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Feeling Invisible: AAPI Identity, Media Influence, and the Psychological Impact of Curriculum Absence

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Evelynn Leung is a junior at Academy of Saint Elizabeth in New Jersey. Evelynn has long been committed to examining the experiences and realities of AAPI communities in American society. Through her work and advocacy, she seeks to raise awareness of the challenges faced by AAPI individuals and actively supports efforts to advance equity, representation, and the rights of AAPI communities.

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the underrepresentation of the history of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) people in formal education and the role of media, including social and digital media, in shaping identity formation. The study builds on recent scholarship and ethnic studies theories, with a particular focus on issues of curricular gaps, systemic exclusion, intersectional diversity, and the mental health consequences of underrepresentation. As a result, existing literature shows that when learning about Asian-American cultures is limited in the school curriculum, students use the media as a source of information to affirm themselves and reinforce stereotypes. Additionally, limited representation leads to invisible experiences and a lack of belonging, which impacts self-concept and resilience. Thus, this paper highlights the need for inclusive curricula, culturally responsive pedagogy, and policy changes that incorporate meaningful representation of AAPI histories, inclusive learning spaces, critical thinking, and positive identity development. The research also reveals that education and media can work together to bridge these gaps and strengthen cultural awareness, social justice, and student empowerment in various educational settings.

Keywords: *AAPI identity, curriculum absence, media representation, ethnic studies, identity formation, cultural invisibility, education inequality, stereotype formation, psychological impact, social perception*

INTRODUCTION

The discourse of cultural identity has taken center stage in recent years, especially in learning areas, such as representation and inclusion. In spite of this change, Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) history is significantly underrepresented in U.S. educational programs (Saavedra et al., 2025). Their stories tend to be overlooked, given a brief mention, or not mentioned at all, which illustrates a larger trend of structural invisibility underpinning mass culture and identity formation.

A deficiency in organized AAPI education also leads to misconceptions, disjointed knowledge, and the reproduction of stereotypes. Although media can be utilized to address these gaps, it can also be used to misrepresent cultural knowledge by simplifying or choosing what to convey (Chen et al., 2024). Thus, the absence of systematic and correct educational frameworks will lead to the persistence of these gaps and the further evolution of incomplete thoughts about the experience of AAPIs.

This paper analyses the role of curriculum absence in AAPI identity, the ways in which media addresses or misinterprets this absence, and the disconnect between the public and history. The position of this paper is that curriculum disjuncture and media impact work together to create both the world-view and self-construction, frequently boosting invisibility and constraining full comprehension of cultural identity (Saavedra et al., 2025; Kim & An, 2024). It is a belief that media and curriculum gaps can reciprocally influence the exterior perception and inward identity, which are likely to reinforce invisibility and suppress in-depth understanding of AAPI communities.

LITERATURE SELECTION AND REVIEW APPROACH

Literature for this study was selected based on its relevance to the central research question of AAPI curricular representation, cultural invisibility, media influence and identity formation. Focus was placed on peer-reviewed academic writing regarding AAPI experiences in educational spaces, ethnic studies, curriculum, media and social media, stereotypes, psychological functioning and intersectional identity. Additionally, recent studies were given a priority to ensure that the review reflected current developments in AAPI education and in digital media. However, foundational scholarly studies were retained when they provided important theoretical or conceptual perspectives. Further, the selected literature involved studies that explored both educational and media contexts in order to account for the relationship between curricular absence and the growing importance of media in cultural knowledge. As such, sources were considered based on their relevance to the key themes of the study, scholarly credibility, and contribution to understanding AAPI underrepresentation experiences and consequences. By adopting this strategy, the literature review considered a range of issues and viewpoints, while

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keeping an eye on how educational exclusion and media representation intersect to influence perceptions, identity development, belonging, and psychological well-being.

LITERATURE REVIEW

AAPI in Education.

Historically, the underrepresentation of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) histories in the U.S. curriculum is a structural issue that has persisted. Conventional textbooks and classroom histories give greater focus to Eurocentric views and commonly relegate AAPI experience to peripheral or back-story status (Saavedra et al., 2025; Kim & An, 2024). Such restricted integration is part of a larger trend of cultural invisibility, which is limiting the exposure of students to different historical stories.

The marginalization of AAPI histories in the curriculum is symptomatic of more systemic forms of marginalization. An (2016) identifies that Asian Americans are often not encompassed in the mainstream U.S. history curriculum or only within specific contexts, like immigration history or participation in war. These subjects, traditionally covered, have usually not included enough depth or continuity, creating fragmented knowledge of AAPI history (JAMA Network Open, 2022). This is indicative of a wider trend of tokenization, by which AAPI content is presented as a few lines or individualized lessons instead of part of the national narrative.

Ethnic Studies is a set of corrective scholarship, as determined by scholars. According to the arguments by Saavedra et al. (2025), inclusive curricula based on marginalized communities promote academic interaction, critical analysis, and identity formation. With a focus on agency, diversity, and intersectionality, Ethnic Studies disrupts the mainstream discourse and defies stereotypes, including the myth of the model minority. Nevertheless, access to these curricula has been unequal, and most schools still use standardized material that creates gaps in representation (Kim & An, 2024). Consequently, students resort to other sources, especially the media, to acquire information about AAPI identities and histories.

Curricular Gaps and Critical Race Pedagogy

Existing research highlights that AAPI voices continue to be excluded from the K–12 and higher education curriculum. For example, Lee & Kwon (2020) observe that traditional education methods frequently address tokenistic coverage, avoiding systemic inequities and recognizing the lived experiences of AAPI students. Therefore, the CRES movement calls for curricular change that is based on counternarratives, deconstruction of Eurocentric stories, and critical thinking (Patel, 2023). Also, implementing anti-racist pedagogical approaches

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can foster inclusive environments where AAPI histories are valued and included within the national educational conversation.

Researchers have pointed out that teacher preparation and professional development play key roles in the successful incorporation of AAPI perspectives. The teacher preparation program that focuses on culturally responsive pedagogy facilitates the effective implementation of curriculum change to engage students in learning and to develop intercultural competence. Schools that follow these practices continuously offer mentoring, collaboration, and evaluation to support these reforms (Lee & Kwon, 2020). These strategies can promote inclusivity, support ongoing cultural shifts in content, and establish institutional accountability for combating the underrepresentation of AAPI at various educational levels.

Media Representation and Culture Learning

Where formal education is not thoroughly developed, the media serves more as a cultural educator, influencing the way people perceive AAPI identity. Media channels like television, film, and most notably social media afford easier avenues of cultural education, whereby AAPI voices get a chance to narrate stories and create awareness (Chen et al., 2024). Besides, social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have increased the possibilities of representation because they allow individuals to create and share content. Such platforms have the power to elevate neglected histories and offer more alternative views than mainstream media (Levin, 2025). However, their influence is shaped by algorithmic systems that prioritize engagement over accuracy, often promoting simplified or sensationalized content.

This process is explainable by using the Cultivation Theory, which postulates that the attitude to social reality is formed by repeated exposure to media. By being repeatedly exposed to a few or limited representations, the stereotyped representations can be made normalized (Levin, 2025). In a similar manner, the Social Identity Theory emphasizes the importance of representation in the development of the self-concept. When media representations lack depth or are stereotypical, people might find it difficult to create a whole and valid sense of identity (Chen et al., 2024). Media, therefore, plays a dual role, where on the one hand, it contributes to the dissemination of cultural knowledge, and on the other, it runs a risk of distortion and simplification, especially in cases where there are no proper educational backgrounds.

Digital Media and Cultural Identity Formation

Digital and social media are a foundational tool in the construction of AAPI identity, especially in situations where formal curricula have not adequately represented AAPI histories. According to Nguyen & Park (2022), social media like TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter can be spaces for cultural affirmation and community

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connection, but also spaces for the exposure of racialized content and influence on self-concept. As such, research has demonstrated that algorithm-driven feeds contribute to both identity exploration and the reinforcement of harmful narratives (Patel, 2023). Thus, digital spaces become important arenas for identity negotiation and discussion beyond school settings.

Further research shows that online communities give AAPI youth a space to share lived experiences and collectively work to confront historical underrepresentation. These platforms offer cultural learning, peer support, and advocacy materials and information to further strengthen cultural pride and resilience (Levin, 2025). Social media also serves as a counter-public sphere where marginalized groups challenge the narratives they see in the mainstream media, form collectivity, and raise social consciousness beyond the confines of the academic world and cultural engagement.

Stereotypes and Perception Formation

The media is a major contributing factor to reinventing AAPI stereotypes, especially the model minority myth and the perpetual foreigner stereotype. The model minority is a narrative that creates the image of uniformly successful and independent AAPI people, which conceals internal diversity and structural inequalities (Levin, 2025). Although this stereotype appears to be a good thing, it fosters unrealistic expectations and systemic silencers.

The perpetual foreigner stereotype portrays AAPI people as outsiders regardless of nationality or generational identity. This perception strengthens the exclusion of nationality and is more frequently reinforced by media images, which underline the cultural difference (Levin, 2025). Such stereotypes influence more than just interpersonal perceptions but also wider societal views. The result of this is that without a thorough education, people tend to follow media-based narratives, and simplified representations may prevail. This leads to a lack of empathy, misunderstanding of AAPI experiences, and the continuation of prejudiced attitudes.

Mental Health Implications of Underrepresentation

The lack of AAPI representation in education can have profound psychological and academic impacts. Curricular exclusion/exposure is correlated with increased stress, anxiety, and stereotype internalization among AAPI students (Yoo et al., 2021). These identity pressures have a negative impact on belonging, engagement in school, and resilience. Recent research also confirms that culturally relevant curricula are vital in helping to reduce the impact of these experiences (Kim et al., 2022). This includes the fact that recognition and validation of AAPI experiences are linked to healthier identity formation and better mental health outcomes.

Other results document how media exposure and education deficits can exacerbate stress and invisibility. For instance, Chen et al. (2024) observe that Ethnic studies courses, mentorship programs, culturally

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responsive counseling, and other interventions offer structured support and promote positive self-concept, self-identity, and coping skills (Yoo et al., 2021). Thus, the integration of educational content and mental health resources allows students to navigate systemic pressures and societal stereotypes while developing resilience and empowering them to engage proactively with personal and community identity challenges in the long term.

Mental Effect and Development of Identity

The cumulative impact of curriculum absence and media representation is witnessed in identity development and psychological welfare. An important notion is identity validation, or how well people feel their experiences are represented in the narratives of a society. In cases where AAPI histories are not included in an educational process, the individuals can feel invisible and detached, which can complicate the formation of a coherent identity. Also, inclusive curricula have been found to enhance self-esteem, belonging, and cultural awareness. Without them, people are prone to seeking validation in the media (Saavedra et al., 2025). Although media may offer other platforms within which identity is explored, it may also strengthen stereotypes or exert pressure to conform to dominant discourse (Chen et al., 2024).

A habitual exposure to limited representations can result in internalization of societal narratives, impacting self-perception and desired aspirations. This may dilute cultural identity and lessen a sense of belonging (Saavedra et al., 2025). On the other hand, precise and varied representation, either educational or through media, can promote cultural pride, self-awareness, and a sense of belonging. As such, the literature tends to indicate that media influence and curriculum absence are two forces that are profoundly intertwined and construct perception and identity (Kim & An, 2024). These gaps should be addressed to facilitate more precise knowledge and facilitate healthier identity development.

Intersectionality and Diversity Within AAPI Communities

AAPIs include various racial, socio-economic, and gender groups that are often not considered in broad research and teaching material. For example, intersectional analyses show that students from Southeast Asian, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander backgrounds have experiences distinct from other students due to their immigration history, socio-economic status, and systemic inequities (Tran et al., 2021). Therefore, if there is no intersectional representation, then the curriculum can end up reinforcing monolithic narratives that would miss the intra-group diversity. As such, it is crucial to embed intersectional lenses into research and education to provide equitable recognition of diverse AAPI experiences.

Furthermore, through the use of intersectional research and policy, interventions can be attuned to multiple aspects of identity. Teachers can design curriculum and programs that reflect cultural, economic, and gender differences in AAPI communities. This not only fosters greater inclusion but also boosts learning results and promotes social equity (Tran et al., 2021). Therefore, identifying intra-group diversity can allow schools and

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policymakers to respond to specific needs and challenges, creating inclusive learning spaces that affirm individual experiences and promote shared identity construction and cross-cultural awareness.

Policy and Curriculum Reform Strategies

Practical approaches to integrating AAPI histories in grades K–12 and in college and university courses are demonstrated in recent policy and programmatic initiatives. For example, community-led curriculum development, teacher preparation in culturally responsive pedagogy, and legislation have proven successful methods to increase representation (Asian Pacific Policy & Planning Council, 2023). These efforts are meant to offer organized, evidence-based educational information and to question stereotypes, including the “model minority” myth (National Education Association, 2022). Research serves as a guide for systemic changes and model programs that support culturally responsive and inclusive practices for AAPI students.

Further recommendations include continuous assessment, collaborative efforts among stakeholders, and feedback loops to ensure curriculum relevance and sustainability. Policy implementation needs to be accompanied by resource allocation, professional development, and monitoring for sustainability (Yoo et al., 2021). These strategies are designed to support educational equity, build cultural awareness, and create inclusive learning spaces that recognize API histories and enrich identity development, cross-cultural competence, and social justice in education.

DISCUSSION

Curriculum Absence as Structural Invisibility

There is solid empirical backing to the argument that curriculum absence is a kind of structural invisibility, which is supported by findings. Considering that most of the literature explored shows that most individuals have had infrequent or minimal exposure to AAPI content, it becomes clear that this background is not being introduced in the education systems in a structured way (Chen et al., 2024). Such underrepresentation makes the scarcity of awareness seem commonplace and nostalgizes the marginalized role of the AAPI narratives in the institutional body of knowledge.

Media: A Double-Edged Sword.

The research proves that the media has succeeded in becoming a prominent contributor to the learning of the culture, bridging the gap in formal education. Nevertheless, the percentage of school-based learning is relatively low, indicating a major transition towards institutional sources of knowledge (Tran et al., 2021).

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Whereas media makes content more accessible, its reliance on operations of the algorithm raises concerns of biased exposure and its preference for simplified narratives, which is also consistent with the Cultivation Theory.

GAP BETWEEN PERCEPTION AND REALITY

According to the literature reviewed, the disparity between high awareness of recent events and low familiarity with foundational history illustrates a clear perception–reality gap. This trend shows that the media visibility of the AAPI history is what shapes the understanding of the subject among participants, rather than thorough education (Chen et al., 2024). Consequently, knowledge is biased and fragmented, further supporting the hegemony of media-based narratives.

IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study have profound educational, social, and psychological implications. Educationally, the findings highlight the necessity to integrate Ethnic Studies and inclusive curricula that take the AAPI past into meaningful consideration (Tran et al., 2021). Such inclusion, as noted in previous studies, not only boosts academic engagement but also fosters critical thinking and cultural awareness (Sleeter, 2011). The elimination of gaps in the curriculum can lead to the minimization of the use of informal and possibly untrustworthy sources of knowledge, creating a more precise and thorough interpretation of history.

Socially, making AAPIs more visible and more accurate may help reduce stereotypes and enhance cross-cultural awareness. Through challenging the dominant narratives like the model minority myth and the perpetual foreigner stereotype, educational and media organizations can contribute to the restructuring of public perception and promote empathy and inclusivity. From a psychological standpoint, better representation can enhance feelings of belonging, esteem, and culture in people (Sleeter, 2011). The more people learn about their past and their experiences in the educational and cultural accounts, the more likely they will grow to have a positive and unified identity about themselves. Therefore, curriculum inclusivity and responsible media reporting are two of the necessary measures that contribute to the improvement of an individual and the overall society.

CONCLUSION

This paper sheds light on the interwoven nature of curriculum gaps and mediated media spaces in forming the external representations of AAPI communities as well as the internal mechanisms of identity formation. The results indicate that the relative absence of AAPI histories on the formal educational curriculum is part of a larger tendency of structural invisibility, in which the latter experiences take a back seat or are entirely

excluded. Because of this, people tend to resort to media as a substitute source of cultural knowledge, thus forming a dynamic where informal learning environments become central to the formation of understanding.

Even though the media provide greater visibility and access, it does not entirely balance the lack of thorough education. Rather, it tends to recreate reduced or selective accounts that perpetuate stereotypes and add to uneven awareness. The findings of this research indicate that there is a significant divergence between perception and historical reality, with the respondents showing more knowledge of well-reported events or recent ones than about the foundations of AAPI history.

Ultimately, the issue of invisibility is not incidental but structurally embedded within both educational systems and media representations. This can be tackled in two ways, where one is the incorporation of inclusive, evidence-based curricula, and the second is encouraging more objective and varied media representations. With these gaps closed, one may have a better-informed population, the persistent stereotypes will be challenged, and more robust cultural identities will be built. By doing so, education and media can stop perpetuating invisibility to engage in representation, recognition, and belongingness actively.

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