

**Feisty Geishas, Friendly Dragon Ladies and Imperfect Model Minorities:  
The New Asian Women of YouTube**

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## INTRODUCTION

"You can't talk about being Asian in media or Asian roles in media without opening a can of worms."

—Natalie Tran, 2015, in a speech at Brown University

This is how Natalie Tran, a content creator on YouTube, describes her feelings toward the topic of Asians in media. It is not a topic for small talk, but instead, is one that cannot be fully understood without touching on subjects like racism, personal identity, community and familial expectations. However, one thing is for sure: the road is difficult for Asians in the creative field. Contrary to popular belief, it is not because of discouragement from Asian parents—a common preconception about Asian households that seems to circulate in mainstream depictions. It is rather because there are very few Asian people who have successfully established themselves in the industry. Film and television in particular offer limited freedom for Asian creatives to instill their particular, complex cultural backgrounds and perspectives. Asian actors in the mainstream also find themselves pressured to sacrifice individuality by playing roles that lean into stereotypes. However, the video sharing platform YouTube has emerged as a safe haven for aspiring Asian creatives, providing them with a free place to host their original video content as well as a potential audience to watch it. This thesis focuses specifically on three of YouTube's most prominent female Asian comedians, Anna Akana, Natalie Tran and Lilly Singh. Through deciphering their respective video content and mannerisms, I argue that with their videos acting like an invisible guiding hand, they are not only redefining what it means to be an Asian woman, but through appropriating the functions of YouTube to challenge the dominant culture, they are redesigning the future landscape of digital media for marginalized groups, demonstrating a fraction of YouTube's potential.

For the context of my topic, it is best to have a sense of traditional media's recent interaction with Asian actors and characters. Amid calls for diversity and equality in media representation in recent decades, film and television executives have begun casting more people of colour. Television shows that feature and centre on the challenges and tensions met by everyday African Americans are seen today through shows such as *Atlanta* and *Black-ish*. These recent shows follow in the footsteps of popular 1990s sitcoms such as *Fresh Prince of Bel Air* (1990-1996), *Family Matters* (1989-1998) and the *Cosby Show* (1984-1992). The past decade has also seen the emergence of new television shows featuring casts of Latin American heritage, such as *Ugly Betty* (2006-2010), *Jane the Virgin* (2014-present) and *One Day at a Time* (2017-present). These new additions are prominent in North America as they are part of mainstream English-language production and are distinct from telenovelas.

Television shows composed of a primarily Asian cast are less prevalent but still exist nonetheless. Shows such as *Fresh Off the Boat* (2015-present), a sitcom about an immigrant Chinese family based on the memoirs of chef Eddie Huang, and *Kim's Convenience* (2016-present), a Canadian sitcom about the intergenerational conflict in a Korean immigrant household, are the two most recent shows that feature an all-Asian cast. Before them, there was the television show *All American Girl* (1994-1995), which starred comedian Margaret Cho as a rebellious teenager from a traditional Korean-American household. The series received heavy criticism from viewers, and lasted only one season.

Asian American creatives are also increasingly stepping into the task of being the whole package as show creator, writer and actor for shows such as *The Mindy Project* (2012-2017), which portrays a second-generation, Ivy League-educated Indian female doctor's quest for love, and *Master of None* (2015-present), which features an Indian man navigating the world as an

aspiring actor and experiencing heartbreak throughout. Although these shows do not feature all-Asian casts, they do feature Asian protagonists.

The difference between the narratives of the two groups (shows written for Asians by mostly non-Asian writers, and shows written by and for Asians) is distinct. Television shows with Asian actors playing roles written for them by majority white writers tend to base the show on characters overcoming problems based on their status as immigrants. For example, in *Fresh Off the Boat*, Jessica's birth name is Chu Tsai Hsia, but because no one in college could pronounce her name, she felt obligated to change it to "Bob", after her favourite haircut. However, she soon changed it to Jessica after learning that the name Bob is usually for boys. Besides that, Jessica is also known for her no nonsense attitude, her love for good deals, her superstitious tendencies and her opposition of her children pursuing artistic fields. These characteristics are all in line with traditional stereotypes of Asians from a white perspective.

On the other hand, the second group of television shows, in which actors play roles they wrote for themselves, have a different flair. For instance, based on showrunner Mindy Kaling's background, her character in *The Mindy Project* is from an Indian American family as well. Although having what some may consider a stereotypical profession as a doctor with a prestigious Ivy League education, her challenges in the show do not surround her second-generation status. Rather, the show is Kaling's homage for her love of Hollywood romantic comedies, for which she wrote a role that would fill the gap for an Asian protagonist in a predominantly white movie genre. The show follows her character's successes and trials with career and love, and tackles realistic subjects such as being a working mother. Kaling is a rare example of a leading South Asian woman who gets to tell her story as creator, showrunner and actress in mainstream Hollywood. Her namesake character is refreshing in that she is smart and

successful, but also vulnerable and at times, high-maintenance. Her character is relatable, and the show's success is a testament to the possibilities of having Asians in the entertainment industry produce and create their content. Despite their different platforms, the subjects of this thesis are, in many ways, similar to Kaling as they are owning and producing their content and vision.

It is undeniably a positive sign of progression to have Asian characters appear regularly on people's television sets. At times, it is easy to confuse an increased exposure to an increase in positive representation and not to approach these presented images with a critical eye. There is still a long way to go for well-rounded representations of Asians, and the implications of having Asians in the creative field can only be promising: who else has the ability to create realistic Asian characters with true, relatable struggles, dealing with obstacles that are not only about their status as immigrants, but as parents, as children, as coworkers, and as significant others?

Of course, Asian characters are not only active in the aforementioned shows. Asian actors are in fact scattered across television and film, but they are rarely, if not never, cast in the leading role. And even if they are in roles with a significant amount of screen time, their characters are often presented as a dramatic or comedic foil to the white leading character, to enhance their likability or their intellect. For example, Cristina Yang from *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-present), and Rajesh Koothrappali from *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-present) are both supporting characters in very popular television shows but with very different narratives. And as we look deeper into the characterization of these Asian American characters, it becomes evident that there is a serious divide between the sexes.

Rajesh Koothrappali in *The Big Bang Theory* is a Cambridge-educated astrophysicist originally from India. He is slightly ignorant of American culture, having stereotypically “nerdy”

interests such as comic books. As a Hindu, he believes that he should willingly suffer by putting up with others' ignorance of his culture and background to ensure he is rewarded in the afterlife by being "reincarnated" as a wealthy man. Although from a privileged background, he sometimes alters his upbringing to whatever reaps the most advantage. He also refuses to speak with women because of a selective mutism disorder, but overcomes it with the consumption of alcohol, which often leads to awkward and comical moments.

Cristina Yang in Grey's Anatomy is a Stanford-educated surgeon. Audiences quickly get a clear picture of who Cristina is as a person: she is incredibly intelligent and she knows it. She is determined to be "the greatest cardio surgeon" there is, stopping at nothing for her goals (allusions are made to her having slept with her professors for a better grade). Cristina's biggest adversity is her choice of love or career. Ultimately, she chooses to leave a loving relationship in order to dedicate her life to her career.

To draw a comparison, Rajesh is portrayed as the clueless, tactless immigrant who is oblivious to local norms and customs, getting himself into mischief, while Cristina is the icy cold, headstrong woman who eventually chooses her career over love. Rajesh, like many other Asian American male characters, is beloved for his goofy tendencies, while Cristina undergoes massive heartbreaks and conflicts, while often being criticized by her peers and superiors as being smart, cold and brooding. This great divide between the sexes is, of course, problematic. Rajesh and Cristina are both highly educated characters with respectable occupations, but their dedication to their careers is received differently. For Rajesh, his career seems to come naturally, and his encounters with women do not seem to negatively impact his career, nor do they attract unsolicited advice from his friends. In the case of Cristina, the choice always seems to be either career or love, as Cristina does not believe she is capable of both. Love seems to always interfere

with her duties as a surgeon, and causes conflicts between her and her loved ones. In short, this comparison between Rajesh and Cristina speaks volumes. Why does a passion for one's career come across as reasonable and even noble for men? Why are women who are career-driven represented as heartless and negative? In later parts of this thesis, I will explore the ways in which the content of Asian female comedians on YouTube differs in terms of owning their identity, and presenting an image of an Asian womanhood that is not rooted in conflict or suffering.

Certainly, the cold-careerist woman is only one of numerous narratives that exist within the onscreen representation of Asian women. For the past two decades, Lucy Liu has been perhaps the most iconic Asian-American actress in Hollywood. Broadly speaking, when viewed critically, her portrayals could be condensed into another stereotype that is the dangerous seductress. A few of her notable roles include Ling Woo in the legal drama *Ally McBeal*, Alex Munday in the *Charlie's Angels* film franchise, and O-Ren Ishii in the film *Kill Bill*, all three major roles rendering her as a beautiful but aggressive Asian woman: Ling Woo, the Chinese-American lawyer who is hypersexualized, "the embodiment of sexuality...the seductive temptress and expert in eroticism" (Patton, 2001, p. 250); Alex Munday, the intelligent spy who is able to conform into different identities to solve cases; and O-Ren Ishii, the Japanese assassin who is not afraid to seduce her enemies to entrap them for killing. This concurrent characterization of Asian women as being the dangerous seductress is one of the many themes that run through Hollywood portrayals, as illustrated in Jessica Hagedorn's article "Asian Women in Film: No Joy, No Luck". Hagedorn bases her research on the analysis of multiple films, and in short finds traditional Hollywood portrayals of Asian women falling into common categories such as the "dragon

lady", "the prostitute", or "the submissive girl". Her article will be more closely discussed in the literature review chapter.

The above examples together only form a small part of existing Asian Americans in mainstream media. In essence, it is safe to say that for characters created by non-Asian writers, the characters mainly serve to embellish the show by offering comic relief or by bringing in dramatic effect. Asian female characters are also further reduced into simple, unrelatable categories such as the perfect mother or the sex-crazed threat.

However, alternative media platforms present new opportunities for Asian women to work against these stereotypes by representing their experiences and telling their stories on their own terms. YouTube provides the everyday person with a camera or webcam the opportunity to produce videos of virtually anything they fancy. And even more importantly, it gives people without financial backing or the support of major film and television studios the opportunity to create and share their own original content. YouTube then is a two-dimensional platform as it, on one hand, gives any individual a platform to actively convey messages, and on the other hand, gives viewers countless opportunities and freedom to form connections with whomever they find on YouTube. With lax content restrictions, YouTube is a platform which offers such content creators the possibility of producing material that overcomes expected Hollywood stereotypes, while at the same time injecting their own ideologies and morals.

However, YouTube, like many other social platforms, has its limitations. For one, viewership is not guaranteed. The success experienced by the site's content creators varies, and only a handful of them garner a sizeable audience that will support them and return to enjoy other video uploads. YouTube is a platform which encourages freedom in creation and user

agency, and in some cases creators might find themselves monetarily compensated by the company, but only if the uploaded content abides by YouTube's Community Guidelines and Terms of Service. The success of monetization has led to the beginning of a new career path, as content creators increasingly decide to pursue YouTube as a full-time career. But with the chance of monetization, some creators, or "YouTubers", might find their creative motivation relocated in expanding their audiences in hopes of garnering advertising revenues, which in turn might interfere with their content's authenticity. This is mostly seen in beauty-related videos, where some content creators produce videos akin to commercials, promoting products instead of providing critical reviews.

Despite these limitations, considering the goldmine of opportunities (the potential for an abundant audience, and the freedom of creation and unfiltered speech) and with the persistence of stereotypes in current mass media, the use of YouTube as a broadcasting platform stands as a promising direction for many independent creatives to pursue and develop.

The launch of YouTube in 2005 can be considered a game changer for many second-generation Asian females. Throughout this thesis I examine the qualities of popular Asian female comedians on YouTube that make them so strikingly different and refreshing in comparison to traditional portrayals in Hollywood, and in turn I work to answer the question of how new media platforms—in this case, YouTube—help propagate what I call “the new Asian women,” they that are funny, true, and relatable.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **The History of Asian Women's Representation in Television and Film**

Much of the literature about the on-screen representation of women of colour focuses on African American women (Rutherford, 1990; Dorworth & Henry, 1992; Read, 1996). The limited literature present that discusses the on-screen representation of Asian people (Dissanayake, 1994; Hamamoto, 1994; Xing, 1998; Lee, 2006) establishes the understanding of on-screen Asian representation as a set of images that are built from perpetuated colonial views. In other words, current Asian representation is heavily influenced not only by Westerners' shallow understanding of non-Western cultures, but also by dominant Western political views. This is most commonly seen in representations that feature both white and Asian men, as their representations are built with the intention to honour the greatness of white men through a comparison with lacklustre Asian men. When expressed on-screen, this understanding, which is seldom challenged successfully, has gradually progressed into a common narrative as these shallow portrayals are often circulated and reused in different Asian representations in television and film creating persistent tropes.

Brooks & Hebert (2006) discuss gendered distinctions in the depictions of Asian men and women. Asian men in general are more inclined to be tied into the "Yellow Peril" trope in mainstream North American media. It is a trope that represents an anti-Asian sentiment, which arose in North America in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in the midst of growing numbers of Chinese, Japanese and South American immigrants. While the term "Yellow Peril" evokes the openly xenophobic and racist rhetoric of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the problematic representations that it describes have not vanished in the intervening decades. This trope can be

seen through examples where Asian men or men with Asian descent are depicted as crime lords, mobsters, or corrupt businessmen on-screen, while "Asian women [and Latina] women are often portrayed in the media as the exotic, sexualized other" (p. 302). Brooks & Hebert's article emphasizes the difference in portrayal between Asian men and women: "Most often these [Asian] men are not seen as possessing traditionally dominant masculine characteristics—most notably sexual prowess...The desexualized or effeminate Asian male stereotype works in conjunction with depictions of Asian women as ultrafeminine sexual objects used by white men to emasculate Asian men" (p. 307). Brooks & Hebert's (2006) "white men" represent the aforementioned "Western colonial power" that has successfully put both Asian sexes against each other—in on-screen portrayals, Asian men are less physically powerful and are sexually inept, in contrast to the aura of physical and sexual dominance held by white men. Asian men are so emasculated in these portrayals that they have trouble gaining the respect of Asian women, who are inevitably smitten with the strong white men in return.

However, despite Brooks & Hebert's (2006) commendable efforts in recognizing the gender difference in on-screen portrayals, their article has its limitations. First, it does not go in-depth on the cultural history of Asian representation, and does not provide concrete examples of portrayals. Second, it overlooks the diversity within the Asian community by not providing insight into the realities of Asian men and women, which in turn oversimplifies the gender stereotypes. It also fails to address the paradox of the representation of Asian men—on one hand they are depicted as crime lords and mobsters, but on the other hand they are presented as being weak and sexually inept—and this in turn lessens their argument's credibility. Brooks & Hebert (2006) acknowledge the lack of scholarship on Asian representation in comparison to that on African American representation, yet they forgo the opportunity to further contribute to this

scholarship by categorizing Asian and Native American men, and Asian and Latina women together to analyze as a group. This is rather counterproductive, as it unjustly condenses two completely different ethnicities and cultures into one category. For readers, this approach could come across as misleading and ineffective to their article's emphasis. Furthermore, they reduce the representation of Asian women into a single stereotype of "ultrafeminine, sexual objects" (Brooks & Hebert, 2006, p. 307). This stereotype is one of many that exists in literature by other scholars.

Mok (1998), like Brooks & Hebert (2006), observes that Asian portrayals are situated under the dominance of a white population, especially agreeing with the deliberately negative construction of Asian men by white men to enhance their own sexual prowess. But Mok (1998) places this topic into historical and political context. For instance, she credits the increasing presence of Asian characters in Western films and television to the rise of Mao Zedong in the People's Republic of China in 1949. Communism under Mao "gave the United States a new enemy to focus on in films" (1998, p. 188) as the growing ideology conflicted with the United States' (and the rest of North America's) democratic and capitalistic ideals.

In the 1950s, the on-screen representation of Asian women was no longer a merely ambiguous, identity-less, ultrafeminine being. Instead, these characteristics were projected on-screen into the being of the *geisha*, also known the *lotus blossom*, "whose only desire was to selflessly cater to the whims of men" (Mok, 1998, p. 192). During that period, depictions of Japanese women were built from recollections of United States servicemen who returned after the war, leading to early images of Japanese women on-screen that framed them as caring and catering in nature: "washing their backs, providing massages, ultimately sacrificing their lives to keep men happy" (Mok, 1998, p. 192). It is important to understand that how important such representations of

Asian women were in the formation of early stereotypes, during this post-war period when people were more inclined to spend leisure time watching television or visiting the cinema. Post-war conflicting emotions about nationality and patriotism would also play into audiences' reception of these images. Given that these representations were sustained and built from recollections of white United States servicemen, these stereotypical depictions support the notion that Asian characters on-screen were rooted in Western colonial power.

Impacting both sexes, the 1960s as Mok (1998) describes, saw the rise of the *model minority* image of Asian Americans (people of Asian descent residing in the United States). She credits the trope's rise in Hollywood to the ignition of the Civil Rights Movement led by another minority in American society: African Americans. The model minority image of Asian Americans is flattering on the surface: Asian Americans are disciplined, hardworking, and have strong family values; gone are the days of visibly demeaning images, the Asians finally have it together! However, Hollywood, by showing Asian Americans especially as a model minority, leaves a subtle message for struggling African Americans, that to be successful in integration with the dominant (white) culture they will need to be orderly and disciplined like their Asian American counterparts. This competition, a pitting of two minority racial groups against each other, is not at all empowering or constructive to either group. It is an act that is once more initiated by the dominant culture in hopes to subdue the voices of both parties, and to hold reins in their representation. For Asians, it can be considered as a backhanded compliment, as this seemingly flattering representation of Asian Americans is a manifestation of racist ideologies, and only exists to aid the hegemonic group in its political means. It is part of the dominant culture's desire to limit the mediated representation of people of colour. This period also led to the perpetuation of Asian Americans as a "homogenous racial group" (Mok, 1998, p. 192), as

with this setting, in the future all minorities will be set to be compared against them. It is a homogeneity that still persists into the present, and it is the basis for sentiments such as "Asians are good at math" or "Asians have excellent family morals."

Characterizations like these are not helpful in fostering collective exchange and empowerment with fellow minority groups. They are also unhelpful in building a stronger identity for Asian-Americans, as their on-screen counterparts are unrelatable. Therefore, it is obvious here that on-screen media representation is extremely important in influencing understanding of Asian-Americans both from an internal and an external perspective. My study applies this understanding to the realm of digital media, and examines content creators' videos with this effect in mind, as they, too, are paving new ways to understand the diversity among Asian people. Once again, all mass media images of Asian Americans carry a political agenda, even those that might initially appear innocent and constructive.

The impact of the birth of the Model Minority stereotype in the 1960s continued to influence Asian American women into the 1980s. Of course, never without larger political implications, Asian American women gradually came to be more accepted onscreen as they reached that period. As Mok (1998) states, "some researchers have argued that minority women have an easier time being accepted by White society in that they do not pose as much of a threat to the status quo as do their male counterparts" (p. 193). She also identifies journalist Connie Chung as the quintessential image of the model minority stereotype with power only under the presence of a white man (Mok, 1998, p.193). As Connie Chung co-anchored the national CBS Evening News with Dan Rather, "this pairing of an Asian American woman and a White man typified pairings of some news anchors around the country in large metropolitan cities [but] Asian American men were rarely seen in such prominent, high profile positions" (Mok, 1998, p.

193). Connie Chung's importance cannot be overstated. She set the bar for the possibilities for Asian women journalists and she also set the mold for future journalistic representations. It is very likely that, because of her appearance on-screen, many major cities started formatting their anchors in the same way.

Teresa Mok's article (1998) surely helps pave a clearer understanding of the progression of depictions of Asian women on-screen. She provides historical background, and manages to bring readers' attention to subjects outside of the fictional realm (such as Connie Chung). Towards the end of her article, Mok also observes that Asian American women receive gentler reception than do Asian American men. This reinforces the earlier observation made in the Introduction chapter, that there is still a great divide between the sexes. It also emphasizes on the importance of strong, realistic portrayals of Asian women. It is often the case that media portrayals fail to differentiate between Asians and Asian Americans, it is also often the case that different communities within the larger Asian population are left uncredited. However, one issue remains as Mok treats depictions of Asian American women as less severe than they actually are, only reducing these depictions into two categories: *the geisha* and *the model minority*. There is, in fact, more to the story. Asians themselves, as a group, are diverse in terms of communities. For Asian women, identity is especially complicated. Asian women are not simply geishas or model minorities, and they are not political tools to be used; they are, in fact, complex beings who often undergo identity crises while balancing different roles as mother, daughter, coworker, and the like, but they do this while also balancing the act of preserving their culture and heritage in a Western upbringing.

Jessica Hagedorn's 1994 magazine article "Asian Women in Film: No Joy, No Luck," published in *Ms.* magazine and aiming at a less academic and more popular audience, dissects

different roles and characters played by Asian women in film. Much like Mok's article, Hagedorn takes a chronological approach, recognizes the stereotype of *the geisha* and *the model minority*, but takes one step further in recognizing the deeper conflicts that exist within portrayals of Asian women. Depictions of Asian women, Hagedorn observes, are always "a dichotomy of the dragon lady and the lotus blossom" (Hagedorn, 1994, p.75). In other words, Asian women on-screen are either good or bad: "If we are 'good', we are childlike, submissive, silent, and eager for sex, or tragic victims....and if we are not silent, suffering doormats, we are demonized dragon ladies—cunning deceitful, sexual provocateurs." (Hagedorn, 1994, p. 74). Hagedorn breaks with the common sentiment of scholars by proposing the dragon lady stereotype as a form of Yellow Peril, which was largely considered as a description for Asian male depictions (Mok, 1998; Yen, 2000; Brooks & Hebert, 2006). This is interesting as it is an introduction of a deviant Asian woman, as the dragon lady is neither submissive nor a model minority. However, it is another example of the extreme nature of on-screen representations of Asian women. Again, Asian women are always either this or that, but never both. However deviant an Asian woman is, there is always a motivation that the narrative shies away from. Hagedorn also describes various dragon lady depictions as borderline feminist icons. For example, in the 1920s and 1930s, Anna May Wong was the only well-known Asian female *star*, and starred in the film *Shanghai Express* (1932) "as a villain slithering around in a slinky gown [which] is at least, gratifying to watch, neither servile nor passive" (p. 75). This "servile nor passive" attitude is somewhat closer to a realistic characterization of Asian women, as being a little bit of both. However, it is still rooted in a stereotypically costumed and personalized character role. Therefore, with this limitation, could Anna May Wong truly be considered a borderline feminist icon? The answer to this question could very well be dependent on the

viewer. In Anna May Wong's era, the simple appearance of an Asian woman on-screen would already be considered remarkable; the actual nature of the character before the audiences' eyes would be glossed over. However, in the present, characters like hers would be considered a caricature more than a feminist icon, and a huge part of that decision would be based on her attitude and wardrobe. That said, perhaps there is a chance for development, a modern retake of the dragon lady. With the right tools, there is no claiming that it is impossible to be a feminist icon while operating within a stereotyped role.

Another iconic film that depicts such dragon ladies is *Year of the Dragon* (1985). The film follows two Jade Cobra girls who are "mere background to the white male foreground/focus" (Hagedorn, 1994, p.75), but who end up remaining in audiences' memory with their defiant nature and daring costumes. What strikes me is the level of captivation many audience members (according to Hagedorn) found within the two Jade Cobra girls. Despite the fact that they were intended to serve as background colour, these two actresses managed to grab the attention of the audience. This suggests that in spite of their minor roles, these Asian actresses had a great deal of talent, and were forced to make do with limited resources, providing memorable performances even within the framework of their limited onscreen visibility.

Hagedorn also analyzes a famous film that features an all-Asian, all-female main cast: *The Joy Luck Club* (1993). Compared to the previous two film examples, *The Joy Luck Club* minimizes the dragon lady stereotype but instead focuses on the lotus blossom/geisha caricature. All the women in the film suffer horrific circumstances and endure heartbreaking sacrifices (including sexual abuse, loss of love, and the forced abandonment of children). Hagedorn finds that most Asian viewers, although sad about the film's events, were joyous about the film's success. Unless watched with a critical eye, Hagedorn also finds there to not be any immediate

reaction to the on-screen women's narratives. Being a film that is directed by a Chinese American man, Wayne Wang, and cowritten and coproduced by a Chinese American woman, Amy Tan, there is no doubt there is a lot to be thankful for, but as Hagedorn quotes a fellow Chinese Filipino writer as saying, "Must ethnicity only be equated with suffering?" (2004, p.76). To most, the film is a celebration of Asian talent in the film industry, but to some, it is a poignant affair, and a testimony of the limitation of storylines available to Asian actors as a whole, and to what sells in the film industry. Do film producers really think that the Asian stories that are worth telling are those that involve endless suffering? Do Asians really need to be hurt in order to have a unique character? This trend once again contributes to the persistence of stereotypes that surface in Asian roles again and again. Asians on-screen are rarely in-between; they are either extremely comic, subdued, or suffering.

Deriving from a film perspective, Hagedorn is successful in recognizing the lack of diversity in the roles and characters for Asian women as they seem to be perpetually stuck in the dragon lady/lotus blossom dichotomy, and for those without character, they are categorized as a boring model minority. Somehow Hollywood has fallen into the belief that Asian women are there as "objects of desire or derision; [they] exist to provide sex, color, and texture in what is essentially a white man's world" (Hagedorn, 1994, p. 78). Furthermore, this supports the notion of an industry that caters to white spectators and is dominated by white people's perspectives. With limited roles that circulate around to a limited number of Asian actors and actresses, it may be time to consider a new medium to showcase and discover what other Asian creatives have to say.

Throughout the literature on the representation of Asian people onscreen, it seems to be universally agreed upon that the depictions of Asian men and women are hugely influenced by

the presence of the figurative white man, and the literal white men who are in charge of film studios and creative directions. Moreover, it is also agreed upon that representations of Asians are designed with a political agenda in mind. With this in mind, it can be easily understood that the main struggles that Asian women have are against an industry dominated by a white, masculine perspective, one that is disinclined to create roles that represent Asian women as strong figures in a mainly white population. However, Xing (1998) argues, "Asian American cinema can...be judged as a tradition in its own right, both for its unique cultural and discursive practices, and for its complex dialectical relationship with Hollywood narrative and other forms of Asian American art" (p. 32). The study of Asian representation is understanding that the conflict does not simply lie on the general surface power struggle with Hollywood executives, but it is one that concerns the deeper unspoken dual battle that Asians face with not only a white gaze but with each other—*how do we truly establish our unique selves when we are busy fighting the mainstream?* And for Asian women, the struggle applies just as well: *how do we break free from the white gaze? How do we establish ourselves apart from the triad of stereotypes of the geisha, the model minority, and the dragon lady?*

### **Women in Visual Representation**

Research on the visual representation of women is vast; there is a substantial body of scholarly literature engaging with the history of visual representations of women, with much of it focusing on the years preceding the emergence of film and television (Nead, 1988; Gutwirth, 1992; Pointon, 1997). Literature on the visual representation of women in recent years tends to regard the term "visual representation" as synonymous with "on-screen": much of this research shares a view that the representation of women is mainly negative in nature and is influenced by

background power figures. In addition, white women are mostly taken as the default subjects in this scholarship.

David Gauntlett (2001) explores the relationship between media, gender and identity, discussing the contemporary representation of gender on-screen. Gauntlett establishes the stereotypical inequality that exists in older television and film, with more men having the spotlight in comparison to women. In the 10-15 years preceding Gauntlett's publication, he notes that men and women working side-by-side as equals has become the norm, meaning that the character of "the working woman" has integrated into mainstream culture over the years. However, despite the side-by-side dynamic in the workplace, women are still subjected to challenges such as objectification and discrimination. Outward criticisms have forced show-runners and advertisers to think twice before casting the victim as a frail woman. He credits the long-running television show *Friends* as an icon of the new era of television, where the line of masculinity and femininity is blurred. Although the 1990s also heavily featured shows with a male lead, as Gauntlett lists shows such as *ER*, *Dawson's Creek*, *The West Wing* and *Frasier*, the 1990s also witnessed the rise of successful, professional women-driven shows such as *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. However, the latter two shows still mainly focus on the storyline of the female protagonist looking for love. Gauntlett describes similar findings for women in contemporary film, advertisements and even pop music: that women are gradually able to share the stage with men as their physical equals. For example, Madonna could easily request to share a stage with Prince, without experiencing doubts from others who question her ability as a female performer. Gauntlett identifies the 1990s as a period that witnessed the leap of women's presence in traditional media, but also notes that the race to total equality in men and women's media presence is a long one. Women might be more prevalent as leads on-screen, but there are

still a lot of power struggles in the background that would influence how a female character is portrayed. Ally McBeal might be the lead on-screen and might be able to share as much screen-time as her male counterpart without question, but decisions on her characterization and portrayal are mostly made by men behind the scenes.

However, apart from the book's limitations that Gauntlett (2001) acknowledges—including lack of criticism of media texts, focus on mainstream media, and a lack of clarity around the processes through which gender is produced and acquired—there are still points that Gauntlett overlooks. Gauntlett identifies existing inequalities between men and women on-screen, but fails to fully address and explain the underlying causes of it such as the political economy of Hollywood, and television and film production in general. Hollywood is a mecca of conglomerates, all existing in forms of decision-making hierarchies. Their products are what most people consume in the media on a daily basis. With this in mind, it is only prudent to look further in understanding the mechanics of Hollywood and other mass media productions, for in the flaws and gaps in decision-making bodies, we might gain clarity in understanding how a certain narrative is being constructed. Usually this sheds light on what needs to change, and offers good solutions.

Byerly & Ross's book *Women and Media* (2006) is similar to Gauntlett's analysis as they look into representations of women among different forms of media. However, their writing takes a feminist perspective, and focuses on how women can shift the pre-existing agenda into an equal media enterprise. Byerly & Ross (2006) also explain what kind of power influence can alter women's representation on-screen. As they state, "The ways in which media represent the female subject and the experiences of women working in media organizations themselves are the product of a world system of patriarchal capitalism whose globalizing tentacles currently

threaten to strangle the fragile flower of change" (p. 75). This system is a dominant force in the political economy of television and film production, as over the years smaller media companies have merged into large media conglomerates known as the Big Five: Comcast, The Walt Disney Company, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Fox, Time Warner, and National Amusements. At the time of Byerly and Ross's writing, these conglomerates held approximately 90% of the media in the United States alone. With big ownership comes big power, and these conglomerates wield massive influence over the way information is communicated to audience. The reason, as Byerly & Ross (2006) put forth, that there are still inaccurate representations of women in media is because of the lack of female leadership in these media companies. As of 2002, across the field of telecommunications and e-commerce alone, "women [made] up only 13 percent of the top executives, and only 9 percent of individuals on boards of directors. Women [made] up only 26 percent of local TV news directors, 17 percent of local TV general managers, and 13 percent of the general managers at radio stations" (Byerly & Ross, 2006, p. 90). Not only do women struggle to compete for executive or leadership positions in a predominantly male field; the lucky women who manage to gain leadership positions are often victims of harassment and unfair treatment in the workplace (Byerly & Ross, 2006, p. 92). Women struggle to find a unique voice and place in the media, both on-screen and off-screen. The relevance of Byerly & Ross' findings is significant: the economic and creative pressures and limitations of these major studios present major barriers to entry for minority women. Alternative platforms such as YouTube present different possibilities, offering aspiring minority women creatives the autonomy needed to successfully tell their stories. With greater control over their portrayals through online platforms like YouTube, Asian women have an opportunity to set in motion a new view of Asian women that could enrich and deepen the portrayals of Asian women in media more broadly.

Byerly & Ross (2006) successfully illustrate the obstacles faced by women both in front of the camera and in executive positions in media. They also recognize that women come in different colours (Byerly & Ross, 2006, p. 29). However, they only mention the experiences of African American women, and neglect to discuss the experiences of other minority women.

"Hateful Contraries: Media Images of Asian Women" by Pratibha Parmar (2003) echoes Gauntlett (2001) and Byerly & Ross (2006) in stating that media images of women (Asian women as Parmar specifies in her article) are highly influenced by underlying power plays. Parmar (2003) considers images of Asian women to be "very much rooted in...the political and social systems of domination," arguing that they "cannot be divorced from the processes of struggle that Asian women are involved in" (p. 287). In current times, Parmar's words might not be as relatable. Of course, this is not to undermine the entrenched stereotypes that the previous sections have established—Asian women are, in most times, deprived of substantial roles in traditional media, and fitted into categories that do little to reflect values and experiences that are true to their identity. There is also no doubt that the difficult experiences of colonization and immigration have played a part in the construction of media images and representations of Asian women, but to claim that all images of Asian women are rooted in misery is to ignore all other types of portrayals in present times.

The discussion of Asian American representation via new media has been discussed by various scholars (Ono & Pham, 2009; Ng, 2012; Chun 2013). YouTube, for instance, has been regarded as a hotspot for Asian Americans to vocalize their individuality, creativity and identity as people of Asian heritage (Balance, 2012; Sato, 2012; Guo & Lee, 2013; Jensen, 2016). Guo and Lee (2013), in particular, utilize what they call a "hybrid vernacular discourse model" (p. 392) to analyze Asian YouTube creators Ryan Higa and Kevin Wu in terms of their content,

agency and subjectivity (pp. 396-397). They observe that Higa and Wu may both be purposefully taking advantage of existing Asian American stereotypes in order to critique them in a comic way, as by doing so they are relating to their audience and are less likely to offend them (Guo & Lee, 2013, p. 403). They, however, regard Higa and Wu's choice of foregrounding entertainment and humour as rendering their underlying message ineffectual and "ambivalent" (Guo & Lee, 2013, p. 403). I disagree with their framing. For one, as discussed in the next section of this literature review, comedy is extremely useful in presenting politically charged messages to a wide audience, as it is a method of outreach that tends to cause less friction than more direct and serious modes would. And second, as I will discuss in my analysis of Asian female comedians on YouTube, I believe that it is the use of comedy that not only aids these content creators in relating to audiences with similar backgrounds, but also aids in reaching a broader audience with these messages. If these comedians were to simply blatantly critique the Asian American status quo in mainstream media, these criticisms would likely not attract the same degree of attention and be met with the same degree of receptiveness as do their comedic and often subversive takes on Asian female identity and the stereotypes Asian women face.

My thesis aims to dissect images of Asian women that appear on new media platforms. The majority of the literature discussed in this section is not able to treat new media platforms such as YouTube as a viable subject of research, as many of these platforms had not yet been introduced when most of these studies were published. As Gauntlett (2001) states, "it is more-or-less impossible to provide a meaningful analysis of 'representations of gender on the Internet' because there is no 'mainstream' that a majority of people are looking at" (p. 53). Gauntlett's book and much other relevant literature was written about ten years ago, but since then, YouTube has surfaced into a one of the major new media companies that a majority of people

are looking at as areas of research in regards to its aspects of cross-screen communication, grassroots origins, and participatory culture (Haridakis & Hanson, 2009; Tolson, 2010; Strangelove, 2010; Smith et al., 2012; Burgess & Green, 2013). Given this surge of scholarly interest in platforms like YouTube, now is the time to examine YouTube's impact on the visual representation of women, and in particular, Asian women.

### **Women and Comedy**

Scholarly literature on comedy often emphasizes the fact that looking critically at humour can tell us much about society's reigning values. As Wagg (1998) states "Comedy [operates] in relation to powerful social and political ideas, assuming them, undermining them, or perhaps, challenging them" (p. xii).

In 1901, *Harper's Bazaar* published an article titled "Have Women a Sense of Humour?" Over a century later, *Vanity Fair* published an article titled "Why Women Aren't Funny" (Wagner, 2011, p.35). In spite of the gap of over a century separating these two articles, a perception has persisted among some cultural commentators that women simply are not funny. According to Wagner (2011), this can be summed up as by-product of gender roles. Comedy is mostly deemed a masculine occupation, as it is on one hand aggressive in nature (comedians deliver *punchlines*, jokes aim to *kill* the audience), and it also deals with wit and intellect, traits which women have traditionally and inaccurately been characterized as lacking. Comedy is built on social critique and challenges to the status quo, and these are forms of commentary that have historically been regarded as unsuitable for women. This is an unfortunate view not shared by me, but it still lingers in today's society. Especially in the late nineteenth century, ideas about female identity were shaped by the Cult of True Womanhood, an ideology that held that "the

feminine ideal...was known for her morality, passivity, and spirituality, not for her ability to tell a joke" (Wagner, 2011, p. 35). As the definition of what entails a "true woman" changes and shifts as time passes, the perception of women being funny changes as well. Wagner (2011) lays out the causes of the unfunny-women stereotype, but her focus is mainly on how the female comic interacts with American society, and this limits her discussion of the struggles of the female comic, such as the tension between the female comic and the traditional male comedian.

Russell (2002)'s article first acknowledges the struggle of being a female comic: not only is it difficult to be taken seriously on stage; the female comic faces different challenges from her male counterpart as women comics have to actively gain the approval of the audience, while male comics are usually funny "until proven otherwise" (Russell, 2002, p.1). Russell also notes that self-deprecatory humour is more prominently featured in the material of the female comics in her study than the male comics.

According to Russell (2002), self-deprecation is usually considered a type of satire. It involves the subject's self-recognition of their flaws, and in turn utilizes humour to ease the audience into acceptance. In other words, self-deprecatory humour used by female comics is in fact a type of accommodation inflicted on the audience: the female comic "hopes" to gain the approval of the hard-to-please audience by lowering herself in alignment with societal expectations. Moreover, self-deprecation offsets the threat of the female comics. As Russell (2002) states, the female comic is threatening as she shows aggression (in delivering punchlines), symbolizes a need of domination (of the stage and of the audience's attention), and outwardly challenges society's status quo. However, self-deprecation can be extremely helpful to discover or establish common ground both among female comics, and between female comics and their audiences (Russell, 2002). These observations emphasize the complexities that exist within the

work of being a female comic. As this thesis argues, female comedians on YouTube could be seen as utilizing self-deprecating humour as a way to establish a connection with their audience, as well as with each other. It is also "breaking the status quo," through the act of willingly depreciating themselves for their content instead of doing so in accordance with the orders given by a large media company.

Russell's article explains the different dimensions of self-deprecatory humour and the female comic, but has its limitations in that it groups female comics into one category. Caroline Hong's 2009 publication "Funny Asians" discusses Asians in particular within the field of comedians. Among Western depictions, she writes, Asians have not traditionally been considered funny except when the laughs are by Westerners at the expense of Asian characters. For example, Asians will likely be considered funny when situated in a Western setting and observed by a Western audience. Mr. Yunioshi (although played by white actor Mickey Rooney) in the film *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961), is not a funny character alone. But rather, it is because he is a stark contrast to Audrey Hepburn and George Peppard's characters that he is considered a funny man.

Through the analysis of funny Asians in popular culture, Hong establishes that "comedy and humor encompass a set of empowering and effective representational tactics, the transformative potential of which has significant pedagogical and material consequences" (Hong, 2009, p. 3). In this thesis, I will be taking Hong's argument as a point of departure, dissecting the impact of Asian comedians, and identifying frameworks through which to understand the work of Asian female comedians on new media platforms: *what are they trying to say through their uses of comedy? What kinds of potential does this comedy have for expanding the media representation of Asian women and undermining longstanding stereotypes?*

## **Literature Review Conclusion**

As presented, the existing relevant literature aims to identify racial stereotypes found in representations of Asian women on-screen, and to discuss the impact and influence of these stereotypes on viewers. The scholarship so far holds a generally negative view concerning the intersections between media and marginalized minorities, and for minority women who decide to pursue an on-screen, comedic route, the struggle is more significant than it is for their male counterparts. Research has been done on the implications of different stereotypes of Asian women presented traditional media, but hardly any research touches on the reception of Asian portrayals in new media outlets such as social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and video sharing websites like YouTube. Furthermore, there is currently no research that closely examines Asian female comedians, examining how their invisible political hand serves to deconstruct pre-existing stereotype frameworks.

With this thesis, I aim to not only contribute to the literature on racial stereotypes and digital media, but I am further looking at the ways that digital media platforms afford users the possibility of overcoming entrenched stereotypes and representing their experiences on their own terms rather than on outdated terms that oversimplify the experiences and identities of an entire group of people.

## THEORY

### Critical Race Theory

What is race? How is it formulated? How is it understood? How does race play a part in society? How do our experiences as people of a given race influence our identities? These are questions that critical race theorists aim to understand. Rooted in the recognition that race is a matter of socially constructed differences rather than innate biological differences, critical race theory concerns the study of the relationships between race, racism and power.

Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic identify several tenets commonly agreed upon by critical race theorists. First, racism is "ordinary" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 20), a usual way of operation in society. That is, it is normal in society to see race, and it is normal in current society for people of colour to experience different treatment based on their race. Racism is ordinary because it is not acknowledged, and ways of thinking that stress "colourblindness" contribute to this problem by pretending racism does not exist.

Second, critical race theorists widely agree that in society, because of prolonged preferential treatment that white elites and white working-class people experience at the expense of people of colour, the dominant societal system has done little to be rid of the concept of racism. This is known as "interest convergence or materialistic determinism" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 21), which is an extension of the first feature's concept of race being ordinary. In other words, the concept of racism is so ordinary in society that white people have grown accustomed to the feelings of superiority and the material advantages that come from their privilege. Until society has reached a truly racially equal way of operating, racism will exist under the determination of interest and luxury experienced by the dominant.

Third, critical race theory views race and races as social constructs that are “products of social thought and relations” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 21). In other words, race is not inherently bound to one's biology or genetics, but is rather a malleable form of category defined by societal treatment, and as a result is easily disposed of or reshaped by whatever is of most interest. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) claim that this feature reduces people to a lowest common denominator, such as skin colour, and completely ignores higher defining aspects such as personality, interests, and intellect. This third feature of critical race theory is especially useful in understanding the ways in which Asian women are viewed. Asian women have long suffered from reductive, homogenizing treatment as they are reduced to not only their skin colour, but further forcibly fitted into other forms of lowest-common-denominator stereotyping such as being docile, cold-hearted or perfect. These stereotypes of Asian women are social constructs as they are rarely acknowledged—to the dominant society, from consuming problematic portrayals on-screen, Asian women have always been that way. As long as dominant cultural perceptions about Asian women depend on reductive stereotypes rather than bringing them into question, it seems unlikely that true equality can be achieved. Media representation matters a great deal in shaping how people of minority racial groups are perceived, and the tendency of many dominant North American media outlets to use outdated stereotypes suggests that much more work is needed to promote equality. Only then will it be possible for Asian people, and Asian women in particular, to be treated as full people rather than stereotypes.

### Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a notion that is closely related to differential racialization, which is the “idea that each race has its own origins and ever-evolving history” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 21). No person can be sorted under a single category, there is no such thing as a unified identity. A

person can have multiple loyalties and allegiances, and these can be conflicting at times. For example, a homosexual white man is part of both a privileged dominant group (being white), and also part of a marginalized community (identifying as homosexual). Intersectionality pays attention to the ways in which different combinations of identifiers, such as race, sex, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity, among others, react under different circumstances. Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge (2016) describe intersectionality's "core insight" as the observation "that major axes of social divisions in a given society at a given time...operate not as discrete and mutually exclusive entities, but build on each other and work together" (p. 4).

Scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) also discusses the concept of intersectionality in her article "Mapping the Margins", where she explores the ways in which experiences of women of colour are "products of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism, and tend not to be represented within the discourses of either feminism or anti-racism" (p. 1243 – 1244). This is because as women of colour, they are part of two separate yet somewhat marginalized groups: being a woman and an ethnic minority. Crenshaw's work focuses on Black women and how their experiences cannot be simply described in terms of racism or sexism, but that their experiences reflect deeper underlying issues that uniquely concern being a Black woman. Similar to the women Crenshaw describes, the subjects of this thesis can be understood as being part of an intricate web of intersecting patterns. The experiences Asian women comedians on YouTube face cannot be completely fitted into the category of being a woman or Asian, but their experiences reflect part of the challenges faced by the double marginalization that Asian women experience. As demonstrated in the literature review, Asian women on YouTube, like other Asian women, always face dual battles: battling against a dominant white society, and battling to

demonstrate individuality in a group that is perceived to be homogenous, whose identity in mass media representations is often presented through stereotypes.

### Institutionalized Racism

Camara Phyllis Jones contributes to the study of critical race theory through her work on institutionalized racism. In summary, race is a system, not a flaw or a disadvantage; such adjectives are only implemented by the system that "structures opportunity and assigns [people] value based on phenotype, or the way people look" (Jones, 2002, p. 9). Originally applying her work to the field of health, Jones' definition of institutionalized racism refers to the structures, policies, practices and norms resulting in differential access to goods, services, and social opportunities by "race" (Jones, 2002, p. 10). However, for the purposes of the present thesis, Jones' understanding can also be applied to the framework of stereotypes surrounding Asian women, as sustained through traditional onscreen portrayals. Here, we can consider Hollywood, or North American mass media production more broadly, as a network of profit and power. The concept of institutionalized racism can also be used to understand why Asians in general receive little to no financial backing in traditional media. Traditional media such as Hollywood and North American television and film depend on a profit model that dictates that whichever production or actor is well-received will gain the most support and exposure. And as Asian actors receive minimal substantial roles, they are unable to garner as much attention or peer respect as non-Asian actors, and audiences are directed to favour other products. It is a circular model that seems to never end: Asian creatives rarely receive funding; Asian creatives rarely receive opportunities to work or produce; Asian creatives rarely receive exposure and support.

## **Convergence Culture**

Scholar Henry Jenkins's (2008) work on convergence culture lies at the collision of old and new media, "where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways" (p.2). Jenkins discusses three concepts:

### 1. Media Convergence

Simply speaking, the word "convergence" alone refers to the flow of content between different media platforms, the partnerships between different media corporations and industries, and most of all "the migratory behaviour of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment they want" (Jenkins, 2008, p.2). Therefore, in a society of media convergence, there is almost an overload of information, as "every important story gets told, every brand gets sold, and every consumer gets courted across multiple media platforms" (Jenkins, 2008, p. 3). With the massive amount of stories told and information circulated, it is hard to pinpoint a piece of information without being bombarded by others. Therefore, Jenkins (2008) proposes that the circulation "depends heavily on consumer's active participation" (p.3). Consumers are encouraged to seek information from various sources, forming the basis of being a smart consumer.

### 2. Participatory Culture

This notion of being a smart consumer of information requires active roles for consumers; they can no longer be passive. Broader views of convergence culture studies concern how the influx of new media influence traditional media markets as well as consumer culture, with platforms like MySpace, YouTube, and Facebook transforming audiences from passive consumers into a

democratic collective in which the participants can take part in the larger conversation through comments and responses. However, Jenkins (2008) notes that not all participants are created equal, and that corporations and their staff usually have more power over their consumers. The ability to participate also depends on a person's access to the necessary old and new media platforms.

On one hand, Jenkins (2008) notes, with new media, media companies are now more willing to co-opt and merge new media platforms to extend their reach for profit, while at the same time allowing smaller communities and grassroots organizations to tell their stories.

Further, Jenkins identifies this convergence culture as

both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process. Media companies are learning how to accelerate the flow of media content across delivery channels to expand revenue opportunities, broaden markets and reinforce consumer loyalties and commitments. Users are learning how to master these different media technologies to bring the flow of media more fully under their control and to interact (and co-create) with other users. (Jenkins, 2008, p.18).

However, although mostly a symbiotic relation that both processes sustain the other, there can be instances of conflict between the two, resulting in debates and renegotiations of power among the two key players: media and user.

### 3. Collective Intelligence

The concept of collective intelligence springs from the fact that with convergence culture and the influx of information, people are increasingly consuming the same material. However, it is not possible for everyone to experience the same experience. Everyone's reaction to a piece of information is different, and each user "constructs [their] own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed into resources through which [they] make sense of [their] everyday lives" (Jenkins, 2008, p.4). Situated in popular

culture, this collective intelligence, this collection of personal myths based on the consumption of media content is what Jenkins credits to "changing the ways religion, education, law, politics, advertising, and even military operate" (Jenkins, 2008, p.4). The individualized consumption of media content provides users with opportunities to produce their own meanings, presenting new readings of popular culture.

### Audience and Reception

Combining the three concepts of media convergence, participatory culture, and collective intelligence, the relevance of the study of convergence culture to this project becomes clear. This frame makes it possible to measure the ways in which changes and evolutions in media, and subsequent media flows determined by consumers' activeness, can influence consumers' ways of perceiving messages and the world around them.

And as there currently exist a multitude of media institutions, the competition that simmers amongst them directly affects the way people consume information. Not to mention that there are constantly new developments in the equipment that people use for information consumption, one example being cellphones, which have been countlessly remodeled from a simple call devices to smart devices that include functions such as music streaming, video viewing, and photographing. As established, not all participants are created equal: as Jenkins (2008) says, "fueling this technological convergence is a shift in patterns of media ownership. Whereas old Hollywood focused on cinema, the new media conglomerates have controlling interests over the entire entertainment industry" (p. 16).

Applying the conflict to my research, I contend that Hollywood and larger North American traditional media production function as the top-down corporate driven process. They

are the conglomerates that hold the most power in the entertainment industry, and due to a long history of viewership, they are the propagator of stereotypes about Asian women, and a central reason why society still sees insubstantial roles being offered to Asian talent. On the other hand, new media platforms such as YouTube function as a creator-driven, consumer-driven, grassroots player that often finds itself in conflict over the power of influence over the audience. Audiences, the third party, are in the middle of the conflict as they begin to analyze and weigh the content and messages produced by both top-down traditional media and digital platforms that offer something closer to a bottom-up approach.

### YouTube as a Platform

One route that Asians have discovered to bypass this institutionalized roadblock of mainstream, traditional media is through new digital media platforms. Although Jenkins' focus on YouTube aligns with political campaigns and reporting, his observations on YouTube are worth noting.

YouTube has emerged as a key site for the production and distribution of grassroots media – ground zero, as it were, in the disruption in the operations of commercial mass media brought about by the emergence of new forms of participatory culture. (Jenkins, 2008, p. 274).

In terms of participatory culture, Jenkins (2008) refers to YouTube as a "larger cultural economy" (p. 274) which functions on three levels.

First, YouTube acts as a "meeting ground between a range of different grassroots communities, each of which has been producing indie media for some time, but are now brought together by this shared media portal" (Jenkins, 2008, p. 274).

Second, YouTube acts as a "media archive where amateur curators scan the media environment, searching for meaningful bits of content, and bringing them to a larger public...can do so in response to mass media content" (Jenkins, 2008, p. 275).

Third, YouTube functions in conjunction with other types of platforms and social networks, in that "its content gets spread via blogs...where it gets reframed for different publics and become the focal point of discussion" (Jenkins, 2008, p. 275).

These three levels, as Jenkins (2008) notes, are nothing new to the media. But YouTube is credited as being the first platform to bring all three levels together to operate simultaneously. It is a platform that requires just as much input from the creator as it does from audience. In this way, it is an example of convergence culture, a place where old media and new media collide, a platform where an abundance of information is at the hands of the participant or consumer, who then have to actively decide which information, which video to watch.

In her 2007 book *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*, Lisa Nakamura discusses the convergence of race on the Internet, and by proxy new media platforms like YouTube. Through new media, Nakamura observes, Asian Americans "have claimed a unique mode as objects and subjects of interactivity that exceeds their role as passive objects of representation" (p. 34). Nakamura advocates looking critically at "the ways that users of the Internet collaboratively produce digital images of the body...in the content of gender and racial identity information" (Nakamura, 2007, p. 5). Such an approach is highly relevant to this project, where users of YouTube (the content creators—YouTube's Asian female comedians—as well as the audience) come together through portrayals and discussions to produce a new and more varied picture of Asian women on-screen.

However, Nakamura (2007) finds that when it comes to Asian Americans and the Internet, there is a digital divide. When considering demographics of Internet use, Nakamura (2007) states that studies emphasize Asian Americans as Internet users, not producers. This

might be credited to a popular image of Asian immigrants as either low-waged immigrants or upper-middle class Model Minorities, either or, they are "[living] on both ends on the networked information economy, both as low-and-high skilled workers and consumers" (Nakamura, 2007, p. 172). Asian Americans, in the dominant white imaginary, either work for Internet companies, or they actively consume materials online, but they are never the creatives; they are never the producers online.

### **Bricolage**

The ways in which critical race theory, intersectionality, convergence culture and YouTube all collide with each other and aid in the purpose of this research could be understood through the lens of bricolage. Deuze (2006) defines bricolage as "[incorporating] practices and notions like borrowing, hybridity, mixture, and plagiarism" (p. 70). It is used by communication and cultural studies scholars to describe and understand the formation of culture among those who do not possess dominant roles within it, referring to the "remixing, reconstructing, and reusing of separate artifacts, actions, ideas, signs, symbols, and styles in order to create new insights or meanings" (Deuze, 2006, p. 70). Describing possibilities for bricolage online, Lisa Nakamura writes:

Asian Americans are far less visible as producers of a distinctive and commodified 'youth culture' than are African Americans. However, they are overrepresented or hypervisible in media industries such as pornography...While this is egregious in that it perpetuates the exoticization of Asian women, it does open up a space for Asian Americans to intervene as critics, artists, and independent contractors (Nakamura, 2007, p. 184).

The Internet, although it exempts Asian Americans from being viewed as producers of mainstream, profitable "youth culture" online, renders Asian women disproportionately visible on pornographic sites. While this visibility is not without its problems, as Nakamura makes clear,

new digital spaces can “encourage reflection and critique through fairly indirect, satirical means” for Asian American users (Nakamura, 2007, p. 185). Thus, these new digital spaces provide opportunities for Asian Americans to be openly critical of what they are witnessing, and to express their frustrations in art. As independent producers, writers, and performers, drawing on stereotypes and repurposing them for subversive, satirical, or otherwise novel ends, Asian women comedians making use of YouTube are able to produce their own interpretations and meanings, undermining the perception of Asian people as consumers but not producers of digital content.

This thesis, therefore, will seek to understand how these Asian female comedians on YouTube engage with bricolage, how they make use of YouTube's convergence culture, the platform's functions and freedoms, as well as humour, to deconstruct stereotypes propagated by traditional media, in turn establishing their own insights and messages through showing pieces of what they aim to challenge.

## METHODOLOGY

### **Choice of Focus**

Asian female content creators participate in many categories and genres on YouTube, with beauty blogging, fashion, daily lifestyle, and culinary arts being a few major genres found. However, I choose to focus on Asian female comedians on the video sharing platform. As described in the literature review, the nature of comedy itself is dynamic and diverse, but it is safe to say that, no matter the type of comedy (satire, slapstick, observational, etc.), there is always a hidden social message underlying the humour that needs to be examined closely and critically. This is why I have chosen to analyze Asian female comedians. I believe that their interactions with their audience on a video sharing website like YouTube is significant to understanding these YouTubers' influence on traditional stereotypical frameworks, and influence on potentially greater matters, including the shifting place of minority women in entertainment, and YouTube's role in social causes.

### Subject Overview

I will be examining videos from three different Asian female comedians on YouTube who have found significant followings, in turn analyzing how their unique online demeanour, interaction and humour-masked critical commentary influence audience reception and hence, the overarching stereotype of Asian women molded by traditional media.

The three content creators I will be focusing on are:

1) Lilly Singh

Lilly Singh is a 29-year-old Canadian-born YouTube content creator; she is of Indian descent. She has a bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of Toronto and has found great

success in posting videos on YouTube. Currently with over 12 million subscribers, and over 2.19 billion total views, Singh is one of YouTube's biggest personalities. Her videos are best known for her comic impersonations and slapstick reenactments of her immigrant parents. Furthermore, utilizing her psychology background, she occasionally features video demonstrations of "different types" of personalities, an example being "Different Types of Students", or "Different Types of Parents". Her channel is named "iiSuperwomanii", and has a predominantly female viewership demographic.

Singh's portrayals of her immigrant parents as imperfect, rash beings with heavy accents in many ways challenge stereotypes. On one hand, her outward slapstick approach to comedy defies the demureness of *The Geisha*, while her portrayals of her parents oppose the image of the perfectly assimilated Model Minority. Singh is also a worthwhile subject to investigate because her impressive 12 million followers forms an opportunity to look further into the exchange of messages between YouTubers and their audience.

## 2) Natalie Tran

Natalie Tran is a 31-year-old Australian-born content creator on YouTube; she is of Vietnamese heritage. She started her YouTube page "communitychannel" in 2006, and has since accumulated over 1.8 million subscribers and over 604 million total views. Commonly referred to as one of the pioneers of Asian presence on YouTube, Tran's videos are famous for her editing, specifically of her playing different people in her daily life, giving an illusion that she is in a room with multiple images of herself with different personalities. Her videos are mostly retellings of her everyday, awkward encounters told with self-deprecating humour, and observational humour on odd social conventions.

Tran's presentation of herself on-screen is very self-aware, often using self-deprecating humour to help understand situations and escape from conflict. Her own on-screen persona starkly differs from the rest of the room, making her a direct contrast to many of the existing archetypes she presents, as she is shown to be relatable, awkward and personal, and not an icy figurine that exists to embellish a room.

### 3) Anna Akana

Anna Akana is a 28-year-old American YouTube content creator; she is of Japanese, Filipino, and Hawaiian descent. With over 1.9 million subscribers and over 171 million total views on her channel "Anna Akana", she is one of the familiar faces in YouTube's Asian viewer community. Akana is known for her straightforward and, at times, blunt personality. Similarly, her videos are funny but comparatively more serious in terms of subject matter. She often comes across as her viewers' "bigger sister they never had", tackling the topics of love, dating trends, and even death from the perspective of an Asian woman.

As a Japanese American, Akana's videos mostly directly challenge the stereotype of the Geisha, but they conflict with other stereotypes as well. Through observational humour, Akana's videos encourage her viewers to be independent, love each other, be confident and seek healthy relationships—traits most stereotypical figures do not possess. In emphasizing interpersonal relationships that promote mutual respect and fulfillment, Akana's message undermines the stereotypical presentation of the Geisha as a figure who lives to serve others.

### Approach

This research takes the form of a textual analysis, which is a larger, overarching research method that is often compared to the method of content analysis. In short, textual analysis is a communication research method that is used to illustrate and interpret the characteristics found in

recorded or visual messages (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 1999), while content analysis is a research technique for "making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" (Krippendorff, 2013, p. 24). Weber (1990) says the research method of content analysis utilizes set of procedures to infer valid observations from text; it has to do with the "sender(s) of the message, the message itself, or the audience of the message" (p.1).

Researchers who take the route of a basic content analysis often utilize a coded word search, and then draw interpretations from the quantitative material. Comparatively, textual analysis allows for more freedom in interpretation and in forming categories. Research data such as YouTube videos often do not repeat phrases or words. The significance of YouTube videos is settled not only within bigger messages, but in how these messages interact with their audience. Moreover, the content and presentation of these YouTube videos are ever evolving, making a structured, coded content analysis more restrictive and difficult to integrate. Therefore, I believe that a textual analysis approach is better suited for this research than a content analysis, providing a more well-rounded yet insightful critical analysis of the data.

In this research, I will be looking into three videos from each of the YouTube content creators, for a total of nine videos. These videos are short in length, usually about 4 to 7 minutes. Videos are chosen in terms of popularity. Generally, when YouTube site users visit different channels, there is a function that allows them to view and sort through videos by popularity. These videos are usually those that best encapsulate a content creator's vision, style and aesthetics, making these videos a good basis to ground my subjects on. As I only want to study the content creators' own messages, interactions, and relationships with their audiences, I have omitted sponsorship and collaboration videos with companies and other content creators. According Stephanie Fred, who examined the effect of endorsements and sponsorships on the

creator-audience relationship, suggestions emerged "that non-brand endorsed YouTubers possess higher-rated expertise and trustworthiness" (2015, p. 27), as they will most likely act as external factors that would influence the YouTubers' demeanour and usual video subjects. To make sure that the data I have are conclusive and not by chance, I have watched over 20 videos from each YouTuber prior to this research which allows me to synthesize and condense my findings into digestible interpretations.

The list of videos for analysis is as follows:

Lilly Singh

- How Girls Get Ready
- Types of Kids at School
- Types of Parents

Natalie Tran

- How to Fake a Six Pack
- The Ultrasound
- Bending at the Knees for Love

Anna Akana

- Why Guys Like Asian Girls
- How to Put on Your Face
- Why Girls Should Ask Guys Out

The analysis will come in three parts: first, a prelude that presents an in-depth look at existing stereotypes concerning Asian women (the Geisha, the Dragon Lady, and the Model Minority); second, an examination of the three content creators; and lastly, a summary of my findings. In the second part, for each of the content creators, I closely examine elements found in their videos. Some of the research questions I ask include: How do they interact with an imagined audience? How do they acknowledge and view their audience? What significance does their

representation on-screen hold? How do common themes, subjects and humour found in their content interact with the stereotypes of the Dragon Lady, The Geisha, and the Model Minority?

However, no research is without its limitations. A research approach like this one, that is purely textual and non-ethnographic, will not account for the content creators' agency and motives in creating these videos. Another limitation would be its terminology, as this research is not specific in terms of investigating portrayals of Asians, and of Asian Americans (immigrants). Rather than focusing on Asian women or immigrants of Asian descent within a specific country, this approach looks more broadly at case studies that demonstrate how women of Asian descent are reshaping comedy and overcoming stereotypes that are often applied to them in uncritical, “blanket” ways. Another limitation has to do with the inability to track how users discover these videos. The ways in which audiences of these content creators come across these videos is opaque; therefore, the audience in this research will mostly be that of subscribed viewers who made the conscious choice to manually opt-in to their content.

## ANALYSIS

### Prelude: The North American Imaginary of Asian Women

As mentioned in the literature review, the development of certain stereotypes of Asian women in television and film correlates with historical developments such as the Second World War's stereotype of the Geisha, its counterpart in the Dragon Lady, and the Model Minority stereotype that sprung from the African American Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. The representation of Asian people in general has also served as an invisible political tool, as we see the Model Minority stereotype molded by the American government in hopes of encouraging the appeasement of the Civil Rights Movement. However, there is a trend that is worth noting: all of these stereotypes stem from North America, and they all find themselves rooted in the fear of the "Yellow Peril" caricature.

The "Yellow Peril" phenomenon began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, when Chinese, Japanese and South Asian people were seen migrating to North America at a significant rate. According to Lee (2007), these Asians were similar to other migrants such as Europeans, who found new settlement in North America in forming diasporic communities, but they were also different in that they "were targets of some of the first national immigration laws that excluded migrants on the basis of race, as well as victims of state-sanctioned violence, expulsion, and incarceration" (p. 538). Such infliction of immigration laws and policies is an early reflection of the anti-Asian sentiment that has persisted over time, and has withstood the evolution of new inventions, such as television.

As stated in the introduction as well as the literature review, there is almost always a stereotype or trope that is in play when audiences see an Asian character on-screen. Such representations are deeply influential, especially to those of younger ages, as research on the

relationship between child development and media consumption has demonstrated (Wright & Huston, 1983; Rule & Ferguson, 1986; Richert et al., 2011). It is safe to say that radical, subversive versions of stereotypes can be beneficial to not only impressionable children, but to adults as well.

The three major Asian women stereotypes that were discussed—the Geisha, the Model Minority, and the Dragon Lady—also form a very ambiguous picture of the Asian woman for audiences. With such extremes at work in the portrayal of Asian women, which image is the most reliable one? The Geisha stems from the Second World War, and served for a long time as a successful conquest of U.S. servicemen. The stereotype of the Geisha portrays Asian women as characterless and weak wives or concubines whose only purpose in their lives is to serve their husbands and lovers. The Geisha does not set foot out of the house, she does not actively make a living for herself, and she is pet-like, unable to speak up for herself and willing to do whatever she can to please others, especially men. According to this stereotype, the Geisha's submissiveness and dependency, as well as her eagerness to please others, are to be understood as appealing traits, offering a kind of fantasy for men. These same traits establish her as a figure who is highly dependent on men and who lacks a public presence of her own.

The Model Minority, which originates from the U.S. government as a subtle threat to African American civil rights protestors, is the utopian immigrant in the eyes of some. The Model Minority Asian family is well-versed in English and has assimilated to North American mannerisms and customs. The father is a hard-working fellow, and the mother, a diligent housewife who cares deeply for her children. Model Minority women, in some cases, are successful businesswomen too, but are not so successful that they forget their household duties. The Model Minority stereotype demands of Asian people full assimilation to Western culture, a

boundless work ethic, and a chaste and dedicated family life. Creativity, risk-taking, and a rich inner life are generally not traits associated with the Model Minority. This stereotype also holds Asian people up as exemplary yardsticks against which African Americans are supposed to be measured, creating an unwarranted opposition and implicit competition between people of colour that is premised on their ability to work their way into an exclusionary, white-dominated culture.

The Dragon Lady is the extreme opposite of the previous two. She is cold-hearted and fearless, intimidating and sex-crazed. The dated Dragon Lady is only striking in terms of her appearance, and in terms of her rebellion against traditional values. But the modern Dragon Lady is different: she has no regard for anyone who stands in her way of success, she is incapable of love, and she is deeply career-focused. The Dragon Lady doesn't have a major historical motivator but she stems from the Yellow Peril sentiment—she is someone you don't want to mess with, or be friends with. Unlike the Geisha and the Model Minority, the image of Asian womanhood that the Dragon Lady caricature represents is one that is perilous and fierce, meant not to ingratiate herself to others but to intimidate them and perhaps to ensnare them. If the purpose of the Geisha and the Model Minority is to domesticate Asian womanhood by presenting it as something that can be conquered by the dominant Western, masculine culture, the Dragon Lady is instead cast as a dangerous and uncontrollable force who challenges that dominant culture. This may seem like a more liberating model than the other stereotypes, but it is problematic in the degree to which it exoticizes Asian women, presenting them as almost akin to wild animals. This is, of course, a highly dehumanizing way to present an entire group of people.

These three images of Asian women on-screen pose a disservice to Asian women off-screen. They generate the perception that off-screen Asian women are unpredictable as they are either weak and passive like the Geisha, boring and orderly like the Model Minority, or

dangerous and seducing like the Dragon Lady. They form a North American imaginary of Asian women that is vague and limited, one that encourages typecasting in traditional media portrayals. This is why Asians are so rarely portrayed as normal, functional women who excel in both personal and professional life. It is the reason why Asian women are still portrayed as targets and exotic beings in many North American productions.

## Part II: The Subjects

Natalie Tran (communitychannel)

One of Tran's most prominent tactics in maintaining popularity lies in her relationship with her audience. One could even argue that the majority of her success can be attributed to her consistent video formats, as well as her stereotype-challenging topics and segments.

As a seasoned YouTuber, Natalie Tran always greets her audience with a swift wave and a "Hi!" In fact, this action has been so ingrained in her videos' style that viewers have come to expect this line and gesture every time they watch a new video of hers. This and other recurring video segments include the "Your Mom" joke of the day—where she casually inserts the joke into a sentence and prompts her viewers to catch on in the end, "Attractive/Unattractive Word of the Day"—a segment where she introduces different words that she personally finds pleasant or unpleasant to hear, and the video segment "Porno-music-slash-comment-time"—an ending segment where she puts screengrabs of different comments into a collage on screen, and sarcastically responds to them while playing clichéd music in the background. All these segments contribute to and result in very successful interactions and relationships with her audience.

The segment "Porno-music-slash-comment-time" is especially powerful in maintaining viewership. In this segment, Tran handpicks, displays and replies to comments from her previous video. For example, "... and MBrian89, that was a fantastic comment!" (communitychannel, 2009). In return, viewers are encouraged to complete and sit for the entire video's length in hopes of seeing their own comment being highlighted. If they are featured, it is almost as if they win Tran's approval, and this dynamic encourages them to seek to extend this approval through posting more comments. And if their comments are not featured, it urges the audience to engage even more in Tran's comment sections, in hopes of being spotlighted one day. However, whether or not Tran handpicks their comment has the same effect on the audience as both outcomes only encourage the audience to subscribe and keep in touch with her channel, and to return week after week. Besides fostering a need to return to her next video, this battle of the comments creates a miniature competition between the audience. It is important to note that YouTube's comment section allows users to respond to others, which greatly contributes to the level of engagement and activity in Tran's comment section. YouTube also allows users to select "like" or "dislike" (represented in a thumbs up or down graphic) comments. Both functions increase activity in Tran's comments section, as users will try to outsmart each other, and to engage with others' writing through liking or disliking comments. This work that users do for validation from not only Tran but from other viewers is a driving force for Tran's success as a content creator on YouTube.

The significance of "Porno-music-slash-comment-time" goes beyond its contribution to Tran's maintenance of a viewership. It is related to Tran's interaction with stereotypes as well. As established in the prelude, as a stereotype Asian women on-screen are demure like a Geisha. Tran's segment directly challenges the Geisha stereotype as she not only uses the rather vulgar

term "porno", she actively encourages the association of "porno music" with her YouTube videos, thereby engaging with content that is not considered reserved or demure. At times, Tran also talks back at her audience's comments, and provides sarcasm in return. This also challenges the Geisha stereotype as Tran is assertive and not subdued with her opinions. Far from aiming to please others at any cost, Tran often directly jokes about those who follow her, demonstrating that she is unafraid to make fun of her audience.

In fact, there are many instances in Tran's videos where she challenges different stereotypes. "Your Mom" jokes are used extensively in Tran's videos, usually making reference to the audience's mothers in a sometimes sexual manner, with comments such as, "It's hard to bend at the knees; once you bend at the knees it's hard to get back up again—just ask your mom" (communitychannel, 2009). Apart from being vulgar, it could appear as if she is leaning in towards a stereotype as she alludes to sex and uses "Your Mom" as a derogatory joke. However, the way in which Tran references sex is in fact giving the "mom" in the joke the autonomy that the stereotype of the Geisha doesn't receive. In other words, "your mom" could decide whether or not to have sex, and "your mom" could decide whether or not to tell you what it means. But most importantly, the joke doesn't contain the image of a white man, as opposed to the stereotype's origins.

Another way in which Tran interacts with stereotypes is seen through her propensity for utilizing self-deprecating humour. Throughout her videos, Tran often mentions that she is far from perfect in a comic way. For example, in her video "Bending at the Knees for Love" (2009), Tran replies to a comment poking fun of her willingness to voluntarily film herself with a bathing suit in the shower for a video, saying, "I don't need someone else to remind me how lame I am, but thank you." Tran agrees with the comment, and acknowledges that her choice does

indeed reflect her as odd amongst other everyday behaviour. Of course, through her sarcastic retort to a viewer's comment, as established earlier, she is challenging the stereotype of the Geisha. But this challenges the Dragon Lady stereotype as well. The Dragon Lady is highly self-focused, cold in demeanor and holds herself highly in comparison to others. Through accepting others' comments and responding in a sarcastic and good-natured way, Tran is acting against the Dragon Lady stereotype. In short, the Dragon Lady doesn't welcome jokes at her expense, but Tran welcomes them and even openly addresses them.

Another element worth looking at is Tran's interaction with the idea of perfection. The Model Minority stereotype focuses on the popular portrayals of Asian women as homogenous, perfect students, housewives or employees. On some occasions, Tran's videos demonstrate the opposite of this stereotype. In her video "How to Fake a Six-Pack. (Re: How to Fake Abs) \*Sarcasm\*" (2008), which is intended as a response to another video of the same topic, Tran is seen wearing a bikini top and recording her own version of "faking a six pack". Fulfilling the big "sarcasm" claim in the title, Tran starts the video with a tongue-in-cheek remark, saying that this video is "...for you to feel a little bit more confident or a little bit more insecure, because you never want to let people know what you actually look like" (communitychannel, 2008). By wearing a bikini and showing off her less than perfectly sculpted abs, Tran is poking fun at the modern day pursuit of the perfect body, and the fact that people want a perfect body so much that they would actually apply makeup to their bodies, and teach others to falsely achieve it. The Model Minority feeds off the idea of perfection, and the mastery of everyday life. Tran veers into the Model Minority lane through seemingly teaching people how to achieve a perfect body, but she counterbalances this through her sarcastic remarks and her application of "makeup" that, as the video progresses, becomes increasingly unrealistic and absurd, concluding with "abs" and

“cleavage” drawn on with thick black marker. What Tran really is conveying in this video is that she does not have a perfectly sculpted body, and she embraces it enough to joke about it. She is not the perfect Model Minority.

This video also offers commentary on other stereotypes. "I mean if he doesn't like you after he sees this, then you're just going to have to go back home and put some more makeup on," Tran says (communitychannel, 2008). Through this statement, Tran is poking fun at women's motivations for faking their bodies, and in turn, this statement points back to the Geisha stereotype. Tran's message is clear: women often go above and beyond to impress men, and that is not necessary or worthwhile. Women are entitled to be different, and are encouraged to find their self-worth away from men's influence.

Women and particularly Asian women tend to find Tran's content entertaining and relatable, and this is where most of Tran's appeal to her demographic lies. As demonstrated above, self-deprecation puts Tran and her viewers on an equal platform, for even though Tran is a semi-public figure through her videos' success, she still finds humour in herself and relates to her audience. More importantly, Tran not only comes across as relatable, she seems to view her audience as equals, not simply as her viewers. The audience is perceived to grow with Tran as she assumes that her audience understands what she's saying or referencing.

Tran's "Your Mom" jokes, for instance, require certain knowledge and common ground to be perceived as funny. If Tran were to consider all age groups, her language used would be much different than it is. But Tran continues to make "Your Mom" jokes, and continues to talk about topics that people her age would understand, topics that surround pop culture. For example, in reference to an interview Tran sat through, where she had awkward banter with a member of an older generation that resulted in a miscommunication, she said, "I meant Britney

Spears and Christina Aguilera, I meant my schedule of watching them on television is moved back because where would else would I be" (communitychannel, 2008). Tran highlights the everyday humour that exists in generation gaps, as well as the fact that she does not have much everyday fun, and is actually quite a homebody as presented in her comments. In short, comments like these achieve two things: they establish her as 1) an introvert and a keen everyday observer, and 2) someone who experiences everyday mishaps like everybody else does. By emphasizing these traits, she successfully relates to her similarly-aged audience.

But Tran's efforts to relate to her audience do not stop there, as she takes advantage of her status as an Asian woman to reach out to other young Asian female viewers. During one "Porno-music-slash-comment-time" segment, Tran responds to a viewer's comment that says "Your mom wears socks and sandals" (communitychannel, 2009). The comment was made and intended as a friendly banter between Tran and her viewers, and to it, Tran replies with "My mom's Asian, of course she wears socks and sandals together" (communitychannel, 2009). Tran embraces her Asian heritage, and even pokes fun at her own mother's stereotypically Asian behaviour. This comment, although it steers into an Asian stereotype, reveals Tran as an unapologetic Asian woman, one who is not ashamed of her upbringing and her heritage. This should, as a result, resonate with a lot of similar second-generation Asian immigrants, who constantly have to divide their personalities between Western customs and Asian parents.



*Top Left - Figure 1: Tran as her mother.  
Retrieved from "the ultrasound" (communitychannel, 2008)*

*Top Right - Figure 2: Tran as her younger self.  
Retrieved from "the ultrasound" (communitychannel, 2008)*

To bring this resonance to life, Tran is also known for her role-playing and split screen technology, the latter more integrated as she grows more mature as a content creator. In the video "the ultrasound" (communitychannel, 2008), she role-plays her mother and herself as a child (refer to figures 1 and 2). Through a combination of acting and retelling past events, Tran is, to an extent, better reaching out to her audience. "Verisimilitude trumps veracity" (Bowman, 1999, p. 596) in the work field; role playing aids in better reception of messages, and a better grasp of the problem. Similarly, when applied to YouTube, the verisimilitude of role playing helps audience to further ground themselves in a role they see on-screen. If Tran were to plainly converse her past experience, the message she is trying to convey would come across as solely applicable to herself, and her audience would see her story as pure narrative, instead of immersing themselves into the characters and relating to it. Tran's role-playing aids in strengthening relatability in her videos.

As a whole, Natalie Tran's utilization of segments and her prompts for audience engagement are successful in sustaining a loyal viewership. Her tactful use of role-playing fully immerses the audience in different situations and, more importantly, encourages the audience to reflect upon their upbringing, and their consumption of cultural depictions. All her efforts result in a very laid-back, good natured persona on-screen, which creates a refreshing image in contrast to the traditional depictions of Asian women in mass media. Unlike the cold Dragon Lady, Tran is approachable and personable. Unlike the demure Geisha, Tran is not afraid to swear and to voice her opinions. And unlike the Model Minority, Natalie Tran is open about her imperfections.

Lilly Singh (iiSuperwomani)

On-screen, Lilly Singh goes by a pseudonym: Superwoman. It is a decision that reveals much about her content's messages and her personal values. The original Superwoman appears in DC Comics in the 1940s as an evil doppelganger of the well-known Wonder Woman. Singh's adaption of this character is only a loose one: instead of a exuding villainous tendencies, Singh takes after the strength, power, persistence and courage that Superwoman has. However, on the other hand, Superwoman could be seen as a fitting metaphor for Singh's presence on YouTube. She might not be the perfect Wonder Woman, but she certainly has room to grow and the capability to do so, much like Superwoman.

Singh's success on YouTube is, at a surface level, credited to her ability to foster a camaraderie amongst her viewers. Almost all of her videos start with a rehearsed greeting: "Hi what's up it's your girl Superwoman!", and afterwards she jumps into her video's topic. Like

Tran, Singh's greeting sets the tone of her YouTube content, establishing that Singh is free spirited, loud and definitely full of character. The repetition of a greeting also formulates a sense of familiarity within her audience—when they hear the term "Superwoman", they think of Singh immediately. The repetition also attracts people to return, as referring herself as the viewer's "girl", Singh's attitude towards her viewers is almost friend-like. Moreover, Singh refers to her viewers as "unicorns", which by allusion, entails that her viewers embrace their uniqueness, their individuality and their rarity (the suggestion is that her viewers are rare as there is only one of them, like a unicorn). This coining of "the unicorns" further strengthens the atmosphere of a family that exists in Singh's comment section. Being named as unicorns, her audience will more likely feel valued and will be encouraged to subscribe and return for other content. In contrast to Tran's viewers, Singh's unicorns are not engaged in micro-competitions, but rather, the activity in the comments sections springs from supporting each other as individuals and as a team.

In addition, occasionally Singh refers to herself as "The Mother of Unicorns" (Singh, 2016). This is most likely in reference to her 2016 documentary "A Trip to Unicorn Island", which documents Singh's journey as a YouTuber, and her quest to find happiness and fulfilment. By calling herself "The Mother of Unicorns", she is characterizing herself as a motherly, nurturing figure to her viewers. Singh does not necessarily view her audience as a group that grows up with her, but rather considers her audience to span multiple generations. This is clear from her huge variety of video content, a variety that includes roleplaying her parents, listing different types of behaviour, and even scripted short depictions of mundane everyday tasks and circumstances.

Singh's videos on different personalities and behaviours, which are also known as "Types of" videos, make up the majority of Singh's content. In those videos, Singh utilizes her

psychology background to demonstrate different personality types. For example, "Types of Parents"—where she demonstrates different types of parents such as "the cool cats", "the makeover failures" and "the generals", or "Types of Students"—where she demonstrates types such as "the know it all", "the older sex-bomb" and "the hot player". In these videos, she appeals to both older and younger generations, and I argue that both are incredibly significant in her content's challenging of Asian stereotypes.

The video "Type of Students" covers different types of students that Singh imagines circulating the school premises. This of course resonates a lot with her younger audiences, who are of school-attending age. Through identifying and explaining many different kinds of students, Singh is casting her net far and wide to make sure that every single one of her young audience members can relate to the video, to make sure that they can point to one of her caricatures and apply them to a classmate. On the other hand, this video could work for Singh's older viewers as well. Singh says this video is relevant "When you're old like me and don't know what your life is about, and you eat popcorn and watch YouTube. This video is for taking a walk down memory lane" (iiSuperwomani, 2012). In framing her video in this way, Singh attempts to reach out to older viewers through encouraging them to view the video through a different perspective.

It is evident that Singh depends a lot on the factor of being relatable, and works to make her video content inclusive to all. Through doing so, Singh is setting the groundwork for deeper thinking. Singh encourages her viewers to find figures in her videos to relate to, as well as to view her videos in different ways. Her ability to appeal to both younger and older viewers is a huge part of her success in being an influencer in the challenge against stereotypical representations of Asian women. For younger viewers, the ability to relate to Singh's content can

only build trust, and it makes viewers more susceptible to Singh's messages in her videos. As Singh is South Asian, her influence is especially important to other young Asian girls. Looking at Singh representing herself as classmates similar to viewers' own makes them feel included in a conversation that wouldn't have previously included them.

As for older viewers, the element of nostalgia is a big driving force in their relationship with Singh. Singh's videos also urge older viewers to try and remember how it is to be young, and to broaden their perspectives on contemporary trends. Through Singh's attempts in relating to older viewers, and her acknowledgement of her background in psychology, Singh's older audience is encouraged to trust her, and to find her observations rooted in valid terms.

One of Singh's methods of reaching out to her audience, whether younger or older, is through role-playing. Compared to Tran's videos, Singh's role-play is much more elaborate. Singh's role-play is not of everyday people, but of her parents. In fact, Singh has introduced her role-played parents as regular guests to her videos, with her dressing in a sari and wearing glasses to resemble her mother (refer to figure 4), and her dressing in a loose-fitting polo shirt, wearing a wig and drawn-on beard to resemble her father (figure 3).



*Top Left - Figure 3: Singh as her father.  
Retrieved from "Type of Parents" (iiSuperwomanii, 2014)*

*Top Right - Figure 4: Singh as her mother.  
Retrieved from "Type of Parents" (iiSuperwomani, 2014)*

Singh's role-played parents are meant to be exaggerated portrayals of her actual parents. By exaggerated, I meant that they are portrayals that lean into stereotypical South Asian behaviour, portrayals that do not reflect her parents' true demeanour. Singh's role-played parents are brash, loud, and speak with accents. They are depicted as cheap, as there is a scene in "Types of Parents" where Singh acts out a scene about pre-drinking. Through the lens of "the cool cat" parents (parents who are totally lenient with their children's boundaries), Singh is caught pre-drinking at home by her father, and after a brief awkward moment, it is revealed that Singh's father is angry because Singh didn't think to bring along his flask: "You stupid. I teach you nothing, huh?...Take my flask!...What the hell...I teach you to go to club and pay \$10 for drink? No, don't be dumb, you take my flask" (iiSuperwomani, 2014). Through this, Singh is agreeing with stereotypical Asian perceptions as being thrifty, and at first this might appear as a negative portrayal of South Asians. However, considering the aforementioned point of Singh's encouragement of a different perspective, the fact that Singh inserted this scene under the category of "the cool cat" parent brings about an alternative understanding of immigrant South Asians. At times, these scenes suggest, the advice of new immigrants can be wise and useful to adopt. Furthermore, portrayals like these are impactful for younger Asian women and girls with similar backgrounds. Through grouping them under the category "the cool cat", Singh provides younger Asian girls who find it difficult to be understood a positive depiction of home life. She suggests that at times, having thrifty South Asian immigrant parents is not a disadvantage at all, for they can be "cool cats" (iiSuperwomani, 2014) as well.

Singh's videos touch on deeper meanings as she focuses on daily family dynamics. In "Types of Parents" (iiSuperwomani, 2014), Singh introduces the parental category of "the

makeover failure": parents who are inspired by television portrayals and seek to embrace similar lifestyles. In the video, Singh, role-playing as her father, sits her family down to have a family meeting. The father says they are going to start spending Sundays together, the reason being because "family comes first...not second. Also we will start eating more healthy and doing exercise around here because of this thing in the news..."(iiSuperwomani, 2014). Through this section of the video, Singh is demonstrating the more intimate sides of being from an immigrant family, and thus interacting with the stereotype of Model Minority. Generally speaking, the Model Minority as a whole speaks to the persistent stereotype that Asians are subject to. In terms of Asian families, the immigrant Model Minority family is perfectly functional with assigned gender roles and family dynamics. In Singh's portrayal, the father is seen to be enamoured by television's depiction of a perfect family, and wishes to emulate it in his own family. However, similar to the category "the makeover failure", the father's attempts are proven futile as well, as he himself cannot withstand the idea of not eating his junk food whenever he pleases. Singh's choice of example and category tells a different story to different audiences. For younger viewers of similar backgrounds, it is once again an attempt to relate to them. For older viewers of similar backgrounds, it is an entertaining depiction of a scenario that might resonate with their own upbringing. And for older viewers of other cultures, it is an eye-opening portrayal of the dynamics that can exist within immigrant families, presenting in humorous terms their constant quest to fit in with the dominant society.

Beyond being tools of education, the exaggerated portrayal of Singh's parents also serves as a tool in disrupting stigmas around immigrants and immigrant families. At first glance, Singh's role-playing could be criticized as being disrespectful, and promoting negative stereotypes. This is because of Singh's portrayals her parents as unrefined beings, who speak

with thick accents and get into awkward scenarios as their traditional culture clashes with society's dominant culture. However, Singh's decision to lean into stereotypes actually leads to surprises. Through Singh's portrayals, her parents (who are immigrants) have come to be very popular with Singh's audiences. Singh's role-playing not only encourages different perspectives and a reconsideration of stigmas; it also works alongside the principle of verisimilitude, thus strengthening people's tendency to relate to the act in one form or another.

Apart from her popular role-play as her parents, Singh is also known for her slapstick humour. This slapstick humour is rooted in realism, as she always portrays realistic scenarios in a comic way. For example, in her video "How Girls Get Ready..." (iiSuperwomanii, 2013), Singh demonstrates the "reality" of how girls actually get ready, which unlike what the majority of people might think, presents young women preparing to go out as indecisive, distracted and easily frustrated. It is noteworthy that although this video is Singh's most popular video (garnering close to 25.7 million views), Singh does not break the fourth wall by engaging with the audience. Without reaching out directly to her viewers, how does Singh acquire this level of popularity? I believe that it is the humour of realism that leads to this success.

Throughout the video, Singh is seen procrastinating in the first half and she delays getting ready until an hour before she has to leave. Singh also gets distracted by music videos, which lead her down a spiral of YouTube dance tutorials, which further wastes her time. She also spends time coordinating with her friends, deciding what to wear and self-grooming. In the end she arrives at the party at 11:30pm, two and a half hours later than her initial plan. To have acquired 25.7 million views, her video content must have resonated with a lot of people, especially young women. This level of identification suggests an anti-Dragon Lady sentiment. Singh's personality is so well-received that people will return to watch her content over and over

again, finding her approachable and humourous rather than intimidating. Moreover, Singh's comic performance conveys that in many times, "the truth" (reality) is funnier than expected, for Singh encourages her viewers to appreciate the humour in everyday life, and to embrace their own rough edges. She is also full of personality and encourages viewers to consider different perspectives. In this way, Singh herself is the opposite of the homogenous, perfection-seeking Model Minority. Singh shows that even though it may be tricky at times to be in between two cultures, it does not mean that you have to follow what everyone else in a similar situation is doing. Contrary to the stereotype of the Geisha, Singh does not dress demurely, and does not shy away from swearing and hand gestures (she even designed a hand gesture representing the letter S in Superwoman). And lastly, unlike the Geisha, Singh stands up for what she believes in, and recently started a foundation called #GirlLove which seeks to end hatred of women by women, and instead promotes friendly camaraderie and support among women.

To summarize, Lilly Singh's utilization of extensive, exaggerated role-play aids in her attempts to establish widespread connections with her audience, and pushes the boundaries of the Model Minority stereotype, shedding new light on the dynamics of an immigrant family. Through her slapstick humour and realistic depictions of a girls' night out, Singh once again challenges stereotypes, and dispels the stigma surrounding second-generation children. Singh leans into South Asian immigrant narratives in particular, and by doing so, demonstrates that it is possible to find a balance between two different communities—the one you grow up in, and the one your parents grew up in. Being second-generation does not necessarily mean abandoning your parents' heritage, but the joy lies in finding different ways to understand and appreciate that heritage.

Anna Akana (Anna Akana)

Anna Akana does not use a pseudonym on YouTube, her channel is simply called "Anna Akana." The choice to employ her own name rather than choosing an alternative one could not be more fitting for a persona like Akana. Akana is a content creator on YouTube, and is perhaps best known for her straightforward and blunt attitude, as well as her dry sense of humour. Amongst all three of the YouTubers discussed in this thesis (Tran, Singh and Akana), Akana's video format is the most free-flowing with no set format, and her content most directly challenges stereotypes surrounding Asian women.

Compared to Tran and Singh, Akana's relationship with her audience is not as overt. Akana does not pique audience activity in the comments section through micro-competitions, and she also does not provide a nickname for her audience. This is consistent with her blunt nature, as with her take-it-or-leave-it attitude in her speech and demeanour, she does not have to do much to attain a following. This is because people either lighten up to her personality or they do not, and those who choose to return to watch her other videos are most likely huge supporters already by default. Moreover, Akana's videos do not possess routinized greetings as Akana usually jumps straight into her topic of the week. This, strangely, can be considered as Akana's form of fostering familiarity with her audience, because although audiences don't know what to expect format-wise, they are driven by the excitement of finding out what Akana will be touching on next. Akana's personality in itself suffices in sustaining a successful creator-audience relationship.

However, this lack of overt engagement could be interpreted as an indifference to audience input and feedback, and a nonchalance toward getting to know her audience better.

Upon a closer look at her videos, I argue that Akana's video content and on-screen attitude toward her viewers makes up for the lack of outreach on Akana's part. Through her videos, it becomes evident that Akana wants nothing short of the best for her viewers.

In "How to Put on Your Face" (AnnaAkana, 2014), Akana responds to her audience's request to upload a makeup tutorial, asking her to demonstrate how she applies her makeup. Akana uploads a video that emphasizes the importance of self-acceptance over physical beauty. In it, she physically applies her makeup, but with a voice-over that focuses on inner beauty and peace. "To start off, dabble your eyes with optimism, it's all about your perspective on the world" (AnnaAkana, 2014), Akana says as she applies eyeshadow to her eyes, she then continues with "But you want to be careful and not put too much optimism or you'll just be left with disappointment via your high expectations" (AnnaAkana, 2014). Using eyeshadow as a metaphor for perspective, Akana says that that the right amount of eyeshadow—or the right amount of perspective—will lead to optimism, a metaphorically and literally bright outlook. In another segment of the video, Akana picks up an eyebrow pencil and instructs viewers to "...start aligning, shaping and filling your thoughts, because we are our thoughts. If your thoughts are too negative, self-deprecating or judgmental...it's going to trickle all the way down that beautiful face and make you ugly" (AnnaAkana, 2014). Once again, she uses the act of filling in eyebrows as a metaphor for framing thoughts, saying that it is just as important to have the right framework of thoughts to act as a foundation for your emotions towards others and towards oneself.

There are three elements to consider in Akana's approach to her makeup tutorial. The first notable element is her extensive usage of metaphors. Her whole video is built on metaphors upon metaphors, all to convey the importance of inner beauty. Through this, we can deduce that Akana is at least targeting this video to an audience that is like-minded and similar. We can also see that

Akana views her audience as intellectually equal to her as she never talks down to her audience, or tells them what to think. This conveys a sense of respect to her viewers, as viewers will likely spend time deciphering her metaphors in order to apply them to daily life. Viewers likely appreciate the freedom that Akana grants them in her video, and in return, respect her for it, and continue to take her seriously. This mutual respect between creator and audience is key to building a solid viewership base, and it helps encourage viewers to return for her subsequent videos.

Second, although she doesn't talk down to her audience, Akana's approach and her language come across as sisterly. In this video, she is not only letting her audience know her makeup routine, she also actively gives advice to her audience in attaining inner peace and optimism. This is one of the examples in which Akana acts like her audience's big sister, in which she isn't overly loving or nurturing like a mother, but acts as a peer with life experience to share and teach. The big sister approach is an interesting one, as it is a mix of authoritative and affectionate emotion. As an audience, especially for Asian female viewers, this attitude produces a unique bond. The authoritativeness in Akana's demeanour is balanced by her good intentions, as through sharing her life experiences and tips, she truly knows what she is saying, and she is sharing this information for a good reason. This fosters trust in Akana's relationship with her audience.

Third, her approach challenges stereotypes about Asian women. For instance, Akana emphasizes the importance of achieving inner beauty and peace as opposed to outer beauty. She believes that thoughts ultimately mold a person's outlook toward the world. This disregard of outer beauty challenges the Model Minority stereotype: as opposed to the constantly striving for perfection like the Model Minority, Akana does not think twice about achieving perfection,

focusing on personal fulfillment over an appearance of flawlessness. Also, as on-screen Geishas are supposed to look impeccable to attract a man, the undermining of the Model Minority stereotype leads to a challenging of the Geisha stereotype as well. Throughout the video, Akana does not mention attracting someone else as a motivation for makeup application. The need for a man is not as dire in Akana's demonstration, as opposed to that of the Geisha, therefore making this video a challenge to the Geisha stereotype. Akana also notes the importance of having "perspective" (AnnaAkana, 2014), and urges audience to think about the amount of kindness in their daily lives. "Can you imagine if we all tried to out-kind each other? How fucking great the world would be!" (AnnaAkana, 2014). The emphasis on having empathy and compassion directly challenges the icy, heartless stereotype of the Dragon Lady.

Akana manages to address Asian women stereotypes in other videos as well. In "Why Guys like Asian Girls" (AnnaAkana, 2014), she critiques the "Yellow Fever" phenomenon, which refers to the trend of people, most commonly white men, fetishizing and dating Asian people regardless of their personalities, and its effect on everyday life as an Asian woman. Akana starts the video with an anecdote, recalling a conversation with a friend: "Recently I was talking to a friend who said that she knew the perfect guy for me, because all he dates are Asians" (AnnaAkana, 2014). She continues with a role-play of the conversation. After expressing her bewilderedness at the conversation she was a part of, Akana exclaims everything she thinks is wrong about fetishizing and romanticizing the figure of the Asian woman:

...Men with Yellow Fever look at you and they only see schoolgirls, or sexual geishas. They hide samurai sword collections in their closet, and they learn how to speak in Asian language and only talk to you in that frigging language (AnnaAkana, 2014).

Akana describes her disgust at men who pursue relationships with Asian women purely because of their skin colour, and as she believes Asian women are condensed into sexualized schoolgirls,

she condenses men with “Yellow Fever” into a stereotype as well. She counteracts the unfairness suffered by Asian women who have little to no control over their image in the eyes of men who fetishize them, by comically assigning those men a stereotypical and reductive description as well. It is safe to say that not all men who date Asian women suffer from “Yellow Fever,” but Akana's comic approach to describing the situation is successful through her construction of contrasting images.

Akana then goes further and role-plays a situation of encountering a man with “Yellow Fever”. She plays a man who only learns to Japanese to speak to and impress women of Japanese descent, and concludes, "...These men, the problem with them is that they don't give a fuck about who you really are. The idea of you is enough" (AnnaAkana, 2014). Akana's reaction to this is even more comic as her bluntness and crassness resist the docile, weak image of Asian women that “Yellow Fever” depends upon, instead presenting unfiltered anger at this behaviour.

Once more, there are three significant elements to the video "Why Guys like Asian Girls" (AnnaAkana, 2014). First, Akana offers complete resistance and challenge toward Asian women stereotypes. Instead of demonstrating them, Akana openly claims the stereotypes as false.



Why Guys Like Asian Girls // Anna Akana

5,094,669 views

115K 8.5K SHARE



Anna Akana  
Published on Jul 26, 2014

SUBSCRIBED 2M

Figure 5: Akana exposing her biceps. Retrieved from "Why Guys like Asian Girls" (AnnaAkana, 2014)

For example, to disclaim the hegemonic view that Asian women are weak, Akana, a lover of exercising, shows off her biceps instead (see figure 5). This directly challenges the Geisha stereotype. As Geishas are, as Akana puts it, "docile" (AnnaAkana, 2014), Akana challenges the stereotype through crass behaviour such as swearing and showing off what some may

perceive as “masculine” parts of her body.

Second, through Akana's role-playing, situations that Asian women face on a daily basis become clearer. Before, unless you were an Asian woman, you would not experience the kind of treatment Akana describes. But with Akana's role-playing, again drawing on the factor of verisimilitude, viewers who are non-Asian are able to find resonance in whichever ways they see fit, and for Asian women, Akana's portrayal only hits home even more. This encourages a stronger audience bond with Akana, as through portrayals, different viewers are able to easily identify with her. And by extension, this also affects the future perception of Asian women, since through Akana's video efforts, people who have watched it are encouraged to rethink their own prejudices against Asian women.

And third, Akana's style in humour really shines throughout this video. Akana's comedic specialty lies in her ability to channel her disdain or anger about different topics into comic displays. For example, the muscles segment in the “Why Guys Like Asian Girls” video was done in actual disgust at the stereotype about weak Asian women; however, it comes across as unexpected, and therefore comical. This genuine anger that was motivated by a desire for change is one that is driven by passion, and it affects people around her by emphasizing the inaccuracy of stereotypes and motivating viewers to rethink their own preconceptions.

Apart from her channeling of anger, Akana's specialty also lies in her ability as a keen observer. Her observational humour shines through her videos. For example, in her video "Why Girls Should Ask Guys Out" (AnnaAkana, 2016), she begins by asking why women never pursue men. She pauses, and states no answer. Meaning, this social norm is one that makes no sense, and women have just as much power to pursue men they fancy. In other words, gender norms that cast men as “hunters” and women as “prey” are outdated and unjustified. This video

is a powerful embodiment of what makes Akana different from the others. At surface, it might seem as if Anna Akana is actually a glorified Dragon Lady. However, despite the fact that Akana's behaviour does align in some respects with the Dragon Lady stereotype (the emphasis on assertion, the importance of taking care of yourself first), Akana twists this stereotype into something that is wholly her own. Not only does she challenge the stereotype of the Geisha through retelling a story of how her own assertiveness gained her a boyfriend, she also acts as a big sister to her audience by encouraging them to be confident, and to take matters into their own hands. Akana utilizes the assertiveness of the Dragon Lady, but transforms it into something viable and positive—liberating rather than reductive.

As is evident in the above discussion, Akana stands up for women in general and Asian women in particular, and her assertiveness works directly against the stereotype of the Geisha. Also, in encouraging her viewers to be the best versions of themselves—an effort that seems to resonate with her audience—she is able to formulate a strong but covert creator and audience relationship.

### Part III: Findings

#### **Leaning into Stereotypes**

All three YouTubers lean into traditional stereotypes about Asian women in mass media in order to acknowledge the forms of representation they are working against and to get their own stereotype-disrupting messages across. For example, Tran leans into the comment about her mother being Asian and therefore wearing socks and sandals. Through this, Tran shows that she is not ashamed of her mother, and instead finds her footwear choices amusing. Singh exaggerates her portrayals of her parents, in order to encourage her audience to learn how to appreciate things

in different ways, and in order to urge them to reconsider their attitudes towards immigrant families. Akana leans into the Dragon Lady stereotype, but twists it and creates her own version of a Dragon Lady, one that utilizes her assertiveness to get the treatment and respect she deserves. Ultimately, these three YouTubers' adaptation and repurposing of stereotypes allows them to produce a new and much more diverse representation of the personalities, experiences, and interests of Asian women than Hollywood films and popular television shows are able to provide. By drawing on stereotypical representations but ultimately undermining them, Tran, Singh, and Akana demonstrate just how short these stereotypes fall of doing justice to the diversity of their experiences as Asian women. Ultimately, stereotypical representations are exposed as absurd in their reductiveness.

### **Importance of Audience**

Despite the quality of the YouTubers' content, it would be worthless without the support of their audiences. In reality, the audience performs much of the work needed, as every comment posted, every like they give, and every link they share impacts a YouTuber's success on the platform. The power of the YouTuber lies just as much on her audience as it does on her content. It is a symbiotic and cyclical relationship. The YouTuber creates content the audience enjoys, the audience reacts positively, and this motivates the YouTuber to create more content. Moreover, as the audience is pertinent to the YouTuber's establishment of a solid viewership, the YouTuber's own original ways in forming a virtual bond with her audience across the screen is what differentiates a successful YouTuber from a less successful one. For example, Tran utilizes micro-competitions regularly to encourage viewers to participate, and this ensures an always-active viewership occurring on the other side of the screen, as well as repeat visits from viewers

the next time she uploads a video. Unlike Tran, Singh fosters a solid viewership through forming a friendly-family like relationship with her audience. By calling her audience "Unicorns," she's complimenting them, encouraging them, and prompting them to render her as a favourable and pleasant person. Her on-screen persona, and the way she treats her audience are driving forces in establishing a successful viewership.

### **Reflexivity**

All three YouTubers garner views and attract new audiences through reflecting and even, at times, mocking YouTube's trends and conventions. For example, Tran's "How to Fake a Six Pack" video is a direct mockery of the perfect body trend, and Akana's "How to Put on Your Face" video implicitly critiques the enormous popularity of makeup tutorial videos on YouTube. By reflecting and drawing on YouTube conventions, these YouTubers are still part of YouTube's greater community, and their self-awareness about the nature of the platform establishes them as relatable for their viewers. However, they take these conventions and mock them in their videos, which establishes them as alternative and different from other YouTubers.

### **The Importance of Humour**

All three YouTubers utilize humour in both reaching out to their audiences, and conveying their messages across the computer screen. Although each YouTuber has a different preference as far as the type of humour they employ, it can be agreed that in each instance, humour is what truly binds people together. Humour is an equalizer, because so as long as a comedian's joke is caught on to by her audience and she receives laughter, it signifies that the comedian's deeper message has reached the audience and resonated with them. In the case of YouTubers, where the

relationship between creator and audience is fostered through a screen, the ability to make one laugh in the midst of terrible circumstances (such as stereotypes and prejudices) is extremely important. For the three YouTubers to achieve what they need to achieve (namely, disputing mass media stereotypes about Asian women), humour is extremely important in making materials and messages digestible while leaving room for people to reflect.

## CONCLUSION

Hollywood might have come a long way in improving diversity in the industry, but it's only a fraction of a journey completed when put into perspective. Ang Lee, to date, is still the only Asian director to ever win an Academy Award. He is one of only four Asian directors to be nominated, and he has since won twice—once for the film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), and the other for *Life of Pi* (2012). And Sir Ben Kingsley, a half-Indian by birth, is the only actor of Asian descent to have been nominated for and win an Academy Award for Best Actor. For women of Asian descent, the entertainment industry's highest honour is even more scarce. Out of five nominations over the decades, Miyoshi Umeki is the only Asian actress to have won an Academy Award for Best Actress, and this was back in 1957.

Clearly, there is much that still has to be done by Asians, in order for Asians to achieve better recognition and support. In many cases, the need for a change isn't even overtly recognized by those in power. Philip Wang from Wong Fu Productions, an Asian content creator on YouTube, expressed a series of thoughts on this topic on Twitter in the wake of the most recent Academy Awards ceremony:

" Almost a century of [#Oscars](#). It's crazy how much I've become used to not seeing a face like mine on that stage or in that entire theatre. With over a billion of us around the world, it's perplexing, yet I understand why, in America, Asian Americans are invisible."

"Asia & directors from there will completely look over us as American. But here, we are foreign. And the few Asian Americans who HAVE risen here think that casting us/telling our stories is not profitable (not entirely true) so they don't take those risks." (Wang, 2018)

Wang effectively captures the main dilemmas that Asian creatives experience. The lack of substantial roles, the constant typecasting, the stereotypes that keep getting perpetuated on traditional television and movie screens. But above all, people of Asian descent living in Western nations face challenges when it comes to their own identities offscreen as well. For Asian

American creatives, they are considered foreign in both their ancestors' birthplaces, and in America. In the former, they are foreign as they did not grow up there, they cannot relate to the locals as they most likely never experienced a lifestyle like theirs, and it is difficult to connect with audience in a market like this. In the latter, Asian American creatives are also considered foreign—not because they grew up elsewhere, but because their skin colour gives the illusion of a perceived otherness amongst their dominant white counterparts. In North America, second-generation Asians often fall into a conflicting dichotomy of either being too Asian, or not Asian enough. Second generation Asians are also discouraged from pursuing a career in the arts because of the lack of acknowledgement in mainstream awards such as the Academy Awards, the Golden Globes and the like. It is a mindset that has set lots of aspiring Asian creatives behind.

"What can we do then? We HAVE to make it OURSELVES. We have to be willing to start at the bottom and rise (that's what every other community has done). We can't compare our chpt 3 to their chpt 30. We have to be willing to work w/ smaller budgets and just. start. making things!" (Wang, 2018)

"Bottomline, we need Asians to care about Asians, and we all need to work w/ each other. Accept that we're at the early stages of a journey, but we've got to start taking many small steps as one, instead of hoping for sporadic solo strides. Learn to walk, soon we'll be running." (Wang, 2018)

All three of the Asian female comedians on YouTube have been successful in undermining traditional, propagated stereotypes about Asian women through their initiation of and dedication in maintaining a presence on-screen. They demonstrate a fraction of YouTube and other similar digital media platforms' power and capability in changing the status quo. Embracing the affordances of YouTube as a platform—the way it allows users to almost seamlessly and easily facilitate an engaging viewership through its comments section, and its ability to let anyone in the world watch its videos—these YouTubers are setting the stage for an increasingly complex and diverse picture of Asian womanhood. With the new possibilities that platforms like YouTube open up, aspiring Asian creatives can follow in the footsteps of Natalie

Tran, Lilly Singh, and Anna Akana. Just like how they have redefined what it means to be an Asian woman, new users can take initiative to redefine what it means to be Asian in the digital generation. New media platforms are the place to push through this glass ceiling that Asians experience as a whole, and while it might be tempered glass for Asian women, all that is needed is a little bit of push and shove to find a solution or, at least, a step in the right direction.

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## Appendix

### **Anna Akana**

Main channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/AnnaAkana>

Videos:

*Why Guys Like Asian Girls* : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zWFQ1uiD8LA>

*How to Put on Your Face*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f49xeXdFSgc>

*Why Girls Should Ask Guys Out*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RWOBFu2uNXA>

### **Lilly Singh**

Main channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/IISuperwomanII>

Videos:

*How Girls Get Ready* : [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7o4uDXft\\_pU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7o4uDXft_pU)

*Types of Parents* : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wTIXFfpjf1o&t=588s>

*Types of Kids at School* : [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eR\\_nzGqYXNw&t=51s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eR_nzGqYXNw&t=51s)

### **Natalie Tran**

Main channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/communitychannel>

Videos:

*How to fake a six pack (Re: How to Fake Abs). \*SARCASM\** :

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijgfBwq\\_vkM&t=7s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijgfBwq_vkM&t=7s)

*The ultrasound.* : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vXu1lEa-NuQ>

*Bending at the Knees for Love* : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c0EgDFXsyQs>

***(Introduction quote)***

*Natalie Tran – Asians in Media Talk* : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TakJZtGILJw>

## **Tweets**

Philip Wang's post-Oscar 2018 tweets on Asian Americans in media:

<https://twitter.com/philipwang/status/970727283743866883>