



SUMMER 2021

I Am Not a Fetish or Model Minority:

Re-defining What it Means to Be
API in the Entertainment Industry
TOOLKIT



Executive Summary

In the past two years, the United States has seen a rise in anti-Asian hate crimes,¹ particularly surrounding COVID-19, which has had a disproportionate impact on the Asian and Pacific Islander (API) communities.² At the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, we believe that it is imperative that we investigate our cultural messaging surrounding marginalized groups. Therefore, we examined the portrayal of Asian people and Pacific Islanders within the film industry - both on screen and behind the scenes. Authentic representation should be informed by the API people who contribute to its creation, and it is important to ask whether they feel heard and seen.

In order to assess inclusion and representation of Asians and Pacific Islanders in entertainment as well as their experiences in the industry, we conducted three complementary studies:

First, we present an original analysis from a survey of respondents recruited by the Coalition of Asian Pacifics in Entertainment (CAPE) about their personal experiences, their perceptions of representation, and the industry as a whole. Individuals who took the survey currently work in or with the entertainment industry as talent, in agencies, or in public relations; over half of respondents indicated that they were in

positions of creative power, such as writers, directors, and producers.

- ▶ Second, we carry out a content analysis of 100 films -- the 10 top-grossing domestic films from each year between 2010-2019 -- to identify the state of API inclusion in popular films.
- ▶ Third, we carry out a content analysis of every film (124) produced or distributed by one of the major conglomerate³ or mini-major⁴ studios and their subsidiaries and/or the major streaming services with API actors in the main title cast from 2017-2020 in order to determine how API characters are portrayed in mainstream films when they are featured prominently.
- ▶ This study is unique because it combines content analysis of on-screen representation of API characters in film and a survey of members of API communities in the entertainment industry about representation. Therefore, our study contributes to an ongoing dialogue about the state of API representation and inclusion by not only assessing whether members of these communities are portrayed on screen, but also the nature of that portrayal, and speaking directly to API creators and industry members about their experiences and ideas about representation.

Key Findings

Survey Analysis

- ▶ The majority of surveyed members of API communities in the entertainment industry recruited by CAPE believe that “representation” means “portraying a group of people in an authentic way on screen” (97.6%), but less than half (42.9%) believe that “Hollywood” shares this opinion. This enormous gap signals that members of API communities in the industry do not feel they are aligned on the meaning of representation with “Hollywood.”
- ▶ The majority of respondents recruited by CAPE do not have a positive view of the state of API representation; 93.3% agree that API representation on screen is inadequate, and 95.1% agree that API representation behind the scenes is inadequate.
- ▶ Eighty percent of CAPE respondents surveyed have experienced microaggressions (80.9%), blatant racism (55.6%), and tokenization (72.5%) in the workplace.
- ▶ Only 43.5% of CAPE respondents surveyed feel that their voice is valued.

Content Analysis

- ▶ Asian people make up about 7% of the US population⁵ and Pacific Islanders about 0.4%⁶, but together only 4.5% of leads or co-leads in the top 10 grossing domestic films from 2010-2019 are API characters; 5.6% of supporting characters are API.
- ▶ Seventeen percent of female API characters are verbally objectified and 13.0% are visually objectified in the top 10 grossing domestic films from 2010-2019. This is more common for API women than white women and other non-API women of color. Characters who are visually and verbally objectified are treated in ways that separate their appearance from their individuality and personal agency.
- ▶ Even in films that feature API characters in the main title cast, nearly three-fourths of API characters are in supportive roles.
- ▶ According to our analysis of films featuring API characters in the main title cast, about a third of API characters embody at least one common API trope or stereotype (35.2%), such as the “Martial Artist,” (Asian trope) the “Model Minority,” (Asian trope) or the “Exotic Woman.”
- ▶ According to our analysis of films featuring API characters in the main title cast, API characters are written as “smart” and “hard-working,” (Asian tropes) but less often “sexy” and “funny.”
- ▶ API ethnic identity is most central to characters who are East Asian (49.2%) and least central to characters who are Hawaiian or Pacific Islanders (12.2%).

Interventions in Partnership with CAPE and Gold House

To further improve API representation in entertainment media, we recommend the following interventions:

MORE diverse representations of the API communities:

- ▶ Cast more API actors in authentic and leading roles. The API communities are not a monolith; the entertainment industry should work to represent these communities authentically.
- ▶ One of the most common suggestions from respondents surveyed is to see more portrayals of mixed-race and multi-ethnic characters and families.
- ▶ Disaggregate data when possible -- break down future analysis by ethnicity, gender, or other key characteristics for more precision and understanding.
- ▶ Expose the Model Minority stereotype as a myth. For example, the Model Minority myth depicts many ethnicities in the Asian American community as successful in academics and wealth. In reality, Asian Americans have some of the widest variances in educational attainment and corporate success.⁶³ Furthermore, research has shown

that Asian Americans are the most economically divided group in the United States in terms of wealth.⁶⁴ This refutes the assumption that all Asian Americans are equally prosperous and reinforces that ethnic differentiations matter in analyses of API communities.

- ▶ Advocate for more Pacific Islander and Southeast Asian inclusion in API representation, as East Asian heritage is most likely to be represented. As a survey respondent emphasized, there is a need for “more API executives and creatives in front of and behind the camera...more [inclusion] of South and South East Asians and Pacific Islanders. There’s virtually no Pacific Islander representation...[there should be] more access and opportunity because there is not a lack of talent.”

MORE access to funding, investments, and opportunities:

- ▶ Greenlight stories written about API characters by API writers.
- ▶ Invest in the API talent pipeline by supporting nonprofit organizations and film festivals that are committed to fortifying the pipeline, and through mentorship and fellowship opportunities. As a respondent from the survey noted, “there aren’t

enough paths, mentorships or opportunities that specifically address the Asian American community” in entertainment media.

- ▶ Invest in the production and marketing budgets of API-led films to ensure they reach mainstream audiences and are not only seen by API communities. At the same time, however, ensure that API critics and journalists are given opportunities to cover films visibly and candidly. That way, they can identify any problems and elevate the best API-led films with wider audiences.
- ▶ Hire and empower more API entertainment executives and leaders who can advocate for meaningful investments in API stories.

MORE balance in storytelling:

- ▶ Good representation creates more opportunities in everyday stories and tells more stories overall that speak to individual ethnic experiences. Cast more API actors in movies of all genres so API people can see themselves as superheroes and romantic leads. But also create more projects that speak to unique API experiences.

- ▶ Recognize the difference between representation and tokenization. One respondent highlighted that, “there is a fine line between tokenization and representation.”
- ▶ When telling API stories, show the good and the bad. Let API characters be dynamic, funny, flawed, and messy, and avoid reinforcing common tropes or stereotypes. Humanizing API characters begins with multidimensional portrayals. As one respondent put it, “I would like to see us as empowered and edgy.” When someone is portrayed as simply a Model Minority or a Shop Owner, flattens their character and neglects more dimensionality.
- ▶ Recognize that racism is unfortunately real and that pretending it does not exist contributes to the problem.⁶⁵ The cultural assumption that Asians don’t face racism in this country because they are stereotyped as being “successful” is harmful and contributes to violence against Asian people.
- ▶ Center API characters and experiences. Move APIs to the center of the frame rather than keeping them on the margins as a sidekick or un/underdeveloped character supporting a white protagonist.
- ▶ Tell more varied stories and be mindful of overrepresented stories. There is a danger in the single story. For example, not all Vietnamese stories need to be about the Vietnam War or the trauma of being a refugee.