

Feeling Invisible: AAPI Identity, Media Influence, and the Psychological Impact of Curriculum Absence By Evelyn Leung

Abstract

This paper discusses how insufficient representation of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) in formal education and the increasing prominence of media may determine both individual identity construction and the general opinion of a wider population. In spite of growing focus on diversity in education, AAPI histories are still underrepresented in the U.S. curriculum, which frequently leads to a lack of knowledge and inadequate cultural awareness. A mixed-methods design was employed, utilizing quantitative survey data and qualitative responses to measure both the familiarity of the participants with major AAPI events, their main sources of information, and the psychological outcomes of the gaps in the curriculum. The results show that there is usually little or no coverage of AAPI content in formal schooling, and that more than 80% of the participants have insufficient exposure. As a result, people use media, especially digital and social media, as the main sources of learning. While the media increases accessibility, it also contributes to uneven awareness and reinforces selective narratives. Moreover, around 70% of participants mentioned that their sense of identity and belonging were negatively affected, which emphasized the psychological impact of underrepresentation. The paper also reveals that there is a disconnection between perception and historical reality because familiarity is organized around recent and highly visible events in addition to underlying historical experiences. The results emphasize the importance of more inclusive curricula and better media depiction.

Introduction

The discourse of cultural identity has taken center stage in recent years, especially in learning areas, such as representation and inclusion. In spite of this change, Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) history is significantly underrepresented in U.S. educational programs. Their stories tend to be overlooked, given a brief mention, or not mentioned at all, which illustrates a larger trend of structural invisibility underpinning mass culture and identity formation.

A deficiency in organized AAPI education also leads to misconceptions, disjointed knowledge, and the reproduction of stereotypes. Although media can be utilized to address these gaps, it can also be used to misrepresent cultural knowledge by simplifying or choosing what to convey (Sleeter, 2011). Thus, the absence of systematic and correct educational frameworks will lead to the persistence of these gaps and the further evolution of incomplete thoughts about the experience of AAPIs.

This paper analyses the role of curriculum absence in AAPI identity, the ways in which media addresses or misinterprets this absence, and the disconnect between the public and history. The position of this paper is that curriculum disjuncture and media impact work together to create both the world-view and self-construction, frequently boosting invisibility and

constraining full comprehension of cultural identity. It is a belief that media and curriculum gaps can reciprocally influence the exterior perception and inward identity, which are likely to reinforce invisibility and suppress in-depth understanding of AAPI communities.

Literature Review

AAPI in Education.

Historically, the underrepresentation of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) histories in the U.S. curriculum is a structural issue that has persisted. Conventional textbooks and classroom histories give greater focus to Eurocentric views and commonly relegate AAPI experience to peripheral or back-story status (Sleeter, 2011). Such restricted integration is part of a larger trend of cultural invisibility, which is limiting the exposure of students to different historical stories.

The marginalization of AAPI histories in the curriculum is symptomatic of more systemic forms of marginalization. An (2016) identifies that Asian Americans are often not encompassed in the mainstream U.S. history curriculum or only within specific contexts, like immigration history or participation in war. These subjects, traditionally covered, have usually not included enough depth or continuity, creating fragmented knowledge of AAPI history. This is indicative of a wider trend of tokenization, by which AAPI content is presented as a few lines or individualized lessons instead of part of the national narrative.

Ethnic Studies is a set of corrective scholarship, as determined by scholars. According to the arguments by Selena Leiter (2011), inclusive curricula based on marginalized communities promote academic interaction, critical analysis, and identity formation. With a focus on agency, diversity, and intersectionality, Ethnic Studies disrupts the mainstream discourse and defies stereotypes, including the myth of the model minority. Nevertheless, access to these curricula has been unequal, and most schools still use standardized material that creates gaps in representation (Lee, 2009). Consequently, students resort to other sources, especially the media, to acquire information about AAPI identities and histories.

Media Representation and Culture Learning.

Where formal education is not thoroughly developed, the media serves more as a cultural educator, influencing the way people perceive AAPI identity. Media channels like television, film, and most notably social media afford easier avenues of cultural education, whereby AAPI voices get a chance to narrate stories and create awareness (Sleeter, 2011). Besides, social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have increased the possibilities of representation because they allow individuals to create and share content. Such platforms have the power to elevate neglected histories and offer more alternative views than mainstream media (Lee, 2009). However, their influence is shaped by algorithmic systems that prioritize engagement over accuracy, often promoting simplified or sensationalized content.

This process is explainable by using Cultivation Theory, which postulates that the attitude to social reality is formed by repeated exposure to media (Gerbner et al., 1986). By being repeatedly exposed to a few or limited representations, the stereotyped representations can be made normalized. In a similar manner, the Social Identity Theory emphasizes the importance of representation in the development of the self-concept (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). When media representations lack depth or are stereotypical, people might find it difficult to create a whole and valid sense of identity (Lee, 2009). The media, therefore, plays a dual role, where on the one hand, it contributes to the dissemination of cultural knowledge, and on the other, it runs a risk of distortion and simplification, especially in cases where there are no proper educational backgrounds.

Stereotypes and Perception Formation

The media is a major contributing factor to reinventing AAPI stereotypes, especially the model minority myth and the perpetual foreigner stereotype. The model minority is a narrative that creates the image of uniformly successful and independent AAPI people, which conceals internal diversity and structural inequalities (Lee, 2009). Although this stereotype appears to be a good thing, it fosters unrealistic expectations and systemic silencers.

On the other hand, the perpetual foreigner stereotype portrays AASI people as outsiders regardless of nationality or generational identity. This perception strengthens the exclusion of nationality and is more frequently reinforced by media images, which underline the cultural difference (Tuan, 1998). Such stereotypes influence more than just interpersonal perceptions but also wider societal views. The result of this is that without a thorough education, people tend to follow media-based narratives, and simplified representations may prevail. This leads to a lack of empathy, misunderstanding of AAPI experiences, and the continuation of prejudiced attitudes.

Mental Effect and Development of Identity.

The cumulative impact of curriculum absence and media representation is witnessed in identity development and psychological welfare. An important notion is identity validation, or how well people feel their experiences are represented in the narratives of a society. In cases where AAPI histories are not included in an educational process, the individuals can feel invisible and detached, which can complicate the formation of a coherent identity. Also, inclusive curricula have been found to enhance self-esteem, belonging, and cultural awareness. Without them, people are prone to seeking validation in the media (Sleeter, 2011). Although media may offer other platforms within which identity is explored, it may also strengthen stereotypes or exert pressure to conform to dominant discourse.

A habitual exposure to limited representations can result in internalization of societal narratives, impacting self-perception and desired aspirations. This may dilute cultural identity and lessen a sense of belonging. On the other hand, precise and varied representation, either educational or through media, can promote cultural pride, self-awareness, and a sense of belonging. As such, the literature tends to indicate that media influence and curriculum absence

are two forces that are profoundly intertwined and construct perception and identity. These gaps should be addressed to facilitate more precise knowledge and facilitate healthier identity development.

Methodology

Research Design

The research design of this study applies a mixed-methods cross-sectional research design to test the association between curriculum absence, media, and AAPI identity formation. The mixed-methods approach combines quantitative survey data with qualitative analysis, allowing for both statistical analysis and deeper interpretation of participants' experiences. To obtain perceptions and attitudes at one given time, a cross-sectional design was chosen to obtain a snapshot of current awareness, educational exposure, and identity-related outcomes.

Participants

The participants were recruited by distributing a structured survey online. The sample consists of people of various levels of education, such as middle school, high school, undergraduate, graduate, and adult learners. The respondents also depict a diversity of ethnicities, such as East Asian, Southeast Asian, South Asian, Pacific Islanders, and mixed-heritage identities. Also, the participants are geographically dispersed in various regions in the United States. This diversity makes the study more effective at getting a range of views on AAPI representation and identity formation.

Instrument

A survey in the form of a structured questionnaire was used to collect data and evaluate four main areas. First, knowledge of AAPI history was assessed using knowledge of major historical events. Second, respondents indicated their major knowledge sources, such as formal education, media, and community-based learning. Third, the survey assessed views on curriculum representation, including aspects of the frequency and intensity of AAPI coverage in schools. Lastly, the psychological influence and identity formation were evaluated by using Likert-scale items and open-ended questions about the feeling of belonging, representation, and connection to their culture.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics with frequencies and percentages were used for the quantitative data and provided insights into patterns in awareness, sources of knowledge, and perceptions of representation. Thematic analysis was utilized to analyze qualitative responses and identify common themes, including identity, invisibility, and representation (Tuan, 1998). This integrated method allows one to learn about the quantifiable tendencies and the subjective experiences of the situation.

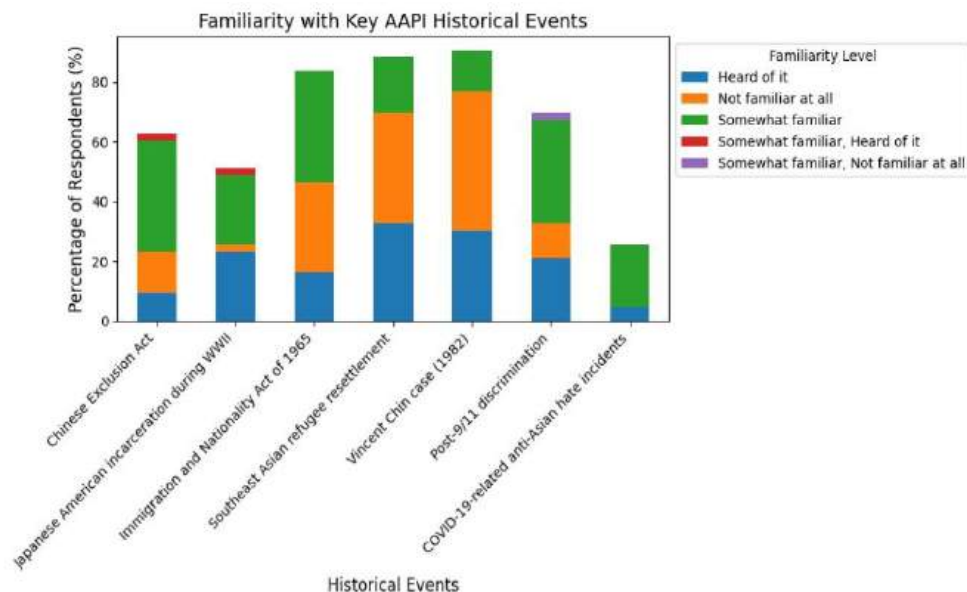
Table 1*Shows the Survey Structure Overview*

Section	Focus	Type of Data
Awareness of AAPI History	Familiarity with key events	Quantitative
Sources of Knowledge	School vs media learning	Quantitative
Curriculum Representation	Frequency and depth of inclusion	Quantitative
Psychological Impact	Identity, belonging, perception	Mixed (Quantitative + Qualitative)

Findings / Results

Awareness of AAPI History

Survey findings (N = 43) demonstrate the lack of equal familiarity with events of AAPI history, with a noticeable trend of preference towards the recent and the highly debated problems. Respondents proved to be more conversant with modern issues, especially anti-Asian hate and post-9/11 discrimination, based on their knowledge. Conversely, previous historical events, including the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Vincent Chin case, and Southeast Asian refugee resettlement, were much less familiar. This gap implies that awareness, to a large extent, is influenced by the visibility and recency of the media but not the systematic exposure to education.

Figure 2*Bar chart illustrating levels of familiarity across historical events.*

Sources of Knowledge

The evidence shows a heavy dependence on informal sources of learning, specifically media sources. Although formal education was mentioned as the source of knowledge, it had a

minor percentage (around 9%). Conversely, online platforms and social media were more often mentioned by participants as their main sources of learning. This tendency reveals an enormous departure of institutional learning into media-based learning. The comparatively smaller contribution of schools to the growth of the AAPI awareness of history supports the suggestion that formal education is not the main stimulus that helps the individual to seek the less structured and possibly uneven sources.

Curriculum Representation

Feedback on curriculum representation proves that AAPI content is scarcely incorporated in educational institutions. Specifically:

- 46.5% indicated that the representation of Asians is infrequent.
- 37.2% reported occasional inclusion
- Only 7.0% said they were frequently represented.
- 9.3% reported no exposure at all

These results suggest that more than 8 out of 10 participants have lower or uneven exposure, which holds the reasoning that AAPI histories are not systematically taught in the curriculum. Rather, there is sporadic and frequently shallow representation, which indicates tokenization trends in previous studies. This trend supports the necessity of a more systematic and global inclusion of AAPI histories into the system of education.

Table 2

The frequency of AAPI representation in education.

Representation Frequency	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Frequently	3	7.0%
Occasionally	16	37.2%
Rarely	20	46.5%
Never	4	9.3%

Psychological Impact

The statistics show that there is a serious psychological effect connected with the lack of representation of Asian-Americans in education. Most respondents admitted being negatively affected in terms of identity and cultural attachment:

- Only 55.8% of the respondents experienced somewhat negative effects.
- 14.0% indicated strongly negative outcomes.
- 23.3% reported neutral responses

- 7.0% were unsure

These findings suggest that around 70% of the respondents have undergone some sort of adverse effect, such as disconnection, underrepresentation, or invisibility.

Figure 3

Psychological Impact of Curriculum Absence on Identity and Belonging

These findings are further supported by the qualitative responses. Respondents said they wanted to be more integrated by organizing cultural events, reforming the curriculum, and conducting sensitization campaigns. An example of this was when one respondent proposed the inclusion of Asian American narratives and books; another focused on increasing school-driven cultural holiday events. These reactions reveal a need for increased institutional visibility and representation.

Discussion

Curriculum Absence as Structural Invisibility

There is solid empirical backing to the argument that curriculum absence is a kind of structural invisibility, which is supported by findings. Considering that more than 83% of surveyed individuals have had infrequent or minimal exposure to AAPI content, it becomes clear that this background is not being introduced in the education systems in a structured way. Such underrepresentation makes the scarcity of awareness seem commonplace and nostalgizes the marginalized role of the AAPI narratives in the institutional body of knowledge.

Media: A Double-Edged Sword.

The information proves that the media has succeeded in becoming a prominent contributor to the learning of the culture, bridging the gap in formal education. Nevertheless, the percentage of school-based learning (around 9%) is relatively low, indicating a major transition towards institutional sources of knowledge. Whereas media makes content more accessible, its reliance on operations of the algorithm raises concerns of biased exposure and its preference for simplified narratives, which is also consistent with the Cultivation Theory.

Gap between Perception and Reality.

The disparity between high awareness of recent events and low familiarity with foundational history illustrates a clear perception–reality gap. This trend shows that the media visibility of the AAPI history is what shapes the understanding of the subject among participants, rather than thorough education. Consequently, knowledge is biased and fragmented, further supporting the hegemony of media-based narratives.

Implications

The results of this research have profound educational, social, and psychological implications. Educationally, the findings highlight the necessity to integrate Ethnic Studies and inclusive curricula that take the AAPI past into meaningful consideration. Such inclusion, as noted in previous studies, not only boosts academic engagement but also fosters critical thinking and cultural awareness (Sleeter, 2011). The elimination of gaps in the curriculum can lead to the minimization of the use of informal and possibly untrustworthy sources of knowledge, creating a more precise and thorough interpretation of history.

Socially, making AAPIs more visible and more accurate may help reduce stereotypes and enhance cross-cultural awareness. Through challenging the dominant narratives like the model minority myth and the perpetual foreigner stereotype, educational and media organizations can contribute to the restructuring of public perception and promote empathy and inclusivity. From a psychological standpoint, better representation can enhance feelings of belonging, esteem, and culture in people (Sleeter, 2011). The more people learn of their past and their experiences in educational and cultural accounts, the more likely they will grow to have a positive and unified identity about themselves. Therefore, curriculum inclusivity and responsible media reporting are two of the necessary measures that contribute to the improvement of an individual and the overall society.

Conclusion

This paper sheds light on the interwoven nature of curriculum gaps and mediated media spaces in forming the external representations of AAPI communities as well as the internal mechanisms of identity formation. The results indicate that the relative absence of AAPI histories on the formal educational curriculum is part of a larger tendency of structural invisibility, in which the latter experiences take a back seat or are entirely excluded. Because of this, people tend to resort to media as a substitute source of cultural knowledge, thus forming a dynamic where informal learning environments become central to the formation of understanding.

Even though the media provide greater visibility and access, it does not entirely balance the lack of thorough education. Rather, it tends to recreate reduced or selective accounts that perpetuate stereotypes and add to uneven awareness. The findings of this research indicate that there is a significant divergence between perception and historical reality, with the respondents showing more knowledge of well-reported events or recent ones than about the foundations of AAPI history.

Ultimately, the issue of invisibility is not incidental but structurally embedded within both educational systems and media representations. This can be tackled in two ways, where one is the incorporation of inclusive, evidence-based curricula, and the second is encouraging more objective and varied media representations. With these gaps closed, one may have a better-informed population, the persistent stereotypes will be challenged, and more robust cultural identities will be built. By doing so, education and media can stop perpetuating invisibility to engage in representation, recognition, and belongingness actively.

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