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Corporate Communication**

Bachelor's Thesis

Media stereotypes and their impact on ethnic minorities:

Asians as a Model Minority

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Abstract

Given that media can strongly impact public opinion and identity development, media stereotypes about ethnic minorities remain one of the most challenging and controversial issues today. Recent research has primarily focused on the influences of negative stereotypes, but has not adequately captured the extent to which positive stereotypes, such as the model minority stereotype that portrays Asians as successful and free of problems, might affect ethnic minorities.

Thus, this thesis aims to examine the detrimental effects of ethnic stereotypes perpetuated by the media, particularly with regard to the model minority stereotype, by incorporating a wide variety of literature mainly from the fields of communication, psychology, and sociology. Furthermore, a combination of theoretical frameworks such as cultivation theory, social identity theory, and selective exposure theory provides an explanation of how ethnic stereotypes are constructed in public media.

The findings demonstrate that ethnic media stereotypes, especially the model minority stereotype, might severely harm the identity of ethnic minorities in relation to their mental health, academic achievement, and unequal distribution of needed help and resources. In order to combat ethnic stereotypes, it is important to (1) develop critical media literacy skills, (2) promote counter-stereotypes, (3) provide more platforms, for instance on social media, which help ethnic minorities to cope with prejudice and discrimination, and (4) raise awareness about the model minority stereotype among scholars and professionals in education, communication, media, public policy, and health care. Some limitations of this work related to the geographical and cultural focus of the model minority stereotype provide opportunities for future research.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Problem Statement

In the light of globalization of media content, the role of mass media in the formation of public opinion and perceptions is becoming increasingly important. In this regard, media also often create and reinforce ethnic stereotypes through the repeated dissemination of one-sided, stereotyped portrayals of ethnic minorities. Therefore, it is essential to understand how media might interfere with society's worldview and how the exposure to as well as the selectivity of biased media content may affect ethnic minorities (Kroon, Van der Meer, & Mastro, 2021, p. 181).

While recent research has prevalingly examined negative ethnic stereotypes (Gaur, 2020), the consequences of positive racial stereotypes represented in media have not been scrutinized by scholars to the same extent (Czopp, Kay, & Cheryan, 2015, p. 452). In contrast to negative ethnic stereotypes, positive ethnic stereotypes are often perceived as harmless, more condoned, and acceptable. While positive stereotypes of ethnic minorities might lead to some psychological benefits, they can also entail a number of negative effects. Asians in particular are often attributed with positive stereotypes and considered as the "model minority". Furthermore, despite being one of the fastest growing populations in the United States, research on stereotypes against Asians remains limited (Alt, Chaney, & Shih, 2019, p. 656).

The model minority stereotype emphasizes that Asian people are hardworking, obedient, and self-disciplined with a high level of economic and educational success. Hence, the model minority narrative is generally considered as a rather positive prejudice (Shih, Chang, & Chen, 2019, p. 414). However, the model minority stereotype homogenizes marginalized communities, in this case Asians, which leads to the invisibility of Asians in the distribution of much needed support and resources. Thus, the model minority stereotype might contribute to misleading images and has critical consequences for the self-identity, mental health, and even academic performance of ethnic minorities (Alt et al., 2019, p. 656).

In addition, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, anti-Asian discrimination has been on the rise. As a result, the public image of Asians as "model minorities" has been shifted back to being the "yellow perils". These contradictory stereotypes call for an in-depth examination of their detrimental effects on the well-being of Asians (Cho, 2021, p. 1).

Considering that ethnic stereotypes often result in prejudices, discrimination, and dysfunctional social relationships, it is important to assess in which ways such stereotypes surface in media and how ethnic stereotypes affect ethnic minorities, especially Asians. Furthermore, stereotypes of ethnic minorities that are perpetuated by the media are not always obvious, which is why media literacy skills and critical thinking abilities are required to recognize misrepresentations. Subsequently, it is crucial to examine how ethnic stereotypes can be effectively combated at a communication level (Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2015, pp. 173).

1.2 Objective and research questions

With the constant development of media content and ongoing changes in media consumption, it is of paramount importance to understand how media facilitate stereotypes of ethnic minorities. While it is clear what types of negative ethnic stereotypes occur in everyday life, recent research has not captured enough to what extent positive ethnic stereotypes, such as the model minority stereotype, might affect ethnic minorities.

Thus, this thesis investigates in which ways stereotypes occur in different media types, how ethnic stereotypes in media influence ethnic minorities in terms of their identity and especially, how the portrayal of Asians affects Asians themselves with respect to the model minority stereotype. After an initial review of available literature, it is worth noting that most of the research employed refers to Asian Americans. However, since the model minority stereotype concerns Asians in all Western countries, the terms “Asian” and “Asian American” are used interchangeably for the purposes of this thesis.

By discussing communication and media theories such as cultivation theory, selective exposure theory, and social identity theory, this thesis assesses to what degree the prior exposure to and the selection of stereotypical media messages are interrelated. Furthermore, published research primarily in the fields of psychology, sociology, and communication is employed in order to demonstrate what effects media stereotypes have on ethnic minorities.

This thesis concludes with recommendations on how ethnic stereotypes perpetuated by the media can be challenged. The proposed findings have important implications for scholars, health professionals, advertisers, journalists, policy makers, and any active media users or consumers for a more ethical and accurate representation of ethnic minorities.

This thesis is concerned with the following research questions:

- How are stereotypes of ethnic minorities constructed in public media?
- How are ethnic minorities influenced by ethnic stereotypes in regard to the formation of their identity?
- How does the model minority stereotype affect Asians in regard to the formation of their identity?
- How can stereotypes be challenged at a communication level?

1.3 The structure of this paper

Starting with chapter two, a general overview of the definition of stereotypes will be provided based on three different approaches. Subsequently, readers will gain an understanding of the role that media play in producing and reproducing stereotypes about ethnic minorities. Furthermore, this chapter clarifies how ethnic stereotypes may vary between different media types.

Chapter three is devoted to three theories of mass communication, namely cultivation theory, selective exposure theory, and social identity theory. These theoretical frameworks help explain how stereotypes are constructed in public media and point to the importance of considering individuals' media choices and the purposes for which users consume specific media content. Chapter four sheds light on the model minority stereotype, which describes Asians as high achieving, disciplined, intelligent, and free of problems. It highlights how Asians are homogenized by the media, particularly with regard to their academic and socioeconomic achievements. In addition, chapter four examines the discrimination, racism, and prejudice Asians have to endure in times of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter five investigates the effects of ethnic stereotypes on ethnic minorities. Based on the theories of stereotype threat and stereotype lift, this chapter explains how stereotypes can lead to achievement gaps among ethnic minorities. Moreover, it illuminates the lasting negative consequences the model minority stereotype has on Asians in terms of academic performance, gender roles, body images, and mental health.

In chapter six, readers will find recommendations on how ethnic stereotypes can be combated at a communication level. Apart from emphasizing the need for critical media literacy skills and counter-stereotypes, the chapter concludes with important implications for professionals working with Asians in order to dispel the model minority stereotype.

2 Media and ethnic stereotypes

2.1 Definition of stereotypes

The concept of stereotypes was first introduced by Lippmann (1922) in his book “Public Opinion”. He referred to stereotypes as “pictures in our heads” which represent individuals’ connection between facts and reality and the subjective interpretation of them in order to comprehend the world.

According to the theory of social categorization, stereotypes arise from category-based responses to other people centered on social distinctions such as race, gender, and age. In other words, in order to make sense of others, people construct categories often based on visually prominent and culturally relevant features (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). In general, stereotypes are based on associating certain characteristics or traits with a group of people, often considered as negative overgeneralizations made by socially dominant groups about socially oppressed groups (Gaur, 2020, p. 711). In short, a stereotype can be referred to as an “oversimplified idea about a group based on some preconceived assumptions.” (Taylor, Mafael, Raithel, Anthony, & Stewart, 2019, p. 1537). However, in order to understand where such overgeneralized beliefs come from, it is important to consider different approaches.

Social science has established three approaches to stereotypes. Phelps (1972) and Arrow (1973) follow an economic approach which considers stereotypes as a manifestation of statistical discrimination. It occurs when economic decision-makers, such as employers, have incomplete information about individuals whom they interact with and use group averages or stereotypes to justify the information gap. For instance, if an employee is less productive due to historic discrimination, each individual of this group is expected to be less productive.

The sociological approach concerns only social groups and views stereotypes as false and derogatory generalizations of group characteristics. Marginalized social groups like ethnic minorities continue to be oppressed due to negative and incorrect stereotypes perpetuated by groups in power. Thus, stereotypes form the basis for prejudice and discrimination (Bordalo, Coffman, Gennaioli, & Shleifer, 2016, p. 1754).

The third approach is based on social psychology and regards stereotypes as special cases of cognitive processes, which are intuitive generalizations that are regularly, and often unconsciously, used by individuals in order to make information processing about other people easier. In this case, stereotypes are sometimes considered as “mental representations of real differences between groups”, meaning that to some extent, stereotypes are representations of

the reality to which an individual is exposed to (ibid., p. 1755). As a result, stereotypes essentially function like social schemas, which are cognitive frameworks that make processing information about others easier and provide expectations for the behavior of others (Tian, Yang, & Chuentarawong, 2021, p. 3).

2.2 Stereotypes of ethnic minorities in media

Apart from the basic tasks of information, education, and entertainment, media play an important role in producing and reproducing beliefs about society and, in particular, beliefs about certain subgroups within our society. What is often presented in media is a selection of certain assumptions, ideologies, or opinions that underlie a worldview of society (Elias, 2018, p. 307). Thus, media are one of the most influential forces on societal attitudes and significantly contribute to activating stereotypes.

For instance, African Americans are disproportionately shown as criminals who display negative traits such as laziness and violence in a variety of media outlets (Gaur, 2020, p. 711). These media generated stereotypes of African Americans reinforce and perpetuate hostile prejudices against Black people (Jin, Pei, & Ma, 2017, p. 2).

There is evidence that mass media can produce and reproduce prejudiced beliefs through the repeated dissemination of one-sided, stereotyped portrayals of minority groups (Kroon et al., 2021, p. 181). However, recent research has mainly examined the effects of negative ethnic stereotypes rather than the consequences of positive stereotypes (Czopp et al., 2015, p. 451). One minority group against which individuals often hold positive stereotypical beliefs is Asians. Asian people are perceived as a group that succeeds educationally and economically and are thus typically referred to as the “model minority”. While primarily sounding positive, such positive stereotypes, which are also perpetuated by the media, can lead to several negative effects (Alt et al., 2019, p. 656).

Accordingly, critical questions remain regarding the relationship between ethnic stereotypes generated by the media and the consequences of such stereotyped content on ethnic minorities, especially in relation to the model minority stereotype of Asians.

2.3 Ethnic stereotypes in different media types

Different media forms and genres are constrained by norms, conventions, and capabilities, which is why audiences may be exposed to one-sided images of ethnic minorities, or not see them at all. Thus, it is important to recognize how certain groups are clustered within specific media types and genres (Mastro, 2015, p. 3).

According to Tukachinsky, Mastro, and Yarchi (2017, p. 539), prime time television offers fictional characters with whom viewers can identify and form emotional connections, which in turn facilitates persuasion and contributes to internalizing social stereotypes. The way in which ethnic minorities have been portrayed on television has been a topic of controversy and criticism since the early introduction of the medium. Depending on the racial or ethnic group, differences exist concerning the number and quality of portrayals. Nonetheless, there are some commonalities in terms of the types of roles and characterizations associated with Black and Hispanic people.

Historically, Black people have been significantly underrepresented and portrayed unfavorably in the media. Over the time, the number of African Americans shown in entertainment media has reached parity with U.S. population figures. Furthermore, although the negative depiction of Black people in prime time entertainment television has improved over the decades, African Americans are still commonly portrayed as violent criminals on television and in print news and are underrepresented as victims compared to real crime statistics (Appel & Weber, 2021, p. 153). The combination of depicting African Americans as successful professionals in TV fiction, on the one hand, and portraying them as criminals in TV news, on the other, promotes the stereotype of a group which has every opportunity to succeed but fails due to a natural inferiority (Behm-Morawitz & Oritz, 2013, p. 253).

Despite amounting to 16% of the U.S. population, only 2% to 5% of the people displayed on prime time television are Latino Americans (Mastro, 2015, p. 3). While traditional stereotypes associated with Latinos in genres such as dramas have begun to disappear, Latino characters still regularly remain unflattering, objectified, and subservient. Moreover, increasing attention by politicians and television news to the issue about illegal immigration contributes to the stereotypical portrayal of Latinos as a group which is poor, dangerous, and criminal (Appel & Weber, 2021, p. 153).

Like other entertainment media, video games are a powerful source of reproducing stereotypes of societal groups. For instance, Black characters are frequently linked with violence, which perpetuates the stereotype that Black people are violent individuals. Furthermore, recent research shows that popular game titles reproduce common stereotypes of racial and ethnic minorities (Behm-Morawitz, Hoffswell, & Szu-Wei Chen, 2016, p. 308).

An experiment by Yang, Gibson, Lueke, Huesmann, and Bushman (2014, p. 698) demonstrated that playing an African American avatar can activate negative stereotypes toward Black people for White individuals. This indicates that people who play violent video games as violent Black characters tend to believe that Black people are violent individuals and additionally, those players have increased aggression against other players.

As far as advertising is concerned, minorities used to be underrepresented in television advertisements, being more likely to be portrayed in background roles or in a stereotypical manner. While the frequencies of displaying minorities have increased over time, certain racial and ethnic groups continue to be depicted in stereotypical roles. For instance, African American males are overrepresented as athletic figures and celebrities, but rarely depicted in romantic settings. Moreover, Latinos tend to be shown in home settings, promoting electronics and food, whereas Asians are frequently shown in business settings or technology advertisements (Taylor et al., 2019, pp. 1537-1538).

New media, especially the Internet, enable immediate interaction with media content and with other users, as well as the individual generation of media content. Hence, the Internet provides a platform for marginalized groups and minorities to voice their alternative views and opinions, in a way that is uncommon for traditional media outlets. New media allow members of minority groups to create their own content and make it available to mass audiences, bypassing gatekeepers in traditional media and contributing to a more realistic representation. Despite this potential, frequently accessed online content seems to follow the same patterns as in traditional media. For instance, online sports coverage exhibits racial biases consistent with those found in televised sports. In addition, user-generated content, like on YouTube, contains many of the same ethnic stereotypes as traditional media channels (Tukachinsky, 2015, p. 191).

While there is a range of recent research focusing on the issues of African Americans and Latinos (Gordon, 2016; Tukachinsky et al., 2017), media depictions of Asians are so uncommon, that little content analytical work has been done to investigate the media imagery of this minority group. However, what is known is that their roles across the media landscape often embody the stereotype of a “model minority” (Behm-Morawitz & Oritz, 2013, pp. 254-255), which will be scrutinized in more detail in chapter 4.

Although explicit racism in the media has significantly decreased over the past few years, stereotypes of racial and ethnic minorities perpetuated by the media remain problematic. In order to gain a better understanding such media imagery, it is necessary to consider not only changes over time and differences among ethnic minorities, but also the notable variations that exist in media representations of minorities based on the medium and the type of content.

3 Theoretical framework explaining the construction of media stereotypes

3.1 Cultivation Theory

As the links between media and ethnic stereotypes become increasingly apparent, it becomes imperative to focus attention on theoretical frameworks in order to gain a clearer understanding of how stereotypes are constructed in public media. In more particular, a combination of three mass communication theories, namely cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), selective exposure theory (Festinger, 1957), and social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974), will help explain the relationship between media and ethnic stereotypes.

Cultivation theory provides important insights into how mass media in general might interfere with consumers' attitudes, views, and beliefs. Originally, cultivation theory suggests that increased exposure to media shapes the audience's conception of social reality. It proposes that the worldview of heavy TV consumers corresponds with the world as presented on television. In more particular, the theory highlights the positive correlation between the extent of television consumption and the perception of prevalence of crime. In other words, viewers who frequently watch TV with violent content may consider the world to be more dangerous than it actually is. Taking this into consideration, cultivation theory also provides a theoretical framework to explain the effects of television's stereotypical depiction of ethnic minorities on viewers' perceptions of minorities. According to cultivation theory, heavy exposure to ethnic stereotypes on TV cultivates the audience's view of ethnic minorities (Gerbner & Gross, 1976).

Gerbner, Gross, and Signorielli (1980, pp. 10-29) established two additional phenomena, which take the possible different outcomes of the cultivation effect into account: mainstreaming and resonance. The concept of mainstreaming implies that heavy television viewing reinforces similarities among otherwise divergent individuals, while differences in perception, attitude, or behavior blur. Thus, divergent TV viewers develop a homogenous, mainstream perspective of reality which is cultivated through heavy exposure to the same television content. Resonance refers to the amplification of the cultivation effects, when the actual lived reality of the viewer is closer to the settings shown on television.

However, cultivation theory was originally applied only to traditional mass media outlets such as television, and therefore may not explain media effects in an online environment. On the Internet, users are able to select and create their own content, designed specifically around their interests. Thus, it is important to consider more current theories that focus on the influence of online media channels and explain the relationship between online media consumption and the

construction of ethnic stereotypes (Intravia & Pickett, 2019, p. 618). These theoretical frameworks include social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974) and selective exposure theory (Festinger, 1957).

3.2 Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory provides the foundation for explaining stereotyping and offers useful insight regarding media content choices as well as stereotypical information distribution in a digital environment. The theory proposes that individuals tend to categorize people into groups to which they belong to, for instance based on race, as the in-group, and those who are different as the out-group. Consequently, in-group members seek negative aspects of out-group members in order to enhance their self-image (Tajfel, 1974).

In other words, individuals generally prefer to maintain a positive social identity, which is why they create favorable comparisons for their in-group, for example White people, and make negative judgements and evaluations about out-group members, such as Black people. Furthermore, social identity theory provides a fundamental explanation for the association between media portrayals and media consumers' attitudes. Once stereotypes are formed, they lead media users to make judgements about others based on their group identity (Gaur, 2020, p. 713).

Since media consumers are consistently exposed to information about the features of different groups in society, mass media play an important role in defining and creating shared group norms and stereotypes. Thus, media images represent the social value and status of certain groups. Moreover, the selection of media content which reinforces self-identity contributes to maintaining ethnic group identity (Mastro, 2015, p. 5).

Taking everything into consideration, social identity theory helps explain why users might purposely seek and share media content which promotes out-group stereotyping. Individuals are driven to choose attitude-consistent information as they wish to maintain a positive image of their in-group (Velasquez, Montgomery, & Hall, 2019, p. 150).

3.3 Selective Exposure Theory

Classic theoretical frameworks such as selective exposure remain pivotal in our interactions with digital media. The foundation of the selective exposure theory is based on the cognitive dissonance theory, which refers to the feeling of mental discomfort that occurs when one's beliefs contradict one's behavior. Selective exposure asserts that individuals tend to choose information which reinforces and aligns with their existing beliefs and views (Festinger, 1957). Intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954) and recent research in the fields of communication (Wojcieszak & Azrout, 2016) suggest that exposure to out-group members in media can have positive effects on intergroup relations and effectively reduce stereotypes. As media discourse is one of the main sources from which people construct attitudes about ethnic groups, and because establishing contact through online media channels is easier than seeking direct face-to-face-contact, the positive effects that media can have on prejudice are usually in the foreground (Schieferdecker & Wessler, 2017, pp. 993-994).

However, in today's high-choice media environments, media users have tremendous freedom to consume specific, self-selected content and can thus easily choose content that primarily portrays their own ethnic group and avoid content that focuses on out-group members (ibd.). In line with social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974) and as described in chapter 3.2, media users might prefer content which depicts members of their own social group in desirable ways in order to enhance their self-esteem, while selecting content in which out-group members appear less frequently or are depicted in less favorable ways. Consequently, social identity plays an important factor in media selection and media selection processes might be crucial factors in perpetuating stereotypes.

Digital media have changed the way people seek, interact with, and are exposed to news and information. Unlike traditional media, where "one to many"-communication primarily takes place, the Internet allows users to actively produce, engage with, and share information with one another in their social network (Weeks, Lane, Kim, Lee, & Kwak, 2017, p. 363).

Therefore, the Internet facilitates seeking out information which reinforces and conforms with one's interests or opinions, while avoiding content contradicting one's views. Additionally, users continue to be exposed to content aligning with their existing beliefs and behavior due to the algorithms of social media. And because online users are able to easily select specific content, they can shape their media consumption just to confirm certain stereotypes about out-group members (Parmelee & Roman, 2020, p. 2).

It is important to note that social contexts, such as peer groups and personal networks, are crucial factors in influencing one's media choices, as online users tend to adapt the preferences of their friends. Consequently, a more diverse interpersonal network or more out-group contacts might decrease group-related selection biases (Schieferdecker & Wessler, 2017, p. 997).

Knobloch-Westerwick's (2012) works on selective exposure theory have inferred that the driving force behind selective exposure is social utility. This means that individuals make decisions about their media consumption based on their potential future social interactions and that they evaluate in what way their social media usage might create social utility. As a result, media users select media messages based on the expected effects of available media messages, and their motivations for exposure will then shape their interpretation of the messages.

It can be summarized that in order to understand how ethnic stereotypes are constructed in public media, we must not only know how the media establishes and reinforces stereotypes, but also consider the media choices of individuals and for what purposes users consume specific media content. After understanding how stereotypes surface in the media with the help of theoretical frameworks, it is important to examine the effects that ethnic stereotypes constructed by the media have on ethnic minorities, such as Asians.

4 Asians as the model minority

4.1 The model minority stereotype

Past research has primarily scrutinized negative ethnic stereotypes and not taken the consequences of positive ethnic stereotypes enough into consideration (Czopp et al., 2015, p. 451). Positive ethnic stereotypes refer to favorable beliefs held about ethnic minorities and are thus often deemed more harmless, inoffensive, and acceptable compared to negative ethnic stereotypes. Despite the complimentary nature of positive stereotypes, they entail several negative effects, especially for individuals targeted by them, which will be discussed in chapter 5 in more detail (Alt et al., 2019, pp. 655-656).

Asians are most commonly recipients of such positive stereotypes since they are perceived as the model minority. The model minority stereotype, or model minority myth, refers to a minority group, in most cases Asians, that is seen as successful, hardworking, intelligent, and free of problems. Therefore, Asians are frequently portrayed as being financially successful, mathematically skilled, and technology-savvy by the media (Shih et al., 2019, p. 414).

Today, Asian Americans are one of the fastest growing minority groups and represent nearly 6% of the U.S. population. However, aggregated data have been used to reinforce the model minority myth by disregarding social and educational disparities as well as the high degree of cultural and ethnic diversity among Asian American communities. As a result, the experiences that Asian people face with racism seem less severe and legitimate than those of other ethnic minorities. (Azhar, Alvarez, Farina, & Klumpner, 2021, p. 2).

In opposition to this myth, Asian people have historically been, and continue to be, a significant target of racism and discrimination. In fact, Asian Americans have been confronted with racism and discrimination since Chinese immigrants' arrival in the late 1840s, being recruited as cheap labor supply to work in California's gold mines and construction of railroads. As a result of their hard work and the increasing number of Asian Americans, they were portrayed as the "yellow peril" by the media for a century – a racist term to describe Asians as a threat to the Western world (Shih et al., 2019, p. 415).

The negative depiction of Asians took a turn with William Petersen, the first person who used the term "model minority" in his 1966 New York Times Magazine article "Success Story, Japanese-American Style" in order to praise the hard work of Japanese Americans and their integration into American society (Petersen, 1966). According to Petersen, Japanese Americans have achieved great success despite enduring enormous injustices and racial discrimination in

times of World War II, which other racial minorities such as African Americans could not achieve. The success of Japanese Americans was attributed to their strong work ethic, family values, and genetics. Thus, the model minority myth was manufactured in order to pit Asians against other racial and ethnic minorities, especially Black people (Lee, Duesbery, Han, Thupten, Her, & Pang, 2017, pp. 3-4).

Other U.S. citizens and the media soon followed the use of the term “model minority” and applied prevalent stereotypes such as obedience, discipline, and socioeconomic success to other Asian ethnic groups. Since then, Asians have been portrayed as intellectual overachievers and naturally successful. For instance, Asian Americans have been referred to as “whiz kids” by media headliners (see Figure 1). Petersen’s article heavily influenced television, advertising, magazines, and movies, which strongly perpetuated the model minority stereotype of Asians (ibd.).



Figure 1. Cover of TIME magazine on August 31, 1987 (Linshi, 2014)

4.2 Portrayal of Asians in the media

Although the term Asian American refers to over 50 different ethnic groups from Southeast Asian, East Asian, and South Asian descent residing in the United States, the media tends to homogenize Asian Americans as a group. Thus, the diversity that exists within Asian American cultures is hardly ever accurately represented by the media (Besana, Katsiaficas, & Loyd, 2019, p. 205).

The model minority stereotype of Asians is prevalent in and reinforced by mainstream media. More precisely, the stereotypical depiction of Asians in the media is most often linked to certain product types, such as technology-based or business-related products. Studies have shown that advertisements featuring Asian models promoting high-tech products generated more positive reactions than those with White models, whereas ads depicting Asians with products associated with convenience or social status did not elicit positive responses (Yoo, 2020, p. 912).

Media are often used to confirm and reinforce a dominant ideology. Thus, it is evident that Asian American men were not only racially discriminated and exploited by labor conditions in the 19th century, but they were, and still are, also depicted as feminine, subservient, and infantile by the media. A lack of diverse sexualities among Asians, especially men, represented in movies perpetuates the stereotype of Asian men being asexual. In general, while Asian men were mostly desexualized, Asian women were rarely represented in the media other than in an exotic and hypersexualized context (Sun, Liberman, Butler, Lee, & Webb, 2015, p. 297).

Mass media have a significant influence on perpetuating gender-biased stereotypes and communicating cultural standards of beauty. Asian women are regularly either exoticized and hypersexualized or portrayed as delicate, obedient, and submissive by the media, exemplified by the image of a “dragon lady” or “china doll”. At the same time, Asian American women are common targets of discrimination based on common natural features of their physical appearance such as slanted, small eyes or flat noses (Tran, 2020, p. 353).

While Asian women are heavily objectified and sexualized in films, they are often absent in beauty or clothing-related advertisements and fashion magazines. Despite the increase in portrayal of Asian women as professional and intelligent, the image of exotic beauty remains common, if Asian models are seen in beauty advertisements at all (Snell & Tsai, 2017).

Furthermore, Tran (2020, p. 353) emphasizes the cultural significance of the model minority stereotype, which portrays Asians as a minority group which has perfectly assimilated into White U.S. society, in influencing Asian American’s concept of beauty. With their desire to conform to prevailing social norms, Asian American women tend to adopt White beauty

standards such as bigger eyes, prominent nose bridges, and slender figures. However, the complexity of beauty cultures among Asian communities is often neglected by only taking beauty standards of East Asians into consideration.

Regarding portrayals in films, an analysis by Sun et al. (2019) showed that as the Asian American population grew significantly over the past few years, there has also been an increase in the number of Asian characters in movies. Furthermore, there were representations of Asians which resisted stereotypes, especially in more recent films. Among other things, these stereotype-resisting representations include romantic interests of playful female characters as well as male Asian characters, which counter ethnic stereotypes of Asian women being shy or Asian men being undesirable.

However, a stereotypical depiction of Asians being nerdy, successful, and disciplined remain prevalent, which upholds the model minority stereotype. For instance, award-winning shows such as “Grey’s Anatomy” have introduced characters like Dr. Cristina Yang, an overachieving Asian American medical doctor with several academic degrees (Assalone & Fann, 2017, p. 422).

4.3 Academic achievements and socioeconomic status of Asian Americans

The model minority stereotype asserts that Asians are free of problems and high academic achievers, which in turn generates the belief that Asians do not need any assistance in attaining educational success. The high academic achievement of some Asian American groups, which is often attributed to their cultural heritage, conceals the lower achievements and educational obstacles of other Asian Americans. Like other racial and ethnic minorities, Asian Americans face many systemic and institutional barriers which are often denied by referring to oversimplified statistics about their educational and economic attainment. While aggregated data have been used to reinforce the model minority myth and to display a general high educational performance of Asian Americans, a more intensive analysis of subgroups is required to demonstrate the obstacles they face in attempts to succeed academically (Cui, 2019, p. 72).

Contrary to the model minority myth, there is clear evidence that educational achievement varies strongly among Asian subgroups. For instance, a study by Lee et al. (2017, p. 22) demonstrates that Cambodian American, Laotian American, and Vietnamese American students are often not ready to enter college due to linguistic problems and significant lower

scores in math compared to their White American peers. The academic performance of these students is heavily influenced by their (familial) socioeconomic status.

Furthermore, disaggregated data indicate that nearly half of Asian American college students choose to attend community colleges rather than colleges of four years. The lower tuition fees, open admissions, and lighter workload of community colleges contradict the stereotypes which are usually applied to the educational needs of Asians. Ultimately, Asian Americans have become one of the most misunderstood communities in higher education due to oversimplified aggregated data. They often suffer silently from unrealistic expectations due to societal pressures and the model minority stereotype (Assalone & Fann, 2017, p. 423).

Asian Americans are misunderstood not only in terms of their academic achievement, but also with regard to their economic status. Aggregated data show that overall, Asian Americans have the highest average household incomes and lowest poverty rates as compared to other racial and ethnic minority groups. Based on this, the general image of Asians being financially wealthy has been created, which reinforces the model minority stereotype. However, just like with academic attainments, there are great disparities among Asian Americans when it comes to household incomes (Shih et al., 2019, p. 417).

For instance, while Indian Americans and Filipino Americans earn an average household income of \$80,000 to \$95,000, there are certain groups with a different national origin such as Cambodian, Hmong, or Laotian Americans, whose median household income is below the national average. In fact, data from 1970 to 2016 demonstrate that the income gap among Asian Americans is far wider than among any other racial or ethnic group in the U.S., which at the same time is a representation of the different structural conditions of these groups. For example, while Indians and Filipinos have selectively migrated to the U.S., tending to have high academic levels and employer-based visas, Southeast Asians immigrated to the United States primarily as refugees with a low educational achievement (ibid.).

To sum up, the portrayal of Asian Americans as advantageously privileged and successful both academically and economically is based on oversimplified aggregated data, which only focus on the success of a few groups among the total Asian American population. This, in turn, distorts the real socioeconomic status of Asian Americans and obscures the hardships they face in terms of educational and economic needs.

4.4 Discrimination against Asians during COVID-19

Between the 1890s and 1950s, Asian Americans were targets of structural racism and called the “yellow peril”, which refers to the fear that Asian immigrants would pose a threat to Western culture. The negative association with Asians took a turn in the 1960s. Ever since then, Asian individuals have been portrayed as the model minority – a group that is law-abiding and high achieving compared to other minorities. However, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the public image of Asians as “model minorities” has been shifted back to being the “yellow perils” (Cho, 2021, p. 1).

As the coronavirus disease has rapidly spread across the United States since 2019, many Asians have been victims of physical attacks, verbal harassment, and vandalism which can be attributed to racial hostility. In March 2020, Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Civil Rights Organizations launched the Stop AAPI Hate project to track incidents of hate crimes and discrimination against Asians during the pandemic. Since then, more than 3,000 reports of anti-Asian violence have been received (Wu, Qian, Wilkes, 2021, p. 819). Although anti-Asian hate crimes were most commonly reported in the U.S., racist and xenophobic behavior has been demonstrated across the globe. However, the association between diseases and racism is not new in history (Jan, 2021, p. 102764).

In the face of a crisis like a global pandemic, individuals tend to disassociate themselves from the threat while blaming others, such as foreign countries or minority groups. Historic examples include blaming Jews for tuberculosis or French people for syphilis. Since the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan, China, many Americans have been blaming Asians as a group for the disease, which at the same time emphasizes the stereotype that all Asians have connections to China and look the same. Consequently, hate crimes against Asian Americans have been on the rise. For instance, health care workers of Asian descent have had to regularly experience verbal slurs or patients refusing treatment from them, and Asian teenagers have been physically assaulted in public spaces. Even the unemployment rate among Asians has been increasing as Asian businesses were forced to shut down due to people avoiding places like Chinatowns (Li & Nicholson, 2021, p. 5).

Chinese people have become the most common victims in the UK, with 76% of people of Chinese ancestry reporting that they have experienced a direct racial slur at least once. With COVID-19, race-based violence has been prevalent in the UK. For instance, a Chinese student was verbally and physically abused for wearing a mask while walking alone in Sheffield (Gao & Sai, 2020, p. 184).

Politicians played an important role in constructing and exacerbating hatred against Asians during the pandemic. Political leaders such as former president Donald Trump have frequently called the coronavirus the “Chinese Virus” or “Wuhan Virus”. Furthermore, Senator Tom Cotton propagated the conspiracy theory that the virus was made by Chinese scientists as a biowarfare weapon. Narratives like these were soon adopted by the general public and other politicians, which reinforced xenophobia and hostility against Asians (Li & Nicholson, 2021, pp. 5-7).

Mainstream media have also been crucial for contributing to anti-Asian discrimination. Images and videos of Asians eating insects and unusual animals, such as a woman eating bat soup, have been circulating on social media or in news stories. Additionally, news outlets such as New York Times have used images of Asians and Chinatown in their articles about the coronavirus outbreak (see Figure 2), even though the content was not related to Asians in any way (ibid).



Figure 2. Facebook post from New York Times in March 2020 (Roy, 2020)

Other news outlets and radio hosts have disseminated various conspiracy theories about COVID-19, calling it “Wuhan virus”, and used Sinophobic slurs, which eventually reached various social media platforms. Figure 3 shows an Instagram story with an example of a violent threat against Asians in New York Chinatown (ibid.). As people increasingly rely on local news and social media due to physical and social isolation, the widespread negative stereotypes and

rhetoric used by government officials and mainstream media blaming Asians play an important role in promoting prejudice and racism against Asians (Tsai, Phua, Pan, & Yang, 2020, p. 2).



Figure 3. Violent threat against Asians on Instagram (Li & Nicholson, 2021, p. 5)

To sum up, between the “yellow peril” and the “model minority”, contradictory stereotypes about Asians seem to coexist to this day. While the stereotype of the model minority has long been used to describe Asian people, the “yellow peril” discourse often comes to the fore in times of competition or crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. All of this suggests that, contrary to previous studies, race still plays a vital role, and that Asians are treated as “forever foreigners” in the United States. Furthermore, the media significantly contribute to the stereotypical portrayal of Asians and other ethnic minorities. The consequences of such ethnic stereotypes perpetuated by the media are discussed in more detail in chapter 5.

5 Effects of ethnic stereotypes on ethnic minorities

5.1 Influence of ethnic stereotypes perpetuated by the media

As it is clear now that media convey stereotypical information about features of different groups in society, especially ethnic minorities, these media portrayals influence the perceptions of, behaviors toward, as well as the identity of these social groups. For instance, a study showed that individuals who rely on media to obtain information about Muslims hold stronger stereotypical beliefs about, show negative attitudes toward, and support harmful policies targeted at Muslims (Sommer & Kühne, 2021, p. 479). For this reason, it is crucial to investigate the effects of ethnic representations in the media.

Theoretical approaches provide an explanation for the relationship between mass media and ethnic stereotypes, as described in chapter 3. For instance, cultivation theory posits that if a certain image is repeatedly presented by preferred media channels, viewers tend to integrate it into their own worldview and heavy media consumers are more likely to adopt the beliefs and attitudes which are conveyed by those media (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Furthermore, social learning theory suggests that new skills and behaviors are learned by imitating others. Thus, if individuals consider the portrayal of a fictional character whom they identify with, because they share the same ethnicity, for example, as realistic, imitation is more likely to occur (Bandura, 1977).

Consequently, these theories also indicate that stereotypical portrayals in the media can create a society in which ethnic minorities might think and behave according to the perpetuated stereotypes. A study by Gordon (2016, pp. 195-220) showed that an increased exposure to and strong identification with stereotypical media portrayals were correlated with the academic underachievement among African American youth. The results presented that Black youth who consumed more media, and identified more strongly with stereotypical media personalities, had lower grades, lower academic self-perceptions, and less interest in careers that require a college education. The association between media portrayal and low academic performance may be due to media messages suggesting that Black people are not capable of academic success.

According to social identity theory and as discussed in chapter 3.2, individuals tend to seek negative aspects of out-group members while viewing members of their own group positively in order to enhance their self-image (Tajfel, 1974). Furthermore, research has found that when individuals are reminded of negative traits of their social group, they are more likely to distance themselves from that identity. Disidentification is common when an in-group identity is

threatened and individuals want to avoid associations with negative stereotypes, which is the foundation of stereotype threat (Yip, 2015, p. 39). The basic theories of stereotype threat will be discussed in more detail in chapter 5.2.

While it is obvious that negative media depictions of ethnic minorities have critical consequences for intergroup relationships and harm their self-esteem, the influences of positive stereotypes perpetuated by the media are often neglected. Based on social identity theory, individuals are motivated to maintain a positive self-concept (Tajfel, 1974). By endorsing positive stereotypes of one's social group, valued and distinctive identities may be established and the potential threat of negative stereotypes can be countered, which helps to build a positive self-image. This can lead to stereotyped group members perceiving and accepting themselves according to the positive stereotype. Furthermore, positive stereotypes may also result in a boost in performance within the stereotyped domain, which will be scrutinized in more detail in chapter 5.2 (Czopp et al., 2015, p. 453).

While there seem to be a few advantages from the personal acceptance of positive stereotypes, they often entail subtle but substantial negative consequences, which will be investigated further in chapter 5.3, where the self-identity, academic achievements, and perceptions of Asians influenced by the model minority stereotype are discussed. In conclusion, ethnic stereotypes perpetuated by the media do not only influence how others perceive ethnic minorities, but also how ethnic minorities perceive themselves. This, in turn, might affect their identify and have a significant impact on their academic career, for instance.

5.2 Stereotype threat and stereotype lift

Stereotypes influence not only others' judgements about ethnic minorities, but also the self-perception of ethnic minorities and even their own performance on important tasks. While positive stereotypes can sometimes prove to be beneficial and lead to an improved performance due to greater self-confidence, negative beliefs might create negative self-fulfilling prophecies and result in poorer performance (Czopp et al., 2015, p. 454). The fear of confirming a negative stereotype about one's racial, ethnic, gender, or cultural group is called stereotype threat, which has long been a contributing factor to racial and gender gaps in academic achievements (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Stereotype threat is elicited in situations in which individuals are confronted with negative stereotypes against the group they identify with (e.g. women are bad at math, Black people are criminal) and feel at risk of knowing a stereotype might be applied to oneself. Consequently,

these individuals will underperform on stereotype relevant tasks due to the anxiety which was caused by the stereotype threat. Since the psychological state of stereotype threat is discomforting, individuals tend to avoid negatively stereotyped tasks in the future. Thus, a continuous experience with stereotype threat might cause individuals from stereotyped groups to disassociate themselves from the stereotyped domain, such as academics. This explains why women might stop pursuing leadership positions or African Americans might quit school early. (Shafer & Rivadeneyra, 2020, p. 2).

Considering the prevalence of stereotypes in the media, media stereotypes might trigger negative associations with certain minority groups. Therefore, media are a main source of stereotype threat. Negative media portrayals constrain stereotyped group members in cognitive tasks, which ultimately leads to a disassociation from the negatively stereotyped domain. Thus, the connection between media stereotypes and academic performances or career preferences of stereotyped groups become evident (Appel & Weber, 2021 p. 155).

While stereotype threat concerns how negative stereotypes can harm the performance of stereotyped individuals, the activation of stereotypes can sometimes also cause an improvement in performance through stereotype lift. Stereotype lift occurs when individuals are exposed to negative stereotypes about another group which they do not identify with, and downward comparisons are made. An example includes when men are confronted with a negative stereotype about women. Hence, nonstereotyped individuals show no disassociation from the stereotyped domain or a decreased performance. In fact, these individuals will experience a boost in performance (ibid., p. 156).

Since the model minority stereotype was initially constructed to pit Asian and Black people against each other, it involves a stereotype lift frame. In contrast, the prevalent negative stereotypes about Black individuals are associated with stereotype threat. For example, a recent study showed that Asian students performed better on a math test when they were asked to consider themselves in terms of their Asian identity (intelligent, self-disciplined, overachievers) compared to the Asian participants who did not receive such a prompt (McGee, 2018, p. 4). Therefore, positive stereotypes might actually increase performance.

While it is apparent now that negative stereotypes impair the cognitive performance of negatively stereotyped individuals and positive stereotypes can enhance performance under conditions of stereotype threat or stereotype lift, it has also been found that positive stereotypes can invoke a range of negative consequences. Despite the complimentary nature of positive stereotypes, targets of such stereotypes may feel depersonalized because these individuals are acknowledged solely on the basis of their membership in a category and they might be under

the constant pressure of high expectations. Similar to stereotype threat, positive stereotypes often prevent stereotyped individuals from seizing achievement-related opportunities. For instance, positive self-stereotyping among Black college students, such as considering all Black people as athletic, might lead to less interest in higher education. Similarly, women might avoid STEM-related majors or careers because they are pressured to confirm expectations of positive stereotypes. Asians who endorse the model minority stereotype are particularly affected by negative consequences of positive stereotypes, which will be discussed in more detail in chapter 5.3 (Czopp et al., 2015, p. 455).

5.3 The influence of the model minority stereotype on Asians

Although the model minority stereotype appears to be positive at first, it can have lasting negative consequences for Asians. The model minority myth portrays all Asians as successful, hardworking, and disciplined. This overgeneralization creates the impression that Asians do not experience any difficulties and thus overlooks the significant diversity and various struggles among Asian communities, which also leads to their exclusion from research and policy considerations. Additionally, the stereotype contributes to the illusion that racism is no longer an issue in the United States and that Asian Americans do not experience racial discrimination, although they have faced racism and various forms of oppression since the 1840s to the present (Shih et al., 2019, p. 413).

When Asians are referred to as the "model minority," other racial minorities such as African Americans or Latinos are simultaneously devalued. While depicting Asians as well assimilated and successful overachievers, other racial groups have been criticized for not trying hard enough in education or in society at large. By pitting minority groups against each other, attention is drawn away from the severe issues of institutional racism and structural inequality that each minority experiences differently (Lee et al., 2017, p. 3).

Considering that media can affect one's identity development both positively and negatively, it is important to note that media portrayals of Asians often lack diversity and do not reflect the cultural complexity. Such misrepresentations may harm the identity development of Asians and create a sense of not being fully recognized or valued in society. When Asians see such stereotypical portrayals in the media, they might internalize such misrepresentations and believe that there are fewer obstacles, such as racial discrimination, to their success compared to other racial groups (Law, Kim, Lee, & Bau, 2019, p. 945).

Furthermore, a continuous exposure to the model minority stereotype in the media may put pressure on Asians to conform to these representations, which could negatively impact their mental health and identity development (Yoo, 2020, p. 916). However, the perceived homogeneity of Asians does not only shape the self-image of Asians, but also how others perceive them. Exposure to media content which confirms stereotypes about Asians can cause negative attitudes and behaviors from other racial groups and, consequently, problematic intergroup behaviors such as discrimination, racism, or microaggression (Besana et al., 2019, p. 218).

Alt et al. (2019) have found that ethnic minorities who speak up when confronted with positive stereotypes suffer higher evaluative costs and are viewed as less favorable by others than those who confront negative stereotypes or do not confront at all. This explains why many Asians may choose to remain silent when confronted with the model minority stereotype because they are aware that they could put their relationships and reputation at risk if they speak up.

5.3.1 The pressure of academic achievement

The model minority myth assumes that all Asians are intelligent overachievers who do not need institutional assistance or educational resources in order to succeed academically. This image raises unrealistic expectations, holding Asian students to higher standards compared to any other racial group, and puts pressure on them to meet these stereotypes. Based on social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974), Asians may internalize the model minority stereotype in order to conform to group identity and believe that they must be successful and outperform other ethnic groups. The high expectations placed upon Asian individuals might damage family relations – as the children may not live up to their parents’ expectations – and cause mental health issues such as depression. While Asians are perceived as high achievers, they are also most likely to be rejected by their peers because they are portrayed as "nerds" with poor social skills. Thus, Asian students may experience bullying and alienation, leading to school dropouts, while they are hesitant to seek help (Shih et al., 2019, p. 422).

There are cases where the pressure placed on Asians by their parents, teachers, and peers might even lead to suicide, especially among Asian women. Noh (2018, p. 319) demonstrates how the model minority stereotype contributes to suicidality among Asians in the following three ways:

- (a) the pressure to succeed creates unbearable stress for individuals as they try to live up to the stereotypical image of Asian American success, particularly within racist and sexist “cultures of terror” that are structured to hinder success, as well as within the “fractured realities” created by the socio-cultural divisions between home and work or

school environments; (b) the dissimulation of the myth as a social fact influences Asian American women to internalize model minority expectations and thus blame themselves if they are unable to succeed, which they perceive to be the result of individual failure; and (c) the image of model success contributes to Asian American women becoming overlooked in the distribution of needed help and resources, further exacerbating their suicidal conditions.

As discussed in chapter 4.3, aggregated and oversimplified statistics have been used to reinforce the model minority stereotype and mask the socioeconomic needs of Asians. While the myth exclusively focuses on selective success stories of a few Asians, it ignores issues such as poverty, wealth disparities, and mental health issues among other groups (Shih et al., 2019, p. 423). By assuming that all Asians are problem-free and inherently successful, they are often excluded from developmental programs, financial resource regulations, affirmative action, and public policy discussions regarding mental health. As a result, the educational needs as well as psychological problems of Asian students are often neglected (Assalone & Fann, 2017, p. 422). According to the theoretical frame of stereotype lift, as explained in chapter 5.2, Asians benefit from positive stereotypes when dealing with cognitive tasks. However, the seemingly positive model minority stereotype may impair the performance of Asians by placing undue pressure on them and making them feel that they must conform to the high standards. For instance, a study showed that Asian American women who were reminded of their ethnic identity before a math test performed worse than participants who were not reminded of their heritage (Czopp et al., 2015, p. 455). Here, it is important to note that positive stereotypes stated by an out-group member, such as a White person, may cause more negative consequences than when it comes from an in-group member (ibd.).

5.3.2 Influence of gender roles and body images

The diversity which exists within Asian cultures is rarely accurately captured in the media, especially when it comes to gender representation. While Asian women are often sexualized and simultaneously portrayed as submissive and docile, Asian men tend to be desexualized and depicted as nerdy and socially awkward by the media. Therefore, some Asians might consider their ethnicity as a limiting factor in their perception of their own attractiveness. Furthermore, the misrepresentation harms the self-esteem, body image, and thus the identity development of Asians (Besana et al., 2019, p. 205).

The model minority assumes that Asians have perfectly assimilated into the society of the United States. The belief that Asians want to conform to prevailing social norms has led Asian American women to adopt White beauty standards, which include a preference for large eyes,

prominent nose bridges, and slender figures. This, in turn, has caused increased dissatisfaction with their own bodies and greater motivation for race-specific cosmetic surgeries, such as double eyelid surgery. Furthermore, exposure to American media ideals of thin White American women might contribute to body shame and eating disorders among Asians (Wong et al., 2017, p. 297). However, since the term “Asian American” encompasses various ethnic groups, the beauty culture within their communities is highly complex, which is often dismissed by depicting all Asians as “looking the same”. At the same time, the constant portrayal of certain groups from East Asia as representative of all Asian Americans constructs hierarchies that neglect the experiences of non-East Asian groups (Tran, 2020, pp. 353-354).

It has not only been found that the lack of diverse body shapes and beauty ideals in the media can negatively affect one’s self-esteem and body image, but also that heterosexual discourse dominates among Asians in movies. The invisibility of diverse sexualities in media may contribute to queer Asians feeling isolated and unvalued in society, and also hinders an exploration of sexual identity (Besana et al., 2019, pp. 220-221).

5.3.3 Impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of Asians

The outbreak of COVID-19 has led to a spike in racism, discrimination, and hate crimes against Asians, especially in the United States. Previous research has shown that racial discrimination can negatively impact the well-being of ethnic minorities as it causes feelings of rejection or exclusion by society (Feinstein, Goldfried, & Davila, 2012; Benner et al., 2018). Thus, the increasing anti-Asian discrimination and prejudice during the pandemic contribute to poorer mental health and depressive symptoms among Asians (Pan, Yang, Tsai, & Dong, 2021, p. 2). Recent studies have investigated the rise of anti-Asian racism during COVID-19 and how it harms the mental health among Asians. For instance, Liu, Finch, Brenneke, Thomas, & Le (2020) have found that the increased perception of COVID-19 associated discrimination has caused increased mental distress among Asians. Another study by Zhai and Du (2020) shows that, since the outbreak of the pandemic, international Chinese students have not only had to worry that their families in China are at risk of an infection, but they also had to endure discrimination and isolation or witness hate crimes against other Asians. Constant fear and negative experiences might be critical factors contributing to mental health disorders among Asian students.

It is worth highlighting that people’s usage of social media has increased significantly since the onset of COVID-19. As misleading media coverage continues to stigmatize and blame Asians

for the spread of the coronavirus, social media plays an influential role in disseminating racism-related content and in activating prejudice against Asians. Given the algorithms and selective exposure patterns, social media usage during this period increases the probability of being exposed to anti-Asian hate and can thus lead to greater risk for mental disorders among Asians. Based on cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), the more individuals consume and trust social media along with the perpetuated conspiracy theories, the more likely they would perceive Asians as a realistic threat (Tsai et al., 2020, p. 11).

After considering the impact of stereotypes on ethnic minorities, and, in particular, how Asians are influenced by the model minority myth, it is important to examine ways in which ethnic stereotypes can be combated. Chapter 6 provides an overview of recommendations on how stereotypes can be challenged at a communication level.

6 Combating ethnic stereotypes

6.1 Critical media literacy skills

Media influence the way individuals perceive themselves and others and strongly contribute to the creation and perpetuation of stereotypes about minority groups. The detrimental consequences of ethnic stereotypes point to the urgent need for developing media literacy skills, which involves the ability to critically analyze, develop, and consume media messages in order to reduce racial and ethnic prejudice. Media literacy works as a strategy to improve interracial relationships and to counter the negative influence of media messages on audiences' stereotypical perception of ethnic minorities (Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2015, pp. 172-174).

The aim of media literacy interventions is to encourage individuals to deconstruct and critically evaluate media messages and to recognize the intentions of media producers. Media literacy programs have been successfully used to reduce gender stereotypes, improve body images and racial attitudes among students. Furthermore, critical media literacy does not only emphasize the evaluation of different aspects of media messages, such as embedded values or persuasion tools, but it also considers in which way one's own sociocultural background and identity, such as race, can affect how messages are interpreted (Erba, Chen, & Kang, 2019, p. 5).

Scharrer and Ramasubramanian (2015, p. 183) suggest that educational institutions should implement media literacy education with a focus on coherent curricula and a complementary analysis of media stereotypes. In addition, current examples from media content that young people can relate to should be used, while a "top-down" teaching approach should be avoided. Instead, young people should be actively involved in the curriculum. Media literacy interventions among young people play an important role in overcoming racial bias against ethnic minorities and promoting an acceptance of diversity. According to Berman & White (2013, p. 46), developing media literacy skills among young people is crucial as they build a sense of self in a social environment with pervasive and unrealistic images in a variety of forms. With young people's usage of social media on the rise, educators and teachers should also encourage dialogues about inequalities in social media representations. By teaching students to become critical online consumers, they are able to use social media platforms as a tool of resistance to challenge stereotypical discourses about ethnic minorities (Pang & Hill, 2018, p. 783).

Sun et al. (2015) argue the importance of teaching media literacy combined with a comprehensive approach which does not only critically analyze media images, texts, and audiences, but also the political economy. Given that mainstream media in the United States are primarily produced for profit and largely owned by five global companies, namely Amazon, Apple, Google, Facebook, and Microsoft, it is crucial to teach students how media systems are organized. By gaining a contextual understanding of media images and knowing why and how they are produced, people are able to think beyond existing stereotypes, dominant ideologies, and corporate systems, and can thus produce alternative images.

Another important step in combating stereotypes is to put media portrayals of ethnic minorities on the public agenda by expanding media literacy programs to parents and communities outside of schools. Education and increased social awareness will make media consumers more critical and resilient to harmful media effects, while facilitating the public discourse required to change stereotypical representations of ethnic minorities (Tukachinsky, 2015, p. 196).

6.2 Counter-stereotypes

While exposure to positive as well as negative stereotypes in the media reinforces prejudice, counter-stereotypes reduce stereotypical thinking. Counter-stereotypes refer to portrayals which counter, challenge, or resist widely held beliefs of a group. An example of this is the representation of African Americans as law-abiding and peace-loving, as this contradicts the prevalent stereotype that Black people are violent and criminal. Past studies reveal that exposure to counter-stereotypes works toward reducing the prevalence of various stereotypes. For instance, when participants were shown counter-stereotypical images of a female surgeon or a male nurse, they exhibited significantly weaker gender bias on a subsequent task (Finnegan, Oakhill, & Garnham, 2015). Similar effects were observed when individuals were exposed to counter-stereotypical exemplars related to race, such as admired Black celebrities, which reduced racial bias (Ramasubramanian, 2015). The results of these studies suggest that counter-stereotypes prompt people to refrain from stereotyped and structured thinking, which ultimately leads to more positive intergroup relations (Gocłowska, Crisp, & Labuschagne, 2013, p. 218). In essence, counter-storytelling can be used as a tool to bring attention to the silenced experiences and stories of minorities while questioning normalized dialogues which perpetuate ethnic stereotypes.

Although stereotypical images persist, the landscape of entertainment media seems to be changing in recent years as programming becomes more diverse. Progressive storytellers focus

on more authentic portrayals and complex characters, resisting historical stereotypes. Contemporary examples of counter-narratives pertaining to race and ethnicity which appear on television include: ABC's "Grand Hotel" or CW's "Jane the Virgin", which are TV shows that depict Latin American families as luxury hotel managers, or recent box office films such as Marvel's "Black Panther", the first big-budget superhero story with a Black hero and a predominantly Black cast (Ramasubramanian, Winfield, & Riewestahl, 2020, pp. 263-265). Furthermore, identification with counter-stereotypical fictional minority characters can be a powerful tool to reduce symbolic racism and prejudice (Dunn & McLaughlin, 2019). Counter-stereotype interventions effectively increase the perceived variability of minority groups by highlighting the out-group members who do not fit into traditional stereotypes, which consequently reduces prejudice and discrimination. Thus, a combination of media literacy education and exposure to counter-stereotypical media content could potentially work together to change misrepresentations, resist harmful media effects, and improve intergroup relationships. At the same time, mainstream media need to actively promote more diverse and counter-stereotypical stories, characters, and content to combat the harmful effects of both positive and negative stereotypes (Ramasubramanian et al., 2020, p. 271).

6.3 Social Media as a coping strategy during COVID-19

While social media creates room for racism, the development of new media platforms provides opportunities for user-generated content, which allows niche audiences from all over the world to engage in political and social debates. In recent years, platforms like Twitter or Instagram have been heavily used to promote movements and hashtag activism such as #BlackLivesMatter in order to raise awareness about minority groups and to fight against mainstream stereotypes (Ramasubramanian et al., 2020, p. 266). Furthermore, digital media offer marginalized individuals a platform to voice their alternative views and produce their own content for mass audiences (Tukachinsky, 2015, p. 191).

Especially in times of the COVID-19 pandemic, social media with circulating hashtags such as #WuhanVirus or #KungFlu have been instrumental in perpetuating stereotypes and discrimination against Asians. However, the use of social media also has the potential to oppose negative stereotypes or racism. Campaigns like #RacismIsAVirus or #IAmNotAVirus (see Figure 4), which have been promoted on channels such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, have helped to counter hate and prejudice against Asians (Croucher, Nguyen, & Rahmani, 2020, p. 2).



Figure 4. #IAmNotAVirus campaign (Riley, 2020)

As Yang, Tsai, & Pan (2020) point out, Asians have been using social media as a coping tool in the face of increased discrimination during COVID-19. It has been found that private messaging as well as posting and commenting were associated with better well-being among Asians. Since private messaging often takes place among close associates, it is closely related to perceived social support, which contributes to a better well-being. Similarly, public posting and commenting can serve as a form of self-representation, where one is able to share personal experiences, which leads to receiving positive feedback and greater social support. In contrast, online browsing was associated with poorer well-being among Asians (see chapter 5.3.3). Browsing during the pandemic raised concerns among Asians about further discrimination, as prejudice and hate speech against Asians were prevalent on social media during this period. This suggests that private messaging, posting, and commenting, but not browsing, can be used as a tool to cope with discrimination and stereotypes and are associated with better well-being. The Facebook group Subtle Asian Traits (SAT) with over 1.9 million members has become a main online destination for people of Asian descent to reflect on the experiences of being Asian during the pandemic. Founded in 2018 by Asian-Australian teenagers, SAT is known for the celebration of memes, jokes, food traditions, and trends surrounding Asian culture. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the Facebook group has evolved into a space to cope with the rise of anti-Asian sentiment. In approximately 1,200 daily posts, members of SAT share their personal experiences with the increasing prejudice and hate crimes against Asians, for example, in the form of self-deprecating or humorous stories about their discriminatory encounters, as can be seen in Figure 5 (Abidin & Zeng, 2020, pp. 1-3).



Figure 5. Screenshot of an SAT post joking about being avoided in public (Abidin & Zeng, 2020, p. 2)

Thus, SAT is considered as a coping strategy to counter racism and serves as a platform where members of the Asian community can find resonance and support by sharing their own feelings. Furthermore, SAT members regularly provide advice on self-defense or problem-solving solutions to help Asian businesses in crises (ibd.).

In summary, providing more platforms for ethnic minorities which allow them to share their experiences and express their alternative views will not only challenge dominant stereotypical discourses, but also help them to cope with discrimination and racial prejudice.

6.4 Recommendations for professionals working with Asians

Knowing how ethnic minorities, particularly Asians, cope with and fight against prejudice, it is important to consider implications for professionals working with Asians in order to combat the model minority stereotype.

Since the model minority myth often leads to the exclusion of Asian students, efforts should be made to improve multicultural education. Apart from teaching critical media literacy skills, activities should be developed and implemented which focus on the diversity among Asians and counteract their homogenous image. As a basis for their curriculum, educators can use historical materials, such as print magazines that reinforce the model minority myth, and

encourage students to decontextualize stereotypical representations (Wang, 2014, p. 38). Furthermore, educational institutions can benefit from incorporating diversity coachings into multicultural programming to establish culturally sensitive faculty, staff, and students (Assalone & Fann, 2017, p. 432).

The model minority stereotype assumes that Asian students are overachievers who all succeed academically, especially in STEM fields. Therefore, school administrators and educators must be aware that while some Asians are successful, others face obstacles and are in need of educational resources and support. Furthermore, in order to dismantle the model minority myth, teachers should encourage Asian students to fully explore their abilities and potential rather than having them hastily commit to STEM subjects (Shih et al., 2019, p. 424).

However, the detrimental consequences of the model minority stereotype have important implications for more than just educators. As discussed in chapter 5.2, stereotype threat and stereotype lift are crucial sources of achievement gaps among ethnic minorities. Thus, Appel and Weber (2021, p. 169) suggest that anyone who can communicate stereotypes to large audiences, such as YouTubers, journalists, or movie producers, should be aware of the consequences stereotype threat. Making recipients aware of stereotype threat generated by the media could be a way to reduce harmful effects on minorities. Furthermore, Yoo (2020) suggests that advertisers should be cautious in using stereotypical portrayals since the depiction of Asians has mostly been associated with certain product types such as technology-related products, further confirming the model minority stereotype.

As the model minority stereotype creates a barrier for Asians not only in their education, but also in their promotion and career advancement, it is important for professionals at the managerial level to develop policies that address racial disparities and support Asian workers. Recognizing that there are poverty, income and wealth inequalities, as well as a lack of mental and physical health services in some Asian communities, it is recommended that social and public policy discussions include Asians who are in need of social and health services (Shih et al., 2019, p. 424).

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, anti-Asian discrimination has been on the rise, harming the mental health of Asians. This underscores the urgent need to change traditional news discourses. Rather than blaming ethnic minorities, emphasis should be put on scientific evidence and the responsibility of political institutions to create effective solutions, which ultimately will reduce disease-related racial prejudice. Furthermore, it is important for public health organizations to develop credible message on social media and mobile news apps in

order to combat racial prejudice and hate against Asians in times of COVID-19 (Tsai et al., 2020, p. 11).

Croucher et al. (2020, p. 10) suggest that governments should develop campaigns to explicitly fight against prejudice and racism during the pandemic. While governments of countries such as New Zealand, Australia, or Canada have established campaigns on various media channels to educate their populations on the risks of COVID-19 and prevention measures, such campaigns should also address racist hate crimes and anti-Asian discrimination by directly discussing the social costs of COVID-19 prejudice.

Given that Asians are less likely to seek mental health care than any other ethnic group, it is critical to respond to anti-Asian discrimination by, for example, investing in mental health services and community-based interventions. Public policies aimed at mitigating mental health problems in times of a global crisis must address hate, violence, and discrimination experienced by Asian people. Since health professionals play an important role in combating racism, it is imperative to ensure that medicine as a field continues to be inclusive of all minorities (Wu et al., 2021, p. 831).

On a more general level, the influences of the model minority stereotype on Asians have significant implications for mental health awareness. Prevention, detection, and outreach programs should be implemented to promote help-seeking behaviors among Asians. In particular, it is important for therapists and clinicians to consider the impact of the model minority stereotype on Asians. In order to provide culturally responsive treatment, mental health professionals need to understand how social and cultural factors, as well as the model minority stereotype, affect Asians' experiences and use of mental health services (Cheng, Chang, Brien, Budgazad, & Tsai, 2017, p. 578).

7 Conclusion

7.1 Summary and answer to the research questions

Media stereotypes about ethnic minorities remain one of the most challenging and controversial issues today. Thus, this thesis investigates the detrimental effects of ethnic stereotypes in media, especially with regard to the model minority stereotype. In particular, this thesis has provided important insights into the following four research questions:

RQ1: How are stereotypes of ethnic minorities constructed in public media?

In order to answer this question, it is important to review and combine theoretical frameworks such as cultivation theory, social identity theory, and selective exposure theory.

Cultivation theory provides the basic explanation for why long-term exposure to media stereotypes might affect people's perception and attitudes toward ethnic minorities. If mass media constantly depicts certain groups in stereotypical ways, it is possible that audience members will acquire such biased perceptions of stereotyped individuals as shown in the media, regardless of reality.

Social identity theory posits that we feel better about ourselves by negatively judging out-group members, which forms the basis of stereotyping. This theoretical perspective also provides a clearer understanding of a common motive behind the consumption of stereotypical content, which is to boost one's own self-esteem and to maintain a positive image about one's own group. Here, the media plays an important role in creating and reinforcing group-based attributes, resulting in disseminating certain stereotypes of minorities.

With the rise of digital media, the way information is shared and consumed has changed drastically. Selective exposure is a crucial theoretical framework for online communication and indicates that self-reinforcing search behaviors and selecting information which aligns with one's pre-existing views contributes to upholding stereotypes.

RQ2: How are ethnic minorities influenced by ethnic stereotypes in regard to the formation of their identity?

Ethnic stereotypes influence the perceptions of, behaviors toward, as well as the identity of ethnic minorities. Stereotypical portrayals in the media can create a society in which ethnic minorities might think and behave according to the perpetuated stereotypes. Based on the theoretical approaches of cultivation theory and stereotype threat, increased exposure to and identification with stereotypical media portrayals might harm self-esteem and result in poorer performance on important tasks among negatively stereotyped individuals. This highlights the

link between media stereotypes and low academic achievement or lack of career interest among stereotyped ethnic minorities.

While negative stereotypes can impair the cognitive performance of negatively stereotyped individuals, positive stereotypes can enhance performance under conditions of stereotype lift. However, it has also been found that positive stereotypes can invoke a range of negative consequences. Not only can positive stereotypes steer targets away from achievement-related opportunities, but they often create feelings of depersonalization and lack of recognition in society, which ultimately harms the identity development of positively stereotyped groups. The detrimental effects of positive stereotypes can be seen in the impact of the model minority stereotype on Asians.

RQ3: How does the model minority stereotype affect Asians in regard to the formation of their identity?

Although the model minority stereotype may seem positive at first, it can have lasting negative consequences for Asians. The overgeneralization that all Asians are successful and free of problems contributes to the invisibility of Asians in the distribution of much needed help and resources related to education and mental health, while overlooking the significant diversity and various struggles among Asian communities. The stereotype contributes to the illusion that Asians do not experience racial discrimination, which can be clearly refuted by the increasing anti-Asian prejudice and hate crimes during COVID-19. In the United States, Asian Americans are not truly considered “Americans” and are stereotyped either as the model minority or the yellow peril. The seemingly contradictory stereotypes highlight the marginalized status of Asians as “forever foreigners”.

Aggregated and oversimplified data create unrealistic expectations and put pressure on Asians to conform to the model minority stereotype, while reinforcing the notion that Asians should keep quiet about their struggles. In addition, the lack of diverse beauty ideals and gender portrayals in the media negatively affects self-esteem and body images of Asians. Ultimately, Asians may internalize the model minority myth, and because the portrayal of Asians often fails to reflect cultural complexity, such misrepresentations might severely damage mental health and cause identity development issues.

RQ4: How can stereotypes be challenged at a communication level?

In order to combat stereotypes, four guidelines have been derived:

First of all, the detrimental consequences of ethnic stereotypes call for the urgent need to develop media literacy skills. This involves the ability to critically analyze, develop, and consume media messages in order to challenge ethnic stereotypes.

Secondly, it has been proven that counter-stereotypes effectively reduce stereotypical thinking as they challenge and resist widely held beliefs about a group. Counter-stereotypes raise awareness about the variability and diversity that exists among minority groups and can thus change misrepresentations.

Thirdly, providing platforms for ethnic minorities which allow them to share their experiences and express their alternative views will challenge stereotypical discourses and help oppressed individuals to cope with racial prejudice. In the light of COVID-19 related anti-Asian discrimination and hate crimes, Asians have been increasingly using social media as a coping strategy.

Lastly, this thesis has important practical implications for communication, education, public policy, and healthcare professionals who work with Asians. Apart from developing media literacy skills, it is of utmost importance for educators to enhance multicultural education by incorporating diversity coachings in order to counter the stereotypical homogenous images of Asians. In general, anyone in a position to communicate stereotypes to large audiences, as well as professionals at the managerial level should be aware of the detrimental effects the model minority myth. Given the rise of anti-Asian racism during COVID-19, news should place more emphasis on scientific evidence, and politicians need to develop campaigns that directly address racial discrimination against Asians. In this context, mental health programs should promote help-seeking behaviors among Asians, and to ensure culturally responsive treatment, therapists need to take the impact of the model minority stereotype into consideration.

7.2 Discussion of the results and limitations

This thesis has numerous implications which may help ethnic minorities see the influential power of media stereotypes and how they might affect the identity of stereotyped individuals. Apart from revealing how ethnic stereotypes are constructed in public media, this paper provides valuable information and strategies to reduce the negative effects of ethnic media stereotypes.

Previous research has primarily focused on the influences of negative stereotypes but has not captured enough to what extent positive stereotypes, such as the model minority stereotype, might affect ethnic minorities. Research on stereotypes toward Asians also remains limited, despite the fact that they are one of the fastest growing populations.

Therefore, the proposed findings of this work have important implications for media and communication scholars to focus research attention on the effects of not only negative but also

positive stereotypes and to represent ethnic minorities in more ethical and accurate ways. Especially with regard to the model minority stereotype, it is of utmost importance for those who interact and work with Asians to take the consequences of this myth into consideration. Ultimately, it becomes imperative to translate such research into practice by engaging directly with media producers, health professionals, educators, and policy makers in order to combat harmful effects of ethnic stereotypes.

Although this thesis addresses important gaps in the current literature, it is not without limitations. For one, this work might be geographically constrained, as it focuses heavily on media formats predominantly in the United States. Furthermore, most of the employed literature addressing the model minority stereotype refers to Asian Americans, while Asians in other Western countries, such as in Europe, are neglected. Thus, this imbalance may constrain the generalizability of this thesis.

Another limitation concerns the lack of consideration of the diverse cultural backgrounds among Asian ethnic groups. This thesis examined stereotypical portrayals of Asians that primarily describe the images of Asians from East Asian countries such as China, Korea, or Japan, which might construct hierarchies that neglect the experiences of non-East Asian groups. Finally, due to the limited scope of this paper, the growing influence of Asian pop culture into Western mainstream culture has not been adequately addressed. Given the increased and improved representation of Asians and their culture in entertainment media, it is important to investigate whether these rising trends, such as K-pop, will further overshadow the issues experienced by Asians or contribute to dismantling the model minority stereotype.

7.3 Outlook and future research

Within the scope of this work, theoretical frameworks such as cultivation theory have been employed in order to understand the construction of media stereotypes. However, since such theories originally apply only to traditional mass media outlets and the media environment is constantly changing, these approaches may not explain media effects in online media channels. Thus, this thesis can be considered as a starting point for communication science scholars to increase their efforts at reviewing classical theories in a more contemporary sense.

Several limitations in this thesis regarding the geographical and cultural focus of the model minority stereotype provide opportunities for future investigations. Both quantitative and qualitative research can be conducted to deepen our understanding of the impact of the model minority myth on Asians in Western countries other than the United States. Moreover, with the

increasing discrimination against Asians during the COVID-19 pandemic, and considering that coronavirus will not disappear overnight, it would be important for future research to continue to observe and examine the social costs of a global health crisis with regard to racial prejudice. Lastly, given the lack of available literature and empirical findings on the current rise of Asian pop culture, there is a need to invest in further empirical research in order to assess whether these trends are more likely to positively or negatively impact Asians in relation to the model minority stereotype. Overall, this thesis contributed to a clearer understanding of the effects of ethnic stereotypes, particularly the model minority stereotype, and provided recommendations for combating stereotypes to improve the well-being and identity development of ethnic minorities.

8 Bibliography

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