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"Fat for an Asian": The Embodiment of Asian Stereotypes in an Online Community

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**"FAT FOR AN ASIAN":THE EMBODIMENT OF
ASIAN STEREOTYPES IN AN ONLINE COMMUNITY**

by

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**“FAT FOR AN ASIAN”: THE EMBODIMENT OF ASIAN STEREOTYPES IN
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ABSTRACT

Previous research has suggested that different racial groups have differing expectations of body size, but Asian Americans have largely been absent from this literature. *Thick Dumpling Skin*, a blog that focuses on body image issues and eating disorders in the Asian American community, provides an opportunity to study this unexplored topic. *Thick Dumpling Skin* is highly interactive and features submitted posts from multiple users. Using qualitative content analysis to code archived blog posts from 2011 to 2014, this paper studies how online users in this community come to embody stereotypes regarding the Asian body. In my analysis, I discuss how users define the ideal Asian body in ways that make thinness and Asian-ness synonymous. To members of this community, being a fat Asian is a contradiction and threat to their Asian identity. Using the microaggressions literature, I examine the potential psychological consequences of not fitting the ideal Asian body. This paper also asserts that Asians do subscribe to a thin ideal, but it is not the same ideal held by whites. I conceptualize the need to attain the perfect Asian body as the embodiment of the model minority stereotype.

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INTRODUCTION

A number of weblogs, or “blogs”, are devoted to various aspects of Asian American culture and identity, and use the medium of the Internet as a forum for interaction and discussion among members of the Asian American community. The blog *Thick Dumpling Skin* is particularly noteworthy, as it is one of the few, if not only, blogs that focuses on body dissatisfaction and eating disorders within the Asian American community. Much of the sociological literature on body image and eating disorders has explored how women of different races may have differing expectations around ideal body size (Cachelin et.al 2002; Hebl and Heatherton 1998; Hebl et.al 2009; Lovejoy 2001), but Asian American women have largely been absent in such research. To that end, *Thick Dumpling Skin* offers a unique insight from within the Asian American community about the struggles Asian American women face with regards to fitting into an ideal Asian body.

Thick Dumpling Skin is hosted through the blogging site Tumblr, which has a highly interactive interface in that users can easily comment, like, or share a post via a “reblogging” option. An important feature of this blog is its “submission” option, in which readers or followers of the blog can submit a post either anonymously or non-anonymously. There are no formal criteria for submission – anyone can submit a post. Thus, rather than the traditional blog “that looks similar to a public diary (Hookway 2008), this blog is set up more like an ad hoc online community that allows for various forms of interaction between different users.

The importance of the Internet cannot be discounted in the facilitation of these discussions. Boero and Pascoe (2012) argue that these online body projects are

embodiment practices, and that embodiment, both on and offline, is relational. While Boero and Pascoe (2012) explore the “pro-ana” online community, I employ a similar framework for exploring how the *Thick Dumpling Skin* community embodies Asian stereotypes, despite the fact that *Thick Dumpling Skin* is profoundly different from the typical “pro-ana” site. However, *Thick Dumpling Skin* illustrates many aspects of online embodiment that Boero and Pascoe discuss. Without the benefit of face-to-face interactions, the users must use discursive techniques in order to actively define the Asian body, and situate their own bodies in relation to this definition. Through this process, the users find themselves confronted with a very definitive image of what the Asian body should look like, a body that they believe to fully encompass what it means to be Asian. As my analysis will show, “thin” and “Asian” often come hand in hand, as though there is no way to fully be one without being the other. Moreover, for many users on the blog, thinness is viewed as a measure of personal success, indicating that the model minority stereotype extends beyond straight A's, and may in fact be embodied through the achievement of this ideal, stereotypical Asian body. Thus, being a fat Asian becomes a direct contradiction, and threat, to an Asian identity.

BACKGROUND AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Thin, the Fat, and the Ugly

Lois Banner's history of women's fashion and beauty in America, *American Beauty* (1984), discusses how fashion trends have reflected ideal standards of beauty. Wolf (1991) argues that such beauty standards are a reflection of the unbalanced power relations in a male-dominated society. Furthermore, she argues, beauty standards are not only a representation of the ideal woman, they are symbolic of the ideal woman's behavior. Dieting is one such example. Although standards of fatness and thinness have fluctuated throughout the 20th century, at least since the 1960's there has been an overall trend towards an extremely thin female figure, one that is perpetuated by the modeling and film industries (Banner 1984; Stearns 2002; Wolf 1991). In the modern era of surgical enhancement and weight loss products, women are told through commercials, magazines, and celebrity figures, that thinness is both a desirable quality, and an achievable one (Bordo 2004; Brumberg 2000). Dieting has become commonplace for many women in the United States, and, indeed, Wolf argues that it is the "essence of contemporary femininity" (1991:216).

Ironically, at the same time as an increasingly thin figure has become the desired standard of American beauty, in reality waistlines have increased fairly steadily since the 1920's (Stearns 2002), to the point where now we frame and discuss obesity as a crisis in need of immediate and extreme intervention (Boero 2012). Certain populations, especially the poor and racial or ethnic minorities, have been targeted as a result of the "obesity epidemic". Childhood obesity is also a major concern in the public health discourse, and the faces of obesity are often the working class, Latina or Black mothers,

who are blamed for their inability to appropriately manage their bodies and the bodies of their children. Thus, “obesity” is understood in terms of society’s intersecting norms of race, class, and gender (Boero 2009; Boero 2012; Saguy and Almeling 2008; Saguy and Gruys 2010).

Asian Americans are rarely present in the public discourse surrounding obesity, unlike their Black or Latino counterparts. Only about 10.8% of Asian adults in the United States have a body mass index (BMI) of 30 or greater, a significantly lower obesity rate compared to non-Hispanic Blacks, 42.5% of Hispanics, and 32.6% of non-Hispanic whites in the United States (Ogden et.al 2013). This is not to say that Asians are impervious to the nationwide panic of the “obesity epidemic”, however. Indeed, as in the United States, Asia is experiencing a similar rise in obesity. Relatively recent economic growth and development has allowed for the emergence of a new middle-class of consumers in such places as China and Singapore (Isono et al. 2009; French and Crabbe 2010). The rise in the middle class has coincided with a rise in weight, but also with the emergence of the Asian weight-loss industry and a new trend towards thinness. As French and Crabbe note: “Anything less than ‘skinny’ has become, to many people’s eyes, synonymous with ugly, and also increasingly with a bad ‘lifestyle,’” (2010:156).

Despite the fact that more people in China, particularly the middle class, are overweight, there does not seem to be a move towards size acceptance. Fat people, usually women, are denied work for being both fat and ugly (French and Crabbe 2010). In Singapore, fat children are targeted; since 1992, children in elementary school who are deemed overweight according to height and weight charts, are put into a compulsory exercise and diet program (Isono et al. 2009). As in the United States, this growing anti-

fat culture has proven particularly detrimental to girls and women. Documented cases of anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa, once conditions thought to be limited to Western cultures, have increased significantly in many developed Asian countries, including Singapore and Japan. The demographics of people with eating disorders in Asian countries are remarkably similar to those of Western countries: young, mostly adolescent females (Isono et.al 2009; Ung 2005; Pike and Borovoy 2004). This means that Asian Americans, no matter if they are first, second, or third generation living in the United States, are subjected to both Western and Eastern standards of beauty that emphasize the thin ideal, and condemn fat.

Eating Disorders and the Thin Ideal

Many sociologists and feminist scholars have argued that the rise in eating disorders has emerged out of the cultural obsession with the thin ideal as the standard of beauty for women (Banner 1989; Bordo 2004; Wolf 1991), a thin ideal that is particularly salient for white women. Trends in anorexia, bulimia, and binge eating disorders reflect important cultural and social differences, particularly around socioeconomic and racial/ethnic lines. Anorexia, for example, has traditionally been portrayed as a disorder that mostly affects white, middle to upper class, young women, but, as Bordo (2004) argues, in an era where anxieties about weight are pervasive in the mainstream discourse, disordered eating of many variations is rapidly becoming a norm within many populations. Thompson (1994) argues that eating problems occur in women of many backgrounds, and have little to do with appearance, and are actually “survival strategies” that serve as responses to sexism, racism, abuse, and other forms of injustice that take control away from women’s lives.

Several studies have found that white women often report lower body satisfaction compared to Black women, and Black women, regardless of actual size, are less likely to consider themselves overweight than white women of a similar weight (Lovejoy 2001; Hebl et.al 2009). In addition, studies show that white women suffer a greater degree of weight-based stigma than do black women, implying that being of a larger size is more consequential for white women (Hebl and Heatherton 1998; Hebl et.al 2009; Mustillo et.al 2013). This supports findings that black and Hispanic women seem to have a greater tolerance, and even acceptance, of larger body sizes (Cachelin et.al 2002). As some scholars have argued, African-American women may actively reject white cultural standards of beauty as a response to systematic racism and oppression (Hebl and Heatherton 1998; Hebl et.al 2009; Lovejoy 2001; Craig 2002).

Conversely, Asian Americans seem to strive to fit into a beauty standard that stereotypically prizes Caucasian features; Asian Americans who undergo plastic surgery often do so to Anglicize their features, such as by getting rid of their “Asian eyes” (Chou and Feagin 2008; Meyer et.al 2009; Kaw 1993). Among Asian populations, some research has shown that women of Asian descent exhibit similar, and sometimes higher, levels of body dissatisfaction compared to Caucasian women, but report lower levels of eating disorder symptoms (Cummins and Lehman 2007). This finding may, however, be because Asian American women are not as likely to report eating disorder symptoms due to the stigmatized nature of any mental health problem in Asian culture (Kawamura and Rice 2009; Meyer et.al 2009).

Asian American Stereotypes

Asians make up about 5% of the United States population (U.S. Census Bureau 2013), and have the highest median income of any racial or ethnic group, including non-Hispanic whites (DeNavas-Walt et.al 2013). Due to their relative success as a minority group, Asian Americans are sometimes referred to as the “model minority”. There is, however, variability within different Asian groups in terms of academic and economic success, although the general public often lump all of these incredibly disparate groups under the umbrella term of “Asian”. Indeed, white Americans have a difficult time disentangling the diffuse meaning of “Asian” and often respond to different Asian groups as if they were all the same (Lin 2010; Sue 2010).

Asian Americans are under immense pressure to conform to the model minority myth, and do so by mimicking white cultural values: individual success in the professional world, academic achievement, and so forth. Chou and Feagin (2008) argue that being framed as the “model minority” has masked Asian American struggles and oppression, both historical and current. Indeed, some research speculates that the model minority myth has contributed to the omission of Asians and Asian Americans from discourse around racism (Lin 2010). Additionally, other research argues that the model minority myth extends to health. Because Asian Americans are assumed to be “healthy” relative to other racial groups, they are referred and/or screened for various services and tests, such as with cancer screenings or mental health services referrals, at lower rates (Hall and Yee 2012; Ibaraki et.al 2014).

In contrast to the model minority stereotype, which views Asians as having successful assimilated into an American lifestyle, the perpetual foreigner stereotype

views Asian Americans as inherently foreign or “other”, and therefore unable to ever be truly American (Lee et.al 2009). In this line of binary thinking, “East” and “West” are mutually exclusive categories, and those that are seen to represent the exotic “East” are emphasized for their Asian-ness, even if they were born and raised in the United States (Espiritu 2008). Chou and Feagin note: “Even with advanced degrees and respectable jobs, [Asian Americans] still find themselves excluded and othered just because of the way they look and because of their cultural backgrounds,” (2008: 221). Asians are situated in a specific place along the racial order; neither black nor white, they are viewed as superior to Blacks, yet inferior to whites (Espiritu 2008).

Similar to other racial minorities, experiences of Asian men and women reflect the complicated relationships between race and gender. For example, throughout the Twentieth Century, Asian men have alternatively been portrayed as hypermasculine vis-a-vis the “Yellow Peril” threat, and as the effeminate, asexual “Asian sidekick” who acts as the devoted servant to white men (Espiritu 2008). Such “controlling images”, as noted by Patricia Hill Collins (2000), help justify and maintain gender, class, and race-based oppressions in a white patriarchal society.

Like Asian men, stereotypes about Asian women emphasize their non-white status. Asian women are portrayed as both aggressive and castrating through the “Dragon Lady” stereotype, and as the demure, passive “China Doll”. Both the “Dragon Lady” and “China Doll” are sexualized, exotic images that emphasize the idea that Asian women cannot meet traditional notions of white femininity (Espiritu 2008). Importantly, these controlling images emphasize Asian American women and men as the unassimilable

“other,” effectively omitting the “American” aspect of their identity and reducing them to a foreign entity.

The literature on microaggressions offers some insights as to how such stereotypes and controlling images of oppressed groups can impact the physical and mental well-being of the people they target. Microaggressions are the commonplace, often brief, encounters of everyday life that convey hostile or negative meanings, and can be directed towards any marginalized group. Microaggressions are often unintentional insults, perhaps even “well-meaning” remarks, which make assumptions or convey hidden meanings about a person based on their race, sexual orientation, gender, etc. (Sue 2010).

Asian Americans may experience a variety of daily interactions that reaffirm cultural stereotypes, such as others assuming they are good at math, or someone asking them what country they are from. The cumulative effect of these daily, seemingly inconsequential interactions, however, can be quite profound:

...marginalized groups are not only exposed to a greater number of stressors, but also a more potent and powerful form than those experienced by majority individuals. When one realizes that devalued groups...must also cope with additional stressors associated with race, gender, and sexual orientation, one can conclude that they are being asked to endure an inhuman amount of stress (Sue 2010:112).

The central argument here is that people in privileged positions in society are not subjected to the same level of cumulative stress as people of marginalized groups. Importantly, the accumulation of chronic stress related to recurring microaggressions in

day to day life has implications for both physical and mental health and well-being.

Chronic stress can manifest in physical symptoms like higher blood pressure, but also can impact how marginalized groups cope psychologically (Sue 2010).

This paper explores dominant stereotypes about the Asian body, as discussed and conceptualized on an Internet blog, and how such stereotypes impact the ways in which the blog users – primarily Asian American women – come to define and shape their Asian identity. Boero and Pascoe (2012) argue that online discourses about the body illustrate the process of embodiment as a relational process. People shape and understand their bodies in relation to one another; Boero and Pascoe use the example of the “wannarexic” to discuss how the pro-ana community sets boundaries and identifies outsiders. Stereotypes of the Asian body are also a means of setting boundaries for who is, and who is not, Asian. While popular discourses seem to assume that *all* Asians are naturally petite and thin, Asian Americans in the online “blogosphere” contest such stereotypes, yet at the same time internalize them and often judge their “Asian-ness” by comparing themselves to these stereotypical images. Moreover, the racialization of physical traits points to the broader issue of the types of racism and microaggressive encounters that Asian Americans experience as a minority group in the United States. Here, I draw on the works of Lespirtu (2008) as well as Chou and Feagin (2008), who point out that various Asian stereotypes serve the purpose of reifying Asians’ status as “nonwhite”, and ultimately, can be detrimental to their physical or psychological health (Sue 2010).

DATA AND METHODS

Since weblogs, commonly referred to as “blogs”, were first introduced to the Internet in the late 90’s, they have become a popular medium of self-representation on the Internet. Blogging is an attractive Internet activity to a diverse array of people, in part because most blogging occurs through host sites such as Tumblr, LiveJournal, and Blogger, all of which require little technical competence and are usually free of cost, such that the average person can easily set up and maintain a blog. Estimates of the number of blogs currently active on the Internet range from 2.8 million to upwards of 50 million (Hookway 2008).

Thick Dumpling Skin is a public blog that is freely available to anyone, although it targets the Asian American community specifically. While there are some debates as to what can be considered “public” or “private” data when it comes to online content, the public accessibility of this blog, and the implicit purpose of blogging in general – publishing text for an unknown audience – lends support for the argument that blogs are decidedly on the public end of the public-private continuum (Hookway 2008; Walther 2002). *Thick Dumpling Skin* has a readership of approximately 4,000 unique views per month, although this number may be higher given Tumblr’s unique capacity to “reblog” posts wherein bloggers can take a post from one blog and post it to their own blog. The blog is maintained by two Asian American women who founded the blog, and regularly post updates to the community, moderate discussions, and screen submissions from other users before posting to the site. This screening process is used to help them maintain the integrity of *Thick Dumpling Skin* as an “educational and supportive community.”

160 users, including the two main authors, posted on the blog between February 17th, 2011, and February 17th, 2014. The main authors contributed to a majority of the posts, with one or both of them posting a total of 326 times. Six other users posted twice, and one user posted three times. Very few of the users (n=113) specified their ethnicity but did identify broadly as Asian or Asian American. The users that did specify an ethnicity had a breakdown as follows: 12 Korean, 3 Japanese, 18 Chinese, 3 Filipino, 2 Vietnamese, 1 Laotian, and 5 Taiwanese. Only three people specified that they did *not* identify as Asian: two identified as Black, and the other identified as Latino.

Most of the users did not specify an exact location as to where they lived or where they were from, although most took a U.S.-centric perspective based on their experiences as an Asian American living in the United States. Many (n=28) were from California, 8 were from New York, 1 was from the Midwest, 2 were from Florida, 2 were from Maryland, and 1 was from Connecticut. A few users from outside the United States also posted on the blog and discussed their experiences in other countries: two said they were from the United Kingdom, four were from Canada, one lived in Finland, and another lived in Taiwan. The experiences of the users living abroad largely corroborated with the experiences of those within the United States, and did not change the analysis or interpretation of the posts.

I analyzed the blog postings using qualitative content analysis. Content analysis allows for the systematic study of qualitative data through the development of coding schemes. The benefit of utilizing a weblog as a source of data is its natural occurring context (Hookway 2008; Schreier 2012). In other words, the presence of a researcher does nothing to affect the data itself, and therefore the study of blogs is an unobtrusive

method of doing qualitative analysis (Schreier 2012). To code the data, I used Nvivo, a computer-assisted qualitative analysis software program. I first read through all of the postings to identify key thematic elements, and based on some of the most prevalent themes, I developed a basic coding frame. I then went through the posts a second time and coded each post according to the framework.

In total, I coded 491 posts and 333 comments from the blog's inception on February 16th, 2011, to February 16th, 2014, giving me a span of three years of archived data. Of these, 37 posts were alternative media, including videos, poems, artwork, inspirational quotes, and photographs. Another 166 posts were news updates, campaigns, notices, or special events sponsored by the *Thick Dumpling Skin* community, all of which were posted by one of the two moderators. The remaining 318 posts are the focal point of this analysis, and fell broadly into one or more of the three major themes: stereotypes regarding the Asian body, the "Americanized" Asian, and the body as a measure of success.

As with many other types of qualitative research, Internet research has its limitations. For one thing, I can only take online users' words at face value, and my interpretation of a post may not be the meaning intended by the author(s). In addition, while the blog attracted many users with eating disorders, having an eating disorder was not a prerequisite for posting or commenting, and there is no systematic way to determine who has an eating disorder and who does not. On this note, since the Internet is arguably a "disembodied" space (Boero and Pascoe 2012), the users must construct virtual representations of themselves (and therefore, their bodies), without the benefit of having a face to face interaction.

Despite the limitations of this research, the anonymity of the Internet is potentially beneficial in this context, especially since mental health, including eating disorders, are subjects typically “taboo” for many Asian-American families, and Asian Americans are known to under-utilize mental health services (Meyer et.al 2009). People who would otherwise not speak up about sensitive issues may be encouraged to use the freedom and relative anonymity of the Internet to their advantage—especially if they find that others are facing similar problems.

ANALYSIS

Thick Dumpling Skin emerged out of the belief that Asian Americans struggling with body image did not have the resources or support to address these psychological issues, which the creators of the blog argued arose out of “social, cultural, and familial” experiences unique to the Asian American community. Of the posts I coded, nearly a third echoed this sentiment, lauding the blog for creating a safe, supportive community where Asian Americans could share their stories with others in similar situations.

As might be expected given the nature of the blog, roughly a quarter of the posts focused solely on the psychological and internal struggles the users had experienced, giving detailed accounts of battles with anorexia, bulimia, or binge eating disorder. It is important to note, however, that many of the users said they never developed an eating disorder. Yet, they still found themselves struggling with their body because they believed that they did not look “Asian” enough. While an eating disorder was not seen as an inevitable consequence of this struggle, many people argued that their eating disorder would not have arisen if not for the drastic measures they took to perfect their bodies as part of this quest to become the ideal Asian.

What follows are some of the most common themes that emerged from the blog. These themes illustrate some of the issues this specific community raises about how Asian Americans are portrayed in the United States, and their personal struggle to shape an Asian American identity based on their physical bodies. This identity was complicated by a number of factors, including popular stereotypes, the increasingly extreme standards of thinness for both Western and Eastern women, and their personal relationships with friends, family members, and significant others.

“Those Size Zero Asians” as the Ideal Asian Body

As part of the relational work of online embodiment, the users on *Thick Dumpling Skin* often discussed the definition of being Asian as part of their embodiment work to disentangle the meaning of being Asian. It was necessary for many users to construct their own images of the “typical” or “ideal” Asian woman. As such, the overwhelming majority of posts discussed common cultural stereotypes regarding the way Asian women are “supposed” to look, which, through multiple topics in multiple posts, could be distilled into a single image: Asian girls are petite and slim, to the point of seeming what some users described as “fragile.” “Diane” describes her version of the typical Asian woman in this quote:

- Slight frames and narrow shoulders and bony hips and knobby knees and protruding ribs and flat asses and tiny breasts and slender thighs and stick arms. It’s [the Asian] answer to the world’s Amazon legs and blonde waves and sexy curves. We’re *skinny*, betches. Well, some of us.

Diane’s description here falls in line with most of the other users’ conceptualizations of the Asian body. Her interpretation, however, is that this is a reflection of gendered notions about what the body should and should not look like; in particular, she notes that Asians seem to actively *reject* other cultural standards of what the female body should look like, in favor of a body that is, in her mind, exaggeratedly thin.

Many users described stereotypes of Asian women as idealized and not a true reflection of reality; yet, in mainstream discourse, it was assumed that this stereotypical Asian body was universally true for all Asian women. As “Keith”, one of the site’s guest bloggers, notes:

- There weren't a lot of Asian people where I grew up...I did, however, have plenty of non-Asian friends who proceeded to inform me about the natural beauty that Asian girls possessed—They're so petite! They never grow old! They never get fat! Their skin is so smooth and shiny! Their fantasies, though, never seemed to match reality.

Because reality often did not match these idealized accounts of Asian women, the Asian women on the blog expressed their struggles of fitting into a confining and unrealistic definition of beauty. As one anonymous woman argued, "...without a terminal illness or severe drug problem...I can't physically achieve this ideal anyway." Another woman jokes: "There has been exactly one time in my life when I was the epitome of the Asian female body ideal: at birth, two months early from my scheduled arrival date and clocking in at a scant 4.1 pounds. Yes, perhaps I had peaked too soon." While the users are clearly being tongue-in-cheek, the quotes above illustrate their belief at the impossibility of achieving the Asian ideal. While Asians are not the only ones where thinness is a prized trait (Banner 1984; Brumberg 2000), the argument here is that the Asian thin ideal, is even more extreme and unattainable than the standards for other women.

The women noted that there were widespread assumptions that Asians fit this body type "naturally"; unlike other people, Asians could eat whatever they wanted, not exercise, and still maintain this extremely thin figure. Such a genetic argument is rife with assumptions about racial essentialism; that being Asian is something intrinsically biological that one's genetic makeup can explain. One commenter, "Kyle", even registered surprise that there may be an alternative to this genetic model: "As a man, I

knew they were pressure for women to fit a certain size n body type but didn't know there were added pressures in the Asian community. I honestly thought Asians were just naturally slim [and] petite.” There are two things of note here: one, Kyle identified as Black in his comment, making him an outlier in terms of the blog’s typical demographics. Second, Kyle admits to being an outsider in terms of understanding what these Asian American women are grappling with, and his “outsider” perceptions of the natural Asian body illustrates the degree to which the genetic framework is entrenched in the popular imagination.

Employing genetic arguments about racial stereotypes points to a second issue; namely, people in groups of power are not subjected to similar assumptions and expectations. For example, one user noted: “I'm not full Asian...So, when people discovered I'm part Asian and that my first name is a Chinese name they say things like, ‘Oh, that's why you played the violin’ or ‘You didn't get the skinny Asian genes, did you?’” What is most interesting to note here is that this woman was not told she must have inherited the “fat white genes”; rather, the messages she received were that her Asian-ness (no matter how partial) meant that she was expected to fit a specific, “natural”, body type, *whereas similar standards do not exist for the white body*. Once she “became” Asian, she was stereotyped as the “model minority”, as if there would be no other explanation for why she played violin; moreover, she experienced a different reaction about her body, which was suddenly upheld to a separate (nonwhite) standard upon the discovery that she was Asian, and not fully white.

In disentangling the meaning of this stereotype, the users on the blog struggled with these assumptions about Asian genetic essentialism, because, for many, their

“natural” bodies did not fit this mold. Ironically, however, many users deployed these same genetic arguments to make sense of why their body was different from the “normal” Asian. It was not uncommon for women to mention lacking the inherited components for a naturally thin physique:

- I thought I was the only Asian girl that missed the ‘naturally-thin’ gene, and there was definitely something wrong with me.
- To my family, I was a failure. My sisters who are naturally athletic and thin simply thought I couldn’t control myself with food. They thought that I was lazy and liked to eat too much.
- I constantly get ridiculed about how fat I am, by all of my family and friends...I feel like I’m fighting a losing battle. My confidence is at an all-time low. What makes me more upset is that on my mother’s side, fast metabolism is genetic to all my cousins and uncles and aunts.

These quotes illustrate the intense feelings of being the “odd one out” in the family. Generally, users such as these two might discuss having defective genes that made it difficult for them to stay slim like the rest of their family could. Importantly, the users seemed to feel as though they should have inherited the “Asian skinny genes”, especially if the rest of their family appeared to have this “natural” body type.

The genetic argument was useful for users who described being of a mixed racial background. They could deploy the same genetic framework to explain exactly why they did not fit in with the rest of their Asian relatives, because they could successfully argue that they had simply lost the genetic lottery in terms of getting the “Asian skinny genes”. “Kate”, who identified herself as Hispanic and Japanese, says: “I wanted to fit in with the

Japanese side, to maybe even be full Japanese, or at least look more Japanese, so people wouldn't keep asking me what I was, where I was from, and, not least of all, so that I would have a genetic slenderness..." Kate, like other users, struggled with feelings of abnormality, but she could attach her sense of being abnormal to her mixed racial background. Furthermore, as will be discussed in more detail, Kate saw being thin as a byproduct of being Asian; many of the other users saw the reverse, believing that thinness would help them become more Asian.

The genetic framework is related to a myth that the users discussed in that "Asians don't get eating disorders"; an assumption that Asians could not get eating disorders because they were already naturally skinny, and therefore would not have to take extreme measures to achieve a thin figure. In effect, users who discussed having an eating disorder often mentioned that they thought they were the "only" Asian with such a problem, as in: "I don't know what it's like in the Asian countries, but in the US, you do not often see Asian girls with eating disorders, at least in my experience...In all the treatment places I've gone to, and women's groups I've been to, I am always the only Asian." Again, a sense of abnormality is prevalent here, and it is tied to widespread assumptions about Asians, including the ways in which the "model minority" stereotype might extend into health behaviors and mental health service utilization (Hall and Yee 2012). However, the message to this woman is that she is abnormal and does not belong in eating disorder treatment because Asians are naturally exempt from such problems. In discursively constructing an Asian body through these online posts, the women are perpetuating an image of what the ideal Asian looks like, and simultaneously recreating the Asian body as separate from the white body. Boero and Pascoe (2012) note that

central to the process of embodiment is boundary work; determining who belongs, and who is an outsider to the group. In these instances, the images of the ideal Asian ideal serve the purpose of defining the boundaries of what constitutes the Asian body. The users who lack the particular qualities of looking Asian feel like they do not quite belong.

Men: Being Too Asian?

Although the majority of the posts were written by women, nine Asian American men did post their own stories that resonated with the blog. Such a sample is too small to make wide-sweeping conclusions; however, the men provide an interesting juxtaposition to the women's discussion and interpretation of the Asian body. For the men on the blog, insecurities about the body were of nearly equal concern, but in the opposite direction. While the women expressed feelings of being too fat or large, these men were concerned that they were too small. One thread of discussion surrounding this dichotomy emerged out of a post titled "Why I Don't Date Asian Guys". This post discussed one woman's insecurities about dating Asian guys because, in her words, "Many Asian guys were (unfortunately) thinner than me, and I always felt larger than them. I already felt 'large' at home...I didn't need those comparisons within the context of a relationship." In response to the post, guest blogger "Tim" writes:

- It's...funny that your post is titled 'Why I Don't Date Asian Guys', because it is a phrase that I'm all too familiar with. It's uttered by many a girl, by many a type, for a myriad of reasons. 'We're too short, we're too skinny, we're not manly enough...'

Similarly, "Terry" says:

- ...I struggled with my short height. I knew that it reinforced how people in the U.S. view Asian American men as inadequate and outside of the ideal masculine

body...an Asian American girl told me to my face that I was too short to date her—even though I was taller than her.

Many scholars have documented how Asian men are often portrayed as effeminate – in fact, stereotypes of both Asian men and women have skewed towards the hyper-feminine in contemporary popular culture (Espiritu 2008). Given our gendered notions about masculinity and femininity, it may be hardly surprising that Asian men would respond to these stereotypes by trying to escape the label of not being masculine enough, while the women would try as best they could to conform to these stereotypes by being more feminine.

These stereotypes also point to another problem the Asian men expressed that contradicts the women on the blog. While most of the posts by women discussed the difficulties of trying to become *more* Asian by conforming their body to Asian stereotypes, the men felt *too* Asian because their bodies exemplified these same stereotypes. In fact, as Terry notes: “I equated ‘good looking’ with the white Mormons that I grew up with in Utah. And Mormon white is much whiter than the rest of white America...So to be a short Asian American kid growing up in this kind of environment made me both highly invisible and visible at the same time.” Whereas the Asian women often rejected white standards of beauty in favor of looking more Asian, Terry felt as if his Asian-ness emphasized his inferiority to white men.

Perhaps in part because they were emblematic of these Asian stereotypes and thus their Asian-ness was physically noted, the male users discussed their experiences with explicit, racial microaggressions –sometimes explicitly so. As Sue (2010) notes, comments directed at a person of color do not have to be intended as racist in nature in

order to be construed as such. Take, for example, this quote from “Jason”: “I still remember the little girl in elementary school who called me a ‘panda bear’. Not a teddy bear, but a panda bear – because I wasn’t just that chubby little boy, I was that chubby little Asian boy.” While the “panda bear” comment was not necessarily intended as an insult, Jason saw it as highlighting the difference between himself and his white peers. In another case, “Edward” says: “The darkest moment I ever remember where Cinnabon saved me one time was during middle school, after being called a chink once again by fellow classmates.” Edward’s experience actually parallels those of the women of the blog, in that he uses eating as a method of coping with his peers’ racism. However, while the women did discuss their experiences in being confronted with various Asian stereotypes, rarely did they make the explicit link between these experiences and racism. The men, however, discussed these encounters with racial microaggressions as a frequent component of their lives.

The Americanized Body: “Do I Look Fat in This Country?”

Unlike the “pro-ana” community, which, arguably, is fundamentally limited to the space of the Internet (Boero and Pascoe 2012), the users of the blog engaged in processes of embodiment outside the virtual world. Users often situated their own bodies in relation to people who seemed to perfectly embody the characteristics of being Asian. In the context of the Internet, it is difficult to tell what users means when they said they were “too fat”, although it was often argued that they were not “fat” in any other sense except when they measured themselves against the standards set by their Asian relatives, the popular media, or Asian cultures. Frequently, posts started off with phrases like “I have always felt large compared to my thinner sisters...”, “...I am not your ‘typical Chinese girl’ ...”, “...I was stupid enough to think I was supposed to look like an Anime

character,” among many others. Users compared themselves against everyone from Korean music idols to their immediate or distant family members. By doing so, they found themselves determining how “Asian” they looked based on whether or not they appeared “fat” compared to these role models. As “Lisa” sarcastically notes: “I guess if you aren’t skinny, you aren’t a ‘real’ Asian.” Lisa’s sentiment echoes the dilemma for many of the users on the blog. They believed that their bodies were not Asian enough because they did not embody the necessary characteristic of thinness that all other Asian bodies exemplified.

Many users attributed the process of becoming “Americanized” to account for falling short of the ideal Asian body—a phenomenon that one user describes as being the “corn-fed Asian from Minnesota.” This was especially true for second-generation Asian Americans, where they often more fully experienced the divide between their lifestyle growing up and their parents’ childhoods in Asia. One woman writes: “It is 4 am and I am kept awake yet again by the nagging thoughts of why I can’t be a thin Asian girl like my mom. Was it because she grew up in Korea and I was raised here in the United States of America where children are lazy and suffer from an obesity epidemic?” To many, it was the American lifestyle of hamburgers and milkshakes that was their downfall.

Related to this anxiety was a general sense of not fully belonging in America (the “perpetual foreigner”), but also no longer belonging in their parents’ or grandparents’ countries of origin. While they could say they were of Asian descent, not all of the users could claim the same cultural and familial ties to their Asian heritage. One Korean adoptee says: “My family never treated me any differently, but by the time I was school aged, I realized how being Asian in a predominantly white school made me different,

even at age five.” Despite growing up in a white community with white parents, this woman was still highlighted in her community as Asian. At the same time, her American upbringing gave her little cultural knowledge or experience with her Korean background, situating her in a space of limbo between being American and being Asian.

The conflict of feeling too Americanized led many users struggling to understand whether or not they could call themselves Asian. They felt somewhere in-between, neither fully Asian nor American, as one user describes:

- I am a first generation American-born Chinese/Filipina and I never felt like I belonged. Living in a community that was mostly caucasian... it was weird that I brought chicken & rice for lunch. Visiting family in Malaysia & Singapore... it was weird that I ate fries with my fingers and not with a fork. I was neither American enough nor Chinese enough.

This sense of not being “enough” in either setting may be why so many users sought to embody Asian features, not white ones. Because they could not become “more white”, perhaps they sought to become more Asian, instead. For example, rather than discussing acculturation issues in terms of language barriers or other forms of cultural capital, these women saw their physical bodies as symbolic of their “outsider”, or “Americanized”, status. For instance, one user notes: “My mom... was always hard on my weight. One summer when we traveled back to her hometown in China, she had to explain that I was big-boned because I drank ‘American water’ growing up.” The issue of the “American water” image is multi-faceted; in this scenario, “American” was equivalent to being fat, and, more importantly, through such a comment, the woman was effectively told that she had an American body, not an Asian one.

Anxieties about the American body became particularly pronounced when users described previous or impending visits to Asian countries, perhaps in part because they understood “Americanized” as synonymous with “supersized”. Comments such as “I am terrified of going back to China because I feel as if I would be a hippo there in comparison to the other girls...” were not uncommon. The users noted how uncomfortable they felt while visiting or living in these Asian countries, as people often remarked on their large size in relation to other Asians. The following quotes illustrate this phenomenon, as users either preemptively anticipated a negative reaction to their bodies, or had already experienced such:

- Even during our family trip to Asia, people were asking me if I was naturally fat or pregnant. To save my parents’ face, I lied to them and said that I was 7 months pregnant and my husband was on a business trip.
- I associated South Korea with k-drama [Korean dramas], k-pop [Korean pop music], and well, the high number of plastic surgeries that happen. So my mini panic attack was only natural when I imagined the kind of looks and comments I might get from people [in South Korea] for being a ‘well-rounded’ Asian.
- ...none of [my] self-esteem prepared me for my trip to Vietnam. After 11 years of being away, I was excited to be in a place that I missed...The excitement was quickly dampened by people’s notice of how much larger I am, compared to how I was before (at age 12) and compared to local girls.

Underlying all of these quotes is a near-universal understanding among the blog users that “real” Asians living in Asian countries like Korea, China, or Japan were all petite,

and that they, in comparison, looked like giants. For the users, this represented a significant visual gulf between themselves and “real” Asians.

These issues became, at times, painfully obvious. In describing their experiences in Asian countries, it was noted that many could not find clothing in their size: “I was searching, shopping for clothes, in the boutiques of Shanghai. The only size that fit on me was XL, and even that one had to stretch.” In such a situation, not only did this woman perceive herself as large, the clothing options available served as a visceral confirmation that her body did indeed deviate from what Asian clothing companies deemed “normal”.

To be sure, there was a finite spectrum of what would be considered “normal” for other Asians. As “Maggie” notes:

- When I was in 8th grade I was 5’7” and size 14. First of all, it is quite a freak of nature to see an Asian woman who is over 5’4” let alone a size 10+. I remember going to Japan with my parents and literally having people just stop and stare at me...making me feel very self-conscious about my size. I can also remember going to a department store in Japan to look for some pajamas and the sales person telling my mom ‘we don’t carry ANYTHING CLOSE to her size’. I was so humiliated.

Here, we see that being too tall was nearly as problematic and “freakish” as being too fat, and moreover, the implication is that it is not possible for Asians to go beyond a certain height and weight.

In exceeding the limits of acceptable sizes, the users noted that this became a sign of individual inadequacy; rather than encouraging clothing stores to diversify their size options, it was the fault of the individuals for not being able to fit into the existing ones:

“If you don’t fit into something, it’s not because the dress is too small, it’s because your bust or hips are too big. From the way certain salespeople act, you’d think my ass was single-handedly changing weather patterns in Taiwan.” In other words, fashion sizes became a very tangible reminder that these women simply did not have the right Asian body.

An interesting point to note here is that the users on the blog rarely compared themselves against white women, even the ones who were part white themselves. Only two women expressed a desire to fit the “long-legged, blonde, blue-eyed, with a perky bust” Westernized image of beauty. “Jude”, for instance, says: “I thought I wanted to be thin, but I think what I really wanted was to be white.” Jude expresses a general feeling of inferiority about her body, which she eventually linked to her race; as Thompson (1994) notes, such anxieties are often rooted in injustices like racism or sexism. However, the majority of the women on the blog expressed a desire to be thin, not because of anxiety about their race, but because they wanted to become more like other Asians.

In fact, many of the posts actively rejected the idea that being white equated being beautiful or being thin; indeed, it was often construed as the exact opposite. These women wanted to confirm their Asian identity, and to be called white effectively meant being rejected from the Asian community, as one comment points out: “...asians who were born and raised in western society [feel] pulled back [by] asians who reject other asians for being 'too white'.” Here, we see that being “too white” holds negative implications and questions the degree to which the users could be a “real” Asian. Perhaps more telling, however, is the implied understanding that being white was, a sign of being

fat, at least for some of the users: "...I was not that helpless, stick-thin Asian girl. I picked up distance running and 'grew a butt' ...my sisters told me I had a 'white girl's body'. What? Yikes." This is unusual in that it is not the typical way white girls are portrayed in the academic or popular media. Contrasted with the middle-class, teenage, white anorectic, this is an entirely new way of observing the white female figure; the implication here is that the Asian thin ideal falls below that of even whites. For this woman, being called "white" was not only an insult to her Asian identity, it was also calling her out as "fat".

This is further illustrated in the general consensus among the blog users that Asian standards of thinness fell far below American ones, as seen in the example of smaller clothing sizes. American size standards might even be considered "fat", according to one user: "I agree that the media's portrayal of Asian women can contribute to unhealthy body image, but...what's 'normal' in America is, well, overweight." This was not a common sentiment on the blog; most users emphasized a body acceptance movement, and did not engage in a discussion of how "fat" Americans in general were, since they longed for a similar diversity in size. However, overall the users did agree that Asian sizes were significantly smaller than American sizes. As "Sunah" remarks: "I often jokingly say that I decided to live in the States because I fit into an Extra Small size here whereas I couldn't wear anything but Large in Korea." If Sunah's comment is not too far off from how Asian and American sizes compare, then it may well be that the women here have a very different conceptualization of "fat" than what the average white woman might have –especially if their basis for determining whether they are thin or not is dependent on which definition of "small" they use.

Microaggressions and the Manifestation of Eating Disorders

As Sue (2010) discusses, microaggressions are manifested through these cultural stereotypes about the Asian body. While the Asian female ideal may be little more than a distortion of reality, the users noted that there was little else for Asians to compare themselves against. In the same way “American” became another word for “fat”, “thin” and “Asian” were frequently tied to one another. Such a dichotomy presents the idea of a fat Asian as a nonexistent entity. As “Sui” points out: “It’s not just ‘good’ or ‘commendable’ for an Asian to be thin and small— it’s expected.” This lack of diversity made it difficult for the users to justify their bodies when they fell outside the range of acceptable sizes, as the following two quotes illustrate:

- It makes me sick to think that there is this perception that all Asian girls are somehow ‘blessed’ with perfectly thin 100 lb bodies. It just makes it that much more difficult for girls like me who don’t fit this stereotype.
- As an Asian American, you rarely hear about girls who are ‘plus sized’... I really think it’s almost a matter of denial in our culture. Asian women are supposed to fit in the ‘cute china doll’ stereotype and if you do not meet those standards you are ignored altogether.

These users are presented with a dilemma, in which their bodies are seen as “not Asian”, perhaps even to the point of being invisible.

Not all of these microaggressions came in the form of external, racial factors, however; for many of the women, they experienced similar, racially driven messages about how their bodies should look within the context of their personal relationships with others. For example, “Kathy” says: “At family gatherings, I was encouraged to diet and

told that all Asian girls fit one body type – slim. Existing otherwise somehow meant being less Asian and less like my family, whose female members were all petite and willowy.” Such relationships with family members, friends, and significant others played an important role in shaping their perceptions about their bodies.

Kathy was not the only one whose family emphasized the desirability of being skinny. In fact, for many of the users, blatant “fat shaming” occurred on a regular basis: during family meals, visits with relatives, dates with a significant other, and other such commonplace events. The following quotes are case in point:

- At family gatherings I was always compared to my skinny cousins. Despite the fact my BMI was always in the ‘healthy’ range, my aunts would not-so-tactfully hint at me to do some exercise...I was given the nickname ‘Tiny Whale.’
- My family, like others, didn’t think anything was wrong with calling you fat, hiding food from you, telling you no boy would date you if you didn’t lose weight, and talking about your weight behind your back.
- I know that I’m not fat, and I’ve never struggled with an eating disorder...However, I did grow up with a nickname that my grandfather used to describe my face that loosely translates to “Round-a-round-round,” a mother who reminded me to always “suck it in”, Asian friends whose mothers were not shy about commenting on all of our appearances...

The common thread in all of these stories is that the microaggressions these women experienced came most frequently from within their own households. The women make a note that, for the most part, these were not isolated instances, but rather ongoing battles between their own bodies and the ideal bodies that their families seemed to call for.

The previous few quotes illustrated several microaggressions that convey a particular message about these women's bodies. The importance of these microaggressions is the potential for them to impact the physical and mental well-being of the women who experience them (Sue 2010). It was not uncommon for women to discuss these instances as eventually leading to some form of disordered eating. In many of these accounts, people discussed going to extreme measures to modify their bodies, as a response to the onslaught of family and friend ridicule. The same woman who was called "Tiny Whale" by her relatives says:

- By the time I was 15 my self-esteem was in ruins. I refused to have photos taken of me, passing any vaguely reflective surface was mental torture, and I couldn't sit down without having something on my lap so as to avoid looking at my 'chubby' thighs. One day, I decided enough was enough. I embarked on a crazy diet and exercise regime, and was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa in 3 months.

It is clear in this description the psychological duress this woman experienced, which she attributed as a result to the steady stream of micro-insults against her body, which included everything from being called "Tiny Whale" to her aunts sending her a Wii Fit for Christmas. While anorexia was not an inevitable result of these experiences, similar disordered eating patterns emerged from many of the women on the blog, which they all attributed to this steady barrage of microaggressions.

Because many of the users believed that they were the only Asian American with an eating disorder, the *Thick Dumpling Skin* community became a space for them to discuss these issues in an environment where they, often much to their surprise, found others facing very similar problems. As such, many went into extensive detail about the

devastating psychological and physical health consequences that resulted out of their struggles with being Asian. For example, “Andrea” wrote a play based on her experiences growing up as a first generation Chinese American, and shared the script on the blog. The narration starts off:

- ... being Asian AND fat...I endured some horrible name calling and felt like an outcast, which lead to more issues...Food became such a comfort for me...And unfortunately, my [bulimia] continued...

Caught in the purgatory between her Chinese immigrant family and American culture, Andrea’s eating problems came about as a response to her feelings of not belonging and being ostracized.

In some cases, the women discussed how the very existence of such stereotypes, like the genetic framework, could contribute to their eating problems. One woman says:

- I recently went through a similar ordeal with eating disorders of my own. Since I’m of a smaller stature at 5’1.5”... everyone would tell me that, no, I’m small, I can eat whatever I wanted. However, I was never comfortable with my body image, and when goaded in family parties and whichever celebrations, I would stuff myself silly...[Later] I started watching my weight and fitness to much more of an extreme level than anyone could consider healthy...My disorder quickly turned to bulimia, something I am still battling with today.

This post echoes the “Asians are naturally skinny” argument, in that the woman here was told that she could eat whatever she wanted and not get fat, which led her to have conflicting views about her body: on the one hand, she was told she could “stuff herself

silly”, but on the other, she was insecure about her body, and her eating habits gradually devolved.

Some of posts focused more on the internal struggles that the users experienced with their eating disorder. While these posts did not explicitly link their eating disorders as a product of being Asian, they did express a desire to belong in the *Thick Dumpling Skin* community, either because they thought it was a supportive environment or because they needed a place that focused on the unique aspects of being Asian American. One woman, raised in Taipei, discusses her struggles with weight while attending school there, which eventually evolved into what she considered anorexic behaviors:

- ...I was convinced that being fat was wrong. Everyone noticed my new thinner body. My mom commented on how she was so proud and impressed with my self-control and the fact I was able to skip dinner while feeling hungry. My dad compared me to my other relatives that have always been skinny and said that I started looking more like they were and more lady-like...I was dying inside...It’s funny how, sometimes, when people think you have everything together is the exact moment when you feel like things are falling apart on the inside.

This post is more illustrative of the consequences of the eating disorder itself, rather than the consequences of being Asian. However, given the frequency of these types of posts, the psychological nature of eating disorders was clearly a concern for many of the users, and one that I cannot discount as unimportant. It may be worth considering that as Asian Americans, they may have felt like *Thick Dumpling Skin* may have been the only “safe space” they could go to discuss the psychological distress that emerged as a result of

disordered eating.

While this and other stories resonated strongly with the users on the blog, these examples are not necessarily unique to Asian households; indeed, many accounts of eating disorders note how family and cultural values around body size have a strong influence in the gradual development of anorexia or bulimia (Bordo 2004; Brumberg 2000). It is, however, a rare instance where a white woman would be told that she is not “white enough” because of her body size. The Asian American users on the blog, however, experienced this very problem. “Quirky Taiwan” argues:

- I want to call a moratorium on the phrase “fat for an Asian.” This phrase has power only because it banks on stereotypes, and these stereotypes only have influence because we internalize them as a minority group. The phrase “fat for a White person” doesn’t have the same impact or “make sense” because as a society we acknowledge that people who are white come in all shapes and sizes...”For an Asian” sets a whole new standard for ‘fat.’ What does ‘for an Asian’ even mean?

Quirky Taiwan gets to the crux of the matter: whiteness is invisible. White people “...represent a default standard by which all other group norms and behaviors are consciously and unconsciously compared, contrasted, and made visible,” (Sue 2010: 128). These women are not white, and do not enjoy the privilege of having a range of body sizes to compare themselves against. Instead, because they are Asian, physical traits like thinness are automatically conferred upon them because of their race.

Although the women were often conscious of, and resistant to, these stereotypes, they still struggled with being “fat for an Asian”. This often meant that they fell into the pitfalls of viewing the Asian body in stereotypical ways. Because they had a vision of

what the ideal Asian would look like, they had to compare, and often modify, their body in order to match that ideal, as illustrated by this woman:

- I spent so much time worrying about how I looked and how to become more “Asian” because deep down, I knew I was an impostor. My weight dropped to 95 lbs and I was still disappointed in myself for being so “fat” and “un-Asian.” Why weren’t those 0 pants 00s instead?

The example above is not unlike a white anorectic’s consuming desire to lose more weight, even when they are at a point where losing any more weight might be detrimental to their health (Brumberg 2000). However, the woman above notes that her drive to be skinny was also attached to her desire to *be more Asian*. As Patricia Hill Collins argues, “...part of the objectification of all women lies in evaluating how they look...Judging White women by their physical appearance and attractiveness to men objectifies them. But their White skin and straight hair simultaneously privilege them...” (2000:123). In the user’s story above, both race and gender are central to her struggles with weight.

The Body as a Measure of Success

Having the perfect Asian body was viewed as being a way of securing an Asian identity. Furthermore, however, I argue that this body is an extension of the model minority myth. These women, through enacting extreme practices such as bingeing and purging, were embodying what they believed to be the perfect Asian. Their physical bodies became an additional measure of success, beyond just the stereotypical good grades and high academic achievement of the model minority. One user, describing her experience as a new girl at an accelerated high school program, says:

- I went in knowing very few people and found myself attached to the familiar. The Asian Girls. A group of six or so girls who had known each other through Chinese school and other various gatherings. I was the tallest, the widest and the most non-stereotypical ‘Tiny Little Asian Girl.’ This came to their attention very quickly and was pointed out at every opportunity. To me, it seemed like every time one of them felt they were lacking an aspect of being small, fragile, graceful and adorable, they could point out that I was far less... The worst of it came when one of the girls flat out told me to my face, ‘You are not like us, you are not Asian’.

This same woman, in her words, “...lived the ‘stereotypical’ first-generation Asian-American childhood. Piano, viola, Chinese brush-painting classes...” However, this “stereotypical” background and enrollment in an accelerated academic program was not enough, and, to her peers, were not qualities that were nearly as important as her physical body with which to measure her “Asian ness”. In this instance, her peers used her body as a means to deny her Asian identity.

The model minority stereotype is often described as the high standard of success that Asian Americans strive to achieve and their successful ability to “overcome” racial barriers to success in American society (Lin 2010). Yet, the users on *Thick Dumpling Skin* frequently argued that this level of achievement was not enough, either for them or their families. There was an underlying notion that in order to be the perfect Asian child, they had to achieve more than just good grades, as several users noted:

- You work hard in school and bring in good grades sacrificing a social life and then there is STILL something else that your parents/family has to nitpick about.
- Even though I got really good grades at school, [my mother] felt like it wasn’t enough because in her eyes, I am fat.

- I've got an irreplaceable and incredibly loving family, the best friends, and I trust in God. I've got a 4.0 and I'm starting medical school in a year. But the thing is, skinny is all I have for someone to judge me physically.
- After 5 years, I received my PhD in chemistry and started my postdoctoral job. Of course, family were proud of my accomplishment, but I received more comments about my body and my looks (not positive).

All of these users noted that, despite striving for academic success, getting good grades, and moving on to successful careers, they had not achieved the illusive vision of “success” that their parents envisioned.

In some cases, the standard of “success” was based on a woman’s eligibility for marriage. Having the perfect body was tied to finding a man. This produces a strongly gendered notion about what constitutes “success”. “Eileen” describes her mother’s response to her post-pregnancy weight: “You got so fat! You look like a fat person swallowed your face...stay too fat too long and he gonna look for pretty skinny girl and what happen to you? Fat, ugly with babies and no man. Poor you!” Eileen’s mother expresses fear that, because her daughter is “fat”, she will lose everything she has. While it is not likely that getting fat will lead to a marital breakdown, the mother’s fears are rooted in her understanding that her daughter’s body is the most important aspect of the marriage. Without the perfect body, Eileen cannot guarantee that she will not lose her marriage.

Some users described “success” as being a physical trait that they strove to embody. For example, one user says: “In my world, being ‘successful’ (violin/piano soloist, high school valedictorian, going to Harvard, graduating from medical school, making money, owning a big house, living in the right ZIP code, the list was endless) was

the analogy to ‘having the perfect body’. It was the unconscious pillar around which I organized all the choices in my life.” In this case, the “perfect body” was tied to all other aspects of success. The user here seeks to physically embody success by achieving a “perfect” body –which they place on the same level of importance as going to Harvard. The body becomes an important vehicle through which “success” becomes a physical manifestation.

A “meme” that circulated Tumblr and was reblogged to *Thick Dumpling Skin*, which reads: “Hunger for food instead of success is why you’re a fatty and a failure,” (original emphasis). Memes are often intended to be funny, often because they resonate with many people; many of the users noted that the phrase on this meme was particularly applicable to their own lives. For many of the users, if being successful meant being thin, being fat was equivalent to being a failure, as seen in these posts:

- No matter how big or small I was, I remember being scared of being ‘fat.’ In my mind, fat equaled imperfect, and imperfect equaled *not good enough* in the eyes of my parents. Not good enough meant *not good enough to be loved*. My father always told me that his love wasn’t unconditional— on the contrary, it *was* conditional. He repeated this to me countless mornings...and the central message was thus: *if you reach this and that standard, you’ll be good enough for me to love you* (original emphasis).
- Some of my earliest and most painful memories growing up is of my parents having the ‘fat conversation’ with me, telling me that they don’t want to be embarrassed taking me out in public because I was fat or that it would be difficult for me to find a husband or be successful in life if I were overweight.

The understanding here is that having the right body was necessary for being accepted. In both cases, the parents articulated that they would not tolerate children who were fat. Having the “fat conversation” with a young child is not a trivial matter, as it sends a very clear and direct message about very explicit expectations surrounding the body. It is not surprising that users like these would internalize such conversations and attempt to embody the traits that they saw as desirable.

As with the other stereotypes about the Asian body, this ongoing quest to be perfect had the potential to have severe psychological consequences. One teenager writes:

- In 7th grade, a lot of pressure came down on me from my parents to get straight A's. I was smart, but English was always difficult for me and every time my report card came, I would get a B+. I guess that is where my eating disorder came from.

Here, we see a direct link between the model minority stereotype (high academic achievement) and the psychological pressures it placed on this Asian girl. Striving for the perfect body is not unique to Asians; certainly, women of all races and ethnicities struggle to achieve specific standards of beauty (Collins 2000; Craig 2002; Brumberg 2000), and many eating problems arise out of psychological distress experienced among people of color (Thompson 1994). However, this teenager's psychological distress arose out of a unique need to fulfill, and even embody, the “model minority” stereotype.

DISCUSSION

For the users on *Thick Dumpling Skin*, being Asian American meant striving for the perfect Asian body, such that the women attempted to physically embody these stereotypes. This sometimes meant taking drastic measures to alter their bodies in an attempt to exemplify what they constructed as the ideal Asian. Clearly, there are many gendered nuances of these experiences that are beyond the scope of this paper, but may be ripe avenues for future research.

There are two points worth emphasizing about Asian Americans and the embodiment of racial stereotypes. First, the “model minority” stereotype is neither benign, nor limited to the academic and professional spheres. Rather, the users sought to physically embody the model minority stereotype such that their body became a symbolic representation of success. The degree to which the users were “fat” or “thin” determined the degree to which they felt like they were expressing the qualities of being the “perfect” Asian. While the “model minority” may be presented as a positive stereotype, the users here demonstrate the degree to which even the most benign stereotypes confine and regulate the bodies of nonwhite persons.

Second, the women’s construction of the Asian body illustrates the degree to which whiteness is an invisible presence in society (Sue 2010). Using the Internet, the women constructed an image of the Asian body that would not have been necessary if they were white. The very premise of many of the users’ body image or eating problems – that they were “fat for an Asian”, or “too fat to be Asian” – suggests that the causal mechanisms behind eating disorders, especially among people of color, are very complex, and often masked by the image of the heterosexual, white, anorexic girl, as Thompson

(1994) would suggest. While the white thin ideal may be the hegemonic standard against which all bodies are compared against, different races construct their own body ideals in relation to the white standard. Although the existing literature on Asian body image is limited, the *Thick Dumpling Skin* community suggests that, on a continuum of idealized body size based on race, Asians are subjected to more stringent standards of thinness than even whites. More importantly, however, these standards of thinness are not just an idealized myth, but, at least for some, become the very definition of being Asian.

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