

THE EXAMINATION OF CAREER MOTIVATIONS, EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS
AMONG ASIAN AMERICAN PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS

by

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Abstract

This study examines Asian American practitioners' career motivations, identity-related experiences, and their general perceptions of the public relations industry. Social identity theory serves as the theoretical background of the study, as identity is the core element in understanding practitioners' working experiences in public relations. A qualitative, in-depth interview method was adopted by the current study. A total of 19 Asian American public relations practitioners were email-interviewed. The study has numerous findings based on the research questions and the emerging themes. In examining why practitioners entered the field of public relations, the study showed that personal interests, industrial attraction, and family influence are key issues in career motivations for practitioners. In examining practitioners' identities, differences exist between Asians and Asian Americans, and between Asians of different nationalities, although practitioners generally agreed being identified as "Asian Americans". Their identities had no direct effects on their daily work in public relations; however, subtle challenges and benefits were detected. Challenges facing practitioners were mostly based on stereotypical mindsets, including stereotypes in physical appearance, personality, language and culture. Benefits of being an Asian American in the public relations field included language and cultural advantage, contribution to diversity in the workplace, accessibility to minority organizations, and Asian American unique personal traits. Finally, the study found practitioners' perceptions of Asian American in public relations were concentrated in the following areas: lacking Asian Americans in the public relations industry, wide opportunities for a career in public relations, professional skills for success in public relations, and increasing Asian American presence in public relations. The current study extends the literature on Asian American public relations practitioners, brings awareness to the subgroup of Asian Americans, and contributes to enhance the presence of Asian Americans to the public relations industry. Strategies of increasing Asian American public relations practitioners are also provided based on participants' recommendations.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	vii
Dedication.....	viii
Chapter 1 - Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2 - Literature Review.....	4
Diversity Issue in the United States.....	4
Diversity among Asian Americans.....	4
Diversity Issue in the Media.....	5
Diversity in Public Relations.....	6
Career Motivations in Public Relations.....	7
Challenges Facing Minorities in Public Relations.....	7
Discrimination towards Minority Public Relations Practitioners.....	8
Discrimination of Ethnic Minority Practitioners.....	8
Gender-Specific Discrimination on Practitioners.....	9
Stereotypical Mindset towards Asian American Practitioners.....	10
Asian Americans Stereotyping.....	10
Gender Stereotyping among Asian Americans.....	11
Benefits of Embracing Minorities in Public Relations.....	12
Social Identity Theory.....	12
Minority Ethnic Identity.....	13
Asian and Asian American Identity.....	14
Gender Identity.....	15
Research Questions.....	15
Chapter 3 - Methodology.....	17
Qualitative Approach.....	17
In-Depth Interview.....	18
In-Depth Email Interview.....	19
Sample.....	20

Sample Selection.....	20
Sample Description.....	21
Instrument.....	22
Data Collection Procedure.....	22
Data Analysis.....	23
Chapter 4 - Findings.....	24
Motivation for Career Choice in Public Relations.....	24
Personal Interest.....	24
Family Influence on Career Choice for Asian Americans.....	25
Industrial Attraction.....	27
Identity-Related Experiences in Public Relations.....	28
Self-Defined Identities of Asian American Practitioners.....	29
Identity-Related Challenges Facing Asian American Practitioners.....	31
Challenges related to Physical Appearance.....	31
Challenges related to Personality.....	32
Challenges related to Language and Culture.....	32
Identity-Related Benefits for Asian American Practitioners.....	33
Language and Cultural Advantage.....	33
Contribution to Diversity in the Workplace.....	34
Accessibility to Minority Organizations.....	35
Asian American Unique Personal Traits.....	35
Perceptions of Asian Americans in Public Relations.....	37
Lacking Asian Americans in the Public Relations Industry.....	37
Wide Opportunities for a Career in Public Relations.....	38
Professional Skills for Success in Public Relations.....	38
Increasing Asian American Presence in Public Relations.....	40
Personal-Level: Self-Engaging to Public Relations.....	40
Organizational-Level: Attracting and Embracing Asian Americans to the Field.....	41
Industrial-Level: Increasing Overall Awareness of Public Relations.....	41
Chapter 5 - Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations.....	43
Motivation for Career Choice in Public Relations.....	43

Identity-Related Experiences in Public Relations	44
Self-Defined Identities for Asian American Practitioners	44
Challenges Facing Asian American Practitioners.....	46
Benefits of being Asian American Practitioners.....	47
Perceptions of Asian Americans in Public Relations	47
Recommendations.....	49
Limitations	50
References.....	52
Appendix A - Interview Guide	60
Appendix B - Informed Consent Form	61

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my parents for their unconditional love and support.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

There is a demographic shift underway in the United States. Ethnic minorities accounted for one-third of the U.S. population in 2007, and they are estimated to reach more half of the population by 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). The Asian American population has reached 14.7 million in 2010, representing 4.8 percent of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). With a growth rate of 27.4 percent, Asian Americans have been recognized as one of the fastest growing minority groups in the United States.

The diversity of the U.S. population results in increasingly diverse consumer markets. The African American consumer market grew twice as much as the Caucasian consumer market over the past two decades, and the former has already become a valuable market of every business aspect in America (Diggs-Brown & Zaharna, 1995). With a growth rate of 25 percent per decade, the Hispanic consumer market becomes one of the fastest consumer markets. The Asian American consumer market is steadily enlarging with an expected rate of 30 percent per decade by 2050 (Wilson, Gutierrez, & Chao, 2003).

Since consumer markets have embraced more ethnic minorities, the public relations industry should reflect the same demographic changes (Hunter, 2007). The public relations industry is, however, still seen as a white-dominated “mono-cultural environment” (Diggs-Brown & Zaharna, 1995, p. 115). Asian American practitioners, in particular, are extremely rare in public relations. The Census Bureau in 1990 revealed that among 167,000 professionals working as public relations specialists, 7 percent were African Americans, 4.3 percent were Hispanics, and only 1.7 percent were Asian/Pacific Islanders (Wilson et al, 2003). A recently published handbook on the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) diversity database also showed that among 21,000 members, only 3 percent of them are Asian American practitioners (PRSA Diversity Briefing Book, 2010).

Previous studies have addressed many issues of minorities in the public relations practice, including public relations job expectations, career and income discrimination, and minority ethnic roles in the organizations (Kern-Foxworth, 1989b; Len-Rios, 1998; Schneider, 1987; Sims & Sims, 2008). However, most of public relations research studies either examined the minority group in general or focused on African American/Hispanic practitioners. For those studies that

centered on Asian American practitioners, most put their emphasis on journalism, as Asian American journalists in the United States have reached a relatively good number (Rivas-Rodriguez, Subervi-Velez, Bramlett- Solomon, & Heider, 2004; Wu & Izard, 2008). There is a dearth of studies specifically focusing on Asian American public relations practitioners. The lack of empirical studies demands a thorough examination of this minority group. Why only few Asian American public relations practitioners choose a career in this field? What have they experienced in daily work? And what do they generally think of this industry? These are all-important questions that are worthy of exploration. Thus, the main purpose of the current study is to examine Asian American practitioners' career motivations, identity-related experiences, and their overall perceptions of the public relations industry.

Social identity theory (Taifel & Turner, 1979) serves as the theoretical background of the current study. Identity is considered the core element associated with practitioners in understanding their motivations, working experiences and perceptions. As an individual's behavior with cultural patterns can be recognized as "an expression of ethnic identity" (Isajiw, 1990, as cited in Kwan, 2000, p. 144), what identity the individual holds could largely affect how they behave and what they think. In this respect, this study takes a close look at Asian Americans, to see how practitioners' self-perceived identities are reflected in their career motivations, experiences and their perceptions of the public relations field.

The current study is significant in three aspects. First, it extends the existing literature on Asian American public relations practitioners. Since this group of people has rarely been addressed, this study provides an exploratory examination on what they do and how they think about public relations. Second, it increases the public understanding of the diverse subgroup of Asian Americans, specifically the differences between Asians and Asian Americans, and among each Asian nationality, such as Chinese, Pilipino, Indian, etc. Recognizing those differences can help public relations organizations work more effectively with Asian American employees, and formulate specific plans to target ethnic audiences. Third, it attracts more Asian Americans to join the field of public relations. By interviewing practitioners in the field, the study provides a clear picture of what it would be like for Asian Americans to work in public relations. Practical suggestions are also offered on ways to increase Asian Americans to public relations. In all, this study contributes to the idea that there is a mutual connection between public relations and Asian

Americans. Not only should organizations recognize these values, but Asian Americans should also learn about the importance of public relations so as to be largely engaged in the field.

The study is organized in a standard academic order. This chapter introduces the background of Asian Americans in the United States, paucity of relevant previous research, and the significance of the current study. Chapter two provides a thorough review of literature on the diversity issue, ethnic minorities and women in public relations, along with the theoretical framing of the study and three research questions. The study provides some historical perspectives on diversity issues in the United States and in the public relations field, with the goal of understanding current trends. Chapter three demonstrates the methodology used in the study. This chapter identifies participants, describes the method of the in-depth interview, and interprets the procedure of data collection and analysis. Following this, chapter four analyzes the results and major findings of the study based on research questions. Discussion, recommendations, and limitations are featured in chapter five.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

This chapter provides a thorough review of literature on diversity and minorities in public relations. First, a general picture of the diversity issue in the United States is provided. Following this, minority practitioners' career motivations, challenges, and benefits of working in public relations are detailed. Social identity theory and specific identity issues, as well as three research questions are also presented in this chapter.

Diversity Issue in the United States

Johnson and Rivera (2007) defined “diversity” as “a commitment to the ethical norms of ‘representativeness, equity and differences’, as opposed to actions that are merely a matter of legal obligations and risk management, such as equal employment or affirmative action regulations” (p. 15-17). The term “diversity” represents “categories of people based on differences that cannot be altered, such as age, race, sexual orientation, gender, ethnicity, and physical abilities/qualities; and differences that can be altered, such as class, language, income, marital status, religion, geography, and military experience” (Sha & Ford, 2007, p. 386).

The United States is a culturally diverse country. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2010, ethnic minority professionals comprised 34.6 percent of the U.S. workforce. The female workforce is also increasing in organizations. It is believed that women have already taken up 60 percent of the overall workforce (Nelson & Quick, 2006). This increasingly diverse demographic in the general work place results in more demand for diversity in the public relations industry (Hon & Brunner, 2000; Mabry et al, 1990).

Diversity among Asian Americans

Cultural diversity exists among “Asian Americans”, a term used to refer to those people with origins in the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent. Representing 4 percent of the total population in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000), Asian Americans can be divided into three types: 1) Native, U.S.-born citizen, 2) Foreign-born, U.S. naturalized citizen and 3) Foreign-born, U.S. non-citizen (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Specifically, in 2000, native, U.S. born citizen stands for 31.1 percent of the Asian American population in the United States; foreign-born, U.S. naturalized citizens and foreign-born, U.S. non-citizen comprise 34.4 percent

and 34.5 percent, respectively. In other words, sixty-nine percent of all Asian Americans in the United States were foreign-born while 31 percent were native Asian Americans (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

According to the U.S. Census in 2000, more than 10 million people considered themselves to be single-race Asian American or Pacific Islander. In the United States, Chinese was the largest group, which consists of 23.8 percent of the Asian American population. The following five nationalities with populations greater than 1 million in the United States are: Filipinos, Asian Indians, Vietnamese, Koreans and Japanese (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). The group of Asian Americans is more diverse compared to African American or Hispanic minority groups as different cultures and languages are involved (Ford, 2005).

As a fast growing population in the workplace, the number of Asian Americans who were employed in the United States is over six million (Reeves & Bennett, 2003). Among the total employed population, nearly half of the Asian Americans were concentrated in management, professional, and related occupations (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

Diversity Issue in the Media

Compared to the management and business fields, the media industry is commonly believed to be less diverse. According to the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE), in 2002 the percentage of minority journalists in U.S. newsrooms increased by merely a half of one percent to 12 percent from the previous year. An absence of minorities is also found in leadership positions and top executives in the U.S. newsroom. The ASNE reported that minority journalists made up only 9.7 percent of the managerial level positions compared with white journalists, who comprised 90.3 percent.

Embracing more minority journalists to the newsroom, especially at the managerial level, is of great importance as it helps to increase the fairness and objectiveness of media reporting. An extensive study of minority journalists' perceptions of the impact of minority executives (Rivas-Rodriguez et al, 2004) found that minorities in leadership positions of media operations could make positive differences in at least four ways: “the news operation's sensitivity to racism; its coverage of minority groups; providing greater job opportunities for all minorities; and influencing how the news media thinks about minority groups” (p. 52). Another study concerning the relationships between Asian American journalists and news coverage on minority

groups also illustrated that newspapers with more Asian American staff provide more news reports on Asian Americans, and newspapers in cities with larger Asian American populations tend to hire more Asian American journalists and offer more news coverage on Asian Americans (Wu & Izard, 2008).

Diversity in Public Relations

The situation of minorities in public relations is not a promising picture either. Although more ethnic minorities have gotten involved in public relations during the past two decades (Hon & Brunner, 2000), they are still underrepresented in this field. The situations of Asian Americans, however, have rarely been examined in the public relations field. Ki and Khang's (2008) research could be considered one of the first studies focusing on this topic. By analyzing the current status, concerns, barriers and roles of Asian American public relations practitioners in the United States, Ki and Khang found that Asian American practitioners are generally satisfied with their current careers in public relations. However, they also confirmed the existence of racial and gender stereotypes in organizations. Moreover, unsatisfied media relationships and gender issues were considered as prevailing concerns among them. They believed those barriers could be overcome if they were more prepared, more educated, more positive, and more experienced.

The reasons behind this lack of diversity in public relations could be categorized into several factors. First, there is a lack of support for mentoring young minority professionals. Educational institutions and organizations have not done enough to foster minority professionals in public relations, leading to few qualified minorities in the field (Len-Rios, 1998). Second, there may be a "comfort level" problem between ethnic minorities and their white employer. For some organizations, they are hesitant to hire minorities because they feel more comfortable with people who are similar with themselves (Jones, 2011; Len-Rios, 1998; Schneider, 1987). Few public relations agencies would spend time and be able to make investment hires just for organizational diversification (Culp, 2007). In addition, a survey by PRWeek showed three main reasons for the lacking of diversity in public relations: 57 percent of the participants believed there are not enough minority role models to follow; 54 percent of the participants reported the organizations are not actively recruiting ethnically diverse students or there is a lack of persuasive recruitment campaigns to attract the minority public relations practitioners; and 46.5

percent of the participants in the survey thought that cultural barriers still exist in organizations (Maul, 2008).

Career Motivations in Public Relations

Since few minorities pursue a career in public relations, research studies have focused on those who have been working in the field to examine what motivated them to choose this career. Pompper's (2005) study generalized the three motivations for minorities in public relations: the increasing disenchantment with news reporting and journalism careers; a broader range of skills provided in public relations; and the influence on the news media agenda towards the minority community. Specifically, minority practitioners in Pompper's (2005) study indicated that they got tired of the "noisy newsroom environment, inflexible work schedules, monotonous story assignments, and low salaries" (p. 281). They saw public relations as an alternative to journalism. Since public relations is a relatively new industry and media experience is "a valuable prerequisite for public relations practice" (p. 281), many believed they could transcend their journalism skills and media relations experience into the public relations field. Moreover, some were attracted to the public relations industry because they appreciated the power to influence the news policy and adjust issues to the minority community.

Ki and Khang (2008) also revealed five affecting factors for Asian American practitioners entering the public relations industry, including academic background in public relations or related fields, dissatisfaction with journalism, flexible schedule, fun and interesting tasks, an affinity for writing and dealing with people, and less perceived barriers compared to an Asian American becoming a reporter or a TV host (p. 103).

Challenges Facing Minorities in Public Relations

Numerous studies have examined the minority practitioners' career satisfaction and challenges in public relations (e.g., Culp, 2007; Diggs-Brown & Zaharna, 1995; Hon & Brunner, 2000; Kern-Foxworth, Gandy, Hines, & Miller, 1994). Those challenges can be identified into two main categories: discrimination and stereotypes.

Discrimination towards Minority Public Relations Practitioners

Discrimination of Ethnic Minority Practitioners

Since the 1980s scholars have examined the general situation of minority professionals in public relations. Research showed that minorities were paid lower salaries than their white colleagues, not given much promotion opportunity in large organizations, and were hired only for filling a quota requirement (Aldoory & Toth, 2002; Kern-Foxworth, 1989b; Wrigley, 2002).

In 2005, scholars from City College of New York and Howard University conducted a survey named “multicultural survey of PR practitioners” that aimed to analyze minority public relations practitioners’ perceptions of diversity in the public relations industry. By examining 132 minority practitioners in public relations, the results showed that 56.6 percent of the participants perceived that the public relations industry is only somewhat successful in retaining a diverse workforce. A majority of participants thought that minority practitioners were put on slow moving tracks in their jobs, and they were not being afforded the same opportunities as white Americans. Over half of the participants experienced subtle discrimination by their employer and their co-workers (Applebaum & Ford, 2005).

However, other studies provided a positive perspective on the situation of ethnic minorities. Kern-Foxworth et al (1994) examined the role of black female public relations practitioners and showed that African American women in management positions in public relations saw themselves in “meaningful roles within the profession” (p. 431). A survey in 2008 examining the challenges for public relations executives to build a diverse industry also revealed that although there is still a lack of diversity in public relations, most minorities believed their company leaders have contributed to a more diverse workforce (Maul, 2008).

While most of the research studies were based on quantitative survey methods, a study by Len-Rios (1998) was one of the first using a qualitative interview to examine the experience, current status, and role of minorities in public relations. Through in-depth interviews with Hispanic American, African American and Asian American minorities, Len-Rios (1998) found that although minority practitioners admitted the progress toward minorities in senior management positions in public relations has been made, they had also experienced discrimination and stereotypes in organizations. The discrimination, however, was found in more subtle forms, which were not easily identified.

Gender-Specific Discrimination on Practitioners

Women in public relations also experience discrimination on salary, promotion opportunities and hiring (Aldoory & Toth, 2002). Asian American women, in particular, might face more challenges than their white counterparts. This may be due to their dual identities as ethnic minorities and female, which give them more obstacles to enter the public relations industry.

The term “Glass Ceiling” may well describe the invisible barriers of female Asian American practitioners in public relations (Aldoory & Toth, 2002). Glass Ceiling, according to the Department of Labor (1991, as cited in Wrigley, 2002), refers to “artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organizational bias that prevent qualified individuals from advancing upward in their organization into management-level positions” (p. 1). The Affirmation Action (DiTomaso & Smith, 1996) and the relevant lawsuits, to some extent, have increased the proportion of women in the public relations field. However, the legislation efforts have not changed much of the status of minority women practitioners, especially their presence in upper-level management positions (Pompper, 2005). It is commonly believed that female public relations practitioners are more likely to be hired in a technical position than a management position, while male practitioners are mostly hired in managerial roles (Broom & Dozier, 1986; Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2001; Toth & Grunig, 1993). Dozier and Broom (1995) believed that the relevant management knowledge a practitioner possess determines if one should hold the management position in public relations. Hon (1995) also claimed that school curriculum should be responsible for the low involvement of women in the senior leadership positions, as academic programs in public relations tend to focus more on the technical skills rather than management knowledge.

The salary situation for female public relations practitioners is also discouraging. Many studies have analyzed the salary discrepancy between men and women practitioners in public relations (e.g., Aldoory & Toth, 2002; Choi & Hon, 2002; Toth & Grunig, 1993; Weaver-Lariscy, Cameron, & Sweep, 1994). Research showed that male practitioners in public relations tend to earn higher salaries than their female counterparts. Though attempts have been made to address this gap in some fields, PRSA 2010 Work, Life & Gender Survey, showed that women’s annual average income was about \$72,000, which was only 60 percent of men’s annual average earnings (\$120,000) (Sha, 2011). Several explanations are found for this phenomenon. First, as public relations is an industry with few male practitioners present, higher salaries are offered to

attract more males to the field. Second, men's natural leadership characteristics make them to be the higher wage earners (Aldoory & Toth, 2002). In addition, other key factors, such as years of experience, age, and education level may all contribute to the reasons why men get the higher salaries. However, Aldoory and Toth (2002) also argued that despite taking those variables into consideration, there is still a gender difference seen in salary.

Stereotypical Mindset towards Asian American Practitioners

Asian Americans Stereotyping

With the transformations in social and economic circumstances, the image of Asian Americans portrayed in the mainstream media has been largely changed from traditional yellow peril, coolie, gook, and deviant to the more popular "model minority" (Kwai, 2005; Zhang, 2010). Originally appeared in magazine articles in 1960s, the term "model minority" has become a long-lasting label of Asian Americans (Zhang, 2010). The model minority stereotype describes Asian Americans as having extraordinary achievement in education, strong work ethic, high median income, and low involvement in crime and mental problems (Qian, Lichter, & Crowley, 2010; Wong, Lai, Nagasawa, & Lin, 1998).

As for the working capacity, Asian Americans are mostly depicted as "extremely hard-working", "intelligent", "self-disciplined", "skillful and capable", "mathematically talented" and "Technologically savvy" (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2007; Ho & Jackson, 2001; Lin, Kwan, Cheung, & Fiske, 2005; McGowan & Lindgern, 2006; Kao, 2000; Taylor & Lee, 1994). Those Asian Americans images are aligned with the model minority stereotype. However, the model minority stereotype may reversely pose detrimental effects for Asian Americans, making them the target of other racial groups or whites (Taylor, Landreth, & Bang, 2005). This is because white Americans or other ethnic minorities may see the success of Asian Americans as a potential threat and generate negative attitude towards them (Lee, 1996).

Apart from the "model minority" stereotype, Asian Americans also suffer from nerdy and foreigner stereotypes (Suzuki, 2002; Zhang, 2010). Their nerdy and foreigner stereotypes include humble, passive, non-confrontational, speaking poor English with accents, and lack of appropriate social skills and cultural knowledge (Lee & Joo, 2005; Park, Gabbadon, & Chernin, 2006). Ki and Khang (2008) also revealed physical appearance stereotypes toward Asian Americans, such as looking younger than their actual age, and not looking like they speak

English. Specifically, Asian American men are mainly described as culturally ignorant, isolated, effeminate, and as cunning villains (Lee & Joo, 2005; Yuen, Chin, Deo, Lee, & Milman, 2005), while Asian American women are usually portrayed as submissive, dependent, silent, obedient, and non-opinionated (Lee & Joo, 2005; Mok, 1998; Park et al., 2006). A study showed that the stereotypes on their physical appearance and personality might be more significant than the “model minority” stereotype towards Asian Americans (Ki & Khang, 2008).

Gender Stereotyping among Asian Americans

The traditional social roles for women are mostly seen as caregivers and nurturers (Frieze, Parsons, Johnson, Ruble, & Zellman, 1978; Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2000). Women are expected to take care of family and children rather than participating in the labor market. Although Bui’s (1999) study showed that around 75 percent of women are willing to pursue upper-level positions in organizations, the gender stereotype has prevented them from achieving their career goals. Asian American women, in particular, might also be influenced under the Confucian ideology, which values obedience and respect (Lee, 1998). Those beliefs might largely affect their perception of gender identity and career expectation (Ibrahim, Ohnishi, & Sandhu, 1997). In Confucianism, women are generally expected to be a good wife and mother more than to be successful at work (Iwao, 1993; Morimoto & Wrigley, 2003). Those social roles and Confucian beliefs bring stereotypes toward Asian American women that they should stay at home instead of having their own careers.

Working women also suffer from stereotypes. Research revealed that women in the workplace are commonly stereotyped as better qualified in technician roles than management roles (Sim & Sim, 2008). According to Grunig (1992), managerial roles often involve the decision-making process in the organization, while technician roles are mainly for the lower-level internal functioning of departments within the organization. It can be seen that corporations generally expect women to be implementers rather than decision makers (Aldoory & Toth, 2002; Dozier, 1984). Another stereotype towards women in corporations lies in that women are less committed to work. Female employees are assumed to devote more to family and housework than their own jobs, and have to occasionally leave for marriage or pregnancy (Blair-Loy, 2001).

Benefits of Embracing Minorities in Public Relations

Public relations is “a management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the public on whom its success or failure depends” (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2006, p. 5). Scholars believed that public relations should ensure ethnic diversity, as diversity would help it better fulfill its role as dual representations of the organization and the public (Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2000; Hon & Brunner, 2000; Kern-Foxworth, 1989b). Diversity could also add benefits to the company and enhance the company’s profile (Hunter, 2007), so that it should be considered the ultimate aim of the organization and public relations (Hon & Brunner, 2000).

In addition, Ravazzani (2006) also indicated several detailed benefits of bringing more minorities to the organizations. Public relations professionals can 1) deliver more effective messages; 2) promote deeper understanding between an organization and its publics; 3) increase employees’ attraction and retention; 4) enrich public relations departments with diverse talents, fertile dialogue and increased innovation; 5) improve corporate reputation; and 6) expand market shares into diverse segments of the stake holder’s public (p. 5).

There seem to be different perspectives on the benefits of being a minority in the workplace between practitioners in journalism and public relations. According to Len-Rios (1998), while minority journalists feel dissatisfied that they are only assigned to stories concerning ethnic-related issues and consider it a form of subtle discrimination, public relations practitioners view this as a typical component of their job and a great practice. Tillery-Larkin’s (1999) study also found that minority practitioners do not admit pigeonholing in public relations. This might be due to the fact that public relations requires the organization to build relationships with minority communities, and minority professionals are needed in helping organizations reach those ethnic markets and manage diversity (Sims & Sims, 2008). Public relations practitioners believe that if they were the best fit for identifying a minority group, then that responsibility would naturally come with them (Len-Rios, 1998). They are expected to perform as a bridge connecting the organization and minority communities.

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory can be applied in the current study to explain Asian American public relations practitioners’ perceived identities. Henri Tajfel and John Turner first proposed

the theory in 1979, which was designed to explain the way people develop a sense of membership and belonging in particular groups, and how the mechanics of intergroup discrimination work. Taifel and Turner (1979) believed that individuals tend to classify themselves and others into different social categories. Once in a certain social group, they express a positive, favorable attitude towards in-group members while having a negative, unfavorable attitude towards out-group members.

Identity can be divided into personal identity and social identity (Choi & Hon, 2002). A personal identity represents personal traits, including a person's physical and psychological characteristics. A social identity, on the other hand, involves social group classifications, such as race, gender, nationality and religion affiliation (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Choi & Hon, 2002; Turner, 1982). The social classification maintains two functions. The first function "cognitively segments and orders the social environment, providing the individual with a systematic means of defining others" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 21), while the second function "enables the individual to locate or define him- or herself in the social environment" (p. 21). The second function of the social classification, according to Ashforth and Mael (1989), can also be referred to as "social identification". This is the core theoretical foundation of the current study, as it focuses on "who am I" (Stryker & Serpe, 1982; Turner, 1982), and could be used to examine how Asian American practitioners perceive themselves.

Individuals maintain multiple identities (Allen, Wilder, & Atkinson, 1983; Hoetler, 1985; Thoits, 1983). A study by Tsetsura (2004) examined the identities of Russian female public relations practitioners and showed that multiple identities of practitioners exist. She then categorized four identities that Russian female public relations practitioners possessed, which is a woman, a professional, a public relations practitioner, and a Russian. However, the current study only concentrates on two main identities: ethnic identity and gender identity, as those two are more related to minority practitioners in public relations.

Minority Ethnic Identity

Ethnic identity refers to "the person's sense of belongings with other members of the ethnic group, based on shared ethnic characteristics" (Ibrahim et al, 1997, p. 36). It is "a schema that engenders general knowledge, beliefs, and expectations that a person has about his or her ethnic group" (Uba, 1994, as cited in Ibrahim et al, 1997, p. 36).

Being a minority in public relations, practitioners have inevitably confronted the identity issue. A research by Pompper (2004) examined African American female public relations practitioners in the field and found that minority practitioners overall thought positive of their ethnic identity. Those African American practitioners believed that being a minority could cultivate organizations about their ethnic culture and customs, and attract more young minority professionals to the field. Kern-Foxworth and colleagues (1994) also found that African American women in public relations viewed themselves as responsible and independent thinkers. They identified the keywords of minority practitioners' values as thinking/analysis, responsibility, pressure, rules, independent, and channels.

Asian and Asian American Identity

Asian Americans practitioners may have different ethnic identities. Uba (1994) believed that some Asian Americans identify strongly with Asian American ethnicity, while others only acknowledge that they are Asian Americans without sharing anything in common with their ethnic group. Gudykunst (2001) also indicated that Asian Americans who identify strongly with the American culture tend to accept American social norms and rules, and those who do not identify strongly with the American culture lack the motivation to assimilate into American communication patterns.

Previous studies have rarely addressed the difference between Asian and Asian American practitioners. Those two subgroups of Asian Americans might have different ethnic identities due to their various degrees of cultural assimilation. Research showed that native-born children tend to be alienated from their immigrant counterparts, as they consider it a higher status to affirmatively involve American cultural values (Qian et al, 2010). However, not all the native-born Asian Americans adhere to an American identity and actively assimilate to the mainstream society. By examining the second-generation of immigrants' language adaptation and family relations, Portes and Hao (2002) pointed out that the family support and solidarity might largely influence how successful the adaptation of the second generation of immigrants is – those who were born in the United States.

Ethnic identity is also linked to patterns of language use (Mouw & Xie, 1999). Those who have a preference of speaking English may be significantly more inclined to identify themselves as Americans than those who do not have this preference (Rumbaut, 1994). U.S.

Census data showed that over 93 percent of Asian Americans speak only English or speak English very well, compared to only more than one third of Asians who can speak good English (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). In the public relations industry where communication skills are strongly valued, English proficiency may be an influential factor separating those who hold Asians and Asian Americans identities, and further affects their perceptions of the field.

Gender Identity

According to PRSA/IABC Salary Survey (2000), women account for approximately 70 percent of overall practitioners in the public relations industry. However, research showed that female practitioners still confront gender discrepancies in this woman dominant profession (e.g., Aldoory & Toth, 2002; Grunig, 1988; Grunig et al, 2001; Toth, Serini, Wright, & Emig, 1998). This unique phenomenon in public relations makes it especially important to examine how female Asian American practitioners perceive themselves in the field.

Pompper (2004) claimed that female public relations practitioners enjoy being a woman in the workplace. Practitioners categorized their abilities as “understanding”, “patience”, “perseverance”, “flexible”, “nurturing”, “organized”, “multitasking”, and “intuition” (p. 285). They also believed that as a woman, they understand both genders more than men, which makes them work better with people in organizations. Similarly, Grunig et al (2000) also summarized several feminine values as “cooperation, respect, caring, nurturance, interconnection, justice, equity, honesty, sensitivity, perceptiveness, intuition, altruism, fairness, morality, and commitment.”

In sum, this review of literatures provides a general background on the diversity issue and working situation of ethnic minorities and women in public relations. Previous studies have examined minority practitioners in terms of their identities, career motivations, and perceived challenges and benefits in the field. However, the situation of Asian Americans in public relations has rarely been investigated. To fill the void of research on this issue, the current study focuses on Asian American practitioners and explores their experiences and perceptions in public relations practice.

Research Questions

The current study examines Asian American practitioners’ career motivations, working experiences and perceptions in public relations. Based on the social identity theory, the study

also analyzes how practitioners identify themselves and how those identities affect their experiences and working situations. In this respect, the study poses the following three research questions:

RQ1: What are the motivations for Asian American practitioners to pursue a career in public relations?

RQ2: What are the identity-related experiences that practitioners have confronted on their daily work in public relations?

RQ3: What are practitioners' general perceptions of Asian Americans in the public relations industry?

Chapter 3 - Methodology

The purpose of the current study is to examine Asian American practitioners' career motivations, experiences, and general perceptions on the public relations industry. Three research questions were raised based on the social identity theory and previous literatures. This chapter introduces the methodological practice applied in the study, with detailed explanations on each of the following sections: qualitative approach description, sample selection process, instrument design, data collection procedure, and data analysis technique.

Qualitative Approach

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) define qualitative research as “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world” (p. 3). In a qualitative research, researchers observe phenomenon and “study things in their natural settings” (p. 3). They seek to make sense of, analyze or interpret the “situated form, content, and experience of social action, rather than subject it to mathematical or other formal transformations” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 18). Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research posits an emphasis on process, the data of which takes the form of words not numbers (Frey, Botan, & Friedman, 1992). Qualitative approach involves a set of interpretive practices (e.g. interviews) to understand how social phenomena is formed and given meanings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

The qualitative approach has been frequently used in social science and relevant fields. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), qualitative communication research is considered a project of “human science” (p. 29), embracing fields of social and psychological science, moral theory, legal and political studies, etc. Those areas share the value and concerns of human activities in which qualitative methods are often employed to interpret and understand public problems, such as human rights, social movements or identity issues (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). The study examines Asian Americans' perceived identities and potential social challenges and benefits that one might involve. Its related social issues, identity concerns and human-oriented subject make qualitative approach a better fit in the current study.

Another reason for using a qualitative approach in the study lies in the mainstream society's undeveloped knowledge of Asian Americans in public relations. From previous

research, Asian Americans in public relations have rarely been studied with a particular focus, and the public relations working situation of this group of people has not yet been fully examined. This socially invisible and silenced group demands for deeper and more critical exploratory research. Qualitative approach is often used to discover, describe, explore and understand the deeper complexity of little-known phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 1999), and the topic in this kind of research might generally be the study of the puzzle, uncovered issues, or unexplored groups (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). As the researcher attempts to explore the experience of this under-represented population in the U.S., a qualitative approach is more suitable for this study.

In-Depth Interview

Qualitative research involves the collection of a variety of empirical materials – such as case study, observational texts, and interview – to describe problems and meanings of one’s life (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This study relies on one of the most commonly used qualitative methods in social science – in-depth interview. In-depth interview is well known for the wealth of detail that it provides (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006), and is particularly useful for obtaining the story behind a participant’s experiences and perspectives (McNamara, 1999). Compared to the survey method, the in-depth interview can generate considerably richer information; researchers can follow up interviewees for more detailed information; and results of the interview could be easily compared and analyzed to navigate further investigation on their responses.

In an in-depth interview, the interviewer is not merely a listener but “an advocate and partner” in the study, hoping to “advocate social policies and ameliorate the conditions of interviewees” (Denzin & Lincoln 2005, p. 696). By building a rapport with interviewees, the interviewer may ease participants’ expression and induce effective communication, which allows more accuracy on the research issues, especially on sensitive topics (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). This is especially true when the interviewer is of the same ethnic background or shares the same experiences with interviewees, as the similarity gives interviewees a sense of closeness.

According to Hunt and McHale (2007), the in-depth interview can be divided into three types: structured interview, semi-structured interview, and the unstructured interview. The current study conducts the semi-structured interview, which includes “a series of issues that the

interviewer wants to address but which can be addressed in any order, depending on the flow of conversation” (p. 1416). This type of interview method gives the interviewer control over the topic while maintaining some degree of freedom to obtain more detailed information from the interviewees.

In-Depth Email Interview

The in-depth interview in the study was conducted via email. Unlike email surveys, an in-depth email interview is “semi-structured in nature and involves multiple email exchanges between the interviewer and interviewee over an extended period of time” (Meho, 2006, p. 1284). The biggest advantage of the email interview lies in its low cost and efficiency. Email interviews require no traveling, no purchase of recording equipment, and no transcribing costs, which become more budget-saving than face-to-face or phone interviews (Hunt & McHale, 2007). Email interviews are also unrestricted in locations. Researchers can “invite participation of large or geographically dispersed samples of people by sending them email messages individually rather than making long-distance telephone calls, using regular mail, or traveling to the location of participants” (Meho, 2006, p. 1285). The benefits of email itself also add its value to the study. For instance, it allows interviewees to answer questions at their preferred time, place, and convenience, which help participants produce deeper thoughts and sophisticated answers. The natural written format of email also makes it easier for the interview tracking and reviewing process. Furthermore, the invisibility of participants in the email prevents unfavorable effects generated by interviewees’ visual or nonverbal gestures, which might be a significant issue in face-to-face interviews (Hunt & McHale, 2007; Meho, 2006).

The email in-depth interview method is also used due to the geographical location of respondents. Although this is a national study targeting Asian Americans public relations practitioners in all states, statistics show that Asian Americans in the U.S. are generally concentrated in metropolitan areas, such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York City, and Chicago (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). The geographically disadvantageous location of this study and the limited resources make face-to-face or telephone interviews, which might involve substantial financial expenses such as traveling fees and phone bills, seem unrealistic. Moreover, as writing is an essential and highly valued skill in public relations (Hornaman & Sriramesh, 2003), practitioners are generally believed to possess strong written capacity. This being the

sense that their writings in email can express and demonstrate the same valuable and in-depth messages as can be obtained from face-to-face or phone interviews. Hence, in order to reach out to a variety of participants while maintaining the quality of information gathered, the email interview is believed to be the only and best way to examine the subject of Asian American public relations practitioners in the study.

Sample

The sample of Asian American public relations practitioners was chosen from a 2011 membership roster of the Asian American Journalists Association (AAJA), a non-profit professional and educational organization with more than 1,400 members in 21 chapters across the U.S. and Asia. Two main reasons contribute to the selection from this organization. First, participants who are members of AAJA are considered actively engaged in the media industry, given that they have met the requirements of being a member of AAJA, and are willing to contribute their time and earnings to be involved in this organization (Choi & Hon, 2002). Second, AAJA is considered an ethnic organization in the mass media industry in which members are highly concentrated on Asian Americans. Since there is no public relations organization specifically for Asian Americans, and the largest public relations organization – Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) – does not reveal its members' ethnicity, AAJA provides a significant convenience to select eligible Asian Americans for the study. Thus, AAJA is believed to be the most relevant and valuable organization for sample collection in the current study.

Sample Selection

AAJA, which serves as a sample frame, is comprised of Asian Americans in all aspects of the mass communication field, including newspaper, broadcasting, advertising, marketing, public relations and so on. To ensure the sample in the current study is exclusively from the public relations area, a social media tool – LinkedIn – is used to filter AAJA members. The specific sample selecting process was performed in the following stages. First, a 2011 membership roster was obtained from the AAJA official website. Since AAJA does not allow any releasing of members' contact information to individuals, only full names on roster can be seen from the website. Each name on the membership list was then searched on LinkedIn. For those who have a LinkedIn account, their professional information would appear with their job

title and profession, along with identified working industry. Members who reported their working industry as “Public Relations and Communications” were selected and contacted. Those who do not have a LinkedIn account were excluded from the study. When more than one name appeared, the one associated with AAJA or other Asian American groups was selected. Practitioners’ contact information was also obtained from their personal profile on LinkedIn. Usually an email address or a link to their company can be found on LinkedIn. If no email address was found from the personal profile, practitioners were then contacted through InMail, a paid function of LinkedIn that allows the account holder to directly contact any individual by sending inbox messages. After sending out 35 emails and 41 InMails, a total of 19 Asian American public relations practitioners were recruited in this study. McCracken (1988) noted that a sufficient number of interviewees for the qualitative research is eight. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) also indicated that in qualitative practice, difficult-to-find participants tend to be justified in having smaller samples. Though this response rate is relatively low, the interviews generated voluminous amounts of information.

Sample Description

Out of 19 participants, 14 of them are female, which take up more than two thirds of the overall participants. Their ages range from 22 to 54, with a mean age of 32. All of the participants have earned a Bachelor’s degree, and seven of them held a Master’s degree. One participant, in particular, had two Master’s degrees. The working experiences of each respondent in public relations also vary from 4 months to 30 years, with an average 8.2 years of experience.

The participation sample was made up of Asian Americans with diverse individual experiences and working environments. Those participants are of various age, gender, and educational backgrounds; they are working in public relations agencies, corporations, university, media, and non-profit organizations, to name a few; they hold a variety of job positions from the founder of the company, senior account executive to account coordinator, interns, or other entry-level positions; and they occupy in multiple fields, including healthcare, technology, financial market, and mass communications, etc. All participants are currently working in the United States.

Instrument

An interview guide is developed for the current study. The interview guide consists of 8 open-ended questions examining practitioners' career motivations, identity-related experiences, and perceptions on the general public relations industry. The questions are all original and are designed based on the three research questions of the study. The purpose of this interview guide is to help the researcher organize the idea and remain focused, and to lead participants to answer questions related to the topic. Participants are encouraged to offer detailed and in-depth responses on the experience and working situation of Asian Americans in public relations. Their demographic information – gender, age, educational level, and years of public relations – is also requested in the interview guide. Participants' identifying information, however, is confidential during the entire interview process.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection started following ethics approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) committee for research involving human subjects at Kansas State University. After the approval, a letter of invitation was sent to each of the qualified participants, in which the participants were informed about the purpose of the study and were invited to participate. The invitation was sent by either email or InMail message, depending on the contact information of participants gathered from LinkedIn. For participants' convenience, this letter of invitation also served as a Consent Form to request permission of interview conducting in this study. Participants were asked to reply with their preferred email address if they agreed to become part of the study. The participants' responses with their contact emails were recognized as their consent to participate in the study. Upon agreement, an interview guide including a list of 8 open-ended questions was sent to the participants as an email attachment. Each of the participants was given approximately two weeks to finish the interview questions, and they were asked to send back their answers as an email attachment without revealing their identifying details when they finished. Reminder emails were sent to the participants' days before or a week after the designated deadline. If still no answers were heard from the participants, customized reminder emails were sent to unanswered practitioners once again with no more than three emails to ensure maximum participation. After receiving the interview guide, a thank you letter was sent to each of the participants.

Data Analysis

With the completion of data collection, interview data were then interpreted by qualitative technique. All emails were thematically organized and analyzed based on grounded theory. Grounded theory, according to Chesebro and Borisoff (2007), is the theory that emerges inductively from the data. It is in contrast with traditional inquiry characteristic of quantitative research developing from a deductive approach. Glaser and Strauss (1967) defined grounded theory as “a general method of constant comparative analysis” (p. 273), which comprises of a series of research activities – “wrestling with data, making comparisons, developing categories, engaging in theoretical sampling, and integrating an analysis” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 510). By using the comparative technique, researchers elicit major ideas from subjects’ answers and seek specific data to identify, refine and scrutinize the emerging conceptual categories (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

This study followed three coding stages: open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Dutta & Basu, 2007). In the opening coding stage, all data gathered from the email interviews were reviewed carefully line by line. Each interviewee’s response to each question was examined and compared with others to look for valuable incidents. By engaging in line-by-line coding, the researcher “makes a close study of the data and lays the foundation for synthesizing it” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 517). In the axial coding stage, common answers from participants were then summarized and grouped into specific categories (Dutta & Basu, 2007). Under each category, salient words, phrases, or standpoints with regards to the research questions were identified and explained. Direct quotations from participants were also utilized in the study as supporting contents. In the selecting coding stage, main themes were eventually merged from the generalized categories. The color-coding method was used to organize data in various themes and categories, keeping into consideration the study’s research questions. For better organization and convenience of the information retrieving, similar opinions were coded with the same color (Weitzman, 2000). Themes based on the research questions were then merged and identified. The researcher also referred to another public relations researcher to determine significant concepts and themes, with the purpose of minimizing the subjective bias during data analysis and ensuring the accuracy of data interpretation. This qualitative data analysis in the study is entirely pen and paper-based.

Chapter 4 - Findings

The aim of this study is to examine Asian American practitioners' career motivations, experiences, and general perceptions on the public relations industry. This chapter presents the key findings and detailed information gathered from the in-depth interviews, organized into emerging themes with consideration of the three research questions. The themes are elicited and explained under each research question, along with supporting statements and quotes from participants.

Motivation for Career Choice in Public Relations

Public relations is not commonly considered a popular career for Asian Americans. This study examines the motivations for Asian Americans to enter the field of public relations. Based on the first research question, participants were asked to give reasons that made them choose a public relations career. Emerging themes were identified from this research question and generalized into three categories: personal interest, family influence on career choice for Asian Americans, and industrial attraction.

Personal Interest

Since the industry of public relations appreciates strong communicators, respondents believe their personal traits, skills and interests make them a good fit in this industry. Several participants indicated that they “enjoy writing”, or are “good at pitching and story telling”, which becomes the main attribution for them to work in public relations. One practitioner mentioned that her “interests and talents have always been in the areas of writing and communication,” and she “looked for work requiring those skills.”

Others commented that they liked helping people, helping the community, and building relationships with others, for which public relations may serve as “the perfect platform”. For instance, one participant expressed her motivation in public relations by saying:

I knew I wanted to work in a career that involved helping people – in my mind, public relations was a great way to do so, to help spread a message about someone or something using strategized communications.

Another participant also indicated that she found joy in helping others. “I enjoy the feeling of achievement whenever I actually help someone or complete a project,” she said.

One Asian American described her intention of choosing public relations as the combination of her passion in writing and building relationships:

I liked the idea of helping out the community by being in contact with them. Similar to journalism, I still get to write and edit about subjects I am passionate about while actually talking to people about these subjects and meeting new people at the same time.

Interestingly, one public relations participant stated that she wanted to go out of her comfort zone and demonstrated herself in a way opposite to her natural personality, to achieve her desired personal characteristics: “I am naturally a shy person but forced myself to get out of my shell when I was pursuing a public relations degree at my University.” But later she found herself good at writing and relationship building, which helped her gradually develop a passion in public relations. “From there [skills she possesses],” she said, “I realized it was my passion to have a career in public relations and continually grow in the profession because it’s a very challenging profession.”

Another Asian American mentioned that his motivation in public relations lied in the fact that he wanted to pursue a career opposite to his parents’ expectation. He stated that Asian parents generally wish their children to be successful in the field of engineering, medicine, or other science subjects, and his choice in public relations would be “the best choice” that his parents would not want him to do. This participant also said he liked “to write and help popularize products and brands,” which added to his interest in public relations.

In all, personal interest is an important factor determining whether a person will pursue a career in public relations. Many of the participants interviewed were happy with the career decision they have made, as it matches their own interests and skills. However, this last participant reminds us that in Asian culture, family still plays a significant role in the individual’s career choice. When their personal interest is in conflict with family expectations, they may have a hard time fighting for “what they want”.

Family Influence on Career Choice for Asian Americans

Several other practitioners also mentioned the family influence on career choices. “Asians, in general, are raised to ‘like’ math and science in hopes to become future engineers,

accountants or even doctors,” said one interviewee. “It’s the way we are raised. My parents drilled medicine education into me and several of my Asian friends were raised to go into accounting.” This interviewee also pointed out that Asians are taught to be “leaders” in their working field, which might be a concern for not working in public relations. “We’re taught to get the best grades, bring home the most academic awards, etc. [But] public relations is an industry where you’re making someone or something else look good. The focus is on the client and their success – not the public relations professional,” he added.

Some respondents commented on the limited career awareness of the public relations industry by many Asian Americans and their families:

It was not encouraged growing up in a traditional Chinese family to promote yourself or your successes, ... Promotion, marketing, media relations are all very foreign concepts to many Asian Americans.

Another Asian American discussed this issue from her own experience:

Many Asian American children grew up knowing about doctors, lawyers, etc. [And] my parents would have never told me about the possibility of being a publicist because they didn’t know what that was.

The family expectation and awareness of their children’s career choices might be associated with an phenomenon that young Asian American professionals are reluctant to seek a career in public relations, as one of the participants revealed:

I’ve met a number of Asian American students studying public relations and [I] am frankly disappointed in their lack of passion for the field. They have trouble explaining why they’d like to go into the field. I think this puts many young Asian Americans at a disadvantage in the job market.

In Asian cultures, family has an essential influence in an individual’s career choices. Asian parents mostly expect their children to pursue a scientific-related career that involves high salary and stability. This may explain why there are not many Asian Americans that enter the field of public relations. Young adults may also be affected by this belief, which further prevents the growing of Asian American public relations practitioners.

Industrial Attraction

Practitioners also choose public relations because they were attracted to the nature of public relations and because some characteristics of this industry give them passion and excitement. “It’s a powerful tool in the overall marketing mix,” said one practitioner. Respondents believed public relations is a profession that offers them opportunity to learn, network and self-improve. An Asian American participant expressed her passion about public relations: “I feel excited about this industry. I love public relations. I love to meet new people, learn new industries, and accept new challenges.” Another participant appreciated that his communication skills were enhanced while practicing in public relations:

I discovered I enjoy the process of communications, particularly [in] community engagement, crisis management and crafting words that have impact and meaning. I’ve done nothing but hone my skills in these areas ever since. You never stop learning.

Respondents who have different academic backgrounds outside public relations were motivated by the urge to have alternative professional experiences. Several that had previous experience in journalism consider public relations an alternative choice, as they got tired of the journalist lifestyle. Their dissatisfaction with journalism careers involved monotonous working conditions, inflexible schedules, and an unpleasant atmosphere in the newsroom. One participant referred, “I began my career as a reporter but did not like the nomadic lifestyle that comes with the career path, ... I wanted a more stable home life, [so] I pursued public relations.” Another added that she preferred public relations to journalism due to the fact that “work [in public relations] is never the same every day.” One interviewee with a journalism background indicated she entered the field because she was inspired by “a big name” in public relations. The prestigious person she met in a meeting has led her to the world of public relations and later became her lifelong mentor. “I was not trained in public relations,” she clarified.

Besides journalism, there were some practitioners who had backgrounds in fields that are outside of mass communications. For example, one participant who used to work in the field of chemical engineering stated the reasons why he chose to be a public relations practitioner:

Though I love science and engineering, I found the work very monotonous. I felt as if I wasn’t utilizing the part of my brain involving creative thinking, writing, etc. So I began looking at alternative careers in these sectors, marketing, sales, public relations, analysis, which eventually led me to my current [public relations] company, which specializes in

Healthcare, Technology. ... I've worked across a wide variety of sectors from IT and computer tech, to traditional and alternative energy, to the chemical and biochemical industry. This diverse group of clients has really appealed to my broad interest in science and technology, which was, and still is, a significant component of my career choices.

Similarly, another interviewee whose background in art history and ethnic studies explained how she gained a job in a public relations firm:

I was struggling to find work, and I remembered an old friend I used to volunteer with at a non-profit organization was working at a public relations firm that was looking for interns. I inquired about it and got an unpaid internship. A month later, they offered me a paid part-time position that will transition into full-time after a few months.

Overall, the exciting, creative, vivid environment and alternative lifestyle in public relations are believed to be an appealing factor for participants to pursue a career in this field. The industry also provides opportunities for those whose backgrounds outside the public relations or mass communication area. For those who used to work in journalism, their journalism skill sets overlap with skills needed in public relations. For those whose previous work was outside the mass communication field, their skills from other industries may also be useful in public relations, as the field of public relations embraces various topics that can be applied to any other industry. Although those practitioners came from different industries, it is important to note that they all considered public relations a right fit and would continue to work in this field.

Identity-Related Experiences in Public Relations

Being an Asian American in the white-dominated public relations industry inevitably evokes concerns on the identity issue. In order to understand their real working situation in public relations, this research question focuses on practitioners' self-perceived identities, and the impacts of those identities on their public relations careers on a daily basis. Questions to participants based on this research question involve how they identify themselves ethnically; how their ethnic background affect daily work in public relations; challenges they have faced as Asian American practitioners; and the benefits of being an Asian American in the public relations field. The specific identity of each participant is first discussed, followed by their career

experience associated with identities. The experience, including challenges and benefits, are examined in details.

Self-Defined Identities of Asian American Practitioners

The mainstream society generally views Asian American as one ethnic group. However, the results of the current study showed that all participants viewed themselves related to some degrees of their ethnic origin. As can be seen from the study, nine participants identified themselves as “Asians” alone, three participants identified themselves as multi-ethnic, and the remaining seven identified themselves as “Asians and Americans.” None of them identified themselves as “Americans.”

Specifically, those who identified themselves as “Asians” include two “Chinese”, one “Korean”, two “Taiwanese”, one “Thai”, one “Indian”, and two “Filipinos”. For those two “multi-ethnic”, one considered himself as “Vietnamese and Indian/South Asian”, one “Asian-Pacific Islander mix”, and one “Spanish, Filipina, Chinese, Arab and White” mix. The remaining participants identified themselves as “Asian and American”, including two “Korean Americans”, one “Thai American”, one “Pilipino American”, one “Chinese American” and two general “Asian Americans”.

Instead of merely presenting their identities, participants also explained that their perceived identities depend on the “context” of which they are being defined. For instance, one participant who claimed as a first generation U.S. citizen said: “ethnically, I’m Indian, but having been born and raised in the States, I’m more American, culturally, than Indian.” Another participant also conveyed a similar concern:

In terms of data given to U.S. government apparatus, I identify myself as Asian American or Filipino. Socially and abroad, I usually identify myself as a Filipino American.

These self-perceived identities revealed that no matter how much difference in perceived identities, practitioners are all aware of their ethnic origins, which separate them from white Americans. In addition, practitioners also specify their country origin, such as Chinese, Korean, Filipino, etc. The awareness of their own country origin demonstrates that practitioners wish others to see Asian American as a diverse group in which people have different languages and cultures. This difference within the Asian American group is usually neglected by the mainstream society and in literature.

Differences are also found between the subgroup of Asians and Asian Americans, which can be seen in practitioners' responses. When asked to provide ethnic identity, one participant particularly clarified herself as an "Asian" instead of an "Asian American". She claimed that she was just a Chinese who came to study in the US. "I don't consider myself as an Asian American," she said. This participant believed Asian is different from Asian American, as they share different cultures and experiences. One participant also showed his concerns on the "misconception of mainstream media, among a myriad of others, that the Asian experience and the Asian American experience are the same." The Asian and Asian American difference, however, is rarely studied or addressed by the mainstream society.

The concept of one's identity can be defined by three ways. The way one defines it from their own vantage point; the way "others" define it; and the way one wishes to be considered (Smith, Burlew, & Mosley, 1978). In this respect, practitioners' self-perceived identity might not match the identity others perceive. Many Asian Americans in the field are all lumped up as Asians, but they do not identify themselves the same as they are identified by the mainstream society. Nevertheless, since many of them share similar values and characteristics, Asian American is still considered a term that can best describe this group, and we just need to be reminded that this group is diverse, and differences exist.

After uncovering their identity, participants were also asked to recall if they confronted any identity-related experience while working in public relations. More than half of participants indicated that their ethnic identities have no direct effects on their daily work in public relations, and they did not confront serious identity issues like discrimination, unequal treatment or other career barriers in the workplace.

Comments such as "very little to none", "my race hasn't had an effect on my work", "I don't notice anything different" revealed that identity might not play a key role on practitioners' ordinary public relations work, and that participants are confident in their identified ethnic backgrounds. "It doesn't [affect me]," said one interviewee. "I don't use it as a stepping stone or a hindrance. You work hard and you get noticed." Another participant claimed, "My ethnicity has never brought about any career challenges. I feel that I face the same challenges as any other public relations practitioner."

One respondent commented on this issue with her knowledge that Asian Americans are given the same opportunity as their white counterparts if they possess necessary skills in public relations:

To be a successful publicist, I think you have to be a voracious consumer of news and culture, in addition to being an excellent communicator and writer. Given those skills, it would seem everybody has an equal opportunity at a successful career.

This shows participants were generally satisfied with working in public relations, and their identity does not pose a significant influence on their daily work.

Identity-Related Challenges Facing Asian American Practitioners

Although a majority of participants reported no serious identity experience related to their daily work in public relations, they have encountered subtle challenges for being an Asian American practitioner in the field. Their perceived challenges are largely from stereotypical mindset towards Asian Americans, which can be specified as challenges in relation to their physical appearance, personality, language and culture.

Challenges related to Physical Appearance

Physical appearance might be the most direct challenge perceived by Asian Americans. Having an Asian American face, “people see you in a different light”. According to some participants, Asian faces and names sometimes became disfavored assets. Their unique names and Asian look might pose a negative effect on their language and working capability.

One participant explained how her name and face brought her troubles at work:

When pitching to reporters, my name could appear as spam or junk mail to reporters because they may not think I’m pitching them. Also at industry events, I may be ignored because I look like an international professional when I can speak fluent English.

Similarly, another participant discovered his last name was “too long” and that confused some people. “No one ever understands what I’m saying when I do state my last name,” he said.

Another participant provided examples from her friend’s experience. She indicated that her friend went to an industrial trade event and felt “alienated” when all the other attendees were white women. At that event, her friend thought she was “being judged not by her resume but by her looks and appearance.”

While most practitioners perceived negative experience from mainstream society, one respondent revealed a unique challenge he had faced -- the “reverse bias”. Although he self-identified as a mix of western and eastern backgrounds, when reaching out the Asian American community, he experienced the reverse bias from Korean audiences who judged him as not “Korean enough”. This attitude reveals the assumption that if you look like Asian, you should behave like an Asian to some extent. People expect to see certain Asian cultural inheritance in Asian Americans, no matter if they are familiar with Asian culture or not.

Challenges related to Personality

Several interviewees also mentioned challenges related to the personality of Asian Americans. “... My challenge has been more about my image as an Asian American woman working with men and overcoming stereotypes,” said one interviewee. Another respondent believed that a successful public relations practitioner should be outgoing, social and good at networking, and the stereotypes of Asian Americans – being shy and not social – pose negative effects on their images. “We have to work extra hard to disapprove that image,” she said. Another participant indicated she was seen as “not speaking up, let everyone take [her] credit,” and she is trying to change this image:

I’ve learned that simply doing good work is not enough. I need to be better at letting people (above my boss) know of the work that I’m doing, have done and want to do.

Challenges related to Language and Culture

Lacking language and communication skills is another challenge that many Asian Americans practitioners have faced, especially for those who speak English as a second language. “I believe you may face more obstacles than other colleagues who may be native,” said an interviewee. One practitioner spoke of her language frustration on whether or not to indicate her ability to speak Chinese on her resume, as she was not sure if doing this would make her English skills into question. “I’m afraid I might have been turned away several times for the reason that I’m not considered to be a well-spoken and well-written candidate,” she said.

Some respondents stated that their challenges originated from stereotypes from the mainstream community. One Asian American indicated that although her company targeted the mainstream audiences, people always assumed that her clients were only related to Asian

Americans, and there seemed to be an expectation that she should represent the minority community.

Identity-Related Benefits for Asian American Practitioners

There are several advantages for multi-cultural public relations practitioners in a phenomenon that particularly seeks cultural diversification. Participants were asked about their positive experience associated with Asian Americans' identity in the public relations field. Their experienced benefits could be summarized into four categories: language and cultural advantage, contribution to diversity in the workplace, accessibility to minority organizations, and Asian American unique personal traits.

Language and Cultural Advantage

A handful of participants reported that their bi-lingual skills and multi-cultural awareness brought them advantages to work in public relations. As one Asian American noted, being able to speak a second language helps her understand "how best to address/promote [her company] to the Asian community." Another Asian American practitioner also indicated that her language knowledge is "transferable" as she can speak both English and Chinese. Still another Asian American interviewee suggested that if working in Technology public relations, knowing a foreign language would be a benefit as "technology clients are more likely to be internationally based in Asian countries."

Besides the language advantage, cultural knowledge and understanding is also seen as a favorable asset mentioned by several participants. One interviewee explained about the transcultural ability and its benefits in public relations:

Public relations and communication relies on, and will continue to rely on, a person's ability to transculturate messages that resonate with target audiences. Straight translation is not a skill. Transculturation understanding and insight presents unlimited opportunity to help companies, people, products and services connect with their ethnic market users.

Another participant demonstrated how her familiarity with the Asian culture brought her unique opportunities at work:

One of my strengths in my practice has been to be able to work with CEOs from abroad. Having the understanding of Asian cultures and being able to educate and be patient in

helping clients understand the public relations process in the US has been an advantage for me.

Cultural awareness enables practitioners to get involved in their ethnic community, and to communicate with target audiences. “The only way that my ethnic background affects my daily work is because I am heavily involved in my community and thus seen by my peers as a resource for issues dealing with communities of color,” noted one Asian American. Another participant indicated how her ethnic background helps her build a rapport with the Asian American community:

At times, people in ethnic communities do become more attentive when one or more of my ethnic background is relatable in some way, which is understandable. They see me as “one of them.”

In particular, when clients are mostly Asian Americans, a stronger relationship can be seen on that shared experience, and the community engagement becomes more apparent, as one interviewee indicated:

I have a feeling that many of them feel comfortable working with us because we come from the same community and share some of the same perspectives.

Contribution to Diversity in the Workplace

A second positive identity-related experience lies in that Asian Americans could also “contribute to the diversity aspect” at public relations agencies. A diverse environment is important for corporations, especially for public relations firms. “I think agencies are dying to recruit and diversify,” said one of the participants. Being an Asian American could bring about diverse perspectives to the table, as one Asian American interviewee noted:

I think it’s good to have a variety of perspectives in the workplace. ... Being a minority can help you identify issues that others might miss. A minority is at least somewhat more likely to be sensitive to the issues of other minorities, whether they are racial, sexual, socioeconomic minorities, etc.

One Asian American also stated that she perceived the world differently due to her ethnic identity:

I sincerely believe that I see the world through a very different lens than most of my professional peers and that being Asian American is part of that reason. I know that I

have a heightened sensitivity to the experience of others and that my perspective is needed (and often missing) at the corporate table.

The cultural and ethnic sensitivity was also seen in some other Asian American participants' words:

Simply not being white ... and being aware of sensitive issues like race gives me an advantage in identifying poor word usage or language that may be problematic that another member may not have noticed.

Absorbing different perspectives could benefit the public relations industry itself as well. According to one Asian American practitioner, "having a slightly different perspective or set of experiences can be a major asset when much of this industry involves thinking of as many different angles as one can." Asian Americans might have a different viewpoint from their white colleagues to certain issues due to their "unique insight and cultural experiences," which might contribute to the completeness and thoroughness of an idea, and deliver information in a more multi-faceted way than their fellow American colleagues.

Accessibility to Minority Organizations

Participants who fit into this category stated that being Asian Americans made it easier for them to get involved in minority professional groups and organizations. "There are certain advantages in terms of being able to network with others through professional affiliations and organizations," said one interviewee. "[In addition], sometimes grants and scholarships are offered [to Asian Americans] if you are looking to pursue special projects, etc." Another participant commented on the benefits of being an Asian American in public relations:

If any benefits exist, I would have to say that the tight-knit cross-cultural community that is created within minority communities in public relations is one of them. In my experience, minorities in public relations tend to support each other, as they understand the common hardships and difficulties that must be navigated to obtain success in the industry.

Asian American Unique Personal Traits

Although some participants reported negative experience with their Asian American appearance, others see it as a benefit. They believed their name and characteristics made them

easier to stand out, gain more attention and obtain more opportunities. “I feel somewhat unique,” said one participant. “A unique name and face usually helps media remember you,” said another. “In a client meeting that is usually filled with Caucasians, the lone Asian usually sticks out in their heads. The same thing [happens] with reporters when you conduct desk-sides. Reporters and clients remember you more.”

A participant explained how being an Asian American separated him from the mainstream community:

People recognize that my background as a person of color gives me insights into our communities that the mainstream lacks. Frankly, I think that I’ve been afforded many more opportunities as a person of color because I live and work in such a white-dominated, yet progressive community.

Apart from benefits of their appearance, participants also commented on changing the Asian American image. They expected that their presence in public relations may, to some extent, alternate the stereotypes toward Asian Americans. For example, one participant believed she could change the image of Asian American women and represent Asians as “outgoing, articulate in speaking, and can do an excellent job in public relations.” Another Asian American participant also commented on the stereotypes changing issue:

Sadly, there is still that stereotype of Asians/Asian Americans as being demure and quiet and this is definitely a field where none of those characteristics apply. So, by being out there, aggressive and commanding attention for the company or non-profit surprises most people. The idea of surprising people and enlightening them at the same time is advantageous because these serve as a way to get their attention to what you have to say.

In summary, this research question examines how practitioners identify themselves, and their experience in public relations based on self-perceived identities. All participants identified themselves with some extent to their original ethnicity. Practitioners’ career experience – challenges and benefits – associated with Asian American identities have been discussed in detail, which portrays an overall real time working environment for Asian Americans currently in public relations.

Perceptions of Asian Americans in Public Relations

This research question addresses the general career perceptions of Asian American practitioners working in the public relations field. Participants were asked to discuss the general career situation for Asian Americans in public relations; what special characteristics or skills they think Asian Americans should possess that would help them be successful in the field, and suggestions on increasing Asian American practitioners in public relations. By examining the answers from public relations interviewees, four categories are identified, including lacking Asian Americans in the public relations industry, wide opportunities for a career in public relations, professional skills for success in public relations, and increasing Asian American presence in public relations.

Lacking Asian Americans in the Public Relations Industry

A minority role model in public relations is of significant importance, as it provides first-hand experience of what to do and how to succeed, so as to attract professionals of the same ethnicity to the field. Being an Asian American role model in public relations helps more Asian Americans get to know this industry and lead them to the predictable career path.

However, not enough Asian Americans in the public relations field is one of the common concerns raised by participants. Key phrases such as “very few Asian Americans”, “not many Asian Americans in the public relations industry”, “have not met many Asian Americans” were frequently seen in respondents’ answers. “Asians are hugely misrepresented in the public relations industry,” said one participant. “This industry is a female dominated world, but with Caucasian American females taking the charge.” Another participant believed that “there needs to be more Asian Americans in this field”, with the reasons explained below:

People do tend to “trust” people who look more like them, especially the Asian/Asian American communities. Also, seeing more diversity in the public relations field overall will make it a more versatile career possibility for people of all backgrounds.

Although an increase has been seen in the population of Asian Americans in the field of public relations, practitioners are still concerned about the under representation of this group. The absence of Asian American practitioners not only obstructs the progress of diversity in public relations, but also discourages more Asian American talents to enter the field.

Wide Opportunities for a Career in Public Relations

At the same time, participants believed that “massive opportunities”, and “plenty of job openings” are available for Asian American practitioners in public relations. One respondent summarized the career situation as a “wide open door. Just walk in and work hard.” “I think there is definitely room and opportunities for Asian Americans in public relations,” said another participant.

Many believed that opportunities arise from the growing minority population and the increasing importance of diversity. “Asian Americans in public relations has enormous potential,” said one interviewee. “As America's cultural landscape is changing and as experts foresee that there will be no majority population by 2042, America's diverse segment will be more important than ever.”

Another participant provided a similar perspective:

I feel the public relations industry is fairly diverse culturally. My logic being that the variety of topics or issues involved in public relations are diverse and, therefore, need a diverse talent base to address these.

The discussion on this section shows practitioners’ positive statements on the population and the future of Asian American practitioners in public relations. They foresee the trends of diversity in the field, which demands more Asian Americans practitioners.

Professional Skills for Success in Public Relations

Practitioners suggested that certain skills are necessary for Asian Americans to help them be better prepared in the public relations industry. “Public speaking skills”, “verbal and written communication skills” are some of the skills necessary. One participant expressed his strong demands for Asian Americans’ communication skills:

More of them need to learn how to write and speak well, especially if English is not your first language. Strong writing and presentation skills for public relations professionals always rise to the top immediately. Asian Americans who can demonstrate this through presence of mind and voice will always get more notice, more opportunities and more success. Public relations is about communicating, if you can’t speak or write well, it doesn’t matter how good your ideas are. In a world of vast amounts of digital communications, strong writing and speaking skills still stand out.

Another of the participants also pointed out the importance of communication skills for an Asian American public relations practitioner:

Know how to talk. Public relations isn't for the shy, timid or anti-social person. You can be the smartest and most strategic person, but if you can't communicate an idea to a client effectively or pitch your story to a reporter, then you become obsolete. We're a results based industry and you need to be social to get results.

"Multi-language capability" is another skill mentioned by several respondents. They claimed that it would be a good asset for Asian Americans to be able to "read, write and speak in another language." "If they are fluent in both English and their Asian language, that's always a plus," said one Asian American. "People like to see that on resumes and sometimes it actually ends up coming in handy." A female public relations practitioner also considered that "possessing foreign language skills can be beneficial and separate an Asian American candidate from the crowd."

Some other participants commented on the personal characteristics of Asian Americans. "I believe being open minded, outgoing, professional and friendly will definitely help any person in the public relations field succeed. At times you do have to be aggressive and blunt, but only when necessary," said one respondent. "Don't be shy," another participant noted. "Take the time to attend professional development and networking events, and learn to play office politics." The comment of one participant also showed a similar concern:

Asian Americans need to learn how to ask questions and really pursue their passions. I think there is too much truth in the stereotype that we're too quiet, too passive, and want to avoid conflict.

Besides the skills to emphasize for Asian Americans, participants also mentioned these as general skills or characteristics that one should possess to be successful in public relations. Those skills includes "experience with social media", "journalism experience", "tech savvies", "cultural competency", "critical thinking", "flexible", "innovative thinking", "business understanding", "creative", "organized", "promotion-minded", "team oriented", "open to all cultures and perspectives", and "the ability to build relationship with people of all background".

"I think the skills that most public relations professionals have would be well applied regardless of cultural background," said one participant.

In all, those skills recommended above are all important for Asian Americans to succeed in public relations. However, they are not exclusively for Asian Americans. The skills can be useful to anyone looking to succeed in public relations. Participants used their own experience to provide advice on essential skills for Asian Americans, in the hope of enhancing the presence of this population in the public relations field.

Increasing Asian American Presence in Public Relations

Participants also provided various suggestions on what needs to be done to increase the number and visibility of Asian Americans in the public relations field. Their suggestions are discussed from personal, organizational, and industrial aspects, respectively.

Personal-Level: Self-Engaging to Public Relations

Some participants offered advice on self-preparation so as to seize opportunities in the public relations field. For example, one Asian American practitioner commented on the benefits of joining professional associations:

Get involved and take on leadership roles advancing the interests of Asian Americans outside of school and work. The Asian American Journalists Association would be a great example. You'll grow as a person and become a better practitioner in the public relations field.

Other practitioners suggested the necessity of internships and volunteering, especially for young practitioners, before they can enter the field. As one participant stated from his own experience:

Whenever I interview potential assistant candidates, I usually skim over their academic record to see where they have interned. I could care less what courses they've finished or what their GPA is. I care about the results they've produced at previous public relations agencies.

One participant provided a comprehensive list of suggestions for Asian American public relations practitioners:

They need to learn and understand where the trends are, where they're headed and what skills they need to get into the stream. Decide first what area you want to practice and enhance or fine-tune your knowledge and skills in that subject matter. Read news and

information; keep up to date on current affairs and happenings in your ethnic segments. Forget the typical passive, quiet general Asian stereotypes. Step, do your homework, understand your audience what you need to do get your messages to resonate with them.

Organizational-Level: Attracting and Embracing Asian Americans to the Field

At the organizational level, participants also brought various thoughts on how to enhance the presence of Asian Americans in public relations. Some called for more “public relations role models” in the field. “When Asian Americans see other Asian Americans in the field and doing well, it will help increase the numbers of them in public relations,” said one Asian American. Another interviewee also commented on the value of role models in public relations:

I believe that if more Asian Americans in the field of public relations were more outspoken about their reputation as prestigious figures (or if more of those individuals would act as examples for the younger generation to emulate), it would motivate more Asian Americans to the field of public relations.

Another way of thinking is to form a professional public relations organization for Asian Americans. As one participant noted, a public relations group is necessary for practitioners to “all come together to share resources, ideas, ... and learn from each other [of how] to succeed in the industry.” A professional public relations association, according to another participant, may also “help increase Asian American practitioners in public relations if they provided scholarship opportunities, mentorship programs, and outreach programs to young Asian Americans.”

With the trends of globalization, participants also suggested enhancing organizational awareness of diversity:

As globalization continues, and international barriers in business breakdown ..., public relations professionals and organizations should look to develop an increasingly diverse talent base to take advantage of this increasingly global business environment.

Industrial-Level: Increasing Overall Awareness of Public Relations

Practitioners indicated that many people lack the knowledge about the public relations industry, and they are unclear about “what public relations is and why it is a good industry to be in.” “Public relations isn’t an industry that people think of for a career or major while in college,” said one respondent. “People know that it exists, but they don’t know much about it

and how successful the field is.” Another interviewee also illustrated how little knowledge people have about this industry by providing his own personal experience:

I didn’t really know what public relations was all about until I started interning at my current firm. But I think once the Asian American community learns more about what public relations entails, we’ll see more and more Asian Americans enter this industry.

Since there is a lack of knowledge and awareness in public relations, participants expressed their strong desires on the mainstream society’s increasing understanding of this field. One interviewee commented on the importance of public relations and why we should enhance the overall awareness of this industry:

Increasing awareness of the industry overall would help increase the number practitioners in general. Since there are so many different sectors covered in public relations, just about anyone can find a way to practice public relations in an industry that interests them.”

Another participant also believed public relations is an important industry in which skills could apply to all the other industries:

Public relations is a great field to enter. The skills you need or acquire translate across all industries. This career path allows you the opportunity to work in any industry imaginable. I think if public relations/Corporate Communication were better promoted in the business schools, Asian American students pursuing business degrees may be more encouraged to try it.

Other respondents suggested Recruitment and outreach work to the universities or Asian American community about the public relations field to increase the industrial awareness of the public relations profession.

In summary, various solutions on increasing the number of Asian Americans in public relations are offered by participants, and they are discussed in order of the listed categories: personal-, organizational- and industrial-level. By combining all of the efforts from these three areas, a rise in Asian American practitioners can be expected in the near future.

Chapter 5 - Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explores Asian American practitioners' career motivations, identity-related experiences, and general perceptions of the public relations industry. In this chapter, detailed discussions drawn from findings and previous literatures are presented under each of three research questions. In addition, the study provides recommendations to organizations and the public relations industry on recognizing Asian American as a diverse and valuable group, as well as how to enhance the presence of this group to public relations. Study limitations are also addressed in this chapter.

Motivation for Career Choice in Public Relations

The first research question, "What are the motivations for Asian American practitioners to pursue a career in public relations?" examines why Asian Americans enter the field of public relations. The findings showed that enjoyment of writing, helping the community, and building relationships with others are the dominant reasons for Asian Americans to pursue a career in public relations, for those personal interests match the skills to do well in the field. Being attracted to the vivid, creative environment of public relations is also a significant motivating factor generating involvement in this industry. These two motivations are in line with findings from previous research studies (Ki & Khang, 2008; Pompper, 2004).

An important distinction found in this study was the discovery of family influence on Asian Americans career choice, which might largely affect their motivations to pursue a career in public relations. Practitioners in the study indicated that in Asian cultures, family plays a significant role in children's career decisions, and Asian parents usually expect their children to pursue a career in science, technology, accounting or other occupations with high security in terms of pay, stability and reputation. Compared to those traditional careers, public relations is a relatively new and nontraditional career consideration for Asian parents. Children are generally pressured to choose traditional, secure professions rather than careers that parents are not familiar with. This might be one of the most important reasons why there are not many Asian Americans entering the field of public relations. Thus, showcasing the security of public relations to Asian families might make them feel more comfortable to let their children consider

this nontraditional field. The more Asian family understands what public relations is and why it is a good industry to work in, the more likely that Asian children would choose a career in this field.

It is also important to note that several practitioners who were attracted to public relations were from other industries, and they entered the field of public relations with no professional training. This implies diverse talents are appreciated in public relations. Absorbing diverse knowledge and perceptions from other industries can benefit public relations, as this field is closely related with a variety of industries. In this respect, academic programs and school curriculum should pay attention to the diverse courses offered to students majoring in public relations so as to maintain a comprehensive development for potential public relations professionals.

Identity-Related Experiences in Public Relations

The second research question, “What are the identity-related experiences that practitioners have confronted on their daily work in public relations?” examines Asian American practitioners’ self-perceived identities, and how those identities affect their working experiences in public relations. The experiences are specifically focused on the practitioners’ challenges and benefits in relation to their identities.

Self-Defined Identities for Asian American Practitioners

Social identity theory (SIT) is applied in examining the initial self-definition of the group of Asian American practitioners and what they think of “who they are.” Practitioners’ self-defined identity, according to SIT, enables them to locate or define themselves in a certain social environment (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), and it shows their sense of belonging and memberships in particular groups (Taifel & Turner, 1979). Identity serves as the core in understanding Asian American practitioners’ working experiences in public relations.

The findings of the current study showed that in general, the identity of “Asian American” was highly accepted by practitioners. Practitioners all identified themselves with a certain degree of their ethnic origin, and none of them identified as “Americans”. This implies that practitioners believed Americans refer to Caucasians only. Even though some of them speak excellent English, grew up in American culture, and behave no differently than their white counterparts, they still considered themselves as minorities in the United States.

Although practitioners generally agreed they are “Asian Americans”, differences exist within the subgroups of Asian Americans. Nearly half of practitioners identified themselves as “Asians” rather than “Asian Americans”. While the mainstream society sees Asian American as a homogeneous group with the assumption that “Asian” and “Asian American” is interchangeable, practitioners who strictly hold an “Asian” identity make it clear that they are different from Asian Americans and should not be considered the same. The differences largely lie in their degree of assimilation into American culture, including English language fluency and cultural knowledge. It can be seen that people who are more adherent to Asian culture tend to identify themselves as Asians, and those who are more assimilated to American culture tend to identify themselves as Asian Americans (Gudykunst, 2001). It is crucial to understand the differences between Asians and Asian Americans. More attention needs to be given to this Asian American subgroup.

It is also found in the study that a proportion of participants specified their country origins rather than indicating “Asian” or “Asian American” in general, such as Chinese, Korean, Thai American, to name a few. Consciousness of specific country origins also showed practitioners’ clear standpoint that they are different from other Asian Americans and should not be considered as a whole. The cultures and languages of each Asian country are of greatly differences. Public relations organizations should be well aware of and carefully address the diversity issue of Asian Americans, abandoning the belief that one Asian American can represent all the other Asian Americans, or even represent the general minority group.

Therefore, although practitioners in public relations generally accept the identity of “Asian American”, we should always be mindful that Asian Americans are a diverse group with various countries of origin and differing cultures. Also, Asian and Asian American are two separate groups that share different cultures and values. The findings were theoretically significant in it discovers one’ sub-identity, which shows an extension of identity exist. The study develops the social identity theory and demonstrates that identity should be taken into close examination from vertical aspect. Under one identity, there might be different sub-identities involved. The findings were also practically significant as it increases public relations organizations’ awareness of the variation within the Asian American group, so that organizations can effectively address different needs of each subgroup of Asian Americans and better target the ethnic market.

With identities defined, the study then examines how those identities are related to their public relations experience. Practitioners indicated that their ethnic identity generally had no direct influence on their daily work in public relations, with subtle challenges and benefits detected. This indicates that Asian Americans in the public relations field are generally treated the same as their colleagues. However, the Asian American identity within them still makes them different than their white counterparts.

Challenges Facing Asian American Practitioners

Asian American practitioners reported no severe challenges, such as racial discrimination or unequal treatment. Nowadays, discrimination has changed into subtle forms; visible discrimination toward minorities in public relations seem to be uncommon phenomenon (Len-Rios, 1998). As respondents noted, stereotypes toward Asian Americans could be a major challenge for practitioners, which could lead to various forms of subtle discrimination.

The finding supports previous studies on the minority working condition in public relations that minorities are generally satisfied with their career in public relations, while admitting the existence of racial and gender stereotypes (Len-Rios, 1998; Pompper, 2004). The study found that practitioners perceived stereotypes in the following areas: physical appearance, personality, language and culture. The most salient stereotypes included looking like foreigners, quiet, and lack of appropriate social skills and are in line with previous Asian American stereotype studies (Lee & Joo, 2005; Park et al, 2006). Practitioners who specifically identified themselves as “Asians” might suffer more stereotypes from the language and culture aspect. Since English is a second language for many of them, Asian practitioners confront the stereotype that if they are not a native speaker, they cannot speak fluent English, even though some master English skills very well.

The findings of the current study also indicated Asian Americans’ struggle with attitudes toward their stereotypical image in public relations. Although practitioners admitted that stereotypes on Asian American appearance and names has a negative effect on their daily work in public relations, they appreciate on the other hand that it makes them stand out from the crowd and gain more attention and opportunities. This shows that Asian Americans are aware of appearance stereotypes toward them. Since the stereotypes can hardly be changed, practitioners try to see them and their Asian American identity in a positive way.

Benefits of being Asian American Practitioners

In spite of the challenges that practitioners have experienced, there are also benefits to being an Asian American working in public relations. Practitioners' perceived benefits were found in four aspects: language and cultural advantage, contribute to diversity in the workplace, accessible to minority organizations, and Asian American unique personal traits. This finding matches Pompper's (2004) study indicating that multicultural ability helps Asian Americans get involved in the Asian American community and audience easily, and enables them to link the multicultural values to organizational goals more effectively.

Concerning the first benefit in public relations, language and cultural advantage, both practitioners with "Asian" and "Asian American" identities believed their bi-lingual skills and transcultural knowledge help them engage more easily with the minority community and build rapport with their target audience. The second benefit found in the current study – contribute to diversity in the workplace – supports Ravazzani's (2006) research on minorities in public relations as well, who concluded that having minorities in the public relations field helps to produce fertile dialogue, more effective messages and increase innovation. Thus, public relations organizations with more Asian Americans in the field might work more efficiently and productively.

From the personal aspect, practitioners believed their minority identity provides them opportunities to access minority associations and conferences, and meet people with similar backgrounds. More importantly, being an Asian American in public relations makes it possible to change the negative stereotypes toward Asian Americans, especially on personality stereotypes like being demure, quiet, and not socialized. Since strong communication skills are highly valued in the public relations field, the outgoing, confident, articulate professional quality that practitioners possess may well change the stereotypes toward Asian Americans in organizations, and represent the group of Asian American in a new way.

Perceptions of Asian Americans in Public Relations

The third research question, "What are practitioners' general perceptions of Asian Americans in the public relations industry?" focuses on practitioners' thoughts and concerns on the general public relations industry. The findings of the study showed that there is still a lack of Asian Americans in the field. Practitioners from the current study indicated that they do not see

many Asian American colleagues in the public relations industry, nor do they have enough role models to follow. This lacking diverse work force in public relations verifies previous studies (Diggs-Brown & Zaharna, 1995; Hon & Brunner, 2000; Pompper, 2005; Wilson et al, 2003).

However, practitioners foresee a rosy prospect and mass opportunities for Asian Americans in the field. The opportunities lie in the changing diverse cultural landscapes of America, the growing Asian American population, and the diverse role of public relations itself. The findings support the previous studies on diversity and public relations (Len-Rios, 1998; Kern-Foxworth, 1989b; Schneider, 1987; Sims & Sims, 2008), in which public relations serves as a bridge between the public and organizations, and this role of public relations calls for a diversified work force to represent both the public and organizations (Sims & Sims, 2008).

Practitioners also suggested essential skills needed in public relations that are from the experience of practitioners themselves and are valuable for Asian Americans to be successful in public relations. Practitioners pointed out that “verbal and written communication skills”, “multi-language capability” and an open minded, outgoing personality, as well as some general skills are necessary for Asian Americans looking to succeed in public relations. Knowing these skills can help Asian Americans better understand what professionals need in this field so they can be better prepared.

There are also various suggestions offered by practitioners on increasing the presence of Asian Americans, which can be categorized into three aspects. From the personal aspect, one should seize every opportunity in public relations, look for possible internships and get involved with relevant activities outside school and work. From the organizational aspect, public relations companies should embrace more Asian Americans in the field, and more role models are needed to attract ethnic talents to the field. From the industrial aspect, increasing the overall awareness of the public relations industry is of significant importance, as too many people, especially Asian Americans, do not know what public relations is and why it is a good profession to be in. Recruitment to universities and outreach to Asian American communities may help enhance the awareness of public relations. The various skills and suggestions mentioned above contribute to attract more Asian Americans to the field of public relations.

Recommendations

This study provides valuable recommendations to organizations and the field of public relations. First, organizations should be mindful that Asian American is a diverse group. Each Asian country has its own language and culture, and they possess entirely different values and customs. For instance, although people's backgrounds from Korea and Philippine are all considered Asian Americans, they use different language systems and have dissimilar social values, which make them separate from each other. Differences also exist between "Asians" and "Asian Americans", which are often neglected by the mainstream. Because of different degrees of cultural assimilation and language knowledge involved, Asians and Asian Americans do not see themselves as the same. Public relations organizations should be carefully aware of these differences so as to formulate effective plans to target desirable audiences. With the expansion of Asian American consumer markets, strategies toward those markets should be specified and customized to each subgroup of Asian Americans. Being mindful about the diverse Asian American group is not only beneficial for organizations but also important within organizations. Many organizations tend to believe their minority employees can represent the general minority population. However, an Indian employee may not know much about Chinese customs, and a Chinese employee may not share the same perceptions as a Chinese American. Organizations should avoid assigning one minority employee to perform on behalf of the overall minority group.

Second, organizations should see Asian American as a valuable group. Many Asians and Asian Americans possess bi-lingual and transcultural skills. Their multi-language capacity and deep understandings of Asian cultures and heritage are essential for organizations to connect with ethnic markets or do business within an international context. Also, Asian Americans can contribute diverse perspectives to the workplace and be well aware of sensitive ethnic issues. This helps organizations deliver multi-facet messages and comprehensive information. Moreover, the diversity role of public relations demands more Asian American talents in the field, as the more diverse public relations is, the more efficiently it works. The increasing Asian American population and growing Asian American markets also need more Asian American practitioners in the field to address their concerns.

Several practical strategies are suggested to embrace more Asian Americans to the field of public relations. First, the industry should offer more working visas to Asian practitioners, as

many of them need sponsorships to legally work in the U.S. Compared to technology industries, the situation of visa sponsorships given to Asians or other international professionals in public relations is far less promising. This limits the opportunities for more Asian talents to pursue a career in public relations. Second, an Asian American public relations association is urgently demanded. Since most Asian American groups in public relations are still branches of large organizations, no independent organization has been seen in America so far. A professional public relations association for Asian Americans is essentially significant as it could strongly tie practitioners together, and provides valuable opportunities and support to this group of people. Third, academic institutions should attract more young Asian Americans to study public relations. Schools can achieve this by holding educational exhibitions, inviting speakers from Asian American practitioners in the field, and offering various scholarships to Asian American students. Finally, Asian Americans themselves should learn more about the importance of public relations. Not only Asian families but also the general Asian community need to increase their knowledge of what public relations is and why it is a great industry.

Limitations

Several limitations can be found in the current study. First, the sample size is relatively small. Nineteen practitioners in the study may not well represent the general Asian American population in the public relations field. The small sample was partly due to the low profile of Asian Americans working in public relations that makes them hard to reach. The geographical location of the study also limits the opportunity to reach out to more Asian Americans in the field, like those who are mostly living in metropolitan areas.

Second, the study uses a social media tool, LinkedIn, to obtain the information of each practitioner, and to get the contact email or send direct InMail messages. Other researchers have not tested this social media tool so its potential negative effects are unknown. Since all information on LinkedIn is based on self-reporting, it might be possible that certain qualified candidates for the study who describe themselves differently were neglected or filtered.

Third, since this study is an exploratory research study on the subject of Asian American public relations practitioners, there needs to be more examination of the subgroup of Asian American practitioners. For instance, it would be interesting to compare Asians with Asian Americans, or make comparisons among Asian Americans with specific country origins. Also,

since the study does not focus on multi-ethnic Asian American practitioners, it would be important to analyze how they perceive themselves and their perspective on the public relations industry. Future research studies are encouraged to utilize other methodologies, such as experiment, survey, and focus groups to learn more about Asian American public relations practitioners.

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Appendix A - Interview Guide

The purpose of this interview guide is to gather opinions and perceptions of Asian American public relations practitioners on the PR industry. This is an academic research study by Jing Qiu, a graduate student of A.Q. Miller School of Journalism & Mass Communications at Kansas State University, under guidance of Dr. Nancy Muturi. Your response to the following questions will contribute towards PR education, specifically understanding diversity issues in the field. The study causes no foreseeable risks and you can withdraw from the interview at any time. If you have any questions relate to this interview guide, please contact Jing Qiu at cathyqiu@ksu.edu or (785) 323-7031. If you have any questions concerning the method or the research procedure, please contact Dr. Muturi at nmuturi@ksu.edu or the University Research Compliance Office, 203 Fairchild Hall, KSU, Manhattan, KS 66502, (785) 532-3224.

Please fill in your demographic information and answer the following questions:

Gender: _____ Age: _____ Year (s) in PR: _____ Education Level: _____

1. What was your motivation to pursue a career in public relations?
2. How do you identify yourself ethnically?
3. To what extent does your ethnic background affect your daily work in public relations?
4. What is your perspective on the general career situation for Asian Americans in public relations?
5. What kind of challenges, if any, have you faced as an Asian American practitioner working in public relations?
6. What are the benefits/advantages of being a minority in public relations?
7. What special characteristics or skills, if any, do you think Asian Americans should possess that help them be successful in public relations?
8. Do you have any suggestions of increasing Asian American practitioners in public relations?

Appendix B - Informed Consent Form

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

INFORMED CONSENT

PROJECT TITLE: The Examination of Career Motivations, Experiences and Perceptions among Asian American Public Relations Practitioners

APPROVAL DATE OF PROJECT: _____ EXPIRATION DATE OF PROJECT: _____

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: CO-
INVESTIGATOR(S):

Dr. Nancy Muturi
Prof. Todd Simon
Dr. Louise Benjamin
Ms. Jing Qiu

CONTACT AND PHONE FOR ANY
PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS:

nmuturi@ksu.edu/ (785) 532-
3890

IRB CHAIR CONTACT/PHONE
INFORMATION:

Rick Scheidt, Chair, Committee on Research
Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild
Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS
66506, (785) 532-3224.

SPONSOR OF
PROJECT:

N/A

PURPOSE OF THE
RESEARCH:

The purpose of this study is to examine Asian American public relations practitioners' career motivations, experiences, and their perceptions of the public relations industry.

PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED:

This study will conduct e-mail interviews of Asian American public relations practitioners. Please sign this informed consent form and send it back as an email attachment as an indicator of your acceptance to participate in this study. You will receive a follow-up email with interview questions. Once you respond to the questions, please send them back as an e-mail attachment with no identifying information. Your name and any personal information on this form and your e-mail correspondence will be kept confidential.

ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES OR TREATMENTS, IF ANY, THAT MIGHT BE ADVANTAGEOUS TO SUBJECT:

N/A

LENGTH OF STUDY:

1 year

RISKS ANTICIPATED:

No known risks

BENEFITS ANTICIPATED:

This study may help more Asian Americans involved in public relations and enhance diversity in this industry.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY:

Your name/signature will only appear in this informed consent form and no identifying personal information will be in the responses to the interview questions. Any information you provide will be used solely for the purpose of this study and will be read only by the researchers. Only email attachments will be printed and any other personal information

from emails and consent form will remain confidential throughout the interview process.

IS COMPENSATION OR MEDICAL TREATMENT AVAILABLE IF INJURY OCCURS:

You will be informed the objectives of study before participating. You can withdraw from the study at any time in the condition of any discomfort. No physical injury is anticipated.

PARENTAL APPROVAL FOR MINORS:

N/A

TERMS OF PARTICIPATION: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is completely voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

(Remember that it is a requirement for the P.I. to maintain a signed and dated copy of the same consent form signed and kept by the participant)

Participant Name: _____

Participant Signature: _____

Date: _____