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Remodeling Minority: The Asian American Experience and Identity

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Abstract

Introduction

“You’re Asian though, shouldn’t you be good at math?”

“Do you have a tiger mom?”

“Aren’t you going to be a doctor though?”

“Are you sure you don’t want to take the AP course instead? You won’t learn anything in the regular class.”

These questions, and others, are ones that I have heard throughout my life from peers and adults. Though I do not recall a moment in which I realized my racial identity, it occurred to me from a young age that I needed to perform in a very specific way in order to better fit in with my peers. I didn’t bring up Chinese holidays or wear traditional clothes. I wanted blonde hair and trendy clothes to look more like my friends. Though I held onto these desires for much of my adolescent life, as I grew this transformed and manifested in my academic performance. Though I couldn’t change my appearance, I believed that my non-Asian peers saw our Asian American peers as academically successful, so I too should be successful. If I performed any less than them, then I thought I was less Asian and a failure. I held myself to unattainable standards because I believed that it was a natural phenomenon that Asian Americans were somehow more intrinsically capable of academic success. When I began failing classes, I didn’t know how to reach out for help and saw my failing grades as a reflection of my character and worth.

Until college, I believed my experience with failure was unique because I had internalized the model minority stereotype, and therefore believed that Asian American students were all successful. Further, I didn’t understand how stereotypes function or have the knowledge to explain why the stereotype was harmful to all minorities. When I began opening up about my academic failures with other Asian American students, I realized that my experience is not an

isolated anomaly, and that talking about our experiences helped me to heal and connect to the community in a way that I did not anticipate.

From this experience, I decided to become an Asian American Studies major and to use the Honors Capstone Project to create a space to talk about the things I learned about in class. However, my experience does not and cannot represent all of the variations of Asian American experience and I needed to include a diverse group of other students to begin representing those variations. I created the “Crazy Broke Students” podcast to record and broadcast our stories in the hopes that it provides comfort and solidarity to our Asian American listeners, and to introduce our audience to the issues addressed in the field of Asian American Studies.

Podcast as Methodology

A traditional podcast is an episodic series of spoken digital audio, and generally caters to a specific audience. Some popular podcasts cover niche topics, like true crime and mythology, while others may cover current events or obscure historical events. These are generally updated on a weekly basis, though some productions may upload more frequently. Some podcasts are broken into “seasons,” similarly to a T.V. show, but continue to produce thematic material. The “Crazy Broke Students” podcast, therefore, is a “mini-series.” With four thematic episodes, the podcast does not have enough episodes to validate a season’s worth of content. Additionally, the four episodes acknowledge the closure of the series and do not give a concrete guarantee for further episodes. I chose to utilize the podcast format over a video format for a variety of reasons; podcasts are better suited to providing in-depth educational information and would require less equipment and aesthetic training on my behalf. The audio-only format does not require the audience to watch an hour-long video, and will increase listener retention.

Additionally, the podcast would allow for frequent updates than videos to stay relevant with current events.

I originally considered a video format with the same content, however, heavy editing would be required to make shorter videos to keep the audience engaged. Though an hour-long video is an option, not many people have the time to continuously watch a video of that length. Additionally, heavy editing would result in an editing of the stories being presented. I believe that context is incredibly important for conversation, and that interviews can be easily manipulated with editing. By using the podcast format, I do not have to remove relevant anecdotes to fit within a specific time limit, and the audience can listen to the conversation in full. Further, with a video format, I would need access to a camera, and lighting and audio equipment. I am not trained to do videography, and do not want to compromise the quality of the video. Though the podcast also requires audio equipment and editing, I felt more confident in my audio editing skills and therefore proceeded with the podcast format.

Production

Though my intention was to cover a number of topics from Asian American studies, there is too much content to discuss to fit within four episodes. Therefore, I chose to focus on introductory topics; model minority and stereotypes, mental health, holidays, and modern identity and community formation. I created questions for five possible episodes prior to recording, though I only used two sets of questions during recording. After speaking to the participants, we decided to add two other episodes unrelated to the ones I prepared. Thus, when listening to the podcast, the final two episodes have an alternative interview structure.

The Yeti Blue Microphone was borrowed from Siddiq Siddiqui-Ali from the ITS Media Team. This microphone has an omni-directional recording setting, allowing myself and the four students to sit around the microphone, instead of five individual microphones. Though individual microphones are preferred, this set-up worked for the four episodes, though it required more audio editing on my behalf and a conscious reminder to speak in turn for the group.

The audio software I used for the project is Logic Pro X. Though this is a paid software, there are many free options that function similarly. I had previously purchased Logic Pro X for personal use, and decided to continue using the software for the project. During recording sessions, I created a main vocal track for the microphone and let the students speak freely. After a test recording, I modified the students' seating arrangement to adjust differences in volume during recording sessions. Following recording, I manually adjusted audio levels to equalize the audio to the best of my ability. I asked the students to speak in turn for this reason; I cannot separate their voices on one audio track, and therefore cannot adjust the audio levels for one speaker over the other.

The episodes feature the interviews with very little post-production editing, as previously stated, it is important to me to allow the audience to listen to the interview in full. I removed small two or three second increments of silence as the students thought about their responses, as well as the microphone volume checks. However, there was no removal of questions posed or student responses.

Limitations of the Project

Although I recruited students with the intention of diversity, it reflects limited gender, ethnicity, or age variation. The podcast would benefit from more Pacific Islander, South,

Southeast, and Central Asian individuals. Stereotypes affect identities in different ways, and may not apply equally despite the generalized “Asian American” identity. With more diversity, the podcast could explore these possible variations, as well as other stereotypes. I am also interested in exploring gendered stereotypes; for example, though the podcast begins the discussions, having an all male or all female cast could better facilitate an in-depth conversation about traditional gender stereotypes and its effects on the casts’ lives. Further, having older Asian Americans’ participation may highlight the fluidity of stereotypes and the importance of social context.

As previously mentioned, the podcast was produced with one microphone. Though it worked, the audio could have been improved with multiple microphones. Additionally, the students would not be as concerned about accidentally speaking over one another or being louder than another student. Multiple microphones would allow me to equalize audio better and improve the listening experience.

Further, due to a lack of silent recording spaces, the microphone picks up white noise generated from the building. With ITS’ generosity, I was able to utilize a video recording space, however, it is not well-suited for audio recording. In the podcast, the sounds from the air conditioning and adjacent rooms can be heard, despite the noise gate added in post-production. The noise gate is intended to reduce sounds below a set decibel, however, it can still be heard when the listeners volume is increased. The white noise would decrease in a studio designed for audio; this space would need to be small, sound-proofed, and carpeted to eliminate noise from neighboring rooms and echoes from the speakers.

Though I have some experience with the Logic Pro X software, I am not professionally trained in post-production editing and mixing. Prior to recording for the podcast, I used basic

functions, such as creating multiple tracks and inputs, splitting and cutting tracks, and simple volume manipulation. For the podcast, I largely utilized the split audio function and manually adjusted decibel levels. In combination with the microphone and studio changes, having quality post-production editing would vastly improve the quality of the final audio file.

Episode 1: ReModeling Minority

In this episode three students joined me in a conversation regarding stereotypes of Asian Americans. I chose to focus on the model minority myth, as it is one of the most prominent stereotypes of Asian American students. However, this further transforms into a conversation about expectations of behaviors and physical appearance.

The term “model minority” was coined in 1966 in a *New York Times Magazine* article entitled, “Success Story: Japanese American Style.” This article explains the perceived economic success of Japanese Americans following their internment. It relies on the idea that Japanese families were better suited culturally and structurally to overcome hardship, and therefore were the “models” of success. This has now transformed into a generalization of nearly all Asian Americans, and is most commonly understood as an affinity for science- and math-related subjects. As this episode explains, the model minority is not a “positive stereotype” and greatly affects those within the community, as well as other minority groups.

The individualistic nature of capitalism and the American Dream produced the model minority stereotype to uphold institutional structures for economic success and racism. By attributing success to one’s ethnicity and cultural values, institutionalized racist practices and beliefs are unchallenged and unchanged. Racial triangulation, as explained by Claire J. Kim, refers to the valorization of Asian Americans’ work ethic and cultural values and structures, and

therefore a deficiency in Black work ethic and values. However, Asian Americans remain socially precarious, as exemplified by the internment of Japanese Americans with birthright citizenship. Though Black communities face police violence and unjust incarceration, they do not have ethnic ties to Africa, but to the Black American South. As a result, they are not considered to be “aliens” in the way that Asian Americans are.

The model minority serves to continue perpetuating this triangulation, and white hegemonic power. The stereotype places the responsibility of economic upward mobility on the individual without acknowledgement of the withholding of and uneven access to resources. Through the internalization of the stereotype, minorities develop an assumption of “inherent” affinity for success and continue to perpetuate the stereotype. This allows current hegemonic powers to continue functioning, and maintain the economic status of various minority groups.

Show Notes

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Episode 2: Mental Health and Expectations of Asian Americans

Mental health refers to the emotional and psychological well-being of a person; this can be heavily affected by one's identity, socioeconomic status, and community. This episode and podcast space is not intended to replace a professional therapy, but I have found that having conversations about mental health and personal journeys when the individual is ready is incredibly helpful and relieving. Mental health is not always recognized as an actual illness and individuals have been characterized as "crazy" or "sad." Having public conversations about mental illness and possible symptoms help others to understand what signs to look for and how to help other individuals manage their symptoms. For this episode, I am interested in the ways our ethnic identity and communities, and gender have contributed to our mental health in both negative and positive ways.

Although seeking counseling has become more commonplace among younger students, there continues to be a stigma attached to therapy. The participants note that despite having

counseling resources, they have never been to therapy or have taken a break from seeing a therapist. However, this conversation allowed them to speak about their concerns and to build solidarity and support to better manage their mental health.

This episode also addresses racialized beauty standards and the effect on our mental health. It is not uncommon for individuals of any racial identity to feel pressured to adhere to socially designated beauty standards, and Asian Americans are now experiencing pressure from two sources. EuroAmerican beauty standards have diffused into many Asian countries; there is a preference for lighter skin tones, double eyelids, tall height, thinness, and strong facial features. These physical features are so preferred in Asia that procedures, such as double eyelid surgery and skin bleaching, are available and affordable. Simultaneously, Asian Americans are expected to maintain some measure of their “exotic” physical appearance. However, the idea of “exotic” features is guided by media and film representations; for women, historic portrayals were limited to the virginal or hypersexual. For men, portrayals were limited to conniving, predatory characters. Modernly, Asian American women continue to be held to the two characteristics, while men have become more masculine according to western gender roles. The expectation to behave according to one’s gender can be detrimental to one’s mental health, and the participants note the ways in which the pressure to conform has impacted their physical and emotional health in negative ways.

Show Notes

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Episode 3: Lunar New Year and Cultural Traditions

The Lunar New Year is similar to the western New Year, in that it is a celebration of the passing of a measurable number of cycles. The western New Year is driven by the Gregorian twelve month calendar, while the Lunar New Year is based on the Lunisolar calendar. This calendar follows the cycles of the moon and solar year; the New Year falls on the new moon cycle. Western cultures often conflate the Lunar New Year with the Chinese New Year, however, the Lunar New Year is celebrated in vastly different ways based on the Asian country. In this episode, the participants discuss the variations in celebration, foods, and traditional dress according to their ethnic identity.

Food is a large part of the New Year celebrations and many dishes are only made for the New Year. Some dishes include bánh chưng from Vietnam, 떡국 or tteok-guk from Korea, and 饺子 or jiaozi from China. Many of the dishes are made to emulate the shape of money and to attract good fortune for the new year.

Traditional dress is also an important component of new year celebrations. The cheongsam or qipao is traditionally worn in China, the áo dài is worn in Vietnam, and the 한복 or hanbok in Korea. Those there are new everyday interactions being created by designers of their respective ethnic identity, there have been concerns of appropriation by non-Asian individuals. Traditional dress is a representation of the ethnic culture, and context is imperative when wearing the clothing.

Show Notes

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Episode 4: Final Thoughts and Moving Forward

In this episode, the participants and I reflect on the previous episodes and the important learning moments for us. We also begin a discussion regarding new forms of Asian American community, including raves and music, and online platforms. The EDM, or electronic dance music, community is not exclusive to Asian Americans, but young individuals have found solidarity and support, and many Asian Americans have joined the community. From the participants’ personal experience, raves and attendees are focused on enjoying and expressing themselves through dance and clothing, making raves a safe space.

The Internet also connects people and allows Asian Americans to create spaces specifically for themselves. On Facebook, the popular page entitled “Subtle Asian Traits” makes memes and jokes about growing up as Asian American, asks the followers to jokingly choose their favorite Asian dish or sauce, and is focused on better representing the numerous variations in Asian American experience. The page is intended for Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) audiences, but has many non-AAPI followers as well.

Since the success of the page, many “spin-off” pages have been made as well. The participants specifically note pages that are more ethnically specific, such as “Subtle Canto Traits.” This page is targeted to Cantonese individuals and includes jokes that may be more difficult to relate to if the individual is not Cantonese. Other pages, like “Subtle Asian Dating” provides a site for networking and connection for individuals who are looking for an Asian or

Pacific Islander partner. Due to uneven diaspora, some Asian Americans do not live in an area predominantly populated by other AAPI families, and use sites like these to connect to their peers.

Show Notes

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Things Learned / Conclusion

Moving forward, this podcast could greatly improve in the following areas; audio quality, cast diversity, and interdisciplinary evaluations of Asian American Pacific Islander studies. The overall audio quality can be improved by using multiple microphones, one per individual to separate audio tracks and adjust and equalize volume. Additionally, the utilization of an audio recording space will reduce background and white noise, as well as echoes and reverb. Post-production editing can be expedited through professional software training. Though the current cast is not of the same ethnic identity, it is limited to East and Southeast Asian ethnicities. Having individuals from other Asian ethnicities would diversify the responses and conversations, and make the podcast more inclusive.

Though the podcast attempts to address a number of topics, there are a number of disciplines that are not evaluated; for example, literature, film, and music created by AAPI individuals are not discussed. However, there are a number of other AAPI podcast creators who have a more narrow focus that cover many of the topics this podcast was unable to. These podcasts include but are not limited to, 6.99 Per Pound, They Call Us Bruce, Asian Not Asian, Asian Boss Girl, Asian America: The Ken Fong Podcast, Books & Boba, and Asian Enough. Some collectives, including the Asian American Podcasters Association and the Potluck Podcast Collective are providing centralized sites to easily find AAPI focused podcasts.

The “Crazy Broke Students” podcast is available for listening on Anchor.fm, Spotify, Google Podcasts, Breaker, and RadioPublic, at the following links:

- Anchor.fm: <https://anchor.fm/vivienne-lu>
- Spotify: <https://open.spotify.com/show/3K8LkuldnXdvuk8n8GGZ8K>
- Google Podcasts:
<https://www.google.com/podcasts?feed=aHR0cHM6Ly9hbmNob3IuZm0vcy8yMGZiMjE2OC9wb2RjYXN0L3Jzcw==>
- Breaker: <https://www.breaker.audio/crazy-broke-students-podcast-mini-series>
- Radio Public: <https://radiopublic.com/crazy-broke-students-podcast-min-6VRPem>

The Crazy Broke Students podcast will likely resume, and will continue to be available on the current sites.

Google Drive Link: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1WnFag67AwG6XxLa-r7167_96FM5qa4lN?usp=sharing

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