ABSTRACT

Social media has played an integral role in East Asian immigrants having found and reclaimed their ethnic identities through online communities. Through a shared sense of identity to their homeland, diasporic East Asian communities can come together online with the help of social media platforms. Multiple generations of immigrants come together in creating a conversation around being the other in western countries. This paper discusses, firstly, the unique position of the 1.5 generation of immigrants in assimilating to western culture and the internalised racism they often face in straddling two cultural identities. Secondly, it examines the catalyst for the larger East Asian movement through Facebook group Subtle Asian Traits, activism, and dispersing the model minority myth. Thirdly, this paper explores the microaggressions and the subtlety of how entrenched they are in western society. By coming together online, East Asians have been able to foster a sense of belonging and speak up against injustices.

The introduction of social media on the web has revolutionised how communities are able to grow and support their networks (boyd & Ellison, 2007). By substituting and enhancing in-person interactions, individuals can build up a network of resources that may otherwise have been lost to them (Wellman et al., 2001). This is especially true for diasporas who may once have lost touch with their ethnic cultures. Diasporic communities consist of those who have been geographically displaced and are bound through a shared sense of identity as immigrants (Kissau, 2012). According to the 2016 Australian census, there were more than 780,000 East Asian immigrants (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022b), making up more than 3.3% of the Australian population at the time (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022a). This does not take into consideration those who were born in Australia with East Asian ancestry. Historically isolated East Asian diasporas can now come together as online communities to share their experiences, raise awareness, and create action through the familiarity of having grown-up as minorities. These online communities function as third places where those of similar backgrounds are able to communicate freely and share commonalities (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982).

Australia has an ever-growing population of immigrants with the fastest growing group coming from Asia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). The 1.5 generation immigrant group is in a unique position where they have migrated to western countries at a considerably young age – between six and ten (Rumbaut, 2004). Their first-generation immigrant parents often relied on this generation to assimilate into western culture, occasionally at the expense of their native identities. They are often forced to straddle both cultures, helping parents and grandparents to interpret and navigate life in the new host country. Distinguishing the 1.5 generation from their parents, and those of the second generation, is crucial in understanding the difference in experiences from all three groups (Rumbaut, 2012). The reliance of the first generation on the 1.5 can create a lack of belonging and often create a conflict in their cultural identity. This is further emphasised as parents often place importance on assimilation to the western ideal, while still stressing the Asian cultural values of filial piety and loyalty (Yeh & Bedford, 2003). By straddling both, the 1.5 generation often feel outcast from both cultures – fitting into neither, traditionally pushing them further into isolation. Social media has provided a space for those of this generation to survive the difficulties and loneliness of fitting in to these new cultures; the third space created by these online communities in essence enables them to create their own new cultures.

East Asian immigrants to western countries often dealt with embarrassment, shame, and internalised racism as an adaptive response with their identities (Schwalbe et al., 2000). By being classified as “others”, East Asian immigrants were required to adapt and assimilate to “whiteness” (Gans, 1992). The multitude of names with which East Asians use to describe themselves, and each

other, show that this racism is not solely directed towards East Asians from external communities, but also self-directed. Terms such as “FOB” (Fresh off the Boat) and “Import” are frequently used to describe those who are considered too ethnic, while “whitewashed” and “banana” are used to describe those who act too white. The use of these racist stereotypes against one another often created a rift between first and second generation immigrants, and even within generations, as either becoming too assimilated (“whitewashed”), or not assimilated enough (“FOB”) into the societal mainstream (Tuan, 1998). By mirroring and accepting the racial stereotypes placed on them, East Asians can seem to give justification on the microaggressions they face; at times leading to blaming those oppressed (Pyke & Dang, 2003). By speaking with others who also faced similar stereotypes, these online communities have been able to reduce the blame placed on themselves and increase awareness.

Along with being culturally reserved and seemingly high achieving in academia, East Asians have found themselves often labelled as the model minority. Although, this term is most widely used to define Asian Americans, many other western countries have similar concepts (Wong, 2015). By adhering to East Asians as the model minority, they are often no longer classified as people of colour and thus their experiences as minorities can often be diminished (Stavish, 2021). Model minority delineates that East Asians are too successful and academically high achieving to be deemed disadvantaged (Cheng, 1997). However, while being excluded from discussions around discrimination (Hwang, 2021), they are still rarely seen as belonging, as even third generation immigrants and beyond are seen as non-English speakers (Waters, 1990). The human desire to belong is innate and powerful (Mellor et al., 2008). This is especially true for the East Asian immigrants coming from collectivist societies, where emphasis is placed on the interest of the group over the individual (Liou et al., 2013). With the invent of social media, the Asian cohort has been able to create a new sense of belonging online and come together to speak on social issues, both inside and outside their ethnic cultures.

In September 2018, when a group of Chinese Australian high school students, many of whom were from the 1.5 generation, noticed there was no forum on the internet where Asians could come together and share their stories, they created their own (Reich, 2021). What began as a distraction from school between friends, the Facebook group Subtle Asian Traits (SAT) has transformed into a space where Asians, and especially Asian immigrants, from all over the world have a space to share and celebrate their unique experiences. Within a matter of months, the group had amassed over one million members. Currently, the group has more than two million members and countless derivative groups dedicated to different interests, such as dating, cooking, parenting, sporting, etc. SAT can be seen as the catalyst for a larger Asian movement on social media through

open discussions and bringing together those who were struggling with their cultural identities, providing immigrants with the ability to connect intergenerationally in a world where real world communities often left them feeling isolated and alienated (Wong, 2020). SAT provided immigrants with a place to belong and be understood without having to explain themselves (Kwai, 2018). Even after more than two years, SAT still provides a place where conversations around these hybrid identities can take place (Brinkerhoff, 2009).

By sharing these experiences on social media, East Asians have been able to raise issues of belonging, oppression, and the model minority myth, creating a transformative effect on activism and against racism. Anti-Asian discrimination in western cultures has long been observed; as early as the 1850s in Australia, where the *Chinese Restriction Act* was passed to restrict immigration following anti-Chinese sentiments during the gold rush (Washington, n.d.). The emergence of social media in the fight against racism is especially poignant in recent years with the emergence of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. With the outbreak first identified in Wuhan, China, this created violence towards all those of East Asian appearance as the Chinese is representative of the largest Asian immigrant group (Chang, 2017). In fact, discrimination towards Asians globally has been reported in greater numbers since the beginning of COVID-19 (Gover et al., 2020), with Australian sources reporting 30% more anti-Asian racism compared to American populations (Zhou, 2020).

With social media infiltrating almost every facet of daily life, it has, along with the use of smart phones, often become a source for breaking news worldwide (Hu et al., 2012). This along with the increase in discrimination gave rise to actions such as the #AsianLivesMatter, and #StopAsianHate movements across social media networks. By sharing the struggles of the Asian hate pandemic through these networks, stories have been able to be circulated to a wider audience and the historically silent have been able to have their voices heard like never before. With anti-Asian sentiment typically overlooked, the use of smart phone recordings and live footage has brought these injustices to light (Eligon et al., 2021).

Having shameful acts of racism broadcast across networking platforms has meant the narrative of these anti-Asian hate movements can no longer be ignored. (Papacharissi, 2010). With direct video footage from acts of discrimination across these platforms, a simple apology from perpetrators, years after the fact, is no longer enough (Bouvier & Machin, 2021). Instances of violence appearing almost daily on news sites and social media networks alike have brought the need for action to the forefront. After the COVID-19 pandemic hit Australian shores, violence against Asians have been consistently reported; from vandalism (Fang & Yang, 2020), to death threats against city councillors (Zhou, 2021), to verbal abuse (Yang, 2020), and being spat on (Dinjaski,

2020). While the majority of attacks in Australia at the beginning of the pandemic appeared to be nonviolent, it was a stark contrast in attacks targeted towards Asians in the United States (Tessler et al., 2020), where many Asians, especially the elderly, have been physically attacked and even died from the amount of violence involved (Brantley-Jones & Chen, 2021). A poignant example of extreme violence against Asian Americans is the Atlanta spa shootings which happened on March 16, 2021, where a violent attacker shot and killed eight people, six of whom were East Asian women (Constantino, 2021). Discussions across social media platforms sparked debate on whether this was racially motivated and was fuelled by law enforcement excusing the attacker's behaviour (Rupar, 2021), culminating in outrage over the systems that were failing to represent and support East Asians in the media. A post by Yang (2021) in the SAT group recorded over 2,000 comments and replies empathising with the victims and showing anger towards the damaging comments portrayed in the media. Showing SAT as a third place community online and offering users a new sense of belonging. Having the police excusing the actions of the shooter and the white offender, himself, claiming his actions were not racially motivated (Lim, 2021) is symbolic of a larger, more insidious form of discrimination (microaggressions) faced by many East Asians, and East Asian women in particular.

Hypersexualisation of East Asian women is often normalised in America, with a long history dating back to as early as 1875 and the *Page Act*, effectively forbidding Asian women from entering the country on the assumption they would engage in prostitution and thus corrupting pure, white society (Wadhia & Hu, 2022). To disregard this attack as racist is reckless and illogical as his targets were specific, having bypassed several adult entertainment locations on his way to attack three establishments that were miles apart (DiVittorio, 2021).

Fetishisation and hypersexualisation along with other microaggressions are subtle and so ingrained that many often do not view it as racism (Devos & Banaji, 2005). These understated and seemingly innocuous statements and biases from white people can have a cumulative effect on self-identity. Sue, Capodilupo, et al. (2007) defines microaggressions as *"brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of colour."* They create a sense of otherness amongst East Asians; some examples of microaggressions include (a) asking where someone is *really* from, (b) telling someone they speak better English than expected, (c) assuming that an Asian woman is submissive and quiet, and (d) saying "*ni hao ma*" (often badly) to any East Asian appearing person. Often times, the perpetrators of racial microaggressions are oblivious to their actions (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007). When perpetrators are challenged on these discriminatory behaviours, they often find it difficult to comprehend, as

they often don't view themselves as racist (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007). With microaggressions being difficult to identify, even the victim has trouble recognising whether it really happened (Crocker & Major, 1989). It is for this reason that microaggressions are so damaging; they can be automatic and become so ingrained in the culture that the offenders can shrug it off as a joke, or say that victims are being too sensitive, when offending behaviours or comments are challenged (Fairchild Television, 2020).

The assumption is that East Asians are limited to their stereotypes and need to justify their belonging in society. White people are never asked to justify their belonging in the same way as East Asians, and this can create a broken sense of identity to children of immigrants (Sue, 2004). In as early as childhood classroom situations, East Asian children are being asked if they are eating worms when they are sent to school with noodles. With these microaggressions starting so early in life, this often causes immigrant children having to grow up with two identities – inside and outside the home. Many have often asked their parents to prepare less ethnic and cultural foods for school in fear they continue to be teased. This can often be extended even towards languages, with immigrants ridiculed for speaking another language (Gast et al., 2017). The continued lack of exposure to Asian culture can idealise white people and unconsciously create a sense of white supremacy (Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007). With more channels for East Asian immigrants to speak up on social media about discrimination, both blatant overt racism and the invisibility of microaggressions, groups are able to break the model minority stereotype; they no longer remain unheard or are required to keep their heads down. With more individuals speaking up against microaggressions, the false perception of minimal harm they inflict can be dispelled (Williams et al., 2003). Activism is created through speaking out on these social media channels and embracing their East Asian culture. Protests and vigils around the world have proven that East Asians are loud and unified in their fight against racism (Chang, 2020).

As food is often seen as the language of love in East Asian cultures (Kline et al., 2008), immigrants accepting and creating their ethnic food, and sharing this love on social media channels can be a catalyst for a wider community of acceptance and representation in diasporas. As an example of this, TikTok user Kat Lieu (https://www.tiktok.com/@subtleasian.baking) has spread appreciation through her baking of different flavoured and coloured breads, and along with her fellow Asian followers, has handled racial comments directed at those within the community. By calling out her attackers on social media, she brings to light many of the microaggressions and negative perceptions people may have. Through this, she not only creates further conversations with the community, but also breaking the status quo of the model minority. There is also a growing number of East Asian food blogs that are sharing love and culture through their authentic recipes.

Sharing their stories along with their recipes, allows for those who may not know the historical context of recipes, both within and outside of the diaspora, to understand and appreciate the East Asian culture.

While it is clear that anti-Asian hate is not new, East Asians diasporas who were once in isolated populations are now able to come together through the use of online communities and social media to share their experiences. For the generations who spent decades, trying to fit into western culture and ideals, and the 1.5 generation who were compelled to assimilate, they learnt that being in the “in-between” is not so different after all. In fact, there are more than two million of them worldwide. They are not alone in their experiences and by embracing their ethnic cultures and sharing their experiences as minorities they have been able to find belonging and create a larger movement of action against racism, which has been especially prominent since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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