

Asian American Representation in Media: An Interpretive Analysis of the Consumer

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Tension is rising in the United States film industry as minority groups continue to struggle for equal opportunity and representation in key media roles. In early 2016, actors, filmmakers, and viewers protested the Oscars to point out the lack of the Academy's minority nominations for the second consecutive year. The trending hashtag "OscarsSoWhite," first tweeted in 2015 after the first year of no minority Oscar nominees, returned in full swing, even making it onto notable newspaper headlines and magazine titles (Goldstein, 2016). The discussion circulating the industry indicates that there has been quite a bit of interest following this situation. Some very prominent media figures in media criticized this lack of diversity, including the powerful Smith couple, comprised of executive producer and actress Jada Pinkett Smith, and Academy Award nominee, producer, and rapper, Will Smith (Shepherd, 2016). Renowned filmmaker Spike Lee also expressed disappointment and frustration in the choice of nominees (Shepherd, 2016), questioning through an Instagram post how it was possible that "for the 2nd consecutive year all 20 contenders under the actor category are white." He also went on to say, "40 white actors in 2 years and no flava [sic] at all."

Not only are minorities concerned with the film industry's limited recognition of minority talent, but they have also been frustrated by the *type* of roles available to them. Despite film actors' demographics more or less reflecting national demographics (Smith, 2016), studies have shown that the actual media roles of these actors have not been diverse. For example, Stern and Taylor's (1997) content analysis revealed that Asian American actors were disproportionately represented in background roles, and they often played stereotypical characters that emphasized work ethic and business life over their personal (home or social) lives. When Lee conducted her study of Asian American actors in 2001, interviewing them to

hear their reflections on their careers, she discovered that every actor she spoke with felt that “big roles” were very limited, both in film and in television. The actors she interviewed felt there was “little opportunity to go beyond [Asian specific roles]” and obtain “superstar status”. Lee (2001) also noted a recurring theme of justification to pursue acting despite their perceived limitations; Asian actors noted that current representation is much better than it has been in the past. Recently, however, Asian actors have added to the conversation and raised their concerns regarding their limited representation: Constance Wu, actress in the comedy show *Fresh Off the Boat*, Aziz Ansari, creator, writer, and lead actor in *Master of None*, and Tony Award winner BD Wong have all spoken up about the difficulty of finding leading or non-stereotypical roles as Asian-Americans (Hess, 2016).

Given that mass media has changed dramatically in the past two decades, further research should be conducted to better understand the modern limitations of upward mobility (access to career growth) for Asian actors. The number of Americans who have obtained consistent access to media outlets has recently increased to include the majority: From 1995-2009, the percentage of adults who regularly accessed internet jumped from approximately 12% to 75% (Rainie, 2010); households that use broadband television increased from approximately 5% to 60% from 2000 to 2009 (Rainie, 2010); and the percentage of American adults who use social networking sites grew from seven percent in 2005 to 65 % in 2015 (Perrin, 2015). With mass media having an ever-wide reach, it may be useful to gather recent data regarding the impacts of Asian representation in media, especially from the perspective of the consumer.

Additionally, there is scarce literature that addresses self-identified Asian Americans’ reactions to media portrayals of Asian Americans. There is abundant research connecting identity with health outcomes, including works by Wexler (2009), Horowitz (2012), and

Rosenbaum (2014), and there have been a considerable number of studies of the media's impact on shaping identity, including those by Spettigue and Henderson (2004), Gomillion and Giuliano (2011), and Chapman (2011). But to obtain a comprehensive picture of the impacts of media representations, it is also necessary to learn about Asian American perspectives. This study works on filling the gap, specifically by focusing on gaining deeper insight into how Asian Americans internalize Asian representations, and how their reflections can help us understand the impacts of media representation more broadly.

### **Review of Literature**

As mentioned earlier, the current literature regarding Asian-American media representation is limited: There was a surge of articles in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century regarding the concept of the “model minority” and Asian American stereotypes, however very few of these studies focused specifically on representation in the context of film and mass media and the subsequent effects of Asian media representation on identity development. The model minority refers to the high socioeconomic status and upward mobility associated with the Asian minority group. Although it appears to be a positive notion on the surface, Suzuki notes it has been used in the past to “discredit the protests and demands for social justice of other minority groups” (as cited in Wong et al. 1998). Notably, Wong, Lai, Nagasawa, and Lin (1998) explored the implications of stereotypes that the media perpetuate and discussed the social and psychological impacts of the model minority academic achievement stereotype. They developed several hypotheses based on perceptions associated with the model minority. If, however, outcomes were not better for Asian Americans compared to other groups, the results would support the “model minority myth”, which suggests perceived differences are not based on fact. They concluded that Asian Americans were regarded as academically superior by all the other racial

groups sampled, even though there was no significant difference in the evidence of academic performance. Whereas they thoroughly examined one example of the media's portrayal of Asian Americans, Wong et al.'s (1998) study did not view the type of roles that were played outside of the hardworking and high-achieving model minority stereotype. This ignores other stereotypes of Asians in the media, including "nerdy" Asians depicted with awkward social skills (Zhang, 2010), and hyper-sexualization of Asian women in subservient roles (Sun, n.d.).

In the sections that follow, four specific constructs related to potential effects of Asian American media representations are discussed.

### **Racial Identity**

Narrowing in on more individual-level outcomes, the literature includes a study conducted by Iwamoto and Liu (2010), exploring the relation between racial identity (and race-related stress) and psychological well-being. Both Asian Americans and Asian international college students were included as participants in this study of racism-related stress. The participants were asked to complete a survey to determine their levels of stress due to racist encounters. The results were analyzed by gender, immigration status (international students were classified as first generation immigrants), and ethnic groups. There were differences found by gender, but among different ethnic groups of Asians, which is what my research is most interested in, they found no differences.

Although Iwamoto and Liu's work is an important contribution to research on racial identity and well-being, it does not account for the effect of *media representations* on Asian American reflections. A useful study of stereotypes, conducted by Oyserman and Sakamoto in 1992, looked at Asian American college students' perceptions of stereotypes. They discovered that the students perceived Asian American stereotypes focused primarily on academic

achievement. Again, this research offers a view of structured responses. Participants were directed to specifically speak about the patterns they noticed from repetitive stereotypes. Similarly, the current study provides space for open-ended questions and will explore what patterns emerge.

### **Narratives**

Personal narratives and reflections of Asian American consumers seem to be critically lacking in current research. Narratives refer to stories of personal experience that have shaped an individual's perspective. As Loseke published in 2007, narratives allow people to make "sense of the buzzing confusion of practical experience" by "constructing coherent connections among life events" (p. 672). In other words, narrative is a method of structuring and combining past experiences into a sensible, palatable form of thought. It is important to allow participants to share their narratives in research because it allows researchers to collect data about how consumers feel without specific prompting. There have been several studies of Asian American representation from the perspective of Asian actors, but this study will explore Asian American reflections from the point of view of the consumer. As described in Markham Shaw's work, *Personal Narrative: Revealing Self and Reflecting Other* (1997), narratives are a powerful form of self-expression; this study gathers and codes data from a unique, personal mindset, rather than a removed scholarly one.

### **Identity**

The concept of 'identity' has morphed over time. As summarized by Straub (2002), identity is a way to "relate to the self and the world" (p.60). Horowitz (2012) defines identity slightly differently, as a word that "refers to continuity in a sense of self within a person...or how that person is socially regarded" (p. 9). Another concept that Horowitz addresses is self-identity

theory, which posits that people inevitably “self-organize”, with varying levels of success, in order to manage their mental understanding of themselves and/or their place in a group. By its very nature, representation shares a small aspect of your identity as a member of a group because it is meant to reflect a commonality among all group members. For Asian Americans, representations of Asian Americans in the media are more than just simple characters, they are a reflection of themselves. This is supported by the identity theory described by White and Burke (1987), which considers “ethnic identity (like all identities) to be a portion of the self that contains shared understandings of what it means to be a member of a given ethnic group” (p. 310). These ideas of identity and reflections of self, as a response to Asian American representations in media by Asian American consumers, are the main topics of interest in the current research.

### **Whitewashing**

One aspect of Asian American representation that has been recently explored from a consumer perspective is the “whitewashing” of media. Whitewashing refers to the portrayal of Asian characters by white actors. Examples of whitewashed roles include Scarlett Johansson as Major in *Ghost in the Shell*, Emma Stone as Allison Ng in *Aloha*, and Noah Ringer as *The Last Airbender*'s Aang. Another form of whitewashing takes place when white actors replace or re-write limited “Asian” roles. For example, in *Doctor Strange*, the role of a Tibetan monk was replaced by a “mystic”, notably white, Tilda Swinton. Additionally, in *The Great Wall*, Matt Damon is the main character in a predominantly Chinese troupe in a movie set in China, directed by a Chinese man; Constance Wu criticized this casting, berating the directors for perpetuating a “white savior” narrative, in which white heroes or heroines save helpless minority communities from destruction (Jones 2016). Considering how difficult it can be for minorities to find work in

the film industry as it is, it can be especially frustrating when white actors are so easily able to replace the few roles that are expected to be played by minorities. It is also worth noting the ease in which Hollywood ignores the lack of representation of Asians in leading roles. Matt Damon representing the Chinese American movie *The Great Wall* is just one glaring example; there is a general lack of Asian Americans as the top-billed or lead actor in film. Smith et al. (2016) recently released a comprehensive look at the top 100 films from 2007 to 2014 (excluding 2011). Although they do not specifically use the term “whitewashing”, their data and findings clearly show that minorities are under-represented across a broad range of categories, from speaking roles to leading actors to directors (Smith et al., 2016). In 2014, more than 40 of the top 100 films did not have an Asian actor with a speaking role. Among all the 700 films that the study analyzed, there was only 1 female Asian director, who was listed as a co-director. Though it may not be stated in exact terms, this study irrefutably quantifies the underrepresentation of minorities, including Asian Americans.

Different literature exists examining the *damage* caused by whitewashing of minority roles (Boyd n.d.; Martins and Harrison 2012; Nelson 2016; Nishime, L. n.d.). This current study includes questioning participants about whitewashing of Asian roles, but it also asks about multiple other aspects of media representation. I am interested in understanding participants’ complete perspectives in the broader context of film representation. For example, I want to know their personal experiences and reflection on how they feel their identities were shaped by representations (or the lack thereof) of Asian Americans in media. This includes whitewashing, white savior-ism, and other related topics, but it also includes positive role models that they have been inspired by, or the specific types of roles they have seen Asian Americans play in the past.



Based on a review of current literature and what still needs to be addressed, my research questions are the following:

RQ1: When discussing Asian American representation in media, what aspects of self-identity do Asian Americans think about?

RQ2: What Asian American stereotypes are Asian Americans aware of, if any? Which stereotypes, if any, most impact their sense of identity?

RQ3: Do Asian Americans have fair/equal representation in the media? (Do Asian Americans care about accurate representation? Why or why not?)

Each of these research questions is closely tied together and explores different aspects of how Asian Americans internalize thoughts about identity, especially in relation to Asian representation in the media.

### **Methods**

I interviewed five self-identified Asian Americans face-to-face and asked them to share their perspective on media representations of Asian Americans. The emphasis of this research was not on psychological well-being, but rather on remaining open and allowing Asian Americans space to respond and express themselves in a flexible interview format. As detailed by Merrigan and Huston in *Communication Research Methods* (2015), face-to-face interviews help interviewers quickly establish rapport and trust with interviewees. I used this format, which allowed me the advantage of asking follow-up questions for more detailed responses, when necessary. At the end of the interviews, each participant was provided with a \$10 University Bookstore gift card as compensation for their time.

The format of the interview was semi-structured. I had a list of topics of interests prepared (general questions to ask), but began by explaining that I was open to hearing the

participants' thoughts on any related topic. At the end of each interview, I allowed participants as much time as they wanted to share their own perspective and narrative regarding Asian American representation in media. I also made sure to allow plenty of time for participants' responses for each question. I gained great insight from every participant, but each individual focused/elaborated on different questions. This was acceptable, as consistent responses were not a strict requirement; the primary goal of the study was to get general feedback, an impression of the individual's response to Asian American representations in media. As such, it was not required that the order of the questions remain uniform. A less exact, more natural conversation was more useful to this study than a completely rigid and structured interview.

I used interpretive methods to seek individual perspectives. I do not intend to generalize the results of this study of individual Asian American responses to a broader Asian American community, but rather my focus was to legitimize the feelings and reactions toward media representations of each participant. My goal is to gather individual insights using an interpretive lens - therefore, my small sample size of five interviewees was not a severe limitation for the purposes of this study. A qualitative, interpretive study such as this can lay important groundwork for discovering areas that would be useful for further research.

My primary method of collecting data was through interviewing willing self-identified Asian American participants obtained through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is a sampling technique in which study subjects recruit other participants among their friends/acquaintances; I will first recruited participants in my social circle, and then asked them to encourage their acquaintances to participate. Although snowball sampling may not be an ideal technique to gather data, it is one of the few sampling techniques available to me given both timing and monetary limitations.

Prior to sitting down with participants for full in-person interviews, I sent them “screener” questions via Facebook to record demographic information and assess if the participant would be a good fit for the study. For example, if a participant does not identify as Asian-American, there would be no point in conducting an interview as I would not be obtaining information pertinent to my research questions. The screeners included the questions listed in Appendix A; they focused on obtaining demographic information, identification of Asian American identity, and media usage/interest. All of the screener respondents identified as Asian American, which is not surprising, as I specifically chose to send the screener to individuals that I believed would identify as Asian American. There was a wide range as to the number of hours of media people consume per week, from 7 – 50 hours per week, with TV shows and movies ranging from 1 – 28.5 hours. There was a wide variety of shows that participants were interested in or currently watching, from comedies such as Parks and Recreations to mystery-solving shows such as Sherlock. Some were already familiar with shows that had Asian American casts like Fresh Off the Boat, while others had seen examples of media “whitewashing”, such as The Great Wall. I requested interviews from participants who were the most engaged and seemed the most open to answering further questions.

Using these screeners, I selected five individuals (each has been given a pseudonym) to interview more thoroughly. Responses to the screener questions are described in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Screener Responses

Participant	DOB	Age	Identify as AA?	Time Spent Consuming Media (Hours per week)	TV/movies	Enjoy, watched recently, plan to watch
1	4/23/94	22	Yes	14-16 hours per week	7-8 hours per week	Bob's Burgers, Family Guy
2	8/5/98	18	Yes	7 hours per week	1 hour per week	Love: How I Met Your Mother, Breaking Bad, Gossip Girl, Limitless, The Walking Dead. Plan to watch: Naruto, Supernatural
3	9/2/96	21	Yes	10 hours per week	10 hours per week	Rupaul's Drag Race, Criminal Minds, Survivor
4	11/7/96	20	Yes	20+ hours per week	6-8 hours per week	Grey's Anatomon, Jane the Virgin, Parks and Rec, New Girl
5	7/23/93	23	Yes	50 hours per week	5 hours per week	Disney & Pixar Movies, The Office, ESPN, Sportscenter, Last Week Tonight with John Oliver, Prison Break, The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon. Recently Watched: Beauty and the Beast, Moana, Zootopia, Finding Dory, Inside Out, Sherlock, A Series of Unfortunate Events. Planning to Watch: Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2
Screeener 6	5/7/98	18	Yes	6-9 hours per week	6-8 hours per week	
Screeener 7	4/10/95	21	Yes	42 hours per week	28.5 hours per week	
Screeener 8	7/26/95	21	Yes	25 hours per week	5 hours per week	

Screener 9	12/24/96	20	Yes	15 hours per week	3 hours per week	Fresh Off the Boat, Parks and Recreation, This Is Us, New Girl, Woman in Gold; Hidden Figures, Beauty & the Beast
Screener 10	6/25/94	22	Yes	50 hours per week	2-4 hours per week	Top Chef, The Magicians, Whose Line is it Anyway
Screener 11	6/9/96	20	Yes	7 hours per week	4 hours per week	This Is Us, The Bachelor
Screener 12	3/20/97	20	Yes	20+ hours per week	3 hours per week	Ricky and Morty, Futurama, Bob's Burgers
Screener 13	12/4/91	25	Yes	15 hours per week	15 hours per week	How to Get Away with Murder, Quantico, Brooklyn 99, Friends, The Office, Parks and Rec. Want to watch: La La Land, Moonlight, Hidden Figures, Guardians of the Galaxy 2
Screener 14	6/14/96	20	Yes	28 hours per week	3 hours per week	Jessica Jones, Sherlock, Peaky Blinders
Screener 15	6/15/97	19	Yes	14 hours per week	2-4 hours per week	The Great Wall, Passengers, Arrival, Moonlight, Bad Moms, Doctor Strange. Want to watch: Justice League, Logan, Fate of the Furious

Interviews focused on gathering information regarding reactions to Asian American representation, particularly reflections on perceptions of identity, personal beliefs, views on stereotypes, views on the media, etc. I audio recorded each conversation (with prior consent) to allow me to re-listen to conversations to analyze responses, as needed. I transcribed portions of the audio files as needed as well. I requested permission from the interviewee to anonymously quote their responses in my research paper. After briefly explaining the purposes of the study, the topic of the conversation, and receiving consent, I used my pre-formed questions as a general

guideline for the interview. Rather than strictly using the same wording during each interview, I summarized or altered phrasing for each interviewee, as needed. For example, for participants unfamiliar with the term “white-washing”, I took the time to provide the definition and give examples if needed. Time allowing, participants went off tangent, as long as most (if not all) of the guideline questions were addressed. The questions/topics that helped reveal participants’ views regarding Asian American representation in media included (but were not limited to) the questions listed in Appendix B.

### **Findings**

The primary goal of this study was to apply an interpretive perspective and allow space for participants to respond. My research seeks to expand the literature in understanding *if* Asian Americans are upset by Asian American representations in media, *why*? I asked all participants the same basic questions, but left plenty of time at the end of each interview for them to speak about whatever comes to mind in relation to the questions. I believe I received genuine answers by using more natural, less rigid prompting. I was interested in hearing what participants’ perceptions were, and which stereotypes, if any, they were most aware of. For example, Pisces mentioned the repeated images of hyper-sexualization of Asian women, as described in Brooks and Hébert’s 2006 study, without specific prompting. He found hyper-sexualization of Asian women troubling and an area in need of improvement within the media. I also wondered how participants would respond to stereotypes in general, as in a previous study, it appeared as if the participants, who identified with a variety of different racial identities, recognized the existence of limiting stereotypes, but readily accepted them, as media corporations would continue to perpetuate them to generate profit (Sun et al, 2015). After coding and analyzing the interview

data, Through analyzing the data, I discovered three emergent themes: the impact of media stereotypes, role models overcoming adversity, and fair representation still in progress.

### **Impact of Media Stereotypes**

Every participant I interviewed reported they had experienced stereotypes of Asians, likely due to media perceptions. Some examples of stereotypes that I heard occurred for participants included pre-conceived notions of Asian parenting, Indians having pre-arranged marriages, Asians being good at math, and assumptions of their careers/professional interests.

Something that struck me was how visceral these memories were, and how young children can catch onto stereotyping quite early. For example, Talia said her younger male cousin was only eight years old when he asked if their family was Asian; he had seen East-Asian actors in the media, but not South Asian (Indian) actors, and was confused if they were considered the same. He also questioned boys who wore make up because his conception of make up was associated only with girls.

Talia also shared stories with me about stereotypes she faced as she was growing up. She told me that in Indian culture, anklets are quite common and worn for celebrations such as weddings. However, once she accidentally wore them to school, and was terrified of being made fun of for wearing them, so she hid them under her socks while at school, even as they dug into her ankle. When she got home, she discovered she had bled a little from the anklets cutting into her skin: “I heard the jingles, and I knew everyone was going to [make fun of me]...I [remember] putting it into my sock...they had these hooks that curve in – I kept getting cut by it...”

Another participant explained that other students assumed she wanted to be a doctor just because her parents, being Asian, would make her. She and a different participant both reported

that they had been assumed to be good at math. A fourth participant explained that her dad was a police officer, but was often assumed to be a taxi driver based on repeated images of brown men as taxi drivers in the media.

I also noticed that among the Asian American participants, those who identified as South Asian (Indian) had different stereotypes. Although there was some overlap, these participants identified themselves as “brown”, and recognized that although they fit the same racial category, they had very different cultural experiences that led to distinct harmful stereotypes of brown.

It makes sense for humans to develop pre-conceived ideas about similar experiences and concepts (schemas) - we use them to process information more quickly, and to make decision-making more efficient. However, I do think we need to make a conscious effort to shift this mechanism when it comes to human culture. Instead of making assumptions, it is important to ask questions, because concepts of identity are a lot more sensitive and personal than an average topic. For example, rather than assume the media’s repeated portrayal of a group of people is correct or exact, ask another individual if that is their experience. Several participants mentioned that they believed the problem of stereotyping could be resolved with conscious effort – Pisces said “if [people making stereotypes about Asians] saw more Asian people in real life, those stereotypes would be dispelled.”

### **Role Models Overcoming Adversity**

The second theme I noticed was an emphasis on courageous role models, particularly those who have overcome or persevered through adversity. I had some concerns of priming issues for this question – Alicia mentioned that I asked about role models in the media after several questions regarding their thoughts on Asian Americans, so they may be more likely to



limit their responses to only Asian American figures – however, I made sure to clarify with each participant that their role models could be *anyone* in the media, not just people of Asian descent.

I received a variety of responses, approximately half Asian, half non-Asian. A common theme among the role models was that the participants admired people who overcame stereotypes themselves and managed to thrive and be successful in an industry (Hollywood) that is not always inclusive. Polly listed Priyanka Chopra; even though the participant thought Priyanka could do more to embrace and shed light on her South Asian culture, the participant still viewed her as a role model and a good initial representative of Indian culture, as there are very limited representations of Indians in leading roles: “Her accent is quite unique...[it makes me] wonder if she changes it to appeal to wider masses...But I am a fan of how she represents herself...she [seems] down-to-earth, tries to be funny...I think she is a good personality to introduce people to [Indian culture]...She’s a good medium – she’s relatable but [still Indian and acting in Bollywood movies].”

Another participant really liked Mindy from the Mindy Project. She enjoys her show, and admires that Kaling also directs and produces the show herself. The participant found this empowering and found the normalization of interracial couples on Kaling’s show “refreshing”. She also mentioned that Kaling’s show defied the stereotype of Asians being exclusive and only interacting with each other. Talia noted that she never really identified actors as role models, because when she understood from a young age that the people she observed in television and movies were just acting and were representing characters instead of themselves. Pisces identified Lucy Liu as their role model, specifically because he admired her strength in facing many stereotypes as an Asian female: “I’m sure she [as an Asian and female] faces a lot of stereotypes [especially in being cast] as Watson in *Elementary*, [which is originally a male character]...to

keep doing what she's doing without blinking an eye is just amazing to me." He also liked Adele, as she "used her platform to support other people", which he found admirable. Another participant mentioned Aria, a character on the show *Game of Thrones*, as a role model, as she had "courage" and would "stand up for her friends". Although this wasn't an example of a real-life person, this still seemed to fit the theme of role models as people of strength.

Even if there was any influence due to priming, the theme of role models based on strength and courage seemed to be common in the participants' responses. This further indicates the impact media representation has on young people – my participants' ages ranged from 19-25 – role models develop based on what qualities characters/people have, and if certain qualities are only associated with certain groups of people (for example, if only white characters are portrayed as courageous heroes and Asian people are only portrayed as cowardly villains), this can have a big impact on what kinds of people are seen as role models.

### **Fair Representation Still in Progress**

It is tricky to define "fair" representation, as there are multiple ways to interpret "fairness". For example, some may say it is enough for Asians to receive roles proportional to their percentage of the population (i.e. if 1% of the American population is Asian, then 1% of movie and TV roles should be given to Asian actors). However, this numerical assessment of fairness does not account for the *type* of representation for a given role. For example, if Asian American actors are given 1% of roles but they are limited to only minor or non-speaking characters, this may not seem like fair representation for some.

The answers from the participants ranged from Meredith who said that representation was more or less equal, to Pisces who said there were still "huge deficits of Asian actors in media".

All of the participants, however, recognized there was a lot of room for growth and improvement in the industry in regards to having more complex Asian characters included.

Polly specifically pointed out that the media could do a better job of “inter-mixing” a “broader range of roles.” She appreciates shows like *Fresh Off the Boat*, which has an all-Asian main cast, but would like to see more leading Asian roles in shows that aren’t necessarily completely Asian, as she has seen “[Asians as] second leads way too often.” A different participant also mentioned *Fresh Off the Boat*, noting that the show itself does a good job of depicting fair and accurate representation by including scenes to show the characters’ humanity and off-set the stereotypes that are also included.

Talia thought that Asian American representation in US media was definitely lacking: she showed exasperation at the repetitive images of South Asian men as “taxi drivers, terrorists, [and] convenience store owners” with “accents that don’t even make sense.” Many participants would note shows they have seen or heard about that feature Asians predominantly, such as *Dr. Ken*, *Fresh Off the Boat*, and *Master of None*, as examples of how the media is improving in terms of fair representation:

“I do think with shows like *Fresh Off the Boat* and *Master of None* [there] is a very fair representation [of Asian Americans]... [they do] include some of the stereotypes about Asian Americans...but at the same time it shows a [human] side to the characters...[For example, *Fresh Off the Boat*] shows why Constance is so protective and overbearing. It makes fun of her but it also shows...that it’s her way of showing she cares.”

Participants also pointed out examples that they seemed to remember quite clearly of scenes that seemed to exoticize/foreignize Asian culture, such as Kelly’s celebration of Diwali in

*The Office*, and the Chinese circus in *Sherlock*. It seems there is a common theme in the participants' responses that the media is headed in the right direction, but it isn't quite there yet. Whether or not they thought Asian American representation was fair, they saw the media moving toward more inclusion of different cultures (including Asian culture). Some did, however, recognize how slow this process can be; Pisces noted that the media's movement in the right direction was "not as fast as [he] would like it to be, but it's in a good direction." He also believes that "once [the media] gets on board [with fair representation]...society will follow."

This data and analysis revealed the challenges Indian Americans face. I personally mentally differentiate between South Asian culture and East Asian culture, as they can be quite different, but I did not realize the added stigma that many South Asians have. For example, *How I Met Your Mother* is one of my favorite shows, and it includes a comical "brown Taxi driver", something one of the participants found frustrating and stereotypical. Learning about this character, after having a thorough discussion with one of the participants about how difficult it can be for brown actors to be cast in roles outside of taxi driver or terrorist, made me realize it is important for me to be cognizant of the many different ways media representations skew Asian American identities.

### **Conclusion**

The intersection of racial stereotypes and identity can be a sensitive topic for some people. For example, if someone has been bullied or racially discriminated against, discussing the effects of representations of specific racial groups may be a challenging topic. As with many other studies that have ethical considerations, participants were thoroughly informed of the subject matter beforehand, and were in no way forced to discuss topics that made them feel uncomfortable. I had specific questions prepared, but if a participant had a difficult time

answering, (which was rare,) we took a short break or moved on to the next question (and came back to it later). I did my best to ensure participants felt as comfortable as possible.

Additionally, the complexity of race calls into question verifying the race of participants who choose to self-identify as Asian American. By interviewing participants who identify as Asian American, I accepted the risk that there could be individuals who claim they are Asian American who may not be socially perceived in that racial category. I found the likelihood of that scenario to be very slim, and the cost of challenging someone's self-identification seems to outweigh the benefits of obtaining verification of race through other methods. This may add a margin of error to my research, but to the best of my knowledge, all of the participants I interviewed that identified as Asian American were also socially categorized as Asian American.

These findings, in conjunction with Lee's (2001) study of Asian American actors indicates the US is still in need of changes in order to achieve fair representation. Markham Shaw (1997) demonstrated that narratives are a powerful form of expression that may be a useful method for obtaining data using an interpretive perspective. Moving forward, a larger sample size could be more useful for developing more specific suggestions for improvement.

In the United States, people have been fired or suspended due to blackface imitations; there are real consequences to representations in immediate life. What this particular study attempts to provide is scholarly space for Asian American consumers to present their reflections without judgment. Understanding implications of mass media on societies and individuals can be a powerful tool in mitigating the effects of harmful stereotypes (Ramasubramanian, 2007), but in order to tackle generalized conclusions, it is useful to first hear personal narratives to guide our next steps.

**Appendix A: Screener Questions**

What is your name, age, and date of birth?

Do you identify as Asian-American? (Yes or no)

Approximately how much time do you spend consuming media? (Hours per week)

Approximately how much of that time is spent watching television shows and movies?

If you do watch TV shows and/or movies, please name some titles that you enjoy, some titles that you have watched recently, and some titles that you are planning to watch in the near future.

**Appendix B: Interview Guide**

--What does the term “representation” mean to you? What about “media representation”?

(If needed, I will define “representation” for the participant and/or re-word the question:  
are there figures in media that you relate to? That seem similar to you? That are like you?)

--What would fair/equal Asian-American representation in media look like to you?

(Do you feel like Asian-Americans are given roles to the same degree that other ethnicities are?)

--Have you heard of the concept of “white-washing” in film roles? If so, what are your thoughts on this topic?)

(--If needed, I will define the term “white-washing”, and provide examples, such as Scarlett Johansson in Ghost in the Machine, Emma Stone in Aloha, etc.)

--What is your reaction to the statement, “white actors are more relatable than minority/Asian actors?

--Have you had any experiences/conversations with people who make assumptions about you based on stereotypes/portrayals of Asians in the media?

--Do you have any memories of positive role models in film? (If so, why did you consider them a role model? Were any of them minorities/Asian?)

(Alternative: please describe figures you have seen in the media that you admired.)

--Do you have any final comments or reflections you would like to share regarding Asian-Americans in media?

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