

**What are you?: A case study of an individual's experience
growing up Asian American**

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Abstract

This presentation will reveal the struggles the Asian American population faces when trying to form their identity by using a case study of an individual's first-hand experiences portrayed in a Vlog. The Vlog will showcase the individual's family dynamic, the discovery of race through self-categorization required by standardized tests, and her journey to self-acceptance. Identity is a term that unites but also divides. Asian Americans are divided by language, social class, culture, sexuality, and race. Through a series of videos presented in the Vlog, the audience will gain a better understanding of how pervasive stereotypes continue to shape how society perceives Asian Americans and how Asian Americans view themselves. Being of mixed race as well adds the struggles of feeling pressure to identify with one race over the other. By describing the bullying she suffered as a student, the audience will also see how she felt alienated by both cultural groups for not being considered "authentic enough" and did not feel a sense of belonging. By sharing her first-hand experiences through the Vlog, the audience will understand how identity is influenced by the community and how stereotypes affect Asian Americans' sense of independence and pride. It is crucial for society to explore where these stereotypes stem from to help the Asian American community rebuild a positive self-image. This is a story of an individual's experience losing her voice as a young person after being exposed to the assumptions and prejudices associated with being Asian American, and later coming to terms with this identity and asserting her voice as an adult.

Table of Contents Page

ABSTRACT.....	i
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION.....	3
CASE STUDY	7
CONCLUSION	12
WORK CITED.....	14

Introduction

Identity is defined as the “distinguishing character or personality of an individual” (Merriam-Webster). This presentation will reveal the struggles the Asian American population faces when trying to form their identity by using a case study of an individual’s first-hand experiences portrayed in a Vlog. The Vlog will showcase the individual’s family dynamic, the discovery of race through self-categorization required by standardized tests, and her journey to self-acceptance. Identity is a term that unites but also divides. Asian Americans are divided by language, social class, culture, sexuality, and race. In fact, the term “Asian American encompasses dozens of distinct ethnic identities, which, in our labels-obsessed era, has splintered the community’s attitudes toward it. Some appreciate being lumped into the collective, while others question its utility” (The Washington Post). Yet, what does unity really include or mean?

Through a series of videos presented in the Vlog, the audience will gain a better understanding of how pervasive stereotypes continue to shape how society perceives Asian Americans and how Asian Americans view themselves. Some topics included in the Vlog series include a brief self-introduction, family dynamics, school experiences, and overall views and takeaways. Each episode will consist of home videos, family photos, and videos of important places such as former schools.

Being of mixed race as well adds the struggles of feeling pressure to identify with one race over the other. By describing the bullying she suffered as a student, the audience will also see how she felt alienated by both cultural groups for not being considered “authentic enough” and did not feel a sense of belonging. By sharing her first-hand experiences through the Vlog, the audience will understand how identity is influenced by

the community and how stereotypes affect Asian Americans' sense of independence and pride. It is crucial for society to explore where these stereotypes stem from to help the Asian American community rebuild a positive self-image. Mahzarin Banaji is a psychology professor at Yale who studies stereotypes. Through her research, Banaji and her colleagues are studying what they call automatic or implicit stereotyping. Through their study, they noted that "we do all the time without knowing it. Though out-and-out bigotry may be on the decline, says Banaji, "if anything, stereotyping is a bigger problem than we ever imagined." (Paul, Annie Murphy 1998).

Natalie Quan, the author of *The No Man's Land of Asian American Identity*, wrote about her struggles growing up Asian American. In her article, she writes, "Many Asian Americans, myself included, wrestle with a constant, nagging sense of unbelonging when it comes to the Asian versus American tension that is part of our cultural identity. For me, it is a subtle, ever-present awareness that I will never be completely accepted—never exactly fit in—in either America or (in my case) China" (Natalie Quan). It is evident Asian Americans feel omitted and are continuing to struggle with acceptance. This is a story of an individual's experience losing her voice as a young person after being exposed to the assumptions and prejudices associated with being Asian American, and later coming to terms with this identity and asserting her voice as an adult.

Included in this write-up will also be a section of a reflection as well as contextual information. The reflection will consist of a description of the videos, explain the theme of each category, and make connections to the framework. After reading my reflections, the contextual information that will be added into this write-up will give my audience a better understanding of Asian American identity, cultural identity, as well as cultural

hybridity. Thus, my audience will understand the theory that guides my videos and concepts to identity.

Contextual Information

When I first started to think about topics I wanted to research, the most important element for me was to make my project as personal as possible. I began to think of key moments in my life and instantly thought of how I struggled to form my identity growing up bi-racial. I always fought with the idea of having to choose one race over the other and found myself constantly trying to combat every Asian stereotype thrown my way. The bullying and discrimination I faced at school made me start to hate who I was. It wasn't until my trip to China, during the summer of 2015, where I found myself embracing my culture and starting to reassemble part of my identity I was desperately trying to hide.

The Asian American population is one of the fastest-growing populations to date. According to World Population Review, "the Asian American population in the United States is estimated to be approximately 20 million, 5.6% of the total population. The U.S. Asian population grew by 72% between 2000 and 2015, growing from 11.9 million to over 20 million" (Asian Population 2020). Based on this information, it is evident that the Asian American population will soon be the largest immigrant group. However, people whose culture, language, and religion that differ from the dominant group continuously have an inner battle with themselves to form and maintain their identity (Corissajoy 2017). Although people are proud of their heritage and culture, there is still pressure felt to hide their identity to feel accepted or a sense of belonging. Those who are mixed race, often struggle with the pressure to choose one group over the other, resulting in hiding or

deemphasizing one race over the other, which also includes their culture, language, and identity.

Asian Americans are often lumped together as one category and seen as one minority group. Oftentimes, people think all Asians are Chinese while ignoring the fact there are other ethnic groups such as Thai, Indonesian, Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese. Different languages in Asian culture are also being lumped into the same group, and are dismissed as being their own separate dialect. By referring to the Asian community as only one minority group, it ignores the diversity of the different cultures we have around us. Culture is defined as “consisting of the values, traditions, worldview, and social and political relationships created, shared, and transformed by a group of people bound together by a common history, geographic location, language, social class, religion, or other shared identity” (Nieto and Bode 137). Not only does it include holidays, food, and attire, but it can also include family dynamics and relationships, values, and attitudes as well. In our society today, we are grouped by cultures, races, and social classes. These groups that will live in can cause us to question who we are, if we belong, and our purpose. Even Though “one’s identity may seem to be a very personal and individual decision,[...], there can be many historical, socioeconomic, and sociological factors that can directly or indirectly influence this decision” (Assimilation & Ethnic Identity). However, there are many different forms of ethnic identity among Asian Americans, which is why it is crucial for us to examine external and internal factors that can affect how Asian Americans shape their identity.

There has been research conducted that focuses on why certain ethnic and minority groups tend to assimilate faster than others. One of the factors includes the

child's relationship with their parents and ethnic community. It was noted that "if the child-parent relationship is strong and healthy, the child is more likely to take on the parent's identity, whatever that may be (i.e., national origin, hyphenated American, pan-Asian, or just "American")" (Assimilation & Ethnic Identity). Unfortunately, perceptions of racism and discrimination can also influence assimilation. In fact, "according to the situational/constructionist/ instrumentalist perspective, for an Asian American to have a strong attachment to traditional forms of ethnic identity, it is not enough to just perceive or experience high levels of ethnic competition, prejudice, or discrimination" (Assimilation & Ethnic Identity). This statement shows how it depends on how the person reacts to these perceptions through their own experiences that will factor in how they decide to identify themselves as.

A possible outcome of the factors listed above may result in what is known as the "melting pot". This is when different ethnic groups come together and, through this interaction, creates a new culture by incorporating the various cultures into one. Secondly, another possible outcome is known as cultural pluralism. Culture pluralism is "when the different racial/ethnic groups keep their unique cultural norms, traditions, and behaviors, while still sharing common national values, goals, and institutions" (Assimilation & Ethnic Identity). There are many factors that can affect ethnic identity, and it is important for us to continue to research patterns of the process of assimilation not only to continue to keep cultures alive but also to foster a welcoming and positive community.

Unfortunately, overgeneralizing a culture can result in negative stereotypes, which can affect how people see others as well as themselves. Combating the "model

minority” stereotype is one of the many issues Asian Americans face. Oftentimes, it is assumed Asian Americans are economically successful, and it creates higher expectations for success and achievement, which can be damaging psychologically. Although education sets the framework for success in Asian culture, “the expectations of high achievement come with a cost: the notion of Asian American success creates an “achievement paradox” in which Asian Americans who do not fit the success frame feel like failures or racial outlier” (The Asian American Achievement Paradox). One of the most significant issues is also addressing the stereotypes in the media. Asian American women are often categorized as being obedient and submissive, while the “Asian Nerd” is seen to be quiet, socially-awkward, and academically smart.

Cultural differences can also add to the challenge of finding a balance between two vastly different cultures. Chinese culture is extremely different from American culture, and I, for one, had a tough time trying to blend these two together. American culture is deeply rooted in the idea of the American Dream and achieving happiness. In Chinese culture, traditional beliefs and values such as education and family are deeply rooted. All of the different expectations from each culture came crashing down at me all at once, which led me to feel confused and feeling lost.

Another way of understanding culture is by looking at hybridity. Our society is more heterogeneous than ever, but this is impossible to recognize with a static view of culture. It is impossible to speak about culture when you have multiple identities from mixed races becoming more common. Hybridity can be seen as “the fusion of various cultures to form new, distinct, and ever-changing identities” (Nieto and Bode, 138). In 2010, the United States population, approximately 1.7 percent of the population were two or more

racism, which shows how multi-ethnicity is continuing to grow (Nieto and Bode 138). In fact, the U.S. Census Bureau allows people to choose to report more than one race to indicate their racial mixture, which proves there's more of an awareness.

According to Stanley Aronowitz, ethnicity in the United States "has been viewed as a temporary condition that some experience on the way to assimilation" (Nieto and Bode 253). Those who feel as if they are unable to identify as both races feel as if claiming both means they have to deny their background. Unfortunately, "our society has forced many young people to make a choice [...], and the consequences of such a choice probably affect what they think they deserve and are entitled to in our society" (Nieto and Bode 253).

It has taken me a long time to find a balance between the two vastly different cultures I am part of. With the Asian American population continuing to grow, it is vital for us to look at the various internal and external factors that affect one's identity crisis in order to avoid deemphasizing one race. My goal of the project is to not only educate people on the identity crisis the Asian American community faced but to also raise awareness as well.

Case Study

Vlog 1- Introducing me

In this first section of the Vlog series, I will introduce myself to my audience. The goal of the first video is to explain why I chose my topic and the importance of exploring this issue. It is emphasized in the beginning that this is a very personal project for me, so there will be moments where I will show my emotions much more with specific topics. By watching the first video, the audience will get a quick glimpse of the issues we will be

talking about, the places we will be filming in, and what they can expect to see in the Vlog series.

The first vlog sets the foundation for the topics I will be discussing more in depth later on such as culture, identity ambivalence, hybridity, and being a model minority. Cultural hybridity establishes the effort to maintain balance among different values, beliefs, and practices among two or more cultures. In cultural hybridization, an individual constructs a new sense of identity that reflects the cultures. However, hybridity may cause individuals confusion and conflict, especially when they are moving freely between multiple identities. For many years, I found it difficult to find a balance between my American identity and my Asian Identity because the two were vastly different from one another. Due to the inner conflict I experience, I felt stressed, confused, angry, and later on resented that fact that I was of mixed race.

Vlog 2- Early Life

In the second Vlog, I will discuss my home-life and show the viewers what life was like growing up under a roof that combined Asian and American culture. This section of the vlog series was filmed in my childhood home and will depict the traditional Asian household I grew up in. Additionally, I will discuss what it was like having a “tiger mom” growing up and note the extracurricular activities I was forced to participate in. In this video, I will show clips and photos of my family members, food I grew up eating, and discuss the holidays and traditions I celebrate on both sides.

This video will explore the concepts of hybridity and being a model minority. Since I grew up in a household that combined two cultures, I often found myself feeling

different from my peers. The concept of the model minority, otherwise known as one of the prevalent stereotypes of Asian Americans, is the idea that members of a minority group regard as having traits such as being hardworking and highly intelligent. In Asian society, education is held at a higher standard. Students are expected to be studious, hardworking, participate in extracurricular activities. Since my mother grew up in Tianjin China, it was expected of me to do well in school, which is why I was forced to go to school seven days a week, complete extra homework, and participate in extracurricular activities such as playing the piano. Not only did this cause a drift between my mother and I, but it also caused me to feel stress, anxiety, frustration, and had a major effect on my self-esteem.

Vlog 3- School Experience

In the third vlog, I will share some of my personal school experiences from kindergarten to college. Through this process, viewers will see how my thought process about ethnicity shifted and I started to question my identity after having to self-categorize myself during standardized testing in third grade. Incorporated in this section includes MCAS test results, report cards, and video clips filmed at my prior high school, middle school, and elementary school. By doing so, the viewers will be able to walk in my shoes and be at the location as I am sharing my experiences.

The third video will touch upon topics such as identity ambivalence and the concept of being a model minority. The first time I experienced personal conflict with my identity was when I was eight years old and had to self-categorize myself for standardized testing. After having to choose one identity over the other, I felt confused as

to why I only could pick one race over the other. As a result of my confusion, I therefore categorized myself as being “other”, which emphasized how different I saw myself from my classmates. Knowing how much importance my mom put on school, I felt pressure to do well on the test and to do well in school in general. The bullying I experienced in school also played a major role in forming my identity. My first time hearing racial or stereotypical slurs was during middle school. Since I the comments were being directed at me, I felt people were not accepting of Asian background, which caused me to hide that part of my identity for a long time. As a result, I didn’t tell people my middle name because it was in Chinese, didn’t bring friends over to the house, and refused to speak Mandarin when in public.

Vlog 4- Building a relationship with my parents

The fourth vlog incorporated into this series focuses on my relationship with my parents. Growing up, and as of today, I have always had a stronger relationship with my father. My mother and I could never see eye to eye, especially when it came to academics. In this vlog, I will discuss the emotional stress I experienced, my high school graduation, and how my relationship with my parents evolved as I became older. Incorporated into this vlog are photos of my graduation day, home videos, and a message to my parents.

The concept of being the model minority put a strain between the relationship I had with my mother and my connection to my Chinese background. Growing up with two cultures under one roof was a blessing and a curse to me. Since American culture was vastly different from Asian culture, especially with the beliefs, values, and religions,

I always felt as if I sided more with the more “carefree” American culture. Although my dad emphasized the importance of school, he would always say “if you tried your hardest, then that is all I can ask for.” On the other hand, my mom would get mad if I did not get A or score high enough on tests. I felt my mom wanted me to be a “perfect”, well rounded individual, which to me did not exist and was not possible. I ended up hating my Chinese background because I did not agree with some of the values and beliefs, especially when it came to academics. Overall, I lost the sense of connection to my Chinese background, because I felt that I connected more to my American identity more and I did not belong to that minority group.

Vlog 5- Ending

The last video of this vlog series wraps up the series as a whole. In this video, I will note my final thoughts of my experience sharing a piece of my life with the viewers and my overall takeaways. Additionally, I will also offer advice to those who may be struggling with finding their identity and offer words of encouragement in hopes they remember they are not alone. The end of the vlog series highlights how I have come to terms with who I am and how I plan to move forward in life with the new insight I gained through this experience.

Although cultural hybridity may cause individuals conflict or confusion, it can also open new doors to opportunities and experiences. It may not be easy to balance two cultures, especially when they are so vastly different, but through the process, new cultures emerge. At the end of this journey, I realized there is no such thing as a “model minority”. Although it may be a prevalent stereotype among the Asian community, it

does not define me as an individual. Experiencing two cultures under the same roof as taught me how to be more open-minded, compassionate, and most of all, confident in my own skin.

Conclusion

Throughout this vlog series, topics such as culture, identity ambivalence, hybridity, and being a model minority were explored more in depth. While filming and conducting more research, I learned that the Asian American population is one of the fastest-growing populations to date. Those who are mixed race, often struggle with the pressure to choose one group over the other, resulting in hiding or deemphasizing one race over the other, which also includes their culture, language, and identity.

If I was given more time, I would have liked to have interviewed friends who are Asian American as well. Adding more personal stories into the vlog series not only would have given a chance for others to voice their opinions and share their experiences, but it would have also showed my audience how relevant this issue is today. During the interviews, I would have asked my friends to share their thoughts on some of the topics I am exploring throughout the Vlog series such as being a model minority and cultural hybridity. Lastly, I would have also had them share how they've overcome obstacles and share encouraging words of advice to those who may still be struggling with their identity.

There has been research conducted that focuses on why certain ethnic and minority groups tend to assimilate faster than others. Some of these reasons include child's relationship with his/her parent, strength of a child's ethnic community, and perceptions of racism and discrimination. To further my research, I will continue to spend

more time researching specific assimilation theories. Some of these theories include Anglo conformity, melting pot, and cultural pluralism. Additionally, to further this research project, I will continue to reflect and share more personal experiences and interview people who have experienced similar inner conflicts regarding their identity.

At the end of this Vlog series, I learned a lot more about myself and considered this project to be part of the healing process. While filming, I began to understand why I had so much built up pain and anger towards my mother, and took this new perspective to begin rebuilding our relationship. Although there are many internal and external factors that can affect how second-generation Asian Americans identify themselves, it is important to continue to research this topic to ensure we begin to overlook prevailing stereotypes and foster a welcoming and positive community.

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