francophones’ reactions when they do not speak French, for example, when asking a question: “Some people will answer by saying you should learn French. But they did not answer my question. It is so frustrating. [...] So, it does not feel good” (Xinyue, China). They feel that the treatment they receive improves when they speak French: “There is no discrimination, especially after I learned French” (Xinyue, China). These accounts point to inferior treatment by the majority group based on the languages spoken (or not spoken) during social interactions.

Some students describe the difficulties they encounter in social interactions in terms of “cultural” differences: “Yeah, there are differences, of course, but I do not think it is because you are local and I am a foreigner. It is because it is the way of life or, how to say it, this is a cultural thing” (Xinyue, China). In that sense, they report that they need to deal with cultural stereotypes: “I do not feel it as discrimination, I just think that is not knowing my culture. I feel like people made a lot of judgments about Korean people [...]. I did not like the idea that I was being stereotyped” (Yu-Jun, Korea). These accounts point to an experience of being Othered during social interactions, which participants nonetheless interpret as the result of cultural differences.

According to these students, classroom interactions are also more difficult because of cultural differences, for example, expectations of the local education system regarding classroom participation: “North American educational settings are very interactive. They ask a lot of questions to students, and sometimes I feel very intimidated to answer those questions, even though I know the answer. Because in Korea, the lecture styles are different” (Yu-Jun, Korea). In fact, the participants interviewed observed that a participation stance considered “active” was rewarded in class, to the detriment of other stances: “She [the professor] favored a girl. She is also white, she is very active, so she [the professor] actually favored people who are very active in class” (Yu-Jun, Korea). These accounts reveal an appreciation of local values (e.g., “active” participation in class) as an expectation that international students must strive to meet.

Their Otherness was also evident in their immigrant status and the prejudices associated with being categorized as an “immigrant.” In fact, they report perceiving that individuals belonging to the majority group are not welcoming to immigrants: “They are not welcoming to immigrants. What I feel is the notion that they are anti-immigration. Yeah, they do not want

immigration. I have talked to people who are Quebecers, they do not really feel comfortable with immigration” (Rudra, India). They add that they feel kindness from certain individuals in the majority group, but not an openness to friendship: “the students that go to the university, to the library, they were very kind, and they look friendly, but I never talk with them. They are very polite. So that is sort of common because I have no communication with them” (Xinyue, China). This sense of distance makes some of them feel lonely: “In India, I did not feel alone. In Canada, you feel alone, and there is nobody. I do not have any friends over here” (Rudra, India). They report feeling no sense of belonging: “I have no sense of belonging at all. The only thing that I can do is go back to China” (Xinyue, China). Following their negative experience, some of them have even changed their minds about becoming permanent residents in Canada: “Before coming to Canada, [...] I was thinking of permanent residency over here. [...] However, after I came here, like my experience right now is like, I do not want to live in this place” (Rudra, India). Some have concluded that Montreal is not a desirable place (for international Asian students) to study and live: “If I should tell you the truth, I will say that I do not like this city [...]. I think this city is a good place for traveling, but not for living and studying” (Zhuofan, China).

As we can see, in this type of experience, the students are more clearly critical of the university and the city. This is their way of dealing with the challenges they encounter (Montsion, 2023). These experiences contrast with those reported by the European participants, who did not describe comparable experiences of racial discrimination, language-based exclusion, or lack of belonging. The comparison therefore suggests that international student status alone does not account for participants’ experiences; rather, their accounts differed according to their race and linguistic positioning within the Montreal context.

Adventurous Experience Type: for European International Students

By contrast, the European international students interviewed (who do not identify as visible minorities) report no experiences of discrimination: “I did not experience any discrimination as such in class” (Simon, France). They say that making friends is easy: “Right away, there were very strong bonds among the students” (Céline, France). Working in groups is also easy for them: “I am really satisfied with the people I have in my groups” (Anna, Czech Republic). They also find professors and other staff members at the university to be very helpful: “Everybody is really helpful. [...] The professors or academic staff, they really try to help you” (Anna, Czech Republic). They also feel included within the university community: “We [international students] feel really included within the university community” (Manon, France). They feel that domestic students are open to international students: “Everyone in the class was really nice and the professors were really kind, very supportive. I think everyone was quite interested to know more about, like, where I am coming from and having an international student in the class” (Emily, United Kingdom). They feel that domestic students are interested in getting to know them: “They are usually very curious to know why I am here, and so very interested” (Céline, France). They also mention feeling a sense of belonging (at the university and in the city): “I really felt as if I

belonged. It was very nice. I did not feel rejected or anything because I was a foreign student” (Céline, France).

Some note that speaking French as their mother tongue makes their experience easier: “I am French, so the whole language thing is no problem at all. Yes, and so I think that helps a lot. So, no, frankly, it is fine” (Annette, France). Even when the language of schooling is not their mother tongue, either French or English, they still sense that local people (professors, peers, and people on the street) are patient with them: “They are really patient with, um, my French. So, they will kind of like give you a second to think of the word. If you cannot think of it, they can help you” (Emily, United Kingdom). They also feel that professors are more lenient when assessing written language quality: “She [the professor] said that there is normally a policy where they remove marks for mistakes in French, but she was quite lenient about it. She knows that it is not my first language, so they have been really welcoming and understanding” (Emily, United Kingdom).

They also report feeling safe at university and in the city: “I feel safe here [at university] and welcome [...]. I feel really safe in the city. [...] I really feel quite safe here in Montreal” (Czech Republic). They also report a general positive impression of people in Canada: “I have to admit that people in Canada are, in general, very generous and helpful. You do not even need to ask for help” (Anna, Czech Republic). They feel welcome in Montreal: “People are really helpful. They are willing to go out of their way to really accompany us to where we are going, and so on. We really feel welcome in the city, so it is nice” (Manon, France). They even compare their experience as international students to a quest for adventure: “I wanted to experience an adventure outside Europe. [...] I wanted to go far away, both geographically and culturally” (Simon, France). They are eager to learn about other cultures: “I want to discover new people, new cultures, new landscapes, new cities” (Sophie, France). The goal is to go far enough to allow them to be independent and self-sufficient: “I said to myself, ‘This is my chance to move 6,000 km away, and I am sure that here I have no choice but to be independent and self-sufficient, and, yeah, that is it’” (Cloris, France). Overall, then, these accounts reflect a positive experience both at university and in the city, and even the sense that their experience as international students is a quest for adventure.

Compared with the Asian international students, the European participants’ accounts were more consistently characterized by ease of integration, positive social interactions, a sense of belonging, and feelings of safety at both the university and in the city. Unlike some Asian participants, they did not report comparable experiences of racial discrimination, microaggressions, or language-based exclusion. Even when French was not their first language, participants described patience and accommodation from others rather than exclusion. As they are located in Western countries and, for the most part, speak languages that hold greater symbolic power internationally (e.g., English), they occupy a different position on the international scene and belong to groups that are less racialized and marginalized in Canada and Quebec. Thus, although participants in both groups could report positive experiences, the

conditions surrounding these experiences differed: Asian participants more often emphasized the need to adapt, integrate, work harder, or overcome linguistic and social barriers, whereas European participants more often described their international student experience in terms of welcome, inclusion, discovery, and adventure.

This study highlights how the experience at university and in the city for some students – notably in terms of race, those being categorized as white – can be completely different from those who are not considered white and French-speaking. The students' experiences are evidently affected by racial and visible differences, but the students (white and non-white) do not refer to these as their main concern. When European international students describe their experience as an adventure, this framing tends to highlight their racial privilege.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The analysis of the data shows that some Asian international students, as visible minorities, face discrimination, unlike their European counterparts, who do not identify as visible minorities. More specifically, Asian international students in the critical experience type report experiencing racism, especially at the onset of the pandemic. They also report language discrimination (in both French and English), microaggressions, and exclusion in social interactions with professors and peers from the majority group due to perceived "cultural" differences, making it difficult to develop a sense of belonging in the host country. By contrast, those in the positive experience type tend to emphasize the positive aspects of their experience both at university and in Montreal. They recount positive interactions with professors and peers, highlighting their friendliness toward international students. In comparison, European international students depict their experience as a quest for adventure, feeling safe and welcome both at university and in Montreal. They adapt easily, which could be explained by accumulated privileges, notably in terms of race, language, and perceived "cultural" similarities with people from the host country.

We can therefore note that the experiences of the European international students we interviewed differ from those of Asian international students, whether they fall into the critical experience type or the positive experience type. Even when we analyze the accounts of Asian international students who emphasize the positive side of their experience, we can see that they tend to stress the importance of working hard, having an open mind, and integrating, while also explaining the difficulties they encounter in terms of cultural or personality differences. They tend to describe their experiences at university and in the city in terms of cultural differences with respect to individuals belonging to the majority group to justify (negative) differences in their treatment (Thésée & Carr, 2016). We can thus affirm that, in general, Asian international students are affected by their otherness (Dervin, 2015) as well as by experiences of discrimination (Sleeter, 2012).

In general, participants (both Asian and European students) do not interpret their experiences as stemming from oppression (for Asian students) or privilege (for European

students). However, their accounts highlight the accumulation of oppression or privilege (Gillborn, 2015). Beyond the direct racism experienced, particularly at the start of the pandemic, Asian international students who fall into the critical experience type recount discrimination as ordinary and part of everyday life, that is, in the form of microaggressions, which are not commonly questioned (Chapman et al., 2013).

The experiences of the European international students we interviewed are, then, clearly distinct from those of Asian international students (of both critical and positive experience types), notably due to their racial and linguistic privileges. In that sense, it is important to return to the concept of stigmatization, particularly visible versus non-visible stigmatization and its consequences for social interactions, including the need to manage tension or information during social interactions (Goffman, 1986).

Like our results, other research has also highlighted the experiences of racism and linguistic discrimination among Asian international students in Quebec. Like ours, other studies have shown that international students, and more specifically racialized international students, such as Asians, are Othered because difference is perceived as an issue. For example, elements such as phenotype, language, and nationality are components of this Othering process (Y. Liu & Qian, 2023). Similarly, other research has shown that Asian international students, when discussing their experiences as international students, tend not to mention racism and instead focus on cultural differences and self-blame in situations of discrimination (Ham, 2023).

To our knowledge, this is one of the first qualitative studies in Quebec to directly compare the experiences of racialized Asian international students with those of European international students who do not identify as visible minorities. This comparison reveals how processes of othering, discrimination, and privilege shape international student experiences differently within the same institutional and societal context. Our research findings suggest that equity measures should be put in place to better support Asian international students who face racial and linguistic inequalities and discrimination both at the university and in the city. More broadly, these findings highlight the need for equity-oriented institutional policies that recognize that international students are not a homogeneous population and that racialized and non-racialized students may experience university life in fundamentally different ways.

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