Perceived Discrimination Among Chinese International Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Qualitative Study Based on Grounded Theory

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Abstract. The reports on discrimination against the Chinese and Asian people has increased during the global COVID-19 pandemic. The study examined discrimination perceived by Chinese international students studying abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic, and constructed the theoretical conceptual model of perceived discrimination among Chinese international students based on the grounded theoretical analysis of the interview data. The study revealed the theoretical logic behind perceived discrimination among Chinese international students in the context of COVID-19 and offered some countermeasure suggestions. Keywords: COVID-19, International students, Discrimination.

1 Introduction

Statistics from the Ministry of Education showed that from 1978 to the end of 2018, a total of 5.8571 million Chinese students studied abroad, among whom 1.5339 million had been studying¹ When studying and living in foreign countries, Chinese international students usually face such challenges as cultural shock, language barrier, being far away from their families and motherland, and it is not easy for them to obtain enough social support as domestic students do. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese international students have faced many challenges including closures of some places, isolation, social distancing, online courses, economic pressure and physical and mental health risks. Discrimination, as a special challenge, has been widely concerned by scholars in the field of higher education [1]. After WHO declared the novel coronavirus pandemic in March 2020, stigma and discrimination against Chinese and other Asians have been on the rise, in both explicit and invisible forms [2]. Related explicit discrimination includes social labeling of Chinese international students as a “Chinese virus”, as well as verbal and even physical aggression [3, 4]. In contrast to direct violent attacks, invisible discrimination is manifested in the form of “cold violence”, such as obvious hostility, exclusion and isolation towards Chinese international students [5]. Perceived discrimination and stigma of COVID-19 further aggravate such uncertainty [6]. The resulting negative effects, such as mental health problems and employment difficulties,

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¹http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/gzdt_gzdt/s5987/201903/t20190327_375704.html

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have been confirmed by many researchers [7, 8]. Therefore, the international student community deserves more attention from education leaders, policy makers, teachers and relevant scholars [9].

Do Chinese international students perceive discrimination during the pandemic? What are the main forms of discrimination? What possible themes can discrimination be associated with? Based on the grounded theory and in-depth interviews with Chinese international students, this paper attempts to answer the above questions, and explores the discrimination perceived by Chinese international students during the COVID-19 epidemic. This paper is divided into 6 sections: (1) an overview of the research background and research question; (2) the literature review; (3) qualitative method based on grounded theory; (4) theoretical model and results analysis; (5) discussion and implications; (6) Conclusion.

2 Literature Review

Discrimination is a negative attitude, judgment or unfair treatment of group members [10]. Based on attribution theory, Anaíd and Jórg defined perceived discrimination as a person’s subjective and self-assessed experience of obstacles when entering any aspect of social life [11]. These obstacles are attributed to discriminatory behaviors or structures in the social environment. Chinese international students’ perceived discrimination can be defined as the subjective experience and self-assessment of various discriminatory behaviors when they enter social lives in foreign countries.

Scholars conducted research on different types of discrimination. Harrell distinguishes the concept of prejudice into derogatory judgments/ignorant attitude and unfair treatment [12]. Derogatory judgments/ignorant treatment attitude can be interpreted as blatant, straightforward and obvious discrimination, including physical violence and verbal attacks, which is closely related to extreme old racism. Unfair treatment is a more subtle and subtle form of discrimination, which is often reflected in microaggressions, feelings of superiority, prejudice and stereotypes, exclusion and so on. Corresponding to this concept is the extension of racism—the neoracism that encodes discrimination against cultures into descriptions of other cultures [13]. The neoracism transcends race and does not emphasize the biological differences of people, but includes the cross of native nationality and cultural stereotypes [14]. Based on the literature review, we conceptually regard derogatory judgments/ignorant attitude as explicit discrimination and unfair treatment as implicit discrimination.

Inequality, explicit and invisible discrimination in higher education not only affect students’ academic performance [5], but also cause great harm to students’ physical and mental health [9], and are associated with depression and unhappiness, social disorders and loneliness [15, 16]. Studies have shown that international students from Asia are more likely than American or European students to perceive overt discrimination, such as verbal aggression and inferiority in employment [16, 17]. After the outbreak of COVID-19, racial hatred towards Chinese and other Asians has been on the rise, especially xenophobic terms such as “Wuhan virus” which appeared in the news media at the early stage of the epidemic, further causing prejudice and discrimination among the public [18, 19]. A study in Poland reported on “mask discrimination”, in which Asian international students who wear masks are more likely to be discriminated against than those who do not [20]. However, the issue on discrimination against Chinese international students who might be the target of discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic needs to be studied further.

Most scholars adopt quantitative research methods to measure discrimination as a dimension of mental health variables and cross-cultural adaptation variables. A few scholars have used qualitative methods to study this issue. For example, Koo et al. explored the experiences...
and views of international students of color on racism during the COVID-19 by using interview method and thematic analysis [21]. However, in general there is a lack of qualitative research on discrimination, especially the use of grounded theory. Grounded theory is the most widely used qualitative research method in social science research methods. It advocates finding the relationship between subjects on the basis of data analysis, and constructing theory by studying the interaction between subjects [22]. The key to grounded theory is to constantly compare phenomena and concepts. In the process of comparison, core categories and the relationship among categories are summarized step by step, and finally the theoretical conceptual model is generated by integrating the theories of different thread development. Grounded theory is applicable to explore Chinese international students’ experience and perception of discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To sum up, discrimination perceived by Chinese international students during the COVID-19 pandemic needs to be studied further both in theory and method. Therefore, this study adopts the grounded theory approach to investigate Chinese international students’ experiences and perception of discrimination in the context of COVID-19.

3 Method

In order to understand Chinese international students’ experiences and perceptions of discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic, we employed a qualitative design for the study by using unstructured data collection methods such as observation, interview, survey, etc., to find the theme and meaning of the problem. Qualitative analysis tends to reveal behavior, attitude and motivation. Grounded theory is a research method that uses systematic procedures to develop and inductively guide grounded theory for a certain phenomenon [23]. It is not to test pre-existing theories, but to obtain data through the expression of participants’ experience, and ultimately to achieve the purpose of generating theories from data. Therefore, it is feasible to adopt grounded theory approach for this study.

3.1 Sampling and Data Collection

This paper adopted the snowball sampling method, and the samples include 10 Chinese international students studying in different developed countries (the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Japan). All the participants have studied and lived abroad for more than one year, which means they have a deep understanding of their living experience abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study used theoretical saturation tests to determine whether the sample for a structural category was saturated. After in-depth interviews with 10 participants, no new effective information could be detected and the data showed signs of saturation, so no new interviewees were contacted.

Online interviews were conducted in August-October 2022. Interviews with participants were in-depth, using semi-structured questionnaires. Before the interview, the researchers obtained the content of the participants, and the researchers explained that they could withdraw from the interview at any time to ensure that each participant is voluntary. The interview time was 40-60 minutes. In the interview process, questions were adjusted and added according to the actual situation. At the beginning, the participants were asked to provide basic information such as the age, universities, major, grade, degree, financial support, and time being abroad, etc. The participants were asked to talk about their experiences, overall feelings about studying abroad during the epidemic, perception of discrimination and how they coped with it. Some sample questions include: “Did you ever feel offended, disrespected, discriminated against or treated unfairly during your study abroad?” “Can you describe your
experience, feelings and perceptions in detail?” “How did you deal with it when you feel you were discriminated against?” With the consent of the participants, the in-depth interviews were recorded and then recorded verbatim by the researchers. After each round of discussion, the researchers reflected on the interviews. Before analyzing the data, the real names of all participants were replaced with pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

The participants in this study consisted of 5 males and 5 females at the age between 21 and 31 years old. The demographic information is shown in table 1. Participants actively engaged in discussions during the interview process, sharing their experiences of studying and living abroad during COVID-19 with a focus on experiences of perceived discrimination.

### 3.2 Open Coding

Open coding is a process of decomposing, testing, comparing, conceptualizing, and generalizing the collected data. The original interview records were conceptualized and categorized in table 2 and the structural elements related to discrimination were obtained.

### 3.3 Spindle Coding

The main task of spindle coding is to discover the potential logical connections between categories as shown in table 3. During spindle coding, researchers conduct an in-depth analysis of one category at a time and then explore the correlations around the category. The various connections between the categories become more specific as the analysis deepens. Spindle coding identified the main category for discrimination, i.e. perceived discrimination, scenes of discrimination, race, culture, news media, employment and national identity.

### 3.4 Selective Coding

Selective coding identifies the core category from the main category and analyzes the connection relationship between the core category, and the main and other categories. It can then depict the phenomenon and context structure in the form of a “story line”. In this study, six logical relationships were extracted and established. On the basis of the main category, this study finally determined the core category of “discrimination against Chinese international students during COVID-19”. This study focused on the “story line”: Race and culture directly affects perceived discrimination of Chinese international students, news media can

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**Table 1. Demographic information of participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Pursuing degree</th>
<th>Country of study abroad</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yin</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>U.S.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wang</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>U.S.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shang</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Doctor</td>
<td>U.S.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Japan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wu</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Britain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sun 1</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Doctor</td>
<td>Britain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sun 2</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>U.S.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhang 1</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>FH</td>
<td>Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhang 2</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>U.S.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Li</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>U.S.A.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Open coding process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Raw data sentence</th>
<th>Key concepts</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When the COVID-19 situation was most serious, my friend was beaten by local people.</td>
<td>Physical violence</td>
<td>Explicit discrimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As soon as she saw us, she began to say some discriminatory and abusive words.</td>
<td>Abuse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When the COVID-19 just broke out, on my way to class, a local teenager student shouted “Chinese virus” at me.</td>
<td>Stigmatization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>when I changed planes at the airport, the staff at the airport were impatient and unfriendly to me compared to others.</td>
<td>Microaggressions</td>
<td>Implicit discrimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some foreign students don’t talk to Chinese students.</td>
<td>Exclusion and isolation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are few discrimination incidents on campus.</td>
<td>Off-campus environment</td>
<td>The place of discrimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The teenagers were so angry that they threw water all over my friend.</td>
<td>Teenagers</td>
<td>The subject of discrimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes I run into homeless people on the street who insult Chinese.</td>
<td>Homeless people</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He started cursing, both the Chinese and the Japanese, so I think he is not just targeting me (Chinese), but has Asian hatred.</td>
<td>Asian hatred</td>
<td>Racial difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some Americans have preconceived notions about people of every race and country.</td>
<td>Label people from different countries</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some local girls think it’s weird that I don’t want to be friends with them.</td>
<td>Sense of cultural superiority</td>
<td>Cultural difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I met locals who spoke very fast, I usually had to ask them to repeat what they said, and some would get very impatient.</td>
<td>Language proficiency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During the outbreak of COVID-19, I saw a lot of news media reports about it.</td>
<td>Coverage of COVID-19 has surged</td>
<td>News media report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influenced by news reports, they blamed the fault on the Chinese, which further deepened their misunderstanding of the Chinese people.</td>
<td>Stigmatized reports</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locals do have an advantage when it comes to finding jobs, their English is better than Chinese and there are no visa issues involved.</td>
<td>Job opportunities are given priority to local students.</td>
<td>Employment environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a teacher of Chinese as a foreign language, I don’t feel job discrimination.</td>
<td>Some positions are friendly to native Chinese speaker.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In March 2020, local Chinese community organization contacted me and sent me some N95 masks.</td>
<td>Get help from the motherland</td>
<td>A strong connection to the motherland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have more recognition of my identity as a Chinese.</td>
<td>Chinese identity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t want to live here for a long time. I’d rather be back to China to stay with my relatives and friends.</td>
<td>Loneliness and insecurity in a foreign country</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. Spindle coding process and results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category relation connotation</th>
<th>Subcategory</th>
<th>Main category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct physical or verbal violence, such as physical attack, abuse, stigmatization, etc.</td>
<td>Explicit discrimination</td>
<td>Perceived discrimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invisible violence, such as slight offence, exclusion, isolation, etc.</td>
<td>Implicit discrimination</td>
<td>Scenarios of discrimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The place where discrimination occurs. Generally in non campus places, such as supermarkets, streets, etc.</td>
<td>The place of discrimination</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjects who impose discrimination, such as teenagers and homeless people.</td>
<td>The subject of discrimination</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial factors that cause discrimination include Asian hatred and labeling of people from different countries.</td>
<td>Racial difference</td>
<td>Race</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural factors that cause discrimination include cultural superiority and language proficiency.</td>
<td>Cultural difference</td>
<td>Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News media factors that aggravate discrimination, including the surge of media reports on COVID-19 and stigmatization of Chinese groups.</td>
<td>News media report</td>
<td>News media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The employment difficulties of Chinese international students caused by discrimination include job reduction and employment inferiority.</td>
<td>Employment environment</td>
<td>Employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in national identity of Chinese international student groups caused by discrimination.</td>
<td>Strong connection to the motherland</td>
<td>National identity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Selective coding process and results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Connotation of relationship structure</th>
<th>Typical relationship structure</th>
<th>Core category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race directly affects perceived discrimination of Chinese international students.</td>
<td>Race→ Perceived Discrimination</td>
<td>Discrimination against Chinese international students during COVID-19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture directly affects Chinese international students’ perception of discrimination.</td>
<td>Culture→Perceived Discrimination</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News media is a factor that affects perceived discrimination of Chinese international students.</td>
<td>News Media</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News media can adjust the relationship between race and perceived discrimination.</td>
<td>Race→Perceived Discrimination</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News media is a factor that affects perceived discrimination of Chinese international students.</td>
<td>News Media</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News media can adjust the relationship between culture and perceived discrimination.</td>
<td>Culture→Perceived Discrimination</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived discrimination directly affects the employment of Chinese international students.</td>
<td>Perceived Discrimination → Employment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived discrimination directly affects the national identity of Chinese international students.</td>
<td>Perceived Discrimination → National Identity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

adjust the relationship between race and perceived discrimination, culture and perceived discrimination, perceived discrimination directly affects the employment and national identity of Chinese international students. The coding results are shown in table 4.

3.5 Saturation Testing

Theoretical saturation is used to determine whether the sampling for a certain structural category is saturated. Saturation means that no additional information can be found. Therefore, researchers can develop characteristics for the category based on the available information.
This study analyzed 1/3 of the reserved interview records (3 personal in-depth interviews), and the results showed that the category dimensions and categories in the model had sufficiently developed. No new categories and relationships were found for each subcategory of discrimination against Chinese international students during the COVID-19 pandemic, and no new constituent factors were found. Therefore, the structural dimension of perceived discrimination is theoretically saturated.

4 Results Analysis

Through open coding, spindle coding and selective coding, we generated the final theoretical conceptual model (see figure 1). During the coding process, the researchers made memos. As a basic technique for mapping concepts from possible sources, memo production is a key intermediate step in the process of encoding and writing data [24, 25]. The main categories are presented below in the form of memorandum.

4.1 Perceived Discrimination

Eight respondents reported that they had suffered explicit or implicit discrimination during the COVID-19. Explicit discrimination included physical conflict, being abused by people on the street for “Chinese virus” or other insulting words. Implicit discrimination included slight offence (mocking Chinese people wearing masks), obvious hostility, etc. Most participants did not fight back against discrimination, instead they suffered in silence.

Zhang 1 described his experience of overt discrimination as follows:

When the COVID-19 just broke out, on my way to class, a local teenager student shouted “Chinese virus” at me. At that time, I was the only Chinese and even the only Asian face around, so I am pretty sure that he was yelling at me. But I can’t do anything because I can’t see his face clearly, and can hardly find him.

Sun 1 expressed that,

My roommates and I went shopping in a supermarket after dinner. At that time, there was a homeless woman in front of the supermarket. As soon as she saw us, she began to say some discriminatory and abusive words. We finally left the supermarket because she was blocking the door and verbally abusing us.

Wu had similar experiences related to “Chinese virus”. While playing an online game, she saw a netizen’s nickname was “Chinese virus”. Yin said that when the pandemic was serious, her friend was beaten by local people, and there were the words “hate Chinese” on the snow. More respondents suffered from invisible discrimination, as Zhang said,
I went out with some Chinese friends on the bus. At that time, we all wore masks. When a local man saw us, he tried to avoid us by crouching together and covering his nose and mouth with his clothes. His behavior made me and my friends uncomfortable.

Wang reported “mask discrimination”. He said that in March 2020, he felt the hostile eyes of people around him on the streets of the United States because he wear masks. “People will think you are strange”. Zhang 2 explained to us his experience at the Airport in 2021:

At that time, when I changed planes at the airport, the staff at the airport were impatient and unfriendly to me compared to others. I’m not sure whether it was for the reason of COVID-19, but that experience made me unhappy.

4.2 Places of Discrimination

When being asked about the place where discrimination occurred, all respondents said that discrimination rarely occurred on campus because teachers and students were highly educated, and the school had anti-discrimination policies. Shang explained to us:

I have almost no experience of being discriminated against. That’s probably because I usually just stay on campus. There are few discrimination incidents on campus. Contrary to me, some of my friends like to travel, have party, and participate in activities outside the campus, and they has been discriminated against for several times.

The discrimination incidents encountered by the interviewees mostly occurred in the off campus environment. The subjects of discrimination are mostly teenagers and homeless people. For example, Wu mentioned that,

On a trip to a small city in Britain with friends, I passed a car filled with teenagers and they made an insulting gesture at one of my friends. Later, when the car passed by, my friend made the same gesture at them. The teenagers were so angry that they threw water all over my friend. My friends later reflected that he should not have reacted in that way at that time.

4.3 Discrimination Related to Race

Race was cited by some participants as a reason for the discrimination they experienced, and they reported that some of the discrimination was directed not at Chinese but at Asians as a whole. In response, Yin described her experience:

One of the locals asked me if I was Japanese. When I said I was Chinese, he started cursing, both the Chinese and the Japanese, so I think he is not just targeting me (Chinese), but has Asian hatred.

Zhang 2 said he had seen many reports of discrimination against Asians:

There are some reports of Asians being punched down by black men while walking down the street, or being verbally abused for no apparent reason while shopping in the supermarket.

Some respondents also said that discrimination by some people may be directed against all outside groups. Wu expressed her view in this manner:

They would prey on people from outside, whether they were Chinese or people of color or people from other parts of the world, but they wouldn’t prey on locals. I think they may be a little xenophobic and consider that outsiders are easy to bully. Two interviewees each mentioned that some people are affected by stereotypes of foreigners. Zhang 2, who used to teach Chinese in a primary school in the United States, described her experience to us:

Some Americans have preconceived notions about people of every race and country. For example, Mexicans are labeled as horny and alcoholic, blacks are labeled as violent, and Chinese are labeled as disunited and impolite. Maybe it’s necessarily a form of discrimination, but sometimes their expression and behaviors make people uncomfortable.
4.4 Discrimination Related to Culture

Nearly all respondents said they perceive invisible discrimination related to culture. They mentioned Chinese stereotypes many times. In most cases, respondents said, cultural discrimination did not hurt them much physically or mentally, but it made them feel uncomfortable. They also explained that, because of the mild manifestations of such discrimination, it was sometimes difficult to judge whether they were discriminated against. Some local people may have cultural superiority, and lack of cross-cultural communication is likely to mutual misunderstanding or discrimination.

When asked whether they make friends with local people and whether they have more Chinese friends, most of the participants stated that they have more Chinese friends, and they usually only communicate with local students for academic work, so it is difficult to have in-depth communication. Wu explained,

*Almost all my friends are Chinese, and the Chinese people around me rarely make friends with foreigners. [In the UK] people have their own circle and it’s hard to break out of it. And we have different lifestyles from them, so it’s hard for us to play together.*

Some interviewees revealed the prevalence of linguistic discrimination, Sun reported,

*When I first came here, my English was mediocre, and when I met locals who spoke very fast, I usually had to ask them to repeat what they said, and some people would get very impatient.*

4.5 Discrimination Related to News Media

The news media has been cited as an important catalyst for hostility toward China during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some news media distorted the facts and tended to linked the virus with “China” and “Wuhan”. These news reports may ignite the anger of people in Western countries and made Chinese people, especially Chinese international students, trapped in a hostile environment. Zhang said,

*Most foreigners have little knowledge of China, and their channels for understanding China are limited, usually limited to the news media. After the outbreak of COVID-19, influenced by news reports, they blamed the fault on the Chinese people, which further deepened their misunderstanding of the Chinese people.*

Similarly, He said,

*I don’t think it’s that foreigners don’t want to know about China, it’s that they don’t have access to it. There are not many news reports about China, and if there are, they usually only cover big cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. I was shocked that the some Japanese people around me had a perception of China that was decades old.*

4.6 Discrimination and Employment

Some participants discussed discrimination and employment. There is no doubt that the COVID-19 has had a major impact on the global economy, and the employment environment has become increasingly difficult. The discrimination is likely to make the employment environment worse for Chinese international students. Yin, a postgraduate student said her major used to be competitive in job market, but companies such as Google and Amazon have reduced or stopped hiring new graduates due to the pandemic. She felt that Chinese international students have fewer job opportunities than American students and Indian students with same or less qualifications:

*Almost most job opportunities are given priority to local students. My Chinese friend has submitted more than 200 resumes, but only received two interview invitations, while local
students who are obviously much less qualified than her can receive many more and better interview invitations.

As a new master graduate, Wu shared her experience of finding a job in UK:

Locals do have an advantage when it comes to finding jobs, their English is better than Chinese and there are no visa issues involved. Only a few companies are qualified for offering work visas. I’m not sure if it’s discrimination, but as an international student, I experienced more difficulties and rejection in the process of finding jobs than local students.

Some interviewees did not feel employment discrimination due to the particularity of the occupations. Zhang 2 and Li, reported that they had an advantage to compete for Chinese language teacher job because they were native Chinese speakers. They also said that Chinese working in other professions may face tougher employment challenges due to the pandemic and discrimination. Zhang 1 shared his opinions on discrimination and employment:

In my opinion, here (Germany) pays more attention to personal ability. As long as you are competent, the company will not look at you differently whether you are German or Chinese.

4.7 Discrimination and National Identity

Most respondents pointed out that the experience of COVID-19 and discrimination enhanced their sense of national identity. During the COVID-19 pandemic, they were alone in a foreign country, which made them have a stronger attachment to the homeland and the Chinese companions. Some interviewees said that they were supported by Chinese embassy or Chinese compatriots and they were proud of their Chinese identity. He said,

When I first arrived in Japan, the COVID-19 pandemic broke out. At that time, people not only worried about being infected by the virus but also faced the shortage of epidemic prevention materials and living materials. In March 2020, local Chinese community organization contacted me and sent me some N95 masks. I was really grateful for being a Chinese and having such Chinese compatriots.

Wu also shared a similar view:

I have more recognition of my identity as a Chinese. I am a very homesick person. After I came to Britain, I felt more warmth from Chinese organizations. I plan to return to China after working in the UK for some time.

Almost all interviewees regard “loneliness” as one of the key words of living abroad, and it is difficult for them to have a deep connection with local people, Sun 1 reported,

There is a strong sense of loneliness abroad. There are few people who can really support each other. I can make friends with foreigners, but it is difficult to really integrate with them. Our ideas and lifestyles are quite different. I don’t like parties. I don’t want to live here for a long time. I’d rather be back to China to stay with my relatives and friends.

A few participants also revealed to us the feeling of insecurity, Yin described,

My family and I are very worried about the problem of guns in the United States. My mother even suggested that I buy a bulletproof vest. Shots and robberies happen near my residence. Especially after the outbreak of the epidemic, the rising unemployment rate leads to the rising crime rate, and the public security situation is even worse.

5 Discussion and Implications

International students’ experiences of discrimination before COVID-19 have been reported in the literature [26, 27]. The current study shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered discrimination against Chinese students to some extent. It was shown that experiences of discrimination interweave with race, culture, nationality and other factors during the pandemic. Chinese international students were likely to encounter discrimination in off-campus
environments such as supermarkets, streets and workplaces. Extreme explicit discrimination was relatively rare, and the manifestations of discrimination tended to be mild, mainly implicit discrimination, such as micro-offense, stereotypes, etc. It was shown that implicit discrimination was subtle and sometimes difficult for students to detect and distinguish. The mild and hidden characteristics of implicit discrimination deserved the attention of Chinese international students, schools and policy makers.

It has been found that students often choose to suffer silently after being discriminated against. There are a number of possible reasons. One could be that they fear that they will suffer a greater degree of assault if they fight back, such as physical violence or shooting. The other could be that in most cases, they have heavy study tasks and insufficient time and knowledge on dealing with discrimination issue.

In addition, the study has showed that participants tended to associate experiences of discrimination with employment problems. Some Chinese international students perceived kind of cultural, national, language and visa discrimination, which made them face more challenges in the job-hunting process and put a damper on their overall experience abroad.

Another finding, which echoes the existing literature [28], is that participants who experienced discrimination during the COVID-19 generally developed a stronger sense of identity with China and a greater sense of pride in their Chinese identity. The possible reason is that the insecurity and loneliness caused by the pandemic and discrimination have strengthened international students’ attachment to the host country. These unique challenges deepen the bonds among Chinese international students, making them inclined to unite in the face of threats from unfamiliar societies. Long pointed out that there is a potential relationship between Western neo racism and Chinese nationalism, which can promote the enhancement of national identity of Chinese international students [28].

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect global higher education. In an increasingly complex international situation, discrimination will affect Chinese international students in a more subtle and less noticeable form. The results of this study show that some Chinese international students suffer from implicit discrimination to some extent. Therefore, this paper puts forward the following policy recommendations.

Firstly, the student affairs departments may make efforts to provide more support and assistance to international students suffering from either the pandemic or discrimination. The universities may set up a special support group to provide international students with a safe place to report their experiences of discrimination or other difficulties. Chinese student unions and communities may strengthen mutual assistance among Chinese and cope with the difficulties and challenges they face during and post the COVID-19 pandemic, so as to provide more targeted help for such groups. In addition, consistent with the suggestions of Koo et al. [21], Yao et al. [27] and Long[28], the campus COVID-19 task force should also provide resource preference to international students.

Secondly, since discrimination may have a negative impact on international Chinese students’ mental health, universities and teachers should care about international students’ psychological well-being, provide sufficient professional psychological consulting, guide them to seek help in a timely manner, and respond to their appeals.

Thirdly, universities should improve anti-discrimination measures and supervise their implementation, and strive to cultivate a diversified, open and inclusive campus atmosphere, so as to provide emotional support for international students. For example, providing more secure appeal channels for international students in need, and handling relevant appeals in a timely manner. For example, holding multicultural exchange activities and language exchange activities. Such activities can imperceptibly strengthen the communications and connection between local students and international students.
Fourthly, the educational institutions at all levels should strengthen the education on equality concept and enhance students’ anti-inequality and anti-discrimination knowledge, and current and future international students should make improving their learning and communication ability, social support seeking and stress-coping ability, adaptability, psychological resilience in diverse cultural environments.

6 Conclusion

This study investigated the challenges, experiences and views of perceived discrimination among Chinese international students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through in-depth interviews with 10 Chinese international students, a theoretical conceptual model of perceived discrimination among Chinese international students was constructed based on grounded theory. “Discrimination against Chinese international students during COVID-19” was identified as the core category. The results show that Chinese international students perceived explicit and implicit discrimination to some degree during the COVID-19 epidemic. The perceived discrimination usually occurred in the off-campus environment, and the subjects of discrimination were generally teenagers and homeless people. Perceived discrimination might be related to race, culture, news media, employment and national identity etc.. Some countermeasure were provided.

The study may contribute to the literature from the following aspects. Firstly, this study used grounded theory to deeply explore the Chinese international students’ cognition and attitudes towards discrimination and their experiences of being discriminated against, filling the gap in using qualitative research methods to study this issue. Second, this study explored the structural dimensions of perceived discrimination among Chinese international students, providing a reference for subsequent research on perceived discrimination among international students. Thirdly, this study constructed a theoretical conceptual model of perceived discrimination among Chinese international students to reveal the theoretical logic behind in the context of COVID-19 pandemic. Fourthly, the exploratory research on Chinese international students’ perceived discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic can help educators effectively recognize the perceived discrimination of Chinese international students in practice, design anti-discrimination programs in overseas higher education, and further improve anti-discrimination measures.

This study has some limitations. First of all, the sample size was small. The generalization of the research results needs further verification. Secondly, although grounded theory emphasized objectivity, it was hard to avoid the influence of subjective judgment of researchers. In the future, quantitative research can be combined to verify the conclusions of this study. Finally, this paper constructed a theoretical conceptual model of discrimination against Chinese international students during the COVID-19 epidemic, anti-discrimination issue needed to be discussed from the perspectives in depth in the future.

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