

The Cool Asians: Asian American Fashion Subculture and Localized Identity

Mirella Castillo

University of San Francisco

Abstract

This paper explores the use of fashion as a means of communication for Asian Americans in the Bay Area. A focus group interview was conducted in order to better understand the expression of a self-constructed identity. Open coding revealed the following: different aspects of identity and ideologies are expressed and perpetuated through fashion, including, but not limited to, class and gender; fashion subcultures are based in the context of location as well as the people who comprise the style. The following paper presents the methods used to conduct this research, three themes related to identity mediation through fashion, as well as the limitations and implication of this study for the topic of Asian American subcultures.

Keywords: Asian American, fashion, identity, subcultures

Introduction

In Hypebeast's 2016 article *The Founding Fathers of Modern Day Streetwear*, four of the seven featured individuals were Asian: Nigo, a member of the Teriyaki Boyz and founder of the Japanese clothing line BAPE (A Bathing Ape); Japanese designer Hiroshi Fujiwara; designer Jeff Ng, better known as jeffstaple; and Bobby Kim, a.k.a. Bobby Hundreds, founder of California clothing brand The Hundreds. Asian presence in streetwear, both as producers and consumers, is undeniable. Kevin Poon attributes the rise in popularity of streetwear among Chinese millennials to the freedom of expression the "alternative space" provides (Hales, 2017). That's what fashion can be: a space for alternative expressions. In this case, the alternative expression is "its own niche" (Ing, n.d., p. 10), one that is uniquely Asian American.

Fashion, as something that is highly visible (Arvanitidou & Gasouka, 2011), can be used to communicate identities and ideologies (Lee & Kim, 2017). This occurs as a result of symbolic and personal values being created and assigned to material goods (Arvanitidou & Gasouka, 2011; Crane & Bovone, 2006), i.e. articles of clothing. People use clothes to construct "particular personae and identities" (Wong & Hall-Lew, 2014, p. 28). People can have either in-group or outside-of-group membership status. Kuleva (2015) found that among Russian youth, having outside membership and being excluded is reconciled through the creation of local subcultures. This concept can also be applied to Asian American youth involved in local fashion subcultures. But Ing (n.d.) finds issue "when identity is considered as something that needs to be achieved" (p. 2) due to the ever changing nature of identity. It is not something concrete and it is constantly influenced by the globally linked society (Reddy, n.d.).

Asian Americans create Asian American spaces for themselves. In the fashion/streetwear community, Asian Americans have been able to create their own space and identity. But research on Asian American fashion subcultures is extremely lacking. With that in mind, the following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What aspects of identity do Asian Americans convey through fashion?

RQ2: Is the identity being constructed specific to the location?

Because dissimilar experiences of being Asian American exist (Wong & Hall-Kew, 2014), a focus group consisting of Asian Americans was conducted in order to better understand the relationships between the Asian American identity and its mediation through fashion. Through open coding of transcription, I found that Asian American fashion identity focuses on the constructions of class, gender, and foreign v. local. It is a contextual construction, seeing as it is very much localized. This paper will present the research methods used, three findings about Asian American identity mediated through fashion, and the implications this study has for the topic of the self-constructed identity of Asian Americans.

Methods

As a scholar of Asian American communication with an interest in fashion, I have followed the trends in streetwear that are influenced and enacted by Asian designers, stylists, and models. Attending university in Northern California has exposed me to an Asian American subculture that is different to what I know from back home in Southern California, i.e. LA's Chinatown and K-town. Having studied Asian American self-perceptions, I became interested in how Asian Americans construct and mediate identity through fashion.

Data Collection

This project included a focus group conducted on November 15, 2017, in a semi-private conference room on a university campus located in an urban city. Participants were found through convenience sampling; researchers asked friends and extra credit was offered to one of the participants. Inclusion requirements for participants were Asian American identifying of any ethnicity, 1.5 generation or later, and male identifying. A total of four (4) individuals participated in the focus group interview. The members' ethnic identities included Chinese, Vietnamese, and Filipino. Appendix A includes a breakdown of participant demographics. Participants were seated at a conference table and audio recorded using one of the researcher's cell phones. The two (2) researchers took turns moderating and co-moderating the focus group. Interview questions asked about participants' ethnic backgrounds, parents' ideologies, and race relations. The complete interview guide is also included in Appendix B. Participants gave verbal consent to be recorded and to have their thoughts used to formulate this paper. All names have also been changed in order to ensure the privacy of participants. Approximately 60 minutes of audio recording were transcribed verbatim by the researchers and yielded 20 pages of transcription. After the focus group, one of the participants reached out and sent us a link to a Twitter post by the Four Pins account; a link to the account and a screenshot of the message are included as part of Appendix C.

Data Analysis

A modified classic analysis was used for this research project. Open coding analysis of the focus group transcription was done in order to code for identity aspects and localization of identity. The transcript was printed out and highlighted in an initial analysis; a second analysis was done in order to color code the data based on emerging themes of identity. Excerpts were

analyzed in conjunction with previous research. Transcript-based analysis was chosen for this research project because a focus group allows for variety in participants' responses. The recorded responses make it easier to follow the flow of the conversation and the participants' thought processes in answering questions and building off of each other. The initial research question concerned Asian American masculinity enacted through the performance of Blackness, but after analysis the research question changed in order to fit the emerging data suggesting the self-construction of a localized Asian American identity mediated through fashion.

Results

The following section describes 3 patterns that were observed in the data, leading to claims that the mediation and construction of an Asian American identity can occur through the medium of fashion in a way that is localized to the Bay Area. These themes are ascriptions of class, performance of gender, and distancing from what is foreign in order to create a localized Asian American masculine identity.

Class Ascription

One aspect of Asian American identity focus group participants felt was "a pretty cool topic" (line 637) was the connection between streetwear and social class. Streetwear, and the brands associated with the style, act as a way to mediate class and social status. Fashion communicates class identity and class ideologies (Lee & Kim, 2017). Lee and Zhou (2017) reported that Asian immigrants "import class specific cultural frames" (p. 2321) related to success that are not just ethnic specific but also middle-class specific.

When Asian parents emigrate to the United States, they bring their views of class and success with them. When they have children, they impart those ideologies on them. Steven¹ talked about how “Vietnamese people [are] so like concerned about looks” (line 402):

407 Steven: Truly petty like, epitome of petty sometimes and like judgemental and like
 408 I asked her [mom] that and then she was like because growing up in like
 409 Vietnam or like China a lot of people always look at money and how well
 410 your family is doing and seeing like how like just essentially like what you
 411 have. They like, judge very accordingly based on class and like your
 image
 412 with class.

In the quote, Steven explains how his mother developed her view of class in her home country. Her experience with being from an Asian country and being judged based on perceived class status (lines 408- 411) shaped how she perceives the class status of others and judges them accordingly. Because Steven was able to talk about why his mother is so judgemental, he understands the connection between his Asian identity and ideology and how they shape his own perceptions of class and success. If an individual appears to be of a higher class status, they are judged better because of perceived ‘successful’ status. This shows that Asian Americans do look at individuals and judge them based on their perceived class status due to ideologies of success based in their respective Asian cultures.

By mediating through brands, Asian Americans can “get symbolically closer to the middle class” (Kuleva, 2015, p. 7). Some of the higher end/luxury fashion brands focus group participants mentioned included Supreme, Yeezy’s, Nike Jordan’s, Flyknits, Louis Vuitton, and Anti Social Social Club. Fast fashion, which is mass produced and therefore more accessible, is

¹ All names in this paper have been changed for privacy.

less valued than brands with global reach (Crane & Bovone, 2006). Matthew pointed out the brand bias in the streetwear community:

641 Matthew: So like [I'm not] sure if it's a thing like if you're just like not shaming
but
642 like if you're wearing like PacSun and like H&M stuff, like I know a lot
of
643 people that would like shame them like, 'Oh you did you get that at like
644 PacSun?' or something but but it's like it's it's cool. Like for me,
streetwear
645 is like a very well I w- I like to believe it's a very welcoming culture. I try
to
646 make it that way um but I mean a lot of people are very um I'm not sure if
647 xenophobic is the right word but they're sort of like closed off to like other
648 people wanting to I dunno take part in it and y'know some people can't
649 afford, y'know, like Supreme or like whatever and y'know they go for like
650 similar looks. Which is like very cool. And like I've seen this online too,
in
651 like streetwear communities, where someone can have like an entire outfit
652 and it's like identical to like more luxury stuff, and but it's like it happens
to
653 be just more fast fashion type things and y'know they still get crap for it.

In this quote, Matthew explains how the streetwear community tends to exclude people who cannot afford higher end luxury brands. Outfits put together using fast fashion pieces, and those who wear the styling, are not validated. In fact, they “get crap for it” (line 653). Matthew sees the issue with putting down those who purchase fast fashion and makes attempts to fix that by being more welcoming into the streetwear community and its culture. But Matthew's acceptance doesn't make up for the fact that those perceived as having a lower class status are excluded by in-group members of the streetwear community. This shows that Asian American members of

the streetwear community perpetuate and enforce perceptions of class status based on the ownership of fast fashion, non-designer goods.

Masculinity

Focus group participants felt like Asian American men enact hypermasculinity to compensate for the masculine identity their Asian-ness robs them of. Lu and Wong (2013) said Asian American men conform to hegemonic masculinity in order to subvert their emasculated identity. The authors define hegemonic masculinity as “practices that signify the dominant and most endorsed forms of masculinity” (p. 346). In the following excerpt, Steven and Darien talk about how Asian American men perform their gender in order to achieve an American ideal of masculinity:

- 549 Steven: I also do see like um an overexertion of masculinity in American contexts
 550 as well because Asian American men do feel the need to- or not
 necessarily
 551 do feel the need but like they do wanna portray themselves as masculine
 so
 552 they do things like “Let’s go get my protein powder and shake it around
 and
 553 like wear my gym bag everywhere I go so they know I’m working out”
 like
 554 they definitely do um, tailor like, their um-
 555 Darien: -the way they present themselves.
 556 Steven: Yeah, the way they present themselves to like be more masculine.

Steven’s example of “overexertion of masculinity” (line 549) addresses a physical and physiological masculine expression. The phrases “protein powder,” “gym bag,” and “working out” (lines 552- 553) are related to expressions of masculinity, which include strength, muscular

builds, and [sexual] attractiveness (Lee & Kim, 2017; Lu & Wong, 2013). The men Steven is describing perform their masculinity through their body image.

Asian American men can also “achieve masculinity” (Lu & Wong, 2013, p. 347) by their participation in hip-hop fashion (Ing, n.d.). Steven and Darien had previously described masculine Asian American fashion standards:

- 475 Steven: If you want your masculinity to be validated uhm please dress like a
 476 fuckboy or like wear Supreme clothing and wear like these Nike Jordan’s
 477 whatever, and like talk about your Flyknits 24/7.
 478 [group laugh]
 479 Darien: I dunno, I feel like for when pe- when specifically Asian people like when
 480 they um use clothing and hip-hop and they also like take up that attitude
 481 that’s associated with hip-hop, I feel like they’re just trying to compensate
 482 for a masculinity that they feel that they’re being robbed of just because of
 483 their Asian-ness.

The curation of masculine Asian American fashion means dressing “like a fuckboy” (lines 475-476). Dictionary.com has several possible definitions for the colloquial term. “Fuckboy,” stylized as *fuckboi*:

has a specific meaning related to fashion. He is someone who wears high-end clothing and wishes to be associated with its culture, while not actually belonging to that culture.

This is a guy who buys articles of clothing just for the logo.

By wearing “hype brands” (line 453) associated with hip-hop culture, i.e. Supreme and Nike, Asian American men can reclaim masculinity. This shows that hegemonic masculinity can be bought into. By mediating through hip-hop brands, Asian American men can pay their way into hypermasculinity. There is a price to pay to be a man.

Geographic Meaning

The second research question asks if the identity construction is specific to the location. Kuleva (2015) stated there are “local and global (transnational) youth subcultures” that aren’t isolated from each other, but also influenced by “national and local characteristics” (p. 4). Fashion subcultures are localized; they are specific to the people that have in-group membership status. Focus group participants perpetuated the construction of membership status in two ways: distancing themselves from foreign fashion cultures and describing a local fashion culture.

Distancing from foreign.

In the following excerpt, Steven enumerates three fashion subcultures he has seen Asian international students participate in at the university:

- 536 Steven: I can see how it’s more class in like international students ‘cuz I definitely
 537 do see like brand names more like valued but I also do see like traces of
 like
 538 J-pop or K-pop like, inter- or like, I wan- I don’t wanna generalize all
 539 international students as like dressing like that but I do see like
 J-pop/K-pop
 540 and like um comica? Anime-con? Whatever.
 541 Matthew: Cosplay?
 542 Steven: Cosplay! [snaps fingers] Yeah, that, Also being like um replicated in like
 543 international students, in the university community. Like there’s this one
 544 resident that always comes in and like she’s a pa- she’s like very into like
 545 um J-pop and like I see very anime related like costuming in their
 546 performances.

The aforementioned trends are J-pop, K-pop, and cosplay. The styles convey codes and require understanding of the meaning making specific to the local identities (Lee & Kim, 2017). The foreign international students dress in ways that Asian American students may not even know the name of (line 540). Asian Americans are not necessarily able to identify with those fashion

subcultures because the subcultures don't account for the "American" aspects of their location and identity.

Bay Area localization.

Focus group participants felt that Asian Americans in the Bay Area have their own identity. In the following excerpt, Jacob explains how "being part of the Bay Area is like, is part of like Asian American culture for us" (line 662):

665 Jacob: I feel like you have to be Bay, like you have to like act like you're from the
666 Bay or else you're just like not, cool. Or like you're just like yeah you're
667 not cool. Like, who are you?

Hall and Lew (2014) found that "Northern California identity is increasingly (but not exclusively) constructed in part through Asian (American), and specifically Chinese (American), cultural practices" (p. 29). Bay Area culture is inherently Asian American because of who makes up the population. But being from the Bay and being Asian isn't necessarily enough to grant an individual in-group status. Jacob briefly describes the fashion expectations of the Bay Area:

653 Jacob: I feel like the Bay has like such like an int- a strong culture of like that you
654 have to like dress like you have to wear Anti-Social Social Club.

To be considered a "cool" Bay Area Asian American, individuals must conform to the local fashion standards. The in-group membership is dependant on 1, if the individual is Asian American, 2, if they are Bay and 3, the display of both through fashion mediation. This shows that standards for inclusion into the local Bay Asian culture is perpetuated by the individuals that already have that membership status; other Bay Area Asian Americans decide who is also a "cool" Bay Area Asian American.

Conclusion

Research Question 1 asked which aspects of identity Asian Americans convey through their fashion choices. By mediating through brands, class and gender ideologies are perpetuated and enforced by a group. Question 2 asked if the identity being described by focus group participants is contextualized by location. Local ideologies and cultures shape subcultures. The local Asian American fashion subculture is based on conformity to local fashion practices and perpetuation of ethnic/race-specific ideologies; they have their own standards of fashion and standards for membership status.

There were several limitations to this study. Only one focus group interview was conducted. Due to convenience sampling, all participants had existing relationships with the researchers. Because participants are students at a university focused on social justice values and have taken classes that have made them more self-aware, none of the participants outwardly perpetuated the local fashion subculture. The interview was also gender biased; all participants were male identifying. Only 3 Asian ethnic groups were represented in the focus group. 3 of 4 participants were also native to the Bay Area, skewing the data provided to focus on that location. All of these things may have affected the quality and variety of the answers.

Future research for this project would include a higher quantity of focus groups. There would be focus groups of more than one gender identity and would also include more Asian ethnic identities. Participants would also come from more varied locations. A bigger diversity in the focus groups would produce a higher variety of answers. Future research would also analyze previous research done on Asian American youth subcultures².

² “Boba, Falsies, and Raves: 'Asian Baby Girls' in Asian American Youth Subcultures” by Jacquelyn Tran

The implications of this research are important because it adds to the existing limited academia on Asian American fashion and subcultures. The research can be applied to other ethnic fashion subcultures outside of Bay Area Asian Americans. Appearance serves as the most visible and first means of communication; fashion can help mediate and present the self. By understanding how Asian American individuals construct and display their hyphenated identity, we can better understand self-perceptions and self-policing of identities.

References

- Arvanitidou, Z. & Gadouka, M. (2011). Fashion, Gender and Social Identity. *First Fashion Colloquia- London*. Retrieved from <https://process.arts.ac.uk/>
- Crane, D. & Bovone, L. (2006). Approaches to Material Culture: The Sociology of Fashion and Clothing. *Poetics*, 34(6), pp. 319-333. doi: 10.1016/j.poetic.2006.10.002
- Dictionary.com. (n.d.). Fuckboy. Retrieved from <http://www.dictionary.com/meaning/fuckboy>
- Hales, C. (2017). Millennials push Chinese streetwear to new heights as they seek ways to express themselves. *South China Morning Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/fashion-luxury/article/2103877/millennials-push-chinese-streetwear-new-heights-they-seek>
- Ing, E. (n.d.). Hip-Hop Street Fashion, Identity, and Cross-Cultural Appropriation in the Asian Diaspora. Retrieved from <http://journals.issn.org/>
- Kuleva, M. I. (2015). Constructing Identities and Boundaries: Fashion and Clothing of Working and Middle Class Youth in Contemporary Russia. *Higher School of Economics Research Paper*. Retrieved from <https://www.ssrn.com/en/>
- Lee, J. & Zhou, M. (2017). Why Class Matters Less for Asian-American Academic Achievement. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 43(14), pp. 2316-2330, doi: 10.1080/1369183X.2017.1315851
- Lee, M-J. & Kim, M-J. (2017) Fashioning Identity and Ideology: A Case Study of a “Quality” Period K-drama ‘Inspiring Generation’. *Fashion, Style, & Popular Culture*, 4(1), pp. 51-67. doi: 10.1386/fspc.4.1.51_1

- Lu, A. & Wong, Y. J. (2013). Stressful Experiences of Masculinity Among U.S.-born and Immigrant Asian American Men. *Gender & Society*, 27(3), pp. 345-371. doi: 10.1177/0891243213479446
- Reddy, S. (n.d.). Styling the Self: Fashion as an Expression of Cultural Identity in a Global World.
- Sajonas, F. (2016). These Are Our Founding Fathers of Modern Day Streetwear. *Hypebeast*. Retrieved from <https://hypebeast.com/2016/7/founding-fathers-of-modern-day-streetwear>
- Wong, A. W-M., & Hall-Lew, L. (2014). Regional Variability and Ethnic Identity: Chinese Americans in New York City and San Francisco. *Language & Communication*, 35, pp. 27-42.

Appendix A

Makeup of Participants

Participant	Ethnicity	Pronouns	Hometown
Darien	Chinese, Filipino	he/him	Saipan
Steven	Chinese, Vietnamese	he/him	Sunnyvale
Matthew	Vietnamese	he/him	San Jose
Jacob	Filipino	he/him	San Jose

Appendix B
Focus Group Interview Guide

INTRO:

Welcome! Thank you for making time to attend this focus group on Asian Americans and race in the United States. We are undergraduate students at USF working on a research project for our Asian American Communications class. We're each interested in a slightly different research question, but all 3 topics relate to how Asian Americans relate to other racial groups. As you might have guessed, you're all Asian or Asian American, and you all coexist with people of a variety of races and ethnicities. The insight you share with us today will help us to better understand how Asian Americans relate to other races.

We'd like to remind you all that thoughts, opinions, and stories shared in this group are private. Please don't talk about them outside of this room. The goal of this discussion is not to get everyone to agree; our goal is to put all opinions out on the table.

This focus group will be video and audio recorded. If you're okay with this please say "Yes".

Great, let's get started.

QUESTIONS:

1. What are your gender pronouns, and where do you consider your hometown to be?
2. How would you describe the neighborhood(s) you grew up in?
3. What were some slang phrases you heard growing up?
4. Do you use slang now? Examples?
5. Do you think discrimination against people of color- (which includes Asian Americans, African Americans, Latinos and other groups)- has affected your opportunities in life?
6. Do you think Asian Americans have similar experiences with prejudice as other POC groups (Latinos, African Americans)? Or, do you think there are more shared experiences with whites?
7. Do you consider Asians people of color ?
8. Have you heard the phrase "Model Minority" before? How do you feel about it?
9. Follow up: If Asian Americans are the "model minority", what did they do to deserve the title that other groups did not do?
10. How do your parents and family members talk about African Americans and Latinos?
11. Did your families encourage you to interact with and cultivate friendships with non-Asian people?
12. (Interacting through fashion/ fashion as a channel) From what you've seen/know, is hip-hop inspired street fashion popular among Asian American (men)?

13. Do you think dressing a certain way makes men feel more masculine?
14. What would that outfit [masculine Asian American] look like?
15. What things do you feel divide Asian Americans from other racial groups?
16. So, unfortunately, we are coming to an end on time. So to sum up, we talked about... Can you think of any questions or thoughts inspired by our discussion?

CLOSING STATEMENT:

Thank you for making the time to participate in this focus group with all of us. The conversation has been invaluable to us as researchers, and we hope it's given you some food for thought as well. Race can be a difficult subject to talk about, and we appreciate your trust in having these discussions. Again, please respect everyone's privacy and do not share others' responses outside of this space. We will be utilizing your responses to write our research papers, and any thoughts we use will be completely confidential. If you'd like to receive copies of the completed papers, please add your email to this list and we will send out the files at the end of the semester. (Offer email sign-up to receive copy of final papers). Thank you again, and feel free to reach out to us via email or text if you have any questions or want to follow up on the discussion. Have a good rest of your day!

Appendix C
Twitter Follow Up

https://twitter.com/Four_Pins

