

**EXPLORING CONTEMPORARY
ASIAN PORTRAYALS IN
HOLLYWOOD:**
FAMILY, CLASS, AND RACIAL EXPERIENCES.



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Problem Statement

At this peak of Asian representation in the media, a dichotomy remains between those native to Asia and Asian Americans. While the race may be the same, the experiences are inherently different, causing varying depictions and portrayals contrary to the actual experiences of both parties. Because most of the researchers in this study are Asian American, it felt pertinent to their expertise to evaluate how these popular movies lauded for their Asian representation portrayed these vastly different experiences. Ono and Pham present a theory about how media operates with regard to Asian Americans, stating that due to “a lack of systematic power within mainstream media production, they (Asian Americans) typically appear in ways that comport with Colonial representations and thus do not represent a true lived experience” (Ono & Pham, 2010, pg.4). With the past misrepresentation and stereotypical portrayals of Asian/Asian Americans in Hollywood films, researchers chose to analyze award-winning films such as *Crazy Rich Asians* (CRA) and *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (EEAO). Specifically, researchers aim to explore these films to see if the Asian representation accurately depicts common aspects of the Asian/Asian American experience or any underlying themes related to the Asian experience. By doing so, the researchers hope to understand better how Hollywood and other media industries portray Asian/Asian American identity and culture.

The films CRA and EEAO were chosen as a sample for their numerous accolades and impact on Asian representation in media. These films consist of almost entirely Asian casts and shed light on these experiences differently. By evaluating these aspects of these movies, the researchers believe that this qualitative data is essential to show producers and filmmakers what these portrayals mean for the Asian and Asian American communities and what they mean for future representation in media. Filmmakers and those in the media must create accurate depictions of the experiences of both perspectives for the people whose races are represented to feel that their story is accurately and authentically told. Asians have dealt with so much adversity in the past few years that it is vital that if studios want to keep their audiences happy and ensure that accurate storytelling prevents the encouragement of stereotyping, they need to understand what these critical and popular movies did for the communities.

Executive Summary

Through two viewings of both films and qualitative research using visual and textual analysis, researchers sought out specifically how class dynamics, race, and family dynamics are represented. Their findings revealed many pattern codes seen across both films. However, they differed in how explicitly they depicted class dynamics, race, and family as critical pillars of their storytelling. For example, CRA was more explicit visually and textually regarding class dynamics, whereas EEAO was more implicit in its portrayal. A standard wealth-related code was the pattern code of “Wealthy vs. Lower-Middle Class,” a prominent theme in CRA and EEAO. However, EEAO was more visual as it told the story of an immigrant family facing discrimination and the American bureaucracy. This reinforces Ono and Pham’s argument that there is a connection of cultural representation through the results of colonization and other forms of historical oppression (Ono & Pham, 2010 pg.4-5). Another code was “Immigrant Stories,” where both told stories of how Asian immigrants experienced significant life changes once they moved to America and found varying degrees of life success as Americans.

A race-related code that was discovered was the concept of “Native Asian vs. Asian American.” Regarding two groups with distinct upbringings, their perceptions of each other can vary greatly. This is evident in the movie CRA, where Rachel, an Asian American, experiences differential treatment while visiting the Young family in Singapore. Her mother remarks that while Rachel may possess physical characteristics and language skills that align with Chinese culture, her beliefs and attitudes differ. Furthermore, Eleanor further ostracizes Rachel by referring to her as a foreigner, and the American values of prioritizing one’s happiness and passions over familial obligations impact Rachel’s relationship with Nick. Similarly, in the movie EEAO, Joy, who is of Asian American descent but was born and raised in the United States, grapples with understanding her immigrant parents from China, who hold different ideals.

Both films explore the theme of high parental expectations common in Asian culture. This code, “Parent-to-child Expectations,” is depicted in both films as how elders frequently dispute their decisions, future prospects, and physical appearance with their children, often either approving or disapproving of their choices. This theme is a poignant reflection of the complex family dynamics that many Asian Americans face in their lives. An additional code is the “Generational Family Ideals Gap,” where many Asian Americans experience the pressure of conforming to their family’s values and attitudes when making important life decisions.



Methodology

The data was collected through two viewings of CRA and EEAO. The films were chosen on the basis that these movies have generated an uprising in Asian representation in cinema and were acknowledged in the most renowned film institutions. EEAO swept the 2023 Oscar Awards, winning seven awards that night. CRA was nominated for many awards, including two Golden Globes and a Screen Actors Guild award, and won many awards, including a Critics Choice Award. These accolades and the fact that these are two of the most renowned Asian films with all Asian cast members made these the perfect sample of films to analyze.

Since the researchers had all seen the films before, two in-depth viewings would be sufficient in identifying themes and coding data and scenes in these films. The researchers viewed both films separately and simultaneously conducted a visual and textual analysis to code scenes related to class dynamics, race, and family. Skin color was another aspect they originally wanted to take into consideration. However, it became an aspect less touched on in the films. Therefore, it became a subcategory that researchers made sure to still take note of while viewing the movies.

Each researcher noted the movie, timestamp, scene, and code and explained why they chose to code it the way they did on a shared spreadsheet. A drop-down menu was also added, so researchers could easily classify what scenes and aspects reflected class dynamics, race, and family. A first viewing allowed for more surface-level observations of the films, for us, as researchers, to refamiliarize ourselves with the movies. A second viewing allowed a change in mindset to find other aspects of these films that were not seen in the first viewing. After the first viewings of watching CRA before EEAO, researchers came together to discuss their findings and reorganize or recategorize their observations. For the second viewing, the movies were observed in the opposite order as having watched CRA first had shifted their mindsets to look for similar things in EEAO despite the movies presenting drastically different commentaries and narratives on native Asian and Asian American experiences.



Findings: Through the Lens of Class

RQ 1: How are Asian/ American experiences portrayed in Hollywood Film through the lens of Class Dynamics?

In regards to class, the researcher's work sheds light on the more explicit and implicit ways wealth and wealth disparities are portrayed by Hollywood with respect to Asian experiences in films. CRA displays a more straightforward approach in the apparent disconnect between Rachel, a first-generation American, and her boyfriend, who comes from a long line of Chinese-Singaporean aristocrats with pennies to spare. Several examples show apparent lifestyle differences between Rachel and the Young family.

- The movie starts with Nick and Rachel flying first class, unbeknownst to Rachel, who was expecting to fly economy. When asked about his family's wealth status, Nick explains vaguely that his family is 'comfortable' in wealth (Chu, 2018, 0:13:00).
- This parallel is made more apparent at the movie's end when Rachel and her mom hustle on a plane among other people in the coach cabin heading back to New York, juxtaposing Rachel's lounge experience at the film's beginning (Chu, 2018, 1:49:43).




Many examples also expressed a clear discrimination and dichotomy between the “class system” put into place by the Young family to prevent the “corruption” of their family by someone not of their same class. The Youngs may be a prime example of “family biopolitics,” in which affluent Chinese families create a system of practical logic and customs to guarantee the safety and prosperity of their members (Chen, 2019).

- In the Mahjong scene, Eleanor tells Rachel that she is not worthy of their family, stating, “You are not our own kind... You’re a foreigner. American. And all Americans think about is their own happiness” (Chu, 2018, 1:43:39).
- During the Bachelor and Bachelorette party scenes, Nick’s best friend Collin explains that “If [Rachel] becomes Mrs. Nicholas Young, every day for her is going to be a struggle,” referring to the discrimination she will encounter marrying into this well-known, influential family (Chu, 2018, 1:00:00).

Conversely, EEAO differed in portraying class dynamics, specifically showing their experiences with wealth and class disparities through visual representations.

- As the first chapter of the film is introduced, a still shot of Evelyn going over her taxes in a messy living room with her elderly father and husband is a visual example of how different the life of an Asian native turned immigrant can be (Kwon & Scheinert, 2022, 0:12:05).
- It is also revealed that this family lives just above the laundromat they own, depicting yet another visual representation of their lives as immigrants that has stagnated and opposed the lives of the Young family and Rachel’s family (Kwon & Scheinert, 2022, 00:05:18).





Another prominent class dynamics pattern code was the code of “Immigrant Stories.” For Asian immigrants especially, there are issues with assimilation and understanding language and cultural norms that make it difficult for them to fit into American society and make them targets for discrimination. This difficulty in assimilation ultimately can determine your class and status within the socio-economic class system. CRA and EEAO told stories of immigrant mothers but had very different outcomes and motivations for doing so. We also see opposing perspectives in that we do not see that journey in one but see it in the other.

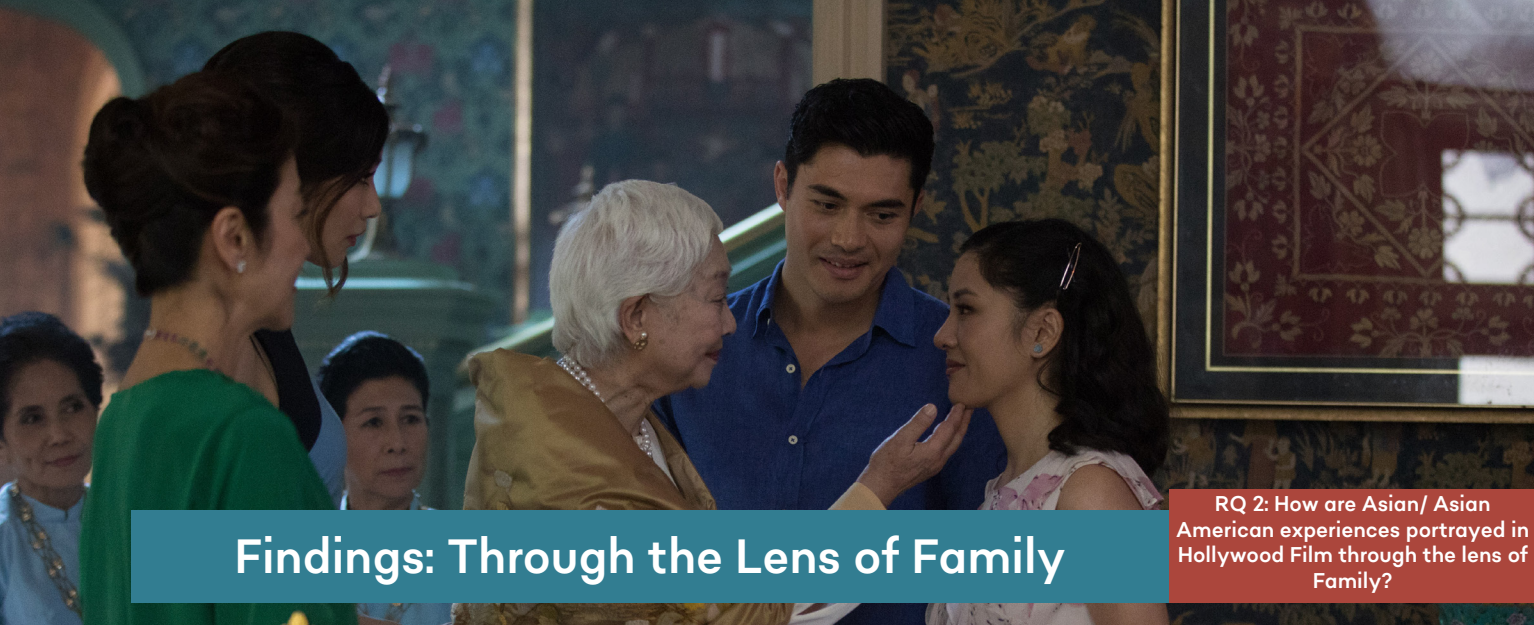
- When Rachel’s mom flies to Singapore and consoles her after her devastating breakup with Nick, her mom tells the story of her immigration. One consisted of an abusive husband and a friend who helped her in her struggle. She later became pregnant with this friend, leading her to fear her husband’s abuse and retaliation. This is when she ultimately fled China to come to the U.S., leaving behind her husband and her best friend and father of her baby (Chu, 2018, 1:37:44). Despite her circumstances, she was able to bring Rachel up on her own and became a top Flushing, NY real-estate agent.
- In EEAO, Evelyn faces much criticism from her father because he wants a boy. Then when she meets Waymond, and they fall in love, Waymond convinces her to move to the U.S. and start a laundromat business with him and live their lives facing marital issues and financial turmoil (Kwon & Scheinert, 2022, 0:13:12).

While Rachel’s mom’s immigration story leads to a happy ending where the audience is not privy to her mom’s struggle leading up to where they are now, EEAO lets audiences into the family’s lifestyle and the tensions and struggles between them. The dichotomy between the two immigrant mother stories displays how their decision to settle in the US is justified by their desire for freedom, even though their struggle to assimilate conveys a sense of otherness (Yang, 2021). In comparing the two films, Rachel and her mom’s assimilation into Western culture in CRA reaffirms their immigrant identity and contributes to the successful dissemination of American ideas among US audiences. By internalizing the Western culture, Rachel and her mother, as the very embodiment of the American Dream, validate the model minority discourse (Yang, 2021). However, EEAO juxtaposes this with the Wang family struggling to conform to Western language, norms, and culture.

In many Asian families, the mother is the head of the household, keeping balance in the family, while the husband is the breadwinner. The primary difference is that Evelyn's struggle is more explicit as an immigrant woman struggling to cope with her many responsibilities and none of the same wealth that Eleanor and her family have in CRA. Evelyn is more open about her feelings stating, "Every day here is a battle. I fight. I fight...I fight for all of us. Everything I do, I try to make things simpler, easier" (Kwon & Scheinert, 2022, 0:07:58) whereas Eleanor only seeks to continue maintaining the family business and dynamic with the grace, charisma, and confidence instilled upon her being part of an influential family.

EEAO specifically details the obstacles many immigrant business owners do with their financial issues as the film begins with Evelyn dealing with taxes and being audited. It portrays the challenge immigrants face of a bureaucracy that works against them with Evelyn stating during the audit "You're always trying to confuse us with these words" and Deidre, their auditor responding "I thought you were going to bring your daughter to help you translate" (Kwon & Scheinert, 2022, 0:21:41). Overall, both movies show two very different but real perspectives on stories of immigration that make it relatable not only for the Asian community but of those who are immigrants who have faced an upward or downward trajectory in their class status and livelihood upon immigrating to the U.S..





Findings: Through the Lens of Family

RQ 2: How are Asian/ Asian American experiences portrayed in Hollywood Film through the lens of Family?

Parent-to-child Expectations

In CRA and EEAO, researchers observe a commonality in the high parental expectations set on their children, which is prevalent in Asian culture. This occurs in multiple scenes through dialogue from the elders about their children's decisions, future, and appearance, with evident disapproval or approval of such. For many Asian Americans, their life choices are influenced by the values and attitudes of their family members (Yalung, 1992).

In CRA, a general theme consistently addressed by parents and recognized by the children is the stereotype of a "good Chinese child." Kerry Chu, Rachel's mother, says, "Maybe his parents are poor, and he has to send them money. That is what all good Chinese children do" (Chu, 2018, 00:10:55). Rachel states to Nick, "Aren't good Chinese sons supposed to stay with their parents" (Chu, 2018, 00:17:41). These directly acknowledge what is considered positive actions that represent a "good child" in their culture.

The film's plotline builds from Eleanor Young's disapproval of Rachel and Nick's relationship. Eleanor desires for her son to return to Singapore to inherit the family business, and because of this, she does not see Rachel fitting into Nick's life or family. This disapproval drives the plot as Nick opposes this and pursues his desires despite the traditional expectations imposed to retain an image as a "good son."

In EEAO, parental expectations are also imposed on both Evelyn and Raymond as they decide to leave their family behind in China and immigrate to the United States. There is an obvious disappointment from Evelyn's parents the moment she enters the cab to run away with him, which is a decision that lingers in her mind even into adulthood, causing her to consider what would have happened if she did not make a choice to do so (Kwon & Scheinert, 2022, 00:14:30). Eventually, we see Evelyn display expectations on her daughter Joy with negative comments on her appearance and when she tries to dismiss her sexuality. This is apparent when Evelyn introduces Becky as Joy's "good friend" rather than her girlfriend (Kwon & Scheinert, 2022, 00:10:13).

These characters are forced to navigate these expectations imposed on their self-perception and identity. Towards the end of both films, the children are firm on their choices and accept that they will not change who they are. The parents eventually accept these differences and realize that family is about supporting their children beyond what they think is best for them.

Generational Family Ideals

Among the older generations within both films, researchers observe principal ideals and views on the concept of a family pushed upon their children or the younger generation around them. This includes the unconditional dedication they believe should be devoted to family and the sacrifices to sustain a strong relationship with their parents and future generations. Many parents believe it is a duty to teach and train their children filial piety and social courtesy (Yalung, 1992). Some of these behaviors include family harmony, responsibility for extended family, and family loyalty (Sileo & Prater, 1998).

In CRA, this is strongly seen through Eleanor's dialogue when comparing her background with Rachel's. She projects a passive-aggressive, assuming view of Rachel's familial dedication by saying, "I chose to help run the family business and to raise a family. For me, it was a privilege. But for you, you may think it is old fashioned...We know to put family first instead of chasing one's passion" (Chu, 2018, 01:10:43). Along with the cultural difference of Rachel being Asian American, Eleanor assumes Rachel and the younger generations as more individualistic, putting her sacrifice for her family on a high pedestal. This is not necessarily the case with Rachel, as she personally does value her family. In Asian American culture, parents are generally considered nurturing, and a child can develop a sense of loyalty to family (Yalung, 1992).



Similar ideals are displayed in EEAO when Evelyn's parents' state, "If you abandon this family for that silly boy, then we will abandon you," as she drives off to leave with Waymond and pursue their relationship while immigrating to the States (Kwon & Scheinert, 2022, 00:14:30). This quote demonstrates how her parents prefer that she prioritize her family rather than her happiness or choice. Because of these decisions, her parents threaten to abandon Evelyn because of this opposing view.

The relationship between the protagonists Rachel and Nick, and Evelyn and Waymond was an opposing force to their parents' traditional ideals of family. Upon choosing to pursue their paths of being together, these choices did not align with the expected sacrifice for family. In contrast, it followed a more individualistic perception that the parents had of their children's views of family as they pursued their passions.

Tough/Conditional Love

Commonly endured in Asian culture is the typical harshness and tough love within family dynamics. Children are usually aware of this through the blunt, passive-aggressive, or honest words from their parents that are intended to be rooted in caring or "wanting the best" for their child.

In CRA, Astrid states, "God forbid we lose the ancient Chinese tradition of guiltning your children," reinforcing their awareness of a shared cultural occurrence of parents' tough love through this guilt (Chu, 2018, 01:09:24). Joy also experiences this consistently in EEAO through the words like "you are getting fat," which Joy previously mentioned to Becky that comments on appearances are her mother's way of showing she cares. Despite repeating her harsh words about her weight towards the end of the movie, she confirms her acceptance of her daughter regardless by saying, "I still want to be here with you. I will always want to be here with you" (Kwon & Scheinert, 2022, 02:06:39).





Findings: Through the Lens of Race

RQ 3: How are Asian/ Asian American experiences portrayed in Hollywood Film through the lens of Race?

“Native” Asian vs. Asian-American

The films also directly address the cultural differences between “Native” Asians and Asian Americans, though ethnically the same. Asians are referred to as those from different countries in Asia, while Asian Americans have immigrated or grown up in the United States and adopted a bicultural identity (Bui & Turnbull, 2003). The two groups are aware of their differences and have perceptions of each other. Naturally, they grew up within separate environments that have created different ideals, attitudes, and habits that distinguish them.

In CRA, these differences are easily observed and rooted in the storyline with Rachel as the Asian American who is treated differently when she visits the Young family in Singapore. Her mother, Kerry, tells her, “Your Face is Chinese. You Speak Chinese. But here and here, [points to her head and heart] you are different” (Chu, 2018, 00:11:46). Eleanor also directly isolates Rachel when she says “You’re a foreigner. American. And all Americans think about is their own happiness” (Chu, 2018, 01:44:23). Among other instances within the film, the prominent “American” ideals of prioritizing happiness and passions as opposed to family dictate Eleanor’s feelings toward Rachel and her relationship with Nick. There is a clear divide between the two groups.

Though there was less of a direct comparison of the two in EEAO, there is a divide between Joy, born in the States and considered Asian-American, and her parents, who immigrated to the States from China. Evelyn still holds her daughter to a standard with high expectations, and it is difficult for Joy to relate to her mother with traditional Asian ideals.



American Ideologies

The films CRA and EEAO explore the differences between American and Native Asian cultures. These cultural distinctions often result in conflicts regarding family obligations and values. In CRA, for example, Nick and his mother have a conversation about his relationship with Rachel, a Chinese-American woman. Nick mentions that he thought his mother would be pleased that he found a Chinese professor to bring home, but his mother corrects him by saying “Chinese American.” Nick states, “I thought you might be excited that the first girl I bring home is a Chinese professor,” then Eleanor corrects him with the statement “Chinese American” (Chu, 2018, 00:47:25). This highlights the divide between how Native Asians view Asian Americans, who they perceive as not being on the same level. Nick assumed that his mother would be impressed by his choice of a woman of the same descent, but Eleanor was unhappy that Rachel was more “Americanized” in her Chinese identity.

In CRA, there is a stereotype that Rachel is only interested in dating Nick because of his wealth. This stereotype is based on an Asian American perception of being a “gold-digger” or “unrefined banana” – someone who is yellow on the outside but white on the inside. Peik Lin mentions this to Rachel in one scene (Chu, 2018, 01:16:05). Another scene shows a contrast between the Young family (who are native Asians) and Rachel (who is Asian American), when Eleanor tells Rachel that she is not their kind and labels her as a foreigner just because she is American. This scene depicts the indifference between the Young family (Native Asian) versus Rachel (Asian American) when Eleanor says, “Our own kind of people. You are not our own kind...You are a foreigner. American. And all Americans think about is their own happiness” (Chu, 2018, 1:43:39). However, many cultural traditions in Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities prioritize collectivist values, where personal identity is defined by relationships and interconnectedness with other community members. In these communities, the group’s needs and interests usually come before individual needs and desires (NAMI, 2023).

Code Switching

Over half of Asian Americans (54%) are non-native US citizens, and this percentage increases to 68% when considering only Asian American adults. Although a significant number of Asian immigrants have recently entered the US, most of them have been residing in the country for over a decade. The history of Asian immigration to the US dates back over a century, and today’s Asian immigrants arrive via different pathways and from diverse backgrounds (Bustmante et al., 2022). Movies such as CRA and EEAO showcase characters shifting between Cantonese or Mandarin and English, emphasizing the language barriers and code-switching differences among families.

Skin Color

The representation of skin color was a part of the racial expectations depicted in both films. As media representations are subjective and limited, it is crucial to understand the context that influences how people of color are portrayed in the media (Ono & Pham, 2010, p.4). In the film CRA, there are scenes where individuals with darker complexions, such as cooks, guards, and maids, are depicted as “the help.” The differing skin colors highlight the class dynamics and subtle colorism present in both films. “Well, I’m one of the poorer relations. The rainbow sheep of the family. But I make myself useful” Oliver tells Rachel (Chu, 2018, 00:45:45). Oliver, Nick’s younger cousin, has a darker complexion and feels compelled to prove his worth to earn respect within his affluent, lighter-skinned family. This highlights the magnified impact of skin color’s racial expectations when combined with wealth and lighter skin tones.

Stereotypes

The movie CRA opens with the Young family arriving at a hotel only to be informed that their reservation is missing. The hotel staff’s assumption that the Youngs, who are Native Asians, cannot afford to stay there highlights how Asian culture is marginalized as a minority. One of the hotel staff tells Eleanors, “May I suggest you explore Chinatown” (Chu, 2018, 00:02:05). Additionally, the movie EEAO subtly portrays Asian culture as being centered on kung fu or martial arts fighting. In another scene, a customer tells the Wang family, “I thought you people were good with math,” perpetuating the harmful model minority stereotype (Kwon & Scheinert, 2022, 00:09:35). The notion of this stereotype may seem complimentary at initial glance; however, it actually perpetuates the detrimental “yellow peril” narrative and presents an intricate and simplified portrayal of Asian and Asian American achievements. (Ono & Pham, 2010, p.95)



Stakeholder Outcomes

This visual analysis study was designed to see how the Asian and Asian American experiences were portrayed in Hollywood films through the lens of class, family, and race. Given the historical lack of diversity and representation of diverse Asian experiences in media, harmful stereotypes have perpetuated and limited the scope of Asian representation. Popular Asian American studies scholars, Kent Ono, and Vincent Pham argue that “in viewing Asians and Asian Americans through the same tired stereotypes and representations across a wide variety of media, these peculiar views become part of the archive of representations available for use.” When repeated viewing of inaccurate and stereotypical portrayals are constantly presented to an audience, they begin to internalize the messaging, which in turn produces “a mass physiological effect on both Asians and Asian Americans and non-Asians and non-Asian Americans (Ono & Pham, 2010).” Therefore, there is a need for a more nuanced and diverse representation of Asian experiences in media to promote understanding and challenge stereotypes that have been portrayed in the past. Ono and Pham, have stressed the importance of challenging dominant media representations of Asian Americans and people of color that have been constructed through history colonialism (Ono & Pham, 2010). By understanding the needs and expectations of these stakeholders, we can identify and propose outcomes that contribute to positive change in Asian Media. The following stakeholder outcomes have been identified:

Asian/Asian American Communities:

- Increased visibility and accurate portrayal of Asian/Asian American experiences in media products, such as film, television, print media, and more within the entertainment sector.
- Enhanced understanding of the rich and varied cultural backgrounds within Asian and Asian American communities.
- Appreciation and acknowledgment of the significant and often overlooked contributions made by individuals of Asian heritage in various fields.
- Empowerment of Asian/Asian American individuals to embrace their identities and challenge stereotypes.

Stakeholder Outcomes

General Public:

- Greater awareness and knowledge about the diversity of Asian cultures, histories, and contributions.
- Heightened sensitivity and understanding of the challenges faced by Asian/Asian American individuals in various aspects of life, like immigration, filial piety, and identity.
- Reduced biases and stereotypes through media and exposure to authentic Asian/Asian American narratives.

Media and Entertainment Industry:

- Improved representation of Asian/Asian American characters and stories in film, television, and other media products.
- Collaboration with Asian/Asian American communities and organizations to develop authentic and inclusive narratives.
- Enhanced cultural competency within the industry to avoid perpetuating stereotypes and engage in responsible storytelling.
- Diversification of the workforce in the media and entertainment sector to include more Asian/Asian American creators, writers, directors, and executives.

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