

Disinformation Narratives related to Representation and Identity Politics Rhetoric

WHY IT MATTERS

In today's media landscape, Asian Americans have largely been portrayed as a professionally high-achieving, economically successful monolith—widely known as the “model minority myth.” In reality, the Asian American (and the larger Asian American and Pacific Islander community, known as AAPI) community is a highly transnational and heterogeneous community with diverse class and immigration experiences and ties to multiple diaspora communities.

Treating AAPI communities as a single entity has resulted in the misuse and weaponization of concepts like “identity politics,” representation, community gatekeeping, and “diaspora wars” — referring to inter-cultural conflicts among diaspora groups — ultimately causing harm to these communities.

This gatekeeping of identity manifests in divisions across generations, diasporas, and languages, seen in intra-community debates over labels or attempts to quantify identity by percentage. For example, the debate over the term “Filipinx” emerged as community members in the diaspora, already struggling to assert their racial and ethnic identities against marginalization by the dominant culture, sought to reassess gender norms.

Representation politics prioritizes placing people of marginalized identities in power without fully considering their personal values, or in the case of political candidates, their policy agendas. This emphasis on identity, without taking into account the individual's specific beliefs and intentions, can significantly affect AAPI racial justice organizing. It may lead to platforming or supporting candidates and policies that ultimately harm marginalized communities.

WHAT WE'RE ANTICIPATING:

In the 2024 elections, candidates are expected to address identity-based groups with a focus on ethnic and racial communities. This involves spotlighting various Asian American cultures and communities in the mainstream and claiming to address “Asian American” issues.

Candidates may attempt to homogenize the AAPI communities and define success for these communities without their input. This has been leveraged in various ways already, such as labeling Asian Americans as anti-affirmative action. In addition, media groups like NextShark or Asian Dawn have focused on promoting Asian American visibility over political priorities.

Misleading Narratives and Counterpoints

Narrative 1: Getting Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders into positions of power is the best approach to achieving progress on AAPI policy issue areas.

The argument that having more AAPI people represented in media and government is a solution to systemic discrimination is tokenism and fails to address the root causes of discrimination. **“Visibility” as an end goal often uplifts dominant culture narratives** – such as those of upper-caste, upper-class, and East and South Asian experiences – at the expense of representing the breadth and diversity of AAPI experiences.

Reframing and Providing Context:

1

No singular individual, elected official, or political candidate can, by virtue of their own personal identity, speak for the entirety of the AAPI community.

2

The singular goal of more AAPI representation – in politics and in Hollywood – centers on a small number of individuals’ goals for inclusion, **detracting from the real-life needs and the racial justice organizing of Asian American communities.**

3

Diversity is a strength of the AAPI community – it is important to uplift a diverse representation of voices and intentionally seek out community organizers working directly with communities to speak to their own needs.

Example

In electoral politics, simply identifying as Asian does not ensure that a candidate will prioritize the interests of Asian American communities. Media outlets and influencers have highlighted individuals like Andrew Yang and Vivek Ramaswamy as candidates who address 'Asian American' issues. However, in reality, they promoted policies that have harmed many marginalized communities, including Asian Americans.

Misleading Narratives and Counterpoints

Narrative 2: “Asian” or “Asian American” identity is determined by proximity to culture, language, motherlands or home countries, and connection to ethnic enclaves.

The idea of “cultural dilution,” rooted in blood quantum classifications of race, argues that a person is “less” of a certain identity if they do not have a specific set of cultural experiences. In the late 1800s, the term “blood quantum” emerged as a method for the government to divide peoples’ identities into percentages and was used as a tactic to deny land allotments to many Native Americans whose “blood quantum” made them ineligible to access property. For example, “cultural dilution” wrongfully argues that those who belong to a diasporic community, are transracial and/or transcultural adoptees, or those who are multiracial are not “truly Asian.”

These arguments perpetuate white supremacy and are rooted in racist ideals that seek to divide and disenfranchise minority communities based on their proximity to whiteness.

Reframing and Providing Context:

1

Asians are not a monolith and have a deep diversity of cultures, languages, and lived experiences. All of the different types of Asian identity are valid.

2

“Cultural dilution” and cultural gatekeeping flatten racial identity to a specific set of personality traits or cultural references and can erase minority experiences.

Example

“Banana” or “Coconut” is a slur for Asian Americans who are perceived to have assimilated to western mainstream culture, negatively characterizing individuals as internalizing whiteness and not “truly Asian.” These pejorative terms erase the explicit and implicit forced assimilation that many communities of color must undergo and seek to gatekeep what the Asian American cultural identity should look like.

Misleading Narratives and Counterpoints

Narrative 3: “Ethnic groups all share the same religion, nationality, and class.”

Due in part to the broader generalizations of Asian and Asian American experiences and diasporic migration, Asian American communities often have their ethnicities, nationalities, social classes, and religions conflated.

This includes harmful stereotypes like the “model minority myth,” which is perpetuated by representations in media such as “Crazy Rich Asians.” It also includes South Asian generalizations of class, caste, nationality, and religion, which, in the United States, paints all South Asians as upper-caste, high-income Indian Americans.

Reframing and Providing Context:

1

The Asian American community is broad and is an umbrella group representing multiple countries and ethnicities.

2

This narrative and generalizing hides the hierarchies within our communities and uplifts the visibility of the most powerful in those hierarchies.

Example

Asian Americans have the highest income disparity of any racial or ethnic group in the US. The “model minority” portrayal of Asian Americans as wealthy obscures the reality that 2.3 million Asian Americans live in poverty.

Footnotes

1. The acronym “AAPI” encompasses Asian American and Pacific Islanders, but its usage has mixed reactions; Pacific Islander Americans face distinct political and economic challenges from Asian Americans, and spaces that lack Pacific Islander representation are often erroneously branded as “AAPI.” Different struggles within the Asian American community based on factors like caste, religion, colorism, and class further complicate the application of inclusive terms.

2. [Diaspora Wars in the Black Community: A Catalyst for Division](#)

3. [When Filipinos Fight with Filipino-Americans, No One Wins](#)

4. Asian American Disinformation Table (2022) “Power, Platforms, Politics: Asian Americans and Disinformation Landscape Report.” August 2022, www.AsianAmDisinfo.org

5. [South Asians for Abolition: Beyond Gilded Cages](#). “Many South Asian immigrants’ struggles—particularly Indian Americans from caste oppressor backgrounds—have focused on obtaining rights and mainstream acceptance in the U.S., from citizenship to visas to representation in popular culture. In desiring inclusion in the matrix of institutional and ideological policies that make up American civic life, South Asians have allowed—even coveted—their complicity with fundamentally imperialist and carceral state systems. In particular, while Savarna, class privileged, cis and straight South Asians have pursued wins on the basis of “rights,” and political inclusion, undocumented, incarcerated, and climate displaced South Asians have been left to fend for themselves.”

6. [One Way That Crazy Rich Asians Is a Step Backward](#)

7. [The Hardships and Dreams of Asian Americans Living in Poverty](#)