Asian American Representation in Sitcoms

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Introduction

Researching Asian American representation on television is important because when stereotypes are attached to minority groups, the media can contribute to the spread of negative or harmful stereotypes, bias, and prejudice by applying them to all people of a particular group (Stamps, 2019). Of the representations of Asians on screen, Yuen (2021) found that throughout the 2015-2016 television season, 87% of 142 Asian and Pacific Islanders (API) series regulars were on screen for less than half the episode (Yuen, 2021). The complexity and depth of Asian characters were also lower than white characters, meaning that with low screen time and shallow characters, the representation of Asians on screen was limited (Yuen, 2021). Yuen's analysis of the 2015-2016 television season highlights the lack of Asian representation in media and the need for more diverse characters and actors. Model minority myth, tiger mom, and foreigner are common and well-known stereotypes of Asian Americans, and from the Literature Review, stereotypes such as lotus blossom, dragon lady, and kung fu master emerged (Sun et al., 2015; Stamps, 2019; Zhang, 2010). Throughout this research, I examine existing literature on representation, Asian stereotypes, media, and identity. Next, I will define common stereotypes and representations of Asians in media and then define what positive and negative representations are. Finally, I will analyze positive and negative representations of Asian Americans using a quantitative content analysis approach.

Literature Review

Currently, there is a lot of research about what representation is and why representation is powerful in shaping the public's perceptions. There is also a lot of information on the damage harmful representations can do to a community or group. Representation in media is powerful because it can create a shared cultural meaning of what a group is (Fürsich, 2010). Television

and media can create and contribute to bias and prejudice when a minority is featured negatively because that one instance can be applied to the whole group (Stamps, 2019). When a minority is portrayed in the media in a negative, harmful, or disrespectful way, the effects can be long-lasting because once that perspective is out there, the general public can then see it as the primary idea of what that minority is (Fürsich, 2010; Stamps, 2019). According to Cultivation Theory, when people get consumed in media, what they observe in media can be infused into their perception of reality and they can start viewing the world through the lens of their media (Fürsich, 2010; Scharrer et al., 2022; Zhang, 2010). When someone has a limited media scope and the representation of minorities is inaccurate, this contributes to misrepresentation and puts people into their bubbles with their viewpoints.

Consequences of Limited or Poor Representations

There are many consequences of poor representations as well as when there are very few representations present. A significant consequence is that groups get silenced when there is a lack of representation or when the representations that exist are inaccurate or misleading. Symbolic Annihilation is an issue in which "At times, representations may leave out whole populations simply by ignoring them or their viewpoints. In a media-saturated culture, this lack of attention means silencing…" (Fürsich, 2010, p. 121). Yuen (2021) uses the documentary *What's the Problem with Apu?*, which highlighted a lot of controversy about *The Simpsons'* character Apu, to describe how a limited representation harms minority groups. In *The Simpsons*, Apu is a South Asian character voiced by a white actor, Hank Azaria, whose purpose was to "provoke a laugh" (Blauvelt, 2022). For a long time, Apu was the primary representation of South Asians, and with this representation saturating the idea of what South Asian culture is, the documentary *What's the Problem with Apu?* is an example of how South Asians were silenced by

the saturation of Apu (Fürsich, 2010; Yuen, 2021). The representation of Apu shows how minorities can be silenced as a result of poor representation as well as how a poor representation can become the primary representation when it is one of few representations.

How Representation Affects Identity

Minority representation is important and the media is influential in forming one's identity and shared norms about what a group could or should be (Besana et al., 2019). Social Mirroring and Social Identity Theory are both involved with a person's sense of identity in relation to being part of a group (Besana et al., 2019; Scharrer et al., 2022; Stamps, 2019). Social Mirroring occurs when a person's expression of themselves is influenced and created by the perception others have of the group they belong to (Scharrer et al., 2022). The ability to feel seen and represented in popular media has the potential to boost one's sense of self and identity. When inaccurate or negative representations are the primary perception of a person or group, this can cause a rift between one's sense of self and their relation to their group identity.

Being able to identify with a group can impact a person's sense of self. According to Social Identity Theory, the identity of a group member is strongly attached to the defining characteristics or traits of their group (Mastro, 2003; Stamps, 2019). A person's identity is impacted because "Social identity theory posits that individuals are motivated to maintain identity congruence in order to foster a positive self concept" (Scharrer et al., 2022, p. 734). This reinforces in-groups and out-groups as people create distinctions that make their group more favorable or desirable (Mastro, 2003; Stamps, 2019). Self-Categorization Theory expands upon Social Identity Theory as it explains how people create further categorizations to highlight the differences between groups (Mastro, 2003; Scharrer et al., 2022). In Self-Categorization Theory, the more a person identifies with a group, the more favorable distinctions between a group are

made and the more a person sees themselves and their group as favorably different (Mastro, 2003).

The impact of representation in identity is significant as many scholars have found people being caught between their identities. When a minority is portrayed in the media and society creates an idea of what that minority is, often members of the group feel stuck between being too ethnic or not ethnic enough (Besana et al., 2019). The portrayals of minorities on screen can also make one feel both invisible and hypervisible (Besana et al., 2019). When representations of stereotypes persist, the inaccuracies of their culture are hypervisible, while the realities remain invisible.

Stereotypes

Several studies have been conducted that examine Asian stereotypes throughout the media. Stereotypes such as Asians are good at math, nerdy, tiger moms, and foreign are common stereotypes that many people recognize. Stereotypes that emerged from the literature are the model minority myth, kung fu master, dragon lady/lotus blossom, and family-oriented. The model minority myth highlights Asian Americans as hard-working, academically advanced, economically successful, standout citizens (Besana et al., 2019; Zhang, 2010). Several scholars found that the model minority myth often serves as an explanation for the academic and economic success that Asian Americans are attributed to (Stamps, 2019; Sun et al., 2015). While many of the attributes of the model minority myth are perceived as positive attributes, it is acknowledged that stereotyping Asian Americans as superior can create hostility between other non-white minority groups and also minimize the diversity of Asian Americans by limiting them to this one stereotype (Stamps, 2019). The family-oriented stereotype branches off of the model minority myth and describes how parental and family influence is strong for children and how

the values of the family are influential in the family members' lives (Besana et al., 2019). Despite the model minority myth, the foreigner stereotype creates an in-between state for Asian Americans where they are stuck between being a stand-out citizen and the ideal minority while also being a perpetual foreigner who still stands out and is perceived as exotic and not fully American (Zhang, 2010). This paradox is congruent with the duality of hypervisibility and invisibility as a result of inaccurate representations mentioned by Besana et al. (2019). The tiger mom stereotype is similar to the model minority myth in that this stereotype is focused on the parents ensuring that their child is successful by pushing them to be the best (Juang et al., 2013). With the tiger mom stereotype, parents are described as strict, controlling of their children's lives, and not overly concerned with what the child wants because the child will end up successful with their help (Juang et al., 2013).

The desexualization of Asian men was another common theme. Portraying men as either feminine, infantile, effeminate, or as a villain, or martial arts master (Stamps, 2019; Sun et al., 2015). The kung fu master stereotype describes Asian men as having no sex appeal (Sun et al., 2015). The opposite occurs for women as they are often hypersexualized as mysterious, seductive, and deviant dragon ladies or ultra-feminine lotus blossoms (Stamps, 2019; Sun et al., 2015).

There is a lot of literature discussing the importance of representation of minorities, the consequences of inadequate representations, and stereotypes of Asian Americans. There is also a lot of research about how the media can shape people's perceptions and how identity is strongly influenced by how others perceive them and the group they belong to. With prior scholarship finding evidence of several Asian stereotypes in media, it is important to analyze new media and how they represent Asian Americans. From the research, questions about the prevalence of

stereotypes on screen emerged. Looking for positive representations is important because it shows that accurate representations are valuable to both the people making the show and the people consuming the show. Using a quantitative content analysis I examine the presence of stereotypes as well as search for positive representations of Asian American culture by asking:

RQ1: How are Asian Americans portrayed in American sitcoms?

RQ1a: Are there positive representations of Asian American culture in American sitcoms?

RQ1b: Are there negative representations of Asian American culture in American sitcoms?

Method

Using the show *Fresh off the Boat*, I analyze how Asian Americans are represented on American sitcoms. *Fresh Off the Boat* aired from 2015 to 2020 and is loosely based on the memoir *Fresh Off the Boat* by Eddie Huang (Lee, 2015). This show is significant because it is the first sitcom to feature an Asian American family in over two decades (Lee, 2015). *Fresh Off the Boat* has received a 7.8 rating on IMDb as well as six television awards and 31 nominations, which means the show was popular and well-viewed (Huang et al., 2015-2020).

Sampling

The unit of analysis was every instance of Asian American representation that occurs in *Fresh Off the Boat*. There are six seasons on Hulu with Season 1 having 13 episodes, Season 2 having 24 episodes, Season 3 having 23 episodes, Season 4 having 19 episodes, Season 5 having 22 episodes, and Season 6 having 15 episodes, totaling 116 episodes. Every fifth episode of *Fresh off the Boat* was selected starting with the pilot episode, so 24 episodes will be analyzed

(refer to Appendix A). The pilot was chosen as the starting point before selecting every fifth episode to see how the show introduced the family.

Variables and Coding Scheme

Using operational definitions of positive representation and negative representation, a quantitative content analysis has been conducted to learn the frequency of Asian American representations throughout the show *Fresh off the Boat*. The overall outcome of whether the representation was positive, negative, neutral or other is informed by interpreting and factoring in the other variables A positive representation is operationally defined as confident expressions of culture and identity that do not diminish the character, nature, or spirit of the characters. The operational definition of a negative representation is a representation that either diminishes the character's spirit, personality, or reputation or makes the viewer think badly of the character. A neutral representation is operationally defined as one in which Asian culture was referenced but it was neither positive nor negative. A representation was coded if there was an explicit and verbal occurrence of the model minority, kung fu master, dragon lady, lotus blossom, foreigner, family-oriented, tiger mom, or other representation. An example of a scene that was coded was one in which school kids were making fun of the main character Eddie for his noodle lunch. An example of a scene that would not be coded is if there was a scene with two characters speaking Mandarin but they were talking about the weather, the scene would not be coded.

Number of Asian Characters Present

The number of Asian characters who are speaking in a scene/representation instance was observed. If there were four characters present but only one of them spoke, it would be coded as one character present.

Asian actors playing Asian roles

The presence of Asian actors playing Asian characters was observed. This information was found through looking up the actor online.

Speaking native language

The occurrence of Mandarin spoken throughout the scene or representation was observed. The possible outcomes were yes, no, and a combination of English and Mandarin.

Representation

Scenes that portrayed Asian culture or verbally mentioned culture were coded. Based on the themes from the literature review, the possible outcomes were: model minority, kung fu master, dragon lady, lotus blossom, foreigner, family-oriented, tiger mom, and other. The definitions can be found in Appendix B.

Embracement of culture

The character's embracement of their culture during the scene or representation was coded. The possible outcomes were confident, proud, neutral, embarrassed, superior, aware they are different, and other. This contributes to the overall outcome of whether the representation was positive, negative, neutral, or other. The definitions can be found in Appendix B.

Purpose of the scene or representation

The purpose of the scene was coded to learn why and how the representation contributed to culture. The possible outcomes were education, relatability, comedy/humor, highlight otherness, and other. The definitions can be found in Appendix B.

Overall outcome

Variables such as the type of representation, embracement of culture, and purpose of the scene contribute to the reaction of the audience and how they view Asian culture. Based on the

variables coded, the possible overall outcomes were positive, negative, neutral, and other. The definitions can be found in Appendix B.

Coder Training and Code Testing

Before coding, the code sheet was tested using three randomly chosen episodes that were not in the sample. The code sheet was reviewed before the start of each coding session and each time a representation occurred, I stopped and coded the representation. If two representations occurred in one scene, both representations were coded separately. A code sheet was created for each episode and then compiled into one document. Throughout the practice coding session, I made adjustments to the code book and sheet. Based on the preliminary coding, the code sheet was modified and the item "highlight otherness" was added to the purpose of the representation variable to explain representations that were not educational or funny character quirks. After the third episode, I could code representations using the codesheet reliably.

Procedure

To code representations, I watched an episode in the sample and paused to code if a representation occurred. I started at Season 1, Episode 1 and coded every fifth episode in the order they aired.

Findings

Out of the 24 episodes that were coded, 110 instances of Asian American representations were found. The highest number of representations coded in an episode was 13 representations, the lowest was 0, and the average was $M = 4.58$ representations. Refer to Appendix C for a graph showing the number of representations in every episode. The most frequently occurring variable of each attribute are as follows: number of Asians present (*mode* = 2-4, 60.6%), Asian actors playing Asian roles (*mode* = yes, 100%), speaking native language (*mode* = no, 82.6%),

representation (*mode* = family-oriented 25.5%), embracement of culture (*mode* = confident, 47.3%), purpose of the scene or representation (*mode* = comedy/humor, 45.5%), and overall outcome (*mode* = positive, 39.1%).

"Family-oriented" was the most frequently coded representation and accounted for 28 representations whereas "kung fu master," "dragon lady," and "lotus blossom" were representations that were not present in the episodes that were coded. The "kung fu master," "dragon lady," and "lotus blossom" representations refer to the desexualization and hypersexualization of Asians so considering *Fresh Off the Boat* is a family sitcom, it made sense that these representations did not occur in any of the episodes in the sample. Aside from the three representations that were not present, there was a balanced mix of the other representations with the second most coded representation being "other" with 26 occurrences. The "foreigner" stereotype had 25 occurrences, "model minority" had 19 occurrences, and "tiger mom" had 12 occurrences.

The most frequently occurring embracement of culture was "confident" with 52 instances. Out of the 52 instances of confidence, the most frequently occurring representation was "family-oriented," with 14 representations, meaning that there were 14 occurrences where the characters were portrayed as "confident" and "family-oriented." In contrast, there were 3 times the characters were "embarrassed," and 11 times the characters were "aware they were different." For both "embarrassed" and "aware they are different," the most frequently occurring representation was "foreigner." There were 2 portrayals of the representation of "embarrassed" and "foreigner" and 6 portrayals of "aware they are different" and "foreigner."

Out of the 110 coded representations, there were 43 "positive" outcomes, 39 "negative" outcomes, and 28 "neutral" outcomes. The most frequently occurring type of representation that

had a "positive" outcome was "family-oriented" with 17 occurrences of "family-oriented" and "positive" portrayals. Out of the "negative" outcomes, the most frequent representation was "other" with 15 instances of portrayals in which the representation was "other" and the outcome was "negative." "Other" was also the most frequently occurring representation out of the "neutral" outcomes. There were 9 instances in which the representation was "other" and the outcome was "neutral." Of the "positive," "negative," and "neutral" outcomes the most frequently occurring purpose of representation for all three was "comedy/humor." There were 13 "positive" and "comedy/humor" portrayals, 16 "negative" and "comedy/humor" portrayals, and 21 "neutral" and "comedy/humor" portrayals. The most frequently occurring purpose of representation was "comedy/humor," which was present in 50 representations.

After "comedy/humor," the second most frequent purpose of representation was "highlight otherness" with 19 instances. Out of the 19 representations that were coded as "highlight otherness" the most frequent embracement of culture was "aware they are different" with 6 occurrences of representations that "highlight otherness" and "aware they are different."

Discussion

RQ1 aimed to learn how Asian Americans are portrayed in American sitcoms. In *Fresh Off the Boat*, Asians expressed confidence in 47.3% of the 110 coded episodes. Asian culture was portrayed in scenes where characters spoke Mandarin or a combination of Mandarin and English. Asian culture was also portrayed with scenes involving traditions or celebrating holidays. *Ride the Tiger*, was an episode that featured the family celebrating Lunar New Year with a competition to see who can speak Mandarin the longest (Huang et al., 2015-2020). Negative aspects of Asian culture such as a teacher not being able to pronounce Eddie's Chinese name highlighted experiences that are not limited to Asians but to many immigrants as well. The

show also expands upon immigrant experiences and challenges. Several scenes represented the experience of being Asian American or being an immigrant and many were coded as "education" for the variable purpose of the scene/representation. "Education" accounted for 14 of the 110 purposes of scene/representations. To answer *RQ1*, the portrayal of Asians in *Fresh Off the Boat* included common stereotypes that were found in the literature review. Although stereotypes were present, the "family-oriented" stereotype often resulted in a positive outcome. *Fresh Off the Boat* also featured representations of Asian American and immigrant experiences to highlight some struggles that these communities encounter.

   RQ1a aimed to learn about any positive representations of Asian Americans in sitcoms. Many stereotypes were present and common in the show. The foreigner, model minority, and family-oriented stereotypes accounted for a majority of the outcomes; however, the family-oriented stereotype reflected a primarily positive outcome as 17 of the 28 instances of "family-oriented" were positive. Several instances of "family-oriented" involved the family supporting each other or trying to inspire another family member to embrace the value of family. Other positive representations included scenes in which the characters supported each other when they achieved a goal such as getting citizenship and getting a high SAT score.

   RQ1b aimed to identify any negative representations of Asian Americans in sitcoms. A theme that emerged was how several representations could be generalizable to any family sitcom. The family-oriented stereotype had instances that could be generalized as assimilation and some instances that were specific to the family being Asian. There were 28 "neutral" outcomes, which included subtle Asian representations that could be dismissed as something that could happen in any sitcom but were still coded because of their subtle portrayals. One instance that could be generalized was when the grandmother was scolding the kids for not helping

Emery practice his lines for the play. The grandmother had several teaching moments about why families should care for each other and the value of family support. These generalizable representations and explicit references to wanting to fit in pointed out the theme of assimilation throughout the show. An example of assimilation and highlighting otherness occurs in the first season during a scene when Eddie brings noodles to school and the other school kids make fun of him for the smell of his noodles (Huang et al., 2015-2020). Eddie's identity was affected as his embarrassment reflected Social Mirroring as his disdain for Asian lunch was formed by the negative reaction of his schoolmates. After school, Eddie begged his parents for "white people lunch" and his mom eventually allowed him to bring Lunchables to school (Huang et al., 2015-2020). A common theme throughout the show was Eddie wanting to fit in with his peers at school and theories such as Social Identity Theory, Self Categorization Theory and Social mirroring were present in his attempts to fit in with his American peers and disassociate from his culture. Throughout the show, several implicit and explicit representations of assimilation occurred.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine how Asian Americans are represented in sitcoms and search for positive and negative representations. A quantitative content analysis was conducted to examine the presence and frequency of Asian actors, native language spoken, stereotypes, embracements of culture, purpose of representations, and overall outcomes in the show *Fresh Off the Boat*. Researching Asian American representations is important because Asians have historically been excluded from the media (Besana et al., 2019). Being able to see yourself in the media you consume is important and can impact your sense of identity and self-esteem (Yuen, 2021).

Throughout the show *Fresh Off the Boat*, positive, negative, and neutral representations of Asians in sitcoms were present. Although the show utilized common Asian stereotypes, some representations resulted in positive outcomes such as how "family-oriented" often resulted in a lesson on family values. *Fresh Off the Boat* also featured educational scenes that portrayed the Asian American and immigrant experiences and struggles. Themes of assimilation also emerged with the results from the variables "embracement of culture" and "representation."

There were some limitations to this study. Intercoder reliability was not available for this research because it was conducted by one researcher. Another limitation is that the sample included every fifth episode meaning that representations could have been missed since only 24 out of 116 episodes were watched. In the future, I would remove "neutral" as an attribute of the variable outcome to make clearer distinctions between positive and negative outcomes. While "neutral" outcomes were coded because the outcomes seemed neither positive nor negative, another topic of future research could be to examine the themes of assimilation on *Fresh Off the Boat* and in other sitcoms.

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Appendix A
Sample Episode List

Season 1
Episode 1 Pilot
Episode 6 Fajita Man
Episode 11 Very Superstitious

Season 2
Episode 3 Shaquille O'Neal Motors
Episode 8 Huangsgiving
Episode 13 Phil's Phaves
Episode 18 Week in Review
Episode 23 The Manchurian Dinner Date

Season 3
Episode 4 Citizen Jessica
Episode 9 How to Be an American
Episode 14 The Gloves are Off
Episode 19 Driving Miss Jenny

Season 4
Episode 1 B as in Best Friends
Episode 6 A League of Her Own
Episode 11 Big Baby
Episode 16 Ride the Tiger

Season 5
Episode 2 The Hand that Sits the Cradle
Episode 7 Where Have All the Cattlemen Gone?
Episode 12 Legends of the Fortieth
Episode 17 These Boots are Made for Walkin'
Episode 22 No Apology Necessary

Season 6
Episode 5 Hal-Lou-Ween
Episode 10 Jessica Town
Episode 15 Commencement

Appendix B
Code Book and Definitions

Number of Asian Characters Present
1. 1
2. 2-4
3. 5+
4. None

Asian actors playing Asian roles
1. Yes
2. No

Speaking Mandarin
1. Yes
2. No
3. Combination of English and Mandarin

Representations in the scene
1. Model minority
2. Kung fu master
3. Dragon lady
4. Lotus blossom
5. Foreigner
6. Family oriented
7. Tiger mom
8. Other

Character's embracement of their culture
1. Confident
2. Proud
3. Neutral
4. Embarrassed
5. Superior
6. Aware they are different
7. Other

Purpose of the scene/representation
1. Education
2. Relatability
3. Comedy/humor

    4. Highlight otherness

    5. Other

Overall outcome

    1. Positive

    2. Negative

    3. Neutral

    4. Other

Definitions

Number of Asian Characters Present

The number of Asian characters who are speaking in a scene/representation instance.

Asian actors playing Asian roles

Is the Asian character played by an Asian actor?

Speaking native language

Are they speaking another language, English, or a combination?

Representations

Model Minority

Showing Asians as successful in academics, good citizens, self-sufficient, and rule-abiding (Zhang, 2010). They are also portrayed with more financial success and general superiority over other minorities (Sun et al., 2015).

Kung Fu Master

Derived from Bruce Lee this stereotype assumes that Asian men know martial arts. Shows Asian men as masculine but diminishes their sexual appeal (Sun et al., 2015).

Dragon Lady

Asian women on screen are often hypersexualized. A dragon lady is a hypersexualized Asian woman who is mysterious, seductive, and cunning (Stamps, 2019).

Lotus Blossom

Asian women on screen are often hypersexualized. A lotus blossom is an Asian woman who is delicate, feminine, obedient, and hypersexualized (Stamps, 2019).

Foreigner

Despite the model minority, Asians are still perceived as being non-American, novel, exotic, and othered. There's a duality of Asians being the "honorary Whites " while also being outsiders (Zhang, 2010).

Family Oriented
Strong family values, parents have a strong influence on their children's lives (Besana et al., 2019).

Tiger Mom
Parents want their kids to succeed and will push them to be the best. Strict, controlling behaviors as well as disappointment when they don't succeed (Juang et al., 2013).

Other
Any representation that does not fit the previously listed items.

Embracement of culture
Confident
The character(s) are able to represent their culture even if people make them feel like they should not be proud of their culture.

Proud
The character(s) embrace their culture.

Neutral
The character(s) do not have a positive or negative reaction in the scene.

Embarrassed
The character(s) feel like they need to hide being Asian, want to draw little attention to themselves, embarrassment directly tied to being Asian.

Superior
The character(s) feel better than others because they are Asian.

Other
Any embracement of culture that does not fit the previously listed items.

Purpose of the scene/representation
Education
The scene/representation teaches the viewers about history, tradition, culture, language, or the experience of being Asian American.

Relatability

The scene/representation makes it easier for viewers to understand, relate, and/or empathize with the history, tradition, culture, language, or experience of being Asian American.

Comedy/humor

The scene/representation is a funny depiction of history, tradition, culture, language, or the experience of being Asian American.

Highlight Otherness

The scene/representation points out that the characters are Asian or not fully American. It points out what makes them different or strange compared to their friends, coworkers, and neighbors. This can be subtle or obvious.

Other

The purpose of the scene/representation does not fit the previously listed purposes.

Overall outcome

Positive

The overall scene/reaction is positive based on the character's embracement of culture and the purpose of the scene/reaction.

Negative

The overall scene/reaction is negative based on the character's embracement of culture and the purpose of the scene/reaction

Neutral

The overall scene/reaction is neutral based on the character's embracement of culture and the purpose of the scene/reaction.

Other

The outcome of the scene/representation does not fit the previously listed outcomes.

Appendix C
Representations per Episode Graph

Representation Instances per Episode