The Model Minority in the 21st Century: Marketing to Asian-Americans

Yicheng Huang[1], Lauren Malanka[#] and Harrison Cho[#]

[1] Tenafly High School, Tenafly, NJ, USA
[#] Advisor

Asians in America: The Model Minority

Asian-Americans are a vastly diverse group within the U.S that includes the immigrants and their descendants who came from Asia, a continent that contains nearly two-thirds of the world's population. Though the Asian population within the U.S only amounts to 5% of the population, Asian-Americans consist of one of the fastest growing demographics within the U.S, with their purchasing power of $1.2 trillion ever increasing (Taylor & Stern, 2013). Asian-Americans on average have the highest incomes and most advanced education in comparison to the general populace and other ethnicities (Kim & Kang, 2021). This is largely due to the significant amount of resources required for Asian immigrants to uproot and move their entire livelihoods across the world to the U.S. Moreover, those who consider themselves as Asian-Americans are growing at a rapid pace, a development that is mainly seen in metropolitan and urban areas where communication can be facilitated with ease. Thus, the marketing and advertising industries are particularly attracted to the Asian-American market and deem them as "model minorities" (Taylor & Stern, 2013).

Much of the discussion on Asian-Americans as a consumer base is unfortunately largely reductive due to the considerable differences in culture among Asian cultures. It is important to note that the cultures of different countries in Asia may be even more different from each other than that of America. Until the 1990s, Asian-Americans were often treated as a monolith, and marketing strategies mainly consisted of incorporating specific icons (especially of Chinese influence) into advertisements. Some of these icons such as dragons, the number 9, and the color red are certainly characteristic of Chinese culture, but the repeated and bland use of these icons can diminish the complexity of Asian culture and oftentimes come across as superficial and ineffective. In fact, there have already been numerous incidents throughout the past few decades that have offended Asian viewers. In an analysis of three advertisement campaigns among six magazines (Newsweek, Business Week, Vogue, In Style, Premiere, and Entertainment Weekly), Asian-American women were objectified and culturally misrepresented, ultimately labeled as the "other," different from the white subjects in the advertisement (Kim & Chung, 2005). In the 1990s, car company Pontiac released an ad that expressed anti-Japanese sentiment as a strategy to discourage customers from buying Japanese cars (Lee, 1991). These inaccurate and offensive portrayals continue today. In 2018, a Dolce & Gabbana ad for a Chinese audience portrayed an Asian woman wearing red clothes in a red background, struggling to eat Western food with chopsticks (Xu, 2018). These misrepresentations show that there needs to be more discussion and inclusion of Asians when creating marketing and advertising content.

Despite the attractive size and buying power of Asian-American consumers, marketers have experienced great difficulty in tapping into the Asian markets, mainly due to the ever changing and complex nature of the Asian-American demographic. In the past few decades, companies and marketers have increasingly become interested in the differences in consumer patterns of Asian-Americans compared to the general populace. Researchers Geng Cui and Kathleen VanScoyoc Powell (2015) from Hampton University have shown that the Asian-American population has generally been divided into four categories: Assimilated, Acculturated, Separated, and Marginalized (Berry, Kim and Boski, 1988). These relationships are based on the degree of adherence

to either the host country's culture or American culture. Those who are assimilated or acculturated are more positive towards American culture yet still may be drawn to certain icons or imagery within marketing media. Though this view may have been sufficient when the population of Asians were unsubstantial, we have to redefine how Asian-Americans are viewed within the modern business world to reflect the diversity of this demographic.

Pattern of Acculturation	Time Dimensions	Characteristics
Segment I: Assimilated	the second and the following generations	They have integrated into the mainstream society and adopted the values and communication patterns of the host people. They are probably educated and have succeeded in the host society.. They probably have moved out of their ethnic community and use little ethnic media.
Segment II: Acculturated	the first generation	These recent immigrants have largely adapted to the American society yet still retain their ethnic identity to a great extent. Many of them are bilingual. They use both ethnic media and the host society media. They are achievers in the new society.
Segment III: Separated	the first generation	These new immigrants have not become adapted to the host society. They rely heavily on ethnic community for economic and social support. They use mainly ethnic media for information or entertainment. They are survivors.
Segment IV: Marginalized	the first generation	This small group of immigrants not only deny their own ethnic or political background but also reject the host society. Their reaction to either ethnic communication or host communication is uncertain. They are the "marginals."

Figure 1. Four Segments of Asian Americans and characteristics (Kim & Kang, 2001)

Youn-Kyung Kim, an expert on consumer patterns within Asian-American populations, develops these ideas in her research to delve into the true complexity of this demographic that has different demands when purchasing products compared to the overall U.S. population. Marketers generally attribute a two-tiered theoretical framework for interpersonal influence in product purchases: the normative and informational influence. Normative influence is the need to conform to or identify with others through the purchase and use of certain products and brands. Individuals who are susceptible to normative influence tend to make purchases based on their concerns of how others would perceive them. In contrast, informational influence is "the tendency to learn about products and services by observing others or seeking information from others" (Bearden et al. 1989). Uncertain or uninformed customers are influenced by those who have previous experience and high credibility, and they desire to obtain objective information about products. Though people are susceptible to both regardless of the product and/or service they are purchasing, Asians who are more acculturated to the U.S. are more influenced by normative influences, responding to the latest trends and more familiar with the dominant U.S. culture of non-Asians. Kim ultimately determined that products should consider these factors when developing media for an Asian-American audience.

Currently, there is still much research to be conducted to understand the ever changing market of Asian-Americans' values and consumer patterns. As Asian-Americans become more assimilated with time, and new generations develop in a more complex cultural environment, companies will need to accurately attract the Asian-American populace.

What Do Asian-Americans Think?

Beyond the consumption patterns of Asian-Americans as viewed by companies, research from the past two decades have revealed a complex relationship between Asian-Americans and their identity within the U.S., especially revealed in Asian representation in the media. Although Asian-Americans are represented in 8.4%

of ads, more than double their proportion in the population, Asian-Americans only play a major role in 47.1% of the advertisements while Caucasian models play a major role in 90.8% of the advertisements in which they appear. Consistent portrayal of minorities in background roles makes it harder for that group to assimilate, which is defined as "host culture's acceptance of the group as equal across all societal roles." Furthermore, if stereotypes are enforced in the commercials, whether it is positive ("model minority") or negative, the overall population may have their prejudices confirmed, further worsening the view of Asian-Americans (Gerbner et al. 1980).

There may even be evidence that stereotypes are exploited to advertise a product. Several studies have shown that viewers may associate these stereotypes with the product that is advertised. In one study, white customers responded more positively to Asian models in advertisements for tech related products (stereo speakers, in this case) and more negatively to Asian models in advertisements for non-tech related products such as foods, suits, and sports (Cohen, 1992). Although the positive responses show that Asians are viewed favorably in today's society (e.g. good work ethic or academic prowess), they also serve to deindividualize everyone in that group. It is clear that Asians do feel isolated and misrepresented within American media. In fact, a recent poll showed that nearly 64.1% of Asian-Americans feel underrepresented in the media. Though there may be a "proportionate" representation in media today, the way in which Asians are portrayed does not reflect the complexity of their cultures.

The Global Age of Technology

With the development of technology and increased access to goods worldwide, Americans are more than ever connected to the rest of the world. At the forefront of this change, Asian-Americans have shown to have a high rate of adaptability to new technology. Evidently, research reveals that Asian-Americans spend 66% of the time on computers, smartphones, and tablets: the highest ratio out of all customer segments. In 2020, Nielsen Ratings stressed the importance of the development of two forms of media that have significant economic impacts. First, the streaming services Netflix and Hulu have gained an international audience and needed to present their service as capable of meeting vastly different entertainment needs. Understanding the content that Asian-Americans prefer can be valuable information to understand consumer patterns. Second, the explosive popularity of e-sports and online gaming among the Asian community puts them at the forefront of the latest form of entertainment and technology.

Despite the popularity of traditional cable television, Asian-Americans are cutting the cord at a rate that is nearly twice that of the total population. Opting instead for newer virtual multichannel video programming distributors (vMVPD), Asian-Americans are drawn to services, such as Sling TV, Hulu + Live TV, Youtube TV, and AT&T TV, that provide an internet based alternative to live TV. Moreover, 82% of Asian-Americans subscribe to at least one streaming service (while only 72% of the total population do) and show strong support for culturally relevant content on these platforms. Likewise, the top most watched episodic series among Asian-Americans on Netflix (such as *V Wars*, *Lost in Space* and *I Am Not Okay With Thi*s) showcase a diverse lead cast.

The largest gaming company in the world, Tencent, located in Shenzhen, China, currently holds prominent positions as owners or partial owners in some of the U.S.'s largest game developers such as Riot Games, Epic Games, and Activision Blizzard. Needless to say, Asia has been the driving force in the growing gaming industry which has already been attractive to big brands who aim to engage with the young audiences, from Panera Bread partnering with the NBA 2K League to the U.S. Air Force partnering with the Call of Duty League. Asian-Americans play an influential role in the industry both as gamers and spectators who are 14% more likely to own a gaming console and 37% more likely to own a virtual reality headset. Asian-American gamers are also younger with the majority (69%) falling between ages 13-34 as compared to the 44% of U.S. gamers, making the gaming industry all the more effective for marketers to reach the Asian-American audience. Furthermore,

Asian companies are already vying for the attention of the Asian-American consumer in the U.S. to use products that American companies can not provide. U.S companies lose much potential and profits if they do not cater to this audience.

Traditional Asian-American Advertising and Marketing Strategies

To successfully navigate the fragmented nature of Asian-American culture and reach this segment, researchers Steven Chen, Yuna Kim, and Chiranjeev Kohli proposed two strategies. The first approach is ethnic segmentation through which Asian-Americans are segmented based on their ethnicity (eg. Chinese, Korean, or Indian). To execute this method, marketers first need to distinguish geographical regions that are densely populated with the chosen Asian segment. For instance, areas like San Francisco and New York contain high densities of Chinese-Americans; Philadelphia and Chicago with Indian-Americans; and Huston and Dallas-Fort Worth with Korean-Americans. When a segment and its appropriate region are selected, marketers then distribute the appropriate products to its respective ethnoburb. This strategy was once adopted by the Filipino fast food giant, Jollibee, when it first expanded its stores to the U.S. In 1998, Jollibee carefully selected Daly City, California, as the site of its first store within the states to cater to the city's large population of Filipino residents. The plan was a success and the company has gone on to open 32 more locations nationwide, many of them employing the same method (S. Chen et al. 2017). Nonetheless, this strategy still does not account for the wide variance of Asian audiences.

The second approach proposed is to use acculturation levels as a predictor of consumer behavior (Kumar & Steenkamp, 2013). By using acculturation levels, marketers are further able to understand the difference in consumer behavior even within the same ethnic group. After all, whether someone is a first generation or second generation Chinese-American, for example, can drastically alter their consumption behavior. For this approach, Asian-Americans are categorized into different levels of acculturation determined by scales such as The Suinn-Lew Asian Self-Identity Acculturation (SL-ASIA) survey and the Vancouver Index of Acculturation (VIA) survey that measure how acculturated an individual is. Those with a low acculturation score associate themselves more closely with their native identities, regarding products and brands from their culture of origin more positively than that of their host culture. To reach this segment of Asian-Americans, marketers have traditionally adopted an approach known as local consumer culture positioning (LCCP), a strategy in which a product or brand is associated with local cultural meanings (Alden, Steenkamp, & Batra, 1999).

On the other hand, Asian-Americans with a high acculturation score were fully adapted to their host culture, but many lacked the ability to read, speak, or understand their native language, making the consumption of cultural products difficult. High acculturation Asian-Americans viewed American brands as symbols of modernity and economic progress, thus a de-ethnicization strategy may be the most effective approach. This strategy, known as known as global consumer culture positioning (GCCP), required cultural elements that link the product to its original culture (eg. symbols, icons, logos, etc.) to be neutralized (Alden et al., 1999). Through GCCP, consumption of these products resonated with consumers and reminded them that they are not just Americans, but Americans of ethnic backgrounds. Lee Kum Lee, a predominant leader in China's food sauce market, was an example of a company employing the GCCP method. After establishing a U.S. subsidiary in 1983, Lee distributed a low cost version of Lee Kum Kee's premium oyster sauce under the name "Panda Brand." The Panda Brand modified its product packaging and labels from including Lee Kum Kee's traditional images and Chinese characters to featuring an image of a panda, a more globalized brand mark. Through this, the Panda Brand effectively de-ethnicized its products and found much success among young Asian consumers and restaurants.

A Need for a New Paradigm

As the Asian-American segment of the population grows ever larger, the way in which companies, marketers, and advertisers engage with their Asian audiences must change to reflect their experience. In addition to hiring more Asian-Americans in the marketing and advertising industry, companies must focus their attention on communicating and engaging with their audience to determine the nuances and complexities that may not be discerned simply by focus groups. In particular, marketers should identify what types of products or services may be popular to certain groups but not adequately available in the US.

One of the key concerns that Asian-American customers have is that they are treated as the "other." Therefore, advertisers should use LCCP strategies less and focus on enhancing GCCP strategies. This may simply mean having more representation of Asians in the media. More importantly, if cultural icons are used, they should be used respectfully. To retain the low acculturation audience, companies should make greater efforts to provide other ways of including Asian audiences such as subtitles and feedback from their Asian customers through social media. Technology must be used effectively to gain personal feedback from customers; it will be at the forefront of identifying strategies that resonate with the Asian audience. Using social media or online discussions, marketers and advertisers should thus use this opportunity to have ongoing dialogue or run focus groups on Asian-American customers to identify their needs as well as to discuss what types of portrayal are inappropriate.

Acknowledgments

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