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Career Representation of Asian Americans in Movies: A Mixed Methods Approach to Examining Media Vocational Anticipatory Socialization Messages

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ABSTRACT

Asian American representation in entertainment media has historically been deficient or plagued by harmful stereotypes, such as the model minority, perpetuating limited perceptions and erasing subgroup diversity. These stereotypes can have tangible career-related consequences for Asian Americans, restricting their career options and creating workplace challenges. Thus, there is a need to examine how the media portrays Asian Americans at the intersection of race and career, and whether these representations reinforce or challenge prevailing stereotypes. This study, grounded in Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), employed content and thematic analyses to investigate how Asian American professional identities are constructed through media Vocational Anticipatory Socialization (VAS) messages – specifically through character occupations and career-related dialogue – in a purposive sample of 53 movies featuring Asian American leads. Findings reveal that while Asian American characters are predominantly portrayed in white-collar occupations, subgroup differences complicate the monolithic model minority narrative. We additionally present career-related themes that perpetuate or subvert racial stereotypes. Altogether, these findings advance VAS research by providing methodological guidance for collecting and analyzing media-based VAS messages, while also informing SCT by illustrating that mediated portrayals are not experienced uniformly but are shaped by intersecting social identities, such as race, gender, and career, which may further limit representation and identification opportunities for marginalized groups.

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According to Social Cognitive Theory (SCT),[1] media not only reflects social realities but also socializes viewers with expectations about different social groups. This process can be of particular concern when media transmits stereotypes to audiences lacking personal connections to the depicted groups.[2] One community that faces pronounced negative

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effects from media depictions is Asian Americans, who, even though are one of the fastest growing and the most diverse racial groups in the United States,[3] are often portrayed in the media as a monolithic entity, or more specifically (among other stereotypes), as the "model minority": competent and hard-working intellectuals who are also docile and unlikely to challenge the status quo.[4] Beyond oversimplifying and erasing the diversity of Asian American experiences, this stereotype particularly carries significant career-related consequences for Asian Americans – reinforcing narrow expectations of career success, imposing unrealistic performance demands, limiting social support, and paradoxically, restricting career advancement opportunities.[5] Given that professional portrayals of Asian Americans in media often perpetuate the model minority stereotype with significant social and career implications for Asian Americans, it is important to thoroughly examine the range of Vocational Anticipatory Socialization (VAS) messages in movies depicting Asian Americans.

The stage of VAS within Jablin's Model of Organizational Socialization posits that people, from early childhood, build their career expectations and goals through messages received from various sources: family, peers, media, educational institutions, and part-time work experiences.[6] Although entertainment media,[7] such as television and movies,[8] is an important source of VAS messages, the VAS literature predominantly focuses on interpersonal sources, often excluding media entertainment as a source of socialization.[9] Existing media VAS studies have made important contributions by quantitatively examining how these messages influence individuals' occupational aspirations;[10] however, less attention has been given to analyzing the content of VAS messages in media and the various forms through which they can be conveyed.

Given this gap in media VAS research, as well as the social implications for Asian Americans, the current study took a novel mixed methods approach to examining VAS message content in 53 movies featuring at least one Asian American character playing a central role. The first was a content analysis examining how (a) characters' occupational roles are represented among Asian American characters and how these roles vary in proportion across different Asian subgroups. Examining occupational roles is especially important as they can establish a baseline for what career pathways are deemed possible, normal, or desirable for specific subgroups. Nuances were considered for this heterogeneous racial group, as perceptions of and lived experiences among Asian American subgroups vary significantly,[11] potentially influencing their professional portrayals in entertainment media. Second, a thematic analysis of (b) dialogues about careers exchanged between characters in the movies resulted in overarching career-related themes from the movies that either reinforce or challenge harmful Asian stereotypes. By integrating both character occupations and career-related dialogues, our study offers a holistic framework for understanding media VAS messages as well as the current state of Asian American career representation in the media.

Social Cognitive Theory: Framework for Analyzing Media Portrayal of Asian Americans

According to SCT, individuals learn and internalize social norms through indirect observation.[12] Entertainment media, with its portrayal of characters who model specific attitudes, behaviors, and norms, serves as an important supplemental source of such

learning,[13] especially when audiences identify with the characters through shared frames of identity, such as ethnic-racial background.[14]

However, the effects of media depictions on ingroup audiences are subject to the availability of what is represented in media content; positive media depictions can affirm identity,[15] while negative depictions can threaten self-esteem and self-worth.[16] Given this, the effects of entertainment media representations are especially meaningful for ethnic-racially marginalized communities as they are at risk of both underrepresentation and misrepresentation that can threaten their social standing and mobility.[17] Moreover, SCT suggests that audiences often look to media portrayals to learn about outgroups.[18] When these depictions rely on stereotypes, the consequences can be especially troubling for viewers who lack meaningful interpersonal connections to the members of these groups.[19] Indeed, outgroup audiences who internalize stereotypical beliefs of certain racial groups from media content are likely to have greater stereotypical and symbolically racist beliefs of those groups in real life.[20] All of this is informed by the prevalence of certain depictions and what audiences can give attention to and retain.[21]

For Asian Americans, the portrayal of "Asians" in American entertainment media has often been far from reality. One common stereotype is the model minority (i.e., of being intelligent, hardworking, yet socially awkward and lacking agency) which has been especially pervasive in the American entertainment media,[22] and is believed to be a trait possessed by all Asians.[23] This view may heighten anxiety and duress amongst Asian audiences[24] and provoke feelings of threats and competitions amongst non-Asians that lead to negative attitudes and affect towards Asian Americans.[25] Although this stereotype may appear positive, it emphasizes Asian Americans' academic and career success as innate and universal, and can have far-reaching consequences, particularly in the career development and advancement of Asian Americans.

Furthermore, media depictions may not thoroughly account for the diversity of Asian Americans. Though many have assumed the model minority stereotype is true for all Asian Americans,[26] the stereotype stems from spotlighting a very selective group of highly educated Asian immigrants whilst neglecting all those who do not immigrate under the same circumstances.[27] Asian Americans can be disaggregated into regional subgroups (e.g., East Asian, South Asian, Southeast Asian), and homogenizing Asian Americans ignores the economic and sociopolitical influences that contribute to each subgroup's immigration history and their plights.[28] Thus, there is a need to examine the nuances of Asian American representation, especially considering the subgroups, as this may inform who is perceived as Asian American and who they are as a group for both ingroup and outgroup audiences.

Career-Related Consequences of the Model Minority Myth

Among harmful Asian stereotypes, existing research highlights that the perception of Asian Americans as the stereotypical "model minority" has significant career-related consequences. Studies indicate that Asian Americans, similar to White Americans, are more likely to be viewed than other minority groups as having successful career trajectories,[29] particularly in "high-status" and high-paying fields, such as STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics), architecture, and legal professionals, rather than in "low status" and low-paying fields like maintenance, construction, and public

transportation.[30] This perception places Asian Americans as a whole closer to White Americans in terms of social mobility while also positioning them as competitors for resources to other minority groups such as Black or Latina/o/x/e communities,[31] fostering divisions between Asian Americans with other minoritized racial/ethnic groups and preventing coalition-building.[32]

Furthermore, the model minority stereotype erases differences in career-related experiences and challenges faced by Asian subgroups. The pathway to college and therefore a greater chance at a white-collar career is often tied to English proficiency and socioeconomic status, of which these different subgroups greatly vary[33] and is significantly more challenging for children whose parents lack of education and resources.[34] For instance, while there are disadvantaged individuals within East and South Asian ethnic groups,[35] Southeast Asians are a largely refugee population and generally have lower educational attainment rates and socioeconomic status than their East and South Asian counterparts.[36] Though English proficiency among Southeast Asians have generally increased, they are still remarkably lower compared to other Asian subgroups, which can exacerbate difficulties in advocating for their children's education.[37] Indeed, Asian American subgroups exhibit the highest income inequality,[38] and their academic performance varies widely.[39]

Beyond creating divisions with other minoritized groups and erasing the divergent career-related challenges across the subgroups, media-imposed career expectations can also limit Asian Americans' perceived career options, funneling them into specific fields and roles that do not align with their personal aspirations.[40] While the stereotypical qualities of being obedient and industrious may be highly valued and sought out by employers, they can also result in unrealistic performance demands, limited social support, and ironically, fewer opportunities for career advancements better known as the "bamboo ceiling" (i.e., professional barriers resulting from the view that Asian Americans are competent yet passive workers, and therefore are unqualified for leadership roles).[41] The pressure to meet these stereotype-driven expectations coupled with the lack of social mobility, despite working hard to fulfill them, can result in significant mental health challenges[42] that may be met with apathy, as Asian Americans are often discouraged from addressing these struggles openly not only due to cultural norms surrounding mental health but also from societal expectations that they must remain "robotic" and "undefeatable" in navigating their endeavors without seeking help.[43] Moreover, these perceptions may further restrict the aid for Asian Americans who actively seek it out.[44]

Given the powerful role of media in shaping public perceptions of social groups (as per SCT), and the significant impact that harmful stereotypes can have on Asian Americans – exemplified by the model minority myth – there is a need to critically examine professional portrayals of Asian American in movies and how these representations may reinforce or challenge such stereotypes. This establishes a foundation for analyzing the VAS messages conveyed in Asian American movies.

Media as a Source of VAS: Professional Portrayals of Asian Americans in Movies

In the VAS stage of Jablin's Organizational Socialization model,[45] people begin shaping their career expectations and goals from an early age through communication. Among

the various sources of VAS messages, entertainment media, such as television[46] and movies,[47] has been recognized as an important socialization agent for career-related perceptions. The current research specifically focuses on movies, which Hylmö identifies as particularly powerful "ideological messengers" for career socialization.[48] This is attributed to (a) its widespread and often unsupervised consumption among all age groups, leading to unchallenged acceptances of the presented career stereotypes, (b) the integration of movies within a broader marketing ecosystem, where their messages are reinforced through other media such as magazines, internet, and consumer products, creating a multi-layered influence on audience, and (c) narrative structures framing characters overcoming personal, often professional, challenges, which impact audiences' views on the meaning of success in relation to careers.[49] Given movies' significant role in shaping career expectations, the ways in which Asian Americans are portrayed in terms of their careers in movies, especially with regard to whether they reinforce or challenge harmful Asian stereotypes such as the model minority, warrant a closer examination.

However, there has been a lack of studies examining the content of VAS messages from movies, let alone from movies featuring Asian Americans, who are often subjected to unique career expectations because of the model minority stereotype. Hylmö provided valuable insights by analyzing gendered VAS messages in films targeting young girls, using thematic analysis to explore how these messages challenge dominant ideology.[50] To further advance this line of research, there is an opportunity to adopt a more systematic approach to identifying and analyzing VAS messages in movies – one that clearly explicates and considers different forms of media VAS messages.

To fully capture the content of VAS messages that reach the audiences of Asian American movies, it is essential to consider the various ways that these messages are conveyed through the medium of movies. First, we propose that *occupational roles assigned to characters* serve as a VAS message to the audience, as variations in these roles (e.g., white collar, blue collar) for Asian American characters can influence how different audiences perceive Asian Americans professionally. In the context of our study, it is also necessary to account for how occupational roles may vary across different Asian subgroups, whose social, cultural, and economic diversity is often flattened.[51] This disparity may show up in the proportion of occupational roles represented among Asian American characters in U.S. movies, which leads us to pose the first research question.

> **RQ1:** How are occupational roles represented among Asian American characters in U.S. movies featuring Asian American leads, and how do these roles vary in proportion among different Asian subgroups?

Another way in which VAS messages can be conveyed in movies is through *career-related character dialogues* and the overarching themes they may convey. Given the context of our study, it is important to also examine the extent to which these themes reinforce or oppose harmful Asian stereotypes. Deriving these career-related themes, rather than examining character occupations in isolation, is necessary, as the character and narrative arcs provide essential context; for example, a movie may have limited portrayals of characters in diverse occupations, but when the character developments and the larger moral of the stories depicted through character dialogues are considered, it may be that the overarching VAS message is one that defies the stereotype. This leads to our second research question:

RQ2: What kinds of overarching career-related themes are conveyed in U.S. movies featuring Asian American leads, via character dialogues regarding careers, and how do they reinforce or challenge harmful Asian stereotypes?

Methods

Data Collection

Movie Selection

Our selection criteria were: American-created live-action movies with original storylines (i.e., we excluded documentaries, biographies, or semi-biographies based on real people) that include at least one Asian American main character. We defined Asian American main character(s) as one who is narratively important and portrayed as having been born in or is permanently residing in the U.S.; we excluded Asian characters whose identities are rooted in non-U.S. contexts to ensure that our analysis focuses on diasporic identities influenced specifically by U.S. racialization. The distinction was especially important given the historically limited depictions of Asians in American media[52] and the increased burden that some audiences may feel when viewing these representations.[53] By including movies with Asian American protagonists or co-protagonists, we minimized the inclusion of movies in which Asian American characters appear only in peripheral or stereotypical roles (e.g., the "nerdy Asian side character") without meaningful narrative development, and instead retained narratives that substantively explore Asian American identity and experience most relevant to our research questions.

The movies also had to be released within the three decades between *The Joy Luck Club* (1993) – a seminal Asian American movie that paved the path for many future works – and *The Joy Ride* (2023), a more contemporary movie that builds on the legacy of The Joy Luck Club. If a movie had sequels, we only included the first movie since the sequels typically revolve around the same original characters. In order to compile data from an extensive range of movies, we used Rotten Tomatoes and IMDB sites which provided user-created lists of Asian American movies; this approach provided access to a publicly available and widely used sample that reflects audience interests and cultural visibility. After the duplicates from the two lists were removed, we had an initial pool of 125 movies. 58 movies were removed based on our inclusion/exclusion criteria (33 with non-original storylines, 13 that were released outside of our time range, 6 non-American movies, 3 sequel movies, 2 that were inaccessible to the public, and 1 animated movie). Our final list included 53 movies that were primarily drama ($n = 38$) and comedy ($n = 31$; see Supplemental Material A for the list of movies included in our analysis and their genres).

Training

A team of four coders including the authors (Korean and Cambodian American, respectively) and two undergraduate research assistants (Japanese and Chinese American, and Vietnamese American) participated in a five-week training to prepare for the coding process, focusing on identifying three areas: characters' Asian subgroup classification (as East Asian, South Asian, Southeast Asian, West and Central Asians, or Mixed-Race), characters' occupations (e.g., "restaurant owner", "graduate student"), and

career-related dialogues exchanged between characters. The training involved discussions to align coders' understanding of Asian subregions and their constituent countries, relevant VAS literature, and common Asian cultural stereotypes. Coders also practiced applying the coding template on sample movie scenes and compared interpretations to ensure coding consistency.

Coding Template

A coding template was developed, requiring the coders to document the subgroup (or ethnicity) of Asian American characters that were central to the story (See Supplemental Material B for coding template). For the Asian subgroup classification, most movies had the characters explicitly state their ethnicities, but in some instances, implicit cues (e.g., spoken language, cultural clothing) were used to deduce characters' ethnicities. For example, if a character spoke Vietnamese even if they did not explicitly state they were Vietnamese, they were coded as "Southeast Asian". However, all of these deductions were based on evidence provided by the movie, and cases of insufficient evidence were coded as "Unknown". The characters included in the analysis for RQ1 were Asian American main characters. This list was determined through team discussions, so not all characters of Asian descent were included in the analysis.

After coding the demographic information of the characters, the coding template then required coders to note characters' occupations and the timestamp of the scenes in which these occupations were made known. Every single instance in which the characters' occupations changed throughout the movie was documented, and for the final analysis, the characters' last occupation was used. For the information on the Asian American characters' occupations, coders used both explicit and implicit context cues from the movies. For example, an explicit context cue may be a character stating "I work at a construction site", whereas an implicit context cue may be that the character is on a construction site with a hard hat and tools. When a character's career was unidentifiable, it was noted as "Unknown".

To address RQ2, the coding template also required the coders to document the following details every single time a career-related dialogue was exchanged between characters in the movie: timestamp, characters' names, and their relationship to each other (e.g., parent-child, sibling, peer), and the content of the message. As opposed to RQ1 which included only Asian American characters, for RQ2, we recorded all instances of career-related dialogues exchanged between characters as long as one Asian American character was involved in the conversation.

Coding Process

After solidifying the foundational understanding of the coding framework, the four coders used the coding template and coded a subset of movies ($n = 12$) together (watching them in the same room but coding independently). Discussions were held afterward to resolve discrepancies in interpretations and to refine the coding scheme as needed. For the content analysis portion of our study (RQ1), a first reliability test was conducted on the Asian subgroup of the 54 confirmed central Asian American characters from the initial 12 movies, yielding a Krippendorff's alpha of $\alpha = 1$ for Asian subgroup classification. Subsequently, the coders independently watched and coded eight movies each ($n = 32$). To ensure coding consistency, the coders reconvened to watch and code

another subset of three movies ($n = 3$) together. A second reliability test was conducted on the Asian subgroups of the seven confirmed characters from these movies, again achieving a Krippendorff's alpha of $a = 1$. Finally, the team completed data collection by dividing the remaining movies equally among the members to watch and code independently. An interrater reliability test was not conducted for the initial identification of character occupations, as coders might label the same occupation differently (e.g., dancer vs. ballerina). Instead, the first author manually reviewed and verified each occupation across all movies to ensure accurate labeling, and an interrater reliability test was performed for the classification of occupations into the five categories outlined below.

Data Analysis

For RQ1, a total of 160 Asian American characters' occupations were compiled. To make sense of the data in a meaningful way, the occupations were categorized into one of the five occupational classifications: white collar, blue collar, students, unemployed (i.e., specific evidence within a movie that a character had no job), or unknown (i.e., no information provided). The distinctions between blue collar and white collar were based on the definitions by Lubrano[54] in which blue-collar workers were conceptualized to often have low educational attainment and perform manual labor, while white collar workers were those who often have high educational attainment and work at professional-type jobs. First, the first and second authors conducted a reliability test on the perceived occupational classification of a subset of movies to ensure that reliability was satisfactory and established. Krippendorff's alpha was .902 for 39 characters across 15 movies (28.3% of the total movies). After the reliability was confirmed and the discrepancies were resolved upon discussion, the first author classified the character occupations in the remaining movies.

For RQ2, the first author created a document listing each movie along with all identified career-related dialogues exchanged between characters within that film (producing over 100 pages of data). Guided by RQ2's focus on Asian stereotypes, the first author analyzed the data using an iterative phronetic approach, alternating between readings of the data and the authors' existing knowledge of stereotypes.[55] When processing the data, each career-related dialogue was analyzed for the meanings it conveyed, while also considering how these meanings evolved, overlapped, or contrasted throughout the film. This approach allowed for attention to individual dialogue content while still capturing the broader narrative arc (e.g., a character might initially reinforce a stereotype but later subvert it), and enabled multiple, coexisting themes – if present – to emerge within a movie. Throughout the analysis, analytic memos were used to document thematic patterns along with details about the characters involved, including their race/ethnicity, jobs, and relational dynamics.[56] This process led to the development of higher-level career-related VAS themes, which were held to Owen's standards of recurrence (when same ideas emerge again in different wording), repetition (when words or phrases reappear frequently), and forcefulness (when ideas are expressed with evocative details), and were refined or removed if they lacked adequate evidence.[57] These themes were documented in a codebook, where the first author listed a few movies under each theme as exemplars to be reviewed collaboratively by the research team and revised through discussions. Some themes were omitted if their relevance was

disputed, combined when overlapping, and split if deemed too broad or complex. New themes were added if there was ample supporting evidence to justify their inclusion.

Findings

There were 186 Asian American characters in total within these movies, but we removed 26 characters who were minors (under the age of 18) and thus legally unemployed. Of the remaining 160 characters, 101 were East Asian (63.12%), followed by 30 South Asian (18.75%), 19 Southeast Asian (11.87%), five of mixed-race backgrounds (3.12%), and five of unspecified Asian background (3.12%).

RQ1: Character Occupations (Proportion of Occupational Roles Among Asian Subgroups)

Of our 160 Asian American characters, the majority held white-collar occupations (n = 61; 38.1%), followed by blue-collar occupations (n = 37; 23.1%), unknown occupations (n = 31; 19.4%), unemployed (n = 26; 16.3%), and finally, students who were not minors (n = 5; 3.1%). Superficially, there is some evidence that Asian Americans are largely seen as model minorities and are thus represented the most with white-collared jobs. To examine this distribution further, a chi-square test of association was conducted to examine the proportion of occupations among Asian subgroups, X^2 (16, 160) = 43.262, $p < .001$. Indeed, there was a significant difference in the proportion of occupations among Asian subgroups, as seen in Figure 1.

The distribution of occupation types varied significantly across different Asian subgroups. For East Asian characters (n = 101), the majority held white-collar occupations (n = 43; 42.6%) followed by blue collar (n = 25; 24.8%), unemployed (n = 18; 17.8%),

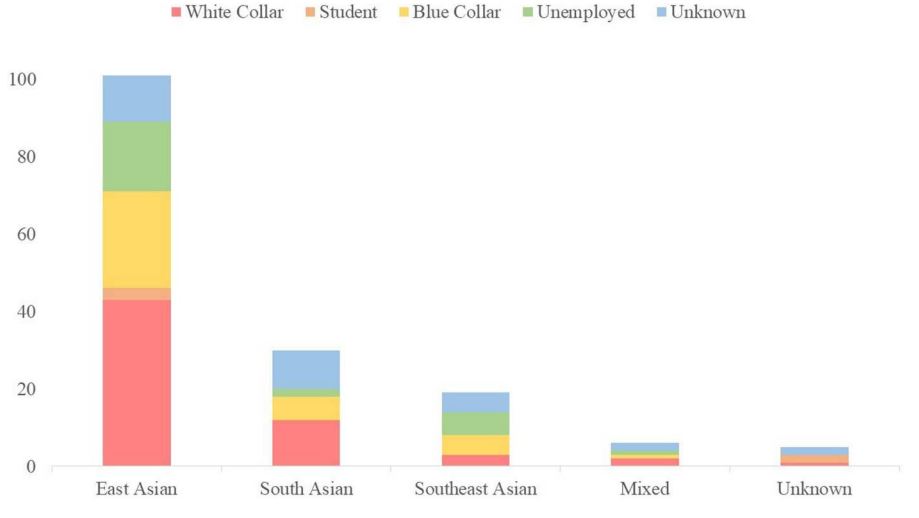


Figure 1 Occupations of Characters by Asian Subgroups

Note. There were no characters of Central or West Asian descents, so these labels were excluded from the figure.

unknown ($n = 12$; 11.9%), and student ($n = 3$; 3%). Of the 30 South Asian characters, the majority held white-collar positions ($n = 12$, 40%), followed by unknown occupations ($n = 10$; 33.3%), blue-collar occupations ($n = 6$, 20%), and unemployed ($n = 2$; 6.7%). Among the 19 Southeast Asian characters, unemployed was the most common category ($n = 6$; 31.6%) followed by unknown ($n = 5$; 26.3%) and blue collar ($n = 5$; 26.3%), then white collar ($n = 3$; 15.8%). Of the five mixed characters, 2 were white collar, 2 had unknown occupations, and 1 had a blue-collar job. Of the five characters of unknown Asian subgroups, 2 were students, 2 had unknown jobs, and 1 had a white-collar occupation.

Overall, the majority of Asian American characters were depicted as white-collar workers, except for Southeast Asian Americans who were most commonly depicted as unemployed. This supports previous research regarding the model minority stereotype that some Asians do not align with these stereotypical perceptions.

RQ2: Themes from Career-related Character Dialogues

By examining the patterns of career-related dialogues exchanged between characters within the broader context of each movie, overarching themes related to career portrayals of Asian Americans emerged. Some of these themes perpetuate harmful stereotypes about Asian Americans, while others actively challenged and defied them.

Messages Reinforcing Asian Stereotypes

"Career-Tiger" Asian Parents. Many movies portrayed Asian parent characters as highly controlling regarding their children's career choices, often pushing children toward limited paths that often conflicted with the children's aspirations (i.e., an extension of "tiger parenting" stereotype).[58] These parental pressures were frequently conveyed through a message to "work harder", which highlighted the parents' sacrifices as first-generation immigrants – emphasizing the hardships they endured and the opportunities they sought to create for their children. These messages were then used by the parents as justification for imposing career expectations on their children. Parent characters often conveyed messages that commonly directed their children toward high-paying or non-blue-collar STEM fields. For example, in *Harold and Kumar*, Kumar (South Asian) is shown interviewing for medical school which he had no interest in, solely to fulfill his father's expectations. His father, a South Asian doctor, warns Kumar, "If I hear from the doctor [whom Kumar will be interviewed by] that you are anything less than spectacular, I will completely cut you off … I have put too much time and energy into you to let you go and f**k it all up!". Even in non-STEM fields, parents demanded career excellence from their children. For instance, in *Saving Face*, Vivian (East Asian) recounts how her father expected her to become the prima ballerina (the principal dancer) at the Paris Opera Ballet, which embodied the same value of working harder to become the best in one's field. Overall, these portrayals reinforced the stereotype of Asian parents as emotionally distant "tiger parents" in the realm of careers, characterized by their relentless expectations that indirectly perpetuates the model minority image.

Whites as Better Career Mentors. Closely related to the previous theme is the portrayal of White characters as mentors better suited to guide Asian protagonists (than

their Asian parents), advancing the notion of White Saviorism. White Saviorism refers to the benevolence of White characters in "saving" racial minorities who cannot overcome their experiences of oppression on their own; in movies that have this theme, minorities often lack the skills or agency to change their circumstances, in which the "White savior" champions necessary changes.[59] We connect the concept of the "White savior" to mentorship in which the Asian American characters receive valuable information (both social and career-related) from White characters. Across movies such as *Saving Face*, *Advantageous*, and *Front Cover*, among others, White characters were frequently depicted as authority figures in workplaces with higher professional and socioeconomic status, reinforcing a class hierarchy between White and Asian characters. Moreover, frequent use of career-supportive messages conveyed by the White mentors to their Asian mentees suggested that White characters, rather than Asian parents, are better equipped to help Asian characters navigate the challenges of the dominant U.S. society, achieve success, and find personal fulfillment. For instance, in *Marvelous and the Black Hole*, main protagonist Sammy (East Asian) struggles with the strict and emotionally distant guidance of her father, Angus (East Asian), following the death of her mother. Angus enforces stringent messages emphasizing academic achievement and productivity, such as insisting that Summer should not be spent idly but rather on "getting good grades and perfect attendance". Sammy instead finds a mentor in Margot, a White magician who recognizes Sammy's talent for magic and offers to teach her more, helping Sammy rediscover joy and purpose in life. This pattern was also frequently observed among the work colleagues and friends of Asian characters, who were predominantly White and often related supportive messages to the Asian characters, reinforcing their key roles in fostering the Asian protagonists' career confidence and success. This theme reinforces racial hierarchies that place Whites above Asians and portrays Asian American characters as docile and restricted, needing White support to self-actualize.

Career-Incompetent Asian Male. The emasculation of Asian male characters through their career-related status was another prominent theme that reinforced a harmful Asian stereotype of undesirable Asian male. The undesirable Asian male has been used as a tool to uphold White dominance, reinforcing the "docile and submissive" model minority stereotype while minimizing the "yellow peril" threat (i.e., Asians are intelligent yet cunning and dangerous to the American ideals).[60] However, tied with career expectations, the undesirable Asian male stereotype further enhances the model minority stereotype and may act as a justification for the dismissal of Asian men. Interestingly, this was often depicted through romantic conflicts, where female partners criticized or expressed dissatisfaction with the male characters' current jobs or career aspirations, frequently leading to breakups or divorces. This recurrent pattern, seen in movies such as *Cavite*, *Blue Bayou*, *Americanish*, *Ms. Purple*, and *Land of Gold*, among others, reinforced the notion that Asian men are socially and sexually undesirable, here due to their career failures and thus lack of socioeconomic stability. While partner conflicts are not unique to Asian American narratives, the consistent framing of breakups as being tied to male Asian characters' careers was a notable finding. For example, in *Blue Bayou*, Antonio, an East Asian male character, is depicted as a criminal engaging in illegal activities to make ends meet, which is starkly contrasted to Kathy, a White character and a nurse with a respectable STEM job. This career disparity strains their marriage, forcing Kathy to return to work after quitting and causing her mother

to disapprove of their relationship. Adding to the contrast, Kathy's ex-husband, a White male character and a law enforcement officer, is juxtaposed with Antonio as a figure of authority, further undermining Antonio (specifically as inferior to a White man). This dynamic is evident even when Asian characters had legal, white-collar STEM professions. In *Americanish*, a South Asian male character, Shahid, reveals that his fiancée broke off their engagement to marry a cardiothoracic surgeon. Shahid laments that he was rejected because his field, pediatrics, is perceived as less prestigious than cardiothoracic surgery. This scenario demonstrates a nuanced career expectation message – that even within "high-status" STEM fields, Asian men may face additional layers of pressure to be the "greater" model minority.

Messages Opposing Asian Stereotypes

Familial Career Acceptance. A common theme across the movies was Asian families finding healing through familial career acceptance, challenging the stereotypes of the model minority myth and Asian parents as career-driven "tiger" figures. For example, in *The Debut*, the main character Ben (Southeast Asian) is portrayed as a student dreaming of attending an art school but faces strong opposition from his father, who dismisses Ben's aspirations as unrealistic after sacrificing much for the family. As the story unfolds, it is revealed that Ben's father endured similar career pressures from his own father, highlighting an intergenerational conflict. However, by the end of the film, Ben's father appears to have softened his stance and shows a shift toward supporting Ben's aspirations, signaling a path to healthier family dynamics.

In another film, *Advantageous*, the main character Gwen (East Asian) who is a single mother undergoes a radical experimental procedure to transform into a younger woman with completely different phenotypic traits (racially ambiguous) to secure an income and pay for her daughter Jules's (East Asian) tuition at a prestigious school. This sacrifice results in relational tension as Gwen's altered identity creates emotional and interpersonal distance between the mother-daughter dyad. At one point, Gwen tells Jules that her sacrifice was to ensure that Jules "might actually go somewhere instead of dreaming [her] life away", echoing the work-harder value: of a parent working hard so that their children can work harder. Despite this tension, the film concludes on a hopeful note, with Gwen reassuring Jules that whatever path she chooses in life, it "will be wonderful and worthwhile". These narratives demonstrated that although cultural expectations arising from racial and/or immigrant backgrounds embedded in VAS messages can lead to intergenerational conflicts, Asian American families can challenge this intergenerational cycle of sacrifice-for-more-sacrifice and move toward reconciliation.

Career Empowerment of Asian Female Characters. Several movies portrayed Asian female characters as empowering, challenging the stereotype of "lotus blossom", another widespread stereotype depicting Asian women as feminine, obedient, and passive.[61] In *Joy Ride*, the main character Audrey (East Asian) begins the film as a lawyer at a firm dominated by White males, trying to succeed while adhering to values like hard work that reinforce the model minority stereotype. However, by the end of the movie, Audrey reveals she is now ready to pursue "something more meaningful", which is to open her own firm. While the status of being a lawyer could still reinforce the model minority image, Audrey's decision to redefine her career aspirations and her identity away

from being a subservient worker opposes the stereotype of Asian women as passive, hard-working individuals without agency.

Another movie in which this theme was prominently shown was *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, where main character Evelyn (East Asian) is initially concerned about her father's judgment of her work as a laundromat owner, disapproving of her blue-collar work. By the end of the movie, however, Evelyn tells her father, "It's okay if you can't be proud of me, because I finally am", demonstrating her newfound pride and fulfillment in her own achievements – refusing to let her identity be shaped solely by others' expectations. This theme of Asian women rejecting external career pressure is also seen in films like *Americanish*, where main character Maryam (South Asian) breaks up with her fiancé, who expects her to prioritize him and the family over herself, to pursue her career aspirations. Similarly, in *The Namesake*, Ashima (South Asian), after her husband's death and seeing her child grow independent, decides to leave the U.S. and return to India to resume her singing education: something she had previously given up for her family. In these films, female characters make the empowering choice not to put their personal aspirations on hold for their family members.

Discussion

This study, using SCT as a theoretical framework, collected and analyzed two forms of entertainment media VAS messages in Asian American movies. Building on past research that has examined thematic VAS messages in media,[62] we also analyzed characters' occupational roles to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the VAS messages conveyed. In this section, we first provide RQ-specific insights, then discuss the implications of our findings for VAS and SCT research, as well as for entertainment media creation.

RQ 1 Discussion: Content Analysis of Character Occupations

In response to this first research question, we found in our sample that Asian American characters are primarily depicted with white-collar occupations, reinforcing the model minority stereotype which may have negative consequences for ingroup and outgroup audiences. For Asian Americans, repeated exposure to such portrayals can lead to internalized pressure, lower group value, and diminished self-esteem, as these depictions may be interpreted as societal expectations.[63] For outgroup members, these portrayals may serve as reference points that reinforce stereotypical beliefs and biases against Asian Americans.[64]

However, we also found empirical evidence highlighting the occupational representation differences across Asian ethnic subgroups, for which the encompassing view of Asian Americans being model minorities becomes destabilized. Within our movie sample, white-collar occupations were more common among East and South Asians, occupying the largest proportions for both groups (42.6% and 40% respectively), yet Southeast Asians were most commonly depicted as unemployed (31.6%). These findings echo research showing Southeast Asians are often discouraged from pursuing educational opportunities,[65] resulting in "low status" occupations or unemployment. This creates a double bind for Southeast Asians: expected to fit the model minority stereotype,[66] yet are also treated as incapable [67] or unsupported.[68] East and South Asians are not excepted

from the harm of limited and stereotypical media representation that portrays them in "high status" fields, limiting occupations they can strive for and heightening the expectations of them to be perfect workers. Media's reflection of social hierarchies[69] may deepen the psychosocial consequences for both ingroup and outgroup audiences – effects that would remain unknown when subgroup nuances are ignored in research.

RQ2 Discussion: Thematic Analysis of Characters' Career-Related Dialogues

For the second research question regarding overarching career-related themes as VAS messages to the audience, we found that besides the more widely recognized model minority stereotype, several other harmful stereotypes are reinforced. These stereotypes, such as the "tiger Asian parents", may reduce Asian American characters to restrictive stereotypical portrayals that hinder more multifaceted societal perceptions of this group. However, we also observed some prominent counter-stereotypical messages. These narratives, portraying Asian characters and families as defying the narrative of intergenerational sacrifice, reflect more diverse and authentic realities of Asian American experiences. Such findings suggest that racialized career portrayals in media can serve dual functions in line with SCT: (a) model normative career pathways aligned with dominant cultural narratives and (b) serve as counter-narratives that challenge monolithic representations and expand the range of possible career identities for viewers. The presence of both messages in the media serves as a reminder that Asian American identity, especially with relevance to their status via their occupation, is being negotiated in broader societal contexts. While some movies may perpetuate the bamboo ceiling via stereotypical portrayals, such that Asian Americans are good workers but not leaders[70], others increasingly portray the complexity of Asian American experiences as creatives and other professional fields aspiring for professional ambitions beyond the constraints of racialized expectations. The latter representations not only draw attention to the richness of Asian American experiences but also contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the group.

However, while both reinforcing and challenging themes were present, a notable finding was the gender disparity in career-related portrayals. Movies frequently empowered Asian female characters by challenging the stereotype of a lotus blossom (though not without flaws, as many still predominantly held white-collar jobs that may reinforce the model minority image), but Asian male characters were often emasculated through portrayals of career failure, typically tied to the breakdown of their romantic relationships. This finding may indicate progress for Asian female characters, but also the need for male Asian characters to be represented with equal depth and respect. And similar to the model minority myth, it is necessary to look beyond the positive veneer of certain themes to uncover deeper complexities. Importantly, we question why Asian men are discriminated against in our media sample compared to Asian women. Mok suggests that Asian women are generally more accepted in White American society, as they pose less of a threat to the status quo.[71] Media, such as entertainment movies, may support Asian women breaking from "outdated" Asian culture and becoming Americanized as it reinforces existing power structures. Conversely, the success of Asian men, historically linked to emasculation,[72] could disrupt these dynamics. While beyond our study's scope, examining how portrayals of Asian American success intersect with

gender (beyond the cisgender male-female binary) could reveal further nuances in ingroup–outgroup audience perceptions. For example, it would be interesting to explore how career representations of cisgender and gender-diverse (e.g., neutral) characters differ within narratives of success.

These findings may be additionally contextualized with regards to the genres of the movies, which were primarily drama ($n = 38$) or comedy ($n = 31$). Given our themes, it seems that some genres may center discussions of the model minority stereotype as a means to highlight Asian versus American cultural conflicts (e.g., *Saving Face*) or as a joke without thoroughly engaging in the implications and impacts of the stereotype (e.g., *Harold and Kumar*). Very few movies moved beyond the cultural conflicts of diasporic Asians or reinforcing/countering the model minority stereotype, highlighting that regardless of genres, Asian American movies are still limited to these topics.

Lastly, in our sample, East Asians were represented 3.36 and 5.31 times more than South Asian and Southeast Asians, respectively, but VAS themes were prominent among both East and South Asians. This pattern may reflect the salient associations between Asian Americans and the model minority stereotype, which often links their identities to career success, except for Southeast Asians who are erased in media depiction yet may still be held to the same expectations.

Overall Discussion on VAS and SCT

This study extends existing VAS research that has primarily focused on VAS message types from interpersonal sources (e.g., family members), by considering how message content may differ when conveyed through media sources. Specifically, because media VAS messages are embedded within narratives rather than a singular message, they are less explicit and are more open to viewer interpretation compared to direct interpersonal messages, suggesting that typologies of VAS messages may not neatly converge across different sources. We thus provide two methodology-related suggestions for those studying media VAS message content. First, a holistic analysis of VAS media messages requires consideration of both the types and frequency of character occupation portrayals (using content analysis), and content of the characters' career dialogues (using thematic analysis). Second, for the thematic analysis portion, researchers should strive to identify deep patterned meanings within the data rather than surface-level, descriptive themes.[73] Instead of constructing merely broad and topical themes, media VAS messages observed in this study indicate that a more culturally attuned and reflexive approach is needed to capture the complex meanings and narrative developments within these messages. These suggestions not only provide a foundation for future research examining variations in movie-based VAS messages, but ones in other forms of entertainment media, such as television and video games.

As for SCT, our findings add more intersectional nuance to ongoing conversations about how mediated portrayals can shape identity formation. Overall, whether these stories perpetuate or counter Asian stereotypes, our study sheds light on a narrow lens through which audiences may perceive Asian Americans in relation to career identity. Although our study does not examine audience effects, the observed portrayal patterns suggest that the range of social models available for observation and identification is further limited when intersecting social identities[74], such as race, gender, and career,

are considered. We argue that in order to more fully capture the complexity of social learning processes for marginalized groups, future SCT-guided studies should continue to account for how these processes unfold across diverse, intersecting identities.

Practical Considerations

Individuals may rely on media VAS messages if they lack adequate career-related information from interpersonal sources (e.g., family). Entertainment media can serve as a crucial resource by providing information about different groups, which may be integrated into future interactions.[75] Given this, we hope that media creators can recognize how their work may either reinforce or challenge harmful stereotypes about Asian Americans and become more cognizant of their power and corresponding responsibility in shaping media VAS messages, particularly through character occupations and career-related dialogues. For example, our findings show that East and South Asians are often depicted with "high-status" careers aligning them closer to the model minority stereotype while Southeast Asians are frequently portrayed as unemployed. Media creators should be intentional about the occupational roles they assign to characters, ensuring they are not unconsciously perpetuating stereotypes based on biases they may have internalized from the media. Additionally, when incorporating career-related themes into their plots, creators should enrich characterization with depth and complexity, considering factors like history and personality, and craft nuanced dialogues to avoid one-dimensional portrayals. A helpful example is The Debut, which explores intergenerational conflict over career expectations throughout the course of the movie. By presenting both the father's history and the son's aspirations with nuance, the film avoids simplistic tropes like the "tiger parent" or the "ungrateful child", offering a model for more multidimensional storytelling.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

There were several limitations to this study. First, our purposive sample was drawn from Rotten Tomatoes and IMDB lists compiled by individuals, which could have inadvertently excluded certain movies – particularly those featuring West and Central Asian characters who may be perceived as White or Middle Eastern[76] by the list creators. Future research could overcome this limitation by using web scraping to identify movies based on character names or ethnicities in platform descriptions. Another limitation of our study is the heavy reliance on character dialogue for analyzing VAS messages, which excluded more implicit messages conveyed through nonverbal cues. Future research could address this by incorporating nonverbal cues such as character appearances and gestures into the coding template, offering a more comprehensive understanding of media-based VAS messages. Additionally, one possible limitation of our content analysis was the criteria of only including movies that had at least one Asian American main character. While the current study included movies with Asian American leads to focus on movies that are more likely to have deeper discussions on Asian American identity, future studies can consider inclusion of movies with Asian Americans as secondary characters that may provide a broader view of how Asian Americans are perceived, especially by outgroup members who would be more likely to consume such movies.

For further future research directions, it would also be valuable to investigate how VAS messages in Asian American movies have evolved over time. Older films may be more likely to reinforce Asian stereotypes, while more recent films could reflect an improved societal awareness on ethnic-racial issues and challenge these stereotypes. Additionally, although our study focused on portrayals of Asian American characters, future research should explore whether similar or distinct themes and stereotypes can be identified in non-U.S.-centered movies. For instance, values labeled as more "Western" such as individualistic approach to life (e.g., career decision-making) and the resulting family conflicts, or narratives surrounding parental sacrifice commonly associated with immigrant experiences, were prominent in Asian American movies in our sample. If similar themes were to be observed as saliently in movies outside the U.S., this could suggest that these values (typically considered "Western" or "immigrant-oriented") may be transmitted generationally or evolve alongside modernization across cultural contexts. Finally, given prior research showing that media VAS messages can influence children's interest in pursuing certain career paths[77], it is important for future studies to not only continue systematically analyzing the content of media VAS messages (especially those surrounding groups that are more vulnerable to harmful stereotypes), but also investigate how such messages are perceived by viewers and how they might shape individuals' career outlooks and choices. Specifically, scholars might explore whether and how media VAS messages are sought after or used by Asian Americans or other minoritized community members when interpersonal messages from their surroundings are too implicit, vague, or absent. By expanding our understanding of how media VAS messages interact with those from other sources, we can identify ways in which media can serve as a valuable resource for influencing career choices and outlooks among marginalized populations who may lack access to mentors during their career development.

Conclusion

This study used SCT as a framework to analyze the intricate layers of VAS messages in Asian American movies. The content analysis portion of the study revealed troubling patterns in the portrayal of occupational roles, where East and South Asians were disproportionately depicted as model minorities, while Southeast Asians faced negative deviations from this stereotype. The thematic analysis of career-related character dialogues further uncovered the perpetuation of other harmful stereotypes, such as the Asian tiger-parents or the undesirable Asian male. However, the findings also pointed to emerging positive VAS messaging that counteracted these stereotypes, potentially offering hope for more diverse representations for Asian Americans in the media. Given the media's influential role in shaping career-related perceptions and the global prominence of U.S. media, it is more crucial than ever to promote multifaceted career-related representations of Asian Americans.

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We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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Notes

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