

## Conference Paper

# Constructing Whiteness in Dating Applications: A Case of Expatriate Tinder Users in Indonesia

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### Abstract

While many white expatriates from Euro-American countries living and working in Indonesia intend to live in Indonesia for the long term, they are often considered (and consider themselves) as the 'others'. As a consequence, they never feel fully accepted as members of the society in Indonesia albeit their efforts to adapt their lives there, hence their difficulties in developing their relationships with Indonesian people. One way for them to build relationships with Indonesians is through dating practices. However, they are often restrained within the conventional dating scene in Indonesia. With the emergence of mobile dating applications such as Tinder, these dating practices can be mediated by new media prior to their face-to-face interactions with their dates. For expatriates who seek dates with Indonesian people, this mediated experience creates a digital space for them to present themselves in the dating scene in Indonesia. This paper thus aims to see how their cultural identities play a role for them to express themselves through Tinder with other users in Indonesia both in online and offline worlds. Using observations and interviews of four expatriates in Indonesia, this paper shows that Tinder allows them to express their cultural identities in the digital world in order to have an alternative dating scene in Indonesia.

**Keywords:** cultural identity; dating application; Tinder

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background

One prominent issue in expatriates' lives in Indonesia is the concept of *othering* in their daily lives. Regardless their efforts to immerse their lives here, an invisible gap between them and local people becomes an obstacle they have to face. This gap is sometimes reduced through one term *bule* to refer to their physical features that are believed to be stood out among Indonesian people: their tall stature, blonde hair, and relatively white skin. This term is embodied within their presence among Indonesian people and it's even emphasized in Indonesian popular culture scene. As an example, there was a comedy show called *bule gila* (literally means 'crazy white people') in the

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2000s in which some foreigners did odd pranks around Indonesian people. The fact that their 'whiteness' is used as part of a comedy skit reflects the gaze of Indonesian people towards white people in Indonesia. Apart of being the center of attention, some expatriates hate to be called *bule*. Fechter gives an example of how *othering* processes can happen to some expatriates in such trivial examples, such as when the locals say 'hello, mister', or when they know that local people talk about them and use the word *bule* to refer to them (2007: 74-75).

Despite this labelling, expatriates in Indonesia are usually keen on adapting their lives and they also try to develop personal relationships with local people. Aside from having friends and colleagues, it's not unheard of for them to build romantic relationships with Indonesians. That being said, dating culture in Indonesia is relatively different from some western countries and it becomes a hot topic amongst expatriate communities. As an instance, when I typed keyword 'dating' on Living in Indonesia Forum, a website dedicated for people to discuss issues related to expatriates in Indonesia, there are dozens of threads solely discussing about this topic. It ranges from 'dating with an Indonesian guy', 'dating a Muslim woman with crazy parents', to 'unmarried couple living together...'

While dating culture in Indonesia can be quite tricky, some expatriates find mobile dating applications to be an alternative way in seeing local people, one of them is Tinder. As Tinder has become one of the most popular dating applications since 2014 (McCormick, 2017), it is common to see expatriates who use this application to meet up with Indonesian people. Since Tinder is less than ten years old and is still gaining its popularity, it is interesting to see how this application is used by expatriates in Indonesia in relation to their understanding of their identity as white people in Indonesia.

## 1.2. Conceptual and theoretical framework

New media technology has not only changed the way people use media, but also has demanded us to rethink our approach in media studies which has been largely depended on the phenomena of mass society (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2006:2). Social relationships and face-to-face interactions therefore can be redefined since it's impossible to ignore the fact that a lot of social practices in the society are now mediated through new media.

The combination of putting together social practices and the technology of ICT (Information and Communications Technology) also creates a new media culture. In this paper, a key concept in the transformation of social practices through social media is

reflected through a term so called gamification, in which social interaction and technical architecture are brought together as part of user's experience in social media (Lampe, 2011). As this term rooted in gaming logic, users of new media are usually guided to follow certain activities that will lead them into getting rewards. Although the concept of gamification is not pretty new, with the rise of mobile applications this approach is proved to be very popular for online application creators. For example, one of the most popular mobile applications in Indonesia called GO-JEK introduced a feature called GO-POINTS where users can get certain points whenever they make any transactions within this application. Using a picture resembling a casino's roulette, users can 'play' the tokens to get random points. These points are accumulated afterwards and can be redeemed with different vouchers and rewards.

While the notion of gamification focuses on the technological characteristics in new media, users who are using mobile applications for socializing purposes such as Tinder also deal with the issue of identity. In this paper, the term identity is particularly related with their status as white expatriates that are often regarded to be the *others* in Indonesian society (Expat.id, 2018). The discourse of expatriates' lives as Fechter noted, has not been explored well (2007:19). In the midst of global migration in the world, there is a big difference between what we call expatriates and immigrants. According to Koutonin, those who are called expatriates are usually deem to have privileges that immigrants don't have (2018). However, in the case of Indonesian expatriates, this condition is more complicated than that. For an instance, a YouTube channel owned by a Canadian expatriate called Sascha Stevenson is dedicated to discuss some of her issues of being a female white expatriate with Indonesian husband. Though most of her videos are satires and taken from her daily experiences, she often highlights her struggles of being a white female expatriate in this heavily-patriarchal country. It resonates with McClintock's explanation about the position of white women in the discourse of imperialism the past, in which she considered contradictory and different from colonial men (1995:6). While colonial men could enjoy full advantages of being the colonizers, white women's position was more ambiguous. They were both privileged as white people but also only possessed limited power in their relation with men. In a country like Indonesia where gender gap between men and women is still huge, this notion can't be ignored.

### 1.3. Methodology

Since the nature of Tinder does not rely solely on its online interaction but also on its potential to allow its users to meet up face-to-face, ethnographic approach is thus chosen for this paper. New media studies show that there is a shift in the idea of observing the internet as an object of exotic discussion to become an inseparable part of everyday life (Hine, 2015: 164). In other words, social practices mediated by the internet can be a reflection of social practices outside the internet (offline). In the case of Tinder, this application tries to mimic the dating experience and give a digital nuance on it. However, a reflection social practices in the context of the internet is not a perfect reflection; within certain limits there is a distortion that occurs on the internet towards social practices caused by reduction of various concepts, mainly the concept of space and time. Therefore, understanding Tinder's offline realities is as important as knowing its online practice. Therefore, while understanding Tinder's technical aspects is important, the ubiquitous interactions of its users also demand an attention, especially when it comes to relation between races and gender. It is also important to emphasize that this paper does not try to generalize the relations between its users as every user has unique experience in using Tinder..

## 2. Result and Discussion

Tinder as a new media has distinctive and interesting features. Moreover, it penetrates the concept of gamification within people's romance. Unlike online dating websites that allow users to have space in their profile to write about themselves, Tinder can only be accessed through mobile devices. Therefore, users won't have enough space on their mobile phone screen to describe themselves on their profile page. Firstly, Tinder only allows its users to upload six photos in their profile. Secondly, other than visual aids to help other users getting know other users better, Tinder only selects a few profile categories to appear on the Tinder users profile: *about me*, *job title*, *company*, and *school*. While categories under *job title*, *company* and *school* doesn't have limited character count, *about me* category limits the users to write about themselves in under 500 characters. It means the users have to be creative in limited space in 'marketing' themselves in front of the other users. The logic behind its character limits is similar to what happens with Twitter. It is believed that by limiting the users' space to write, people can be more creative in presenting themselves in such constrained condition (Newton, 2017).

A stronger adaptation of gamification can be seen from the way the users present their profile in in 'swipe logic'. It indicates that the users which is a selection process that is applied by shifting the photo to the left to reject (nope), shift the photo to the right (like) or move the photo up (super like). The practice of gamification in Tinder is interesting to see because similar to the way of thinking of a game, there is a sense of pleasure that results from an achievement (Schell, 2014).

Nicho, a Canadian guy who lives mostly in Jakarta, besides my first informant reveals that this sense of accomplishment appears when he gets to meet up with the girls he has texted before.

*.....I had spent a couple days in Jakarta, swiped right on Tinder, and was due to meet a girl from Jakarta....in terms of "success," well, that depends. For certain periods, it was almost entirely about just having sex. But at other periods, it was simply meeting someone new that was hopefully interesting and shared common interests.*

The swipe action performed by Nicho above implies the element of mystery that is emphasized through the word 'hopefully'. This concept is interesting because it is similar to a game, players are usually triggered to continue playing a game because of new challenges and new mysteries. Nicho's statement above also shows the concept of goal which is one of the important elements in a game. For Nicho, the goal in the 'game' is at least expressed in two ways, which is to have sexual encounter or to meet someone who has the same interests as him.

While Nicho implicitly explains his accomplishment in his offline Tinder experience, my other informant, Winona, suggests explicitly that most of her experience on using Tinder is for the sake of entertainment. She enjoys scrolling swiping pictures after pictures until she ran out of the limit for the swipe for that day (around 100). Besides that, her main goal on using Tinder is not to find someone to hook up with. Instead, she just wants to chat with people because she likes to talk with people. Her situation last year as a Darmasiswa (a year-long program for foreigners to learn Indonesian culture) student who didn't have a lot of Indonesian friends drove her to use Tinder as a way to talk to Indonesian people. Swipe logic as happens in Tinder suggests a fast, intuitive and firm selection process in eliminating dating candidates (David and Cambre, 2016). Given these limitations, there is a priority to select the micro information contained in Tinder. Different from Winona and Nicho who are in their 20s and 30s respectively, Frank who is in his late 40s said that selection is an important process in using Tinder. His way of selecting a potential match to meet up with focus on bio, age, and work. He emphasized

age as the most important factor in selecting his match on Tinder. According to him, he doesn't like the idea of having a date with someone who's ten years younger than he is. He also doesn't have any rush on getting a girlfriend in Indonesia although he confessed that some girls can be quite intimidating. Therefore, although his motivation is more or less similar to Winona and Nicho, he shows some serious consideration in using Tinder:

*Filtering the bio is important for me...there's a lot of women don't put the bio at all, who just have photos and I would immediately not...I would just...whatever..swipe...left, I would definitely delete them... 'cause if you couldn't take the time to write one or two sentences, then I wasn't interested in meeting you. Umm...so the bio... usually the age I set between thirty and fifty...and I was around forty...(exhale) ...usually their job was pretty important for me...there are couple that I could match with were writers.*

Similar with Winona, Frank considers Tinder to be a medium for him to 'meet' with Indonesian women while learning Indonesian. His experience in using Tinder is almost entirely non-romantic. While Nicho doesn't deny that his Tinder dates can lead to sexual encounters, intimate relationship almost never becomes Frank's foundation in using Tinder.

Besides Frank and Nicho, there is also Jack, an English teacher from Texas who often uses Tinder to find dates. From some of the writer's small talk with Jack, Jack often used Tinder when he was bored or when he was in a new area. In the early days of Jack using Tinder for the first time, he admitted that he was not too selective in filtering Tinder Match; this implies that Jack's decision was more arbitrary than Frank. However, with the swipe logic described above, the selection process still occurs through photos.

In contrast, Winona's point of view of selection process in Tinder are mostly conducted through the chat room. She said that she can categorize the type of first chats she often gets on Tinder. 'So I'd usually get the 'can I get to know you', 'can we be friends', and then you'll get messages that are like 'hey, do you like sex?'. Regarding the second type of messages, she would sometime reply with some witty replies and sarcastic remarks. She also said that she enjoys turning down people in their own language (Indonesian).

Different from Jack who is keen on meeting up with his Tinder dates, Winona and Frank show their restraint in having 'real' dates following a Tinder encounter. According to Winona, she had only been on one Tinder date and to my surprise, she is still seeing that guy. Among all of the informants I have interviewed, Winona is the only person who maintains her Tinder experience in offline world. However, she confessed that her

decision to follow up her relationship with her date was because of her fear living alone in Indonesia and that she needs someone who can help her in case something bad happens to her.

Like other Tinder users, Jack, Frank and Nicho deal with a lot of trials and errors. The difference is, because of the characteristics of new media that are attached to Tinder, these trial and error processes can happen in a very fast pace. In contrast to online dating websites such as *okcupid* and *e-harmony*, gaps for feedback can be easily traced in a short period of time because Tinder can only be accessed by mobile phones which people use constantly.

The concept of identity and race became one of the important aspects that colored the experiences of Frank, Nicho, Jack, and Winona in using Tinder. Their presence as foreigners in Indonesia influences their online and offline interactions in the Tinder cyber room. In the writer's observation, the four of them at least get more or less similar questions: Where they come from, what activities they do in Indonesia, and whether they speak Indonesian.

My four informants showed that their identity as foreigners in Indonesia as an integral part in their experience in using Tinder. Through their experience in using Tinder, there is a process of confirmation of their identity as white people. Frank, for example, explains this through one dating experience with one of the Tinder users:

*There was one woman who... we started chatting and literally what she wanted to do is talk about sex... so basically after chatting with her for maybe four days I kind of realized that literally all she wanted to talk about was sex and..... to me it's just boring. Ummm... (long pause) I'm definitely saying there are kind of women that are "different". Whether they're more sexual or maybe they're sort of focused on white terms of meeting guys... you can call them bule hunter...*

*Bule hunter*, as mentioned by Frank is a term that is getting more known among expatriates in Indonesia. Although it hasn't been defined in academic lexicon, *bule hunter* is a stereotype given to Indonesian people who are looking for a relationship with white people for their own advantages and is sometimes parallel with the term 'gold-diggers' (Partogi, 2014). While Frank gave a negative tone in the word *bule hunter*, an alternative view of this term is presented through a book written by Elisabeth Oktofani who interviewed a number of women who have encountered relationships with white people in Indonesia (2014). Her book consists of three controversial issues surrounding *bule hunters*: money, sex, and love. From these women stories, it can be seen that



although Oktofani doesn't try justifying or even giving a new definition of *bule hunter*, it is remarkable that she could show some important contexts behind these women's preferences of white people over Indonesian people.

Unlike Frank, Jack seems to be aware of his identity as a white male and this factor made him get likes on his profile almost every week and he ended up having quite a lot of meet ups with his Tinder dates. Through some informal meetings with Jack, I saw Jack's attitude as ambivalent to his racial awareness. As someone who is around this forties, Jack often uses the word 'settle down' which implies its literal meaning (having a permanent home in one area, having a steady income) and metaphorical one (having a stable personal relationship). He often compares his condition with his friends who have families and children. Jack admits that he cannot maintain a committed relationship and using Tinder is one way to fill the gap where he can have personal relationships with women without being locked into a commitment. However, the affirmation of his racial identity makes Jack feel that Tinder dates were not genuine. He realized that his identity as a white person was one of the factors that led to him on getting Tinder dates.

Although there is an oppositional view of *bule hunter* in this dating practice for informants, there are examples where informants differentiate between women they meet in Tinder and the women they meet every day based on cultural references they have in their home countries. Nicho, for example explaining this:

*Author: Do you think the girls you meet on Tinder are different than the girls you meet in your daily life?*

*Nicho: No, nothing's different about them at all. But with Tinder, it seems like girls feel more able to be themselves, be forthright, not feel publicly shamed. For instances, in public, a girl would very, very rarely (ie, never) walk up to a guy and just start talking or flirting. But on Tinder, and maybe especially with a foreigner, there seems to be more openness to expressing oneself in sexual or romantic terms.*

Nicho's explanation above shows two things. First, there is a preference for what kind of women he prefers to talk to or to meet up with on Tinder, and second, his two opposite views on women shows that there is a contradiction of women that he sees in his everyday life with the girls he chats on Tinder with. His preferences are indicated by the word *forthright*, and the word *flirting* shows that Nicho's social identity played a role in selecting what female characters he expected from his Tinder date in Indonesia. But this also shows that in his daily interactions, Nicho sees that Indonesian women are more open in Tinder rather than in real life. He also noted that in Tinder he has seen



more openness towards Indonesian people than what he witnesses on his day-to-day life.

While Nicho's impressions towards Indonesian women in online and offline worlds are quite contradictory, Winona, an English teacher from America explains that her interactions with Indonesian men are not completely different. In fact, during our interview, one of the first things she said was the fact that to be sexually objected has become her daily struggle as a *bule* and turns out that Tinder is no exception.

While her tone of voice doesn't seem to reflect her frustration on getting cat-called by Indonesian men, but when I asked what her experience in chatting with Indonesian men in Tinder is like, she said something about picking up slangs and abbreviations that she would've never known if she hadn't had chats on Tinder. However, she started lowering her voice, rolled her eyes and confessed that *'Indonesian men can be.....sooo inappropriate to bules. I wouldn't even want to meet the people out there. I've learn some great inappropriate vocabulary...'* This is followed by her writing on a piece of paper two slang words that are used to refer to women's sexual body parts.

Winona's experience both in chat rooms and in real life is not new in white female's experiences staying or living in Indonesia. A few extreme cases show that they are prone to sexual harassment or even rape in Indonesia. In June 2018, a French girl was raped by her travel guide in Labuan Bajo, Indonesia (Kompas, 2018) and in September a 19-year-old Norwegian was raped by a house keeper in a Villa in Bali (Mardiastuti, 2018). From what I gathered through some white female friends, their experiences of being cat-called and harassed on the street are not new. Unfortunately, despite some strong voices demanding the government of Indonesia to be more serious in handling this issue, there is no legal protection for women on this matter (Cochrane, 2018).

This scophophilic view towards white female in Indonesia can be explained with the concept of male gaze by Laura Mulvey. Through this concept, Mulvey described the unequal image shown by the cinema where men are depicted as active, while women are seen as passive (2006:342-352). Although the male gaze shown by Winona's experience is not necessarily based in cinema, but the manifestation of this concept relies heavily on how white women are usually represented in Indonesian popular culture. It can be seen from the depiction of white female characters that are played in blockbuster/Hollywood movies in cinemas in Indonesia and the white-like beauty standard perpetuated by beauty industry.

However, Winona also expressed the other side of being 'visible' in Tinder in Indonesia compared to her experience back in her hometown. *'I would say...one of the big things that surprised me is my desirability level...in the United States my profile doesn't*

scream Hi, I just wrote not hook up with you. And so a lot of times I got left swipe. While here, because I'm a bule I got super swipe....ALL THE TIME. If I want to swipe on someone it will be like this (flicking her fingers).

Winona's experience in defining her identity above is interesting to see because her visibility as a white female living in Indonesia can be put at two different spectrums at the same time. On one hand, Winona experiences male gaze as the result of constant representation from the media that tend to objectify women in their portrayal. Meanwhile on the other spectrum she find a confidence boost because according to her, people in Indonesia value western women aesthetic more than people in her home country.

### 3. Conclusion

From four informants I have observed and interviewed, all of them consider Tinder as a tool to connect themselves with Indonesian people. Unlike Fechter (2014) who sees white expatriates in Jakarta denying the consequences of their cultural identity in their live in Indonesia, my observations show that these four expatriates are fully aware of their 'whiteness' and how it plays roles in their Tinder experience in Indonesia. It is also important to notice that the drive to learn Indonesian and to develop friendship with Indonesian people are deemed to be quite pivotal in their experience in using Tinder. That being said, my interviews show a clear difference on how gender relation works between local people and my respondents when they are in Tinder's chatroom. My female informant is most likely to get sexually explicit messages compared to my male informants, therefore she is more selective in choosing someone to talk to in Tinder. While one of my informants sees Indonesian women in Tinder chat to be relatively easier to talk to compared to when he has to talk to them in person, this doesn't happen to my female informant. Her offline and online encounters with Indonesian men have caused her to be more careful in interacting and developing relationships with local people.

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