WHEN GROUP BOUNDARIES BLUR: THE IMPACT OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN REPRESENTATION IN FILM AND TELEVISION

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ABSTRACT: *Representation of minorities in the media is a frequently touched upon topic, especially regarding racial minorities. While the media has made strides in increased representation of minorities over the years, the overall quantity and quality of representation in television and film is still lacking. This is especially true when it comes to the representation of Southeast Asians in media, as both media platforms and the general populace are too quick to group Southeast Asians, South Asians, and East Asians into a singular racial category. This research paper analyzes sources implicating the impact that the lack of quality representation in media has on Southeast Asians, to build an argument about media being a powerful tool that should be used in ways that will lead us to a more accepting and diverse world.*

Introduction

This research project's goal is to discuss the impact that representation, or a lack thereof, in television and movies has on Southeast Asians. Southeast Asia includes the countries of Vietnam, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Indonesia, among others. Throughout the research process, it was found that the effects of lack of quality representation of Southeast Asians in media on Southeast Asians include divisions between them and others, a sense of isolation, mental health and self-image issues, internalized racism, and colorism.

Methodology

At first, the topic of this research paper was about the broader issue of how media representation impacts all people of color, so the keywords used during the first search through the Gale Virtual Reference Library included "media" and "race." While those keywords were useful for finding relevant sources within the database of the Gale Virtual Reference Library, such broad keywords were not as helpful when searching through databases for academic articles. Many of the academic articles found were focused on a specific demographic or a specific type of media, which forced me to narrow down my focus, as well as use more specific keywords. The next place I searched through was Project Muse, a multidisciplinary database, using keywords such as "media representation" and "Southeast Asians." After filtering out results that were not journal articles, a few relevant sources were found, though not as many as was hoped. I also tried using the multidisciplinary database of Academic Search Complete with the same keywords and filters, but found similarly disappointing amount of relevant results. The next places that were searched through were subject-specific databases such as CommunicationSource, Sociological Abstracts, and PsycInfo, where the most relevant results were found by using keywords such as "representation," "Southeast Asian," "media," "film," and "television," as well as by using filters. Not only were more relevant and reliable sources found by filtering out results that were not peer-reviewed, it was also useful to filter sources by subtopics such as "Asian Americans" or "mass media." Out of all the databases used, the most results were found through Sociological Abstracts, and the largest amount of relevant journal articles were from the *Journal of Asian American Studies*.

Divisions Between Southeast Asians and Others

One effect that the representation of Southeast Asians in the media has been that it leads to divisions between Southeast Asians and other Asians. According to Dr. Jana K. Lipman, an Assistant Professor of History at Tulane University, American media after the Vietnam War portrayed mixed race Vietnamese-Americans in a positive light and welcomed them as Americans, but often overlooked their full Vietnamese relatives (Lipman 49). This clear difference in the portrayals of Vietnamese-Americans and their families may potentially lead to fractures within their relationships. In addition to these potential personal conflicts within families, the difference in media portrayals of Southeast Asians compared to East Asians may cause conflicts between these two groups. Dr. Kevin L. Nadal, a Professor of Psychology at City University of New York, documented a criticism of the 2018 movie Crazy Rich Asians that, "in the film, the presence of Brown Asians was either minimal or stereotypical (e.g., Brown Asians were only portrayed as servants, and Filipino actors were cast as East Asian characters)" (Nadal 6). Most of the portrayals of Asians on the screen are of East Asians, rather than Southeast Asians. Media that East Asians celebrate as representative of Asian-Americans in general may fail to include other Asian demographics such as South Asians and Southeast Asians, as proved by the example in the previous sentence. In these instances, even mass media that supposedly represents all Asian-Americans actually lack in both the quality and quantity of Southeast Asian portrayals. Liann Yamashita, an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Trainer, noted that many of the Southeast Asians that she interviewed "felt that common depictions of Asian Americans were not only unrepresentative of their experiences but predicated upon quiet neglect which eschewed [Southeast Asian-American] issues by amalgamating refugees with East Asians" (Yamashita 261). In addition, according to Alana J. Bock, a graduate student of American Studies at the University of New Mexico, the struggle to assert and define these feelings of being overlooked can lead to itself, and thus can lead Southeast Asians to perpetuate racism against other minorities (Bock 256). This is yet another example of how lack of representation can indirectly lead to strife within relationships between Southeast Asians and others. This portrayal of Southeast Asians in media can lead to disharmony within both the personal and intergroup relationships of Southeast Asians, even within the Asian-American community.

Feelings of Invisibility and Isolation

Another negative effect of the portrayal of Southeast Asians in media is that it enhances one's feelings of being invisible or an outsider. A study of Southeast Asian refugees in Canada found that "Canadian education and frequency of use of Canadian media were both directly related to the level of perceived discrimination" (Beiser, et al.). The correlation between the refugees' exposure to Canadian media and the amount of discrimination they are aware of points to a lack in quantity and quality of representation found in Canadian mass media. While one could argue this finding might instead signify racist attitudes and viewpoints present in movies, televisions, and newspapers, the lack of quality Southeast Asian representation likely plays a part as well. This effect is not exclusive to Canada, however, it is also prevalent in the United States. Asian-Americans as a whole have already been historically underrepresented in American television (Beaudoin 1429), and Southeast Asian-Americans, as an ethnic subgroup of Asian-Americans, are even more so. Bock argues that "the Filipinx [gender-neutral form of Filipino] body is rendered illegible through the contradictions between the image of the United States as a liberal nation-state and its imperial reality" (Bock 249). While this quote mainly alludes to the politics and general culture of the United States playing a part in the

reduced visibility of Filipinos, this fading of Filipino identity can also be partly attributed to the lack of Filipino representation in American media such as film and television. A 2011 survey found that there are over one million Southeast Asians living in Canada (Ferzacca), while there are around two-and-a-half million Southeast Asians living in the United States (Constante). These examples of the experiences of Southeast Asians in both America and Canada further prove that the lack of quality and quantity in representation can lead to a sense of isolation.

Mental Health and Self Esteem Issues

The lack of Southeast Asian representation in media can also lead to issues in the mental health and self-esteem of Southeast Asians. According to Wong et al., exposure to the "model minority" stereotype of Asian-Americans can lead to damaged self-esteem when Asian-American youth do not meet those expectations, especially if they themselves believe the stereotype to be true (113). Even though Southeast Asians may not usually come to mind when one hears the term "Asian-Americans", the stereotypes about Asian-Americans are still likely to affect them. Through interviews with multiple Southeast Asian-Americans, it was found that some Southeast Asians were expected by their peers to conform to the model minority stereotype and were insulted or had their racial identity invalidated when they did not (Yamashita 258). This can cause mental health issues and stress. In fact, a study found that both Korean-Americans and Filipino-Americans were more likely to rate events as challenging compared to their Caucasian peers (Bjork et al. 436). This may be a sign of prolonged stress, since even everyday occurrences can be exhausting when one is facing constant stress. Another issue that impacts self-esteem, and thus, mental health, is one's perceptions of their own attractiveness. A study of Asian-American men, including Southeast Asian men, discusses how Asian-American men find it harder to meet the American masculinity standard of being tall and muscular, and how this may lead to "feelings of hopelessness, psychological emasculation, and unattractiveness among the participants" (Liao et al. 339). Both the pressure of model minority stereotypes due to stereotypical representation and the body image issues, which arise from underrepresentation of certain groups but overrepresentations of others, can lead not only to reduced self-esteem among Southeast Asians, but also to mental health issues.

Internalized Racism and Colorism

Lack of quality representation of Southeast Asians can also lead to internalized racism and colorism. A study on the self esteem of Asian-American men found that a significant amount of the men surveyed regarded features typical of European Americans as necessary for attractiveness (Liao et al. 338). These ideals of masculinity are partly fueled by the overrepresentation of Caucasian "hypermasculine men" in Western media, as well as the lack of more traditionally masculine Asian men within movies and television. According to Whitney Hua and Jane Junn, many Asian-Americans deal with internalized racism not only due to American culture viewing whiteness as the norm, but also since the media often promotes the idea to be American is to be white (Hua and Junn 23). This phenomenon of internalized racism and colorism among Southeast Asians is not exclusive to men or those living in the United States.

In Asia, women often feel coerced to apply face whitening creams because they are very popular, and one can often find advertisements for them on television. While this study focuses on Southeast Asia, it is important to note that internalized racism and colorism are rampant in other Asian countries as well. Doctor Madhusmita Das and Professor Sangeeta Sharma noted that advertisements for skin-whitening creams are popular in India (Das and Sharma 124). A study found that skin-whitening creams were some of the biggest advertisement

categories in both China and Korea (Yu et al. para. 28). Even in Southeast Asian countries such as the Philippines, the effects of the colorism and internalized racism perpetuated by the media is evident, with one example of this being the popularity of face-whitening creams and other skin-whitening products, partly due to media influence advertising these products (Mendoza 230). Dr. L. Ayu Saraswati, a professor in the Department of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Hawaii, observes that many of the dark-skinned Indonesian women she interviewed feel shame and a lack of confidence when it comes to their skin color (Saraswati 127). While this may partly be a result of the long history of colorism and colonialism in Indonesia, there are other, more modern factors that may play a role in creating these feelings. As mentioned earlier, skin-whitening cream advertisements are popular in Asia, which may play a part in the colorism, both internalized and external, that these Indonesian women experience. The external colorism also plays a part. Saraswati notes that "dark-skinned people in today's Indonesia are perceived as "scary," "criminal," "smelly," "dirty," and "weird-looking"" (120). Internalized colorism is already a part of many cultures that Southeast Asians live in, and the media in both Southeast Asia and abroad only further perpetuate this.

Conclusion

During my research process, not only were the direct effects made evident that current Southeast Asian representation in movies and television can have on the self-esteem and mental health of Southeast Asian individuals, but it was also shown how it can indirectly affect the relationship between Southeast Asians and other Asian minorities. It was also demonstrated how the lack of quality and quantity in Southeast Asian representation in media is only part of the problem; it works in tandem with the culture around an individual to cause its negative effects. Originally, the conclusion reached was that

simply adding more positive representations of Southeast Asians in media would be an effective solution, but now it is clear this is only part of a solution. In order to fully eradicate the negative effects mentioned in this paper, such as rifts in relationships with others, feelings of isolation, decreased self-esteem, and internalized racism, we must also work towards eradicating the racism and colorism that are deeply ingrained within not only American culture, but other cultures as well.

One of the ways this can be rectified is through more education about racism and biases. Throughout my research, I have realized how little scholarly research there is about Southeast Asians, especially concerning the representation of Southeast Asians in media and how lack of quality representation negatively affects Southeast Asians. However, implementing more education on such issues is easier said than done. It may not be possible to ever remove prejudice fully from any society, not to mention that ethical questions may arise from attempts to remove even negative aspects of cultures. This does not mean that we have to be complacent, however. Although movies and television may only be a piece of the problem, and therefore only a piece of the solution, they are still an important part of many cultures and an excellent place to start when one wants to affect change within the world. Therefore, the original solution that was concluded is not enough; not only should we improve both the quantity and quality of Southeast Asian representation in movies and television moving forward, but we should also utilize movies and television as platforms where we can ask the viewer to confront the racial biases within their environment, as well as within themselves.

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