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RESEARCH ARTICLES

A Common Identity: Narratives of Asian American Girls and Their Internalized Gendered-Racialization

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Asian American women are the victims of intersectional gendered racism, experiencing various unique forms of discrimination, racial profiling, fetishization, and hyper-feminization. These inequalities are deeply rooted in Western history, the male gaze, notions of hegemonic masculinity as well as exaggerated portrayals in mass media and social media. Drawing from in-depth interviews, the holistic and nuanced narratives of Asian American female youths are gathered to show similarities as well as discrepancies in experiences and construction of their identities within the United States. The analysis of the data reveals three different domains and external factors that affect Asian American female youths today: social expectations, parental expectations, and personal expectations. The author's finding reveals the deep internalizations of Western and traditional values that are deeply embedded within Asian American identities yet unique to the individual experiences of these female youths. This study offers potential insight into how the marginalization of Asian American female youths can be remedied by urging society to take responsibility for discrimination and gender racialization reflected in everyday behavior and mass media.

Introduction

In addressing the idea of identity recomposition to the "Western culture", studies often overlook the importance of the impact of racism and microaggressions against Asian American youths within communities, both at school, online, and through interactions with non-Asian individuals (Pyke & Johnson, 2003). Furthermore, Asian American female youths often are oppressed by yet another set of complicated restraints different from their male counterparts. Previous literature on the unique harassment experiences of Asian American women draws on intersectionality theories in which Asian women are subject to unwanted sexual attention and advances as well as gender harassment in other racial contexts (Ho et al., 2018). With stereotypical representation and lack of accurate, humanized representation, Asian women in widely consumed media undergo intersectional invisibility, objectification, and eroticization of their identities (Ahn et al., 2021).

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Artificial identity development models constructed by previous research have been shown to be incomplete and tend to homogenize all Asian Americans as a single subclass of Americans. An example of said stages includes: "Ethnic Awareness", "White Identification" and the final stage of "incorporation" into the Asian community (Wijeyesinghe & Jackson, 2012). It is important to understand that the construction of identity is done so at an individual level; similar patterns may be observed among different Asian groups, but there is no standard to categorize all Asian Americans.

Societal Distortion of the Asian American Identity

The idea of the model minority myth comes from the belief that the traditional set of Confucianist values and work ethics of Asian Americans have come to contribute to the success of individuals (Kim, 1973). The common stereotypes of high academic prowess and expectations of parental figures in Asian American households can limit the development of Asian American adolescents as they navigate the liminal space in their multicultural identity between traditional values and Westernized ideals. (Ahn et al., 2021). However, at times, Western racialized framing of the Asian identity can also align with familial expectations of Asian American ancestors, which may further compound internalized pressures to strive for success in academic and professional environments.

The blatant mockery and generalization of Asian Americans under "sameness" in regard to accents, values, and physical appearances is often dismissed as comedic. The normalization of such experiences as perpetuated by mainstream media and common cases of microaggressions against Asian Americans can be further internalized in informal social interactions. The lack of institutional consequences for people engaging in anti-Asian racism continues to contribute to and encourage the white framing of the gendered and racialized "Asian American" identity (Chou & Feagin, 2015).

External influences of family and peers as well as mass media have continued to perpetuate racism and sexism against Asian American women. The effects can be detrimental to identity development, self-esteem, body image, and general mental health (Hall, 1995). Patterned behavior of family socialization can further shape the physical experience of Asian American girls in fitting both familial and Western expectations of physical beauty (Ahn et al., 2021). However, popular media can also lead to the internalization of thin and colorist ideals relevant not only to the Asian American experience but to all women as well.

Stereotypes result in perpetuating cliches that often reinforce negative prejudices instead of encouraging awareness of the nuances of Asian identities (B. Y. Lee, 2013). Such attributes, when attached to the identities of racial categories, become inseparable from the individual subject. In the context of the racialization and sexualization of Asian women, stereotypical imagery has been naturalized and normalized from mass exposure to popular media and networked into society. In films such as *The World of Suzie Wong*, the identity of Asian women has not only been monetized but capitalized on in

the film industries in which Asian women are portrayed to be submissive and hypersexualized. The eroticization and hyper-feminization of Asian American women by non-Asian peers and widely consumed media is representative of the experienced microaggressions that perpetuate expectations of submissiveness, fetishism, and the assumption of a uniform universal appearance, all of which can be detrimental to the mental health of individuals and the development of a multicultural identity (Pyke & Johnson, 2003).

Identity negotiations happen in social interactions and internalizations of Asian American stereotypes. It is a rising pattern of behavior in which Asian American presence in the US is "tolerated" in the United States due to their status as a perpetual foreigner (Wu, 2002). This leads to a battle of internal and external negotiations in which subjects must qualify their identity as American simply because racial otherization, exoticization, and racism contradict their status as legal citizens. Asian Americans today are often asked for their country of origin or ethnic heritage, simply because they appear "foreign" due to not being what society has established an "American" looks like. The normativity of such identity negotiations occurring in day-to-day life is one that slowly becomes normalized, in which the lack of consequences for people engaging in anti-Asian racism continues to perpetuate the underlying systems of inequality and stereotyping against the Asian American population. When an adolescent's American identity is brought into question, this may influence the individual to seek out an identity that opposes both their American nationality and their ethnicity. This is often observed in Asian American teens, especially so in girls. In the development of a "third culture" and hybrid "bicultural" negotiation, the choice of cultural values that can fluidly co-exist with one another contributes to an unequal balance in which sets of values are prioritized or sacrificed. (Park, 2008).

The Asian American woman's experience with identity negotiation is complicated due to intersections of oppression and racialized gender discrimination. Asian women are expected to align with sexualized stereotypes formed from the Western and male gaze, meaning they are highly susceptible to unwanted sexual attention and advances (Ho, 2018). Asian fetishization, a strong sexual or romantic preference often referring to women of East and Southeast Asian descent, can be particularly harmful in reducing the identities of Asian American women into sexual objects holding stereotypical values of submissiveness and hyper-femininity. Today, studies of interracial couples, specifically those involving white males and Asian females, seek to answer the complicated nature of intermarriage and panethnicity of Asians within the U.S. (Shinagawa & Pang, 1996). The sexual and romantic desire of Asian American women is rooted in internalized white supremacy and hegemonic masculinity, which have been romanticized under the guise of male chivalry and attraction (Pyke, 2010).

Familial Relationships

Intergenerational parental conflicts often stand at the forefront of studies that explore the interactions Asian American individuals have within their own familial spheres. From established traditional ethnic "norms" and Western "acculturation", differences in beliefs and values may lead to strained relations between first, second, and third-generation immigrants (Tsai-Chae & Nagata, 2008). The historical and social context in which earlier Asian American immigrants immigrated to the States is often forgotten by newer generations, where multiple ethnic groups sought refuge from political instability or better employment opportunities as early as the 1900s. Growing up in the United States, Asian American adolescents have typically grown up in environments drastically different from those of their parent's childhoods. The quality of parent-child relationships has often been evaluated through measures of communication, language differences, and discrepancies between the adopted values of children in contrast to their parents (R. M. Lee et al., 2000).

Parental pressures are commonly seen to be manifested in academic and career expectations in which Asian parent stereotypes of "tiger-moms" and "helicopter" parents reveal the stigma that surrounds strict authoritative parental strategies (Cheah et al., 2013). Theories such as the Pillar Theory (a parenting style theory that identifies four broad parenting styles and their impact on a child's behavior) have appeared to evaluate the results of different parental styles on the academic and developmental outcomes of students (Baumrind, 1971). Such conceptual frameworks have translated into specific findings regarding the often patterned (and negative) dynamics that exist between Asian parents and their children. However, these studies fail to convey the complexities and unique struggles of finding suitable parental strategies as Asian immigrants. In believing that parental strategies are shaped by cultural beliefs and notions, the perceived harshness of Asian parents is stereotypically believed to be rooted in ethnic ideals (an example being Confucianism) (Qin et al., 2012).

Thesis

From stereotypes, expectations of high academic achievement, and exposure to beauty standards in mass media, Asian American girls undergo social pressures from a variety of external sources. Pressures to assimilate into American society are complicated by ethnic pride and identification. The goal of this study is to continue to dive into the complexity of racialization and its internalization in Asian American girls in the context of relevant environments that impact the development of a multicultural identity. By interviewing ten Asian American female youths, I hope to analyze the reasons why and how Asian American girls choose to either assimilate, resist acculturation, or pave their own way in regard to their identities in America.

Methods

This study is based on the qualitative narrative and thematic analysis of ten interviews; five with Asian Americans high school-attending girls and five with Asian American girls currently enrolled in college at Chapman University. All high school interviewees come from various school districts in Southern California.

I started my interviewees with a few short questions concerning ethnic background, self-identification, and their overall school and home environment. Then, I pursued in-depth personal, and often vulnerable, questions that outlined experienced hardships, internalized pressures, and desired freedoms. Through those follow-up questions, I sought behavioral patterns and different types of "code" and language usage that would come to establish a conclusion with my findings.

After all interviews were collected and translated, I examined my data from a broad perspective, first grasping the background of the interviewees, including geographical location, home/familial background, age, gender, education, and more. These large subcategories and factors of observation helped me find broader threads of connections within the diverse and detailed responses of my interviews. Then, I observed my interviews on a narrative and thematic scale, looking closely at their self-perception, how they face expectations, and the factors that influence decision-making and the development of a multicultural identity.

Results

Parental Expectations

The majority of interviewees highlighted the significance of familial and multigenerational interactions in constructing pressures and expectations leading to their adoption of similar traditional and conservative ideals. However, there was also a fraction of interviewees who believe that their childhood development and gradual assimilation into an American culture of seemingly egalitarian and individual-based ideals have led them to diverge from typical standards held by their ethnic/racial group. Sentiments from an interviewee from Chapman University are echoed by other students, both in high school and college:

> "I've heard a lot about the sacrifices my parents made, especially my mom immigrating to the US at a young age so I do feel some pressure in needing to be successful to not let their hard work to make a good life for us go to waste."

The aforementioned pressure to "live up" to the standards and "make the most" out of the opportunities offered through a series of multigenerational sacrifices is a recurring process of thought in many of these student

interviews. As an act of acknowledgment of parental sacrifices and love, students internalize their family's experiences with immigration to the U.S. as motivations to pursue educational and financial prowess.

However, in a transition to familial reactions and responses to student decisions, pressures to conform to parents' expectations can also take the form of disapproval and restriction. In an interview with a Korean American from Chapman University, she states:

> "I think that due to how my family feels about dating within our culture I may have to end up with someone of the same ethnic background [as] I've experienced how my family has treated the significant others of my older sister when they were not Korean."

Here the student claims that her decision in forming romantic relationships will be largely shaped by her parents' opinion on the racial and ethnic identity of the partner. Knowing her parents may disapprove of a non-Korean partner, she accepts her parents' attachment to her cultural ideal and expresses the likelihood of her decisions aligning with her parent's expectations.

In another interview, a student speaks of her parent's relationship in shaping her own understanding of "healthy" relationships:

> "My parents do not really show affection towards each other, which I guess is kind of typical for Asian parents, but they led me to not really know what a healthy and happy relationship is. This is something I still struggle with understanding to this day."

The example that Asian American parents set for their children can be influential in the internalization of romantic ideals and expectations in how relationship dynamics should/are "supposed" to function. In clashing against the stereotypical imagery of happy white couples commonly perpetuated and reflected in mass media and the Western canon, the student's idea of a "healthy and happy" relationship is not modeled in regards to the relationship of her parents, but instead, Western values in which open communication and emotional expression are idealized.

The same student goes on to comment on academic pressures imposed by parents:

> "It felt like I had to be the 'golden child,' I couldn't make one wrong move...Growing up, my parents did put a lot of pressure on me to get straight A's...going into college getting A's wasn't so easy anymore...I only felt that I was worth something when I got those good grades. I didn't have that validation anymore, I

> didn't really know who I was. All those years of being told that 'I [was] the smart one'... really affected my mental health and sense of self."

The honesty in the interviewee's answers reveals a sentiment similarly expressed in other additional interviews: parental pressure to succeed in the academic setting often directly correlates to an individual's sense of self-worth. In situations where individuals are unable to fulfill familial expectations, their own confidence and sense of identity are also wounded.

Societal Expectations

Interviewees highlighted contrasting values systems held by their traditional ethnic identities and American beliefs, while others spoke specifically to their experience in a racialized and gendered environment in which they had to navigate through shared processes of assimilation and internal conflict. All interviewees have acknowledged a shared process of acculturation or assimilation in some way or form, but some have grown to either accept or reject it as a process of developing their unique identities. Reflecting on early education, an interviewee commented on their experience in attending primary school in California:

> "Growing up I loved Gyoza/pot stickers, but whenever I took them to school for lunch people would say that they're stinky and didn't want to sit by me. I begged my parents to make me sandwiches and pasta like the other kids."

Non-inclusive behavior and discriminatory attitudes manifested in early childhood behavior can easily isolate minority groups who feel constant pressure to assimilate into Western culture. This example clearly showcases simple shifts in behavior where personal preferences (in this context: food) and behavior (parental requests) are made to remedy and better relationships in social settings.

A more extreme example is mentioned by a Chapman University student:

> "Back in 2021, there were a lot of Asian American hate crimes...It was scary honestly...all you would hear about on the news was people who looked like me getting hurt. It's important to remember that at this time covid was pretty much at its peak, and everyone was pretty much under the assumption that it was 'all because of the Asians'"

In reference to the widespread pandemic of COVID-19, this student reflects upon widespread fear induced by the racialization of the pandemic which had led to dire outcomes of violence against Asian Americans. This student's reflection reveals the constricting nature of society within the United States in which stepping outside of the sphere of one's home means potentially becoming a victim of racist aggression and violence.

Societal standards and deeply rooted aggression and prejudice from communities outside of the Asian American identity continue to affect modern behavior in contexts less explored. This is further reflected by a personal account by a Filipino and Japanese American student also studying at Chapman University:

> "In middle school, I was known as the 'smart girl.' People only sat next to me because they could cheat off [of] me or ask me for help. Going to high school, the only reason the 'popular kids' wanted to talk to me was for homework answers. I constantly felt this pressure to live up to their expectations."

Peer pressure is an experience that many students undergo in their school careers. However, specifically, it is common for Asian American youths to have seemingly exploitable academic strengths. A recurring pattern in student interviews reveals that the idea of the "model minority" actively imposed by classmates and friends is also internalized.

On the other hand, romantic advancements in school settings and educational spheres can also be detrimental to Asian American female youths. A high school student from a predominantly white community recalls:

> "I've been approached by boys who have the notorious reputation of going for Asians... this interest doesn't even feel genuine to me... it feels like they've sexualized my whole race."

Racial preferences for romantic and sexual partners become naturalized under the idea of simple attraction but hints at large at the greater, and far more dire, issue of the racialized and sexualized identities of Asian women.

Personal Expectations

Interviewees reflected on their personal expectations in regard to future relationships, financial success, and obligations to the household–personal expectations that have undoubtedly been shaped by interactions within society and families, but also by the internalization of gendered and racialized ideals. The varied responses revealed different perceptions of what ideal candidates for romantic partners may look like for each individual. When asked to specify racial or ethnic preferences, interviewees often shifted away from responding or answered in accordance with their family's or peer's expectations. A Vietnamese American student from Chapman University mentioned:

> "I'm most likely going to date and marry someone of Asian descent...as modeled by my parents, I've got a specific type and I'm a specific type of person... I'm not the type to want to cause any unnecessary drama (for my family, theirs, or myself)."

Here, the individual reveals that her personal construction of expectations in regard to romantic partners is largely shaped by her relationship with her parents and her traditional ties to ethnic ideals. She notes that there may be risks of conflicts and tension which may occur if she were to look for a relationship outside of the same racial group.

In another interview, a student shares their input:

> "I think my partner would be of more Western descent...There are some stigmas around people of certain religions and races which mostly push me towards being interested in white guys...Eastern values may be difficult for me since I want to be able to have kids and work, not be stuck at home."

Believing that East Asian values conflict with future career plans and personal values, the individual believes that it would be most suitable to find a Western partner to maintain personal autonomy and professional freedom as a woman.

Offering a different perspective regarding bodily image, a high school student stated:

> "I've always felt a pressure to stay thin. Whenever I go back to Asia, you'll see everyone is sticky-skinny. I always modeled myself after the girls I saw there...My mother's critique of my body, and compliments when I had lost weight, led me to develop an eating disorder in the past... though I think it also has a lot to do with what I've seen on social media, but most of this pressure comes internally. It might not always be a healthy choice, but it's me who ultimately decides to uphold these standards of beauty."

The student offers her insight regarding the interacting factors leading to her struggles with her relationship with food: her relationship with her mother, mass media consumption, and a personal and conscious choice to align with beauty aesthetics within the context of her ethnicity. However, when echoed by parents and personal critique, it can lead to mental disorders and negative perceptions of the self.

Discussion

Among the young adolescents and young adults interviewed, commonalities and discrepancies arose in perspectives and behaviors. Recurring patterns appeared in discussions regarding the weight of academic expectations in personal, parental, and societal contexts. It appeared that there were negative responses to such pressures, potentially offering implications for mental health and general stress in academic settings. In order to "fit in", many interviewees felt that it was necessary to live up to the stereotype of being naturally "smart" in the eyes of classmates and peers, often sacrificing their morals and ethics to facilitate bonds and networks

within social spheres. A clear example of this is when Asian American students allow themselves to be taken advantage of, academically, to make friends in situations where it otherwise might be difficult to.

In a familial context, high (and often strict) parental expectations seemed to be deeply rooted in multi-generational experiences with hardships. To honor their parents, students recognize their parents' sacrifices by working hard in their educational journey to prove their self-worth and capability. However, many interviewees remain neutral and respectful of parental authority, and individuals often outline the lack of "healthy" romantic interaction between their parents. In some cases, individuals feel personally affected by familial dynamics, in which conservative households may be less expressive in emotions, leading to possible manifestations of similar values and behaviors. However, other interviewees responded by identifying with Western values in which they highlighted the state of individualism in the United States to be a Western value they embodied. Certain individuals rejected sets of "traditional values" of marriage within their own ethnic group, claiming that their attraction to the Western population has been a natural occurrence of shared "American" values and belief in female autonomy. However, this poses a question of whether this is true or not: are Asians currently living in their ethnic lands restrained in the domestic sphere by traditional values and gender roles? Perhaps the juxtaposition of Western values and "traditional" ethnic values appears more exaggerated than what is true.

Concerns regarding body image have also been manifested by parental expectations and comparisons that occur through engagement with peers and social media. A pressure to remain "thin" has been noted in several students' experiences where the beauty standard begins to dictate self-worth. To the detriment of self-esteem, there seems to be no escape from the influences of comparison and the desire to achieve certain physical aesthetics. Echoed by an ethnic population where many young girls embody an admirable and desirable body, a specific goes on to mention the dire consequences of disordered eating and body dysmorphia which internalizations of such values may cause.

In summary, the results of the interviews come together to reveal the burdens that Asian American female youths carry today. These burdens, not always visible, induce a wide variety of different behaviors: anxiety from familial and social expectations, mental health struggles, and attempts to align oneself with systems of social beliefs and values different from those of their ethnicities and cultures.

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