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FETISHIZATION OF ASIAN AMERICAN WOMEN:
A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS ON THE MEDIA PORTRAYAL OF THE
VICTIMS OF THE 2021 ATLANTA SPA SHOOTINGS

by
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors Undergraduate Thesis Program in Social Work
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ABSTRACT

Asian American women have an intersectional identity that creates unique experiences, including discrimination and violence with a history of fetishization. In 2021, eight people were shot and killed in three spas in Atlanta, Georgia. Seven of the eight victims were women, six of whom were of Asian descent. While the shooter stated his actions were the results of sex addiction, and not racially motivated, the shootings occurred during a rise in attacks against Asian Americans amid the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Pandemic. The Atlanta Spa Shootings provide a unique case where we can apply an intersectional lens to determine how identifiers, such as gender and race, shape Asian American women's experiences in America. The study specifically analyzes Asian American women's experiences of violence in the media's framing of their narrative as victims through qualitative discourse analysis. By analyzing news discourse in the Atlanta Spa Shootings as covered by American newspapers over a period of one year, the study highlights the way both racism and misogyny, exemplified by the fetishization of Asian American women, may have compounded into the attack and its portrayal.

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I want to acknowledge and honor the eight victims of the 2021 Atlanta Spa Shootings. Daoyou Feng. Delaina Ashley Yaun. Hyun Jung Grant. Paul Andre Michels. Soon Chung Park. Suncha Kim. Xiaojie Tan. Yong Ae Yue. Every one of you deserved to live a full life and that was taken from you. You will forever live on in the words that you spoke, the actions that you took, and the lives that you have touched.

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It's also necessary that I thank all strong and powerful Asian women in my life. My mother, grandmother, aunts, cousins, friends, and mentors. You have inspired and shaped me into the person I am today. From the choices I make to the words I speak, there is a piece of each of you in every action I take. Thank you for teaching me to be proud of who I am and to never be afraid to fill a room.

To my dad and brother, thank you for always supporting in what I do. I know that no matter what path I take, I can always look back and see you cheering me on as I pursue my goals and dreams.

Lastly, my due recognition to Bangtan Sonyeondan, who remind me that “No matter who you are, where you’re from, your skin color, or gender identity: speak yourself.”

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INTRODUCTION

On March 16, 2021, eight people were shot and killed in three separate spas in the Atlanta, Georgia area. The shooter, Robert Long, killed four of the victims at the Young's Asian Massage in Cherokee County, before traveling to Atlanta and killing three more at Gold Spa, and then killing the last victim at Aromatherapy Spa across the street (Fausset & Vigdor, 2021). Seven of the eight total victims were women, six of whom were of Asian descent.

While Long states his actions were the results of “sex addiction” and that he was not racially motivated, the shootings occurred during a rise in attacks against Asian Americans amid the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Pandemic (McWhirter & Bauerlein, 2021). The Atlanta Spa Shootings gained mass media attention, as people, specifically those within the Asian American community, began to call the incident a hate crime. Since then, Long has pleaded guilty to four counts of murder in Cherokee County and is serving a life sentence. Long also pleaded not guilty to charges of murder, aggravated assault, and domestic terrorism in Fulton County. He currently faces the death penalty and possible sentencing enhancement under Georgia's new hate crimes law (Abusaid, 2021). While some debate whether Long's motives were sexually or racially motivated, the shootings put into question how the victims' demographics as both women and Asian Americans played a role in the attack.¹

Prior to the shootings, there had been calls on social media for greater awareness about attacks against Asian Americans; these shootings further spurred national discussion regarding discrimination and prejudice against Asian Americans. From social media movements, including the trending hashtag #StopAsianHate, to President Biden pushing for Congress to pass COVID-

¹ Acknowledging the fact that the Asian race includes a vast array of identities and experiences, this study will specifically focus on those of East and Southeast Asian descent.

19-related hate crime legislation, calls for change on these issues occurred after the shootings (McWhirter & Bauerlein, 2021).

While race was an issue in these attacks, it is also important to look at the shootings with specific regard to violence against women. Long's stated motive to "eliminate temptation" of his sex addiction is representative of the widespread sexism and misogyny that pervades society (Abusaid, 2021). Long reduced the women to mere objects of sexual desire and temptation, rather than regarding them as actual human beings. This objectification of women has been linked to behaviors supportive of violence against women (Seabrook et al., 2019). In the media, there have been many movements that call attention to the objectification of women and its ties to sexual violence, with many gaining widespread attention. In 2017, the #MeToo movement caught national attention in the news and on social media, advocating for victims of sexual assault and harassment to speak out and work to end sexual violence (Get to Know Us, 2020). Seen in almost all aspects of society, from the workforce to Hollywood, there was an outcry for a change in societal attitudes and legislation during the peak of the #MeToo movement.

While both issues of Asian American discrimination and violence against women have garnered mass media attention in recent years, there has been little coverage specifically regarding violence against Asian American women. A population subject to both racism and misogyny, often exemplified by fetishization, Asian American women face unique forms of discrimination in American society (Mukkamala & Suyemoto, 2018). However, many Asian American experiences are already swept under the rug and not reported in mainstream media (Kabasaes, 1995). The Atlanta Spa Shootings is one of few incidents where Asian American women were targeted that gained national attention due to the severity of the attack and its timing in regard to major social justice movements. To understand how the victims'

demographics as both women and Asian Americans played a role in the media's portrayal of the shootings, this study will examine the news discourse about the Atlanta Spa Shootings in the one-year period following the attack. In doing so, the study highlights the way both racism and misogyny, exemplified by the fetishization of Asian American women, may have compounded into the attack and its portrayal.

LITERATURE REVIEW

History of Asian American Discrimination

People of Asian descent have existed in the United States for over a hundred years, with the first Asian immigrants arriving in the 19th century (Budiman & Ruiz, 2022). East Asian immigrants are largely visible in the early labor force, predominantly in western states. Chinese laborers were brought to California to work in agriculture, mining, construction, or manufacturing after the Gold Rush (Min, 2011). Japanese laborers also were brought to California and Hawaii to work in the mines and agriculture, alongside Korean immigrants settling in Hawaii to work on the sugar cane farms (Min, 2011). Currently, Asian Americans are the fastest-growing racial or ethnic group in the United States and are projected to surpass 46 million by 2060 (Budiman & Ruiz, 2022).

In the United States, despite Asian Americans forming an essential labor backbone in the past with increases in their presence and integration, they have been and continue to be labeled as the perpetual foreigner. Coined as the “Yellow Peril”, Asians are depicted as economic, social, and/or military threats to the Western World and, as a result, have experienced hate crimes and harassment throughout history (Cortés, 2013). This xenophobia was further perpetuated through government laws and policies. The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act restricted immigration from China, despite Asian men initially being desired as a form of cheap labor, as they were soon believed to be economic threats to white men and sexual threats to white women (Cortés, 2013). This was the first major federal law that barred immigration of a specific ethnicity. Similar laws would also later pass in the 20th century restricting immigration from India, Japan, Korea, and the Philippines (Cortés, 2013). This perpetuation of “otherness” was not only directed toward

foreign-born Asians, but also those born in the United States. During World War II, after the attack on Pearl Harbor, President Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which sent all those of Japanese descent on the west coast into internment camps (Cortés, 2013). Despite the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation stating that this was unnecessary, those of Japanese descent were treated as a threat and enemy to the United States (Cortés, 2013). This history illustrates that often in American society there is a failure to distinguish between Asian Americans born outside the U.S. and those native to the U.S., instead all Asians are viewed as a monolith: the outsider (Devos & Ma, 2008).

Asian American discrimination is not only overt in policies and actions, but also seen in microaggressions that are subtle in their nature. Sue et al. (2007) defines racial microaggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (p.271) These everyday exchanges perpetuate white supremacy in common spaces. Sue et al. (2009) found that microaggressions against Asians can be categorized into eight different themes, some of which include aliens in their own land, denial of racial reality, second-class citizenship, and invisibility. After being the target of a microaggression, Asian Americans often question how others perceive them and are left feeling unwelcome (Sue et al., 2009). They find themselves questioning if they belong, or if they are respected by their neighbors (Sue et al., 2009). Therefore, no matter how long they had lived in the U.S. or how much they assimilate, Asian Americans have continuously been labeled as “other” and ostracized by American society and government.

COVID-19 and the Rise of Asian American Hate Crimes

Incidents of Asian American discrimination were heightened and further exacerbated as COVID-19 spread across the United States. Believed to have originated in Wuhan, China in late December 2019, COVID-19 has rapidly spread across the globe and infected more than 400 billion people to date (Wang et al., 2020; World Health Organization, 2022).

Named for the crown-like protein structures, the World Health Organization (WHO) followed their “Best Practices for the Naming of New Human Diseases” when naming the disease (World Health Organization, 2015). These practices include avoiding terms such as geographic locations, people’s names, species, culture, population, industry or occupational references, and those that induce fear (World Health Organization, 2015). Disease names have been shown to “provoke a backlash against members of particular religious or ethnic communities” according to Dr. Keiki Fukuda, Assistant Director-General for Health Security, WHO (World Health Organization, 2015). Language is extremely important when regarding new diseases, as fear often follows and can turn into biases against minority groups if they become associated. Despite these suggestions, COVID-19 was still referred to as the “Chinese Virus” or “China Virus” by major leaders. This was most noticeably seen in former President Donald Trump’s addresses, from various tweets to a White House press conference (Fallows, 2022). As a national political figure, Trump held power and influence over how people viewed major current events. By assigning unconfirmed origin information, people who follow Trump are more likely to blame Asian victims of hate crimes (Yamawaki et al., 2021). Research has even shown that Trump’s tweet calling COVID-19 “the Chinese virus” coincided with an increase in tweets regarding COVID-19 along with the hashtag #ChineseVirus overtaking the hashtag #Covid19 (Hswen et al., 2021). The hashtag #ChineseVirus was more associated with anti-Asian

sentiment; however, both of these hashtags showed an increased number of anti-Asian hashtags being used in tandem (Hswen et al., 2021). Due to the widespread attention and fear of COVID-19, along with national figureheads using inflammatory language, Asian Americans found themselves targeted by society during the COVID-19 pandemic. To oppose this, the #StopAsianHate movement trended on social media with a massive volume of tweets expressing anger and condemning the rise in anti-Asian sentiment and attacks (Fan et al., 2021). Awareness of these issues was brought to mainstream media, thus, highlighting the current prevalence of Asian American discrimination.

Coinciding with anti-Asian sentiments in the media were an increased number of anti-Asian hate crimes taking place since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Anti-Asian hate crimes increased by nearly 150% in 2020 compared to 2019, with the advocacy group Stop AAPI (Asian American and Pacific Islander) Hate receiving more than 2,800 reports of hate incidents that year with Asian American women making up 68% of reports (Cabral, 2021; Stop AAPI Hate, 2021; Yam, 2021). These incidents include an 84-year-old Thai immigrant dying after being shoved to the ground, an 89-year-old Chinese woman being slapped and set on fire, two Asian American women being stabbed, a Vietnamese school board candidate finding a note with the words "Kung Flu" on her doorstep, and much more (Cabral, 2021). Already having to cope with the anxieties and fears of COVID-19, Asian Americans found themselves living in fear of being the victim of a hate crime, a fear which continues into the current day. For example, Chinese American college students reported higher perceived discrimination and anxiety during COVID-19 than prior to COVID-19 (Haft & Zhou, 2021). Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic brought about a new wave of anti-Asian sentiment and attacks across the United States.

Intersectionality

The term intersectionality was originally coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw to address the marginalization of Black women within both feminist and anti-racist agendas (Davis, 2008). Crenshaw argued that when discrimination is analyzed from a single-issue perspective, it ignores group differences and fails to acknowledge the culmination of minority identities that play into the victims' discrimination (Crenshaw, 1994). Crenshaw (1994) questions the single-axis framework of disadvantages that assumes discrimination against one group occurs evenly across all other levels of demographics. Crenshaw (1994) centers Black women and explains that their experiences are a result of race, sex, and class multiplying together in their encounters. This intersectional perspective can also be applied to the unique experiences of Asian American women, defined by their gender, race, language, and class (Chun et al., 2013). It is essential to regard women of color through their unique experiences, as they cannot be defined by single-identity narratives.

There is little research on Asian American women's identities concerning their portrayal as victims in media. However, there have been calls for the application of Asian Critical Race Theory and Asian Americanist perspective, in research on Asian American race and racism (Yoo et al., 2021). These theories, aim to highlight the long history of oppression and struggle of Asian Americans in the United States, as opposed to the often-overrepresented concepts of traditions, values, and customs that are found in current studies of Asian Americans (Yoo et al., 2021). However, the theories also emphasize the importance of intersectionality, encouraging examination of how systems of oppression and privilege work in conjunction with the Asian identifier to produce unique experiences of Asian American discrimination (Yoo et. Al, 2021). Examining the Asian American experience from an intersectional framework allows for the

exploration of how different genders, sexualities, classes, etc. create new and unique Asian American experiences that cannot be analyzed from a single-identity viewpoint.

The Atlanta Spa Shootings provide a unique case where we can apply an intersectional lens to determine how identifiers, such as gender and race, shape Asian American women's experiences in America. The study specifically analyzes Asian American women's experiences of violence in the media's framing of their narrative as victims.

Fetishization of Asian Women

In parallel with Asian American discrimination, the fetishization of Asian women has a long and dark history in America. As a result of both racism and misogyny, Asian women have been and continue to be viewed as exotic objects of desire in American society. Often called "Yellow Fever," Asian American women are often fetishized and stripped of their identities. Centuries of Western imperialism have created the stereotype that Asian women are both hypersexual and submissive (Jeong, 2021). Early colonization of east Asia documents the origins of these stereotypes, with a French naval officer visiting 19th century Japan depicting Asian women as stupid creatures to be used for men's sexual desires (Jeong, 2021). This notion followed the Western expansion of the United States, as Asians began to immigrate into the country. Chinese women were assumed to be prostitutes and under the Page law of 1875, which barred entry to those who agreed to "lewd and immoral purposes," were essentially unable to immigrate to the United States (Cortés, 2013). This sentiment of hypersexualizing Asian women continued into the 20th century, as the U.S. military allowed and even encouraged servicemen in Vietnam to participate in sex with local Asian women in exchange for money (Jeong, 2021). Soldiers would often take this encouragement and rape the local women, with the most noticeable incident being the My Lai Massacre, where American soldiers stationed in Vietnam

murdered over five hundred civilians and raped and assaulted the women and children (Karsten, 2005). This was not an isolated tactic as the American servicemen stationed in Korea also received the same encouragement to use the local women for sexual pleasure (Jeong, 2021). These encounters are most likely the origin of Korean massage parlors, coupled with the hyper-sexualization of Asians and massage parlors. This history creates the idea that Asian women are expendable sex objects, stripping them of their humanity and identity. Asian American women are further ostracized as foreigners, as discussed above in the discussion of the History of Asian American Discrimination.

The fetishization of Asian American women is also currently perpetuated in America's media and pop culture. Building upon the stereotypes of hyper-sexualization and submissiveness, the entertainment industry constantly plays into these stereotypes. Asian American women's representation in Hollywood often falls into tropes of the "dragon lady," "butterfly," or "China doll," all of which are characterized by their promiscuity and temptation (Low & Davis, 2021). Another common trope is the submissive and "docile war bride," demonstrated by Miyoshi Umeki's role in 1957's "Sayonara" (Low & Davis, 2021). Asian American women's roles in films and TV typically fall into one of these two categories, with flat characterization and little development. Asian representation in Hollywood is already limited and with little representation outside of racist stereotypes. Asian American women are left further marginalized by society as they find themselves fetishized not only by American society but also in books, shows, and films – objects meant to serve as an escape from reality. This widespread fetishization of Asian American women in mass media and pop culture emphasizes how ingrained it is into society, echoing America's history.

This fetishization of Asian American women in media is not limited to Hollywood and the entertainment industry, but also in its news reports. Thus, this study will analyze how victims' demographics as both women and Asian Americans played a role in the media's narrative of the victims of the Atlanta Spa Shootings. In doing so, highlights the way both racism and misogyny, exemplified by the fetishization of Asian American women, may have compounded into the attack and its depiction in American media.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, qualitative discourse analysis was used to investigate how the 2021 Atlanta Spa Shootings' victims' demographics influenced the media portrayal of the attack.

Sample and Data Collection

The collection for this discourse analysis was conducted via the Nexis Uni database to find newspaper articles regarding the 2021 Atlanta Spa Shootings between the date of the incident's occurrence, March 16, 2021, to a year after, March 16, 2022. Using the keywords "Atlanta Spa Shootings," the researcher used the Nexis Uni database's guided search to acquire news coverage regarding the attack that fit the designated timeframe. This results in 295 articles. Results were then filtered to only Newspapers in the United States in order to understand the narrative surrounding this event in the US, resulting in 125 newspapers. The researcher then excluded any content unrelated to the shootings or deemed irrelevant for the analysis due to word count being less than 250 words, less than 60% of the article discussing the victims, or not directly reporting on the attacks (n=102), the final data set yielded 23 articles covering the 2021 Atlanta Spa Shootings (see Table 1 for all articles included in this analysis).

Analysis

Discourse analysis is a qualitative research method used to identify the dominant themes regarding the language surrounding a particular subject and its role in constructing the subject's social reality (Smith & Willig, 2015). The researcher analyzed the newspaper articles covering the 2021 Atlanta Spa Shootings to understand how the victims' demographics as both women and Asian Americans played a role in the media's portrayal of the attack. In doing so, the study

aims to understand how both racism and misogyny, exploring the fetishization of Asian American women, revealed themselves in media coverage of the event.

The analysis will begin by coding the content with three predetermined codes, “Gender,” “Race,” and “Intersectional.” For each newspaper article, the researcher determined whether its content regarded the victims from a gendered standpoint, a racial standpoint, or both and coded the content accordingly. Any content that was deemed relevant, but did not fit either of the predetermined codes, was then analyzed to determine if it represented a new developing classification. After completing the coding, the researcher read through all the coded data to determine major themes within each code. Subcodes were then created for each theme during a second round of coding. Iterative coding continued to explore all themes that emerged from the data. The subtheme that emerged included “Recognition as a Person.” All coding was done via excel. After coding was completed, the researcher then counted the number of iterations for each code and summarized the results for each theme with example quotations.

Table 1*Coded Articles Utilized for Study*

Number	Article	Codes
1	Miranda, G. (2022, March 16). Atlanta spa shootings, one year later: Families share their 'pain,' denial,' and 'collective grief'. <i>USA TODAY</i> . https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2022/03/16/atlanta-spa-shootings-one-year-later/7064778001/	Gender, Race, Intersectional
2	Bogel-Burroughs, N. (2021). Atlanta spa shootings were hate crimes, prosecutor says. <i>The New York Times</i> . https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/11/us/atlanta-spa-shootings-hate-crimes.html	Gender, Race, Intersectional
3	Taylor, D. B., & Hauser, C. (2021). What to know about the Atlanta spa shootings. <i>The New York Times</i> . https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/17/us/atlanta-spa-shootings.html .	Gender, Race, Intersectional
4	Skiles, G. (2021, May 8). Anti-Asian violence scares Ui Community. <i>The Daily Illini</i> . https://dailyillini.com/life_and_culture-stories/2021/04/22/anti-asian-violence-scares-ui-community/	Race
5	Stevens, A. (2021, September 17). Spa Shootings funds help families. <i>The Atlanta Journal-Constitution</i> .	Gender, Race, Intersectional
6	Sandoval, E. (2021, March 17). A survivor of the shooting spree called his wife: 'I've been shot! Please come.'. <i>The New York Times</i> . https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/03/17/us/shooting-atlanta-acworth/a-survivor-of-the-shooting-spre-called-his-wife-ive-been-shot-please-come?smid=url-share	Race
7	Nogel-Burroughs, N. (2021, March 19). The suspect asked if he was going to jail for 'the rest of his life,' police say. <i>The New York Times</i> .	Gender, Race, Intersectional
8	Boone, C. (2021, July 28). ONE CHAPTER ENDS IN SPA KILLINGS. <i>The Atlanta Journal-Constitution</i> .	Gender, Race, Intersectional
9	Miranda, G. (2022, March 13). 'We won't forget': Atlanta community rallies together to remember Atlanta spa shooting victims ahead of anniversary. <i>USA Today</i> . https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2022/03/12/asian-american-communities-remember-atlanta-spa-shooting-victims/7018698001/	Gender, Race, Intersectional
10	Tankersley, J., & Fazio, M. (2021, March 18). Joe Biden and Kamala Harris Plan to visit with Asian-American leaders in Atlanta. <i>The New York Times</i> . https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/18/us/biden-harris-atlanta.html	Race
11	Mitchell, T. (2021, April 22). U.S. Senate passes anti-Asian hate-crimes bill motivated by Atlanta spa shootings. <i>The Atlanta Journal-Constitution</i> . https://www.ajc.com/politics/us-senate-	Race, Recognition as People

	passes-anti-asian-hate-crime-bill-motivated-by-atlanta-spa-shootings/FISME5UADFHNLPYH4QTRGMTWOM/	
12	Vigdor, N. (2021, March 19). Joe Biden and Kamala Harris met with Asian-American leaders in Atlanta. <i>The New York Times</i> . https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/19/us/biden-harris-atlanta.html	Race, Intersectional
13	Hughes, T. (2022, March 15). 'Profound generational grief': Asian Americans still recovering from Atlanta-area spa murders. <i>USA TODAY</i> .	Gender, Race, Intersectional
14	Trottenberg, S., & Trottenberg, A. S. (2021, March 28). Activists rally against anti-Asian hate in Nubian Square. <i>The Daily Free Press</i> .	Race, Intersectional
15	Strauss, A. (2021, March 26). Asian American shooting in Atlanta. <i>The Collegiate Live</i> . https://thecollegiatelive.com/2021/03/asian-american-shooting-in-atlanta/	Gender, Race, Intersectional
16	Ackerman, G., & Mirza, S. (2021, March 26). 'Stop Asian Hate'. The Campus. https://alleghenycampus.com/19779/news/stop-asian-hate/	Race, Intersectional
17	Lu, R. (2021, April 15). Asian affinity groups process grief, anger after Atlanta shootings. <i>The Middlebury Campus</i> . https://www.middleburycampus.com/article/2021/04/asian-affinity-groups-process-grief-anger-after-atlanta-shootings	Race, Intersectional
18	Song, G. (2021, April 8). MIT student groups Unite Against anti-Asian racism after Atlanta shootings. <i>The Tech</i> . https://thetech.com/2021/04/08/mit-aapi-support-2021-mit	Race, Intersectional
19	Wang, W. (2021, March 24). Bloomington community gathers to mourn victims of anti-Asian violence. <i>Indiana Daily Student</i> . https://www.idsnews.com/article/2021/03/bloomington-gathers-to-mourn-victims-anti-asian-violence	Gender, Race, Recognition as People
20	Martinez, I. (2021, March 27). Salt Lake City joins National Day of action against Asian hate. <i>The Daily Utah Chronicle</i> . https://dailyutahchronicle.com/2021/03/27/salt-lake-city-joins-national-day-of-action-against-asian-hate/	Race, Intersectional
21	Sherlock, J. (2021, April 1). Asian American Hate Crime in America. <i>The Bengal</i> . http://isubengal.com/asian-american-hate-crime-in-america/	Race
22	Goel, V., & Cowan, J. (2021, March 18). Californians fear more Anti-Asian Attacks After Georgia killings. <i>The New York Times</i> . https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/18/us/asian-hate-crimes-ca.html	Gender, Race, Intersectional
23	Wachman, R. (2021, April 1). Community Vigil provides healing space for Asian and Asian American students. <i>The Wesleyan Argus</i> . http://wesleyanargus.com/2021/04/01/community-vigil-provides-healing-space-for-asian-and-asian-american-students/	Race, Intersectional, Recognition as People

RESULTS

In this study, discourse analysis was used to analyze how the 2021 Atlanta Spa Shootings' victims' demographics played a role in the media's narrative of the victims of the Atlanta Spa Shootings. Therefore, the following themes and subthemes emerged within each respective demographic of the victims.

Gender

Eleven of the articles included content that regarded the victims from a gendered perspective, focusing on their demographic as women in the news coverage narrative. Three main subthemes emerged – femicide/gender-based hate crime, women's role in relation to others, and objectification.

Femicide/Gender-based Hate Crimes

Some of the articles depicted the killing as femicide, a form of gender-based violence where women are killed because they are women. These news stories focused on the victims' identity as women when discussing the attacks and the shooter's motivations. Article 1 covered a rally in response to the shootings, where they called "for a stop to ... femicide." Additionally, Article 5 covered the shootings' status in the courtroom, highlighting that "prosecutors were prepared to argue that Long [the shooter] committed a hate crime when he targeted women." While some articles focused on femicide in a specific context to the shootings, others provided a broader view of their story. Article 19 provided statistics in relation to the attacks, mentioning a report that "found that women reported hate incidents 2.3 times more than men," to place the attacks under a wider scope in regards to femicide.

Role in Relation to Others

Some of the articles emphasized their victims' roles in relation to others when naming those killed in the attacks. When identifying the victims, the news stories called them "wives, sisters and mothers" (Article 1). Article 3 specifically described three victims in this context:

Hyun J. Grant: Ms. Grant, who was 51 and a single mother, worked from early morning to late at night at Gold Spa to support her two sons who needed college tuition, the rent on the home they shared and their bills.

Yong A. Yue: Ms. Yue, 63, worked at Aromatherapy Spa, and was the last person killed in the shootings. She moved to the U.S. from South Korea in the 1970s with a husband who had been stationed in the Army. The couple had two sons and divorced in the 1980s.

Delaina Ashley Yaun: Ms. Yaun, 33, was on a date with her husband when she was killed. A mother of two, Ms. Yaun had grown up in the area.

A few articles also specifically highlighted how the victims provided for others in their descriptions. Article 15 emphasized these duties as they commemorate the women: "But here we are now, mourning for the eight mothers, friends, and family members who lost their lives working for their families and for themselves." Thus, depicting that their most important – and most newsworthy – traits and memories are how they served others.

Objectification

A few articles depicted the victims as objects, used as a means for sexual pleasure, rather than humans. The articles referenced the shooter who claimed that "he had a sexual addiction and had attacked the massage parlors to eliminate his temptation" (Article 22). By calling the

victims a temptation, they are characterized solely by their use to the shooter and equated as nothing more than an object for sexual gratification. A couple of articles also quoted the shooter's former roommate, saying that the shootings were possibly motivated by "[him growing] frustrated and distraught when he failed to curb his sexual urges" (Article 13). Likened to a sexual urge, the victims are stripped of their human value and regarded as a means to an end.

The articles also referenced the shooter's desire "to attack a business in Florida connected to the pornography industry" in tandem with their discussion of his sexual addiction (Article 2). In this story, the victims are associated with the pornography industry, which is based on the sexual objectification of people, particularly women. Article 8 depicted Long's view of the victims as "satisfying his sexual fantasies," most likely derived from pornography, and how "he decided to visit the spa and pay for one last sexual act with one of the employees in hopes that the guilt that always followed such experiences would compel him to pull the trigger." The article connects the objectification of the victims to the shooter's motives.

Race

All 23 articles included content that covered the victims from a racial perspective, focusing on their demographic as Asian Americans in their narrative. Four articles specifically only included a racial perspective on the victims, with no consideration to their other demographics. Six main subthemes emerged – identification by race, race-based hate crime victimization, COVID-19-related hate crimes, history of Asian American discrimination/racism, shared community experiences, and parallels to other minority groups.

Identification by Race

Many articles directly described the victims by their race and/or ethnicity. When depicting the attack, some only included the victims' racial demographic in their introductory statements, as background information on the story. For example, Article 9's second sentence states: "A year ago this week, on March 16, 2021, eight people were killed - including six of Asian descent - in the attacks. Four of the victims were Korean." Some of the articles also referenced their status as Korean immigrants in their narratives. Article 2 highlights that "all had immigrated from South Korea," when providing background information on the victims and emphasizing their foreign origins.

Additionally, some articles also referenced the businesses where the shootings occurred as being Asian-owned. They linked the spas to the owners' race and question its connection to the shooter's motivations. Article 71 quoted Vice President Kamala Harris: "whatever the killer's motive, these facts are clear ... the shootings took place in businesses owned by Asian Americans." Additionally, Article 13 specified the businesses' racial connection when outlining the shooter's long travel path to commit the killings: "Police and prosecutors said that after Long attacked Young's, he drove about 30 miles south, where he attacked two more Asian spas: Gold Massage Spa and Aromatherapy Spa." The article implies that the businesses being Asian-owned may be the reason why the shooter traveled 30 miles from the first spa to continue his attacks.

Article 21 connects both the victims' race/ethnicity and the businesses owned by Asians to the shootings:

On March 16th of 2021 in Atlanta, Georgia, three salons were targeted by an active shooter. What do these salons have in common, you may ask? What was the motive?

Well, they were all owned, operated, and managed by Asian-American citizens. While the motive is not confirmed as racially motivated by prosecutors, there were eight people brutally murdered that day and six of the lives lost were the lives of people with Asian heritage, identity, or status.

Race-Based Hate Crime Victimization

Many articles also discussed if the killings were a race-based hate crime, asking whether the victims were targeted and killed because of their race. Article 21 calls the shootings, “an attack that is up for debate on whether it was racially motivated or can be called a hate crime.” Articles reviewed the attacks’ legal cases, comparing the two counties’ prosecutors’ statements. Article 2 included Fulton County’s Prosecutor’s statement:

A prosecutor said on Tuesday that the man accused of killing eight people at spas in and around Atlanta had targeted some of the victims because they were of Asian descent, and said she was planning to seek the death penalty against him.

Contrast this with the Cherokee County’s prosecutor’s statement where they “said investigators found no evidence of racial motivation. Long told investigators his actions weren’t racially motivated, and Asian American people who have known him told prosecutors they had not seen racial bias from him” (Article 5). Despite the two attacks having the same killer, the two counties’ prosecutors taking different views on the shooting call into question the validity of the statement that the attacks are hate crimes.

However, most articles implied agreement with Fulton County’s Prosecutor that the shootings were a hate crime, as they include the general public outcry against the Cherokee county prosecutor's position. These news stories covered outrage and disbelief from citizens after

the prosecutor's statement. Statements agreeing with the shooter's claim that it wasn't racially motivated were "criticized ... as many see this as a major hate crime and a threat toward anyone who is of Asian American descent" (Article 15). Likewise, Article 21 states:

They [Stop Asian Hate Protestors] think there is no debate whether or not the shooter should be charged with a hate crime, even if the attacker was justified in his action by a law enforcement official with a publicly posted statement that is prejudiced and insensitive.

The inclusion of these statements pushes the narrative that the victims were targeted for their race and that the justice system should regard these shootings as hate crimes.

Rise in COVID-19 Related Asian American Hate Crimes

Twenty of the articles mentioned the Atlanta Spa Shootings in conjunction with the rise in Asian American hate crimes amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. These news stories discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic heightened anti-Asian sentiment and lead to increased numbers of anti-Asian hate crimes. Some articles place the shooting as one of many hate crimes during the pandemic, calling them "among the first large-scale shootings in public places in more than a year and stoked fear in many Asian-Americans, who have increasingly reported being targeted in attacks since the coronavirus pandemic began" (Article 2). By contextualizing the attack in this manner, the attack's credibility as a hate crime is solidified. Additionally, attention is drawn "to the increase in anti-Asian hate crimes that has coincided with inflammatory rhetoric surrounding Covid-19 throughout the past year" (Article 17).

Some articles also used statistics to display the escalation in anti-Asian hate crimes, "Anti-Asian hate crime increased by 339 percent last year compared to the year before" (Article

9). This allows the reader to understand the severity of this issue and how it has become “an ‘epidemic’” (Article 9). This quantification places the Atlanta Spa Shootings as one of many, once again placing the victims and the attack in a broader scope to call attention to a greater, more systemic issue in the United States.

Some articles discussed the shootings in tandem with movements that called for the ending of Asian hate, where people came to rally and protest in light of the shootings and other anti-Asian hate crimes. By highlighting the victims as people honored at these events, such as a “#StopAsianHate rally” in Article 4, they are further used as a symbol for the current “escalating anti-Asian violence” in the United States (Article 6).

History of Asian American Discrimination

More than half of the articles characterized the victims’ deaths as indicative of the long history of Asian American discrimination in the United States. A few articles discuss historical instances of racism against Asians, including “the U.S.’s discrimination of Asian immigrants, as well as Asian American lynchings, throughout the 19th and 20th centuries” (Article 23). The feeling of otherness is also mentioned as “the murders tore open memories of brutal attacks faced by Asian American communities for generations, an unsettling reminder of their treatment as perpetual foreigners” (Article 13). Discussing these topics along with the Atlanta Spa Shootings alludes to the fact that there is systemic anti-Asian racism that dates back centuries and is still manifesting in the country’s present events.

Some articles also included personal accounts of the history of Asian American discrimination. Many Asian Americans said the shootings caused them to “[feel] this inexplicable pain for my ancestors” (Article 1). By aligning the sentiments that they felt in

response to the attacks on their ancestors, the articles create the idea that these types of events have occurred across multiple generations. The new stories examine how this historical discrimination continues in current times, specifically through the Atlanta Spa Shootings, discussing “the violence as rooted in long-standing anti-Asian stereotypes ... Asians have long been the target of jokes about their culture, language and appearance, and are often forgotten in American society.” (Article 19). The victims making mainstream media gave an opportunity for news outlets to call attention to all the discrimination Asian Americans have faced in the United States, building momentum to start conversations about the racism that has been ignored in the past.

Shared Community Experiences

Many articles covered how the Asian American community shared similar responses to the news of the Atlanta Spa Shootings. They depicted the killings as something that brought the community together in a time of grief and shock. The new stories discussed how when the community saw Asian people being the victims of such a violent crime, they see the faces of their family, friends, and acquaintances. Article 4 states:

She fears for the safety of her family. "When I see a lot of the crimes being targeted at elderly Asian people, I'm thinking of all my family members and especially the ones that live in Chicago who are walking around the city where anyone can come up and do something to them," Greenberg said. "It's weird to have that fear that at any moment the next victim on the news could be someone I know or someone related to me."

Through these sentiments, the articles depict the victims of the shooting as a possible future for all Asian Americans. Someone shares that they “pray every day for the victims’

families and for [their] community” (Article 1). The victims serve as a reminder of what the Asian American community is currently facing. They share a sense of fear that they alone can only experience. Article 4 states:

Greenberg is half Filipino and half white. She said her white side of the family isn't capable of having the level of fear the AAPI community has and feels as if this applies to a large portion of white Americans.

"My Dad's side of the family is white, and I feel like they can obviously empathize and really try to do their part, but they don't really understand the fear because it's not their own blood that they're fearing for," Greenberg said.

The attacks created a sense of solidarity in the Asian American community, as they now share this collective fear. The killings act as a wakeup call and “the murders shattered the sense of safety many ... felt” (Article 13). Articles 38 discussed how the shootings made one Asian American feel “as if she has a target on her back because of her race. By highlighting how Asian Americans saw themselves and their community in the victims, the articles place the victims as a face for the community.

The articles also depicted the sense of urgency some Asian Americans felt in response to the attacks. Many have a “growing desire for systemic change in everything from law enforcement to community priorities to history classes. It's significant, many younger Asian Americans say, because their immigrant parents have long counseled a policy of quiet acceptance” (Article 13). Additionally, Article 17 shares “Following the shooting, various Asian and Asian-American affinity groups at Middlebury have responded to the tragedy, voicing their

solidarity alongside each other and working to start larger conversations around anti-Asian racism and oppression” (Article 17). The victims are highlighted as a memory that has brought the Asian American community together and motivated them to adopt new mindsets to enact change.

Parallels to Other Minority Groups

Some articles drew parallels between the victims to other experiences of racial and ethnic minorities. They describe the shootings’ violent and racist nature as something that has “happened to ... Black, Latinx and Asian communities” (Article 9). Article 13 depicts the shootings and its victims as the result of “layers on layers of violence upon [the Asian American] community and other communities of color.” These parallels characterize the killings as one of many hate crimes occurring against multiple minority groups, suggesting systemic racism in the United States.

Some articles compared the victims to the experiences of the Black community. One article called for “solidarity to speak out against racism” between Asian and Black Americans (Article 19). Article 14 directly compares the Atlanta Spa Shootings to an attack on the Black community:

The afternoon's final speaker, ANSWER Coalition organizer Joe Tache, said the Atlanta shootings reminded him of the 2015 Charleston shooting, when Dylann Roof killed nine Black churchgoers.

"He's probably sitting in his prison cell right now, applauding what happened in Atlanta last week," Tache said.

Tache called for solidarity between the Black and Asian communities.

The Atlanta Spa Shootings illustrate that hate crimes against Asian Americans are not an anomaly for minority groups. Article 13 recognizes that regarding the Black community's history, the Asian community "can't even compare. But there are parallel experiences." The articles document the shared outrage and grief over racial violence between the two groups, highlighting the universal experience of racism for minorities.

The shootings are used to give a commonality between Black and Asian Americans' experiences. However, Article 13 highlights the difference in coverage the two groups receive when it comes to hate crimes:

Across Atlanta, there's little to commemorate the lives lost during last year's spa shootings. A mural near the historic Reynoldstown/Cabbagetown neighborhood border lists the names of the eight victims, but homages to George Floyd and Breonna Taylor are far more common, as are Black Lives Matter signs, posters and graffiti.

The victims are depicted as receiving fewer commemorations than those of the Black community. By drawing this comparison, the articles portrayed them as less important and memorable to society.

Intersectional

Seventeen of the articles included content that covered the victims from an intersectional perspective, considering both their demographics as women and Asian Americans in the narrative. Three main subthemes emerged – intersectional identification, fetishization, and solidarity among Asian American women.

Intersectional Identification

Many articles described their victims by both their gender and racial identity, calling attention to how both demographics should be considered when analyzing the attacks. When reporting, they included that “Six of the people killed in the Atlanta shootings were women of Asian descent” (Article 12). By doing so, the articles highlight the victim’s identities as both women and Asian Americans in their stories.

Few articles also directly referenced both identities as a possible cause for the attacks, claiming they were targeted for both their race and gender. Article 5 calls the shootings a hate crime “driven by racial and gender bias.” Additionally, Article 14 includes a statistic that “For 2020 and 2021, Asian women and gender-nonconforming people made up 71% of all reported hate crimes.” The articles thus emphasize how both demographics of the victims created a unique, intersectional identity and experience.

Fetishization

Some articles discussed the victims in parallel to the fetishization of Asian American women in society, viewing them as exotic objects of desire. A few articles broadly discussed the victims in conjunction with the long history of fetishization of Asian American women. They describe “that ‘racial capitalism’ is intertwined in a damaging way with the sexual exploitation of Asian women over many decades, and particularly Korean women” (Article 22). This alludes to the fact that the victims are the manifestation of the fetishization that has occurred for decades. Additionally, one article covers a remembrance event for the victims and states:

The event was held near the Young Girls Peace Monument in Brookhaven, Georgia, that honors "the 200,000+ girls and women, known as ‘comfort women,’ who were sexually

enslaved throughout Asia during World War II," according to councilmember John Park.

One by one attendees placed a single flower next to the statue, said a prayer, and bowed in respect.

"To have an event remembering the deaths of Asian Americans near a statue that also means so much was beyond emotional," Jamie Chou told USA TODAY. "People bowed, they cried and they hoped for a better year." (Article 9)

By mentioning this while reporting on the victims, it places the fetishization of Asian American women as a possible connection to the shootings. Article 20 quotes a speaker that emphasizes "women of color are people, women of color are not a fantasy, a two-dimensional empty figure to project whatever perverse and dehumanizing illusion the eyes of the oppressor wants to see" when speaking on the shootings.

Some articles also specifically called to mind fetishization by intentionally discussing the killings' location at Asian Massage Parlors, which are often stereotyped as places where sex work occurs. They discuss the spas in relation to the shooter's alleged sex addiction and to the fact that he "relapsed by visiting a massage business for sex" (Article 7). The articles allude to the idea that the Asian women in the spas were performing sex acts that were the "temptation" and trigger for the shooter, contributing to the fetishization of Asian American women in the United States (Article 12).

Solidarity among Asian American Women

A few articles discussed the increased solidarity among Asian American women in the United States following the shootings. The articles discussed how Asian American women saw themselves, their moms, sisters, etc. in the victims. Article 43 quotes someone who states: "In the

few days after Atlanta, I was really aware of appearing as an Asian woman.” The victims are depicted as a symbol of their current shared reality.

While providing depictions of shared sentiment, articles also discussed how more Asian American women are taking a stand against the discrimination and fetishization they face after the shootings. Article 13 states:

Atlanta-area musician and performer Jennifer Chung, 32, said she's thankful to see more Asian Americans, especially Asian American women, getting comfortable speaking up. Like many, she said the generational advice to remain quiet is being replaced by a realization that they are already being targeted. Chung said the growing chorus of voices following the murders give her hope that change is coming.

The victims are portrayed as a motivator for Asian American women to speak out and act against discrimination, to incite a new reality for themselves.

Recognition as People

A few articles called for the victims to be commemorated outside their demographics and to be remembered as people. Article 6 quotes a victim's son who states: “My mom was more than her ethnicity, she was more than her job and she was more than the way she was killed.” Additionally, Article 23 emphasizes that:

It is essential to take the time and space to mourn the lives lost and remember them as full human beings who had multidimensional lives, not solely as the victims of a mass murder that brought their names to light.

These articles called for the need to remember the victims as human beings who simply existed without the need to be categorized by their race or gender. These articles highlight that the victims are worthy of memory and remorse regardless of their demographics.

DISCUSSION

Through the analysis of news coverage of the 2021 Atlanta Spa Shootings, this study aimed to explore the media narratives surrounding the victims. In doing so, I examined how the victims' demographics as both women and Asian Americans contributed to their portrayal. Many themes emerged concerning misogyny, racism, and the intersectionality of the victims. While all the victims' demographics were key to their portrayals within the news stories, it is important to dissect the difference between the single-identity narratives and the intersectional ones.

Single Identity Narratives

While most articles stated the victims' identities as Asian American women, articles were more likely to explicitly focus on one demographic when exploring the context of the shootings. They'd directly discuss a singular demographic of the victims in their narratives regarding the shooting.

Many articles also focused on the race of the victims when contextualizing the attacks with themes of identification by race, hate crime victimization, COVID-19-related hate crimes, history of Asian American discrimination/racism, shared community experiences, parallels to other minority groups. Many articles focused on the Asian identity of the victims, positioning the killings as another result of anti-Asian sentiment amid the COVID-19 Pandemic while neglecting to note the victims' identities as women as well. The victims and attack are depicted as part of a larger trend of racism against Asian Americans in the United States during the pandemic. This aligns with research finding an increased number of anti-Asian hate crimes since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (Gover et al., 2020). The framing of the attacks as hate crimes resulting from this increased racial prejudice is important as research shows the association

between media consumption and prejudice against Asian Americans during the pandemic (Tsai et al., 2020).

Articles also focused on the victims' racial identity by acknowledging the history of Asian American discrimination and the community's shared experiences. By comparing the victims to the long legacy of violence against Asian Americans in the United States, it highlights the fact that the victims' race is still a key portion of their identity. This is underscored by research arguing that Asians are still marginalized as a minority in the country (Li & Nicholson, 2021). Articles discussed a new sense of unity among Asian Americans as they bonded over seeing themselves and their family in the faces of the victim. This aligns with research that links hate crimes to a "sense of 'shared suffering'" within the community (Walters et al., 2020). Combining the recognition of historic Asian American prejudice along with the new sense of community, the victims were also discussed in spurring new attitudes within Asian Americans. Depicted as wanting to speak out against past and current racism and violence, this supports research that these attacks have "galvanized AAPI communities" (Dong et al., 2021).

Some articles also focused on the gender, not the race, of the victims when contextualizing the attacks with themes of femicide, women's role in relation to others, and objectification. Articles often would commemorate the victims by referring to them as mothers, daughters, sisters, etc., and emphasizes their role in serving others. This type of news coverage perpetuates views of traditional gender roles, as women are emphasized be the primary caregivers in households (Blackstone, 2003). Likewise, some articles objectified the victims, discussing them in terms of objects of sexual temptation for the shooter. This is significant, as research shows a linkage between sexual objectification and interpersonal violence (Gervais & Eagan, 2017).

Intersectional Narratives

Most articles stated that the victims of the attack were Asian Americans and women, but only a few fully explored the intersections of this identity when reporting. As discussed above, articles were more likely to explore the attack from either a racial or gendered perspective. Intersectional portrayals were implicit when compared to single identity narratives, with this perspective being found in subtext rather than being directly stated in the articles.

Articles often referred to the victims in their relation to the spas, which were suggested to be a location where sex acts are sold. This pushes the stereotypes that Asian women are hypersexual, causing them to be further fetishized (Jeong, 2021). Asian American women working within spas are depicted or implied to be sex workers, which can be harmful as research shows sex workers are stigmatized and ostracized from society (Benoit et al, 2018). When the constant association with the spas is combined with the emphasis that the shooter viewed the victims as temptations, the news articles echo the long history of Asian American women being seen as sexual objects. Asian American women have been depicted as “dragon ladies” or “China dolls,” which both strip Asian women of their humanity and place their value on their sexuality (Prasso, 2005). By perpetuating these ideas, the articles are further contributing to the fetishization of Asian American women in the United States. This is particularly significant as research shows how stereotypes can be fueled by race-related news stories (Ramasubramanian, 2007).

These implicit narratives are indicative of the broader issue that the victims are not seen by all parts of their identity. Most articles did not utilize an intersectional focus when regarding the shootings. They failed to acknowledge that the victims’ identities are the result of unique experiences as women AND Asian Americans (Crenshaw, 1994). The articles did not discuss

how the objectification of the victims both as women and the discrimination they face as Asian Americans intersected resulting in the view that the victims are expendable sex objects. This reflects research that media often depicts news through a monolithic lens and needs to adopt a new intersectional framework (Joseph & Winfield, 2019).

Limitations and Future Research

This study was not without limitations. The articles were solely sourced from the Nexis Uni Database within a one-year time frame, and it cannot be certain that they are representative of all the news coverage of the 2021 Atlanta Spa Shootings. Given these limitations, future research may include a broader dataset that includes more databases with a larger time frame. Research may also look at other forms of media. For example, social media responses to the shootings to analyze the general public's perspective.

CONCLUSION

In this study, news articles covering the 2021 Atlanta Spa shootings were examined to understand how the victims' demographics as both women and Asian Americans played a role in the media's portrayal of the shootings. Their identities as both women and Asian Americans were both explicitly acknowledged in the articles' depictions of the attacks, while their intersectional identity as Asian American women was implicitly displayed through the objectification of the victims due to their gender and race. The shootings provided a unique case to understand how identifiers, including gender and race, are used to create Asian American women's experiences in the United States.

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