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"Not that type of Asian": deconstructing the model minority myth from a South Asian perspective.

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"Not that Type of Asian": Deconstructing the Model Minority Myth from a South Asian Perspective

By

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Abstract

The myth of the model minority is an essential aspect of the literature on Asian American racialization. However, dominant narratives of the concept largely focus on East Asians, with limited literature highlighting its unique impact on South Asians. In light of this, this qualitative study sought to illuminate where South Asian experiences align with, deviate from, or expand upon the themes observed in existing literature. Using interview data from 21 South Asian American participants from across the United States, we explored 1) identity and sense of belonging, 2) mental health as it pertains to expectations associated with the model minority myth, 3) experiences with racism, 4) minimization of diversity, and 5) the relationship between place, wealth, and internalization of the myth. South Asian experiences largely aligned with the themes observed in existing literature but provided essential nuance to the narrative, especially regarding the distinct forms of racism South Asians face and minimization of diversity.

Introduction

Beginning in the 1960s, the myth of the model minority, or the idea that Asians are smart, STEM-oriented, and otherwise successful through hard work, has shaped how Asian Americans are racialized in the United States. Although these traits comprise a widespread set of stereotypes today, considering the history of the model minority myth illuminates that it is exactly that: a myth. For much of U.S. history, xenophobia, the idea of "Yellow Peril," and overwhelmingly negative stereotypes defined how Asian Americans were perceived, treated, and racialized (Asian Immigration: "The Yellow Peril"). However, in the wake of the civil rights movement, a new narrative of Asian Americans emerged. Beginning with a 1966 article titled "Success Story: Japanese American Style," (Peterson 1966) this narrative became a rhetorical strategy that served two functions: 1) to dismiss the racism Asians faced, and 2) to use Asians to dismiss the racism faced by other racial minority groups. By singling out Asians as a group that supposedly achieved upward mobility and success through hard work, Peterson essentially suggested that Asian Americans were a model minority (1966). With this narrative, white supremacists were able to point at the accomplishments of a select group of Asians in order to suggest that racial disparities were a product of individual failures rather than systemic barriers. In such a way, the myth fed the argument that racial barriers did not exist and that upward mobility was achievable for all through hard work, discipline, and belief in the "American Dream" (Chou & Feagin 2008, Yoo, et al, 2015).

Considering hyper-selectivity in immigration, which can be dated back to the 1960s, further illuminates why the idea that Asian American success is rooted in inherent characteristics, cultural values, or individual choices is inaccurate and problematic for social justice efforts. Hyper-selected immigrants are more highly educated than their non-migrant

counterparts in their home countries and are also more highly educated than the general U.S. population (Lee & Zhou 2017). Chinese Americans are a primary example of hyper-selected immigrants (Lee & Zhou 2017). With this, the academic success seen among children of some select groups of Asian immigrants can be better understood as a product of their more favorable "launching points" than as a product of cultural values. Furthermore, children of Asian immigrants who are not part of hyper-selected groups may benefit from what Lee and Zhou refer to as "stereotype promise," which occurs when being viewed through the lens of a positive stereotype enhances academic performance (2017). The impacts of hyper-selectivity in immigration further demonstrate how the idea that Asian Americans' high levels of achievement are rooted in "cultural values" is the inaccurate premise of an argument that upholds white supremacy by dismissing systemic racism.

Despite being rooted in fallacy, the myth continues to shape how Asian Americans are racialized in the present day. A review of the existing literature on the model minority myth reveals three major themes: 1) The myth has negative implications for Asian American mental health (Chen 1995; Qin et al 2007; Lee 2009; Kim & Lee 2014; ; Yoo, et al, 2015), 2) Asian Americans continue to face racism despite the myth (Kim, et al, 2021; Lee, 2021; Tessler, et al, 2020), 3) The myth minimizes the diversity of Asian experiences (Tendulkar, 2011; Pew Research Center 2021; Shams, 2019).

While much existing research supports these conclusions, it focuses almost entirely on East Asian experiences. The limited research that focuses on South Asians suggests that the subgroup experiences the myth uniquely (Shams, 2019; Lu 2020). For example, a 2019 study that highlights the experiences of South Asian Muslim Americans in California finds that even

though South Asians have been successful academically and financially (hence the glorification of South Asians as a "model minority"), many still feel a sense of othering and instability because of ongoing Islamophobia (Shams, 2019). Another study highlights key differences between East and South Asians, including cultural differences and the distinct ways in which the two subgroups experience prejudice (Lu, 2020). It finds that South Asians experience higher levels of prejudice than East Asians (possibly due to skin tone), that South and East Asians have equal levels of motivation, and that South Asians exhibit a higher degree of assertiveness due to cultural factors (Lu, 2020). Religion (or perceived religion), culture, and skin tone have been observed as factors that distinguish East and South Asian experiences, suggesting that the way in which South Asians experience the myth is a topic worthy of its own research. In light of wide-scale exclusion of South Asians from the dominant narrative of the Asian American experience, the present study seeks to illuminate South Asians' unique relationship with the myth of the model minority by assessing where the subgroup's experiences align with, deviate from, or expand upon the themes observed in existing literature. Specifically, the study explores (1) the relationship between the model minority myth and South Asian mental health, (2) how South Asians experience racism within the context of the myth, and (3) whether the myth minimizes the diversity of South Asian experiences.

Literature Review

Internalization of the Myth and Asian American Mental Health

Existing literature on Asian American mental health illuminates realities that stand in stark contrast with the image painted by the model minority myth (Chen 1995; Qin et al 2007; Lee 2009; Kim & Lee 2014; Yoo, et al, 2015). Studies across time and place document negative

mental health outcomes among Asian Americans, highlighting psychological stress that is often associated with pressure to live up to an image of success and then overlooked precisely because of that image. Although the model minority myth is comprised of seemingly "positive" stereotypes, literature demonstrates the adverse mental health outcomes that arise when success is tied to identity.

Internalization of the myth, which occurs when Asian Americans believe the stereotypes associated with the "model minority" image, has been associated with depression, anxiety, and psychological distress. A 1995 study found internalization of the myth to be a predictor of depression among Chinese Americans (Chen 1995; Atkin et al, 2018). A 2007 study titled "The other side of the model minority story" examined psychological and social difficulties Chinese American youth experienced in familial contexts, with academic expectations among the explanatory factors for mental health concerns (Qin et al 2007). This demonstrates the unfavorable mental health outcomes that occur when parents reinforce pressures related to the model minority stereotype, with literature suggesting that parents socialize their children under the model minority myth (Juang et al, 2017; Yi & Todd 2024). Failing to meet the academic expectations associated with the myth has been related to feelings of insecurity and thoughts of suicide (Kim & Park 2008; Atkin et al, 2018). A 2009 study showed a positive correlation between internalization of the myth and anxiety (Lee 2009; Atkin 2018). A 2014 study which investigated the relationship between internalization of the model minority myth and help-seeking attitudes among Asian Americans found a negative correlation, demonstrating that Asian Americans who have internalized the myth are less likely to seek help (Kim & Lee, 2014). A study conducted by Yoo, et al. (2015) also utilized an internalization of the myth measure but directly assessed its relationship with Asian American students' psychological distress. The

study found a positive correlation between internalization of the myth and stress related to academic expectations.

While South Asian participants have been included in some of these studies, it is often the case that mostly or even only Indians are included, which does not encapsulate the diversity of the South Asian region. Furthermore, studies that do include participants from various Asian backgrounds often fail to acknowledge the massive differences between regions of Asia and to assess the differential effect of the model minority myth on people holding the various identities that fall under the term "Asian American."

Asians Continue to Face Racism Despite the Myth

While the myth posits that Asian Americans are a "problem-free" group who do not face racism, extant literature on workplace discrimination and racism in other contexts suggests otherwise. The myth results in the positioning of Asians as "white-adjacent," but "adjacency" does not entail complete white privilege. Documented experiences of both macro and microaggressions reflect that Asians continue to be perceived as "perpetual foreigners" (Kim, et al, 2021; Lee, 2021; Tessler, et al, 2020).

A 2019 study that sought to understand the experiences of Asian American men in higher education leadership documented how they navigate barriers to career advancement and highlighted challenges, including experiences of racism, faced by Asians who do obtain leadership roles (Adamos 2019). This is part of a larger body of literature regarding the "bamboo ceiling," a term for the barriers that prevent Asian Americans from attaining leadership positions. A 2021 study highlights that positive attitudes toward Asians, possibly promoted by the myth, do

not necessarily protect Asians from racism. The study examined how two factors, the subtlety of microaggressions and attitudes toward Asian Americans, affected people's perceptions of the harmful impacts of microaggressions. Those with higher positive attitudes toward Asian Americans were likely to perceive blatant microaggressions as more harmful than those with less positive attitudes. However, in the perceived harm of more subtle types of microaggressions, there was no significant difference between those with positive attitudes toward Asian Americans and those with less positive attitudes. A limitation which should be acknowledged here is that this study presented microaggressions as singular acts, when in reality their effect is collective (Kim et al, 2021).

Notably, the rise of anti-Asian hate that occurred amidst fears surrounding Covid-19 demonstrated the "precariousness of [Asians'] status" as model minorities (Lee 2021), highlighting that positive attitudes toward Asians are not a stable phenomenon and can rapidly shift with changes in sociopolitical context. Some argue the rise in anti-Asian hate crimes and microaggressions reflects a resurgence of the "Yellow Peril" narrative and threatens Asian Americans' safety and mental health (Tessler 2020).

However, limited existing literature suggests that East and South Asians face distinct barriers. A 2020 study sought to unveil why East but not South Asians are underrepresented in leadership positions and highlighted differences in prejudice, motivation, and assertiveness as potential explanatory factors (Lu 2020). While the "bamboo ceiling" is an essential concept in the literature on Asian American workplace discrimination, it is possible that it is not entirely relevant to South Asians. Furthermore, phenotypic differences between the groups are likely to

manifest in distinct forms of racism. As it appears, the specific forms of discrimination and racism South Asians face are not commonly categorized as anti-Asian hate.

The Myth Minimizes the Diversity of Asian Experiences

The term "Asian American" encompasses a broad range of ethnicities and prescribes the same label to people with vastly different lived experiences. However, the image most commonly associated with the myth is that of hyper-selected, highly educated, and financially successful Chinese Americans (Lee 2021). This image reflects a select set of identities that only represent a small percentage of people who identify as Asian American. Considering differences between subgroups of the "Asian American" umbrella term as well as considering Asian Americans' many intersecting identities highlights an array of circumstances and experiences that are deemed invisible by the model minority image.

Literature suggests that health disparities are one example of circumstances hidden and minimized by the myth. A 2011 study for which community health assessments were performed in the Boston area revealed barriers Chinese and Vietnamese Americans face to healthcare access, including language barriers (Tendulkar 2011). The study revealed poor general health conditions among the two subgroups, both mental and physical. Such health assessments had not previously been conducted in the area, with researchers suggesting the Asian American communities may have been overlooked because of the illusion of prosperity promoted by the model minority myth (Tendulkar, 2011). A 2014 article highlights that despite cancer being the leading cause of death among Asian Americans, "the rate of cancer screening in Asian Americans is lower than in White Americans," with the authors suggesting that the model minority stereotype is a potential cause of this disparity (Ibaraki 2014). More recently, a 2021

article highlights the continued lack of research on Asian American health, also highlighting the model minority myth as a factor that masks unfavorable realities among Asian American communities. Despite being the fastest growing immigrant group, Asian Americans are understudied, possibly because of the notion that they are "well-positioned" and un-needing (Kim et al 2021).

Furthermore, the myth minimizes the vast differences in socioeconomic status between different Asian origin groups. The image of academic success created by the myth is often tied to financial prosperity as well. However, median household incomes among Asian American subgroups range from $44,000 to $119,000, and poverty rates among Asian subgroups range from 6 percent to 25 percent (Pew Research Center 2021). Thus, the myth erases barriers associated with class for groups who are not among the most financially successful Asians.

Lastly, the wide-scale exclusion of South Asians has been an under-researched form of minimization of diversity. The aforementioned 2019 study on South Asian Muslim Americans in California, which found the subgroup be "successful but precarious," represents part of the limited body of research that highlights South Asians' unique experience with the myth of the model minority (Shams 2019).

Methods

The purpose of this study was to provide nuance to the current narrative of Asian American experiences with the model minority myth by highlighting where South Asian experiences align with, deviate from, or expand upon the themes observed in existing literature. Furthermore, the project sought to illuminate the role of place in shaping South Asian

experiences, and as such, required a geographically diverse sample. This informed the choice to employ snowball sampling, as potential participants were "not centrally located but scattered in different sites" (Ary et al, 2006). A total of 21 participants were included in this study. All participants self-identified as South Asian American, were at least 18 years of age, and were residing in the United States at the time of data collection. There were 16 Indian American participants, 3 Pakistani American participants, and 2 participants of mixed backgrounds. Each participant was given a pseudonym to protect anonymity (see Table 1). The majority of participants were students at an elite medical school in the Northeastern region of the United States but were raised in various locations across the country and had a diverse set of lived experiences.

Data collection began in December of 2023 and was concluded in February of 2024. An initial group of potential participants were identified based on their participation in South Asian affinity spaces between 2018 and 2023 at an international youth leadership conference in order to maximize geographic diversity. Participants were largely recruited through email correspondence (see Appendix A) and subsequently participated in structured interviews via a virtual videoconference platform. Interviews were conducted in English and typically lasted around 35 minutes, with the shortest one lasting 17 minutes and the longest one lasting 65 minutes. Participants were asked open-ended questions about their family, academic experiences, and social identities. All participants were asked the same questions, each of which was outlined in an interview guide that contained four categories: 1) Place and Background, 2) Sense of Belonging, 3) Societal Expectations and Effects, and 4) Minimization of Diversity (see Appendix B). Upon completion of an interview, some participants were asked to identify other potential participants. Interviews were conducted by the author, an Indian American woman. Her identity

positioned her as an insider, which may have led participants to feel more comfortable in sharing sensitive personal experiences.

Participants of geographically diverse backgrounds were selected in order to better understand the role that diversity of surroundings can play in South Asians' experiences with the model minority myth. Particularly, it was anticipated that more diverse surroundings may protect South Asians from the harmful effects of the myth, and assessing this required participants from both diverse and predominantly white contexts.

Data analysis included field notes for mentions of experiences with the model minority myth that appeared to be distinct to South Asians. It also included thematic analysis of transcripts that were created from audio recordings of interviews. Interviews were coded for themes based on the patterns in existing research (Fugard & Potts 2019) and were subsequently organized into categories including Identity and Sense of Belonging; Mental Health and Myth-Related Social Expectations; Facing Racism Despite the Myth; Minimization of Diversity; and Place, Wealth, and Internalization of the Myth.

Findings

Identity and Sense of Belonging

A core premise of the present study is that South Asians experience a unique form of racialization that is not encapsulated by dominant narratives of the Asian American experience. Our findings reflected this idea, as regardless of their location and surroundings participants almost universally struggled to identify as "Asian." While participants understood that they were

technically Asian, many expressed how that label did not reflect either how they perceived themselves or how others perceived them. For example, Sakshi shared:

> I probably get considered Asian in like a demographics way but I feel like not on a day-to day basis. . . I feel like I find myself saying "oh they're Asian," so kind of using "Asian" to describe a group of people who aren't South Asian like people who are from China, Japan, or Korea.

Other participants expressed discomfort and hesitation with selecting "Asian" on forms; Vihaan shared "I always feel a bit weird when I check the Asian box." Even those who strongly identified as Asian shared experiences of having to defend that identity, as they were often not perceived as such. Sankita highlighted experiences of explaining to people that she is Asian:

> Sometimes people ask me "where are you really from?" And I say I'm Asian and they're like "Are you really though?" And I'm just like India is literally a part of Asia, I don't know what to tell you. Maybe you could've done better in second grade geography.

Gopi, a biology professor, expressed that her colleagues struggle to understand that she is Asian even given their high levels of educational attainment. Her experiences reflect that South Asian countries are often not understood to be part of Asia:

> I've always known [I'm Asian] because I'm map literate. I understand that my parents immigrated from Asia, but I have to just understand even people with PhDs in biology are not map literate.

In light of vast cultural and other differences between different regions of Asia, many participants felt the term "Asian American" to be nonsensical and "too large of an umbrella." However, some found there to be value in a unified political identity. Divya shared "I think it can be very useful and powerful when you're organizing political coalitions. . . because there's power in numbers and as a minority group, we're not that numerous." Despite this potential value, its usefulness for the specific issues that South Asians face is questionable. Given how

frequently South Asians are perceived as “not Asian,” it is unsurprising that some participants reported feeling left out of the discourse surrounding Asian American issues. Naina stated:

> My experience has been that typically when people use the word Asian they’re referring to East Asian communities. And there seems to be a pretty stark distinction between East Asian and South Asian. And I often find that South Asian communities are sort of left out of the conversation of being Asian American.

The theme of feeling left out of Asian American conversations was reflected in a general lack of belonging in Pan-Asian spaces. In referring to a Pan-Asian space at her school, Divya shared “theoretically South Asian is definitely part of that,” but in practice, that space was not what she most gravitated toward. Similarly, Ameera shared:

> There's something called APAMSA, which is the Asian Pacific American Medical Student Association. . . my friends, like South Asian friends, and I were really actively trying to be a part of that association. But it never really fit and they were really nice and we talked to them a lot, but it was definitely not shared culture and we found our shared culture specifically through the South Asian Medical Student Association group.

Vidya shared a similar experience with Pan-Asian spaces during her undergraduate years:

> In college there's different groups for whatever kind of affinity we were and . . .I didn't really feel that close of an affinity to the Pan-Asian groups. I would more so participate in the South Asian groups because it seemed like the cultural activities were just kind of tailored in different ways in the Pan-Asian groups. . . like East Asian holidays and stuff they would have celebrations for and then obviously the South Asian groups would have more South Asian oriented activities

While many participants expressed feeling a sense of belonging in South Asian spaces, participants who represented minorities within the South Asian community shared that it can be difficult to find complete belonging. Particularly, Pakistani participants commented on how they have navigated predominantly Indian spaces. One participant shared:

> There’s no other Pakistani girl in my school, so a lot of my friends are Indian and there’s like this slight difference, you know, like I go to Diwali, but I don’t really know it. Like I don’t have an attachment to it, and they do things that are very specifically Indian. I feel like I’ve already known that part of the [South Asian] diaspora, and I feel really

> comfortable, but there's a different sense of belonging that comes with someone who knows specifically your culture. It took me a long time to realize I can celebrate other people in the diaspora, but I also don't have to assimilate. I can still maintain my own identity within that picture.

Comparably, many South Indian participants expressed feeling minoritized within the community, commenting on North Indian predominance. Colorism emerged as a key factor affecting South Indians' sense of belonging. Vidya shared:

> Even within the South Asian diaspora, I think that there's this predominance of North Indian culture and North Indian beauty standards that definitely affects me as a South Indian having different features and . . . I definitely feel like I've experienced colorism. And I think that it's kind of shaped my identity as well because even within the South Asians, I am somewhat of a minority in that as well amongst the Indian American crowd that I've associated with.

Furthermore, some participants suggested that shared identity was not enough for them to experience belonging and highlighted the need for shared values. Ahana discussed her journey in finding South Asians friends "who are also activists" after growing up around "brown people who act white in terms of their advocacy . . . [and who] just don't stand for anything." Ahana described them as "privileged" and suggested this was a product of their "internalized racism." The attitudes of the brown people Ahana grew up with may be a product of internalization of the myth, which has been defined as a form of internalized racism (Hwang 2021). Because the myth posits that Asians are "problem-free," internalizing it may result in a decreased engagement in activism – both that surrounding Asian American issues and issues faced by other people of color (Yi & Todd 2024).

Lastly, some participants who grew up in predominantly white contexts and did not have access to South Asian community spaces shared that their other identities played a greater role as they sought out a sense of belonging. Sima, who grew up in a rural and predominantly white

town shared “I don’t really rely on my South Asian-ness to help me find community.” While Sima elaborated that she “craves” a South Asian community, “it usually isn’t practical where [she lives] to find it.” Saanvi, who also grew up in a rural predominantly white context, shared that she finds herself navigating class-related differences to a greater extent than race-related ones, further suggesting that other identities may become more salient in finding belonging for those to whom South Asian community spaces are not readily available.

South Asians’ experiences with identity and sense of belonging provide a foundation for understanding their unique relationship with the model minority myth. In the next sections, we unpack how South Asians’ specific lived experiences fit within the major themes observed in existing literature.

Mental Health and Myth-Related Social Expectations

While participants dealt with varying levels of academic expectations, only a few attributed their stress to identity-related societal expectations. Nearly all participants were familiar with model-minority-related stereotypes and reported experiences of being viewed through that lens, but the extent to which they were affected by them varied widely. However, across geographic contexts and other differences in lived experience, families were the most common and significant source of expectations. Sima shares “if the expectations came from anywhere, they came from my parents and not from my peers.” Others shared that even if their peers made assumptions about their academic abilities, they would immediately discredit them if it was clear those were identity-based assumptions. Thus, many participants reported that the only expectations they took seriously were those coming from family; Vidya shared “the only

expectations I really pay mind to are my family." Some did report feeling high levels of pressure related to familial expectations. When asked how she copes, Ameera shared "I go to therapy and I'm on SSRIs which helps." Rajan also reported coping with therapy after going through a "rocky journey" in meeting her family's expectations as well as her own:

> I never felt like I lived up to the expectations, like when I was in college, I ended up taking time off and didn't get into medical school the first time. . . which felt really shameful.

However, stress related to both familial and societal identity-based expectations declined with age for most participants. When describing pressure to appear smart, many participants would preface with "when I was younger." Mahi, for example, described that she used to be frustrated when people made identity-based assumptions about her intelligence, but remarked "whatever – you get over that in life." Many participants attributed the decline in pressure to coming across and spending significant time around people who they perceived as smarter than them. Saanvi shared:

> I did feel pressure in high school, but in college there's just a lot of people who are smarter than me and that made me feel comfortable just having my own type of intelligence.

Another participant shared that while she used to be affected by societal expectations to go into health and that those dictated her choice to pursue something "different," she eventually made the conscious choice to give more decision-making power to her passions than to other people's expectations:

> For the longest time I'd wanted to do architecture and I was like oh this will be cool and different and totally off the path of what people expect me to do and then I realized like I really really care about health and medicine and this is like a passion and this is where social justice can really align so I like had to at some point let go of that discomfort of like oh I thought I was gonna be different but now I'm not I guess.

While only a few participants shared that mental health concerns were directly rooted in model-minority-related expectations, some did share various other adverse mental health outcomes which may be deemed invisible by the image of prosperity. Vihaan recalled:

> I had a pretty a big period. . .like a pretty intense period, I think between the ages of like 14 and like I would say like 20 maybe, where I was pretty heavily experimenting with a lot of like different substances, like different drugs . . . I realized probably now in retrospect that I was like self-medicating and dealing with a lot of troubles that I should have been seeing somebody professional for.

Another participant shared that she felt little to no stress related to societal identity-based academic expectations, but she was severely affected by race-based isolation and the lack of safety she felt as a brown person:

> It was just a very traumatic thing to basically unpack how unsafe I really feel and have felt for a very long time . . . I was in mourning basically. I was just mourning the fact that white people . . . can walk around and you have the entitlement and safety . . . when you go to the grocery store and you see all the different foods you grew up with represented and clothes you can buy. Every single aspect of life is made for you in a way that makes you feel safe and entitled to that safety.

Thus, while she was not significantly affected by identity-based academic expectations, she experienced race-related stress which may be concealed by the "problem-free" image promoted by the model minority myth.

Facing Racism Despite the Myth

Participants' experiences with racism both aligned with and expanded upon the themes observed in existing literature. Although to varying degrees, nearly all participants shared experiences of encountering model minority related stereotypes, such as being perceived as inherently intelligent and STEM-oriented. Despite these "positive" stereotypes, they also almost

universally shared experiences of racism that reflected a "perpetual foreigner" status. While participants experienced many forms of microaggressions that are common across Asian American identities – such as people assuming they do not speak English (Pew Research Center) – they also experienced forms of racism that were distinctly related to their South Asian identity and which are often not viewed as anti-Asian racism.

South Asian Muslim participants, as well as some participants who did not identify as Muslim but were perceived as such due to their brown skin, shared experiences of anti-Muslim racism. Ameera shared:

> I'm Pakistani and my last name's Hussein which especially around 9/11 and stuff was a really big deal and a very formative experience for me was this kid in middle school threw a chicken nugget at me and he . . .yelled 9/11 or something. . . and as a middle schooler who's a people pleaser I was like, oh, okay like fine or whatever and I walked away I thought it was nothing. But when I told it to my parents. . .and I didn't realize it was, you know, first bullying and then second racially charged.

Ahana also shared that her Muslim identity and brown skin have shaped her experiences with racism, and that it is distinct from the form of racism East Asian people experience:

> During Covid [when there was] a lot of anti-Chinese sentiment, it was like I'm Asian, but not the type of Asian where people are like 'you're responsible for the virus' . . . like technically I'm Asian but I am Muslim my last name is Muslim and I'm Muslim appearing to a lot of people . . . who want to come for brown people

Roshni, a Hindu participant, also shared experiences of being perceived as threatening because she is brown, which may have been rooted in anti-Muslim sentiments. She highlighted an experience from summer camp in middle school:

> This girl came up to me and she was like, "my parents said I'm not allowed to be friends with you because brown people are dangerous."

Some participants also reported that at times, they have struggled to feel safe within their identities. Rajan, who spent all of her formative years in predominantly white environments, shared an incidence with hate speech that she received online through an anonymous message. She and two of her friends Sarah and Paige, who were Taiwanese and Black respectively, were targeted with racial and ethnic slurs:

> The [messages] to Sarah used a lot of Asian slurs, the one to Paige used the 'n' word, and the ones to me used a lot of Indian [slurs] talking about like curry and incest . . . and we brought it up to the principal at my school and it was just not taken very seriously despite. . . like in mine they were talking about bombing me and my family and, you know, I just felt like really really unsafe on campus.

Ahana also shared that she struggles to feel safe in her identity, although for her it was chronic rather than related to a specific incident. She shares that she feels especially unsafe in predominantly white spaces:

> I hate going to Soul Cycle classes where it's like 60 white people who are all in the same income bracket and are like "I like your samosas, but you might be a terrorist" and I was just never honest with the fact that I don't have a feeling of safety.

Several participants also reported incidences of bullying in school, with comments related to their food and the way they smelled emerging as common themes. Ayush shared experiencing "just casual racism like Indians smell." Anjali shared: "I would bring Indian food for lunch, and they [would say] oh that's gross." Roshni shared:

> It's just like the small [comments] curry muncher, brown skinned . . . you learn to laugh it off, but I feel like when that happens so often to you, especially when you're little, I feel like that definitely is really traumatic.

Some participants coming from predominantly white contexts also shared experiences of being perceived as non-English-speaking. Sankita shared:

> I was just sitting in the building doing my homework because I didn't want to go back to the dorm yet and this old white woman comes up to me and she's asking me a question like very slowly. . . and you could just tell by her face that she was very shocked somebody like me was speaking great English.

Participants reported various other incidences in which they were perceived as inherently foreign. Gopi, a professor, discussed a comment she received from a student in a course evaluation:

> "When I first saw this name, I thought it was gonna be an a**hole immigrant man, but you ended up being a pretty nice lady."

Another participant, Mahi, shared several instances of having to defend her American-ness. She describes one particularly salient example:

> I was biking to school, and someone told me "Go back to where you came from." And I was so offended by that. I was like this is where I'm from. Like, what are you talking about? And that was the first time that I really identified as American.

However, the degree to which participants felt affected by comments such as these varied. Many reported they experienced racist and xenophobic incidences more when they were younger and that their frequency declined as they were presented with opportunities to more intentionally seek out community. For example, Divya describes the people she surrounds herself with as "fairly worldly and diverse and sensitive," and highlights that she "gets shielded from a lot of generalized assumptions."

Minimization of Diversity

Socioeconomic status emerged as a primary factor relating to minimization of diversity. Comparable to the way in which the image of an East Asian model minority is a highly educated and financially well-off Chinese American (Lee 2021), it seems the predominant image of a

South Asian model minority is an academically and financially successful Indian. For example, Divya commented: “I do recognize that when it comes to socioeconomics, people who specifically identify as Indian American tend to enjoy higher SES status.” Saakshi also alluded to the hyper-selection of Indian immigrants:

> A lot of Indian immigrants in the United States tend to be people from more professional backgrounds and end up in a higher socioeconomic status because of their higher education level.

This image minimizes the diversity of the South Asian region, resulting in the erasure of many non-Indian South Asian identities. Gopi commented on Indians’ financial success and its effect on how all South Asians are perceived:

> I mean Indians among the South Asian community. . . have the highest sort of financial ranking among South Asians. But I’m like look, if we use the term South Asian, it includes Pakistanis, Sri Lankans, Nepalis, Bangladeshis. . . back when we actually had taxi cabs, I think 5000 cabs, taxi cab drivers in New York city were South Asian . . .the South Asian community isn’t necessarily all financially stable.

Furthermore, this image also erases Indians who do not experience financial prosperity. Mahi highlighted Fiji Indians among the South Asian subgroups whose socioeconomic status does not reflect the dominant image of Indians: “Like in my area, there’s a lot of Fiji Indians, and I guess they identify as Fiji, but their descent is from India and they are very working class.” Saanvi, who is Gujarati Indian, shared how her lived experiences have been very different from “rich brown people:”

> I’ve met rich brown people that I have like a very, very huge disconnection with because of how I grew up in a lower socioeconomic status . . . if you have a higher socioeconomic status, your life is easier.”

Similarly, Sima, another Indian American participant, shares that her experiences were starkly different from the dominant narrative:

> I think a lot of the dominant narrative about Indians in America, or South Asians in America, tend to all focus on wealthier communities and wealthier families which was not my experience at all growing up.

In addition to socioeconomic status, gender emerged as another factor relating to minimization of diversity, as the narrative promoted by the myth in many ways erases the experiences of South Asian women. While the model minority myth may suggest that Asians are smart and STEM-oriented, many participants who were women continued to battle assumptions of incompetency in their workplaces. Saakshi, a medical student, highlighted her experiences while completing a surgery clerkship:

> I felt like if I didn't ask to do something no one would let me do it whereas I heard from classmates who were men, like both white and men, "they just let me do this," or "they just told me to do this," I was like okay so I don't know how much of it is like maybe you act more comfortable in those spaces and people assume that you are more confident versus them having an assumption that you're not able to do something because of your background.

Ahana, who is also in medicine, shared frustration with frequently being referred to as a nurse rather than a doctor:

> I'm a doctor now. It says MD on my badge. And then it, okay, it's triggering to the point of me wanting to scream, like, especially in the ED. In the ED this week, I got called a nurse so many times, like every day, every single patient. And I introduce myself as a doctor. I say, I'm your doctor. And then they'll be like, but I want to talk to that doctor. And it's like the white man doctor, all the ED attendings are white men, white men, balding white men.

Place, Wealth, and Internalization of the Myth

Overall, socioeconomic status and diversity of surroundings seemed to be factors associated with internalization of the myth, which occurs when Asian Americans believe the stereotypes associated with the model minority image. Internalizing the myth has been associated

with increased stress related to academic expectations (Yoo et al, 2015) and has also been shown to damage interracial solidarity (Matriano et al., 2021; Ouch & Moradi, 2022; Yi & Todd, 2021; Yi & Todd 2024).

Participants with higher socioeconomic statuses and limited exposure to diversity were most likely to show signs of internalization of the myth. Roshni, an Indian American participant, describes coming from an upper middle-class background and attending a high school with selective admission. She described the school as "predominantly white and Asian." Thus, while her surroundings were not predominantly white, she was surrounded by few non-Asian people of color. When asked if she felt pressure to appear smarter than her peers, Roshni responded:

> I 100% feel the need to be better than my peers, like everybody else. It's not just an ego thing, but it's also just like, this is gonna sound so bad, but it's also like I'm Indian, I need to be the smartest one here, it's part of my identity. I feel like I've kind of associated being Indian and being smart . . . So I feel like that also does build some unwanted pressure or stress because I'm always just trying to reach this level that I've set for myself as an overachiever.

In addition to believing her identity was inherently tied to academic achievement, Roshni shared that she felt like she was at a "disadvantage" as an Indian person and seemed to be informed by ideas related to the model minority myth in the thought process that led her to that conclusion:

> I feel like we come from like a very like hard-working background and it's just something that our parents will always pass down to us. . . We have really been able to like thrive and I feel like now that we're just kind of like taking over all of these like different jobs, especially like ones that will earn you six figures I feel like now people no longer see us like as a minority because it's just like "oh no you guys are everywhere You guys are taking all the jobs like you guys are becoming a majority now." If anything, I feel like I'm disadvantaged in a way. I don't want to sound pretentious but for example pursuing a field in computer science, I know people probably won't want me because they would want like more diversity other than Indian people.

However, participants who came from relatively diverse and majority minority backgrounds, regardless of their class status, were less likely to be deeply affected by identity-based academic

expectations and were also more likely to discuss identity-related privilege in certain contexts. Ayush, an Indian American participant who has consistently lived in relatively diverse environments shares:

> I'm not pressured to like out-achieve [my peers] in any way. That's not ever been a thing. And it's not ever been because of my South Asian background.

Also in contrast with Roshni, Ayush discussed his identity with a language of privilege:

> I think the way South Asian people are treated as minorities is very different from other minority groups. So like that's just a privilege that I've learned to recognize and understand that, you know, even though I'm maybe like a minority population wise or like in certain settings where I'm with certain that people don't look like me, it's still, I know I'm definitely treated differently than other minority groups.

Similarly, Ameera, who is a medical student described herself as privileged in the context of her field:

> I know I'm not underrepresented. Like there's a billion brown girls who wanna go into pediatrics and like they look like me and they have the same CV as I do. . . I feel like a lot of my life, I've been like trying to fight and like be the, not like be the minority, but like I felt, you know, like I am fighting privilege. And I know I am in a very privileged situation right now.

Divya, who grew up in a majority minority neighborhood and who is from a low-income background shares that she "feels no pressure" to appear smarter than her peers. Like Ayush and Ameera, she also refers to her South Asian identity as one of privilege in medicine. She discusses how awareness of her intersecting identities affects the way she navigates spaces meant for underrepresented populations:

> A lot of people represented in the field of medicine tend to be white, Asian, and also like wealthy or have parents as physicians. So it's like hard to figure out where I fit in there because I'm definitely on the Asian side of things. But like my parents are not doctors and I'm not wealthy.

Thus, participants coming from wealthy backgrounds with limited levels of diversity in their surroundings were more likely to experience stress related to identity-based societal academic expectations. Participants coming from relatively diverse and majority minority backgrounds were less likely to experience that pressure, and they were also more likely to discuss privilege related to their identity in contexts where South Asians are overrepresented.

Conclusion

In this study we sought to explore South Asian Americans' unique relationship with the model minority myth. Participants' comments on identity and sense of belonging highlighted that South Asians are perceived differently than other Asian subgroups and are more likely to be perceived as "not Asian." This context was important in understanding the unique way in which South Asians are racialized and in analyzing how South Asians' experiences provide nuance to the major themes observed in existing literature on the model minority myth.

South Asian experiences somewhat aligned with the first major theme explored: the relationship between the model minority myth and Asian American mental health. Many participants reported feeling unwanted pressure related to the stereotypes that fall under the model minority myth at young ages; however, this declined as they grew older. Many participants reported that they were aware of the stereotypes but that they did not feel unhealthy amounts of pressure. Families were the most common source of academic expectations, with participants reporting that they were less affected by larger societal expectations.

In analyzing South Asians' experiences with racism and xenophobia, we found that South Asians had some experiences that seem to be common across Asian American identities, and

they reflected the "perpetual foreigner" concept. However, participants also highlighted experiences that were distinctly related to their South Asian identity and are often not viewed as forms of anti-Asian racism. In exploring minimization of diversity, we found that the experiences of wealthy Indians represent the dominant narrative of the South Asian "model minority," minimizing the ethnic and socioeconomic diversity of South Asian Americans. Additionally, the model minority narrative can minimize the experiences of South Asian women, who continue to battle assumptions of incompetency in their workplaces. Lastly, socioeconomic status and diversity of surroundings were factors associated with the extent to which participants showed signs of having internalized the model minority myth. Participants from wealthier backgrounds with limited exposure to diversity were more likely to be deeply affected by identity-based societal expectations and to show other signs of having internalized the model minority myth.

A limitation of the present study is that the sample was comprised largely of South Asian medical students who excelled academically. Exploring model minority related pressures and expectations among South Asians outside of STEM or South Asians who choose non-academic paths to success may reveal different mental health outcomes. Furthermore, while this preliminary study provided some insight into the role that place and racial composition of surroundings play in shaping South Asian lived experiences, there was more east coast representation than any other region. Further research is needed to understand the role that place plays in shaping identity and perspective.

Despite these limitations, this study does contribute to the way we understand the Asian American experience. Overall, this study demonstrated the need for nuance when studying Asian

American experiences. The aggregation of diverse identities under the label “Asian American,” which is often treated as a single category of analysis, can function to uphold dominant narratives and erase identities that are marginalized within this community.

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Appendix A

Email to Interviewees

Dear [insert name],

My name is Shraddha Patel, and I am a senior at the University of Louisville studying Sociology with a Track in Diversity and Inequality. For my senior thesis, I am conducting a research study under the supervision of Dr. Jasmine Whiteside, the goal of which is to better understand the lived experiences of South Asian people from across the United States.

I am reaching out to you because I am looking for interview participants as I enter the study's data collection phase. The research study will involve in-depth interviews that will be conducted virtually. It is expected that interviews will last 30 to 60 minutes. I am looking for individuals who are 18 or older, identify as South Asian American, and who are currently residing in the United States. If you are interested in participating, please let me know. Additionally, if you know anyone who would be interested in participating and could pass this information along, that would be greatly appreciated.

Thank you in advance, and please do not hesitate to reach out with any questions or concerns.

Best,
Shraddha Patel

Appendix B

Interview Guide

Place and Background

1) In as much detail as you can, tell me about your background and where you are from.
    a. How would you describe the size of your hometown (urban, rural, or suburban)?
    b. How would you describe the racial/ethnic diversity of your hometown (predominantly white, relatively diverse, or majority minority)?
2) Can you tell me about your family (i.e., the size of your immediate family)?
    a. Did you all move to any other areas? If so, what was that like?

Sense of Belonging

3) As a South Asian person, do you feel a sense of belonging in your neighborhood community now?
    a. Have you always felt a sense of community or disengagement with your neighborhood? Has this feeling changed over the years? Why do you think that is?

4) If you are still in school, do you feel a sense of belonging in school now?
    a. Have you always felt a sense of community or disengagement while you were in school? Why do you think that is?
5) As a South Asian person, do you feel like your sense of belonging increases or decreases when you are in different (predominantly white, majority, minority, Asian American) spaces? If so, how do you navigate these spaces? If not, why do you think that is?
    a. What are the spaces in which you feel like you most belong?
6) As a South Asian person, have you ever struggled to identify as Asian? Do you feel that your identity is distinct from the mainstream understanding of what it is to be Asian?
7) Do you ever feel like people perceive you as "not really" a minority?

Societal Assumptions and Effects

8) Can you think of particular moments where you felt like people made assumptions of your academic abilities because of your South Asian identity?
9) In academic spaces, do you feel pressure to appear smarter than your peers?
    a. If so, does this pressure add any stress to you or does it not bother you?
10) Can you think of particular moments where you felt like people made assumptions, other than those related to academic abilities, because of your South Asian identity?
11) How do you deal with other people's expectations of you?

Minimization of Diversity

12) Other than being South Asian, are there any social identities that you think really represent who you are and/or shape how you define yourself (e.g., socioeconomic status, religion, first language)?
    a. How have each of these identities shaped your lived experiences? And how have these affected you?
    b. Are there any additional stories relating to these experiences that you would like to share?

Table 1

Participant Information

PSEUDONYM	ETHNICITY	HOMETOWN LOCATION	HOMETOWN SIZE	HOMETOWN DIVERSITY	CURRENT LOCATION
AMEERA	Pakistani	New York	Suburban	Relatively diverse	New York
ANJALI	Indian (South Indian)	Mississippi	Rural/Suburban	Relatively diverse	Mississippi
ROSHNI	Indian (South Indian)	Arizona	Suburban	Predominantly white and Asian	Arizona
SIMA	Indian (Gujarati)	Kentucky	Rural/Suburban	Predominantly white	Florida
DIVYA	Indian (Gujrati)	New York	Urban	Majority minority	New York
VIDYA	Indian (South Indian)	Florida	Rural	Predominantly white	New York
SAKSHI	Indian (Punjabi)	New York	Urban	Majority minority	New York
MAHI	Indian/white	California	Suburban	Predominantly white	California
ANAS	Pakistani	New York	Suburban	Relatively diverse	New York
AYUSH	Indian (South Indian)	California	Suburban	Relatively diverse	New York
AHANA	Indian (Gujarati)	Maryland	Suburban	Relatively diverse	New York
AYAAN	Indian (North Indian)	California	Suburban	Relatively diverse	New York
SANKITA	Indian	Mississippi	Suburban	Majority minority	Mississippi
GOPI	Indian	Illinois	--	Predominantly white	Colorado
RUHI	Pakistani	New York	Urban	Majority minority	New York
MAHIRA	Indian/white	Kentucky	Suburban	Predominantly white	New York
SAANVI	Indian	Mississippi	Rural	Predominantly white	Mississippi
NAINA	Indian	California	Urban	Predominantly white	California
AARUSHI	Indian (South Indian)	North Carolina	Rural	Relatively diverse	Ohio
RAJAN	Indian	Oregon	Rural	Predominantly white	New York
VIHAAN	Indian (Gujarati)	Georgia	Rural	Relatively diverse	New York