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Asian American Cultural Identity Portrayal on Instagram

Jesse Lau Kristine King

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### Asian American Cultural Identity Portrayal on Instagram

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Master of Arts

Though more recent Asian American representation in media has been lauded, the majority of portrayals have been considered to be stereotypical misrepresentations. Because negative media representations can have a detrimental impact on people's self-concepts and their views of others, it is important to understand how Asian Americans are representing their own identities online. In order to understand how Asian Americans are negotiating their own ethnic, racial, and national identities online, constant comparative analysis was employed to examine patterns and themes in the visual and textual communication of Asian American Instagram posts. Their cultural identities were communicated as a cultural blending, which included the use of Asian, American/Western, and Asian American cultural values, products, and behaviors. Together, these factors provided insight into the construction and communication of a multilayered identity, mirroring the process of the communication theory of identity. This study indicates that multicultural identity analysis can be applied to visual texts and Instagram can provide more fluid, authentic representations of identity despite its inability to account for internal multicultural identity conflict. Further, not only are values, products, and behaviors components of culture, but they are also facets of identity that can be portrayed visually.

Keywords: communication theory of identity (CTI), Asian Americans, identity, representation, Instagram, culture

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## Introduction

Identity is multifaceted and is developed through self-perceptions, communication with others, and the media (Eguchi, 2011; Ho, 2011; Miller & Collette, 2019; Okada, 2015; Shek & McEwen, 2012; Subramanian, 2010). Often, when an individual does not have much physical contact with a certain identity, such as someone of a different race or culture, media informs their perceptual schemas about these foreign groups of people (Mastro, 2015; Zimmerman, 1998). Thus, media not only has the power to inform people of the unfamiliar, but it can also influence how one views oneself (Ho, 2011). In the case of Asian Americans, negative and stereotypical portrayals have been shown to negatively impact Asian Americans' sense of identity (Ho, 2011; Subramanian, 2010). The term Asian American refers to any individual who is of U.S. nationality and has Asian heritage (Chou & Feagin, 2014). The Internet has been shown to provide Asian Americans with a place where they can grapple with their multicultural identities (Subramanian, 2010). Likewise, media plays a crucial role in one's identity development and self-perception. Because Asian Americans have been largely portrayed in negative ways in the media, as a consequence, they have had to negotiate their identity through a distorted lens.

Recent films and television shows, such as *Crazy Rich Asians* (Jacobson, Simpson, Penotti, & Chu, 2018) and *Fresh Off the Boat* (Blomquist & McEwen, 2015), have put Asian Americans at the forefront of mainstream media. This includes the recognition of Asian American talent in Hollywood with awards for films such as *Crazy Rich Asians* (Jacobson et al., 2018) and *The Farewell* (Melia et al. 2019) as well as for actors such as Sandra Oh for her role in the television series *Killing Eve* (Wratten & Day, 2018) and Aziz Ansari's work in *Master of None* (Srubshchik, 2015). While recent media portrayals of Asian American identity have been



esteemed (Los Angeles Times, n.d.; Rice, 2019), the majority of portrayals have been deemed negative, stereotypical, and inaccurate (Chen, 1996; Lopez, 2016; Okada, 2015; Reyes, 2004).

With the rise of not only Asian American entertainment in mainstream media but also the introduction of social media and platforms such as YouTube, Asian Americans have employed these platforms to portray overt and covert oppositional messages about Asian American roles and identity (Cortes, 2014; Jensen, 2016). YouTube stars such as Ryan Higa and Wong Fu Productions have used YouTube to show alternative Asian American identities. Among Asian American mass media research, much attention has been devoted to stereotypical portrayals in film and television or the discursive oppositional power of YouTube to give voice to Asian Americans (Cortes, 2014; Jensen, 2016; Mallapragada, 2017); however, little if any research has focused on Asian Americans' use of other social media networks to portray identity. Chen and Lin (2016) contend that “media platforms [open] up new areas for the study of cultural identities” (p. 16) and that social media may be an area wherein researchers may find new insights into communication of cultural identities.

Social media, unlike television shows and movies, allows regular individuals control over their creative content, and thus control over portrayals of identity. While the Asian American population is comprised of many distinct ethnic groups (The Nielsen Company, 2018), there are commonalities in how it uses digital media (Facebook IQ, 2015), and social media networks have the potential to influence society's views on identity—including Asian American identity—through personalized content (Eguchi, 2011; Ho, 2011; Reyes, 2004). Thus, these interactive platforms may provide Asian Americans a place in mass media where they can reassert their identity rather than relying solely on stereotypical portrayals to dictate their sense of self to others. Enactment of identity on a visual platform such as Instagram, for instance, may provide

Asian Americans with a unique opportunity to depict themselves holistically rather than in the fragmented ways their race or culture is presented in Hollywood. Little research, however, examines how Asian Americans portray their ethnic, racial, and national identity on social media. The purpose of this study is, therefore, to identify how Asian Americans represent their cultural identities on Instagram.

### **Literature Review**

Communicating identity through mass media has varying effects on its audience and can influence one's self-esteem and worldview (Ho, 2011; Lee, 2013; Subramanian, 2010). Thus, mass communication plays an important role in people's cognitive processing of cultural identity (Benet-Martínez & Hong, 2015; Miller & Collette, 2019) as the messages people absorb from mass media can have direct and indirect effects on how individuals see themselves and others (Ramasubramanian, 2016; Subramanian, 2010). Though Asian Americans are today less likely to appear in the news for experiencing discrimination, they are still underrepresented in Hollywood and often portrayed in negative or stereotypical roles that can negatively influence self-concept and heighten acceptance of racist sentiments or behaviors in non-Asians (Mastro, 2015; Smith, Choueiti, & Pieper, 2017).

### **Asian American Representation in American Media**

Though Asian Americans are stereotyped today as the model minority—seen as academically and financially successful—the history of Asian Americans in the media cannot be viewed through rose-colored glasses. Much of the literature on Asian American identity and film refers to negative stereotypes including the sexualization of Asian women and the demasculinization of Asian men (Chou & Feagin, 2014; Ho, 2011; Nguyen, 2014). These stereotypical representations date back to the first Chinese immigrants in the 1800s, during

which time the men maintained a physical appearance typical of Chinese culture and the women typically worked as prostitutes. Thus, in the media, Asian men were feminized and Asian women sexualized (Chen, 1996; Lopez, 2018). Other stereotypical portrayals included the comical or idiotic foreigner, the martial arts villain, geishas, concubines, and dragon ladies—all demeaning and limited (Lopez, 2016, 2018). Just as the United States imposed discriminatory laws, so too did Hollywood through the Motion Picture Production Code, which included segregational ideas (Chen, 1996). For instance, Wong (1978) observed that Hollywood interracial relationships were only between white males and Asian females, but the depiction of interracial sex shown on screen was only permitted if the Asian male character was a white actor dressed up as an Asian man. Though these precepts were eventually changed, inaccurate and stereotypical portrayals persisted. An example of this was the 2002 film *Better Luck Tomorrow* (Lin, Asato, Foronda, & Lin, 2002). The film represented the model minority stereotype but diverged from it and explored a lesser-used stereotype—a stereotype nonetheless—of the Asian gangster (Ho, 2011). It was still common in the 2000s to see stereotypical representations of Asians in the media, such as the comical, kung fu performances of Jackie Chan (Klein, 2004). While these portrayals still fit within the stereotypical, societal understanding of Asians, Asian Americans admired Jackie Chan for his representation in Hollywood. Still, Asian Americans have reported that kung fu movie stereotypes are exasperatingly tiresome and contribute to a lowering self-esteem among Asian American men (Ho, 2011). Because the representation of Asians in film was so low and the portrayals grossly inaccurate and offensive, Asian Americans' true selves and representations were essentially rendered invisible in mainstream media (Ho, 2011).

Asian Americans make up approximately 5.6 percent of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017), of which the largest groups represented are Chinese, Filipinos, Asian Indians,

Vietnamese, and Koreans (Hoeffel, Rastogi, Kim, & Shahid, 2012). Though Asian representation in popular films is on par with the population percentage of Asians in the United States, there is still a disproportionately low number of Asian American leads in Hollywood films, and the legacy of limited roles persists (Smith et al., 2017). In the 2017 USC Annenberg report on racial diversity in Hollywood, researchers found that of 900 films, 5.7% of the representation was Asian, which was 0.1% higher than the national Asian population; however, of those films, 44 had no Asian speaking characters. Further, only 3% of the directors were Asian or Asian American. In the top 100 films, 66 did not include an Asian or Asian American female (Smith et al., 2017). While there appears to be some representation, there doesn't appear to be the same quality of representation.

Another issue within the film industry, not unique to Asian Americans, is the problem of whitewashing (Magnan-Park, 2018), wherein white actors are cast to play characters of another race. This predicament has occurred more recently for Asian characters in films such as *Ghost in the Shell* (Arad, Paul, Costigan, & Sanders, 2017), *Doctor Strange* (Feige & Derrickson, 2016), and *Aloha* (Rudin, Crowe, & Crowe, 2015). In the past, the Asian American community even banded together in opposition to the issue. When the film *The Last Airbender* (Shyamalan, Mercer, & Marshall, & Shyamalan, 2010) was released, the Asian American community was especially upset that three of the primary roles were cast to white actors rather than Asian actors, and in reaction, a group of Asian Americans organized a group called Racebending to discuss the issue of whitewashing in Hollywood (Jensen, 2016; Lopez, 2012).

With few Asian leads in film and television, Asian Americans must navigate this “invisibility” (Ho, 2011) in relation to their identity. When Asian American actors are present in mainstream television, roles are typically stereotyped and exaggerated, and roles are narrow in

portrayal, such as characters who orientalize themselves and straight, male dominant characters (Eguchi, 2011; Li, 2017). Shows such as *Heroes* (Moyter & Lafferty, 2006) and *Lost* (Abrams et al., 2004) are known to include more prominent Asian American examples of these two ends of the spectrum, such as Masi Oka who plays the geeky Hiro Nakamura and Daniel Dae Kim who plays the hunky Jin-Soo Kwom. In in-depth interviews, Ho (2011) found that though Asian American men often did not watch these television shows regularly, they were aware of the lack of representation, which had a direct impact on their own negotiation with their ethnic identities. Thus, when Asian Americans see only these types of portrayals and don't see representations closer to reality, they must grapple with them in their self-perceptions.

Other television shows starring Asian Americans, such as *All-American Girl* (Johnson, 1994), *Dr. Ken* (Jeong et al., 2015), and *Fresh Off the Boat* (Blomquist & McEwen, 2015)—though they include characters that appear to be more American and, thus, free of an accent—still hold elements of a model minority stereotype, including middle class status, which mirrors mainstream, stereotypical representations of Asian Americans. Other post-network television, including streaming services such as Netflix and Hulu, however, have stood out for their Asian American representation, such as in the shows *Master of None* (Srubshchik, 2015) and *The Mindy Project* (Deschamps et al., 2012). Though the representation isn't always necessarily as true to reality as the public would like (Ho, 2011; Jensen, 2016), it is evident that the television and film industry has improved over time in its representation of Asian Americans, which in part is due to the increase in Asian Americans in the film industry, including directors and writers.

Despite the more recent instances of Asian American representation in film and television, the stereotypical depictions have left their mark. Because of this, Asian Americans

have often turned to other means of media creation to take control of the representation of their multicultural identities.

### **Asian American Representation Online**

Because the Internet allows anyone to create content, people can construct their own identity online, be that an authentic or alter identity. Asian Americans have taken advantage of these online tools to portray themselves on their own terms.

Asian Americans have utilized YouTube to create ethnic and racial-specific content along with videos unrelated their cultural identity. Previously, Asian American YouTube channels were among some of the top subscribed channels (Balance, 2012), indicating that Asian American-created identities were reaching a wide audience. Their content created an oppositional viewpoint on racial identity, one that offered an alternate to the limited stereotypes placed upon Asian Americans by the mainstream, dominant media (Jensen, 2016). The grassroots movement to create productions made by Asian Americans with Asian Americans for Asian Americans exhibits a counternarrative used by a highly accessible medium. Asian Americans used YouTube to bypass the bureaucracy of Hollywood and tell their own stories, including a broader range of Asian American representation (Balance, 2012; Jensen, 2016). Included within these stories, however, many stereotypical representations and themes persisted even though the content was diverse. Thus, their stories reflect an identity formation that occurs both offline and online, in an online space they examine the offline factors that contribute to their identity.

Both blogs and online groups have also provided Asian Americans with an improved, more positive sense of identity. Dich (2016) observed that Asian American online writers created online identity through the sharing of texts as they navigated Asian American stereotypes. They

did so by specifically addressing the stereotypes as part of their experiences—resisting or accepting them. In doing so, they identified in-community and exo-community perceptions of their identity and grappled with them in a public setting, perhaps not common to real-life interactions. In doing so, Asian Americans were able to speak to both to their community and a wider American audience, thus negotiating through their dual identities. In an online group setting, Subramanian (2010) found that some Asian American young women exerted their own ethnic identity by using technology to assert new definitions of ethnic identity, including their emancipation from expected community traditions.

While blogs and online groups may allow for self-expression of identity, Asian American identity has not been examined through newer social media. Regarding the use of social media in Asian American identity, the research is sparse. Some research has indicated Asian Americans are actively involved in Facebook and the Facebook Messenger app (Facebook IQ, 2015); however, research on Asian Americans' identity on social media is lacking.

### **Instagram & Visual Communication**

Instagram and individual influencers may not have the reach that Hollywood has, but they are quite influential on younger individuals and have the potential of shaping nuanced views of Asian Americans. In 2018, Instagram had 800 million users (Holmes, 2018), and a recent Pew Research Center report indicated that 35% of U.S. adults use Instagram, 71% of individuals ages 18–24 years old use it, and just over 50% of individuals 25–29 years old use it (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Research on Instagram identified the various uses of the platform for users. Those uses that may influence Asian Americans' perception of self and others' perceptions of Asian Americans include social interaction, self-expression, and peeking (Lee, Lee, Moon, & Sung, 2015; Ting, Ming, Cyril de Run, & Choo, 2015). In addition to specific uses of the

platform, people who use Instagram report that their use is often influenced by others, a concept which reflects the social aspect of identity development (Bryant & Vorderer, 2013).

Instagram is one platform that Asian Americans have used to create their self-presentations of identity. This platform is a commonly used social media app and website wherein the focus is on visual communication through photos, images, and video, typically with a limited amount of text. Just as text communicates, so too do images: “Images are memorable because they have strong and compelling literal and symbolic messages” (Kapidzic & Herring, 2015, p. 5). Elements in Instagram posts, both text and photo, can indicate something about one’s identity. Berger (2012) stated,

“Our identities are a combination of our personalities, our characters (including national character), our occupations, our genders, our races, our ages, our religions, and any number of other phenomena—many of which are communicated visually to others by our hairstyles, our clothes, our facial expressions, our accents, our possessions, and various other means” (p. 25).

Thus, identities can be created and interpreted through visual symbols. On Instagram, Hu, Manikonda, and Kambhampati (2014) identified eight types of Instagram posts: friends, food, gadgets, captioned photos, pets, activities, selfies, and fashion. Though this list was compiled in 2014, and posts have expanded to include images of travel, fitness, and nature/landscape, all of these categories have the potential to act as visual communication of identity.

One way Asian Americans may exhibit their identity is through promotion of certain products. Many companies have latched onto the marketing capabilities of Instagram and often reach out to social media influencers to promote products (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017; Stelzner, 2018). An influencer is any individual who has a significant number of social



media followers and who can post about themselves using products or provide exclusive discount codes for their followers (Mathur, Narayanan, & Chetty, 2018). Typically, companies will reach out to influencers whose created image matches the branding of their product so that the product will be marketed to people who already ascribe to the influencer's specific aesthetic or have an interest in the influencer's area of expertise (Ewers, 2017). They provide snapshots into their personal life, often creating a personal brand or lifestyle complete with a specific aesthetic—essentially turning their identity into a business (Burke, 2017; Hellenkemper, 2018; Influencer Marketing Hub, n.d.). Even the products influencers choose to endorse are typically chosen based on their compatibility with self-branding (Burns, 2016). Thus, it is possible that Asian Americans may be targeted for culture specific products, which then reinforce an identity that they both assume and accept from others.

Interestingly, there is little to no research on Asian American influencers other than what has been done on YouTube (Balance, 2012; Jensen, 2016). One Nielsen report, however, suggested that Asian American influencers were rated higher in marketability, likeability, trendsetting, and influence than their counterparts (The Nielson Company, 2018). Thus, this group is a worthy subject of study, and this study will respond to the gap in the literature.

Through the analysis of Asian Americans' posts on Instagram, it is possible to ascertain non-Hollywood depictions of Asian American identity. Though the app allows users to edit and add filters to photos, Instagram may still provide a semi-authentic depiction of identity. For instance, Iqbal, Karsidi, Utari, and Hastjarjo (2019) found that Instagram is not just an extension of self-identity but can also communicate beliefs such as values. Though Instagram posts viewed individually may not provide the narrative power that film or television can provide, Instagram accounts looked at as a whole may provide a deeper understanding of how one negotiates one's

multicultural identity through the portrayal of values based in different cultures. Thus, Instagram may prove a satisfactory platform on which to study Asian Americans' representation of cultural identity.

### **Theoretical Background**

Identity is an essential element in determining one's self-concept (Aumer, Blas, Huston, Mabuti, & Hsu, 2017; Lee, 2013) and is made up of factors such as nationality or ethnicity, marital status, gender, and geographic location. Social identity theory states that an individual's self-perception is based on his or her affiliation or self-association with a certain group (Bryant & Vorderer, 2013). Thus, once an individual decides on his or her in-group identification, he or she is motivated to act in accordance with, and thus portray, attributes and traits indicative of a member of that specific group (Iwamoto & Liu, 2010). One's online identity, then, may be an extension of one's lived identity (Iqbal et al., 2019), and as such may provide a more balanced, less stereotyped enactment of identity.

The communication theory of identity (CTI) views communication as both part of the creation of identity and as a product of identity. Thus, because identity is based on social constructs, communication contributes to shaping those identities. It then follows that identity is communicated through one's social behavior (Jung & Hecht, 2004). The theory posits that "identity is inherently a communicative process and must be understood as a transaction in which messages are exchanged" (Hecht, 1993, p. 78). Based on social identity theory and symbolic interactionism, CTI includes four frames of identity (Chen & Lin, 2016; Hecht, 1993; Jung & Hecht, 2004).

- Personal: This identity is the individual's self-perception, including their characteristics.

- Enacted: This identity is the individual's performed identity, which they do so through communication.
- Relational: There are four sublevels of relational identity: The first is termed ascribed relational identity, meaning that an individual's identity is created in part by his or her perception of others' view of him or her; Next, an identity is in part created by one's relationship with others; The third type is the interaction between the identities; the final type is that a relationship itself can be an identity.
- Communal: This identity describes the identity of the collective or a group.

These four frames are to be viewed in conjunction with one another, as identity is a fluid and multilayered creation. However, because the communication process is replete with misinterpretation and other human error, it is inevitable that there will be contradictions between the different frames; these are called identity gaps. They represent the “dynamic and fluid nature of identity” (Jung & Hecht, 2004, p. 268).

For Asian Americans, identity is dynamic because they must negotiate multiple identities, including ethnic, racial, and national identities; in other words, they negotiate a multicultural identity. A multicultural individual is one who has experience with multiple cultures, either by living in multiple places or by being in or by being a product of an intercultural relationship (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2010). Typically, these individuals will experience an internalization of and loyalty to the two cultures. Asian Americans, for example, navigate both their Asian heritage and their American daily lifestyle. Because navigating multiple identities can be a complex process, it is anticipated that the CTI will provide a framework with which to better understand Asian American portrayal of cultural identity on Instagram.

## **The Current Study**

Because many current depictions of Asian American identity in mass media are considered stereotypical and inaccurate, it is of interest to understand how social media platforms, such as Instagram, are being employed to portray Asian American identity (Chen & Lin, 2016). Because Asian Americans must negotiate multiple cultural identities, it is expected that Asian American influencers portray their cultural identity in a complex manner. CTI provides an explanation for complex identity construction, and thus, it can provide a framework for understanding how one's ethnic, racial, and national identities intersect and interact on Instagram. This study will examine the following research questions:

*RQ1:* How do Asian American influencers on Instagram portray their racial, ethnic, and national identities?

*RQ2:* How do Asian American influencers on Instagram portray personal, enacted, relational, and communal identities (related to racial, ethnic, and national identities)?

## **Method**

This study employed constant comparative analysis of Asian American influencers' Instagram posts to explore the cultural values, products, and behaviors that exhibited the influencers' racial, ethnic, and national identities.

## **Sample**

In order to produce a clear picture of popular Asian American cultural identity, only Asian American social media influencers with over one million followers were chosen for this study. According to influencer experts (Ismali, 2018), influencers with over 1 million followers are called macro influencers. For the purpose of this study and evaluating Asian Americans influencers, influencers will hereon refer to influencers who gained popularity primarily through

social media and who have more than 1 million followers. In order to identify influencers who fit these parameters, the researcher performed an online search for Asian American influencers, and those who were mentioned prominently and had 1 million or more followers on Instagram were considered for this study. The Instagram influencers selected for this study were found through various online articles, social media, and forums. Those Asian American influencers who were not mentioned as frequently were left out of the study, as their reach was less documented. Asian Americans for the purpose of this study are individuals who are of Asian descent (either full or part) who were identified online as American and who lived in the United States in 2018. The influencers chosen were of any Asian ethnicity and of any subject matter and included both men and women. Each influencer's popularity was evaluated and eliminated from the sample if found to have gained fame through a non-online platform. One million followers was chosen as the minimum number of followers as it implies larger reach, and this study is focused on the Asian American group identity that reaches a larger audience. Thus, this sample was based on purposive sampling.

A total of 15 Instagram influencers were selected for this study. The influencers included were as follows: Aimee Song (Korean-American, 5.4 million followers, @aimeesong), Chriselle Lim (Korean-American, 1.1 million followers, @chrisellelim), Mark Fischbach (Korean-American, 7.6 million followers, @markiplier), Liza Koshy (Indian-American, 18 million followers, @lizakoshy), Ryan Higa (Japanese-American, 2.4 million followers, @notryanhiga), Liane Valenzuela (Filipino-American, 4.5 million followers, @LianeV), Michelle Phan (Vietnamese-American, 2 million followers, @michellephan), Alex Burriss (Filipino-American, 3.6 million followers, @alexwassabi), Patrick Simondac (Filipino-American, 4.8 million followers, @patrickstarr), Nikita Dragun (Filipino-Mexican-American, 5.8 million followers,

@nikita\_dragun), Promise Tamang (Nepali-American, 1.3 million followers, @promisetamang), Bretman Sacayanan (Filipino-American, 13.9 million followers, @bretmanrock), Nabela Noor (Bengalese-American, 1.3 million followers, @nabela), Jenn Im (Korean-American, 1.7 million followers, @imjennim), Wendy Nguyen (Vietnamese-American, 1.1 million followers, @wendyslookbook). For the purpose of easy name recognition, influencers will be referred to by their influencer names (i.e., Alex Burriss will be referred to as Alex Wassabi).

Photos selected for this study were screenshotted for July 1, 2018 through December 31, 2018 in order to have a wider timeframe that included multiple holidays. If a post had more than one image, only images that were different were screenshotted. For the videos, only the first frame was screenshotted as a still image. The screenshots were taken on a desktop window and included the image and the caption; when the caption was too long, multiple screenshots of the image were taken with different portions of the caption to ensure all the caption text was included in the coding. This study did not account for any possible deleted, altered, or edited photos. A total of 2,321 images were screenshotted and coded. The number of posts per influencers varied from 25 posts from Promise Tamang to 459 posts from Aimee Song.

## **Analysis**

In order to examine cultural identity portrayal of Asian American influencers on Instagram, the coders employed constant comparative analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), which is best suited to expose cultural patterns and values. Also known as grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), this method is a systematic analysis that explores cultural phenomena by identifying concepts, categories, and propositions between and within texts (Corbin & Strauss, 1990); in the case of this study, the texts were the Instagram posts from the Asian American influencers. Two independent coders performed open coding, for which they trained for one hour

on the process and reviewed the coding together. Both the image and the caption were analyzed due to the fact that each provides context and nuance to the other. The coders reviewed every post and annotated general concepts. Both coders had mixed heritage in American/Western culture and Asian culture; the second coder had more experience with Filipino culture, which the first coder was less versed in. The second coder performed coding to saturation, which included nine influencers while the first coder performed coding on all 15 influencers. Saturation of data occurs when no new themes are introduced into the dataset (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Both coders took notes (i.e., memoing) during coding of any possible patterns or propositions that they observed and debriefed each other occasionally to corroborate findings and adjust coding as needed based on feedback from the other coder. In order to understand how Asian Americans negotiated their various cultural identities, three separate identities were coded for: ethnic, racial, and national. For the purpose of this study, ethnic identity was defined as a person's cultural heritage, including customs or language (Holt, Hovick, Fete, & Dailey, 2017; Liu, Volcic, & Gallois, 2015); examples of ethnic identity for this sample include Korean, Filipino, Japanese, etc. Racial identity was defined based on phenotype and ancestral origin; thus, for this study, the Asian racial identity was analyzed. Finally, national identity dealt with citizenship (Liu et al., 2015), which in the case of this study dealt solely with American national identity. Categories were then constructed based on constant comparison from one text to the next and one influencer to the next to ensure accuracy of coding.

Following open coding, axial coding was performed in which the memos were revisited to identify categories and connections between the various categories that were based on open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Both memos and open coding were consulted in the developing of categories, of which 10 were identified: collectivism, individualism, Western/American

culture, fusion culture, Asian culture, Adopting/mirroring American culture, product endorsement, “home” embracing, mention of racial/ethnic/national identity, influencer persona. The memos were grouped like with like (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) to provide insights into the links between categories. One core category emerged, which represents “the central phenomenon of other study” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 14): cultural blending. The three subcategories that emerged provide a richer understanding of the core category are Asian identity, American/Western identity, and Asian American identity. In order to build upon and strengthen the emerging theory, all the texts were reanalyzed and compared to the emergent core category (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Results were conferred upon by the coders. Within each of the three subcategories, three subcategories of cultural signifiers—which are present in other culture research (Moran, 2001)—emerged inductively: cultural values, products, and behaviors.

Culture is a complex concept, but for the purpose of this study it is interpreted as “the values, customs, beliefs and symbolic practices by which men and women live” (Eagleton, 2016, p. 1). Cultural values include philosophical perspectives, ideas, and beliefs (Benet-Martínez & Hong, 2015; Moran, 2001; O’Brien & Levy, 2008). Other terms for “customs” in other culture literature include practices and behaviors (Benet-Martínez & Hong, 2015; Moran, 2001); this study will refer to cultural behaviors, which includes verbal and non-verbal language, actions, and social interactions (Moran, 2001; O’Brien & Levy, 2008). Based on the emergence of the aforementioned cultural signifiers in this sample, the definition of culture also includes products, which includes both tangible and intangible things such as tools, food, clothing, music, and written language (Moran, 2001; National Standards for Foreign Language Education Project, 1999); they are the things created by members of a culture. In order to provide a unified



organization of findings, the three subcategories will be presented in terms of cultural values, products, and behaviors.

### **Findings**

Though elements of ethnic, racial, and national identity were present in the Asian American influencers' posts, these references were only peripheral to the influencer's primary identity, which was based on their commercial identity and the lifestyle or brand they sell. References to cultural identities were typically sparse and very rarely the main subject of a post; but when they were present, they were usually secondary to a depiction of something else—such as travel, humor, or beauty. The mention of cultural identity was more likely to be naturally incorporated into their post rather than the main subject of a post. Unlike what previous research indicated about entertainment media and even YouTube, these Asian American influencers did not display themselves through the lens of any particular “Asian stereotype.” The emergent theme of the sample was that Asian American influencers portray their ethnic, racial, and national identities as a cultural blending. The three subcategories and their cultural signifiers (i.e., values, products, and behaviors) are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. *Asian American Instagram Influencers' cultural identity portrayal through cultural values, products, and behaviors*

	Values	Products	Behaviors
Asian Cultural Identity	Collectivism, honor, filial piety	Food, Asian pop culture (i.e., anime), fashion (i.e., Chinese parasol), written language	Performed fashion (i.e. “couple costume”), posing (i.e., victory sign), kung fu, beauty (i.e., skincare)
American/Western Cultural Identity	Individualism (i.e., self-love), millennial tattoo culture, openness, consumerism	Fashion (i.e., cowboy boots), food, pop culture (i.e., Mean Girls)	Celebration of Western holidays, Disney vacations, language construction
Asian American Cultural Identity	Explicit statement of racial/ethnic/national identity, promotion of diversity, American Dream narrative	Pop culture (i.e., Pokémon), skincare products	Multi-home embracing, Western appearance adoption (i.e., blond hair), status signaling

*Note.* These categories were developed based on emergent coding.

In articulating the overall theme of cultural blending, the following section is organized around each subtheme: Asian cultural identity, American/Western cultural identity, and Asian American cultural identity. In each of the subthemes, the findings will be further broken down into subcategories of cultural values, cultural products, and cultural behaviors. In each category, a representative screenshot will be included to illustrate the observable phenomenon.

### **Asian Cultural Identity**

Asian American influencers portrayed their Asian race and ethnic cultural identities on Instagram through various Asian cultural values, products, and behaviors.

#### ***Asian Cultural Values***

A prominent cultural value of Asians is collectivism, or giving priority to the group over the individual (Kim, Triandis, Kâğitçibaşı, Choi, & Yoon, 1994; Miller & Collette, 2019). This perspective was apparent in the posts featuring family members and friends and the concept of

sharing the wealth and spotlight with them. This concept was apparent in the way influencers posted pictures of family members, described the sacrifices of immigrant parents, and referred to the idea that success for the influencer is a success for the whole family—similar to the sentiments of the song “Honor to us all” in the Disney animated film *Mulan* (Coats, Cook, & Bancroft, 1998).

Example 1: Liza Koshy demonstrates the collectivistic behavior of describing her father as part of her success, which is her way of honoring him. Koshy, L. [@lizakoshy]. (2018, December 9). life. is. insane. liza. is. too...blessed to live it. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/lizakoshy>

Example 2: Patrick Star explains the importance of family while including his brothers in his line of work, which in this case is an advertisement for his MAC makeup line.

Simondac, P. [@patrickstarr]. (2018, August 29). Everyday I wake up living a dream. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/patrickstarr>

Asian American influencers also exhibited the concept of filial piety in their posts, which is a practice of showing respect to one’s elders (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.).

Example 3: Mark Fischbach demonstrates the collectivistic behavior of revering his ancestors. Fischbach, M. [@markiplier]. (2018, October 5). Pic of my family at the temple where my grandfather’s resting place is. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/markiplier>

Example 4: Nabela Noor mentions the practice of respect to parents’ wishes in regards to marriage. At first they disapprove of her then-boyfriend without having met him, which may indicate their dislike of the pairing or the fact that as she stated in another post that she was supposed to have an arranged marriage. Her reaction to the blessing from her

parents shows her respect for her parents. Noor, N. [@nabela]. (2018, August 23). On this day 3 years ago I married a man my family disapproved of for the longest time.

[Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/nabela>

This same concept of collectivism could be seen in the way the influencers infused their relationships with their business—their business being their influencer brand. In a photo Alex Wassabi posted on December 25, 2018, it shows his whole family in a Wassabi merch sweatshirt—one that he'd been promoting for fans to purchase.

Example 5: Alex Wassabi shows his family dressed in his branded merchandise,

indicating that his business and his family life are intertwined. Burriss, A.

[@alexwassabi]. (2018, December 25). merry Christmas from my family to yours.

[Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/alexwassabi>

Example 6: Bretman Rock and his sister pose in traditional Filipino clothing in promotion of Rock's new makeup line; thus, he connects his ethnic heritage and family with his business life. Sacayanan, B. [@bretmanrock]. (2018, November 9). My wet and lit collection is NOW AVAILABLE. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from

<https://www.instagram.com/bretmanrock>

### ***Asian Cultural Products***

The Asian American influencers were apt to include Asian-related cultural products in their images and captions, including food, pop culture references, fashion, and written language. For instance, the importance of food serves the function of social connection (Ho, 2005). Images that included Asian food typically included other people as well or posted in context of a meal with family and friends. Asian foods that were mentioned or pictured include tea (and boba), dumplings, Korean food, tofu, noodles, Chinese food, adobo, biryani, and durian.

Example 7: Chriselle Lim, though she is Korean, is pictured eating Chinese dumplings and drinking bubble tea (originally from Taiwan). This is an example of the importance of food and family that is a common theme among Asian American influencers. Also observable are cross-cultural food interactions. Lim, C. [@chrisellelim]. (2018, December 29). We asked her what she wanted for lunch and she said xiaolongbao. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/chrisellelim>

Example 8: LianeV demonstrates the importance of and joy associated with food and family; here she is pictured with her sister and mother. In Asian cultures, food from one's parents is understood as a form of love. Valenzuela, L. [@LianeV]. (2018, December 8). Sisterly love with @jessicalesaca. [Instagram video]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/lianev>

Other Asian cultural products included references from Asian popular culture.

Interestingly, the influencer's ethnic identity did not preclude them from participating in other ethnic Asian pop culture. These products included Sailor Moon, anime, K-pop and J-pop (i.e., Korean pop music and Japanese pop music), Asian-style art, manga, Japanese calico cat figures, Naruto, and Darna (Filipino superhero).

Example 9: Bretman Rock cosplays as Darna, the most prominent Filipina superhero. He employs the use of a Filipino flag emoji to emphasize his ethnic cultural identity.

Sacayanan, B. [@bretmanrock]. (2018, October 27). A picture of a strong Filipino woman. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/bretmanrock>

Example 10: Michelle Phan regularly employs the anime aesthetic in her posts and in her cosmetic branding. In this post, she makes a direct reference to anime in the caption.

Phan, M. [@michellephan]. (2018, July 13). I wish my life was an anime. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/michellephan>

Other Asian symbols that were present were related to fashion choices, which included Chinese parasols, dragons, and cutesy animal paraphernalia (e.g., animal ears, etc.), Asian-styled shoes, and oriental-style robes.

Example 11: Chriselle Lim poses with a parasol, which originated in China but then spread throughout Asia. In a following photo, her husband dons the same one, which provides context for the playful caption. Lim, C. [@chrisellelim]. (2018, July 29). Who wore it better?. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/chrisellelim>

Example 12: Mark Fischbach wears a headband with bear ears and a face mask. The bear ears and cutesy animal tradition may be an example of kawaii, or a “cuteness” culture that comes from Japan. Fischbach, M. [@markiplier]. (2018, October 15). Fun video coming tomorrow! [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/markiplier>

The influencers would occasionally dress in traditional ethnic, cultural clothing; this was done in the context of traditional ceremonies (i.e., weddings) or commercial branding.

Example 13: Jenn Im and her husband are dressed in traditional Korean clothing at their Korean wedding reception. She uses the Korean flag emoji to emphasize her ethnic cultural heritage. Im, J. [@imjennim]. (2018, August 20). Just uploaded the Korean wedding reception on my channel. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/imjennim>

Example 14: Nabela Noor is dressed in a traditional Desi wedding outfit and describes the cultural difficulties she went through to find her dress. She indicates the importance of this ethnic cultural tradition to her. She dons ethnic clothing in her posts far more frequently than the other Asian American influencers in this sample. Noor, N. [@nabela]. (2018, July 19). When I was shopping for my bridal lehenga, I walked into a specific shop and was stopped at the entrance by a salesclerk. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/nabela>

Another Asian cultural practice shown by the Asian American influencers was in the use of language. More so in the captions, they would mention Asian-language names, use Asian vocabulary (typically family-related terms), and use the Asian language writing systems.

Example 15: In the caption of this photo, Lim uses Korean writing characters and explains the pronunciation of her children's Korean names, which were given by her mother. Lim, C. [@chrisellelim]. (2018, November 18). 은혜 & 사랑. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/chrisellelim>

Example 16: Michelle Phan explains that the name of her cosmetics line comes from Vietnamese. Phan, M. [@michellephan]. (2018, November 15). Swipe left to see the old @emcosmetics logo. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/michellephan>

### ***Asian Cultural Behaviors***

The Asian cultural behaviors that were apparent in the influencers' posts were related to their performed fashion, physical movements, language, and beauty behaviors.

The performance of fashion is different than fashion products because the performance of fashion involves cultural-specific actions of fashion. One more overtly Asian performance of

fashion is the female wearing of double or pigtail buns (in Japanese, odango, or in Chinese, niújiǎotóu).

Example 17: Jenn Im is promoting her clothing brand that includes Korean-inspired themes, such as the Koreatown shirt she's wearing, which is considered a product. She is also sporting pigtail buns—popularized by the Japanese cartoon Sailor Moon—which is an example of performed fashion. Im, J. [@imjennim]. (2018, August 13). Going to Australia for the very first time! [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/imjennim>

Another common practice of Asian couples is to wear matching outfits, which was present in some of the influencers' posts. This is known in South Korea as “couple look” or in other parts of Asia as “couple costume.”

Example 18: Aimee Song poses with boyfriend in matching outfits. Song, A. [@aimeesong]. (2018, November 19). Four more days until I see @jacopomoschini! [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/aimeesong>

Example 19: Wendy Nguyen and her partner Colin Gardner match in beige outfits, which she explicitly states in the caption. Nguyen, W. [@wendyslookbook]. (2018, July 24). Twinning in beige and black with @gardnercr! [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/wendyslookbook>

Also apparent in some of the images is the use of Asian-style posing. Common poses that were present in the influencers' posts were the use of the finger V, or “victory” signs and the Asian squat, which is a squat wherein both feet (including heels) are flat on the ground.



Example 20: Mark Fischbach does an Asian victory sign pose. Fischbach, M. [@markiplier]. (2018, November 22). Visited a garden. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/markiplier>

Though it's been adapted by other countries, karate and kung fu originated in Asia, and Asian American influencers were pictured imitating these movements in their posts.

Example 21: Liza Koshy, who is Indian, poses with a martial arts kick. Koshy, L. [@lizakoshy]. (2018, July 22). just showing off that my tampon works. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/lizakoshy>

More recently, Korean skincare has been trending in the United States, a trend that is commonplace in Asian countries, where people are more preoccupied with skincare in general. The importance of skincare is evident in Asian American influencers' posts across all ethnicities that were represented in this sample. Influencers posted images of Korean face masks, cleansers, and other skincare products.

Example 22: Chriselle Lim describes the intergenerational importance of "the Asian skincare beauty secret" that she hopes to pass on to her children. Lim, C. [@chrisellelim]. (2018, December 2). On day 2 of the #12DaysofCHRISelle we partnered up with @skii. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/chrisellelim>

Example 23: Aimee Song shows her dog wearing a Korean face mask. Song, A. [@aimeesong]. (2018, December 12). Sunday night mood. [Instagram video]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/aimeesong>

Asian beauty also encompasses certain styles and tricks with makeup that were showcased by Asian American influencers.

Example 24: Promise Tamang uses makeup to transform herself, and in this video she uses a popular Chinese makeup style. Tamang, P. [@promisetamang]. (2018, August 20). Omg who is She!??? [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/promisetamang>

Example 25: Because “Asian/monolid eyes” require a certain type of makeup application to make the eyeliner visible, Chriselle Lim specifically states in the caption that the makeup she is wearing in her photo is for Asian eyes. Lim, C. [@chrisellelim]. (2018, December 28). Ready to ring in 2019 with this major glam look. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/chrisellelim>

### **American/Western Cultural Identity**

Also present in the Asian American influencers’ posts were American and Western values, products, and behaviors.

### ***American/Western Cultural Values***

Due likely in part to the age of these Asian American influencers (most are millennials and a couple are Gen Zers over 18 years old), they exhibited the Western value of individualism (Kim et al., 1994; Miller & Collette, 2019). This was most evident in posts on things such as self-love and self-care.

Example 26: Liza Koshy describes her self-love as part of a millennial American value. Koshy, L. [@lizakoshy]. (2018, September 9). i like every. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/lizakoshy>

Example 27: Nabela Noor indicates that she is her first love, an example of the value of self-love. Noor, N. [@nabela]. (2018, December 23). Just a photo of my first love. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/nabela>

Further, the concept of a Western mindset was evident in millennial tattoo culture and a move away from traditionalism. Promise Tamang even posted a video showing how to successfully hide tattoos from Asian parents.

Example 28: Tamang, P. [@promisetamang]. (2018, December 29). Especially if you have Asian parents. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/promisetamang>

Example 29: Alex Wassabi shows off his tattoo, which indicates that he participates in the millennial tattoo culture. The caption includes slang that further supports this idea. Burriss, A. [@alexwassabi]. (2018, December 13). ya boy is officially tatted. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/alexwassabi>

While Asians may in general be more conservative about certain topics, such as sex, the Asian American influencers in this sample in general appeared to exhibit an individualistic, American openness about such topics.

Example 30: Chriselle Lim talks openly about sex, which exhibits a more individualistic mindset. Lim, C. [@chrisellelim]. (2018, September 27). Hi.I'm.Still.Here. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/chrisellelim>

Another facet of American culture that was evident in these posts was consumerism. While it may be argued that this concept is present among influencers from any country, it is also important to note that it is a prominent theme amongst Asian American influencers.

### ***American/Western Cultural Products***

The Western cultural products portrayed in the Asian American influencers' posts included fashion, food, and pop culture references.

For the most part, the influencers wore Western-style clothing. More specific American trends included cowboy boots, camo, and the appropriation of hip-hop fashion.

Example 31: Aimee Song wears cowboy boots, a Western fashion choice. Song, A. [@aimeesong]. (2018, November 13). My feet were thanking me this season. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/aimeesong>

Foods that are considered more often eaten by Americans or Westerners that were depicted or mentioned included coffee (though it is present, tea is dominant in Asia), pizza, and pumpkin spice latte.

Example 32: LianeV eats pizza and indicates her love for this Americanized food in the caption. Valenzuela, L. [@LianeV]. (2018, December 10). What's the one thing you can eat everyday for the rest of your life? [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/lianev>

Example 33: Wendy Nguyen indicates she has a habit for drinking coffee daily. Nguyen, W. [@wendyslookbook]. (2018, September 11). Morning coffee run! [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/wendyslookbook>

Also employed frequently was the reference to Western popular media in words or dress. The film *Mean Girls* was regularly quoted, which is prominent in millennial popular culture.

Other Western stories referenced included *Grease* and *The Grinch*.

Example 34: Aimee Song refers to a *Mean Girls* reference (i.e., “On Wednesdays we wear pink.”) in the caption of this post; this same reference is mentioned by several of the Asian American influencers, which indicates their association with American popular culture. Song, A. [@aimeesong]. (2018, August 1). It's been awhile since I took a photo

by a #pinkwall but since it's Wednesday, thought it'd make sense. [Instagram photo].

Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/aimeesong>

Example 35: LianeV and her father are dressed as Sandy and Danny from the American film and musical, Grease. Valenzuela, L. [@LianeV]. (2018, November 2). Watch my last post! [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/lianev>

### ***American/Western Cultural Behaviors***

Asian American influencers indicated their American/Western cultural behaviors through holiday celebrations, Disney vacations, and language.

During the time frame chosen for this study, nearly all of the influencers posted for the 4th of July, Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. For the 4th of July, Halloween, and Christmas, they were likely to be dressed up in costume or the traditional holiday colors.

Especially evident of their national identity was their celebration of the 4th of July.

Example 36: Patrick Star shows his American patriotic identity by dressing in and doing his makeup in red, white, and blue. He uses the American flag emojis to strengthen his celebration of the national holiday. Simondac, P. [@patrickstarr]. (2018, July 4). Sup Ammmuricaaaa. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/patrickstarr>

Example 37: Liza Koshy, though she is Indian and Caucasian, used Spanish—a common language in the United States—to celebrate American Independence Day. She is dressed in red, white, and blue. It is clear from her captions that her ethnic, racial, and national identity is second to her brand as a comedian. Koshy, L. [@lizakoshy]. (2018, July 4). happy cuatro de julio from me, my hot dog, and her buns. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/lizakoshy>

Though Disney is known throughout the world and is quite popular among Asians, these Asian American influencers were apt to post in the fashion of what the Internet calls “The ‘Basic White Girl at a Disney Theme Park’ starter pack,” which involves taking photos of themselves in Minnie Mouse ears in front of the Disney castle with a group of friends (SmRndmGeek, 2018). It’s a common image that can be seen across social media.

Example 38: LianeV poses with friends in Minnie Mouse ears in front of the Disney castle at Disneyland. This is an example of a common American practice. The hashtag #SquadGoals is American Internet slang. Valenzuela, L. [@LianeV]. (2018, August 18). Magical day at @disneyland with my squad! [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/lianev>

Lastly, American/Western cultural behaviors can be seen in the type of language that these Asian American influencers use. They use American slang, Internet language, and millennial phrasing such as “mood,” “loves,” “moment,” “AF,” “ballin,” and “goals.”

### **Asian American Cultural Identity**

Also present in the Asian American influencers’ posts were Asian American values, products, and behaviors.

### ***Asian American Cultural Values***

There are some cultural values that these influencers display that are a product of being multicultural, including the mention of national, racial, and ethnic identity; promoting of diversity; and reference to the American Dream narrative.

Though the reference of national, racial, or ethnic identity are more rarely mentioned explicitly, when they are, they are not typically the focus of the post; rather, they are in the context of something else, such as humor, family, or product promotion.

Example 39: Bretman Rock mentions his heritage in the caption—which is then indicated by the Filipino flag emoji—in conjunction with his new makeup line. In the post, he dons traditional Filipino clothing. Sacayanan, B. [@bretmanrock]. (2018, November 5). So excited to announce my new Collaboration with @colourpopcosmetics. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/bretmanrock>

Example 40: Aimee Song states her racial and national identity in the caption of this post in the context of doing humanitarian work in Africa. Song, A. [@aimeesong]. (2018, October 22). Spent the day with the ninth graders at the school @metowe has built here in the Mara. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/aimeesong>

Example 41: Liza Koshy humorously displays her ethnic identity through her posing and her caption, which indicate that she is performing an Indian-style pose. Koshy, L. [@lizakoshy]. (2018, July 15). indian style. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/lizakoshy>

It is apparent that their national, ethnic, and racial identities are intertwined with their Instagram portrayals in more natural ways. Nabela Noor appears to be an exception, however, and mentions her national and ethnic identity far more than other Asian American influencers. Patrick Star might be considered to do so more often as well.

Example 42: Nabela Noor states her national and ethnic identity with her national homeland (New York, U.S.) pictured in the background. Noor, N. [@nabela]. (2018, October 18). I was born in New York, the first 1st generation Bangladeshi-American in my family. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/nabela>

Example 43: Patrick Star identifies himself as a proud Filipino along with another Filipina singer. Simondac, P. [@patrickstarr]. (2018, July 14). “I need all the cameras to

zoon in so they can see 2 FILIPINOS on stage...” [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/patrickstarr>

Perhaps due to the multicultural state of the United States, the topic of diversity and representation are more present in the Asian American influencers’ posts.

Example 44: Nabela Noor promotes diverse representation while identifying her own national and ethnic identity. Noor, N. [@nabela]. (2018, August 29). I am standing in a lineup of incredible, powerful humans. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/nabela>

Example 45: Chriselle Lim describes her excitement about Asian American diversity in film. Lim, C. [@chrisellelim]. (2018, August 23). Couldn’t be more proud of @mommasohn for making her debut on the big screen. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/chrisellelim>

They occasionally showcased themselves as supporters of other Asian American influencers and celebrities. For instance, in 2018, the film *Crazy Rich Asians* (Jacobson et al., 2018) was released, which was referenced in multiple posts. Even Ryan Higa, who claimed to not openly advocate Asian American entertainment posted about the film.

Example 46: Ryan Higa indicates his racial identity by explaining his views on Asian American entertainment and his support of *Crazy Rich Asians*. Higa, R. [@notryanhiga]. (2018, August 20). I knoooooow.. I’m late to the party, but finally got to see *Crazy Rich Asians*. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/notryanhiga>

Other films and TV shows that were mentioned that include Asian American cast members included *Fresh Off the Boat* (Blomquist & McEwen, 2015), *To All the Boys I’ve*



Loved (Levin, Kaplan, Cash, & Johnson, 2018), and Searching (Bekmambetov, Ohanian, Qasabian, Sidman, & Chagarity, 2018).

Another Asian American cultural perspective that existed among the Asian American posts was the use of the American dream narrative, wherein the influencer mentioned their immigrant parents and their sacrifices as part of the influencer's success. The Asian American influencers also show themselves giving back to their parents such as in a post by Nabela Noor:

Example 47: Nabela Noor explains in the caption of this post how her immigrant parents sacrificed for her and how she now takes care of them financially. Noor, N. [@nabela]. (2018, July 26). This week I moved into my dream home with the man of my dreams. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/nabela>

Example 48: Patrick Star describes how his upbringing was difficult but that his career has brought his family closer. He poses with his parents in fancy clothing, which shows he has been able to provide his parents with a better life. Simondac, P. [@patrickstarr]. (2018, December 3). Last night was the best night of my life. [Instagram photo].

Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/patrickstarr>

### ***Asian American Cultural Products***

Some of the cultural products that the Asian American influencers mentioned or depicted can be considered Asian American because they have passed over into the other culture or are a mix of the two cultures. For instance, Peanuts was created by an American cartoonist, but Snoopy is quite popular in Asia, where there's even a small theme park in Hong Kong called Snoopy's World. Other products that can be considered Asian American cultural products that were showcased in these Asian American influencers' posts were lo-fi music (J., 2018), Avatar the Last Airbender, Chinatown, Koreatown, Nintendo, and Pokémon.

Example 49: Wendy Nguyen poses in her Woodstock (from Peanuts) sweater dress.

Nguyen, W. [@wendyslookbook]. (2018, November 11). Hi hi from the Peanuts gang.

[Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/wendyslookbook>.

Example 50: Alex Wassabi and others are pictured in Avatar the Last Airbender

(American television series with Asian themes) cosplay. Burriss, A. [@alexwassabi].

(2018, November 2). happy birthday lil bro. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from

<https://www.instagram.com/alexwassabi>

Example 51: Ryan Higa promotes Nintendo (originally a Japanese brand that is popular

in the U.S.). Higa, R. [@notryanhiga]. (2018, November 30). I ain't mad at the perks lol.

[Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/notryanhiga>

Other Asian American cultural products could be the product endorsements, such as those related to skincare and beauty. Because these two areas are important in Asia, they become Asian American products because Asian American influencers are promoting American versions of these products. The ones that were promoted by multiple influencers were Olay, Biossance, and Sephora.

### ***Asian American Cultural Behaviors***

Of the Asian American cultural behaviors that were present, the most apparent were a multi-home embracing, Western appearance adoption, and status signaling.

First, the Asian American influencers were apt to portray a multi-home embracing, showing themselves visiting their ethnic home countries while at the same time showing pride for their U.S. home, be that their city, state, or just the country in general. They did this in their captions, stating the name of the place specifically, or through the use of emojis of their ethnic home country flag or the American flag.

Example 52: LianeV, who is Filipino, is pictured in the Philippines, which she states is one of her favorite places. Valenzuela, L. [@LianeV]. (2018, October 22). The Philippines is definitely one of my favorite places in the world. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/lianev>

Example 53: Wendy Nguyen, who is Vietnamese, is pictured in Vietnam on a boat wearing a Vietnamese style conical hat, which is a type of hat that originated in Asia. Nguyen, W. [@wendyslookbook]. (2018, July 15). Memories of #Vietnam. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/wendyslookbook>

Many of the influencers also showed their national identity by posting about voting in the U.S. elections.

Example 54: Nabela Noor demonstrates that she is proud to vote in the U.S. and explains the importance of it to her immigrant family. Noor, N. [@nabela]. (2018, October 20). As a daughter of immigrants, I have so many precious memories when it comes to voting. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/nabela>

Example 55: Jenn Im wears a red, white, and blue “I voted” sticker that indicates her pride in her national identity. Im, J. [@imjennim]. (2018, November 6). Cheeki is wondering, “Have you voted today?”. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/imjennim>

Interestingly, the Asian American influencers also used tricks with photography and makeup to appear more Caucasian. This concept is present in other countries, however, for the purpose of this study, it will be considered an Asian American behavior because it is taking place in the United States context. The most explicit example of this is from a post from Promise Tamang:

Example 56: Promise Tamang shows in a video how people can look taller in pictures. Asians are more commonly considered to be shorter than Westerners; thus, this video indicates the Asian American desire for Western appearance standards. Tamang, P. [@promisetamang]. (2018, July 13). Tag your short friend that needs to see this. [Instagram video]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/promisetamang>

Influencers also used makeup, wigs, exercise, and surgery to attain certain Western features, such as blonde hair, freckles, the male muscular aesthetic, and adoption of the Kardashian western beauty standard.

Example 57: Alex Wassabi portrays his desire for the Western muscular body ideal. Burriss, A. [@alexwassabi]. (2018, August 12). If you haven't seen the Transformation vid yet GO CHECK IT OUT! [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/alexwassabi>

Example 58: Nikita Dragun uses a blonde wig and makeup to create freckles, mirroring a Western beauty aesthetic. Dragun, N. [@nikita\_dragun]. (2018, July 8). do you love me? [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from [https://www.instagram.com/nikita\\_dragun](https://www.instagram.com/nikita_dragun)

Another theme amongst the Asian American influencers is the concept of status signaling, wherein they portray themselves as having a higher status based on the luxury or high-end brands they wear or promote and the photos they take with celebrities. For instance, there are many photos showing Asian American influencers with brand-name bags.

Example 59: LianeV poses in such a way that emphasizes her Louis Vuitton designer bag. Valenzuela, L. [@LianeV]. (2018, December 7). Times Square. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/lianev>

Example 60: Jenn Im is pictured with gold Chanel logos on her eyelids. This is an example of showing off her status with a designer brand. Im, J. [@imjennim]. (2018, December 7). I see both sides like Chanel. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/imjennim>

Some of the other luxury or high-end brands include Dior, Saint Laurent, Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Michael Kors, Cartier, Lacoste, Mango, Valentino, Chloe, Oscar De La Renta, Lancôme, and Chanel. It is important to note, however, that because influencers' content generally mixes unattainable with relatability, the Asian American influencers also promoted less coveted brands such as Target, Disney, Walmart, CoverGirl, Revolve, L'Oréal, Express, and Samsung. Similar to consumerism, this cultural behavior may also be part of the influencer identity.

Finally, there is also a sort of celebrity aspiration to many of the influencers, wherein they show their excitement for knowing and interacting with celebrities as well as their desire to reach that level of celebrity.

Example 61: Patrick Star portrays his giddy excitement while posing with celebrity Kris Jenner, which demonstrates status signaling. Simondac, P. [@patrickstarr]. (2018, July 6). Shishtars. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/patrickstarr>

The following two sections will answer the research questions of this study, followed by a discussion on the significance of cultural blending in terms of multicultural identity research and Instagram.

### **Research Question 1: Portrayal of Ethnic, Racial, and National Identities**

Though Asian American influencers' ethnic, racial, and national identities are not their primary Instagram identities, there is still evidence of multicultural identities that incorporate

cultural blending of Asian, Western, and Asian American cultural signifiers in their posts. Further, Asian American influencers did not communicate their ethnic, racial, or national identities in their posts with the same frequency, corroborating the idea that identity is fluid and multilayered and allows concurrently for a static and changing self (Chen & Lin, 2016). In this context, the following descriptions of how racial, ethnic, and national identities were portrayed are generalizations of the sample as a whole, rather than focused specifically on one individual.

### ***Ethnic Identity of Asian Americans on Instagram***

Though in some cases the influencers specifically stated their ethnic identity (i.e., Korean, Filipino, Vietnamese, etc.), they also communicated their ethnic identity through the depiction of themselves with ethnic-specific products and performing ethnic-specific behaviors. Bretman Rock, for instance, communicated his ethnic identity as a Filipino by dressing in traditional Filipino clothing and cosplaying as a well-known Filipina superhero; these are ethnically specific products that demonstrate the incorporation of his ethnic heritage into his Instagram identity. Culturally ethnic behaviors included beauty practices, such as when Aimee Song comedically put a Korean face mask on her dog (showing an important ethnic beauty practice), and embracing of ethnic homelands. This second behavior is especially noteworthy as the influencers in this sample are all American; however, many post images of themselves in ethnic homelands that are tied up with their identities. Examples of this include photos of LianeV in the Philippines, Wendy Nguyen in Vietnam, and Markiplier in Korea.

### ***Racial Identity of Asian Americans on Instagram***

The portrayal of racial Asian identity was evident in the use of all three cultural signifiers. First, Asian collectivistic values were present in the presentation of the Asian American influencers' identities, which was present in depictions of filial piety and the inclusion

of family in their influencer branding. Product signifiers of racial identity were especially interesting, as these Asian American influencers often participated in cross-cultural use of Asian products. For example, Chriselle Lim, who is Korean, posted an image of her and her daughter eating Chinese dumplings and Michelle Phan, who is Vietnamese, regularly posts about a Japanese cartoon. There were also cross-cultural Asian behaviors that were present in the posts, such as Liza Koshy, who is Indian, doing a kung fu stance, or Wendy Nguyen, who is Vietnamese, doing “couple costume” (which comes from Korea).

Unlike historic depictions of Asians in the media, this sample did not show any overt Orientalized symbols of identity. The depictions were far more fluid. For example, the gender portrayals were far less extreme on Instagram compared to Hollywood portrayals (Chen, 1996; Eguchi, 2011; Li, 2017; Lopez, 2018). The Asian American men posted images where they were showing off their muscularity, but they also posted images that could be considered kawaii or even overtly feminine. Bretman Rock is an example of this, wherein he has posted pictures of himself shirtless while sitting on the hood of his expensive car, but he has also posted pictures of himself in feminine clothing and high heels. Similarly, the Asian American women are presented less-extreme ways, and in general are not overly sexualized—though there are exceptions. In the case of this sample, Nikita Dragan’s Instagram identity is intertwined with a sexualized identity; however, she adopts a Kim Kardashian aesthetic (i.e., curvaceous and often posed provocatively) that is prevalent on social media and associated as a Western beauty standard (Romero, 2017).

### ***National Identity of Asian Americans on Instagram***

Similar to racial identity, national identity was portrayed by Asian Americans with all three cultural signifiers. They portrayed individualistic, Western values in their posts along with products such as cowboy boots and pop cultural references to the film *Mean Girls* and other

Western-based stories. Their behaviors also identified them as American, such as in their celebration of American holidays (i.e., Fourth of July) and use of American slang and American linguistic constructions.

### ***Cultural Blending Identity***

Viewed together, these three identities interact throughout the Asian Americans' posts. None of the influencers in this sample portrayed their identity as consisting of only one of the three aforementioned identities, but rather a conglomerate of the three. One way in which this was embodied was through product promotion. Many of the influencers promoted skincare brands, such as Olay. Because influencers are likely to only advertise products that are relevant to their personal brand identity, the products they endorse are then also extensions of their Instagram identity (Ewers, 2017; Mathur et al., 2018). In the case of a product promotion for Olay, the influencer is showing their racial behavior of keeping a skincare regimen while reinforcing their national identity with an American product.

By communicating their identity as cultural blending, Asian Americans position their identity as context (Zimmerman, 1998). Though in some cases, the influencer may identify their different identities all in one post (see figure 1), in the majority of posts, influencers' actions and products—the context—are communicating identity. However, it is also important to note that though these Asian American influencers are symbolically identifying themselves through this cultural blending frame, their multicultural identity may not be apparent to all those that view a post because viewers may lack the inside knowledge to recognize certain symbols as indicative of a specific culture. Thus, in order to facilitate the audience's ability to view a cultural signifier as related to a certain identity, the influencer sometimes states the obvious, such as in Nabela Noor's post on finding her wedding lehenga.



## **Research Question 2: The Four Frames of CTI**

Though the analysis of Instagram posts does not provide the richness of results that in-person interviews or quantitative measure may provide regarding identity construction (Daft & Lengel, 1986), the findings of this study indicate that Instagram has the capability to portray Asian Americans' personal, enacted, relational, and communal identities.

In accordance with CTI, they employ text and visual communication to produce identity, which they then communicate to others when they post their photos and captions online. Because their Instagram identities are not portrayed in a stereotypical manner, it is more likely that these Asian American portrayals of identity are more similar to a natural reflection of cultural identity developed offline—one that they then present on social media. This finding corroborates previous research on Instagram portrayals as being an extension of self-identity (Iqbal et al., 2019).

Viewing the Asian American Instagram posts in conjunction, they illustrate a complex, multilayered portrayal of Asian American identity through the four frames of CTI. Though the frames are meant to be interpreted together, it is acceptable to separate them out for analysis (Jung & Hecht, 2004). Following this analysis will be the interpenetration of the frames, which will explain how the frames relate to or contradict one another.

### ***Personal Frame of Identity***

The personal frame describes how an individual defines themselves (Hecht, 1993). An individual, however, typically has multiple identities, and thus, the portrayed identities act in a hierarchical fashion. In the case of these Asian American influencers, their Instagram identity is first and foremost based on their influencer brand, be that for fashion, beauty, or comedy. Their

ethnic, racial, and national identities are typically secondary and are not usually communicated as the main message of posts. In a few cases, such as with Nabela Noor or Patrick Star (see Figures 2 and 3), the ethnic, racial, or national identities are posed as the primary message of a post, but for the most part, these identities are supplementary. For instance, Bretman Rock (see Figure 4) posted an image of himself in traditional Filipino clothing and referenced his heritage with a Filipino flag emoji in the caption; however, this ethnic identity is only contributory to his new makeup line, which is part of his branded influencer identity.

These influencers built their images based on their interests and talents and then naturally incorporate their ethnic, racial, and national identities into their posts. This may be in part because they do not desire to be defined by their ethnicity, race, or nationality—although they certainly acknowledge and communicate those aspects of their identity in the periphery. Identities dictate expectations and motivations, however, and the motivation behind their social media presence is most likely tied to their ability to maintain their lifestyle. Thus, they will likely prioritize their monetized identity, which for some is related to their desire for the American Dream lifestyle.

Those instances when the influencers do mention their ethnic, racial, or national identities outright are rarer. These are what CTI refers to as identity “ascribed to self by others in the social world” (Hecht, 1993, p. 79). These types of identity are socially constructed in part based on unstable, social definitions. These identities are chosen in part based on what these influencers are told they are, be that by parents, government, peers, or the media. They then communicate these identities through social media.

### *Enacted Frame of Identity*

The second frame of CTI is the enacted frame, which is the performance of identity through communication (Hecht, 1993). The enacted identity of the Asian American influencers was apparent through the cultural products and cultural behaviors that they exhibited.

First, from the perspective of identity as performance, the ways in which the Asian American influencers textually and visually communicated Asian, Western, and Asian American cultural behaviors portrayed their ethnic, racial, and national behaviors. Using language as an example, when Asian Americans used Asian writing systems, they portrayed their identities as being Asian and sometimes as being of a certain ethnicity. For instance, Chriselle Lim (see Figure 5) used Korean characters in her post to tell her followers what her daughters' Korean names were, indicating her racial identity as Asian and her ethnic identity as Korean.

Enacted identity was also apparent in the treatment of certain geographical locations and the pride associated with them. The Asian American influencers indicated their pride in ethnic homelands through photos of themselves in those places, often accompanied by a flag emoji of the country (see figure 6). To show their pride in their national identity, they often did so by posting about the 4th of July accompanied often by an American flag emoji or by posting about having voted in the U.S. elections, indicating that they are citizens of the United States and their national identity is American.

Asian American influencers also communicated their ethnic, racial, and national identities through the use of physical and symbolic products. Each culture has certain shared elements that are associated with its identity as a culture; these are often reflected in products (Hecht & Choi, 2011). In general, Asian Americans' posts are replete with American,

westernized fashion choices indicating a national identity; however, there are instances wherein Asian-style fashion is portrayed, such as for weddings. Interestingly, these influencers post images of both their Western wedding clothes and their traditional ethnic wedding clothes, indicating a multicultural identity. Unlike the theory of adaptation that presumes a give-and-take relationship in cultural identity formation, the findings of this study strengthen the need for expanded theories that reflect multiculturalism within an individual.

One of the assumptions of the enacted frame is that identity is emergent. This concept was mirrored in this sample of Asian Americans, as the frequency with which Asian, American, and Asian American products varied amongst the influencers. Those who enacted their identity with more products or behaviors in their posts were perhaps those who saw their ethnic, racial, or national identities as a more immediately present part of their lives, be that because of personal grapplings with identity or situational experiences, such as with Ryan Higa's post on seeing the film *Crazy Rich Asians* (see Figure 7; Jacobson et al., 2018).

### ***Relational Frame of Identity***

The third layer of CTI is the relational frame, which states that identity is created through social interaction and relational communication (Hecht, 1993). Based on the findings of the study, the first three sublevels (see Theoretical Background) of relational identity are most pertinent to the understanding of Asian American multicultural identity on Instagram.

First, the ascribed relational identity, or the identity that is created by others' perception of the Asian American influencers, was evident through product endorsement. Sometimes the way they communicate their identity is through the products that others (i.e., companies) ask the influencers to endorse. One of the most common types of product that Asian American influencers promoted for pay (normally indicated by #ad) was skincare products. It is possible

that because marketers understand the importance of skincare in Asian culture that they targeted these influencers in order to sell their product to more Asian Americans who might be following the influencers or non-Asians who may view the influencers as experts on skincare. Thus, in promoting skincare products—even though they are American brands—it is possible that not only marketers are identifying Asian Americans by their racial or ethnic identities but that others will also identify these influencers in this way. Further, because influencers are more apt to only promote brands that fit their personal brand, they may also internalize the perception of others in developing their own racial identity.

The second sublevel of the relational frame is that identity is created by one's relationships with others. For Instagram users, that includes anyone who is pictured or tagged in a photo or mentioned (with or without the @ symbol) in a caption. For Asian American influencers, they portrayed themselves with family and friends, including other Asian American influencers. Nikita Dragun, for example, was regularly pictured with Bretman Rock. Others also posed with Eva Chen (who was not included in this sample size because she did not yet have the sufficient number of followers to qualify at the time of analysis) or even reposted posts from other Asian American influencers with a tag or shout out in the caption. The relationships were also depicted in specific ways that mirrored Asian values. They did this by showing the influencers giving back to their parents, sharing their wealth with their family, or including their families in their business. Alex Wassabi, for instance, showed this collectivistic nature by blending his culture and commerce, portraying his family and business as interconnected (see Figure 8).

Finally, the third layer relates to the interaction between identities. This relationship is evident in the relationship between influencer identity and multicultural identity, as mentioned

before, in that the multicultural identity is typically peripheral to the influencer identity. Further, the way in which Asian Americans are expressing their multicultural identities on Instagram is not in a fragmented fashion, but rather the identities interact with each other. In other words, no one identity overtly dominates the others. For instance, the diversity-promoting behavior of Asian Americans would not exist without the combination of their American national identities existing in conjunction with their ethnic Asian identities. Similarly, the influencers are neither fully collectivistic or individualistic in their identity portrayal, but rather a blending of the two cultural values. In other multicultural identity research, the existence of two cultures can be viewed as conflicting, but in the case of these Instagram portrayals of identity, the different cultural values appear to coexist without any visible conflict (Mok & Morris, 2010).

### ***Communal Frame of Identity***

The communal frame is described as the identity that comes from a collective group (Hecht, 1993). The communal identity of Asian Americans was most prominently seen in the communication of values. Both collectivism and individualism, which were portrayed by the influencers, are both larger community values shared by the influencers' two cultures. Though no two individuals communicated equal amounts of collectivism and individualism in their posts, it was clear that values from both cultures were present in their posts. Chriselle Lim, for instance, showed the importance of family in how she let her mother choose her daughters' Korean names (see Figure 5), but she also showed individualism in her openness about more traditionally private matters (see Figure 9).

As part of their communication of Asian American cultural values, Asian Americans asserted their identity as "Asian Americans" in their support of Asian American celebrities and in their support of diversity and representation. Many of the influencers voiced their support for

*Crazy Rich Asians* (Jacobson et al., 2018), other films and TV shows that showcased Asian American actors, and the actors themselves. These were instances of products and behaviors that bonded the group and influenced a racial national identity. It also indicated Asian Americans' support for more diverse representation of Asian American identity.

Further, the Asian racial identity was communicated when there was cross-ethnic use of products or behaviors, wherein a product or behavior originated in a country different than the influencer's ethnic heritage. Some examples of this are "couple look," foods, pigtail buns, kung fu, and pop culture (e.g., Sailor Moon). These cross-ethnic behaviors indicated the adoption of panethnic Asian American behaviors.

### ***Interpenetration of Frames***

Because identity frames exist congruently, it is necessary to view them in conjunction with one another in the analysis of identity (Hecht, 1993). Each of the frames is likely to influence the other. The enacted identity is the means by which identity can be communicated, which Asian American influencers did through the reference or depiction of ethnic, racial, national, and products and behaviors. In using these items, they were communicating their personal, relational, and collective identities. For instance, when Jenn Im posted a photo of herself wearing traditional Korean wedding clothes (see Figure 10), she was indicating her personal identity. When Alex Wassabi posted a photo with his Caucasian father and Filipino mother on November 25, 2018, he was enacting his personal identity as half white and half Filipino. Similarly, by enacting the behavior of promoting Asian American representation in media, the influencers were stating their personal racial-national identities. Thus, collective values also contributed to one's personal identity, but it also contributed to their relational identity, such as in posts about the American Dream and sharing the wealth and success with

family members. In this sample, each of the frames can be seen as contributing to and being a product of each of the other frames.

It does not appear that there were any blatant identity gaps in the current sample, which is due to the limited amount of information provided by Instagram posts. It is possible that the constraints of Instagram as a medium play a part in this lack, as Instagram is known as a visual platform for aesthetic pleasure. Due to this idea, it may not afford for in-depth, transparent discussions about identity issues. This lack of clear identity gaps could also be a result of influencer attitudes, such that their main identity takes priority, and thus cultural identity issues may not be fully explored on this platform.

### **Discussion**

Based on the findings of this study, Asian Americans portray their ethnic, racial, and national identities on Instagram as a cultural blending, indicated by cultural signifiers, including cultural values, products, and behaviors. The concept of cultural blending has been cited sparsely in multicultural identity psychology research, and is typically used empirically to understand how an individual responds when primed with culture-specific images (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2010). For instance, when primed with images of Chinese culture, a Chinese American will be more likely to behave in a culturally Chinese manner rather than in a culturally American way (Benet-Martínez, Leu, Lee, & Morris, 2002). Though still an emerging and evolving area of study, multicultural identity theories have not yet been applied to the visual texts. This study indicates that Instagram may provide nuanced forms or perspectives of cultural identity as suggested by Chen and Lin (2016).

Though cultural blending has been explored in previous literature (Birman, 1994), the present study indicates that this conceptual finding warrants future examination. In the field of



multicultural research, many of the current theories are based on the idea that a multicultural individual must negotiate a loss of one culture to make room for another culture. Acculturation, for instance, explains how immigrant populations adjust to host environments (Kim, 1977) while assimilation describes abandoning one's host culture and replacing it with the dominant culture of the host environment (Pauls, n.d.). Other similar frameworks include interaction adaptation theory (Burgoon, Stern, & Dillman, 2007) and cultural fusion theory (Croucher & Kramer, 2017), which still do not fully explain the experience of non-immigrants and those who do not communicate identity as a loss of home culture. With growing numbers of multicultural individuals in the United States (Livingston & Brown, 2017), there are increasing numbers of mixed-race children and American-born children of immigrants who are born with and must navigate multiple cultural identities; however, an immigrant-based theory may not sufficiently reflect their cultural identity experiences.

One acculturation position posited by Berry (2003) states that one way individuals acculturate is not through a loss, but through integration or biculturalism, wherein the individual is involved with and identifies with both cultures. In research, this concept has mostly been applied to behaviors of bicultural individuals and the creation of a third culture that combines the two distinct culture (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2010), as is present in the current study. Birman (1994) expanded on biculturalism and indicated four types, of which blended described individuals who were both behaviorally oriented to the two cultures and identified with both. Toomey, Dorjee, and Ting-Toomey (2013) found that bicultural individuals reflected this blended culture mindset when they refrained from identifying themselves as a percentage of either culture and instead explained that their cultural identities could not be parsed out, and that

doing so would not accurately reflect their lived identity. This same idea was relevant in the Asian Americans' Instagram posts.

Because Instagram allows users to create their own portrayals of identity, the platform allows for more authentic representations of identity, including a bicultural blended identity. The researcher is not aware of other research that has found evidence of the portrayal of bicultural blended identity on social media, which indicates that further investigating the construction of identity on social media may provide promising insights (Chen & Lin, 2019). Rather than relying on one-sided, stereotypical portrayals, Instagram provides a tool to Asian Americans and other minority groups with which they can present a more authentic identity, similar to previous findings on Asian American blogging (Subramanian, 2010). Unlike a quantitative measure that examines internal processes of identity construction and conflict (Benet-Martínez & Hong, 2015; Mok & Morris, 2010), social media provides an embodied expression of identity, which can be useful for analyzing people's identities—especially if those individuals lack self-awareness or have not engaged in identity introspection.

In the case of the current study, cultural blending indicates that the Asian American influencers did not overtly adopt one culture as dominant over another. Though one post may more explicitly cite an influencer's ethnic identity (such as when LianeV identifies herself as Filipino), another post may indicate a patriotic nationalist identity (such as when LianeV posted multiple times for the Fourth of July). Because an Instagram account is a personalized extension of self-identity (Iqbal et al., 2019), it can provide individuals with the ability to portray their personal identity as complex, non-static, and multifaceted. Where Hollywood and television identity portrayals are often limited and stereotypical, social media provides Asian Americans a

space where they can create authentic depictions of identity (Jensen, 2016; Lopez, 2012). These users are reasserting their claim on their identity representations in a media setting.

Because users are in control of their content on Instagram, they are allowed to portray Asian American identity in ways that challenge the media's hegemonic portrayal of them (Lopez, 2016). Thus, the representation of Asian American identity on Instagram is much closer to the broad representation of Asian Americans on YouTube (Balance, 2012; Jensen, 2016). On both platforms, they can position themselves outside the model minority, ninja, and perpetual foreigner narratives of mainstream media (Lopez, 2016, 2018) and build their identities around their non-stereotypical interests, such as comedy, fashion, and beauty. Though Instagram provides individuals with control over their representation of identity, Instagram's algorithms may compromise influencers' follower engagement and thus influence influencers to strategically post in ways that may not be congruent with their true identity (Agung & Darma, 2019). Future research should explore how Instagram's algorithms influence identity on Instagram.

Typically, the influencer interests are intertwined with the Asian American's influencer brand, and as such takes a hierarchically dominant position (Burgoon et al., 2007) in their online self-presentation. Thus, the cultural identity becomes a less important factor or conversation point for the influencer. As such, the influencer is seemingly less likely to discuss this identity and the tensions associated with identity negotiation (whereas they do appear to discuss complications related to their influencer work). A drawback, then, of using visual social media to gather insights on identity is that it may not provide enough information or context to show the internal cultural identity conflict present in previous multicultural identity research (Nguyen & Benet-Nartínez, 2010).

This study further confirmed existing research on identity and provided insights into the interaction between aspects of culture and identity. Similar to CTI, the findings confirmed that identity is fluid and multilayered; however, these concepts are not limited to an offline environment but can also be parsed out online. These findings also further argue the need for research on cultural blending with visual texts. Future studies should examine the nuances of multicultural identity through visual texts to examine the possibility of visually representing the internal conflict an individual with multicultural identities goes through. Finally, based on the emergent theory of this method, not only are values, products, and behaviors components of culture, but they are also facets of identity that can be portrayed visually.

### **Conclusion**

Though Asian Americans are diverse in their ethnic origins and influencer identities, each communicated their ethnic, racial, and national identities on Instagram as part of a blended cultural identity. Though their multicultural identities were not always explicitly stated and were not treated as primary identities on Instagram, they were communicated visually and textually through cultural values, products, and behaviors. Their blended identities were comprised of cultural signifiers of Asian cultural identity, American/Western cultural identity, and Asian American cultural identity. When viewed in conjunction, these factors were representative of the four frames of CTI: personal identity, enacted identity, relational identity, and communal identity. Thus, as Chen and Lin (2016) suggested, social media—in this case Instagram—may prove to be useful in understanding developing or developed cultural identities. Where entertainment media and YouTube have been shown to portray Asian Americans stereotypically (Cortes, 2014; Lopez, 2016), social media representations on Instagram may be more conducive to a more accurate portrayal of Asian Americans identity as it portrays multifaceted Asian

Americans and their ethnic, racial, and national identities in more natural ways. This study should be viewed as a preliminary analysis of Asian American identity on social media, and future studies should examine the effects that these Instagram identity portrayals may have on Asian Americans' sense of identity as well as on non-Asian Americans' perceptions of Asian Americans.

### **Limitations**

This study is not without limitations. First, this dataset is a generalized view of Asian Americans, which is a very diverse group, and not all Asian ethnicities were present in the sample size. Because different ethnic groups may hold different values, these results must be viewed through this limitation. A more accurate depiction of group identity would include only one ethnic group rather than a racial group. For instance, the Filipinos seemed more likely to post images with an emphasis on family compared to other influencers. It is also important to note that some of the findings in this study may be associated with other influencers of different races, such as status signaling, and may just be an attribute of Instagram influencers.

Further, this study does not measure the strength of any one influencer's cultural identity (i.e., ethnic, racial, national). The purpose of this study is to identify that a multicultural identity exists among Asian American influencers, an identity that is not stereotypical in nature as is found in entertainment media. Future research may employ other methods to measure the strength of one's ethnic, racial, or national identity on social media. Because identity changes over time, the results of this study should only be viewed as a snapshot of cultural identity, subject to change. Thus, a longitudinal view would provide greater insights into multicultural identity changes over time. Future research may also explore the portrayal of multicultural identity on other social media platforms.

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## APPENDIX

This appendix will include the images discussed in-text in the body of the text.

Figure 1.



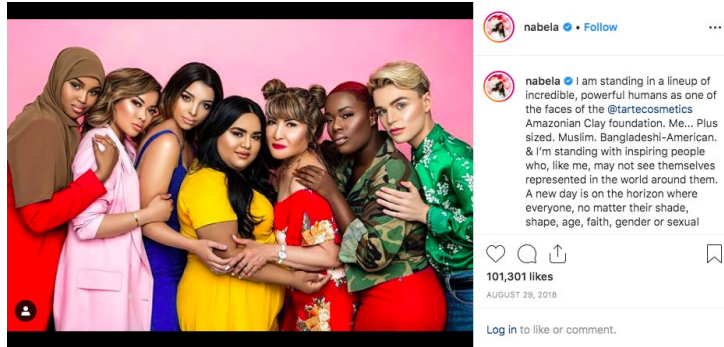
Noor, N. [@nabela]. (2018, October 18). I was born in New York, the first 1st generation Bangladeshi-American in my family. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/nabela>

Figure 2.



Simondac, P. [@patrickstarr]. (2018, July 14). "I need all the cameras to zoom in so they can see 2 FILIPINOS on stage..." [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/patrickstarr>

Figure 3.



Noor, N. [@nabela]. (2018, August 29). I am standing in a lineup of incredible, powerful humans. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/nabela>

Figure 4.



Sacayanan, B. [@bretmanrock]. (2018, November 5). So excited to announce my new Collaboration with @colourpopcosmetics. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/bretmanrock>

Figure 5.



Lim, C. [@chrisellelim]. (2018, November 18). 은혜 & 사랑. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/chrisellelim>

Figure 6.



Nguyen, W. [@wendyslookbook]. (2018, July 15). Memories of #Vietnam. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/wendyslookbook>

Figure 7.



Noor, N. [@nabela]. (2018, July 26). This week I moved into my dream home with the man of my dreams. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/nabela>

Figure 8.



Figure 8. Alex Wassabi shows his family dressed in his branded merchandise, indicating that his business and his family life are intertwined. Burriss, A. [@alexwassabi]. (2018, December 25). merry Christmas from my family to yours. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/alexwassabi>

Figure 9.



Lim, C. [@chrisellelim]. (2018, September 27). Hi.I'm.Still.Here. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/chrisellelim>

Figure 10.



Im, J. [@imjennim]. (2018, August 20). Just uploaded the Korean wedding reception on my channel. [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/imjennim>