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Asian American television activity: Is it related to outgroup vitality?

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ABSTRACT

Applying a uses and gratifications and social identity gratifications approach, the present study explores Asian American television viewing. Specifically, Asian Americans report on the quantity of television they watch, what shows they watch, why they watch, and whether their uses are related to their perceptions of Caucasian vitality. The data reveal that using television for entertainment and to escape/relieve boredom were the most important television uses for this group of Asian Americans. At the same time, these two uses were significant predictors of how vital Asian Americans perceived Caucasians. Although selecting and avoiding television for ethnic identity gratifications were not important relative to other gratifications, television selection for identity gratifications was important to Asian Americans who highly identify with their ethnic group.

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1. Introduction

Intergroup relations are informed by a number of factors: history, values, and power to name a few. In recent years, scholars have begun to explore the role of media in intergroup relations (e.g., Abrams, Eveland, & Giles, 2003). As a pervasive cultural storyteller, media have the ability to shape perceptions of social groups, as well as accentuate and attenuate intergroup relations. Relying on both intergroup and mass media theory, research has explored the effects of television on groups that have little contact with each other (Fujioka, 1999) and groups that have more frequent intergroup contact (Mastro, 2003). Researchers have also explored how media influence the perceptions of both minority and majority groups. For example, media can effect the perceptions that a majority group has of a minority group (Mastro, Behm-Morawitz, & Kopacz, 2008; Tan, Fujioka, & Tan, 2000; Vergeer, Lubbers, & Scheepers, 2000), the way a minority group feels about itself (Jeffres, 2000), and the way a minority group feels about a majority group (Abrams, 2008). In line with the area of burgeoning research that melds intergroup relations and mass media, the purpose of the present study is to explore minority group television activity. Specifically, Asian American television activity will be examined as will the relationship between Asian American television activity and their perceptions of Caucasians.¹ Before attempting to understand Asian American television habits, a discussion about where Asian Americans fit in the media landscape is apposite.

1.1. Asian Americans

In response to the increase in the ethnic minority population in the United States and the effects of media conglomeration, the media landscape has undergone a significant change in the past 20 years. The old "one size fits all approach" no

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¹ Although Asian American identity includes several different ethnic groups that each have their own unique language and culture (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Thai, and Vietnamese), the present study takes into consideration that in the United States, people with origins in East Asia or Southeast Asia are often homogenized and grouped together as Asian American.

longer applies to today's media environment. Instead, because media conglomeration has afforded companies the luxury of purchasing many media organizations, media conglomerates can divide the media landscape into specialized segments that attract niche audiences. One major way media companies have partitioned audiences is by ethnicity (Kubey, Shifflet, Weerakkody, & Ukeiley, 1995). Because of this change, the visibility of some ethnic groups has increased (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000), while the presence of others has declined or stayed the same (Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005).

Currently, Asian Americans comprise approximately 5% of the total United States population (US Census Bureau, 2008a). Between 2005 and 2006, the Asian American population was the fastest growing racial group, and it is estimated to reach 9% in 2050 (US Census Bureau, 2008b). Although Asian Americans are the third largest ethnic group in the United States, the group is underrepresented in American media, especially on television (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). With the exception of one examination on Asian American representation in primetime television that found that Asian American representation was equal to their population statistics (Harwood & Anderson, 2002), the literature consistently demonstrates that Asian Americans are underrepresented in broadcast television relative to their actual population estimates (Atkin, 1992; Glascock, 2001; Greenberg & Collette, 1997; Kubey et al., 1995). For instance, in their analysis of race in primetime broadcast television, Mastro and Behm-Morawitz (2005) found that Asian Americans comprised 1.5% of all characters on television. Similarly, according to the 2008 Asian Pacific American Media Coalition Report Card on Television Diversity (Asian American Justice Center, 2008), there were a total of 35 Asian Pacific American (APA) actors cast in regular roles in the 2008 primetime season. They note that "APAs are still far less likely to be in starring roles in primetime programming, even though a number of shows are set in cities with high APA populations" (p. 1). Despite their lack of representation, Asian Americans are said to prefer television over any other medium (Delener & Neelankavil, 1990).

The pattern of underrepresentation also emerges in research that has examined the visibility of Asian Americans in television advertising (Knobloch-Westerwick & Coates, 2006; Lin, 1998; Li-Vollmer, 2002; see Taylor & Stern, 1997 for an exception); however, Asian Americans seem to be more frequently represented in magazine advertising. For example, in their study of portrayals of Asian Americans in mainstream magazine ads, Lee and Joo (2005) found that of their sample of 1,843 magazine ads, 153 (8.3%) contained Asian Americans. And, unlike other minority ethnic groups, such as African Americans and Latino Americans, there is some evidence that indicates that Asian American men and women are equally represented in advertising (Paek & Shah, 2003).

However, numbers tell only half of the story. The other half is told by the quality of portrayals. In her historical account of Asian American representation in media, Mok (1998) contends that Asian Americans were primarily used in media as "background color." As time passed, representation of Asian Americans changed and the stereotype of Asian Americans as exotic or evil aliens emerged. This image, especially of Asian American men, shifted in the 1970s as a result of the popularity of kung-fu fighter Bruce Lee. On the other hand, Asian American women were portrayed as beautiful and subservient. More recent portrayals of Asian Americans include the "model minority" image. Asian Americans are often said to be the model minority because to many they represent the ideal minority group, which exhibits strong values, commitment to family, determination, and hard work (Sue & Morishima, 1982; Uba, 1994). While some may consider the model minority a positive stereotype, others contend the stereotype furthers racial division (Chou & Feagin, 2008).

Although researchers are sometimes unable to examine the quality of Asian American portrayals because samples are too small (Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000), when sample size has been adequate, the literature indicates that Asian Americans are often portrayed as smart and good with technology. For instance, in their investigation of ethnicity in primetime television advertising, Mastro and Stern (2003) found that Asian Americans, in comparison to Blacks, Latinos, and Whites, most frequently appeared in ads for technology and where they were seen working (see also Taylor & Stern, 1997). The connection between Asian Americans and technology might be created at a young age. In an examination of race representation in child-targeted television commercials, Li-Vollmer (2002) found that Asian Americans were underrepresented; however, when they did appear, they were in commercials involving technology products 36% of the time even though technology products were one of the smallest categories advertised. The representation of Asian Americans in magazines seems to mirror the same trend as television advertising. For instance, in their examination of Asian American portrayals in mainstream magazine ads, Lee and Joo (2005) found that Asian Americans more frequently appeared in ads for technology and business related products/services compared to ads for nontechnology and nonbusiness related products/services. Their analysis also revealed that the portrayals confirmed the "hard work, no fun" stereotype of Asian Americans (see also Paek & Shah, 2003; Taylor & Lee, 1994; Taylor, Lee, & Stern, 1995). More recently, in one of the few investigations of Asian American representation on television, the 2008 Asian Pacific American Media Coalition Report Card on Television Diversity (Asian American Justice Center, 2008) found that the majority of Asian Pacific Americans on television hold high status positions, and of the Asian Pacific American characters with known occupations, 100% have positions that highlight their intelligence and/or require advanced degrees, often in the sciences. The study also documents that Asian Americans are consistently absent in family and domestic settings. Importantly, the representation of Asian Americans on television may influence their viewing motivations.

1.2. Viewing motivations

Clearly, researchers have investigated Asian American visibility and representation in media; however, there is little examination of their media habits. For example, although Knobloch-Westerwick and Coates (2006) report that the magazines

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