“Blowing up is a luxury”: Korean American Audience Reception to *Beef* (2023)

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ABSTRACT

Since the late 2010s, there has been a boom of Asian American characters in Hollywood. *Beef* (2023) is a key example—a television series that features a predominantly Asian American cast. Using Stuart Hall (1988)’s framework of “new ethnicities,” this thesis presents the audience reception to *Beef* and its depiction of the Korean American diaspora through the findings from eight in-depth interviews conducted with Korean Americans between the ages of 18-25. I argue that specific cultural references in *Beef* contrasts previous stereotypical representations of the diaspora and enable audiences to create a sense of community and belonging. Furthermore, I argue that *Beef* presents a vision of Korean American masculinity. Acknowledging that Asian Americans were historically portrayed as being emasculated and lacking anger, *Beef* allowed audiences to negotiate the meaning of masculinity in the context of the diaspora. Finally, I raise concerns about the insular and narrow scope of the community that reception to *Beef* suggests, which can have damaging ramifications for pan-ethnic solidarity.

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INTRODUCTION

"I'd never seen a more Korean American show… The series takes an I.Y.K.Y.K. approach to many of these cultural details: if you know, you know."

- Inkoo Kang (2023) for *The New Yorker*

Released in 2023 on Netflix, *Beef* is a deeply Korean American television program. Beyond the fact that many of the cast and showrunner/creator are Korean American, *Beef* places details that are distinctly Korean American—such as the upbeat ringtone of the Korean messaging app KakaoTalk or the character Isaac's insistence that his younger cousin use the honorific *hyung* even when speaking English. As a Korean American, I "know" the cultural references peppered throughout the series. However, I represent a small percentage of the audience. What is unique about *Beef* is that this "I.Y.K.Y.K. approach" is maintained despite being distributed through Netflix, a global streaming service.

In the last fifteen years, Asian American representation has significantly increased in mainstream Hollywood productions (Venkatraman, 2023). *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) was the first Hollywood film in several decades to feature an all-Asian cast. Since then, films such as *Minari* (2020) and *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once* (2022) have also prominently featured Asian American casts and narratives. This trend has continued in television, with *Beef* being a prime example.

This thesis aims to investigate the reception of *Beef* to Korean American audiences, who have rarely been represented in mainstream media in the past. How does the Korean American diaspora respond to this deeply Korean American television? How do audiences use *Beef* to build and negotiate their identities as members of the diaspora? What does it mean to be Korean American? I aim to answer these questions through an audience reception analysis of *Beef*, using responses from semi-structured interviews with Korean American audiences.

Beef as a New Genre of Asian American Representation

Beef is a limited television series created by Lee Sung Jin, released on Netflix in April 2023. Colloquially meaning "to fight" or "to have a problem with," *Beef* is a comedy-drama that centers around the characters Danny Cho (Steven Yeun) and Amy Lau (Ali Wong) after they are involved in a road rage incident. With nearly all main characters being Asian American, the show depicts the personal struggles and the culture of Asian Americans in Los Angeles, from families of both low and high socioeconomic status.

Creator and showrunner Lee is an immigrant himself, who was born in South Korea and immigrated to the United States as a child. *Beef* is a show-running debut for Lee, who previously used the name "Sonny Lee" while working as a screenwriter. Reflecting on changing his name to the traditional three-syllable Korean version, Lee notes that *Beef* includes personal experiences and feelings: it "is super specific and it's because I felt comfortable leaning into the things that I have experienced" (Rose, 2023). Lee also explains that he intentionally wrote the story with two Asian Americans in opposing roles, wanting to "remove that Asians versus white people lens" to remove audiences from inter-racial conflict (Rose, 2023).

With eight Emmy awards from thirteen nominations, *Beef* received critical acclaim upon its release. The show is praised for its exploration of human vulnerability, anger, and the feeling of powerlessness (Holmes, 2023; Abad Santos, 2023; Kang, 2023; Kaur, 2023; Tallerico, 2023). Many critics pinpoint the role of race and the Asian American identity in the series. Some praise the "distinct Asian-American lens" that the story is told through, and how the authors understand that "the Asian-American experience isn't a monolith." For example, Amy's upbringing as a daughter to working-class Chinese and Vietnamese immigrants differs significantly from her

husband's, who was raised by an upper-class and fluently English-speaking family (Abad Santos, 2023). This characterization of Asian American characters means that it is "both relevant and not that Danny and Amy are Asian American" (Kang, 2023). The series does not identify the unique struggles of Asian Americans in contrast to other racial groups. Rather, it communicates common human struggles in the context of Asian Americans. Therefore, I argue that *Beef* represents a new era of Asian American representation on television—the creation of programs that view Asian Americans as what Stuart Hall might call a"new ethnicity."

"New Ethnicities": Diaspora and Asian American Representation

Stuart Hall (1988) uses media texts created by Black and Asian cultural producers in the United Kingdom during the 1980s to argue that "new ethnicities" have emerged. Hall notes that the *diaspora* stems from the periphery of the dominant culture and incorporates the culture of the ethnic homeland. Then, the diaspora contests over what it means to belong to the dominant culture while using the influences from the culture of the homeland.

Durham (2004) utilizes the "new ethnicities" framework and investigates the relationship between diasporic audiences and mainstream media texts, such as television, film, and music, in the context of Indian American girls. Durham argues that immigrants do not attempt to "find a place in both cultural worlds" and rather recognize "the need to assert a new identity position" that "rejected the options offered by Indian as well as American media texts" (155). Therefore, there must be representations of the diaspora itself—relying on that of the homeland is not a suitable alternative.

Parker and Song (2009) expand upon Hall's concept of "new ethnicities" in the age of immediate cultural exchange through the Internet. Using British Chinese forums as an example,

Parker and Song argue that "new ethnicities" in the age of the Internet are beyond negotiation of their national and cultural allegiances of the past and the present, but are "shaped by transnational cultural formations" of the global diasporas (584). The Internet enables a wider array of representations, as well as immediate responses to social injustices. While these characteristics in themselves do not create social cohesion, the authors argue that "what matters is the content distributed through them, and the social action stimulated as a result" (600). In recent years, materials distributed through the Internet have gone beyond forums and user-created content. Mainstream media productions, such as *Beef*, are able to cross regional boundaries through subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) platforms.

Using the framework of "new ethnicities," Asian American representation in television can be viewed as a site of negotiation for Asian diasporas. Distribution of television through the internet also facilitates cultural exchange. However, the history of representation highlights that this may not have been possible in the past due to the hegemony of the dominant culture—Asian Americans were portrayed through the lens of a predominantly White industry.

"Yellow Peril" and "Model Minority": Asian American Representation in Television

"Yellow Peril" has been the longest-standing stereotype in Asian American television representation, where Asians and Asian Americans have been portrayed "as threatening to take over, invade, or otherwise negatively Asianize the US nation and its society and culture" (Ono and Pham, 2009, pg 25). The discourse of the yellow peril is structurally embedded in media, and themes of Asians as "merciless, immoral, subhuman, and a threat to white women and whites" have been reproduced constantly with more recent instances linking the yellow peril discourse to

issues with the workforce, such as exporting "US jobs" and commodity globalization and the dangers of Asian-made products (Ono and Pham, 2009, pg38).

As an extension of the "yellow peril" discourse, the concept of the model minority has influenced Asian American representation. Asians and Asian Americans are represented as "smart, good students, from good families, law-abiding citizens, and as getting good jobs, especially as doctors, scientists, and other medical professions" (Ono, 2017, p. 108). Not only does this pit Asian Americans against other racial minorities, but it also poses Asian Americans as a threat to the United States. This is especially highlighted by the trope of robotic Asian Americans, via primetime hospital dramas such as *E.R.* and *Grey's Anatomy* that portray Asian American characters as "too focused on awards and schools and not focused enough on the lives of their patients" (Ono, 2017, p. 109).

Another branch of Asian American representation in media is the "forever foreigner." This also links back to previous stereotypes, in that Asian Americans can only be considered as "yellow perils" if they are considered an outsider. Tasha Oren (2005) notes the difficulty in finding Asian *American* representation, as opposed to Asians as foreigners. For instance, Oren highlights that "contemporary Hollywood duplicates its own conditions of production by concocting endless narratives where capable Asian foreigners arrive to ably assist local (American) police officers or distressed-but-plucky heroines… then disappear to their home countries" (342). Asian men, in particular, are often martial arts practitioners who cannot speak fluent English and are culturally ignorant (Park et al, 2006). Representations of Asian Americans, especially men, have long been stereotyped as being foreign.

Korean American representation in particular has also stayed in line with the overall Asian American representation. August and Kim argue that in the past, Korean Americans "have

been cast as model minorities, successful entrepreneurs, and/or devious shop-owners—a set of revised orientalist clichés designed to suit the momentary political needs of a U.S. history that continually reinvents itself to maintain a structure of racial dominance" (2016, p.336). Asian American representation, especially that of East Asians, has stayed monolithic. A notable example is the actor Phillip Ahn, the first Korean American actor in Hollywood and one of the first American citizens to be born to Korean parents. Ahn had over 200 roles in film and television from the 1930s to the 70s, playing characters of varying Asian ethnicities, which reinforces the notion that Hollywood viewed Asian Americans as one entity without acknowledging ethnic differences[1] (Chung, 2006, p. 50).

In the twenty-first century, Asian American representations have become more prominent in television, with many ensemble casts featuring Asian American characters and actors. These include John Cho in *Selfie* and *FlashForward,* and Daniel Dae Kim in *Lost* and *Hawaii Five-O*, where they were one of the only Asian cast in an otherwise predominantly white and male cast (Ho, 2016, pg 57-58). Contemporary television, therefore, is "structured to support white male narratives, with Asian Americans serving other characters' interests as sidekicks, professional consultants, and/or scientific specialists… [who] work well under the purview of lead (white) characters, and speak unaccented English" (Ho, 2016, p. 61). Hollywood has been resistant to casting more than one Asian American, let alone non-white character, in an ensemble cast (Davé, 2017).

However, a new shift in the industry led to the creation of Asian American film and television, featuring ensemble casts of nearly all Asian American characters. As demonstrated in

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[1] The first American television series that heavily discussed Korean settings and cultures was M*A*S*H, which debuted in 1973 on CBS and depicts the Korean War. M*A*S*H included a large number of Korean characters, who were often played by Asian actors of other ethnicities. However, the show "tended to steer clear of explicit interrogations of institutional racism and engrained American xenophobia, opting instead to use Korean characters and settings as exotic backdrops" for White characters (Diffrient, 43).

Beef, these media texts are challenging the stereotypical representations of Asian Americans—particularly of men and their masculinity.

"Angry Asian Man": Asian American Masculinity and Rage on Television

"You have this serene Zen Buddhist thing going" Jordan, one of the only major non-Asian American characters, tells Amy. While Amy begrudgingly agrees to please Jordan, *Beef* provides a stark contrast to the hegemonic model minority myth and the stereotype of being docile. What makes *Beef* a product of "new ethnicity" creation is this departure from prior television representations that relied on the dominant American culture, and its unique portrayal of Asian American masculinity and anger.

Asian American men have been "materially and psychically feminized within the context of a larger U.S. cultural imaginary" (Eng, 2001, p.2). Ono and Pham (2009) argue that the yellow peril discourse of Asian American media representations has necessitated the emasculation, "as a way to cover over anxiety over power relations" (p. 71). Contemporary representations have also portrayed Asian American men as nerdy, geeky, and physically unattractive— continuing the dominant culture that they are "less powerful than and inferior to all other men, be they white, African American, Latino, or other" (p. 71).

Consequently, anger by Asian American figures has traditionally been absent in Hollywood productions. Oren argues that the dominant understanding of becoming angry is "an act of agency and loss: loss of temper, composure, and self-control." Furthermore, the expression of anger is "both privilege and a last resort, a luxury and the explosion of bottled-up frustration" which can also become cathartic. (Oren, 2005, p. 344-5). This privilege, however, has not been afforded to Asian American portrayals.

Due to the stereotypical portrayal of Asian American bodies in mainstream media, Asian Americans have historically turned to other forms of media to provide alternative representations. One influential source is the blog *Angry Asian Man,* which started in 2001. The creator Phil Yu states that "the very idea of 'Angry Asian' anything stands in defiance to the destructive expectation that Asian Americans are supposed to be passive, willing subjects just along for the ride" (p. 117). Yu's blog offers an alternative representation of Asian American masculinity.

Another influential figure is the artist David Choe, who happens to play Isaac in *Beef.* He published a self-titled artbook as well as a documentary film that articulates his experience as a Los Angeles Koreatown native during the L.A. Riots. Self-branding his art as "Koreans Gone Bad," Wendy Sung argues that "part of selling his work is his persona and associating his personal narrative to sites of criminality, pornography, the spectacle of violence and the riots themselves, enacting a public type of legitimizing performance to buttress his marginal status" (94) and that this representation "ushers in constellations of questioning and obfuscation that query Asian American respectability politics" (p. 101). Several years later, Choe's character in *Beef* also reflects this branding and is given a larger platform to be showcased.

In the past decade, Asian American men have begun to steer away from previous stereotypes, especially that of being asexual and unattractive, and have "renegotiated their position within the present hierarchy of romantic preference" (Chong and Kim, 2022). They are beginning to be seen as having romantic and sexual appeal, especially to White women. However, this change continues to be based on existing stereotypes. Chong and Kim argue that this new position of Asian American masculinity is a "construction that combines the elements

of White hegemonic masculinity and the model minority-based ‘Asian’ masculinity” (2022). Meaning that being seen as masculine is built upon another stereotype of being a model minority.

One notable representation of Korean American masculinity that exemplifies this notion is *The Walking Dead*, which premiered in 2012. The character Glenn Rhee—the breakthrough role of *Beef’*s Steven Yeun—offers a vision of an Asian American man as a hero. Glenn is a non-feminized Asian American character who is seen in a romantic relationship with a White woman and as an invaluable member of a post-apocalyptic world plagued by zombies. At the same time, Ho argues that Glenn’s position as a valued member depends on his model minority attributes—being loyal, strategic, and efficient. Furthermore, Ho argues that Glenn’s masculinity is only afforded by the flawed masculinity of the White characters, and since *The Walking Dead* is a series that features a post-racial world (2016, p.f 61).

Despite being played by the same actor, Danny is a stark contrast to Glenn. Danny is not strategic and efficient but hot-tempered and suicidal. He is not a hero amid a post-racial zombie apocalypse, but a struggling owner of a contracting business in present-day Los Angeles. However, Danny and *Beef* are able to remove themselves from existing stereotypes. Danny is not seen as a “yellow peril” stealing American opportunities, and his financial struggles and temper are far from the characteristics of a robotic model minority. Danny is also not a foreigner—California is where his family belongs, not Korea. Therefore, the portrayal of Danny offers a new vision of Korean American masculinity and media representation. How is this new vision received by Korean American audiences? How can the new portrayal of masculinity and rage function as a site of negotiation of the “new ethnicity”?

Chapter Breakdown

In recent years, shows like *Beef* have found a space between Asian and American television—representing the concept of "new ethnicities." This thesis aims to further the scholarship on Asian American audiences, and Korean Americans more specifically. How does a Korean American program resonate differently compared to a Korean production or a hegemonic White-dominated American production? Specifically, I am interested in the reception of Korean American masculinity as depicted in *Beef* and how this departure from existing Hollywood stereotypes impacts audiences.

In Chapter One, I outline my methodology that was used to answer these questions. I conduct semi-structured interviews with Korean Americans. I ask questions regarding Asian American representation on television in general and the participants' prior experiences with them. I then show two clips from *Beef*, featuring the Korean American character Danny and his interactions with the rest of his family. I also provide information on how I selected the scenes to show the participants and the recruitment process.

Chapter Two provides the context for analyzing the interview responses. First, I provide my textual analysis of the scenes from *Beef* that I used during the interview. I provide my own reading of the scenes because as a Korean American myself, my own readings of the text guided the interviews and their analysis. I also outline findings from the first portion of the interviews, where I asked about participants' prior experiences with seeing Asian American characters in Hollywood productions. These findings give the context as to how my participants were viewing the scenes.

Chapters Three and Four provide the findings and discussions of participants' reception to watching *Beef*. In Chapter Three, I discuss how *Beef* and its specific references to Korean

culture enabled participants to create a sense of community and belonging. I argue that while *Beef* enabled audiences to negotiate their identities as Korean Americans, it can also lead to insularity—where due to the specificity to Korean American culture results in distance from the pan-ethnic vision of Asian America.

In Chapter Four, I argue that *Beef* allowed participants to create a vision of Korean American masculinity through the characters' projection and repression of anger. This representation is valuable given how it was absent from mainstream media in the past. Participant responses showed that there were culturally specific elements that make the Korean American expectations of masculinity differ from that of the dominant, White, and American culture. However, I acknowledge that cross-references to personal experiences were crucial in whether or not participants accepted or rejected elements to be a part of their imagination of Korean American culture. Again, this insular thinking can be detrimental to solidarity within the ethnic group.

Finally, I conclude this thesis by discussing the limitations of my research and suggest directions for future study. I hope that this thesis sheds light on the significance of diversity in representation in mainstream media—why representation does matter.

CHAPTER 1: METHODOLOGY

Literature Review: Audience Analysis

My thesis utilizes the theoretical framework of audience analysis, and the method of semi-structured interviews. In his seminal work, David Morley develops an empirical method of researching audiences. He utilizes Stuart Hall's encoding and decoding theory and establishes that "the text cannot be considered in isolation" but the meaning of the text "must be thought of in terms of which set of discourses it encounters in any particular set of circumstances, and how this encounter may re-structure both the meaning of the text and the discourses which it meets" (Morley, 1980, p.138). Class, power, and ideology of the audience play a crucial role in how they decode the text.

Since then, interviews and audience analysis have been used transnationally, comparing audience groups of different nationalities (Wagner, Boczkowski, and Mitchelstein, 2021; Wagner et al., 2021; Espiritu, 2011). Furthermore, prior scholarship has examined the reception of Hollywood productions in Asian audiences. Gao (2016) found that Chinese university students perceive U.S. television programs to have an idyllic authenticity, and Su (2021) found that Chinese audiences use Hollywood films as a tool for negotiating their own culture and society. In the context of South Korea, Kim (2020) argues that a localized concept of American television exists where they are perceived to have higher production value, diversity, and narrative strength.

Asian American audiences have also been a site of scholarly attention. Oh (2011), acknowledging the little academic attention on second-generation immigrants, notes that they undergo constant ethnic and racial identity exploration. Upon watching Korean films, Korean American youths showed a desire for cultural and ethnic connection that is not available in the dominant culture, although they maintained distance from Korean films and considered them as

their media. Durham (2004) argues similarly: the cultural products of ethnic heritage represent both a sense of longing and desire to connect with one's heritage yet remain distant and unfamiliar.

A gap in literature exists to discuss how Asian Americans respond to representations of themselves—the diasporic community. As Oh and Durham argue, Korean Americans do not feel a sense of belonging with either Korean or American media. When Hollywood is finally greenlighting productions about diasporic communities, how do audiences engage with these texts?

Methodology: Semi-structured Interviews

In order to explore the audience reception to *Beef*, I conducted interviews. A total of eight interviews were conducted The interviews lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. I discuss the participant criteria, recruitment process, and the interview protocol below.

Participant Criteria

Participants must have been between the ages of 18-25 at the time of the interview, which was conducted between January and February of 2024. There were two key reasons for establishing this age limit. First, differences in responses due to generational differences can be avoided. The Asian American mediascape is rapidly changing, and older Korean Americans' experiences with representation in television are expected to be vastly different from that of a young adult. The second reason for the age limit is that this research specifically explores the reception of audiences who have been exposed to SVOD services from a young age, given that *Beef* was a Netflix original and was only distributed through SVOD platforms.

Furthermore, participants must identify as Korean American and not have lived outside of the United States for more than five years. This ensures that all Korean American participants have familiarity with American culture, both in their lives and also in the media. Also, participants must have been raised by at least one parent or guardian who identifies as either Korean or Korean American.

Finally, participants were not required to have watched *Beef* in its entirety to be interviewed. Instead, I screened two three-minute clips from *Beef* during the interview.

Recruitment

Upon the Internal Review Board's approval (see Appendix A) in January 2024, recruitment advertisements (see Appendix B) were posted in email newsletters and group chats for various Korean, Korean American, and Asian American organizations. Two student organizations at a public university in the Southeastern United States posted an advertisement in their email newsletter—the Korean Student Association and Asian Student Union. Furthermore, the campus ministry of the university's local Korean Presbyterian church also posted a recruitment advertisement in the member-only group chat via KakaoTalk, as well as the young adult ministry of a Korean mega-church based in a metropolitan area in the Southeastern United States.

From the recruitments, six participants contacted me to be interviewed. Two more participants were recruited using the snowball method, with one of the participants recommending the experience to their friends after being interviewed.

Participants

The participants ranged in age from 19-24, with seven of eight participants being university students. The remaining participant was a recent graduate. All Korean American participants were either born in the United States or had immigrated before the age of five. Further information about the participants is found in Appendix C. To protect the anonymity of the participants, they are referred to by pseudonyms in this thesis that were selected by me.

Interview Protocol

The interview was loosely structured and consisted of three sections. In the first section, I asked participants to share their experiences with watching Asian American characters in American television and film productions. Then, I showed a three-minute clip from the first episode of *Beef*, depicting a conversation between the character Danny and his brother Paul. I then asked participants to point out aspects that were either surprising or felt relatable or otherwise stood out. I repeated the process after showing a second clip taken from the eighth episode, also lasting around three minutes, depicting Danny, a white police investigator, Paul, and his parents.

CHAPTER 2: TEXTUAL ANALYSIS AND THE ASIAN AMERICAN MEDIASCAPE

The Asian American Media Landscape

In the first portion of the interview, I asked the participants about their prior experiences with Asian American representation in television and film. During the conversations, four major themes were commonly found: (1) audiences do not actively seek out representation, (2) Hollywood is not their own source, (3) current characters are riddled with stereotypes, and (4) Hollywood has improved in recent years.

Audiences do not actively seek out Asian American representation

All participants responded that they do not actively look for Asian American characters or narratives when deciding on a television show to watch. In part, participants claimed that Asian American characters were simply unavailable to them in the past. George responded that it "just came down to the fact that there was none." Benjamin also simply responded with a laugh when asked how often he came across Asian American characters in the past. Frances stated that they never expect Asian American characters to be present in the television shows they watch.

However, all participants also responded that Asian American characters can either work as a hook or help them continue to watch a show. Agnes pointed out that characters like Christina of *Grey's Anatomy,* played by Sandra Oh, made the overall show more likable and engaging. Charlotte also shared similar sentiments, saying that Asian American characters can be "a hook" where it adds interest to the show and helps them continue reading. David claimed that Asian American characters can bring a "comforting feeling" when watching television shows. Overall, the responses highlight that while Asian American characters elicit positive attitudes towards the

overall show, their presence is not a consideration when selecting and watching a television program.

Hollywood is not their own source

Some respondents also indicated that when they want to see Asian American characters or seek cultural familiarity, they turn to Korean programming instead. Charlotte claims that they primarily watch Korean television shows. Since their parents mainly watched Korean programs at home, Charlotte feels more familiar and comfortable with Korean programs. Furthermore, they specifically mentioned how a television program feels more relatable "if they look similar to me." Eleanor also noted that Korean television is more relatable, particularly in terms of culture and humor.

George also responded similarly, saying that since they grew up watching Korean television at home, they feel a deeper connection and can better understand the cultural nuances. Benjamin shared similar experiences, despite lacking fluency in the Korean language. They are currently watching the Korean reality program *Running Man*, since it is a "childhood show" yet he "watch[es] it with English captions …[to] understand what's going on." Benjamin's experience suggests that despite the language barrier, Korean Americans find comfort and familiarity in Korean media productions.

Stereotyped and Marginalized Asian American Characters

Participants also stated that Asian American characters are often given minor roles and portrayed in stereotyped ways. When prompted, participants were able to quickly identify film or television programs with Asian American characters yet they concluded that the characters were

unimportant or unmemorable. Agnes pointed out that there was an Asian American character in *Riverdale* (2017-2023), despite being unable to recall the character's name.

All participants shared dismay about these characters. They found them to be reduced to stereotypes and flat. Eleanor discussed how most characters they have seen are stereotyped as being the "nerd" or the "computer science whiz," who lack social intelligence, are introverted, and are physically unattractive. As an example of this stereotype, Eleanor used Ned ("Spiderman's best friend") from Marvel Studios' *Spiderman* series (2017-). Eleanor also notes how these stereotypes impacted the way her peers treated her at school, and even how they viewed themselves. Even though they grew up in a metropolitan area with a higher concentration of Asian Americans, they were expected to excel in math and science classes. They said, "I was never offended, but like, maybe in small ways… maybe like more subconsciously." Frances also noted there is typically one "token Asian character" who is smart but submissive, and only "comes out when the main character needs something."

Meanwhile, participants have noticed a greater number of Asian American characters in recent action and superhero films—although they remain stereotyped. Benjamin recalled the character of Wong in *Dr. Strange (2016)* and its sequels, pointing out how "they've been in the previous movie, and so they kind of continue to be in the movie" rather than being given a fully fleshed-out character arc. Participants also discussed Korean actors being given roles in Hollywood productions, particularly in action or superhero films. Some participants recalled Park Seo-joon's role in *The Marvels* (2023), "some random character with minimal screen time" as described by George. Benjamin also highlighted Lee Byung-hyun's role in *G.I. Joe: The Rise of the Cobra* (2009). He also voiced concern with the genre's use of Asian (American) characters, saying studios cast Asian and Asian American actors as a "diversity thing" but

"you'll see Asians as like a supporting role at most, usually here and there… as a cameo type of thing."

Hollywood's improvements in past years

Despite the dissatisfaction, the participants commonly voiced that they believe Hollywood is improving in terms of representation. David said he has especially seen changes around the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though it was a Korean production, *Parasite* (2019) received accolades from Hollywood-centered awards, which they believe put Korean and Asian Americans in the spotlight. Eleanor also praised *To All the Boys I Loved Before* (2018) for moving away from stereotypes. Multiple participants also brought up *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021), the first superhero film from a major studio with an Asian American lead. Participants noted they purposefully watched the film for its Asian American representation.

Similarly, participants tended to feel a sense of responsibility for watching Hollywood productions centered around the Asian American experience. Participants also felt the need to watch *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), which was marketed as being a monumental film for the Asian American community (Lopez 2021). *Minari* (2020) and *Past Lives* (2023) were also mentioned as being felt like a "must-watch." George discussed how he sees greater changes in independent films—such as *Minari* and *Past Lives*—where characters are more "fleshed out" and "nuanced." At the same time, George considers those films to be "meant for Asian people," understanding that they may only cater to relatively niche audiences.

At the same time, participants also voiced concern with recent Asian-American-centered films. David considers *Minari* to have portrayed and highlighted the stereotypical aspects of the

Asian American experience by solely focusing on the struggles of immigration. Henry suggested that they "didn't grow up with that kind of experience" and "personally can't relate to the immigrant experience" as depicted in existing narratives as a third-generation immigrant.

Watching Beef in today's mediascape

Having watched *Beef* was not a requirement to be a participant, yet a few participants had already watched the show in its entirety prior to the interview. Frances highlighted that they "thought it was a Korean drama at first," but decided to watch upon realizing that "it was an American show about Asian people." George also stated that his reason for watching the show was "it's about Asian people" and the cast was a main factor, specifically stating Steven Yeun and Ali Wong. Agnes also noted that in addition to hearing about the show through word-of-mouth, Steven Yeun was the key reason for watching the show. Their reactions affirm that while Asian American audiences may not actively seek out Asian American representation, narratives about the Asian American experience are a large draw.

Textual Analysis of Beef

All participants were shown two clips from *Beef*. Prior to the discussion of the participant's reception to the clips, I provide a textual analysis of the two clips to demonstrate my reasons for selecting these clips. Furthermore, as a member of the Korean diaspora myself, my understanding and analysis of the clips may have guided the interview process.

"Did you eat?": Clip 1 and cultural details

The first clip is taken from Episode 1 of *Beef*[2] and features one of the main characters, Danny as he returns home from a road rage incident. He enters the apartment that he shares with his younger brother, complaining that he feels like having no control over his life and that he is "sick of smiling." He then picks up a video call from his parents, who are working in Korea after losing their family business in Los Angeles. The clip ends with Danny discovering that his younger brother, Paul, has been investing in cryptocurrency and becomes upset at this.

I selected this clip for what I call "cultural details"—dialogue, set design and props, or other aspects of the scene that are specific to Korean and Korean American culture. I argue that these details add a nuance that is only understood by Korean Americans to a seemingly mundane scene, which establishes *Beef* as being specifically made for Korean American audiences.

Korean and English: Code-switching

The most notable cultural detail in the clip is code-switching, or mixing two languages in conversation. This is particularly visible during Danny's phone conversation with his parents, with all parties speaking a mix of Korean and English. Danny's mother constantly refers to him as "Danny-ya," borrowing the suffix from Korean. "-ya" is a casual title that is used at the end of names that end with a vowel. While "Danny" is a Western name, his mother uses the Korean way of referring to his name as many Korean-American households do. Danny also switches back and forth between the two languages. For instance, he tells his parents "엄마 아빠 걱정하지 마세요. Business is good. 제가 엄마 아빠 항상 원하던 땅 사줄게요. Build a big house[3]." The

[2] Timestamp (as streamed on Netflix): 7:20-10:40
[3] Translation: "Mom, Dad, don't worry. Business is good. I'll buy that land you two always wanted. Build a big house."

parents also completely understand Danny's speech which goes back and forth in English and Korean.

In this scene, *Beef* does not provide any context into why the characters suddenly switch to Korean. There are also no embedded subtitles for this scene[4]. The language use highlights that the intended audience for *Beef* is Asian American—the show refuses to account for the fact that many audiences do not understand Korean. Rather than making the viewing experience more comfortable for non-Korean-Americans by keeping the dialogue in English, *Beef* elects for what would be the most natural and comfortable for Korean Americans. For Korean-American audiences, the realistic and familiar code-switching from English to Korean makes the show familiar and relatable—establishing that *Beef* was made for them.

Creating a Korean-American home

Other "cultural details" that gesture towards the Korean American experience in *Beef* are in the set design of Danny and Paul's apartment and the parents' apartment that is seen through Danny's video call with them. To begin, Danny and Paul's home appears to be a typical rundown apartment that is disorganized. However, small details make it clear that the apartment is lived in by Korean Americans. Most notably, there is a box of Ottogi-brand instant rice on the top of their cupboard. Compared to the genericized brand "Hetbahn" which is used to refer to all single-portioned microwavable instant rice in Korea, the Ottogi brand found in Danny's apartment is cheaper and easier to find in Asian grocery stores in the United States.

Another aspect that adds authenticity is the Korean apartment that Danny's parents are living in. Through Danny's video call, audiences are able to get glimpses of the Korean household. The parents are sitting on the ground with a wooden tea table, using blue-and-white

[4] If the viewer was already watching with captions or other language, the Korean text is translated.

tableware that is often found in older Korean households. Even the seemingly out-of-fashion accent wallpaper adds credibility to the set. Furthermore, the initial ringtone that started the video chat would instantly be familiar to Korean-American audiences. KakaoTalk's FaceTalk function—that Danny and his parents were using—is distinct music that cannot be changed and is a staple sound in Korean homes. As soon as Korean American audiences hear the music, they understand that Danny is receiving a phone call from another Korean person. However, the ringtone would have no significance to a person unfamiliar with Korean culture.

The unique set design again adds authenticity and creates the sense that the character of Danny was written with Korean American audiences in mind. Rather than having a singular, token Asian American character in an otherwise White setting, the show recreates the Korean-American experience through its sets.

"Did you eat?": Showing culture through dialogue

After a heated argument with his brother, Danny turns around before leaving the room. With a softened expression, he asks Paul: "Did you eat?" This short dialogue exemplifies the writers' understanding of Korean culture. The question "did you eat?" functions more as a greeting in the Korean language—people would frequently ask the questions as a casual greeting, rather than actually being concerned with whether or not the other person has eaten. Meals and eating are also commonly used in all parts of the Korean colloquial language. Instead of "thank you," one might say "I'll buy you food later." Rather than "see you next time," Koreans often say "let's eat together sometime" ("Asia Society" 2024). Danny asking Paul whether he has eaten goes beyond its surface meaning. Danny feels sorry for the argument and wants to make up with Paul. Rather than apologizing outright, Danny simply asks if Paul has eaten.

The deeper meaning of this short dialogue that ends the scene will be familiar to all Korean American audiences. Furthermore, the intentionality of this dialogue communicates that the writers, too, were expecting Korean Americans to understand. The camera switches to a medium shot of Danny, just for this dialogue, making the dialogue seem like an inside joke—"if you know, you know."

"You told me not to take shit": Clip 2 and Asian American rage

The second clip is taken from the eighth episode, where the new house that Danny built for his family burns down. Danny, Paul, and his parents who have since returned from Korea arrive at the scene of the fire. Danny and Paul talk to the fire investigator who has been assigned to the case, which is followed by Danny yelling at Paul for mistakenly thinking that Amy burned down the house upon finding out about it from Paul. Then, the scene cuts to a flashback of Danny's past where he is bullied at a playground. The clip then returns to the present day, where Danny attempts to comfort his parents who were waiting in their car.

I have chosen this scene for its portrayal of Asian American rage and masculinity, and how it differs based on the characters that he is talking to—the White police officer, Paul, or his parents. I argue that this clip offers a new vision of Asian American masculinity that differs from previous representations that feels authentic and relatable to Asian American audiences.

Fire investigator and girls on the playground: inter-racial dynamics

The clip begins with Danny's conversation with the fire investigator, who is the first White character seen in either of the clips. In this scene, Danny appears to be holding down his rage, despite the fire investigator being unsympathetic and cold. He redirects any questions being

asked to the insurance provider, saying that “a lot of people are blind-sided by their insurance and unfairly blindside me with their frustrations.” Despite the fire investigator providing very little information and accusing Danny of potentially taking out his anger on him, Danny remains calm and does not prod the investigator further.

Following this scene, there is a flashback to Danny’s childhood. Danny is seen as being alone in the playground, unable to play with the other children. Another Asian American boy approaches him and suggests that he talk to the two White girls on the playset. When Danny stands up to do so, the boy pushes Danny and makes a fool out of him. The girls, who are looking down on Danny from their playset, simply laugh.

The interaction with the White characters in this clip demonstrates the racial barriers that Asian Americans face in their daily lives. Danny does not agitate the fire investigator and does not expect support from him. There is a clear sense of ostracization by the investigator to Danny, who takes an antagonistic stance. The scene also communicates that this sense of othering is ever-present in the lives of Asian Americans. Even at a young age, Danny was not able to befriend the White girls. Even though it is another Asian American boy who physically hurts him, it is the image of the laughing girls that remains.

There is an ongoing perception of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners and “outside the realm of Americanness” (Lee et al. 2016), with Asian Americans being excluded from civic membership (Kim 1999). Therefore, Asian American audiences would be able to identify with Danny being unable to join the other children on the playground or being weary of speaking up to the fire investigator in fear of being ostracized and unfairly treated.

Having a platform to show anger

However, *Beef* and this clip differs from previous portrayals of Asian American rage. Rather than lacking the platform to do so, characters *choose* not to be angry based on their societal position. When they are given the opportunity, the characters do not hesitate to show their rage. A prime example is the conversation between Danny and Paul, two brothers who have no reason to hide their anger from each other. When the fire investigator leaves, the two characters immediately show their anger and frustration—Paul is even smacking himself in the head. Paul mentions how Danny taught him to "not take shit" and got revenge on Amy, who he suspects committed arson on their house. Upon hearing this, Danny dials Amy's phone number and says "there is no holding back. I'm going all out." When there is no fear of being ostracized by race, characters are fully showing their rage and anger—which is afforded to the characters as *Beef* is a show about the Asian American community, not an Asian American individual in an otherwise White society.

Parent-child dynamics: subdued anger

After the flashback, the scene switches to a conversation between Danny and his parents, who have since returned from Korea. Danny lies to them and says the insurance will cover all the damages to the house. However, his father does not believe Danny and says he will return to work, despite Danny's protests and frustration. As Danny gets frustrated with his father, the father quickly ends the conversation in English: "We tired from jetlag. Let's go back to your apartment."

For parents with a language barrier, it is common for the children to be interpreters and deal with all external communications for family matters (Yoo and Kim, 2010). What stood out

in this scene is that the parents, despite speaking little English and staying in the car throughout Danny's conversation with the fire investigator, are aware of the situation and are visibly frustrated. These interactions between the parents and Danny present rage and frustration within an Asian American family, which is often missing from Hollywood productions that are centered around White society.

Based on my textual analysis, I argue that *Beef* is representative of the new changes in Hollywood of moving away from stereotypical representations of Asian American characters as mentioned by the participants, and may become an alternative to otherwise unrelatable American media productions for Korean American audiences. In the next chapter, I discuss how Korean American participants responded to the two clips analyzed above, and argue how *Beef* is used for the identity negotiation of Korean American viewers.

CHAPTER 3: BUILDING A COMMUNITY: WHAT IT MEANS TO BELONG

In this chapter, I offer a discussion of how participants negotiated the sense of belonging and community using *Beef*. In particular, I discuss the reception to Clip 1, scenes in which Danny returns home from a road rage incident and argues with his younger brother, Paul, after receiving a video call from his parents in Korea. There were two main themes that enabled identity negotiation for the participants: relationships between the parent and the son, and that of between brothers. Both of these themes were used to define the "Korean American" identity. As Stuart Hall (1988) suggests, the diaspora creates "new ethnicities" and finds their identities between the imagined "homeland" culture and the dominant American, or White, culture. In a media text that represents the diaspora itself, participants identified aspects of familiarity that set them apart from the dominant White American culture.

At the same time, the findings show that Korean American audiences are insular in their television viewing—meaning that participants had a narrow scope of what it means to belong to the Korean American diaspora. I argue that insularity in identity negotiation can tightly connect those that are deemed fit to belong, but is problematic in developing the pan-ethnic Asian American solidarity that may be needed.

Am I Paul, or am I Danny?: Finding oneself in the brotherly dynamic

A key source of identification for the participants was the relationship between Danny and Paul. To begin, participants were quick to highlight characters that they most closely identify with, based on their personal relationships with their siblings. Those who were the eldest child often related to Danny's struggles of bearing the responsibility of taking care of the family, and participants who were the younger siblings admitted they saw similarities between them and

Paul. For instance, Agnes noted that they found Paul to be similar to her younger brother, while Danny resembles her older sister—"our second mom [who] takes care of everything." David also replied that the brotherly relationship depicted in the clip "kind of looks like something that is happening in my place at my house." They replied that upon watching Danny go up to Paul who is playing a PC game, it "just completely reminds me of my brother when I go up to him, and I interrupt him during his game… and wow, that seems, we're identical." These remarks highlight that especially for participants with siblings themselves, Danny and Paul's interactions immediately served as points of identification for the participants. More importantly, this identification enabled participants to consider what it means to have a sibling as a Korean American—and therefore what it means to belong to the Korean American diasporic community.

"Man of the family" and Patriarchal obligations of the oldest son

In discussing how Danny and Paul's relationship is specific to Korean American culture, participants noted that the older sibling Danny is taking on a parental role or assuming to be the "man of the family." In Korean and by extension, Korean American culture, eldest sons are expected to take responsibility for their younger siblings. This patriarchal authority is placed more heavily on the oldest son alone for Koreans, compared to other Asian cultures (Chung 2016). The obligations of the oldest son were a source of familiarity for the participants, which was highlighted as being a key marker of Korean American identity.

Henry mentioned the obligation of the oldest son sets Korean Americans apart from the dominant culture: "I feel like for most American households, they make the kids very independent, like when they turn eighteen… the parents just kick them out, or they go off and do their own thing…. In a lot of Korean households, you have to take care of one another… [Paul's]

older brother still didn't make him pay rent." Regardless of whether Henry's imagining of the "American households" is true, Henry's comment further demonstrates that the identity negotiation of the diaspora partially stems from positioning themselves against the dominant culture.

Moreover, George, who is also an oldest son himself, connected Danny's assumption of the parental role to his older brother to their personal experience. When George's father was deployed in the military, "the value that my dad instilled in me was, because he's gone, I have to be the man of the family. I have to take care of everyone." George also discusses the sacrifice that comes with this responsibility, such as repressing his feelings. George notes how in the scene, Danny was complaining to his brother about "having to smile all the time" yet when his parents call, he does exactly that—hiding his frustration from his parents. George felt a sense of familiarity in this situation, saying he also "grew up very much keeping my issues to myself," having been given the responsibility of caring for not only his younger siblings but also his mother and grandparents.

Ultimately, George felt a sense of belonging to this depiction of Korean American masculinity, or the cultural norms of what it means to be the oldest son. These characteristics were considered to be what sets apart the Korean American diaspora from the dominant American culture. Such depictions were historically absent from mainstream media, with Asian American men often being emasculated and feminized. However, *Beef* and this scene in particular offers a vision of *Korean American* masculinity—the obligation to take responsibility for their younger siblings and serve as a liaison between them and their parents. Therefore, participants such as George felt a sense of validation, knowing how their personal experiences can be reflected accurately on the screen.

“Did you eat?”: Ways of showing care between siblings

In addition to responsibility as the oldest child, participants also praised the way that the argument between Danny and Paul was resolved. In the scene, Danny becomes upset at Paul for investing in cryptocurrency—a method of earning money that Danny deems to be too risky and illegitimate, given that Paul is otherwise unemployed. At the end of the argument, Danny turns back to Paul with a visibly softened expression and asks, “did you eat?[5]”

This exchange was also identified as a point of recognition and familiarity in depicting the brotherly relationship. George discussed how this piece of dialogue contained further meaning and nuance that they were able to understand because he was Asian American. George was able to tell that “[Danny] obviously cares about his brother. That’s why at the end of the scene, he’s like… ‘did you eat?’ That's a very Asian thing to do after a confrontation.” Charlotte also shared similar sentiments: that as the older sibling, they “always ask, ‘oh, so did you eat today?’ It’s like a tough love kind of situation.” Agnes also shared from the perspective of the younger sibling, that being as “did you eat?” is a sign that communicates affection and love even if they are having an argument with their sibling.

Therefore, this dialogue is representative of how Korean American siblings show care for one another—allowing participants to negotiate and differentiate the Korean American community from the dominant culture. Food and sharing a meal plays a large role in Korean culture, carrying many nuances. The simple dialogue of “did you eat” was representative of this, and served as a crucial marker for participants’ community building.

[5] I offer my own reading of this dialogue in Chapter 1.

Video-call from Korea: familiarity in parent-child depiction

In addition to the relationship between siblings, the video call with the parents in the clip and the depiction of the parent-child relationship was a source of connection from the audience. From the economic status of the parents to the content of the conversations between Danny and his parents, participants were able to use the scene to extrapolate to their personal experiences. The text served as a tool to imagine the Korean American identity and contrast it against the dominant culture, creating a sense of belonging and community within the diaspora.

Socioeconomic status of the family

Participants shared that *Beef* was particularly relatable for them because it shows Korean American parents who are financially struggling. *Beef* portrays a Korean American family in economic hardship. Danny owns a struggling business and his parents had to return to Korea to find employment. Agnes said that similarly to the situation in the scene, "Whenever I call [my dad, he gives] updates on how his work was… He does handyman jobs, so that resonated with me. I think I felt a little more empathetic to the scene." Agnes also mentioned that historically, the family situation of Asian American characters are not referenced in mainstream television due to having little screen time: "[Asian Americans are] side characters, so they don't really show if they are low income. But, this show really portrayed that." This directly opposes the Model Minority trope as discussed earlier, where Asian Americans are represented as "smart, good students, scientists, and other medical professions" (Ono, 2017, pg. 108). This Model Minority myth and its portrayal in media "renders invisible those not-so-successful stories, such as high rates of poverty in some groups, [and] income and wealth disparities" (Shih, Chang, and Chen, p.423). Agnes' comments highlight that *Beef* provides visibility for those who do not fit

the traditional media stereotypes. This allows greater socioeconomic diversity in the shared imagination of the Korean American identity. Therefore, the sense of belonging and community extends beyond Korean Americans of certain socioeconomic statuses that have been made visible in the past through the Model Minority Myth, becoming a better reflection of the diaspora.

"Find a good Korean girl from Church": Parental pressure

Charlotte also mentions that the video call "kind of looks like something that is happening in my place at my house" and "was very relatable." Charlotte identified with the content of the conversation, where the parents were initially complaining about the family's hardships, but then encourages Danny to get married. Charlotte said "it's so ironic that all these parents were [complaining] but say 'don't worry about us. You should find a girl and get married.'" They also highlight that this is a source of pressure and burden, where "if my parents are telling me about what they're worried about and things that aren't working well, how can I, just like… go find someone to get married with? It feels like a burden, and I could feel that burden on [Danny's] shoulders." Culturally specific details, like the mother's insistence towards Danny to "find a nice Korean girl at church and start a family" create connections to their personal experiences in similar situations.

Then, Charlotte was able to mirror their own emotions onto the character of Danny. Charlotte could "feel that burden" on Danny, similar to how they are under pressure from their parents to carry the family name and start one of their own. Among Korean immigrants, there is an expectation to emulate the heteronormative family values and dynamics as demonstrated by their parents (Chung, 2013). When this expectation is represented in mainstream media, viewers

such as Charlotte are able to negotiate their sentiments surrounding this—it is a pressure and a burden. These sentiments, however, are not expressed to the parents. Charlotte notes how Danny's voice brightened after picking up the phone, because "in Korean culture, we always want to answer our calls in a very welcoming, bright mood." Danny also maintains this brightness throughout the call. This repression of emotions and feeling burdened, then, is a part of the Korean American identity. Being a media production by the "new ethnicities," this scene allowed a sense of validation and belonging by giving a representation of feelings that are unique to diasporic audiences.

Furthermore, the parental expectation of "finding a nice Korean girl from church" allowed participants to imagine the characteristics of the "new ethnicity"—how Korean Americans are positioned in between the homeland and the dominant culture. Eleanor claimed that "Korean Americans are kind of delayed compared to mainland Korea" when it comes to accepting changing social values, especially those related to the family structure. Eleanor believes that "Koreans have become less conservative and became more understanding… but first generation parents who immigrated here, their mindset is still very, very conservative. More than the average parent in Korea." Eleanor also mentioned that they had this discussion with friends in the past, and hypothesized the reasoning: "it's because they moved from Korea when they are younger, when Korea used to be more conservative and they haven't been updated. So they're still living in that 30 years-ago-mindset." Eleanor positions Korean Americans in comparison to the dominant culture and the imagined culture of the homeland. Through these comparisons, Eleanor is able to make sense of the community. Eleanor also reflects on her past experience of discussing this with other Korean Americans, demonstrating that media texts play a crucial role in building a shared understanding and vision of the diaspora.

Insularity in of the "new ethnicity"

As highlighted above, Korean American audiences are using Asian American media texts to create a collective identity and a sense of belonging. I argue that in line with findings on prior media consumption of Korean American participants, as described in Chapter 1, this new collective identity has a very insular scope. Interview responses show a limited version of the "new ethnicity"—in order to fit in, one must have a complete understanding of the cultural nuances and language.

Upon watching the first clip, participants were prompted how the experience would have differed if the ethnicity of the characters were not Korean, but of a different Asian background. All eight participants responded that they would have felt a lesser connection to the clip. Henry in particular noted that the "small elements" were what made the show feel personal to them, and it would be difficult to see themselves in the situation had the show depicted a non-Korean American household. The details made the show feel "natural" and they felt immersed in the story, "without having to explain all the little things behind it… I just got it naturally, because that's the way I've lived." Frances also identifies the cultural details to have completely changed their viewing experience. They said that they "wouldn't relate to niche things that I picked up in *Beef*" and "the significance [of the show] would be minimized for me." George compared watching *Beef* to other Asian American media texts, such as *Crazy Rich Asians* and *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once.* They acknowledged relating to the "human experience and human emotion" of the immigrant experience in these works, but acknowledged that they missed the "subtleties and the details that pertain to Chinese American families."

Participants also noted that being able to understand Korean played a large role in making the clip relatable. David mentions that although they would be able to understand what the show is trying to convey, there would be a lessened sense of belonging had it not been for the "Konglish." Charlotte says that an Asian American family would be more relatable than a white family, and a change in ethnicity would not result in a disconnect. However, they "completely understood all the Korean that was being said in the show" and as a result, "able to understand that whole situation entirely, just from that clip… It hits home really hard" In fact, if they had known about how "the little details were so relatable," they would have seen the entire show to watch someone "in similar situations like me" and "assess their life and my life", which Charlotte admits is a rare occurrence in her prior experience with American television.

This is not to say that participants rejected the hypothetical scenario in which the show depicted a non-Korean American family. Most participants agreed that they would be able to feel a connection to the text, even if those connections were not identified as immediately. However, the responses suggest diasporic audiences are becoming more insular in their media consumption. In line with findings from Chapter 1 where participants felt more familiar and comfortable with Korean programming where characters "look similar to me," Korean American audiences are placing significant value in specifically *Korean* American performances.

I argue that this narrow scope of what audiences considered to be "relatable" can lead to exclusion of members of the diaspora who are deemed to not fit in, or do not speak the language of the homeland. For instance, Korean American adoptees often struggle with defining their ethnic and racial identities, with unfamiliarity with the Korean language and culture playing a key role (Park Nelson, 2016). In the age of representations of the diaspora in mainstream media, are these portrayals gatekeeping what it means to be Korean American? While *Beef* was praised

by the participants for depicting Korean Americans who are financially struggling, I argue that it nonetheless cannot be treated as a universal story of the diaspora.

Furthermore, the insularity in identity building raises concerns for pan-ethnic solidarity. Okamoto defines panethnicity as the "process through which multiple ethnic groups relax and widen their boundaries to forge a new, broader grouping and identity" and "share interests and a collective history and build institutions and identities across ethnic or cultural boundaries" and argues that this is a social achievement that cannot occur naturally. (Okamoto, 2014, p.2). Although participants were only shown scenes depicting Korean American characters, *Beef* as a whole depicts a wide range of ethnicities, with characters of Japanese, Chinese, and Vietnamese descent. However, the findings of this research raise concerns: audiences may be engaging in a "us vs. them" behavior, where the sense of belonging and community created from the text is strictly limited to those who share a common ethnicity.

The findings also directly challenge previous efforts, particularly by YouTube content creators, in creating a collective brand of Asian America where Lopez argues that the attempt to brand a collective Asian America is an inherent critique of "the absence of Asian Americans within mainstream television and film production" (2018, p. 256). Findings show that when Asian America enter mainstream television and film, the collective no longer exist—being *Korean* mattered more than being *Asian*. This insularity in media reception may be a threat to panethnicity, which can eventually weaken the sociopolitical power of Asian Americans in a social structure of White racial dominance (Lee, 2019). Acknowledging that diasporic audiences seem to engage in an insular identity and community building through *Beef,* further research on how audiences react to media texts with multiple ethnicities present (as opposed to my own

research) may be needed to fully illuminate the impacts of *Beef* and other mainstream depictions of Asian American diasporas on panethnicity.

CHAPTER 4: THE KOREAN AMERICAN MASCULINITY: ANGER AND REPRESSION

The previous chapter discussed how *Beef* was used by the participants to create a sense of belonging and community, although I argue that this vision of community is insular in scope and may be problematic. In this chapter, I discuss the reception of the participant to the portrayal of anger and masculinity. I mainly discuss the responses to Clip 2: Danny and Paul find out that their new house has burned down. The scene starts with an interaction between them and a White fire investigator, then an argument between the brothers. Then, the scene cuts to a flashback of Danny's childhood, where he is shoved by an older Asian boy while trying to talk to two White girls. Finally, the scene ends with Danny explaining the situation to his parents, who have moved back from Korea to the United States.

I argue that unlike the findings of the previous chapter where participants largely agreed and accepted the portrayals as being "realistic" and "relatable", they were engaged in a negotiated reading of this scene. Some aspects were deemed stereotypical or untrue, while other aspects were regarded as being an accurate representation of the Korean American experience. I argue that ultimately, participants were able to use the scene to negotiate an understanding of Korean American masculinity and anger—in the current mediascape that often emasculates Asian American men and where their anger is absent.

Emotion and masculinity: Having a platform

Overall, participants were surprised at the portrayal of anger by Danny and found it to be realistic. Agnes, for instance, mentioned how they "haven't really seen anyone with so much anger and emotions" from previous Asian American characters. This reflects a return to traditional stereotypes of Asian American characters as the robotic Model Minority, and

particularly how Asian American men are emasculated in television and film. Henry also noted how Danny's anger made the scene seem more believable. They said, "it's very realistic showing your anger, especially with your family, your siblings… really showing that anger and not trying to present as an understanding, older brother." While participants generally highlighted the presence of anger in the scenes, they also noted that this anger was repressed and subdued—which then led to the negotiation of what anger and masculinity mean for the Korean American diaspora.

Controlling your anger: Korean Americans as less emotional

Many participants described that while Danny was angry in the scene, this anger was repressed with the character attempting to control his emotions. However, this was not a result of the emasculation of Asian American men or to show their inferiority over other races, as was the case in prior representations (Ono and Pham, 2009). Rather, the participants related to how Danny quickly controlled his emotions to talk to their older parents and considered it to be a realistic portrayal. Similar to the responses to the first clip, the participants used the clip to create a shared vision of the Korean American diaspora—and highlighted that Korean Americans are less emotional compared to the dominant and White American culture.

First, participants noted that the more "American" someone is, the more acceptable it becomes to express their emotions. Eleanor said "we don't express [emotions], so even if we get mad… you push it down." They said that the show of overt anger by Danny is what makes him more American—or White. In doing so, Eleanor compares the situation to their personal family; while they lived in Korea for a few years and their brother had stayed in the United States. Eleanor said that their brother became "much more expressive and firm," not being afraid to

show his frustration and anger. Eleanor said that they absorbed more Korean culture and are more quiet and reserved, compared to their "American" brother.

Benjamin was also surprised by how well the characters controlled their emotions and considered this to be "commendable" especially as Danny hid his feelings to comfort his parents. However, their point of comparison was not from their personal experience but from their *imagined* culture of Korea through Korean television. Benjamin stated that there was a lack of the "die together mentality" that is commonly seen in Korean dramas. Referring to the popular Korean phrase that translates to "You die and I die[6]," where someone takes revenge or retaliates to injustices in an aggressive manner ("You die") even at the risk of consequences and punishments themselves ("I die"). Benjamin noted that this trope was not present—they said, "more common to see 'you're going to do this to me? Let's both die together… type of mentality" and was "surprised about the emotional control." This contrasts Eleanor's observations about the Korean culture being more reserved than the American one—perhaps due to Benjamin using the imagined Korean culture through the lens of Korean television products.

These findings exemplify the identity negotiation through the lens of "new ethnicities"—diasporic identity stems from between the dominant culture and the imagined culture of the homeland. In the age of streaming, audiences like Benjamin were easily able to refer to the cultural products of the homeland. Furthermore, these findings underscore the lack of consensus on what is the *Korean American* way of expressing anger. Eleanor claimed that Koreans are more reserved compared to Americans while Benjamin said that characters in Korean television are much more expressive. These responses give insight as to what audiences bring as points of reference when building their identities through a representation of the diaspora itself.

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[6] "너 죽고 나 죽자"

“Blowing up is a luxury”: Having a platform for anger

George said, “being able to blow up is a luxury… But if you don’t have the luxury, then you just gotta keep it to yourself.” In viewing the interaction between Danny, his family, the participant sensed the anger and frustration but understood how Danny was “keeping it in.” He does not “blow up” with his anger, because he does not have the means to “handle the things that happen after.” George also connects this with their personal experience of being the eldest child, saying that they “definitely had a similar situation… having to keep everything in and pretending and trying to stay calm and take charge of the situation.” Therefore, George assesses the scene to be an “accurate portrayal” of the Korean American experience.

This discussion directly aligns with Tasha Oren’s examination of the absence of Asian American anger in Hollywood productions. Oren writes that anger in Hollywood “suggests both privilege and a last resort, a luxury and the explosion of bottled-up frustration. Yet, in the common mythologies of American popular storytelling, it is also therapeutic: a beneficial catharsis” (2005, p. 345). At the same time, Asian Americans were not afforded this “luxury” in the media—they were seen as emasculated, nerdy, and robotic. Why, then, did participants consider Danny’s repressed anger to be realistic?

I argue that participants responded positively to Danny’s repression of anger because it was by the character’s choice—the platform is present. He does not repress his anger in other situations in the series. He urinates all over Amy’s bathroom, and yells at his brother. In fact, the series starts with Danny’s road *rage* incident. Anger is also not the only emotion that is not repressed—the series does not shy away from Danny’s sadness, with scenes of him sobbing at a Korean church. Therefore, Danny does have the privilege of the therapeutic explosion of

emotions, which is given to him by the mostly Asian American creative team. Therefore, Danny is repressing his anger in this scene not because of Hollywood's reluctance to give Asian Americans a platform, but because of the societal expectations of him.

The Wall: Repressing feelings against the hegemonic society

Rather than the character not being able to get angry because he was written in a non-emotional and emasculated way, repressing the anger is what makes sense for the character given the situation. As previously mentioned, one of the main stereotypic tropes of Asian Americans is the "perpetual foreigner"—the concept that Asian Americans are continuously represented as a foreigner and an outsider to American society. This stereotype has its roots in the daily interactions between Asian and White Americans. As Claire Jean Kim (1999) writes in her seminal work, Asian Americans are civically ostracized by Whites and are viewed as foreigners. This ostracization is reflected in *Beef*: rather than representing Asian Americans as an outsider like previous stereotyped representations, it depicts the feeling of ostracization that Asian Americans experience every day. Therefore, the participants identified with Danny's decision to withhold himself, especially in comparison to White characters such as the fire investigator who represents the White and dominant American society.

In the scene, the fire investigator plainly explains that arson is not covered under any insurance policies—and that Danny should contact the policy provider, instead of getting frustrated at him. Frances, in particular, showed the most intense dismay for the fire investigator: "that pissed me off… you're supposed to be social, what are you doing?" Frances mentioned how it is the fire investigator's job to explain the situation to people who are often devastated from having their property burned down, yet he was impersonal and blamed the victims for

unfairly treating him. While the other participants did not have as strong reactions, they showed similar sentiments with Benjamin saying, "it wouldn't hurt to be more nice. Someone just lost their house."

Many participants used the word "wall" to describe this situation—the feeling of distance and barrier between them and the dominant culture. Charlotte said that the investigator "wasn't explaining it in an optimistic way, or even saying 'I'm so sorry that you lost your house.'... there was a wall rather than trying to communicate with each other." The interaction between Danny and the fire investigator reminded the participants of their own experiences of feeling "walled off." The mutual acknowledgment of difference is continuously present in every interaction with White people; a participant put it to words by saying, "they knew we were different. We also knew they were different."

The participants also shared that being angry would not lead to a resolution, and were able to understand and see themselves in Danny, as they had similar experiences of holding back anger in the past. Charlotte said that Danny's "problem-solving skills kicked in rather than trying to get his anger out." The acknowledgment of "the wall" exemplifies that in the lives of Korean Americans, the feeling of being an outsider means rational "problem-solving skills" are needed rather than a show of emotion in hopes of receiving sympathy. Danny's decision to stay calm was what was expected of him, according to the responses from the participants.

Repressed but masculine: Responsibility to stay calm

The participants also noted that the repression of anger was expected especially since Danny's parents were present[7]. David pointed out how Danny "took a moment to process his thoughts when he talked to his parents" and in relaying the message. They also discussed how

[7] Discussion of the relationship between the oldest child and the parent is also discussed in Chapter 3.

the eldest child calming down the parents after a catastrophic situation was akin to their personal experience. Agnes mentions that as the eldest child, Danny has the burden of making his parents feel comfortable. Charlotte shared similar sentiments, saying that the feeling of obligation to give back to one's parents is central to Asian American immigrant culture. Children understand the hardships that their parents went through as immigrants, and decide to keep troubles to themselves: "I've seen my friends, not necessarily all Korean but mostly Asian, where if some things aren't really going well… they've already told their parents that it's going to be fine and it's going to be handled this way." Charlotte connects this experience to how Danny suppresses his anger and lies to his parents that their home insurance will cover the damages done to the house, and how such action is a unique aspect of the immigrant culture.

I argue that despite the character hiding his anger, Danny continued to be depicted in a traditionally masculine way. Participants identified that even in a catastrophic situation, Danny was showing responsibility to the oldest child for the rest of his family, maintaining his composure to act as a liaison between his family and the rest of society. This is a stark contrast to historical representations of Asian American men, where the characterization of being asocial and emotionless removed their platform to show anger. On the other hand, Danny's repression of anger strengthens the patriarchal masculinity that participants consider to be situated in Korean American identity. Therefore, even the suppression of anger—typically a sign of stereotyped characterization of Asian Americans—can operate as a site of identity negotiation for participants if it is done in a "realistic" way.

"My parents aren't like that": Emotionless parents and negotiated reading

So far, participants used the clips shown in relation to their personal experiences—which were then used to inform what they considered to be the Korean American identity. However, the interaction between Danny and his parents raised doubt from the participants, to which they responded: "My parents aren't like that." Specifically, participants showed dismay at the lack of emotions, anger, and action by the parents in the scene. Overall, participants engaged in a negotiated reading where they acknowledged certain aspects to be "accurate" from being reflective of their own experiences, but were also quick to label other aspects of the interaction as being stereotypical, and rejected it from their version of the Korean American identity. I argue that similar to how participants reacted to the hypothetical scenario in which the language spoken in Clip 1 was not Korean, this suggests Korean American audiences are insular in what they consider to be the Korean American identity.

Motivations of the parents as relatable

The key area of agreement and acceptance by the participants was in the motivations of the parents. Despite the brief conversation with the parents in the scene, the participants had similar readings of the characters' motivations. Participants commonly described the parents as being "fed up" or having accepted defeat, and questioning whether or not they should retire, even though the dialogue does not directly discuss retirement. For instance, Charlotte mentions that "this scene was very realistic to me" given that they are "surrounded by people… where I see that their parents are always on the verge of 'should I keep on working? Or should I retire?" Frances also notes that based on the two clips they watched, they noticed the parents were "already fed up with life and working for the uncle." Frances also suggests their reasons for why

the characters felt as such: “parents and older people, have a self-pride thing where they probably wouldn’t want to work for their family member… they already had to swallow their pride and work for someone else.” They also highlight that this dynamic is “not really shown in Western shows.” Here, Frances not only resonated with the text that they were shown, but also made inferences about the characters—not simply based on what is given in the context, but using their own experiences of being Korean American.

In discussing the parents’ motivations, participants also noted that the responsibility of the eldest child is deeply intertwined. Henry noted that the parents did not want to “burden the older son” and insisted on continuing to work, despite them not wanting to. At the same time, Danny also takes on the responsibility—which participants continuously refer to as “a burden.” George said that “[Danny is] being the one that tries to prop them up and give them a better life and have that burden, but also take on the burden of their disappointment.” George agrees that this is a “realistic portrayal” of the Korean American family—however, they are also quick to follow up by saying that “my parents aren’t like that.”

Rejecting the (lack of) actions by the parents

Despite considering the motivations of the parents to be akin to their own experiences and therefore the Korean American identity, participants also rejected certain aspects of the parents’ portrayal and considered them to be stereotypical. In particular, the portal of the parents as passive bystanders was a source of disassociation for the participants.

For instance, Charlotte mentioned that the parents are “always mad and telling [their children], ‘this is why we never should have trusted you’ and have doubts… A lot of that is stereotypical.” Another participant considered parents to be “demoralizing.” George also said

that “Korean parents are usually much more active than what’s in the scene.” While the clip may have been accurate if the parents spoke little English, Eleanor identifies that “in current culture, the parents have a very fierce paternal and maternal responsibility for their kids” and do not see things playing out the same way in their own family. Eleanor predicts that their mother would be outside the car, arguing with the investigator since she speaks fluent English, but even their dad, who does not speak fluently, would be trying to understand the situation even if he is not talking. Across both clips, George notes that “the older generation is portrayed as very powerless because [the series is] putting such a passive light on them” referring to both their inaction when the house burned down and also their reluctance to work in the earlier scene.

Returning to the concept of the “platform”, the participants rejected the portrayal of the parents due to their lack of action and anger. Danny’s portrayal and suppression of anger were considered to be realistic, given his situation of being the oldest child and having to face the White and dominant society for his family. Contrarily, the suppression of anger by the parents was rejected as being stereotypical. The parents' passivity and unwillingness to take action is a return to traditional tropes of being the “perpetual foreigner.” The parents are portrayed to have accepted defeat against “the wall” and are incapable of engaging with the hegemonic society as represented by the White fire investigator, and simply await their son to relay information. The rejection of this portrayal by participants underscores the notion that anger and patriarchal responsibility should be displayed across generations, rather than being given to solely the oldest son. Thus, parents and the older generation also deserve the platform to show anger when necessary.

In sum, the participants' reading of the clip was that the parents lack the platform for anger and are unjustly so. However, I argue that this sentiment by the participants may be specific to the demographic that I interviewed—urban and young.

Limited vision of Korean America

Participants acknowledged the feeling of being "fed up" and "walled off" as markers of the Korean American identity—on the other hand, they rejected the lack of action taken to mitigate the issues. I argue that this rejection of the text stems from the insularity of young audiences. The participants were raised in environments where it was possible to take action. Here, it is crucial to note the biases of the participants in the recruiting process. Of the eight participants, at least three had at least one parent who spoke fluent English[8]. All participants were either raised, or their immediate families were from, major metropolitan areas with a high percentage of the Korean population[9]. These biases were often acknowledged during the interviews. Multiple participants have replied that they have never experienced race-based bullying, which they consider to be a "privilege." Other participants replied that their experiences with individual White Americans are generally positive.

Therefore, I argue that participants' expectations for the older generation to show anger and take action may stem from their experiences of living in urban and diverse environments. In areas such as New York City that are considered gateway cities for immigration, Asian American immigrants have built "a strong presence not only in neighborhoods and communities but also within the school system, local businesses, service sector, and political environment" from

[8] Only three participants discussed the English fluency of their parents, so it is possible other more participants had fluent English-speaking parents.
[9] Participants or their families were from either the Washington D.C. metropolitan area, New York City, Atlanta, or Los Angeles, representing four of the top seven cities with highest Korean and Korean American populations (Pew Research Center).

multiple generations of immigration and settlement (Kiang and Supple, 2016). Considering many of the participants were raised in these communities, they would likely have had these institutional and social infrastructures of support. The participants' expectations for older generations to take an active stance may have stemmed from having lived with these support systems for Korean Americans to fall back on. Reception from audiences in rural or less racially diverse areas may differ, where confrontation with the dominant society is discouraged in fear of further isolation or racial discrimination. Furthermore, the age of the interviewees was restricted to be between 18-25, with most participants being students. Greater involvement by parents would be expected given that as students, the participants are closer to being in a position of caretaking rather than caregiving, with parents that are likely still active in the workforce.

The demonstrated biases of the responses again underscore the insularity in identity negotiation. In Chapter 3, I discussed how participants had a far greater identification with specifically Korean aspects of the scene, which can have consequences for pan-ethnic solidarity. The negotiated reading of the parents in *Beef* demonstrates that even within an ethnic group, sociodemographic factors have a significant impact on what is considered to be a “realistic” portrayal, versus a stereotypical one. The definition and expectations for Korean American masculinity and anger vary—in order to create a vision of what it means to be Korean American, there must be a cross-reference with personal experiences. What *I* experience is Korean American; what I have not experienced, then, is a stereotype.

The insularity in audience reception may have problematic implications in community building, not only pan-ethnically but also within the ethnic group. As demonstrated in the participant responses, they were quick to reject aspects of the text that did not match their personal experience or expectations. This can lead to feelings of invalidation across the ethnic

group—what is rejected by one person may be the experience of another. Therefore, it is crucial that media representations are varied and diverse. *Beef* is undoubtedly a step in the right direction by showcasing a family of a lower socioeconomic status. At the same time, there are perspectives that are left behind in mainstream media: third-generation immigrants, adoptees, those in rural areas, multi-ethnic families, and the list continues. Therefore, the trend of representing diversity within the Korean American and Asian American communities must continue to create solidarity, both within and between ethnic groups.

CONCLUSION

With eight Primetime Emmys and thirteen nominations (Television Academy, n.d), *Beef* became one of the most decorated television series in 2023. *Beef* undoubtedly shined much-needed visibility of Asian Americans on television, and gave a platform for talented Asian American creatives. This thesis aimed to investigate the reception of the series amongst Korean American audiences between the ages of 18-25, specifically focusing on two clips of the show. The first depicted a conversation between the central character and his younger brother and parents, and the second was the reaction of the said character to the destruction of his house. Based on eight interviews, I argue that *Beef* enables shared understanding and communication of the Korean American diasporic identity, based on Stuart Hall's framework of the "new ethnicities."

In Chapter 1, I outline my methodology of semi-structured interviews. In the following chapter, I provide my own textual analysis of the two clips that were shown to participants during the interview. I also outline the current media consumption of the participants. In the third chapter, I discuss participants' reception to *Beef* and argue how it creates a sense of community and belonging amongst the diaspora. At the same time, I raise concerns about the insularity, or the narrow scope of "community" as defined by the participants, on pan-ethnic solidarity between Asian Americans. In the fourth chapter, I provide a discussion of how participants responded to the show of anger in the scenes, and how it was used to imagine the meaning of Korean American masculinity. Ultimately, *Beef* enables Korean American audiences to negotiate what it means to belong to the Korean American diaspora while underscoring the need for a greater diversity of Asian American representation.

Limitations and directions for future research

A key limitation of this research is in the demographics of the participants—most participants answered that they can speak Korean to some degree. This had implications on the findings, given how many participants cited the use of the Korean language as a key factor in developing a connection with the text. Furthermore, most participants were from urban areas with a large number of Korean and Korean American population, which may have shaped their discussions. Finally, all participants were from families with relatively short immigration histories. They were either first-generation immigrants themselves or were children of either first or second-generation (or both) immigrants. Consequently, all participants grew up speaking at least some Korean at home. Future research may attempt to examine a different set of participants—such as Korean Americans who do not speak the language, third or fourth-generation immigrants, multiracial/ethnic individuals, or adoptees.

Additionally, there were limitations in the interview protocol. Namely, I showed each participant scenes from the series that only depicted Korean American characters. Findings, especially that regarding panethnicity and insularity of identity building, may be further improved by studying the reception to scenes with interactions of characters from different ethnicities.

Comparative research: Koreans

Initially, this study was conceived as a comparative study between South Korean and Korean American audiences. My guiding interest in the beginning stages of this research is how the Korean American diaspora is perceived by Koreans of the "homeland"—and how media texts such as *Beef* facilitate cultural exchange between the two groups in the age of streaming

where television can easily cross regional boundaries. Three Korean participants (see Appendix C for details) were recruited and interviewed, with the criteria being that they must be Korean nationals between the ages of 18-25 who have not lived outside of Korea for no more than five years. All three Korean participants met the criteria but were located in the United States as either international students or on an exchange program at U.S. institutions[10]. Therefore, these participants had experiences in interacting with Asian Americans and had a degree of interest in American culture. I concluded that these interviewees could not be generalized to represent the greater Korean audience. Even if I were to account for these limitations, there was insufficient data to make a full comparative analysis between the two groups due to the limited responses. However, the interviews did raise a few intriguing differences. I discuss them below in hopes of sparking further discussion and research on the cultural exchange from the diaspora to the homeland[11].

Danny as "American"

A common response from the participants is how Danny appeared to seem "American" based on both his English use and behavior. Isabella noticed that "with the younger brother, Danny spoke in English from beginning to the end except for the word *samchon*[12]. I understood that as being an American, where his identity is completely in English and therefore Americanized." While Korean American participants fixated on intermittent use of Korean and "Konglish" such as the use of the word *samchon*, Korean participants such as Isabella were more focused on the fact that the brothers mostly used English. This was understood as a sign of being

[10] Two participants were based in the Southeastern United States, the other was based in the Midwest.
[11] All three interviews were conducted in Korean, with the two clips being played with Korean subtitles (provided by Netflix). Interview translations are mine.
[12] Meaning "uncle" in Korean

"Americanized" or being from the West. Isabella found the parents, who mostly spoke Korean, to maintain Korean values. This is a stark contrast to responses from the Korean American participants, who found Danny to hold traditional Korean values—one participant even considered the character to have "really embodied old traditional Asian Confucianism."

Given that South Korea is a monolingual country, Korean participants immediately associated the use of English as being "foreign" and "American." Korean American participants, however, did not associate language with otherness. Instead, they were negotiating the Korean American culture with that of the dominant American society and the imagined culture of the homeland, Korea. For Korean participants, I hypothesized that markers of comparison did not exist. Similarities between Danny and Korean culture were overlooked, and the focus was shifted to the differences—with language being the key example. Acknowledging that the participants were responding to only brief scenes from the series, I understand that participants may not have enough time to fully engage with the text. Further research may address how Korean participants respond to depictions of the diaspora in longer and more complete texts.

Discomfort with "stereotypical" representations

Another main difference between the responses of the two participant groups was in the responses to the depiction of Korean Americans as being of a lower socioeconomic status. All participants discussed the employment and financial situation of the characters, while such discussions happened less frequently with Korean American participants. One Korean participant even showed discomfort at this depiction: "The characters are portrayed as being financially struggling, living with and receiving help from their uncle… I think this is a stereotype [of

immigrants]. I do not wish Koreans to be consumed in the media in ways that perpetuate this stereotype."

Considering how Korean American participants praised this depiction as being inclusive and validating, the responses from the Korean participants felt surprising. I do not believe that this reaction stemmed from wanting to invalidate the lives of struggling Korean Americans in real life. I hypothesize that this response stems from Koreans not being familiar with the negative consequences of the Model Minority Myth that, as mentioned earlier, weighs on many Asian Americans. Furthermore, as other Korean participants stated, Korean Americans are often depicted as being affluent and "standing out" in Korean media. Therefore, the depiction of Korean Americans in *Beef* may have come across as being unrealistic and discriminatory to audiences that were only familiar with Korean Americans through the lens of Korean media.

These findings illuminate the missing voices of Korean Americans in the cultural exchange between Korea and the United States. American culture undoubtedly has a large influence on Korean popular culture and its counterflow to the Global North (Demont-Henrich, 2022; Kim, 2017). What was absent, was the perspectives from the diaspora. Diasporic and transnational views are crucial in understanding the homeland's negotiation of the national identity (Quayson and Daswani, 2013; Ascher and Schiff, 2020). I argue that the representation of Korean Americans in mainstream media, especially in the age of streaming where distribution easily crosses national borders, plays a crucial role in the national identity building of South Korea where the longstanding concept of ethnonationalism is rapidly being challenged.

Directions for Asian Americans in Hollywood

As the concluding question of the interview, I asked the participants how they wanted to see Asian Americans on television in the future. Answers, as expected, varied. Some participants advocated for more depictions of the "immigrant experiences"—saying such stories are the best methods to combat racism. Others called for an increase in Asian Americans in genres outside of drama, in sitcoms or fantasy series. Ultimately, participants agreed that there should be more Asian American representation in television. Not only in terms of casting, but also as directors, writers, and producers.

The findings of this thesis provide valuable insight into the persisting importance of representation in mainstream media. Participants were able to create a sense of belonging and community, envisioning what it means to be a member of the Korean American diaspora. In the current dominant culture that emasculates and feminizes Asian American men, participants were also able to create an understanding of Korean American masculinity. At the same time, the findings demonstrate the necessity of greater Asian American television and media. Audiences engage in a narrow and insular reading of the text. Therefore, the text must give greater visibility—showcase Asian Americans of all ethnicities, socioeconomic statuses, sexual orientations, and generations—to create pan-ethnic solidarity. I hope that the critical and commercial success of *Beef* opens the door for more Asian Americans of all backgrounds to have a spotlight in Hollywood.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A: Internal Review Board Approval

Institutional Review Board for Social & Behavioral Sciences
University of Virginia

Office of the Vice President for Research

Human Research Protection Program

Institutional Review Board for the Social and Behavioral Sciences

IRB-SBS Chair: Hudson, David

IRB-SBS Director: Blackwood, Bronwyn

Protocol Number (6261) Approval Certificate

The UVA IRB-SBS reviewed "Audience Reception of Koreans and Korean Americans to Beef (2023)" and determined that the protocol met the qualifications for approval as described in 45 CFR 46.

Principal Investigator: Park, Jiwon

Faculty Sponsor: Press, Andrea

Protocol Number: 6261

Protocol Title: Audience Reception of Koreans and Korean Americans to Beef (2023)

Is this research funded? No

Review category: Exempt Review

2ii. Educational tests, surveys, interviews, observations (no surveys or interviews for minors): no risk to criminal/civil liability, financial standing, employability, education advancement, reputation
3B. Benign behavioral interventions: no risk to criminal/civil liability, financial standing, employability, education advancement, reputation

Review Type:

Modifications: No
Continuation: No
Unexpected Adverse Events: No

Approval Date: 2024-01-09

As indicated in the Principal Investigator, Faculty Sponsor, and Department Chair Assurances as part of the IRB requirements for approval, the PI has ultimate responsibility for the conduct of the study, the ethical performance of the project, the protection of the rights and welfare of human subjects, and strict adherence to any stipulations imposed by the IRB-SBS.

The PI and research team will comply with all UVA policies and procedures, as well as with all applicable Federal, State, and local laws regarding the protection of human subjects in research, including, but not limited to, the following:

1. That no participants will be recruited or data accessed under the protocol until the Investigator has received this approval certificate.
2. That no participants will be recruited or entered under the protocol until all researchers for the project including the Faculty Sponsor have completed their human investigation research ethics educational requirement (CITI training is required every 3 years for UVA researchers). The PI ensures that all personnel performing the project are qualified, appropriately trained, and will adhere to the provisions of the approved protocol.
3. That any modifications of the protocol or consent form will not be implemented without prior written approval from the IRB-SBS Chair or designee except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazards to the participants.
4. That any deviation from the protocol and/or consent form that is serious, unexpected and related to the study or a death occurring during the study will be reported promptly to the SBS Review Board in writing.
5. That all protocol forms for continuations of this protocol will be completed and returned within the time limit stated on the renewal notification letter.
6. That all participants will be recruited and consented as stated in the protocol approved or exempted by the IRB-SBS board. If written consent is required, all participants will be consented by signing a copy of the consent form unless this requirement is waived by the board.
7. That the IRB-SBS office will be notified within 30 days of a change in the Principal Investigator for the study.
8. That the IRB-SBS office will be notified when the active study is complete.
9. The SBS Review Board reserves the right to suspend and/or terminate this study at any time if, in its opinion, (1) the risks of further research are prohibitive, or (2) the above agreement is breached.

Date this Protocol Approval Certificate was generated: 2024-04-09

APPENDIX B: Email and Text Recruitment Call

Jiwon Park, a graduate student at the University of Virginia, is looking for participants for an audience reception study (IRB-SBS #6261). Participants will be asked questions about their experiences with Asian American media and reactions to short clips from the television show Beef via a Zoom interview. The interview will take about 30 minutes. Participants must be between the ages of 18-25, identify themselves as Korean American and have not lived outside of the United States for more than 5 years.
If interested, please contact jp5dr@virginia.edu

APPENDIX C: Participant Information

Pseudonym	Age	Personal Details
Korean American		
Agnes	21	Born in the United States to 1st generation immigrants, Grew up speaking a mix of Korean and English at home.
Benjamin	21	Born in the United States to 1.5 generation immigrants who arrived in the United States at a young age. Grew up speaking English at home. Briefly lived in South Korea as a child.
Charlotte	20	Born in the United States to 1st generation immigrants. Grew up speaking Korean at home.
David	19	Immigrated to the United States at 5 years old. Grew up speaking a mix of Korean and English at home
Eleanor	21	Born in the United States to 1st generation immigrants. Briefly lived in South Korea for three years. Grew up speaking Korean at home.
Frances	19	Born in the United States to 1st generation immigrants. Grew up speaking Korean at home.
George	21	Born in the United States to 1st generation immigrants. Grew up speaking Korean at home.
Henry	21	Born in the United States to 1st and 2nd generation immigrants. Grew up speaking English at home
Korean		
Isabella	24	Born and raised in South Korea. Spent the last 3 years in the United States attending university.
Jessica	21	Born and raised in South Korea. Temporarily living in the United States as an exchange student.
Kimberly	20	Born and raised in South Korea. Temporarily living in the United States as a student.