Prejudice of Asian American Women: Clothing Influences Stereotypes

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ABSTRACT

Clothing type can have a significant impact on the way people are perceived. We were interested in the effects of including race as a variable. Participants (N=252) rated 3 pictures of female Asian American models in either business or causal outfits on descriptors related to general Asian stereotypes, sexualized Asian women stereotypes, submissive Asian women stereotypes, and invisible Asian women stereotypes. Models in business clothing were rated lower on general Asian stereotypes, sexualized stereotypes, and invisible stereotypes. These results suggest that stereotypes of Asian American women indeed can be influenced.

INTRODUCTION

There is a long history of stereotypes of Asian American women in the U.S. Such stereotypes can impact the personal lives, opportunities, relationships, and professional or academic careers of these women (Hommadova & Davydova, 2018; Nguyen, 2016). Asian or Asian American women are often stereotyped as exoticized, fetishized, submissive, passive, invisible, quiet, sexualized, and not fit for leadership roles (Hommadova & Davydova, 2018; Nguyen, 2016; Sue et al., 2008). Given the prejudice and discrimination that can arise from stereotypes (Fiske, 1998; Van Knippenberg et al., 1999), it is important to explore this issue as well as ways to influence them.

Previous research has confirmed the significant impact of clothing in how people are perceived (Abbey et al., 1987; Kahn & Davies, 2017; Livingston & Gurung, 2019; McDermott & Pettijohn II, 2011). Even very minor changes in one's clothing may greatly alter judgements made about that person (Howlett et al., 2013). Clothing can either enhance or mitigate racial stereotypes held by observers, as observers often have strong reactions to clothing associated with a specific group (Gurung et al., 2020; Kahn & Davies, 2017). Business clothing specifically may increase perceptions of being authoritative, competent, intelligent, and interesting (Bell, 1991; Harris et al., 1983; Kwon & Johnson-Hillery, 1998). We were interested in seeing how these effects might influence perceptions of Asian American women, given the various stereotypes about them.

This study integrates the impact of clothing on perceptions and racial stereotypes of Asian American women. We hypothesized that Asian American models in business clothing would be rated lower on submissive, invisible and sexualized stereotypes, but rated higher on general Asian stereotypes.

Mean Ratings by Stereotype Group
*p < .05
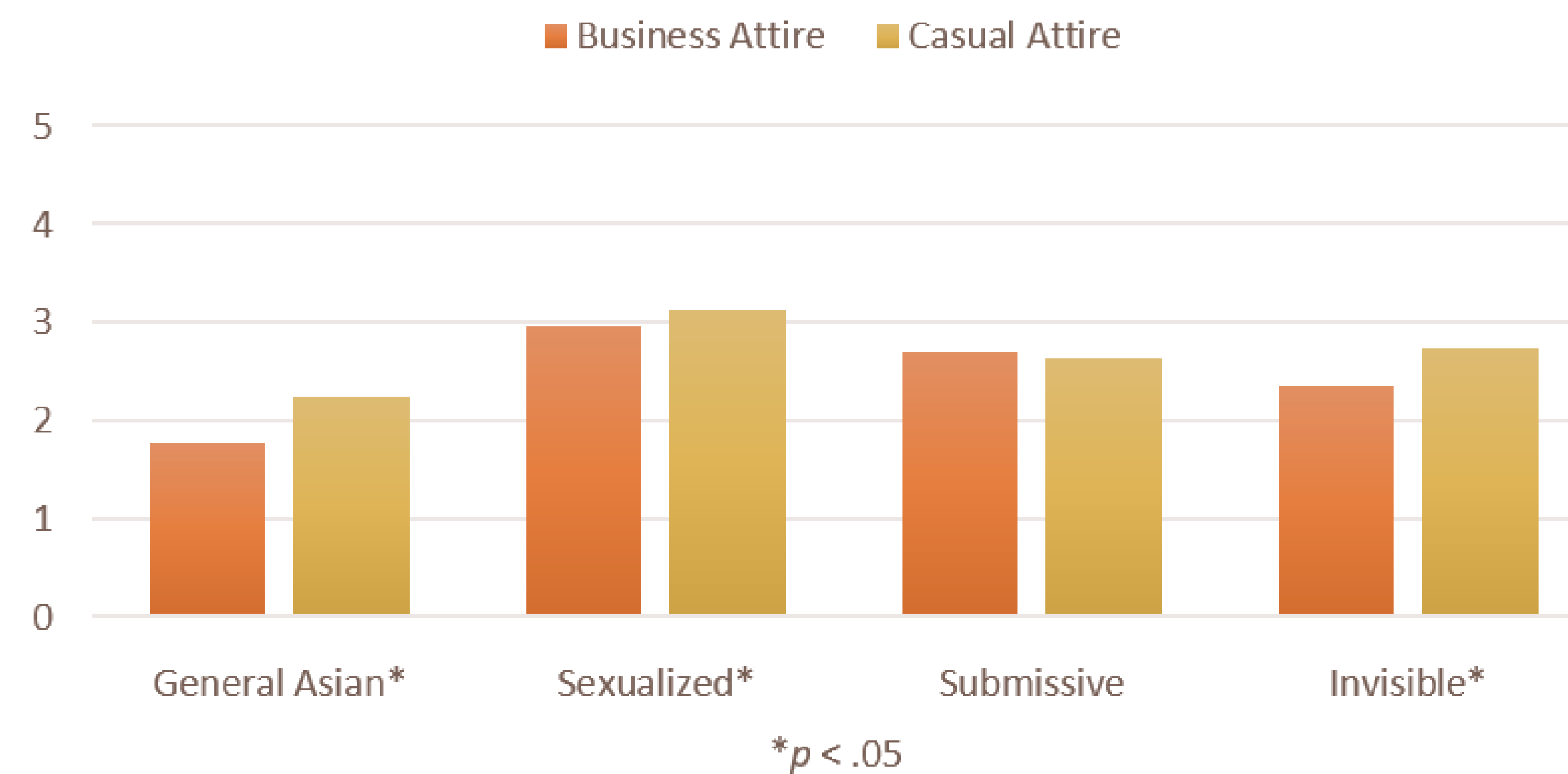
METHODS

Participants: 252 participants.

Materials: 4 pictures of models (one White used as a distractor); demographics; Scale of Anti-Asian American Stereotypes (SAAS); Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI); Asian exposure question

Procedure: Participants were randomly assigned to either the business or casual clothing condition and rated the models on various descriptors. They completed the demographics as well as the other measures previously mentioned.

RESULTS

- Models in casual attire were rated higher on general Asian stereotypes, $F(1, 239) = 46.56$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .17$, and sexualized stereotypes, $F(1, 239) = 12.91$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$. Models in the business attire condition were rated lower on invisible stereotypes, $F(1, 239) = 42.01$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .15$.

- Both gender, $F(4, 233) = 3.42$, $p = .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .056$, and Asian stereotyping, $F(4, 233) = 6.09$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .095$, were significant covariates.

- Having more Asian American friends was associated with significantly higher levels of overall and competence related stereotyping.

DISCUSSION

In focusing on race, our study demonstrated how clothing can have a considerable effect on the way Asian American women specifically are perceived and can in fact be used as a means to influence these stereotypes. We found that models in business clothing were seen as less stereotypically Asian, less sexualized, and less invisible (a novel finding, given the stereotypes of Asian women as invisible and not likely to be in leadership roles).

Our design represents a first step into using a relatively simple variable, clothing, to predict perceptions. The sizable research literature on the linkage of clothing to sexism, and newer research showing how formal clothing may attenuate racist perceptions (Gurung et al., 2020) was matched here where professional clothing short circuits commonly held beliefs about Asian American women.

A limitation of this study is the makeup of the sample, the majority of participants being young European American females. Since our models were female, these results also cannot be generalized to Asian American men, for example.

This study was a first step in examining the power of clothing as it relates to perceptions of race and gender, and the current design sets up some possible next steps. Future research could gather a more diverse sample size, or compare Asian American models against other races. It is also important to note that further research is needed to explore ways to alter the mindsets of those who hold stereotypes, rather than relying on victims of discrimination to alter their actions to avoid prejudice.

References available upon request: conrowa@oregonstate.edu