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Happy Mediums:
Young Asian American Men's Quest to be Average or Well-Rounded

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Sociology

Corinne Wai Yin Tam

June 2023

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Happy Mediums:
Young Asian American Men's Quest to be Average or Well-Rounded

by

Corinne Wai Yin Tam

Master of Arts, Graduate Program in Sociology
University of California, Riverside, June 2023
Dr. Ellen Reese, Chairperson

This project combines insights from intersectionality theory, racial formation theory, and masculinity studies to explore how young Asian American men negotiate identities within a complicated cultural climate that both exalts and denigrates them. My research is based on an analysis of 33 in-depth interviews with Chinese and Chinese-Vietnamese American men between the ages of 18-25. I find that young Asian American men encounter both positive and negative racial-ethnic and gendered ideas that are specific to their demographic. This contributes to distinct identity-formation experiences during emerging adulthood, a critical period for identity construction. My findings suggest that Asian American men draw on four central reference points which I call the "White Frat Boy," "Trashy Kevin," "Nerdy Kevin," and "Simu Liu." By "reference

point," I refer to a shared set of ideas that reflect a model of an identity that can contain

both positive and negative attributes. I also find that my participants engaged with these

reference points in two ways: they distanced themselves from the negative elements of

reference points to not be limited by them but also embraced the positive elements of

reference points to exercise their agency. Finally, I coin the term "happy medium" to

describe the comfortable balance that participants aimed to strike among reference points.

By engaging in distancing and embracing strategies among various reference points, my

participants constructed happy mediums that fall into two main categories. Some

participants constructed an "average happy medium," aiming to blend in with other Asian

American men. Other participants constructed a "well-rounded happy medium," aiming

to be viewed as multifaceted and unique. This project contributes to our understanding of

the life stage of emerging adulthood, highlighting how men of one racial-ethnic minority

group encounter unique pressures that lead them to embark on a distinct path for their

identity construction. Additionally, this project offers the concept of reference points,

which broadens our understanding of how other groups draw on various models of

identity to construct and negotiate their intersectional identities.

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Introduction

Like other young adults encountering the life stage of emerging adulthood, broad social and economic factors constrain Asian American men's ability to achieve traditional milestones of adulthood (Arnett 2000). However, Asian American men often face culturally specific high expectations among their families for their academic and professional success (Lee and Zhou 2017). Aside from these pressures, in schools and workplaces young Asian American men are faced with a host of contradictory stereotypes that, at times, put them on a pedestal (Chou and Feagin 2015) and at other times, hinder their professional advancement (Hyun 2005). Overall, stereotypes tied to Asian American men's intersectional identities challenge their ability to freely construct who they wish to be as individuals. Combining insights from masculinity studies, intersectionality theory (Crenshaw 1990), racial formation theory (Omi and Winant 2015), and scholarship on Asian Americans, this project asks: How do college-aged Asian American men negotiate identities within a complicated cultural climate that both exalts and denigrates them? To address this question, I analyze 33 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with college-aged Asian American men that explore how they construct their identities amid their families' expectations of their academic and professional success, their professional goals, stereotypes they have faced about being Asian American men, and their ideas about the men they wish to be.

To better understand Asian American men's identity-formation experiences, I introduce two concepts: "cultural reference points" and "intersectional identity projects." A cultural reference point is a shared, organized set of ideas that constitutes a cultural

model of an identity. The concept of reference points differs from Patricia Hill Collins' (2008) concept of "controlling images" in that it is not necessarily created by dominant groups. Although impacted by larger relations of domination and inequality, a reference point may be constructed by, reinforced by, and provide benefits to subordinate groups. Additionally, while many controlling images are widespread and well-known across society, the familiarity of reference points may remain centralized within the subordinate group which creates them.

My concept of intersectional identity projects is an extension of Omi and Winant's concept of "racial projects," which they define as "simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial identities and meanings, and an effort to organize and distribute resources (economic, political, cultural) along particular racial lines" (2015:125). Thus, racial projects refer to racial activities that result from the interplay between ideological and structural factors. In thinking about identity, racial projects represent one's constant production of their racial identity given the combination of broader racial ideas and race-based social structures. Extending this idea, intersectional identity projects describe people's ongoing projects of identity construction beyond the dimension of race; it accounts for other identity axes such as gender and recognizes these identity axes as inseparable from one another.

Overall, I find that the Asian American men in my study strive to find a happy medium, or comfortable position, among the stereotypes they face. A happy medium is a specific type of intersectional identity project. First, my findings indicate that Asian American men draw on four main cultural reference points to construct their identities as

racialized young men. Like all men, my participants are deeply influenced by hegemonic masculinity, which I call "The White Frat Boy" reference point. However, their identity projects also rely heavily on a different set of reference points that uniquely reflect their racial group. I call these "Trashy Kevin," "Nerdy Kevin," and the "Simu Liu." Using these reference points to evaluate the types of Asian American men that they do and do not wish to be associated with, my participants attempt to find a happy medium among these categories of racialized masculinities.

Second, my findings reveal that the Asian American men in my study relate to these reference points in two ways. Engaging in "identity work," (Snow and Anderson 1987), they attempt to find a happy medium by concurrently distancing themselves far enough from negative aspects of reference points that they believe might limit them, and remaining close enough to positive aspects of reference points that they believe will benefit them. For example, many of my respondents push back against aspects of reference points that describe Asian American men as nerdy and scrawny men by going to the gym and lifting weights. On the other hand, my respondents also embrace other aspects of reference points that describe Asian American men as academically gifted by working hard to maintain high GPAs.

Finally, my project finds that in seeking this happy medium, respondents construct identities as either average or well-rounded. Wedged between reference points that construe limiting images of Asian American men, some of these men are satisfied cultivating identities that cast them as average and ordinary, which they believe help them to blend in with other Asian American men. Others seek to be viewed as

multidimensional individuals with a variety of interests. In creating this happy medium

through distancing and embracing strategies, Asian American men engage in

"intersectional identity projects" that draw on ideological and structural factors to

negotiate their identities.

This research adds to the literature on masculinities, exploring how young men of

one racial-ethnic minority group experience and relate to masculinity ideals. It also adds

to our understanding of young Asian Americans as they face race- and gender-based

stereotypes. Given the significantly higher levels of depression found among Asian

American men compared to their white male counterparts (Young, Fang, and Zisook

2010), this project also provides insight into the mental health challenges faced by young

Asian American men. In addition, my analysis provides conceptual tools that can be used

to understand identity formation processes among other social groups. As I discuss in my

conclusion, future research is needed to further explore how other social groups engage in

"intersectional identity projects" in response to "cultural reference points."

Prior to presenting my empirical analysis, I discuss my theoretical perspective

which combines and extends theoretical insights from scholarship on masculinities,

intersectionality theory, and racial formation theory. I begin by emphasizing the need to

study "identity work" (Snow and Anderson 1987) among Asian American men who are

young adults because emerging adulthood is a prime time in which they are constructing

their identities. I then outline the concept of hegemonic masculinity and argue that Asian

American men's identity simultaneously reflects positions of gender power and racial

subordination, shaping a unique relationship that they have to hegemonic masculinity

ideals. Next, I discuss the specific racial-ethnic forces affecting the lives of Asian American men, such as model minority stereotypes that impact their high participation in STEM careers. Finally, I introduce and develop the two key theoretical concepts that guide my analysis, intersectional identity projects and reference points, and explain how they respectively build upon Omi and Winant's (2015) concept of "racial projects" and Patricia Hill Collins' (2008) concept of "controlling images."

Intersectionality, Hegemonic Masculinity, Racial Formation, and Identity

My theoretical perspective combines insights of theories and research on masculinity, intersectionality theory, and racial formation theory. In doing so, it highlights how cultural or ideological factors relate to intersecting relations of race and gender domination and shape how people construct their identities. Intersectionality theory is a wide-ranging framework that often builds on the foundational writings of black feminist scholars such as Kimberly Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins. Intersectionality theory illustrates how various structures of domination such as race, gender, and class are constantly interacting with one another, leading to a range of lived experiences (Crenshaw 1990). The convergence of various axes of power tied to these structures results in distinct identities and experiences. This perspective illuminates the unique position occupied by Asian American men in the gender structure as it exposes the contradiction between their racial axis of subordination and their gender axis of domination. Intersectionality theory suggests that Asian American men share power with men of other racial backgrounds. Yet, they are not situated within *equal* positions as men of other racial backgrounds due to their position within racial hierarchies (Espiritu 1997).

In this way, Asian American men's experiences are simultaneously shaped by both their gender and racial identities, generating a unique way in which they experience the world.

I argue that the structuring power of ideological factors is central to understanding the experiences of Asian American men. As Hays writes, "Not reducible to systems of social relations, culture has a logic of its own. Transcending individuals, constraining and enabling, produced in interaction and producing the form of interaction, culture is a resilient pattern that provides for the continuity of social life" (1994:70). Collins (2004) has drawn attention to the cultural domain of power, especially the influence of "controlling images," or images "designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life" (Collins 2004:69). Despite this groundbreaking work, some intersectionality scholars tend to overlook or neglect the reciprocal relationship between structural and ideological factors. Emphasizing intersectionality theory's ability to discern the various ways power generates and utilizes overlapping identity categories, MacKinnon says identities and stereotypes "are the ossified outcomes of the dynamic intersection of multiple hierarchies, not the dynamic that creates them. They are there, but they are not the reason they are there" (Cho et al. 2013:798). Thus, some intersectionality theorists identify the ways in which ideological factors result from structural factors. Yet, they overlook the corresponding effect that the former has on the latter.

I coin the term "reference point" to describe a shared, organized set of ideas that constitute a cultural image of an identity. While controlling images are created by dominant groups to simultaneously reinforce their own dominance and other groups'

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subordinance (Collins 2000), reference points may be created and reproduced by a subordinate group. In my study, Asian American men define and uphold reference points about other Asian American men to guide their own identity formation processes. Like controlling images, reference points are impacted by larger relations of domination. For example, the reference points used by my participants are shaped by hegemonic masculinity. However, subordinate groups may also benefit from the use of reference points. Another characteristic of reference points is that, although they draw from the broader culture, they often are more salient within the subordinate group from which they emanate. For example, Asian American men are likely more familiar with reference points about Asian American men than are men of other racial-ethnic backgrounds.

While revealing an important and powerful process of degradation stemming from cultural ideas, the concept of controlling images only shows one facet of how cultural ideas operate. Reference points offer insight into a second facet – using cultural ideas for agency and empowerment – and reveal a complex process in which people can simultaneously engage with these two contradictory facets of cultural ideas. Reference points show how people can simultaneously and selectively be constrained, shaped, and sometimes empowered by cultural ideas.

In discussing controlling images of Black women – the matriarch, the mammy, the welfare mother, and the jezebel – Collins (2000) shows how controlling images encourage the oppressed group to internalize and behave according to the negative views that the dominant society has constructed of them. Falling victim to the regulation by controlling images, Black women struggle to create positive self-definitions and may

respond by internalizing controlling images, denying controlling images, or working relentlessly to resist them.

In contrast, reference points not only highlight the constraints brought about by the dominant society's constructed view of subordinate groups, they also reveal how these cultural ideas supply subordinate groups with assumptions with which they may use to their benefit in select situations. Thus, while reference points emphasize controlling images' insight that cultural ideas created by the dominant society force degrading labels on subordinate groups, reference points exhibit how subordinate groups may also selectively draw on or combine parts of those labels to create more positive identities or circumstances for themselves.

Applying intersectionality theory to Asian American men's identity experiences leads us to view model minority stereotypes as controlling images that serve to maintain the power of dominant racial groups. However, this ignores the benefits of model minority stereotypes, such as how they contribute to high familial expectations of success, which helps young Asian Americans to excel in schools (Lee and Zhou 2017). Thus, model minority stereotypes and expectations of success from within the family cannot be reduced entirely to "the ossified outcomes of…multiple hierarchies" (Cho et al. 2013:798) of power. This theoretical limitation of intersectionality hinders this study's ability to adequately examine how young Asian American men construct their gender identities.

Other theoretical concepts address this gap in intersectionality and offer additional tools for understanding Asian American men's experiences. Hegemonic masculinity

describes the most powerful, influential form of masculinity which draws men to consent to and strive for its ideal form (Connell 1987). Connell defines it as, "a social ascendancy achieved in a play of social forces that extends beyond contests of brute power into the organization of private life and cultural processes" (1987:184). Building on the ideas of Gramsci, Connell's notion of "hegemonic masculinity" is grounded in the concept of the gender order, which describes a broad spectrum of masculinities that each hold varying levels of culturally-ascribed value and power.

Observing the gender identity processes experienced by Asian American men through the lens of hegemonic masculinity makes explicit the lure of a cultural ideal that leads men to aspire to embody it. Viewing young Asian American men's gender identity projects as being influenced by a hegemonic ideal helps us to remain attentive to mechanisms such as complicity (Connell 2005). The pervasiveness of hegemonic masculinity's power allows us to examine how, despite being in a subordinate position due to their racial identities, Asian American men can still consent to and find enticing what is, for them, an unachievable hegemonic form. Furthermore, one may recognize how whiteness is a central feature of hegemonic masculinity, with the meanings of non-white masculinities consistently being measured against their white, normative counterparts (Cheng 1999). Even if Asian American men do not actively embody hegemonic masculinity, they may perform "complicit masculinities" that continue to uphold cultural ideals of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005).

Hegemonic masculinity recognizes the interconnectivity between race and class with gender (Connell 2005). However, it describes exploring gender relations *within* race

and class structures and does not detail how racial and class structures shape these relations, or whether racial and class relations exist within gender structures (Connell 2005). Additionally, hegemonic masculinity leads one to view Asian American men as powerful and embodying the hegemonic ideal based on their material reality, yet, an empirical puzzle arises that this framework fails to explain: if financial success is a critical indicator of hegemonic masculinity, why do Asian American men continue to be viewed as subordinate and effeminate?

Racial formation theory offers useful insights for answering this question. This perspective regards race as a category that people use to navigate the social world and recognizes its central role in shaping the history of the United States (Omi and Winant 2015). The history of U.S. racial politics–its racial trajectory–is constituted by racial projects, or active and dynamic activities in which structural and ideological factors interact and contribute to the ongoing process of racial formation. Although racial projects often reproduce inequality, some also serve as resistance projects that challenge the social structure.

Racial formation theory provides a valuable lens for examining how racial meanings and social structures interact and influence how young Asian American men construct their masculinities. The model minority myth, bamboo ceiling, and views of Asian American men as especially effeminate men reflect ideological resources that serve as blueprints to guide both Asian American men's and the broader society's understanding of how Asian American men are to think and behave. Asian American men's financial success reflects a structural position they occupy and structural resources

they possess as a wealthier group compared to men of other racial-ethnic backgrounds. These ideological and structural resources interact to sustain and challenge racial representations of Asian American men and their structural positions.
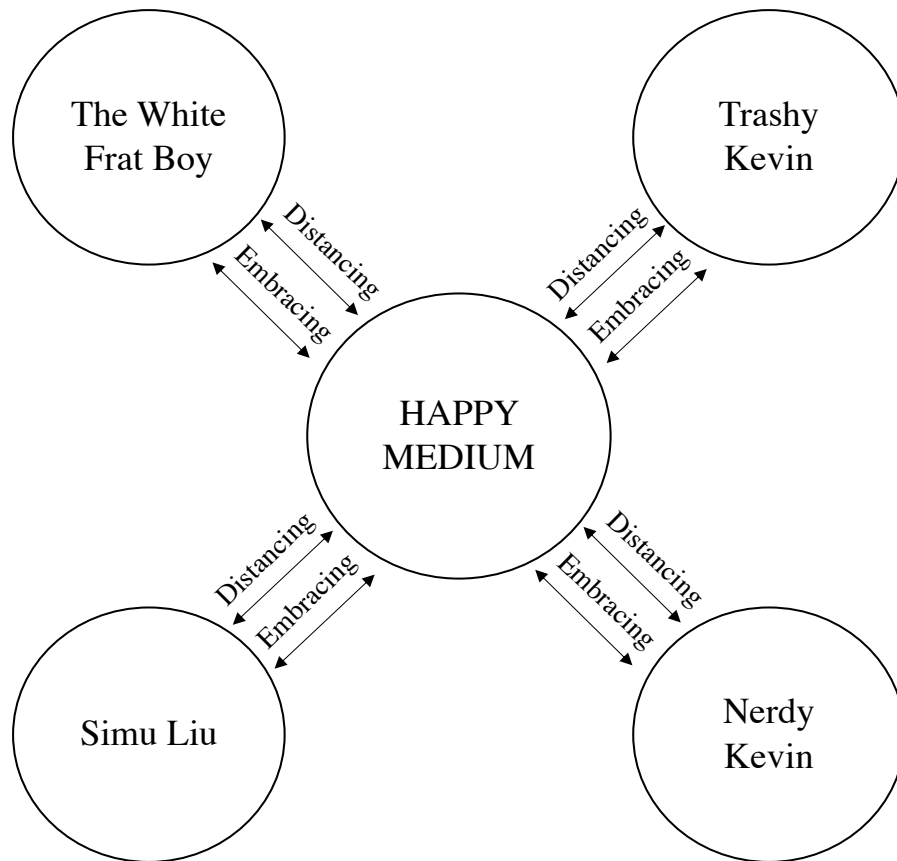
Consequently, this perspective addresses the empirical puzzle confronted by hegemonic masculinity as it shows how these men may simultaneously encounter advantageous structural factors and disadvantageous ideological factors that lead them to be viewed as subordinate men despite their material success. Examining the experiences of Asian American men through racial formation theory also addresses the theoretical puzzle confronted by intersectionality as it highlights the internal logic and structuring power of ideological factors. However, one substantive puzzle remains for racial formation theory: while providing a complex, multilayered explanation for the formation processes of race, it does not adequately address the role of other identity categories and social relations, such as gender. This project extends racial formation theory by examining how race, gender, and culture interact in identity formation processes through reference points.

I coin the term "intersectional identity projects" to describe how individuals continuously forge their interlocking racial, gender, and class identities using both ideological and structural factors. Intersectional identity projects is an extension of Omi and Winant's (2015) term, "racial projects." Like racial projects, intersectional identity projects recognize how ideological factors such as stereotypes constantly interact with structural factors such as laws and policies to continuously contribute to the construction of an identity. While racial projects can refer to everything from micro-level events such

as an exchange among two individuals of different races to macro-level events such as social movements, intersectional identity projects are particularly concerned with the ongoing formation of identities. However, different from racial projects, intersectional identity projects recognize that one's racial identity cannot be formed apart from one's other identities, such as gender. This project focuses on the intersection between racial and gender identities by examining how Asian American men construct their intersectional identity projects.

A happy medium is a certain type of intersectional identity project in which Asian American men construct an identity that allows them to feel comfortably balanced among reference points. My participants aimed to construct this happy medium by distancing themselves from the aspects of reference points that they viewed as negative and embracing other aspects of reference points that they viewed as positive. The figure below demonstrates how the Asian American men in my study employed the distancing and embracing strategies among four central reference points — the White Frat Boy, Trashy Kevin, Nerdy Kevin, and Simu Liu — to construct a happy medium.

Figure 1: Strategies Used Among Stereotypes to Create Happy Mediums

The White Frat Boy

Trashy Kevin

HAPPY MEDIUM

Simu Liu

Nerdy Kevin

Distancing

Embracing

Distancing

Embracing

Distancing

Embracing

Distancing

Embracing

In conclusion, intersectionality theory, hegemonic masculinity, and racial formation theory each provide useful tools for studying the experiences of Asian American men, but each is not without its limitations. Intersectionality helps us to analyze how Asian American men are affected by converging axes of gender domination and racial subordination but does not fully acknowledge the internal logic and structuring power of ideological factors faced by Asian American men. Hegemonic masculinity reveals this internal logic and structuring power of the hegemonic masculinity ideal,

strategies of complicity related to it, and features of hegemonic masculinity–such as whiteness and earning a high income–that Asian American men use as standards for their own gender identity projects. However, it is unable to address how Asian American men may be both financially successful and viewed as subordinate men. Racial formation theory helps us to understand such contradictory aspects of Asian American men's realities by recognizing how structural and ideological factors coexist and concurrently shape their lives. Yet, it pays too little attention to the role of gender and masculinity in shaping Asian American men's identities and lived experiences.

Emerging Adulthood, Identity Work, and Masculinities among Asian Americans

Young adulthood is a time in which individuals explore and aim to understand the self, especially as it relates to the broader social world (Steinberg and Morris 2001). However, economic and cultural shifts have rattled and extended this period, resulting in a new stage in the life course. "Emerging adulthood" is characterized as a time of identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between adolescence and adulthood, and having a sense of broad possibilities for the future (Arnett 2000; Otters and Hollander 2015). Many young adults are returning home to reside with their families following their undergraduate schooling. Young people experiencing this period of dependence and financial instability are generally between 18 and 25 years old (U.S. Census Bureau 2015). These economic changes have interfered with young adults' abilities to achieve certain milestones to adulthood, which include completing an education and gaining financial independence (Furstenberg, Jr., Kennedy, McLoyd, Rumbaut, and Settersten, Jr. 2004). With the growing cost of college, the longer completion time to a degree, and the

higher academic qualifications necessary to attain a job that will provide financial independence, young adults now face new challenges compared to those who were in their same position just a few decades ago. This social context and the new challenges that they present are critical to consider when examining young adults' identity formation processes during adolescence.

Identity work involves the process that people engage in to "create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept" (Snow and Anderson 1987:1348). Identity work may include using physical settings and props, engaging in face work or changing one's personal appearance, choosing to associate with other people or groups, and verbal construction of personal identities (identity talk). Snow and Anderson's (1987) study of identity work among homeless people reveal three strategies of identity talk: distancing, embracement, and fictive storytelling. Distancing includes a maneuver used by homeless people to consciously distance themselves from other homeless people while embracement includes a strategy used by homeless people to verbally accept and confirm one's attachment to the homeless status placed upon them.

Scholars examine the use of identity work among a diverse range of social actors—including people who are homeless, childless, or engaged in sex work—in order to draw cognitive distinctions between themselves and negatively evaluated others in order to preserve self-esteem (Casey, Goudie, and Reeve 2008; Oselin 2018; Snow and Anderson 1993). Browne, Tatum, and Gonzalez (2021) examine how middle-class Dominicans and Mexicans utilize strategies for identity work to challenge the low-status

stereotype of Latinos as work-class Mexicans. Mexicans aim to stress their middle-class status while Dominicans aim to stress that they are not Mexican. Parallel to how these Mexican and Dominican participants in Browne et al.'s (2021) study draw on a distancing strategy to create identities that do not align with the dominant society's stereotype of Latinos as working-class Mexicans, some of the Asian American men in my study draw on a distancing strategy to not be constrained by the dominant society's stereotype of Asian American men as nerdy, scrawny, and effeminate.

Oselin (2018) investigates how one aspect of identity work, identity talk, is used differently among male sex workers whose occupation is stigmatized. She finds that these men exercise three different strategies–organizational alignment, rejecting recovery, and adopting a professional sex worker identity–to create three unique identities among this stigma. Like the participants in Browne et al.'s study (2021), the men in Oselin's (2018) study who used a rejecting recovery strategy emphasized characteristics outside of the dominant society's stigmatized, stereotyped view of them, such as their heterosexuality, to distance themselves from stigma.

However, different from Browne et al's (2021) and Oselin's (2018) participants who drew on identity characteristics that exist outside of the stereotype – such as Dominicans drawing on their ethnicity to challenge the stigmatized Mexican stereotype or male sex workers drawing on their heterosexuality to challenge the homosexual stigma of their occupation – to challenge stereotypes, the Asian American men in my study draw from positive identity characteristics that *do* align with the dominant society's stereotype

of them. For example, in select circumstances some of my participants emphasize their intellectual abilities to their benefit.

Scholars have explored how men of different racial-ethnic minority groups construct their identities (Goodwill et al. 2019; Lu and Wong 2014; Milton 2012; Walters and Valenzuela 2020; Wong, Horn, and Shitao 2013). These men are marginalized because of their race and have challenges living up to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity, or the most powerful and influential form of masculinity largely due to their race (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). The form of masculinity which ascends to the position of the hegemonic ideal disseminates its power and influence through means such as media visibility, where its associated meanings are made hyper-visible. However, men who are not part of the dominant group also endorse and participate in their own subordination through their acceptance and perpetuation of the hegemonic form (Connell 1995). For example, Oselin and Barber (2019) find that lower-class, male sex workers of color engage in "status maneuvering," seeking clients who are white, wealthy, and can offer them opportunities to experience a sense of status, even if momentarily. In doing so, these men aimed to associate themselves with elements of hegemonic masculinity.

Hegemonic masculinity evolves depending on time, place, and context (Connell 1995). The contemporary form of hegemonic masculinity is the transnational business masculine ideal which involves transactional interactions, impersonality, flexible and calculative behavior, no long-lasting obligations except to the idea of accumulation itself, little reliance on bodily force, and the ability to navigate and be in positions of power within systems of authority in transnational corporations (Connell 1998; Connell and

Wood 2005). Throughout transformations in the meanings of hegemonic masculinity, one characteristic has remained: a man's masculinity has been and continues to be measured largely by his income (Kimmel 2004).

Today, Asian American men hold a unique position to contemporary hegemonic masculine ideals. On the one hand, Asian American men earn a significantly higher income than their Black, white, and Latino counterparts (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2018). On the other hand, they are cast as effeminate men. For example, research on user preferences on dating sites and applications exhibit a commonly held view of Asian American men as particularly effeminate and less desirable than men of other racial-ethnic backgrounds. Among white women seeking heterosexual relationships, Asian men are ranked last in their dating preferences exhibiting the racial-ethnic hierarchy in romantic partner preferences (Feliciano, Robnett, and Komaie 2009; Balistreri, Joyner, and Kao 2015). This racial hierarchy has been suggested to be supported by negative stereotypical media depictions of racial-ethnic minorities (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Larson 2006). Consequently, a contradiction in the literature emerges that this project aims to explore: How do Asian American men face being viewed as both masculine men and emasculated men?

Asian American Men: Manly or Effeminate? Hard Workers or Poor Leaders?
Other racial-ethnic factors contribute to young Asian American men's identity formation processes. While there is heterogeneity among Asian Americans, Asian American parents often employ "success frames," providing their children with distinct expectations to measure their success (Lee and Zhou 2017). Examples include obtaining straight A's,

becoming valedictorian of their graduating class, or being accepted into prestigious colleges and universities.

Within the broader U.S. society, Asian Americans are often stereotyped as the "model minority" (Chou and Feagin 2015). Emerging from the influx of Asian professionals arriving in the United States in the 1970s following the 1965 Immigration Act (Shek 2006), this stereotype communicates specific ideas of what Asian Americans are capable of and how they should perform in schools leading peers and teachers to maintain high standards for their academic success (Chou and Feagin 2015). This encourages Asian American children to pursue more rigorous classes and programs. The power of these external societal pressures coupled with internal family expectations result in their high rates of employment in high-paying fields, with Asian Americans making up 33% of computer hardware engineers and 31% of medical scientists (USA Facts 2021). This is significant, as Asian Americans make up only 7% of the United States population (Budiman and Ruiz 2021).

Even with substantial representation in high-income occupations such as engineering, Asian Americans continue to be underrepresented in top leadership positions in the workplace (Fernandez 1998). Cultural ideas of Asian Americans set in motion by the model minority myth are viewed differently through the conceptualization of the "bamboo ceiling," a barrier for Asian American men in these professional organizations (Hyun 2005). Ideas about qualities characterizing Asian Americans as exceptional students and employees become the very reasons they are unable to advance into high-status leadership positions (Lee and Zhou 2017). Thus, this project aims to explore how

stereotypes of Asian American men may advance them in some contexts but prevent their advancement in others, and how these dynamics shape their identity work during young adulthood.

Scholars document other ways in which stereotypes operate among and impact Asian Americans. Negative depictions of Asian American men have long pervaded American media (Cheung 2005). When Chinese immigrants arrived in the United States in the nineteenth century, European immigrants framed their traditional customs and physical appearances as feminine (Chen 1996). The feminization attached to Asian American men was perpetuated when Congress enacted legislation that forced these men into traditionally female jobs such as those of cooks, waiters, and laundrymen (Chen 1996). Chen (1999) finds four strategies Chinese American men utilize to respond to such negative stereotypes, which include compensation, deflection, denial, and repudiation.

More recently, media images have emerged challenging these characterizations of Asian American men and representing them in a new light, as seen in the influence of Simu Liu. This Chinese-Canadian actor played the physically strong, brave, and funny superhero character in the Marvel Studios movie *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*. The seemingly changing views of Asian American men is also apparent off screen. The actor appeared on the cover of *Time Magazine* as one of their 100 most influential people of 2022, and in *People Magazine*'s "Sexiest Man Alive" issue of 2021. Despite this positive depiction of Asian American men, negative caricatures of this group continue to pervade our society.

Stereotypical images impact Asian American adolescents by shaping their academic goals, defining their areas of competency, and reinforcing boundaries between themselves and other racial ethnic-groups by leading them to measure their success against same-race peers (Kao 2000). In this way, Asian American adolescents aim to meet high academic expectations and gravitate toward some extracurricular activities while veering away from others based on stereotypes of Asians as extremely intelligent and unfit to play sports. Some Asian American students' academic performance may also be propelled as stereotypes accompany immigration trajectories. "Stereotype promise," or the guarantee of being perceived through the lens of positive stereotypes, is generated when highly-educated and highly-selected Asian immigrants transfer and recreate middle-class cultural institutions and practices from their countries of origin to the United States (Lee and Zhou 2014).

Stereotypes impact Asian Americans' views of themselves and their mental health. One study exploring how Asian American male college students perceive others' views of them finds that they are generally aware of how they are stereotyped by others in terms of their intelligence, physical appearance, and social skills. The authors suggest that Asian American men who dwell on these perceived stereotypes repeatedly reflect on their marginalized status, making them more susceptible to depressive symptoms (Wong, Owen, Tran, Collins, and Higgins 2012).

Methods

This study drew on a snowball sampling method to collect 33 in-depth, semi-structured interviews that examine how young Asian American men negotiate and

construct identities in contemporary U.S. society. Data collection took place between June 2020 and August 2022. Due to the circumstances of COVID-19, 85% of interviews took place over Zoom, 12% took place in-person in a university conference room, and 3% took place over the phone. This study's interview sample consisted of cisgender, heterosexual Chinese American and Chinese-Vietnamese American men who were either enrolled in college or college educated at the time of the interview. Economic and cultural changes have shaped a new life stage called "emerging adulthood" in contemporary society in which many young adults are unable to financially support themselves (Arnett 2000). Because emerging adulthood is a period in which young people are shaping and reflecting upon their identities, college-aged or recent graduates between the ages of 18-25 were included in the sample.

Studies reveal that Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans are most often viewed as Asian or Asian American, whereas groups such as Filipinos, Indians, Pakistanis, and Arabs are less likely to be viewed as Asian or Asian American (Lee and Ramakrishnan 2019). Of those groups who are more likely to be viewed as Asian or Asian American, Chinese Americans constitute the largest population and were selected for this study (Budiman and Ruiz 2021). As Table 1 shows, Chinese American participants made up 91% of the sample and Chinese-Vietnamese American participants made up 9% of the sample. This study does not seek to make overarching claims about Asian American men from different ethnic groups. Rather, it seeks to identify underlying social processes affecting the lives of young, cisgender Chinese and Chinese-Vietnamese American men who grew up in the United States.

Although model minority stereotypes also affect Asian American immigrants, they especially impact Asian Americans who grew up in the United States and who have had many years of experience with American educational institutions and the mass media. As Table 1 shows, participants of 1.5 generation status made up 6% of the sample, participants of second generation status made up 64% of the sample, participants of third generation status made up 18% of the sample, and 12% of participants did not wish to disclose their generational status. First or second year college students made up 12% of the sample, third or fourth year college students made up 33% of the sample, and participants with Bachelor's degrees made up 55% of the sample. Altogether, my sample includes participants from across twelve different undergraduate institutions. Participants who attended a large, public state university made up 64% of the sample, participants who attended a mid-sized, public state university made up 24% of the sample, and participants who attended a small, liberal arts school made up 12% of the sample. There were no participants who held a degree higher than their Bachelor's.

The majority of participants majored in a STEM field; participants who majored in the arts or social sciences made up only 9% of the sample (see Table 1). Participants who majored in biology or physics made up 18% of the sample, participants who majored in business, economics, or finance made up 27% of the sample, participants who majored in data science, computer science, statistics, or math made up 18% of the sample, and participants who majored in engineering made up 27% of the sample. Participants who attended colleges in Northern California made up 42% of the sample, participants who attended colleges in Southern California made up 52% of the sample, and participants

who attended colleges outside of California but within the United States made up 6% of the sample. Full-time college students without jobs made up 33% of the sample while full-time college students with part-time jobs made up 12% of the sample. Participants working fulltime and not enrolled in college at the time of their interview made up 42% of the. Participants working in finance made up 15% of the sample, participants working in engineering made up 15% of the sample, participants working in another type of industry made up 12% of the sample, and unemployed participants made up 12% of the sample.

Table 1: Social Characteristics of Interview Sample

ETHNICITY	
Chinese	91% (n=30)
Chinese-Vietnamese	9% (n=3)
AGE	
18-19	24% (n=8)
20-22	33% (n=11)
23-25	42% (n=14)
EDUCATIONAL STATUS	
1st/2nd year college student	12% (n=4)
3rd/4th/4+ year college student	33% (n=11)
Bachelor's degree	55% (n=18)
OCCUPATION	
Student	33% (n=11)
Student with part-time job	12% (n=4)
Employed in finance (non-students)	15% (n=5)
Employed in engineering (non-students)	15% (n=5)
Employed in another industry (non-students)	12% (n=4)
Unemployed (non-students)	12% (n=4)
UNDERGRADUATE INSTITUTION	
Large, public state university	64% (n=21)
Mid-sized, public state university	24% (n=8)
Small, private liberal arts school	12% (n=4)
UNDERGRADUATE INSTITUTION LOCATION	
Northern California	42% (n=14)
Southern California	52% (n=17)
Out of State	6% (n=2)
MAJOR	
Arts/Social Sciences	9% (n=3)

Biology/Physics	18% (n=6)
Business/Economics/Finance	27% (n=9)
Data Science/Computer Science/Statistics/Math	18% (n=6)
Engineering	27% (n=9)
IMMIGRATION STATUS	
1.5 (arrived in U.S. before age 13)	6% (n=2)
2 (first generation to be born in the U.S.)	64% (n=21)
3 (parents born in the U.S.)	18% (n=6)
Undisclosed	12% (n=4)

Reflexivity is a critical practice within qualitative studies that calls researchers to reflect on how their social positions, or positionality, is tied to their interactions with participants in the field (Reyes 2020). My positionality as a young, heterosexual, cisgender Asian American woman researcher may grant me a certain "toolkit," or a set of privileges and underprivileges tied to my identity, in how my population of young, heterosexual, cisgender Asian American men view me (Reyes 2020). For example, my age may have allowed them to view me as a peer, and my race may have allowed them to view me as similar to them. At the same time, the difference in my gender may have been a challenge when discussing topics such as dating or how these men feel about the stereotypes they face regarding being Asian American men.

Multiple strategies were used to ease potential tensions within interviews and to make participants feel as comfortable as possible. First, I established rapport with participants as best as possible (Reyes 2020). For example, I drew on my race and ethnicity as a tool from my toolkit, expressing to participants that the inspiration from my study derives from the close relationships I share with my brothers and father and observing how they face stereotypes in their lives. Following some of Hermanowicz's (2002) strategies for conducting interviews with people regarding potentially sensitive topics, I treated the interview similar to a casual conversation rather than as a formal interview, listening attentively to respondents and probing only as much as they felt comfortable sharing, and notifying participants at the beginning of the interview that they could request a break or stop at any time to assure that they were not overwhelmed.

At the beginning of each interview, a brief questionnaire was administered to record participants' demographic characteristics, including their age, gender, and major. The interview schedule includes themes such as educational experience and career trajectory to examine the influence of the model minority myth. To explore these topics, I included questions such as, "Please tell me about a time when you experienced academic or social expectations because you are Asian American." Scholars have examined masculinities using men's careers and professions, especially as their jobs and career aspirations relate to power (Connell and Wood 2005). Following their lead, I investigated how the men in my study are constructing their masculinities by asking about their professional plans and goals through questions such as, "What steps are you currently taking to prepare for your career?" and "What does a successful career look like for you?"

The "bamboo ceiling" refers to the barriers to advancement that Asian American men experience in the workplace (Hyun 2005). However, a limitation to studying college-aged men is that most of this study's participants may not have a job or may only be in the early stages of their careers. Questions about this phenomenon were still asked as this study examined whether they were aware of these potential barriers connected to their racial-ethnic identities at this point in their lives. As anticipated, some of these men have been involved in internships or part-time jobs and were able to draw from these early-career experiences. For those participants that were not employed at the time, questions were asked of them that drew from the experiences of other Asian American men in their lives who were employed and established in their careers. For example,

"Please tell me about an Asian American man you know who is well into his career. What success has he achieved in his career? What obstacles has he faced in his career?" (see Appendix C).

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using an online application called Otter.ai. Data analysis consisted of flexible coding, as this approach is well-suited for the analytic software that was used: Atlas.ti. The analysis began with creating codes that fit the broad themes, such as experiences of the model minority myth, that structured the interviews. I then identified the most relevant sections of the data that related to these codes (Deterding and Waters 2018).

Asian American Men Draw on Reference Points to Shape their Identities

Previous research reveals that Asian Americans experience high rates of stress tied to cultural pressures and rely on resources to cope (Yoo 2017). For example, they draw on electronic dance music and use drugs at raves to reduce the stress of model minority expectations. Striving to form a comfortable identity in the face of cultural pressures, I find that Asian American men in my study use reference points as resources. I use the concept of a ***reference point*** to refer to a set of stereotypes that, together, form a shared, organized set of ideas about an identity. Often, the men in my study described a certain dress code and set of hobbies that came with reference points. Reference points also are distinct in their relation to hegemonic masculinity.

Connell's (1987) framework examines masculinities as existing along a spectrum called the gender order, with one end reflecting the most powerful cultural ideal of masculinity–hegemonic masculinity–and the opposite end reflecting masculinities

associated most closely with femininity. Participants in my study drew upon four main reference points to construct their identities. Adopted from the terminology of my participants, the first three reference points are called "The White Frat Boy," "Trashy Kevin," and "Nerdy Kevin." I call the final reference point "The Simu Liu." Along the gender order, the White Frat Boy is associated with a position closer to the powerful end because it involves the enactment of hegemonic masculinity. Nerdy Kevin is linked to a position much closer to effeminate masculinity. Finally, the masculinities enacted by Trashy Kevin and Simu Liu are tied to positions in between hegemonic masculinity and effeminate masculinity.

The White Frat Boy Reference Point. Connell and Wood's (2005) study of managers striving to embody transnational business masculinity reveals that men enacting this contemporary hegemonic masculine ideal utilize a certain dress code, have similar concerns and interests, and share a certain demeanor. The Australian men they studied tended to be affluent, wear suits, work long hours under high stress, be attentive to their health and engage in routine exercise and diets, travel frequently, and hold jobs that offered much money and power despite being insecure. Importantly, these men often maintained a detached, carefree attitude in how they engaged with others – their employees, other women, and their families. The White Frat Boy reference point resembles the hegemonic masculine ideal as it is performed by younger men, in comparison to the post-emerging adulthood men that Connell and Wood (2005) examined.

At 21 years old, Marcus is a full-time student and a part-time chef. His mother was born in Vietnam and earned a high school diploma, and his father was born in Hong Kong and earned a bachelor's degree. Both of Marcus's parents are currently working as IT consultants. Marcus is now entering his fourth year as an economics major at a public university not too far from the predominantly Asian American suburb in which he grew up. While he communicated that he was neither impressed by nor interested in who he calls the "White Frat Boy," he had a vivid image of this hegemonic masculine ideal:

> The White Frat Boy image is… cargo shorts or a polo or a t-shirt. They probably wear Sperrys or Air Forces. And then they have… a… baseball cap… tank top… basketball short shorts… chains, and they [are]… muscular. And then they have like the white tube socks… but most importantly that hat… All the frat bros have it… the Bass Pro Shop hat. They always wear a Bass Proshop trucker hat.

Marcus shares the dress code of the White Frat Boy, detailing his every day attire as including some combination of cargo shorts, a polo, t-shirts, tank tops, basketball shorts, tube socks, chains, and a certain kind of hat. Further demonstrating his knowledge of the White Frat Boy's wardrobe, he says that these men tend to wear shoes such as Sperrys or Air Forces. This cultural reference point also involves a certain build: muscular.

The dress code and hobbies of the White Frat Boy finds similarities with the dress code of the Australian managers in Connell and Wood's (2005) study. Both the White Frat Boy and the Australian managers care about being well-groomed, having healthy bodies, and wearing preppy and trendy attire. The White Frat Boy and transnational business masculinity also resemble one another in their relation to power. The Australian managers performing transnational business masculinity treated their emotions and the

emotions of their clients as things to be managed, had casual sex during their business trips while their wives were at home, and leveraged the power granted by the corporations for which they worked by becoming comfortable with firing workers (Connell and Wood 2005). In this way, these men maintained a detached, carefree demeanor that reflected their powerful positions and allowed them to have no difficulty coercing their clients, having affairs with women, and terminating employees. In the same way, the White Frat Boy wields a detached, carefree attitude as seen in their relationships with women and the lack of attention they give to people who appear less powerful than themselves.

Dylan is a 24-year-old Chinese- and Vietnamese-American. He earned his bachelor's degree in accounting and has been working full-time since graduating. He recalls his experiences with the White Frat Boy reference point at his public, 4-year institution:

> Frat kids… with that confidence level you could just walk up and talk to anyone… That's something that I kind of envied… I feel like there [is] a lot of diversity within those fraternities, but it's just the people who are branding it are particularly white… They're mainly white people…

Like Connell and Wood's (2005) Australian managers, Dylan described how the White Frat Boy reference point he encountered during college had the power and authority to command attention from others. In this way, from the White Frat Boy reference point emanates a power that draws others to wish to envy this way of being.

The Trashy Kevin Reference Point. Ben, a 24-year-old who majored in aerospace engineering at a public, four-year university, provided his version of Trashy Kevin:

They have like the dangling earrings… the cross that dangles, that's a really common one… The fade, they have the combover… tattoos… They're kind of fit, but not muscular fit… They're fit, they're skinny and slim. They wear… black ripped jeans with white shoes and the denim jacket. The black with the gold chain on the outside… And then there's stuff that associates them with the culture… drinking, smoking, definitely a partier type, low key fuck boy… So that means a lot of girls like him… so there's something good about him that people like, but he's a fuck boy so that's not good… they listen to EDM. They also go to raves… And they drink boba.

Ben revealed many parallels between Trashy Kevins' and White Frat Boys' dress codes and hobbies. Air Forces, chains, faded haircuts, partying, and having sex with many women appear to be essentials for constructing the identity project of the white and Asian American frat boys. However, Trashy Kevins' Asian identities are evident in Ben's descriptions of their attendance at raves such as EDC, an increasingly popular activity among Asian Americans (Hunt, Milhet, and Bergeron 2011), their love for boba – a drink originating from Taiwan – and their tattoos. These distinctly Asian foods and common activities among Asian Americans represent the main differences that set Trashy Kevin apart from the White Frat Boy, according to my participants. In other words, their Asian identities and culture create a more Asian American-specific ideal for Ben and my other participants to draw from.

An even more significant distinction must be made between the White Frat Boy and the Trashy Kevin reference points according to their levels of power. Recall Dylan's quote that stated, "I feel like there [is] a lot of diversity within those fraternities, but it's just the people who are branding it are particularly white…" When discussing the fraternities at his undergraduate university, Dylan described how these groups were often racially diverse. However, the people "branding" them – acting as the leaders and serving

as the face of these organizations – were white. Thus, while the White Frat Boy and Trashy Kevin reference points have much in common, they diverge along an important basis: their levels of power. The whiteness of the White Frat Boy allows this reference point to claim hegemonic masculinity while being Asian relegates Trashy Kevin to a lower position along the gender order of which Connell (1987) theorizes.

The Nerdy Kevin Reference Point. The third reference point of Asian American men as nerds – what my respondents called "Nerdy Kevin" – stems from the feminized image of Asian American men that emerged in the nineteenth century. This image finds its roots in a combination of both their physical appearance and the physical jobs in which Asian men have historically been employed. Arriving as laborers in the U.S., Chinese men maintained their traditional customs of long, braided queues to preserve their national identities. European immigrants viewed these customs and physical appearances as both different and feminine (Chen 1996). Furthermore, the feminized characterization of Asian American men grew when Congress passed legislation limiting the occupations of foreign laborers, forcing Chinese men to assume jobs as cooks, waiters, and laundrymen, occupations that were traditionally viewed as women's work (Chen 1996).

Marcus provides his perspective on the image of an Asian American man who he calls the "Nerdy Kevins":

> So the computer incels is the other Kevin…. They're the spitting image of a guy who only cares about playing his video games. He's probably a computer engineer, computer science major… who is nothing of the sort attractive… He's not good with women at all… He probably tries and the most he'll get is… friendzoned.

Maxwell is a 25-year-old Chinese American who is currently working as a software

engineer. In his free time, he enjoys playing video games, listening to music, and building

computer keyboards. Maxwell shared a similar description to Marcus's description of the

Nerdy Kevin reference point:

> I feel like for Asian American men, the negative stereotype would be that they're nerdy or they just play video games and things like that. Or they're scrawny… with glasses… I just described me. I want to say it's semi accurate because I think about all my friends and I'm like, 'Crap, I just described them.'

The majority of my participants were familiar with the reference point of Nerdy Kevin,

which consists of stereotypes of nerdy and unathletic men. Evident to my participants is

the idea that others perceive Asian American men as computer game geeks who enter

careers in STEM and have trouble in their romantic lives. Marcus described Nerdy

Kevins as "computer incels," referring to their skillfulness with computers and inability

to engage with women romantically or sexually despite desiring this kind of relationship.

This reveals a harsh contrast to the White Frat Boy and Trashy Kevin reference points,

which my participants described as not being serious about schoolwork and having many

successful romantic encounters with women. Despite Nerdy Kevin's academic success,

this reference point involves a masculinity that occupies a position on Connell's (1987)

gender order that is far from hegemonic masculinity and within the realm of masculinities

associated with femininity. Nerdy Kevin's nerdiness reflects an inability to have

successful romantic or sexual interactions with women and a lack of the physical

characteristics to be considered a man—two critical criteria for successfully performing

hegemonic masculinity.

The Simu Liu Reference Point. Finally, my participants were heavily influenced by a fourth cultural reference point, which I call the Simu Liu. Characteristics of this cultural reference point include caring about the progress of Asian American men and Asian Americans as a whole, giving back to one's community, taking care of one's health, providing for one's family, being respectful to women, and caring about one's career. In tune with the many stereotypes made about Asian American men, many participants communicated the importance of representation, particularly expanding the definition of what it means to be an Asian American man. Many described Simu Liu as a role model whose acting career has made much headway in this endeavor, as Asian Americans are not well represented in Hollywood and are often viewed as choosing careers that veer far from the arts.

Vincent is a 24-year-old Chinese American. He describes the qualities he admires about the Asian Canadian actor, Simu Liu:

> Simu Liu… cares about Asian American representation in the media so that's really good. And he's pretty buff. He's a good looking guy. He's like six feet so he's tall, so that definitely helps to be physically attractive… He's muscular for an Asian. And I liked that he kept going. He kept seeking a better part… I think it's cool that he became the first [Asian] Marvel superhero… I like that he kind of represents other Asian American men… just kind of leading the pathway…

Like the White Frat Boy and Trashy Kevin reference points, the Simu Liu reference point presents the image of a physically fit, muscular, and attractive man. Vincent tied the actor's height to his being attractive. Additionally, Vincent and many other participants commended Simu Liu's role as the first Asian American Marvel superhero. Like Vincent, many suggested that this was "leading the pathway" of progress for Asian American men,

who they recognize Hollywood has largely ignored or ridiculed. Although improving the

perception and representation of Asian Americans was commonly found in my

participants' accounts of the Simu Liu reference point, this ideal is characterized by more

than a desire to advance the Asian American community.

Jackson detailed the ideas that come to mind when considering his definition of a

successful life:

> At the end, your wealth really does come from the people around you or
> people you love, family, friends… Money is important, as long as you're
> living comfortably. And that's how I think… there's only so much money
> can buy at the end… It's your health and your own well being that's
> definitely the most important… Successful life for me would be, of course,
> my own place to live… Having the career I do like and love and not staying
> miserable for years… Having a family. Probably two kids max if
> anything… Two dogs, two kids… Provide for the family… showing
> emotion too is really important… If I do have extra cash… I will give back
> to my mom and dad… My dad does have a dream car. Eventually, I do want
> to buy him that dream car, of course, my mom as well too.

Jackson shared that he cared for the people around him. He described money as a

necessity for "living comfortably," but that true "wealth" stems from family and friends.

Similar to the White Frat Boy and Trashy Kevin reference points, there is a concern for

one's health that is present in Jackson's narrative. There is a sense of needing to set long-

term goals and be responsible that Jackson communicated, as he imagined a successful

life to include ownership of a home and providing for his family. He also shared the

desire to "give back." Thus, the Simu Liu reference point involves being a respectful and

selfless son, a man who cares for others and values the advancement of Asian Americans,

a father and partner who provides for his family, and an individual who takes care of his

personal health, career, and well-being.

Drawing a large contrast to the men in Connell and Wood's (2005) study who persisted within careers despite the conditions of the work, Jackson described wanting a career that he enjoys and is not "miserable" with. This reflects a different level of power that the Simu Liu reference point strives for in contrast with the White Frat Boy. While the White Frat Boy will put his body, health, and relationships on the line in exchange for power and money, the Simu Liu reference point seeks a lifestyle that is not as driven toward these levels of power. However, the Simu Liu reference point has other features that do resemble those of hegemonic masculinity, such as being physically fit and having romantic or sexual relationships with women. Thus, it involves a masculinity that holds a position on Connell's (1987) gender order that is between hegemonic masculinity and subordinate masculinity, similar to Trashy Kevin.

While Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity is valuable in allowing us to recognize the power of the White Frat Boy reference point, it is unable to account for the influence of other reference points that my participants drew from. The young Asian American men in my study described their relationship to three other models of Asian American masculinity–the Trashy Kevin, Nerdy Kevin, and Simu Liu reference points–reflecting the influence of these non-hegemonic masculinities. While my participants described these reference points as less powerful than hegemonic masculinity, there are still aspects of them that are enticing, desirable, and strategically embraced by these men for their own benefit.

Asian American Men Selectively Distance Negative Aspects and Embrace Positive Aspects of Reference Points

Asian American men have a history of drawing on strategies to negotiate reference points. For instance, Chen (1999) found four main gender strategies of compensation, deflection, denial, and repudiation as common among Chinese American men responding to stereotypes. Compensation is used to challenge negative stereotypes by aiming for the ideals of hegemonic masculinity; deflection is an effort to direct attention away from self-perceived stereotypical conduct; denial ignores stereotypes or their relevance to oneself; and repudiation rejects the cultural assumptions about hegemonic masculinity that allow such stereotypes to exist.

The Asian American men in my study strive to find a happy medium among the negative and positive aspects of reference points in two ways. First, they distance themselves from negative aspects of reference points. For example, my participants avoided certain characteristics of reference points by going to the gym and engaging in athletic activity. Second, my participants remain close to the positive aspects of reference points. For example, some embraced certain characteristics of reference points by finding truth in the ideas they projected. My participants' manipulation of reference points as both ideals to avoid and ideals to keep within close proximity demonstrate how these reference points are a double-edged sword: they have the ability to both help and harm Asian American men in their identity construction processes.

The distancing strategy my participants drew on was most evident in their descriptions of engaging in athletic activities as a response to the negative aspects of the Nerdy Kevin reference point. In order to depart from this image casting Asian American men as weak, scrawny, and only focused on academics, my participants frequently went

to the gym, lifted weights, and played sports to characterize themselves as strong and athletic men. The distancing strategy that I find among my participants closely resembles the gender strategy of compensation and deflection that Chen (1999) observed. Like the men in Chen's study (1999), the Asian American men in my study, at times, strive for the hegemonic masculine ideal or aim to avoid being seen as stereotypical. However I expand upon Chen's (1999) findings in two ways. First, my concept of reference points reveals how Asian American men are not just responding to negative stereotypes, but encountering cultural models that are mixed with both positive and negative characteristics. Second, my study uncovers an embracing strategy that young Asian American use as a maneuver to benefit from stereotypes and enact their agency.

Oselin and Barber (2019) also observe a strategy used agentically by lower-class, male sex workers of color to remain in close proximity to aspects of hegemonic masculinity. These men engage in "status maneuvering," seeking white, wealthy clients with the resources to provide them with a sense of elevated status, even if momentarily. Like the men in Oselin and Barber's (2019) study, my participants embraced and distanced themselves from aspects of the White Frat Boy's hegemonic masculinity. However, my participants also engaged in these strategies from several other reference points, demonstrating how hegemonic masculinity is not the only form of masculinity that is enticing to men or serves as a resource for their identity construction processes.

Alex's father was born in California and his mother was born in Indonesia and immigrated to the United States at the age of 13. In his interview, Alex shared how challenging it has been and continues to be for him as an Asian American man facing the

reference point painting Asian American men as unathletic, unattractive, and weak. He

opened up about the strategies he has used to combat this idea:

> There's always been that stereotype of Asian men being smaller or shorter…
> unattractive… not being very, very athletic… Growing up… the stereotype
> is people who look like you are unattractive… it really affects your self
> esteem and your self confidence… I really like physical activity… It just
> feels really empowering because I used to be fat… Whenever I do physical
> activity or get exercise, it's fighting my insecurities in a way… When I'm at
> the gym, and I'm putting on mass… it feels like maybe I'm fighting that
> stereotype that Asians are small…

Alex described how the reference point characterizing Asian American men as "smaller,"

"shorter," "unattractive," and unathletic has negatively impacted his self esteem and self

confidence. He also described having been "fat" as a child. These experiences have

played a formative role in shaping his currently active lifestyle. On top of being

"empowering," activities like weightlifting and "putting on mass" in the gym provided

him with an avenue to counter the Nerdy Kevin reference point.

Now working as a senior accountant, Dylan reflected on interactions he had with

peers as an undergraduate:

> I feel like because I'm Asian people reach[ed] out to me more often in class.
> For example… I was in a business law class and I did well on a midterm.
> So people who I don't normally talk to… when they saw my score, they're
> more likely to reach out to me and be… nicer so that… they can copy my
> test or whatever… That's just how it works. If you're Asian they see your
> score and then that's the only way to make friends… throughout the class.
> And by the time you finish the class, they don't care to talk to you
> anymore… I don't mind helping them… If they're not interfering with what
> I do… I don't really care… They are trying to use me for personal gain, I
> think that's fine… But I don't expect anything from them because of this.
> So for them to actually hit me up after we finish the class, I don't expect
> anything like that. It's just something that helps us both get through the
> semester.

Dylan reflected on a memory of how his peers treated him in an undergraduate business law class. Upon learning that he did well on an exam, his peers became friendlier so that Dylan might help them. Dylan recognized the presence of model minority myths, saying "Because I'm Asian people reach[ed] out to me more often in class." Others held assumptions about his academic abilities based on his identity, and their assumptions were strengthened by his actual test performance. In this way, the Nerdy Kevin reference point reduced Dylan to his academic abilities because of his identity. Although Dylan acknowledged that he is being used by his peers, he said he did not mind. Instead, he viewed it as "something that helps us both get through the semester." Thus, Dylan embraced and benefited from his peers' use of Nerdy Kevin characteristics as he was able to make friends and be reaffirmed as a smart and academically successful Asian American man.

The differences between Bryson's experiences at a predominantly white school and a predominantly Asian American school further highlight how mixed aspects of reference points both confine and benefit Asian American men:

> Since I was Asian there were already a lot of expectations for me to be really smart… When I was growing up… I was the only Chinese kid in the entire school… All these people were like, 'Yeah he's good at math because he's Asian.' But I mean, yeah, it's true. I was good at math. So, what you gonna do about it? So, I mean, it worked in my favor… But then I moved… And suddenly, 60% of the school is Asian… I was like, 'Oh my god, I have so many more options now. I don't have to just be the intelligent guy anymore. I can do other things as well, like branch out because clearly there are other people there that are way more intelligent than I am. So then it's more of just optimizing my own route to differentiate myself from the others.

Bryson discussed the academic expectations others had of him because he is an Asian American male student at a predominantly white school. He felt a strong pressure from the Nerdy Kevin reference point, but discovered a happy medium by believing it worked to his advantage. His line of thinking of "So, what you gonna do about it?" was quite defensive as he aimed to protect himself from the constraints of this reference point and transformed it into something positive that "worked in [his] favor." However, Bryson expressed relief as he detailed his experiences at the predominantly Asian American school. No longer limited to being "the intelligent guy," he was now free to cultivate an identity that incorporated other things he enjoyed. At the same time, his new school provided a place with more competition, as more Asian Americans meant peers that were "way more intelligent" than he was. However, he made sense of no longer being "the intelligent guy" and found a new happy medium by focusing on how he was no longer constrained by the Nerdy Kevin reference point.

Connell (1995) argues that we must understand masculinities as a set of gender relations and processes. Within this gender order, hegemonic masculinity is the position that holds the most power and influence, and all other masculinities are subordinate to the hegemonic ideal. Complicit masculinities are those that do not embody the hegemonic masculine ideal but uphold and benefit from it. Masculinities that engage in complicity benefit from the overall structure of patriarchy and do not risk challenging the gender structure. Connell (1995) is unclear about how marginalized masculinities compare to complicit masculinities in their levels of power, however, it is suggested that marginalized masculinities are less powerful; because the gender order exists within a

white-supremacist context, non-white masculinities are considered marginalized. Thus, while a complicit masculinity enacted by a white, working-class man may still benefit from hegemonic masculinity, a marginalized masculinity enacted by an Asian American, working-class man would benefit less from the hegemonic ideal and be viewed as less powerful.

The distancing strategy used by participants in my study like Alex align with Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity in that these young Asian American men are engaging in a strategy that helps them construct an identity that more closely resembles the hegemonic masculine ideal and rejects characteristics tied to subordinate masculinities. However, the concept of hegemonic masculinity does not explain how marginalized masculinities such as the Trashy Kevin, Nerdy Kevin, and Simu Liu may still be heavily relied upon in positive ways by Asian American men in their identity construction processes. The embracing strategy used by participants such as Dylan and Bryson demonstrates the value in using the concept of reference points to understand how young Asian American men shape their identities. These reference points are mixed with both negative and positive characteristics, and the young Asian American men in my study selectively embraced some positive characteristics from non-hegemonic reference points in a way that benefited them.

The Average Happy Medium and the Well-Rounded Happy Medium

Narrowly positioned between reference points containing elements that can both help and harm them, I found two main patterns in the messages that Asian American men's identity constructions signal. First, many of my participants communicated the

desire to simply be "that one Asian guy." Whether they were thinking about their physical appearance, academic success, or professional goals, these men felt comfortable with and were sometimes even aspiring to blend in with the crowd, not stand out, and be average. Occupying a liminal space that does not invite too much attention but also is enough for them to not be completely lacking in physical stature, academic performance, or professional goals provided these men with a sense of safety from and contentment with the reference points they are forced to carry with their identities. Second, other participants constructed their identities in such a way that signaled they are well-rounded. They describe having interests in non-academic activities, such as playing sports and journaling. Participants who shaped this happy medium of well-roundedness aimed to project an image of themselves as multifaceted and distinct individuals with their own unique interests.

The Average Happy Medium. Vincent spent some time at a community college before transferring to a public, four-year university. He obtained his bachelor's degree in International Business but has been struggling to find a full-time job since then. Currently, he works part-time at a boba shop. Vincent described how he is "average":

> I'm more on the skinny side… I'm not short, but I'm not tall… Just average… Average is good… In school… I strove to be average… Just good enough… Academically just maintaining like, Bs or Cs, just not failing… Because average is good enough for me. I don't really care to be number one… I feel okay about that. I'm cool with it. It's nice… not being the spotlight… When I walk into a room, it's not like, "Whoa, there's that ethnicity coming in. It's just an Asian, just the guy in the crowd."

Omi and Winant's (2015) concept of *racial projects* describes how individuals are constantly engaging in the active production of race. This concept provides us with a lens

to observe how my participants are always in the process of creating the meaning of being an Asian American. In Vincent's case, he communicates not only being average in his academics, but that average was his goal. He described doing enough in school to not fail, but having no desire "to be number one." He interpreted this as not drawing attention to himself, describing attaining mediocrity as "good." Thus, the racial project that Vincent shaped is one that tied a meaning to being Asian American that countered that of the dominant society's – one that said Asian Americans are average rather than extremely intelligent.

However, racial projects do not account for why, in his discussion of this desire to be average, Vincent *also* mentioned his physical stature. Reflecting on his height and leaner build, Vincent explained that he is physically "just average." In doing so, it is not just his race that is being constructed, but his racial *and* gender identity as an Asian American man. While race and gender identity axes are not the only ones that are being created in an intersectional identity project, these are the most salient among my participants and are the focus of this study. Both Vincent's racial project and gender project were being sculpted, but they could not be formed separately. His attempt to blend in but not fail in his academics and his assessment of his height as typical are linked; he aimed to be an academically-average Asian American *man*, and he evaluated his physical stature as average for an *Asian American* man. In this way, Vincent was engaging in what I call an *intersectional identity project*.

Jacob, 25, graduated from a mid-sized, public state university. He studied Finance and Data Analytics and now works as a financial analyst. Jacob communicated a sentiment of feeling content being viewed as any other Asian guy:

> I don't think I really stand out. I'm not small either. I'm like 5'8… I'm just like a normal Asian guy… I don't care about… standing out… I'm cool with that title, "That One Asian Guy."

Jacob shared that, despite his relatively tall stature, he blends in with other Asian American men as "a normal Asian guy." In fact, he said he is satisfied with the title of "That One Asian Guy." Not wanting to "stand out," Jacob was happy being an ordinary Asian American man.

Like Vincent, Jacob demonstrated how he was creating a racial project of being average. Also like Vincent, however, Jacob's racial and gender identities are intertwined and simultaneously being shaped. Jacob does not say that he is content with being called "That One Asian" or "That One Guy." Instead, both identities are being formed together as intersectional identity projects.

The Well-Rounded Happy Medium. Some respondents also created happy mediums that signal they are multidimensional beings who have an array of skills and interests. Such an example of creating an identity of well-roundedness can be found in Jayden's account of positive and negative stereotypes that exist about Asian American men. Jayden expressed that he finds truth in stereotypes characterizing Asian American men as hyper-ambitious, as he has interacted with peers who are "too determined" and "too focused on what they want to do."

> In terms of positive stereotypes, I think a lot of people just see them as very determined. Always on track in what they want to do. Always very

straightforward and persevering… Almost in a way those positive
stereotypes can be turned into a negative stereotype. Being too determined,
being too focused… Whether it is grades, whether it is something they're
passionate about… And I think that… can work against them a lot of times.

While Jayden saw the Nerdy Kevin reference point casting Asian American men as

"determined" as a truthful and positive reality, he also viewed this as something that

confines Asian American men. He described them as being "too determined" and "too

focused" in a way that "can work against them." Responding to a question asking

whether he believed others view him as hyper-focused on something in the way that he

described other Asian American men often are, Jayden said:

I don't think so. I hope not. I try to be as well-rounded as I can. And not…
be so attached to a certain thing. I do have certain things I do love…
Basketball is definitely one. I'm such a huge basketball guy that any chance
to go to a court or a gym, I'm taking that opportunity.

When asked about how he relates to these stereotypes, Jayden appeared to resist his

previous remark that being determined and focused is a positive quality of Asian

American men. He openly hoped that others do not view him the way he views these men

to be. Instead, he talked about his love for basketball and how he aimed to be and be

perceived as "well-rounded." He revealed the desire to be viewed as someone who is

dynamic in his interests and passions.

The concept of intersectional identity projects makes visible the simultaneous

racial and gender elements of Jayden's identity that are being negotiated as he wrestles

with society's stereotypes of Asian American men. While playing basketball allowed him

to shape an identity that counters the idea that Asians are only interested in academics,

the identity he was creating also challenged the idea that Asian American men are

unathletic. In this way, Jayden is one example of how intersectional identity projects may lend a hand in observing how one's identity axes, such as race and gender, are always working inseparably and in tandem to create individuals' intersectional identities.

The concept of intersectional identity projects also allows us to examine the different happy mediums that my participants shaped in the face of the same reference points: the average happy medium and the well-rounded happy medium. Participants such as Vincent drew upon these reference points by shaping an intersectional identity project that aimed to convey to others that he was an average Asian American man, while participants such as Jayden drew upon these reference points by engaging in an intersectional identity project that aimed to express to others that he was a well-rounded Asian American man.

Discussion and Conclusion

Intersectionality theory allows us to observe how young Asian American men are uniquely positioned within a contradictory space (Crenshaw 1990). Their racial identities reflect subordination while their gender identities reflect domination. This contradictory space is further complicated when we account for the cultural reference points that men draw upon to construct their identities. My concept of "reference points" is similar to Collins' (2004) notion of "controlling images," but distinct in that they reveal how cultural ideas can be used as a resource for enacting agency. Controlling images reveal how the dominant society's ideologies of subordinate groups can be constraining and oppressive, limiting individuals' abilities to construct identities outside of what these images entail. Reference points, however, build upon this and show that cultural ideas are

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not just constraining. Instead, they also serve as a resource from which individuals draw. While agreeing with controlling images' principle that cultural ideas can be restricting and degrading, reference points reveal a second dimension of cultural ideas that reflects how people can use these images to their advantage. Reference points reveal the agency that people have in creatively and strategically using these images to navigate different situations in positive ways. Thus, while cultural ideas *are* oppressive, they also can be an instrument of power resourcefully and innovatively used by individuals.

For example, some aspects of the Nerdy Kevin reference point reflect model minority ideas that cast Asian American men as geeky and innately gifted in math and science. These ideas have both uplifted and degraded this group of men. Other aspects of reference points identify these men as especially effeminate and unattractive men. Yet, according to traditional paradigms of masculinity, their overall high professional success would be considered an attractive feature. As such, young Asian American men face a frenzy of contradictory ideas that, at times, elevate them, and at other times, degrade them. This project explored how these men selectively adopt and combine particular characteristics or features of these reference points to negotiate their identities.

As the most powerful and influential form of masculinity, hegemonic masculinity is enticing to all men regardless of their social identity (Connell 1995). The young Asian American men in my study are no exception. However, the first finding of this project revealed the use of other highly influential reference points in addition to hegemonic masculinity that are unique to Asian American men: the Trashy Kevin, Nerdy Kevin, and Simu Liu reference points. The Trashy Kevin reference point closely resembled the

hegemonic masculinity reference point, which participants identified as "the White Frat Boy." Both reference points were described to attend parties frequently, dress in a stylish manner, and have successful interactions with women. However, Trashy Kevin was viewed as less powerful than the White Frat Boy, particularly because of this reference point's racial identity. The Nerdy Kevin reference point described a stereotypical image of Asian American men as hyper-focused on their academic achievement, viewed as unattractive by other women, and obsessed with video games. Participants viewed this reference point as intelligent but unathletic and not well-rounded.

The Simu Liu reference point was described as giving back to one's community, being a respectful and involved father, husband, and son, maintaining healthy relationships with one's friends and family, enjoying one's career, and having enough money to be financially comfortable. This reference point looked down upon traits such as violence and using force to dominate others, instead encouraging traits such as being funny, courageous, charismatic, intelligent, confident, muscular, and a good leader. This reference point inspired men to be ambitious about their professional and academic goals, aim for happiness and not money, and find a deeper purpose in their lives. Men who engaged in identity projects mimicking the Simu Liu reference point had hobbies such as watching anime, working out at the gym or engaging in physical activity, and playing video games. Lastly, this ideal allowed men to feel comfortable openly expressing their feelings beyond anger, such as joy or sadness.

The second finding from this study was that Asian American men's identity work (Snow and Anderson 1987) often combined a distancing strategy with an embracing

strategy to create a happy medium among the negative and positive aspects of reference points. For example, in an attempt to avoid negative characteristics of the Nerdy Kevin reference point identifying these men as physically weak and scrawny and excelling only in academics, many participants engaged in physical activities such as going to the gym or playing basketball. Yet, some also embraced the element of Nerdy Kevin that portrays Asian American men as intellectually gifted as this provided them an opportunity to make friends or be viewed as higher-achieving than their peers.

The third finding from this study was that, in using a distancing and embracing strategy to engage with various aspects of reference points, Asian American men were sculpting intersectional identity projects of either averageness or well-roundedness. My concept of intersectional identity projects builds upon Omi and Winant's (2015) concept of racial projects by revealing how one's various social identities are simultaneously created and combined in distinct ways. This study focused mainly on the intersection of race and gender identities. Some participants such as Vincent and Jacob sought to create an intersectional identity project that signaled that they were typical Asian American men. Whether in school or in the gym, these men yearned to blend in with other Asian American men. However, other participants such as Jayden sought to shape a different intersectional identity project, one that signaled well-roundedness. They aimed to be viewed as multifaceted beings who held a variety of interests and engaged in a variety of activities in their lives. Overall, these men were engaging in a careful balancing act of selectively distancing and embracing elements of reference points as part of the process

of finding a happy medium, or an intersectional identity project with which they were content.

This project builds upon existing literature on hegemonic masculinity by drawing on an intersectional framework to explore how Asian American men relate to non-hegemonic reference points. While hegemonic masculinity continues to be incredibly powerful and influential to these men, other reference points also serve as significant guideposts for the identities they wish to construct. Additionally, these non-hegemonic reference points are not just subordinate models of masculinity to be rejected; instead, they are also infused with positive characteristics that my participants strategically embraced to their own benefit. This has implications for men of other marginalized identities as it allows us to recognize that despite the power of hegemonic masculinity, other reference points may also serve to significantly and distinctively influence men's intersectional identity projects. Additionally, this research illuminates the complicated reality of one group of people who encounter contradictory stereotypes in their lives, but the findings serve as a stepping stone for expanding research on other types of intersectional identities. For example, the contradiction that Black women face as their blackness is observed as masculine, yet their identities as women are feminine has long been documented (hooks 2014). This project may help us draw parallels between groups such as Black women and Asian American men who encounter contradictory aspects of racialized gender identities.

As a group who has achieved relatively great success in the United States with high rates of employment in high-status and high-paying fields, there are privileges that

many Asian American men maintain. However, they continue to be marginalized in other ways, such as through mixed reference points and the narrow expectations for them to work in STEM fields. This project highlights some of the contradictions that young Asian American men face and the strategies they use to navigate these contradictions. By observing young men who encounter reference points, this research also adds to our knowledge of emerging adulthood by making visible the added tensions that some young adults face given the intersection of their racial-ethnic and gender identities. In this way, this study brings a greater awareness to the processes that young Asian American men are engaging in that may affect their career choices, educational paths, familial relationships, and well-being. Thus, this project may inform the work of policymakers working to reform hiring practices that account for different cultural backgrounds, educators who work closely with this demographic, and Asian American families whose relatives are the subject of this study.

This sample relied on Asian American men of Chinese descent. Literature on the model minority makes explicit the diversity among Asian Americans. Thus, more research on Asian American men of different racial-ethnic backgrounds is needed before generalizations can be made across Asian American ethnic groups. Additionally, previous literature details the significance of social class in people's identity formation processes and experiences (Lareau 2002). Future research should further explore the role of class background in shaping young Asian American men's identity formation experiences.

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Appendix A

Asian American Men and Masculinity

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research. This is a study intended to explore young Asian American men's masculinity-formation experiences. Your participation in this project is important for my research with the University of California, Riverside. Please be assured that all answers you provide will be kept confidential.

1. Please indicate your name. _____

2. Please indicate your gender.

    Cis-gender Man   Transgender Man   Other

3. Please indicate your sexual orientation. _____
                or
          Prefer not to answer

4. Please indicate your racial-ethnic identity (e.g. Chinese-American, Filipino-American, Vietnamese-American). _____

1. Please indicate your generational status.

    1st generation (you were born in another country and moved to the U.S. after the age of 15)
    1.5 generation (you were born in another country and moved to the U.S. before the age of 15)
    2nd generation (both of your parents were born in another country and you were born in the U.S.)
    3rd+ generation (one or both of your parents were born in the U.S. and you were born in the U.S.)

6. Please indicate your age._____

7. Please indicate your current educational status. _____

    1st year   2nd year   3rd year   4th year
    4+ year   Graduate School/Professional Program
Other:_____

8. Please indicate your occupation if you have one. _____

9. Please indicate your major. _____

10. Please indicate your parents' highest levels of educational attainment.
Parent 1: _____
Parent 2: _____

11. Please indicate your parents' current occupations.
Parent 1: _____
Parent 2: _____

Appendix B

Educational and Career Pathways
1. Please tell me about a time when you experienced academic or social expectations because you are Asian American.
2. What role did your parents play in guiding your educational and career goals? For example, did your parents have expectations of what profession you should pursue?
3. Please tell me about an Asian American man you know who is well into his career. What success has he achieved in his career? What obstacles has he faced in his career?
4. What does a successful career look like for you? Where do you think this idea of a successful career comes from? Do you think this idea has influenced you? How?
5. What steps are you currently taking to prepare for your career?
6. If you are currently employed or participating in an internship, what challenges have you faced in the workplace, if any? If you are not yet employed or in an internship, what challenges do you anticipate experiencing once you are working?
7. What are some challenges tied to your identity as an Asian American that might keep you from pursuing your career goals?
8. Are you aware of any views about Asian American men that exist that may block their advancement in their careers? How do you feel about them? Does this apply to you or anyone you know?

Views of Asian American Men
9. Can you think of any positive stereotypes people have of Asian American men? Can you think of any negative stereotypes people have of Asian American men? How accurate do you think these stereotypes are? Where do you see these stereotypes coming from? Do these stereotypes influence you in any way? How?
10. How true do you think this statement is? "Asian American men are perceived as less masculine than other men." Why? Does this influence you in any way?
11. How desirable do you think women find Asian American men to be? What about them do they find desirable or undesirable? Why? Does this affect you in any way?
12. How important do you think money is to women when they are looking for a male partner?
13. How true do you think this statement is? "Asian American men tend to make more money than men of other racial-ethnic groups."
14. If you think this statement is true, do you think people view Asian American men as more "manly" because of this? Why or why not?
15. What are two adjectives strangers might use to describe you as an Asian American man? What are two adjectives you would use to describe yourself as an Asian American man?
16. Is there anything else we did not cover in this interview that you would like to share?