“He’s prettier than me”:

Comparing Cross-Racial Perceptions of Asian-American Masculinity

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Abstract

This study seeks to explore understandings of masculinity by comparing perceptions of Asian/Asian-American masculinity between Asian-American women and White American women. Asian men have historically been stereotyped as being effeminate and void of sexuality, which has put them at a social and cultural disadvantage in the U.S.; a place that upholds hegemonic masculinity as the only suitable gender expression for males. Through conducting qualitative focus groups, four heterosexual White American women and four heterosexual Asian-American women express their differential perceptions of Asian/Asian-American masculinity by drawing comparisons between beauty standards in the U.S. and in Asia. Out of a total of three focus groups, two were selected for final coding and thematic analysis. The results indicate that perceptions of Asian/Asian-American masculinity are heavily influenced by common stereotypes and culturally differing definitions of masculinity. The findings suggest that both Asian-American women as well as White American women, even after controlling for sexual attraction to Asian/Asian-American men, found these men to be effeminate and frequently portrayed through media in a desexualizing manner. Analysis across focus groups revealed the following salient themes identified by the participants: feminizing language, culturally differential definitions of masculinity, and masculinity as it is gauged by the level of effort put into appearance.

Keywords: Asian-American, masculinity, beauty, stereotypes, feminizing, emasculation

Comparing Cross-Racial Perceptions of Asian-American Masculinity

The feminization of Asian men is a phenomenon that has roots in the historical oppression of the Asian race in the U.S. and persists today in the various ways that media portrays Asian/Asian-American men. This tendency to presume Asian/Asian-American men to be effeminate is imperative to study, as it stands in stark contrast to the ways that Asian/Asian-American women are perceived and portrayed through media, raising valid questions about why there exists such a discrepancy in the qualities we attribute to men and women of Asian descent. Moreover, the feminization of Asian/Asian-American males promotes problematic internalized racism and therefore can induce psychological distress unique to this racial minority (Lu & Wong, 2013). It is important to deconstruct this discourse to understand the larger sociopolitical structures that generated this mentality in the first place, and to hopefully dismantle the harmful myths that circulate about Asian/Asian-American masculinity that continue to disadvantage this racial group.

Research on this phenomenon is quite prevalent among cultural communication scholars, who often frame the issue in terms of historical oppression of Asians' in the U.S., particularly in the late 1800's when anti-Asian sentiment was high (Chen, 1996). Many researchers presume that the feminization of Asian-American men is specifically a result of legal structures that limited opportunities for Asian-American men throughout history (Chen, 1996; Park, 2013; Wu, 2014). Particularly influential on modern day stereotypes was the limited access that Asian/Asian-American men had to Asian/Asian-American women, who were not permitted in the U.S. for some time due immigration policies, many of which were structured around the fear of prostitution that often characterized these women (Park, 2013). Furthermore, anti-miscegeny laws also limited romantic opportunities for Asian-American men with white women,

leaving the majority of Asian-American men at the time without romantic prospects or hope of having a family.

The classic (Western) hegemonic masculinity is defined by the archetypal straight, white, land-owning male, and leaves little room for much else to be considered masculine. In keeping with previous attempts to emasculate Asian/Asian-American men, the U.S. legal system further emasculated them by making it illegal for them to own property at the time of anti-Asian sentiment (Chen, 1996; Lu & Wong, 2013). Insofar as Americans at the time were concerned, Asian/Asian-American men were thus, by definition, not masculine; as they were neither white, sexualized, nor property-owning (Park, 2013). Another historical trend that influences the feminization of Asian-American men is the type of labor they were relegated to, which is often deemed feminine labor (Chen, 1996; Park, 2013). This was most exemplified in the cleaning industry, (laundry; dishwashing) as society commonly attributes such duties to women. That being said, even the jobs available to Asian-American men reflect the tendency of Western culture to attribute feminine qualities to these immigrants.

With this context of the lonely, non-property owning, feminine laborer in mind, it becomes clear that legal policies of the past helped in forming this widespread essentialism of Asian-American men as effeminate, and consequently robbed these subjects of their masculinity (Park, 2013; Wong, Horn, & Chen, 2013; Wu, 2014). In tracing the historical roots of Asian-American male feminization, modern-day perspectives become relevant, as they may further confirm the origins of feminization and offer social and linguistic tools to challenge these stereotypes. Perhaps if people understand where their feminizing perspectives originated, they may be able to understand their problematic nature, which would hopefully prompt increased awareness of this phenomenon. With this in mind, I propose the following research question:

RQ: How, if at all, do heterosexual White American women and Asian-American women differ in their perceptions of Asian/Asian-American masculinity?

Analysis of the data led me to conclude that both racial groups viewed Asian/Asian-American men as effeminate despite their sexual attraction to them. Furthermore, participants were able to trace these perceptions back to common stereotypes of Asian men being considered feminine as well as culturally differing definitions of masculinity. In what follows, I will present the methodology employed, the salient themes identified by the participants, and the implications of these findings on Asian-American culture and communication.

Method

The research for this study utilized qualitative methods and was conducted through two race-specific focus groups. Qualitative methods were employed for their unique ability to exact rich information that may be neglected through the use of other research paradigms. The method took the form of a focus group to illustrate the ways these individual opinions interact to form group perspectives, which are potentially telling of larger cultural viewpoints. Using a phenomenological lens, the data on Asian/Asian-American masculinity garnered from the focus groups were coded through constant comparison upon undergoing thematic analysis. The study sought to compare the perceptions from two different racial groups—White American women and Asian-American women—on Asian/Asian-American masculinity. Perceptions of masculinity were closely linked to perceived attractiveness of the male subject to the female participant.

Data Collection

Participants.

Researchers divided the sample of eight heterosexual undergraduate females into two race-specific groups: one comprised of Asian-American women, and one comprised of White American women. For confidentiality purposes, the participants elected to create their own pseudonyms: Josephine, Jo, Gwen, and Ruby, who all identified as heterosexual Asian-American women; and Becca, Lily, Samantha, and Betty, who all identified as heterosexual White American women. Participants reside and study in Northern California, where the study was conducted.

Procedures.

The study was conducted at a private University Northern California in the Fall of 2016. Focus groups were held in private conference rooms on campus and were purposely divided by race. The latter measure was taken to ensure a sense of in-group security enabling free expression of opinion toward a different racial group. Snowball sampling was used to gather participants, half of which received extra credit in their Communication Studies courses for their participation. This sampling method was used primarily to have a wide reach as well as to draw on the researchers' Asian-American social networks.

The focus group started generally by getting a sense of the participants' identities and proceeded through gauging participant knowledge of Asian-American men in the U.S. in terms of both popular culture and personal experience. Upon that assessment, participants were asked more detailed questions that aimed to get a sense of their individual (and ultimately group) definitions of masculinity, their potential attraction to Asian/Asian-American men, and their opinions on the differential beauty standards in Asia and the U.S. Additionally, participants were asked to evaluate two different sets of images of Asian/Asian-American men to analyze the extent to which media and common stereotypes influenced their perceptions of masculinity and

consequently, their level of attraction to these men (to view a complete list of the interview guide questions, see Appendix A). Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim upon gaining participant verbal consent, and they lasted an average of one hour in length for a total of twenty-nine pages of transcriptions.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis of the data began with the process of open coding, wherein major concepts were identified from the data set. I coded by extracting the statements that were relevant to my research question, compiling them into one document, and creating memos on the document throughout the coding sequence to identify salient themes. Then, the selected data underwent axial coding, which allowed for deeper textual analysis and helped to solidify and confirm the conceptual themes that emerged throughout the transcripts. Throughout the coding process, the method of constant comparison was implemented to derive commonalities and discrepancies across participant accounts.

Results

Interpretation of the data revealed the following salient themes that characterized participants' perceptions of Asian/Asian-American masculinity: a) Feminizing language, b) Cross-cultural differences in the definition of masculinity, and c) Masculinity as it is determined by the amount of effort put into male physical appearance. These themes, their implications, and limitations are further discussed in the remainder of this section.

Feminizing Language

In addition to the majority of participants explicitly stating that they had the tendency to perceive Asian-American men as effeminate, almost all of them—including those who rejected the feminization of Asian/Asian-American men—subtly communicated this perception through

the use of feminizing language. Park (2013) refers to this implicit practice as "female gendering," wherein heteronormative mentalities lead individuals to characterize those lacking normative masculine traits (a common characterization of Asian/Asian-American men) as feminine (p. 5). Among the Asian-American females, this practice unfolded as they evaluated images of South Korean celebrities. Gwen, a Vietnamese-American, indicates: "For me, every time I see them [K-pop icons] I'm like, they're prettier than I am." The word "pretty" typically connotes femininity, and is thus not used to describe males; making this application illustrate how subtle word choices can function to feminize Asian/Asian-American males.

This trend also held true for the White American women, who either exoticized or infantilized Asian/Asian-American men through language use. It should be noted that both of those classifications are usually geared toward females; rendering the men who are classified as such non-masculine (Chen, 1996). When asked to describe an image of an Asian-American man, Becca—a White American woman—claims "he just looks kinda like a ghost and it's cute… he's a little cutie pie, like I want to make him soup or something." "Cute," much like the word "pretty," is typically reserved for women and children and when it is applied to men, it is usually received as an insult (Lu & Wong, 2013). If operating under the assumption of Wong et al. (2013) that masculinity is tied to perceived attractiveness, then it is safe to say that infantilizing a man—likening him to a child—does not denote sexual or physical attraction. Rather, these classifications reflect a maternal orientation toward Asian/Asian-American men that invalidates their perceptions of themselves as masculine.

However, the tendency to gender Asian/Asian-American men as female was just as often explicitly stated as it was subtly conveyed through language. In the following excerpt,

participants used their individual evaluations to form group perspectives on their assessment of images of South Korean celebrities:

Becca: I don't think, like the one with the long hair, I don't think a lot of people would be down with that, they'd be like "ugh, you look like a woman, you can't do that!"

Samantha & Lily: Yeah

Betty: Agreed, the long blonde hair is just like, I think it's a hard pill to swallow

Moderator: What about it, is it too—

Betty: Too feminine.

As evidenced in lines 2-6, all of the White American female participants viewed the man in the image with long hair as being too feminine, likely because long hair is typically reserved for women and often is considered inappropriate for men. Josephine, a Chinese-American woman, overtly remarked on what she considered to be the norm-violation of men having long hair: "I don't know I feel like, like guys you know should be short haired." When asked why that was, Josephine explained that she thought long hair was too feminine.

Participants' accounts indicate that whether it exists as an implicit feeling or an explicit attitude, female gendering of Asian/Asian-American men is nevertheless common. Even though all eight participants found at least one of the male images sexually/physically attractive, they all asserted that one or more of these images portrayed a very effeminate Asian/Asian-American man. That being said, perceptions of these men as feminine existed even after controlling for participant sexual/physical attraction, illustrating just how widespread and common this emasculating tendency is.

Cross-Cultural Differences in Definitions of Masculinity

In both focus groups, all eight participants expressed a belief that both beauty standards and definitions of masculinity vary across cultures, and that there are significant discrepancies in these standards in the context of Asia versus the U.S. In a study by Wong et al. (2013) of cross-racial perceptions of the masculinity of White, Black, and Asian male subjects; findings show that an overwhelming majority of women perceived black men as having the highest levels of masculinity, whereas Asian men were considered to have the lowest levels.

As detailed in the previous section, this sentiment regarding Asian/Asian-American men was upheld by all of the participants, who expressed that men of this racial group often appear to be more feminine than whites or men of other ethnicities. However, participants in both groups (the white focus group especially) explained that these perceptions were the result of culturally differing beauty standards and definitions of masculinity, as Lily—a White American woman—remarks:

> In American society and culture, it's more like, masculinity is based off of what males have, so they have more testosterone so their voices are deeper, and they tend to get more facial hair, and so they have bigger muscles and stuff like that. That's kind of how masculinity is perceived…I think in more Asian cultures, it's based more off of—just from what I know—or what I can gather, it's more off of their qualities and the masculine qualities and like taking pride in their look, it's not as much of that ruggedness, and I kind of think in America the more rugged the more attractive.

The rest of the White-American female participants agreed with Lily's classification of the U.S. definition of masculinity and maintained that masculinity is a matter of cultural and racial preference. Similarly, the women in the Asian-American group intimated that what it means to be masculine is represented differently in different cultures. Gwen, Josephine, and Ruby

expressed the belief that the Asian conception of masculinity had less to do with physical characteristics, and was more concerned with style and persona:

Ruby: Yeah. I feel like the guys in America get away with a lot like how they dress and stuff… Like skaters…They're grimy and they don't wash themselves and that's like attractive for some reason...Honestly guys, I feel like they're [Asian/Asian-American men] a lot cleaner and like well groomed, they take—it seems like they take care of themselves.

Gwen: Like Asian international students, they dress really—the guys especially. I mean guys and girls they both like dress really really nice like every day…

Ruby: I know they have their Gucci loafers.

This excerpt reveals the ways in which the definition of masculinity differs between Asia and U.S. considerably, with style and prestige resembling Asian masculinity, and the bearded "rugged mountain man," as Becca called it, resembling American definitions of masculinity.

This reveals a potential explanation for the common research finding that states that men and women (especially white ones) do not find Asian/Asian-American men masculine, (Lu & Wong, 2013; Wong et al, 2013) as the Asian conception of masculinity reflects opposing characteristics like sleek, styled, and extravagant ensembles. Conversely, men in the U.S. are seen as feminine when they possess such qualities and are regarded as masculine when they are unshaven, have large muscles, and don't expend much effort on their appearance.

Masculinity As Determined By Amount of Effort Put Into Appearance

Across focus groups, the most common differentiation between Asian and American masculinities was found in the level of effort that men expend on their physical appearance. When trying to distinguish between different definitions of masculinity, participants in both

groups described Asian masculinities as being characterized by care and effort, whereas American masculinities were associated with low effort and little to no concern for physical appearance, perhaps barring one's fitness regimes that result in muscles. When asked to identify a particular South Korean celebrity she thought to be attractive, Ruby remarks: "I feel like he like has the least done to him, he did his hair like he hasn't dyed it." This suggests that Ruby, a Filipina-American, is more attracted to the men who reflect masculine norms of the U.S., implying that men who do put a lot of effort into their appearance are unattractive, or at the very least, less attractive.

On the other hand, Josephine—the only one of the participants who was born and raised in an Asian country—explains her preferred aesthetic to be that of the stylish and tasteful Asian definition of masculinity:

Josephine: You have to be handsome tall stylish and then we go further… So to me like—like stylish Chinese guys are pretty like okay…because like they really like to show off. You know? Gets a lot of money and just like shows off. Cars, clothes, shoes.

Josephine placed a lot of emphasis on style throughout the focus group, often referencing Asian/Asian-American men as having "good taste." Through her indication of style as attractive, Josephine points to a link between attractiveness and masculinity, implying that what is considered masculine is more often than not what is considered attractive. As such, Josephine's account reflects a potential reason for why Asian/Asian American men are often perceived as feminine—and thus not attractive— in the U.S.: because the aesthetic is not in line with the masculine traits that are culturally emphasized in the U.S.

Numerous studies have shown that men who are tall are perceived as more masculine and more attractive, (Wong et al, 2013) which suggests a widespread belief that short men are

unattractive as well as less masculine. In the U.S., it is common to hear women describe attractive and masculine men as tall, dark, handsome, and well-endowed; as these are considered desirable traits. The women in the current study offer similar perceptions in that they preferred these traits, and often found Asian/Asian-American men to be lacking them:

Samantha: I think for Asian cultures as well you don't see those big muscles, or a lot of facial hair, like none of these men have facial hair, and a lot of them are very slender and thin…the only thing that I've heard is that they have small penises.

The rest of the focus group agreed with Samantha in her assessment as they noted that they preferred "tall men" and "big guys," and that Asian/Asian-American men didn't fulfill this image.

Overall, the majority of participant accounts explicitly indicate attraction to the traits that resemble U.S. normative masculine traits, which were found to be a perceived rarity among Asian/Asian-American men in the present study, as intimated by the female participants. This finding confirms past research, which has found Asian/Asian-American men to be perceived as effeminate and considered less attractive than other races (Lu & Wong, 2013; Wong et al, 2013; Wu, 2014). However, the current study offers up a relatively understudied phenomenon: that perceptions of Asian/Asian-American men as effeminate are upheld even after controlling for participant attraction. That is, seven of the eight participants in the present study indicated that they were attracted to certain Asian/Asian-American men while also characterizing them as feminine, suggesting that the link between perceived masculinity and attractiveness may not always exist.

Conclusion

The research question that drove this study sought to uncover how, if at all, perceptions

of Asian/Asian-American masculinity differed between Asian-American and White American women. Participant accounts revealed that given the culturally differential definitions of masculinity, Asian/Asian-American men are indeed considered less masculine in the U.S. by both White American and Asian-American women. However, participants across both focus groups expressed that despite the common classification of Asian/Asian-American men as effeminate, these men were in some cases still considered attractive even if they had more feminine features. While this may run counter to the notion that attractiveness and perceived masculinity are linked (Wong et al, 2013), it is nevertheless a salient finding worthy of mention. Furthermore, this study found that the perception of Asian/Asian-American as effeminate is perpetuated by the use of feminizing language, and complicated by the culturally differential definitions of masculinity. In attempts to unravel the complexity of these differing standards, participants suggest the distinction between definitions is the level of effort a man expends on his appearance, with Asian/Asian-American men seen as expending more effort.

While compelling, the present study did have some limitations. Perhaps most notably is the fact that Northern California has a large Asian/Asian-American population, which may have desensitized participants from the more discriminatory and severely emasculating stereotypes frequently directed toward the Asian-American community. If the study was conducted elsewhere, perhaps there would have been more drastic differences between the perceptions of White and Asian-American women. Additionally, the present study was lacking in sample size, and holding more focus groups with more participants could have garnered different or (more) supporting findings on this phenomenon. Perhaps the largest constraint on participants was the potential aim of appearing socially desirable. In other words, participant accounts may have been altered to align with the perceptions of other participants, or they may have been

influenced by the desire to be viewed in a positive light, rendering them (potentially) inauthentic. Group-think effects also may have emerged, as that is a risk inherent in focus groups.

Future research should compare how cross-racial perceptions may differ by region and regional influences. This would allow researchers to distinguish the impact that residential culture may have on peoples' perceptions of Asian/Asian-American masculinity. Additionally, cultural communication scholars should explore the ways that native Asian women perceive Asian masculinity in comparison to western conceptualizations, as this would help firmly establish the exact cultural definitions of masculinity. Both of these expansions would contribute meaningful insights that will help society develop a better understanding of why they (may) perceive Asian/Asian-American men as non-masculine.

The most salient implication these findings have on Asian-American culture and communication is coincidentally a reality we should work to eradicate via research: the potential of this phenomenon to promote internalized racism among Asian/Asian-American men. Research on this topic continually finds this implication, yet struggles with how to prevent it. It is already a difficult and insecurity-laden experience when you're any race other than White in the U.S., and the potential for internalized racism only adds to the severity of persons acculturative stress.

It is imperative that we deconstruct this feminizing discourse to understand its origins and thus prevent perpetuation through existing sociopolitical structures. Differential definitions of masculinity need not be compared to evaluate which one is right and which one is wrong. Rather, dissecting this phenomenon will allow people to view these definitions as *not* being in inherent opposition to one another; simply different. This difference should not carry any type of moral valence, as that only promotes discrimination and the ever so harmful us

versus them mentality. The sooner we are able to circumvent that perspective, the sooner we can help alleviate one of the many disadvantages faced by Asian-Americans in U.S society.

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Appendix A

INTRODUCTION

Thank you all for coming today. We invited you to be part of this focus group because you all identify as Asian Americans (or as Caucasian-Americans). We are curious to know about your experiences with Asian-American men and women and your perceptions and impressions of Asian-American masculinity and femininity. We value all of your input and personal experiences in response to the questions we pose. First of all, we'd like to remind you all that is discussed today will remain private, and what is said in this focus group will stay in this focus group. If at any point you become uncomfortable and wish to cease your participation, you are free to do so. We ask that you consent to not discuss the information shared today outside of this context. This focus group session will be recorded, but all data will be erased once the project has been completed. To ensure anonymity among you and your peers, we ask that you choose an alias/pseudonym and refer to each other by them for the duration of this session.

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Thank you all for being here today. Let's begin by going around the room and sharing our pseudonyms, preferred pronouns, and undergraduate majors. If you're comfortable with doing so, please also share your sexual orientation and your ethnicity.
2. Can you list any prominent Asian/Asian American celebrities in the U.S.?
3. Imagine "the most interesting man" and "the most interesting woman" in the world. What do they look like, and what kind of person are they?
    a. Now imagine an ideal Asian man and woman. Can you describe some physical characteristics and personality traits?
    b. Were your ideas of this perfect person influenced by anything?

What do you think would happen if you brought home an AA as your boyfriend or girlfriend?

-How would your family hypothetically respond, and what would you say?

. -Would they be looking for an explanation?

Do you have any Asian Americans in your life? If so, are they friends, family, classmates, co-workers, etc? -What kind of presence do they have in your life

- If I asked you to describe them, how would you talk about them?

We're going to show you some images of South Korean celebrities. Please determine whether or not they would be seen as attractive in the U.S.

How do you think beauty standards for men and women in Asia (South Korea) vary from standards here in the United States?

At this point, we are going to show you an assortment of images of Asian men, and we'd like you to jot down some of the thoughts that come to mind when you see them.

How, if at all, do you see Asian Americans as different from White Americans? (Do you view these differences as negative or positive, and why?)

CONCLUSION

This concludes the focus group session. If you would like to add any last comments please feel free. Thank you all for your time and participation. We value all of the answers each and every one of you has given us today, and we'd like to reassure you that this data will be used for our final term papers and nothing more. We again ask that you please do not discuss the information shared today outside of this room. If you would like to know more about this project or see the final result, feel free to contact us. Thank you again for your time and your thoughtful responses--we greatly appreciate your help in our study.