Analyzing the Portrayal of Asian Americans in Marvel Cinematic Universe

Claudia B. Bawole

Department of Advertising and Public Relation, The University of Alabama

Abstract

For decades, the film industry in the United States has perpetuated harmful stereotypes about Asians and Asian Americans while also failing to portray their community adequately. Especially in light of the recent outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, the question of Asian representation has emerged as one that demands increased attention. The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), which is one of the largest American media franchises and has generally received positive reviews from audiences, starts to portray Asian Americans as superheroes through several of their characters in phase four of their production of movies and series that happened between 2021 and 2022. MCU's production of Asian superheroes is necessary for the representation of Asian Americans in media because the anti-Asian movement also happened during these years. Yet, there is some uncertainty as to whether these Asian characters are being depicted solely for tokenism or are based on stereotypical conceptions of what it means to be Asian, or whether Marvel genuinely wants to provide a place for Asians to be regarded as superheroes in the first place. This study occurs to clear up the confusion. In addition, the study wants to investigate the ways in which Asian audiences connect with the personalities of superheroes using the parasocial interaction framework. Due to the fact that this is just a proposal, the study has not yet achieved any results.

Keywords: Media representation, Asian American, stereotypes, Marvel Cinematic Universe, qualitative content analysis, parasocial interaction theory

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"…I grew up without role models or even people in the media who looked like me"

Margaret Cho - *I'm the One that I Want*.

The struggle of finding role model in the media that Cho shares in her autobiography *I'm the One that I Want* is also common for other Asian Americans. This struggle that happens is not without justification. Several years ago, #OscarSoWhite embedded the narrative of the film industry's inequalities, where white actors played most of the leading roles in the top films. This action began on social media but was reported in prominent newspapers and magazines worldwide. In addition, Ono and Pham (2009) argue that the representation of Asian American nowadays in the media is a result of their historical representation in the U.S. media.

Although Asian Americans are the fastest-growing racial group in the United States, studies have found that Asian Americans are highly underrepresented in the media (Besana et al., 2019; Budiman & Ruiz, 2021; Grimm & Schwartz, 2017; Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005). Even when they get the chance to play, they play for stereotypical characters or tokenism (Stern & Taylor, 1997; Tran, 2021). Yuen et al. (2021) report focusing on the portrayal of Asians and Pacific Islanders across 1,300 popular movies between 2007 and 2019 found that Asian and Pacific Islanders characters are absent in popular films. Among the 1,300 top films in the same time range, only 29 have Asian Americans lead and co-lead, while 21 films have Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander lead and co-lead. In addition, the perpetual foreigner stereotype is the most prevalent in movies because most of the movies show Asian and Pacific Islanders characters speaking English with a non-U.S. accent.

As media has the ability to shape audience identities, real-world perceptions, and the treatment of marginalized communities, examining the media's portrayal of a specific racial

group is an essential ongoing academic topic (Besana et al., 2019; Dillon & Jones, 2019). Although the controversies surrounding the depiction of Asian Americans in media are not a recent problem, it has become more critical since anti-Asian racism and discrimination grew during the pandemic (Yuen, 2021). More than 9,000 incidents have been reported related to anti-Asians since the pandemic started (The Associated Press, 2021).

Appearing to address the problem of representation, Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) as a leading American media franchise that produced by Marvel Studio superhero has increased its focus on diversity. Starting from the second phases of production, Anthony Mackie who played Falcon in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier (2014)* is the symbol of African American superhero representation, even though he is not the lead actors in the movie. MCU's *Black Panther (2018)*, which released in the third phases of production, was the first movie with an African American superhero and almost all cast are African American.

In addition, MCU started to pay attention to Asian American by including Asian locations in three Marvel movies settings: *Black Panther (2018), Avengers: Age of Ultron (2015),* and *Doctor Strange (2016)*. These actions provide a better representation of Asians, even though MCU failed to provide exact representation to people and culture in those locations (Rogers, 2022). All of these films were produced during the second and third phases of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, when it was difficult for viewers to see Asian characters represented in ways other than those based on the yellow peril or forever foreigner stereotypes.

Starting last year, MCU entered phase 4 of production, where they started to incorporate Asians not only as characters but also as hiring Asian creatives, integrating Asian languages, and depicting significant historical events. This decision is a massive accomplishment for MCU since

the current timeline matches the whole pandemic situation and has become a breath of fresh air for Asian American population during the pandemic.

Focusing solely on the fourth phase of MCU's production, this study will examine the portrayal of Asian Americans in movies and series in this phase. During the fourth phase, which happens from 2021 through 2022, MCU produces seven films and nine television series available on Disney+. In addition, as Asian Americans have been well known to play stereotypical roles in media, this study wants to emphasize all the stereotypes that have occurred in the MCU phase four. The author wants to see whether the increase in racial diversity still comes with stereotypical roles of Asian American characters in the MCU movies and series. Lastly, as a media scholar, the author wants to analyze the implication of Asian American representations in this phase to the viewers in regard to the COVID-19 pandemic using a parasocial interaction framework.

Literature Review

Representation of Racial and Ethnic Minorities in the Media

Several studies have indicated that certain racial and ethnic groups are overrepresented in the media compared to their demographic proportion in the United States (Dilon & Jones, 2019; Harwood & Anderson, 2009; Mastro, 2015; Signorielli, 2009; Tukachinsky et al., 2015). Dillon and Jones (2019) discovered that white people were highly overrepresented in competitive reality TV (CRTV) from 2000 to 2013, even much greater than the proportion of White Americans in the actual population. African American CRTV participants are not statistically different from those recognized in the United States Census, while other racial/ethnic minorities are obviously underrepresented. These findings are not surprising given that a previous study by Tukachinsky et al. (2015) found that Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans were numerically

underrepresented. However, Black characters were portrayed roughly according to their percentage of the U.S. population. Signorielli (2009), who analyzed prime-time TV programming from 2000 to 2008, discovered similar findings: white characters were overrepresented compared to their actual population representation, Black characters were roughly at parity, and other racial and ethnic minorities were considerably underrepresented. These studies provide evidence of the dearth of underrepresented group depictions on television.

Moreover, Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), one of the most successful film franchises and brands in the United States and one of the dominant pop culture media today, has received numerous negative comments due to the fact that the first and second phases display white actors playing superheroes. At the same time, characters of color are typically plot devices or supporting cast to white protagonists (Kapoor, 2021). Representation has become an issue in this large franchise company, not only in their movies but also in television shows, short clips, and animated series broadcast on Disney+. This circumstance has been argued that fans of color are not equally important as white viewers.

To answer this problem, MCU started producing superhero movies and series outside of their custom. As the first film with an African-American director and a predominantly African American cast, Black Panther (2018) may have the highest social justice value among other films in these three production phases (Smith, n.d.). The movie received a tremendous amount of audience attention and a nearly perfect rating on the Rotten Tomatoes review website (Rotten Tomatoes, n.d.). This film serves African American audiences that have been underrepresented for decades, a burden neither Thor nor Captain America movies that feature White, attractive, heterosexual men were forced to bear.

If Black Panther (2018) becomes the first African-American superhero in the MCU universe, the subsequent phase, beginning in 2021, will bring the first Asian-American superhero into the spotlight. Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings (2021) is the first superhero film with a primarily Asian cast. Beyond representation in the cast, the film extensively uses Chinese cultural influences, such as the concept of respect for elders, the gender inequality in traditional Chinese households, and a substantial amount of mandarin language. In addition, Eternals (2021) cast various Asian actors and characters that have never existed in the MCU. Not only Chinese or other East Asian representations like in Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings (2021), but the Eternals (2021) also featured South Asia casts. Meanwhile, the representation of South Asians also occurs in the Ms. Marvel television series (2022).

Since the fourth production phase of the Marvel Cinematic Universe portrays more Asian American characters than previous production phases in terms of quantity and Asian diversity, this study aims to answer the first research questions:

RQ1a: How does the Marvel Cinematic Universe portray Asian cultures in the movies and series in this phase?

RQ1b: How does the Marvel Cinematic Universe portray Asian American characters in the phase four production?

Stereotyping Asian Americans in Media

The Asian American population in the United States grew 46% between 2000 and 2010 and 10% between 2010 and 2013, according to the 2010 Census, which made them the fastest-growing population in the country (Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence, n.d.). However, based on the 2020 Census, there are 20.6 million people who are Asian, Native Hawaiian, and other Pacific Islanders alone, making up 6.2% of the country's population (Monte

& Shin, 2020). By 2060 it is projected that the Asian American Population will reach 46 million (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021). Unfortunately, this growing population is not being presented in the media proportionally.

Asian Americans, along with Latinos and Native Americans, have historically been underrepresented in the mainstream media. Surprisingly, studies have revealed that when Asian Americans appear, they are frequently portrayed in the media as stereotypical characters (Kawai, 2005; Lee & Joo, 2005; Paner, 2018; Taylor & Lee, 2004). Studies discovered, for example, that Asian Americans are frequently portrayed in media for technology-related products, popular business press publications, and business settings and relationships (Taylor & Lee, 2004; Lee & Joo, 2005). However, the model minority and the yellow peril are the most significant and universal stereotypes of Asian Americans (Kawai, 2005).

Model minority stereotypes, according to Zhang (2010), occurred initially in magazine articles in the 1960s. However, it became widespread across media, such as advertising, primetime television series, and Hollywood movies, not long after that (Kawai, 2005). It is argued that model minority characterized Asian Americans as diligent, thoughtful, and well-mannered (Taylor & Lee, 1994; Taylor & Stern, 1997). This stereotype holds Asian Americans as a model for other racial minorities because they are praised as honorary Whites or as a group that outperforms the Whites (Suzuki, 1989). Although it seems a positive stereotype, the model minority has an insidious stereotype that depicts Asian Americans as quiet, nerdy, and passive (Lee & Joo, 2005). Alongside the model minority, the yellow peril stereotype is not entirely different. Ono and Pham (2009) argue that model minority is essentially interconnected with yellow peril because The superior image of Asian Americans compared to whites may cause whites to feel threatened by them.

Since the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the west, particularly in the United States, the yellow peril stereotype has been established (Kawai, 2005). This stereotype alludes to the belief that yellow-skinned individuals will pose a danger to the dominance of the White race, which is a result of East Asia's huge population number, and especially the fear of Asian migration into the United States (Laffey, 2000). The yellow peril stereotype resulted in the exclusion of Asian immigrants and the colonization of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, and the Philippines by the United States (Lee, 1999). Ono and Pham (2009) argue that the yellow peril stereotype also led to the stereotype of Asian American based on gender.

Asian ladies have been categorized as Dragon Lady, Lotus Blossom, China Doll, and Madame Butterfly based on gender (Nakamatsu, 2005; Uchida, 1998; Paner, 2018; Ono & Pham, 2009). The earliest stereotypes about Asian women in America may be traced back to the mid- and late-nineteenth century when Asian male immigrants in the states were exploited as cheap labor, whereas their wives were frequently left behind in their original countries due to financial hardship (Uchida, 1998). Asian male laborers will utilize prostitutes to satisfy their sexual needs. As a result, Asian women who were willing to immigrate to the United States became prostitutes, which led white men to view them as prostitutes. Later, scholars refer to this stereotype of Asian women as the Dragon Lady. Okumura (1976) argues that Asian women in America were frequently portrayed as beautiful, exotic, and appealing and that they would corrupt the morality of Christian white men. In the media, the portrayal of Asian American women as Dragon Lady can be found in movies such as Year of the Dragon (1985) and The World of Suzie Wong (1960). However, the Dragon Lady stereotype also means Asian women as strong, domineering, and mysterious (Herbst, 1997).

After World War II, the American government let American troops bring their Asian and European wives to the United States. As Asian wives entered the United States, a stereotype accompanied their arrival. These ladies were portrayed as Lotus Blossom or China Dolls, who are exemplary wives, adorable, submissive, aware of how to satisfy their husbands, and wonderful homemakers (Uchida, 1998; Paner, 2018). Despite the passage of many years, the portrayal of Asian women in the American media has not changed significantly since these stereotypes still exist (Zhou & Paul, 2016). Movies like Rush Hour 2 (2001), The Wolverine (2013), and Tomorrow Never Dies (1997) cast their Asian women characters in line with the stereotype of Lotus Blossom and China Doll. Additionally, as parents, Asian women, particularly Chinese women, are frequently characterized as Tiger Mothers. This stereotype implies that they are typically involved in their children's education and encourage them to excel academically (Guo, 2013).

Aside from women, Asian men have been portrayed as a nerd, asexual, and less masculine (Paner, 2018). These stereotypes exist as implications of model minority stereotypes. Huynh and Woo (2014) argue that since Asians are educated and economically successful, they become workaholics and nerds. They are also framed as socially and sexually impotent because of their nerdiness (Eng, 2001). Asian males are portrayed as less manly than their White and African American counterparts and lack physical attractiveness and social competence to attract women (Mok, 1999).

Another stereotype for Asian Americans is called perpetual foreigners or forever foreigners. Even though Asian have been in the states for a long time, they will never be thoroughly American (Suzuki, 2002). Questions like Asian American actual hometown and their ability to speak English are an example of projecting Asians as forever foreigners. In some cases,

the forever foreigner stereotype suggests that Asian Americans are evil and untrustworthy, leading to discrimination, racism, and xenophobia (Kawai, 2005; Suzuki, 2002). A recent example of this situation is the anti-Asian movement that occurs during the pandemic.

Asian representation in the Marvel Cinematic Universe began before they first released the Asian-American superhero movie Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings (2021). However, little scholarly attention has been devoted to this phenomenon to date. Focusing on the Asian American stereotypes that exist in the American media, this study wants to address the second research question:

RQ2: What stereotypes exist through the representation of Asian American characters in the phase four Marvel Cinematic Universe movies?

Parasocial Interaction

Parasocial interaction refers to the pseudo relationships or imagined connections audiences have with media figures after frequent exposure (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Cohen et al. (2020) claim that character favoritism in media influence identity creation and maintenance. Viewers frequently reflect on media for extended periods after viewing them, so they may continue to connect imaginatively with the characters. These imaginary relationships may have a long-term impact on audience social group membership, desired personal and social characteristics, and personal values (Cohen et al., 2020). Tian and Hoffner (2010) discovered that when viewers sense similarities, identification, and parasocial engagement with the characters, they tend to alter their elements to become more like them. If the MCU keeps portraying stereotypical Asian characters as they did since 2008, whenever they have Asian characters, then viewers may come to the conclusion that the stereotypes are true and Asian viewers will associate themselves with the stereotypical characters.

In terms of television audiences, it makes perfect sense for the viewers to create such a relationship with certain characters, given that the TV episodes are available in streaming media every week, allowing these pseudo relationships to develop. It is not just because the individual spends more time with a character but also because they follow the narratives and storyline conversations, spoilers, unexpected twists, and celebrity interviews (Misailidou, 2018). The MCU clearly understands how to build this relationship with its viewers; not only does the MCU series on Disney+ have new episodes every week, but the whole MCU follows a coherent chronology that includes both films and television shows to create engagement with the viewers.

RQ3: What are the implications of the representation of Asian American characters in the phase four Marvel Cinematic Universe movies and series to audiences?

Proposed Method

In order to investigate Asian American characters in the fourth phase of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the data collection process began with observing and noting all Asian characters in movies and television series released between 2021 and 2022. Until today seven movies have been produced: Black Widow (2021), Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings (2021), Eternals (2021), Spider-Man: No Way Home (2021), Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness (2022), Thor: Love and Thunder (2022), and Black Panther: Wakanda Forever (2022) that released on November 11, 2022. In addition, nine television series are available on Disney+: Wanda Vision (2021), The Falcon and the Winter Soldier (2021), Loki (2021), What If...? (2021), Hawkeye (2021), Moon Knight (2022), Ms. Marvel (2022), She-Hulk: Attorney at Law (2022), and I am Groot (2022).

The study employs qualitative content analysis along with semiotic analysis to answer the first and second research questions. Forman and Damschroder (2008) argue that qualitative

content analysis is used to examine textual that use open-ended data collection techniques that focus on detail and depth rather than measurement. Meanwhile, semiotic analysis provides a tool to analyze symbolic systems, including signs (Manning & Cullum-Swan, 1994). Both analyses are usually based on text; however, in this study, they are used to analyze digital images or movie scenes. The process of meaning-making depends on the research perspective: if the interpretant changes, the meaning of the sign changes as well (Manning & Cullum-Swan, 1994).

Before answering all the research questions, the author watched all the movies and series for recreation purpose. This activity provided story context and familiarized the author with Asian actors and actresses in films and television series in this phase. Before watching the movies and series for a second time, the author compiled a list of all the characters, places, cultures, and values mentioned in online reviews. The second time watching allows the author to cross-check information from the internet with the movies and television series. Meanwhile, the author used all Asian American stereotypes as a coding guide to define the answer to the second research question. The characters' roles, actions, and abilities presented in movies and television series are used to determine the stereotype.

Furthermore, this study uses an online questionnaire to answer the third research question. Several criteria for survey participants are born and raised in an Asian family, live in the United States, have an age range above 19, and have watched more than 4 Marvel movies or series from the fourth phase. The age range is based on Marvel has PG-13 rate, which means the movies are inappropriate for young children or pre-teens because of the use of strong language, violence, drug use, and sexual scenes. However, the University of Alabama Institutional Review Board (UA IRB) listed that people below 18 years old is determined as minor and, therefore, the survey will need parental permission. To justify these two factors, the author decided to start the

age range from and beyond 19 years old. There is no maximum age range because MCU movies and series do not control adult ratings.

In addition, participants should have watched at least 4 movies and series from the fourth phase before taking the survey to familiarize them with the context. The 4 movies and series will be 25 percent of the total movies and series MCU releases in this phase. It is important to note that this particular criterion will be redefined after the pilot study. Before this phase, MCU already had more than 50 movies and series that tied together since the first movie in 2008. Participants may have watched the previous movies and series from previous phases. The participants also need to come from Asian American families because the author only focuses on the parasocial relationship between Asian characters in the movies and Asian American viewers. Lastly, the study will be specified in the United States only.

The survey will consist of demographic, 25 open-ended questions, and 3 short answers focusing on the parasocial interaction that occurred between Asian American viewers with Asian American superheroes. Before answering the questionnaire, the participants will sign the consent agreement. The survey will be speeded through Amazon MTurk, and there will be no monetary benefit for participating in the study.

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