



Beyond Linsanity: The Stereotypes and Prejudices Affecting Asian American Basketball Players

Jayden Zhuge

Basketball is one of the most popular sports in the United States. There are over 28.1 million people in the United States of America who play basketball (May, 2024). Of the population in the United States, 7.2% are Asian, yet, less than 0.4% of drafted players in the history of the NBA (National Basketball Association) are of Asian descent (Gaetano, 2025). One key player you might recognize is Jeremy Lin. In his earlier years, Lin grew up in a Taiwanese household near San Francisco, California, where he attended school and earned honors for his academic prowess. Although Lin was initially undrafted, he has gone on to become one of the most recognized names in the NBA, playing for over eight teams (Gold House, 2023). Being the NBA's first American-born Chinese player, many doubted his size and ability to perform on the court. Even after being undrafted and cut from many different teams, Lin became a standard for many other underexposed Asian American basketball players whose dream is to achieve his accomplishments. His remarkable story from being disregarded to being known as "Linsanity" shows the possibility for success for Asian American basketball players when given an opportunity.

Lin showed that Asian American basketball players can reach the top of the league, but Asian Americans are still heavily underrepresented. Why do we see so few Asian Americans in basketball? Lin rose to prominence in a community where people like him are uncommon, thus leading to stereotyping because of the tiny population who share his background. For example, major sports networks, like ESPN, focused on Lin's Asian heritage rather than his unique ability to play basketball (Shaw, 2012). Averaging 22.5 points per game and 8 assists per game, Lin dominated the NBA leading the New York Knicks to a 9-3 record in his first 12 starts. Still, a controversial headline made by an ESPN representative referred to Lin as the "Chink in the Armor" of the New York Knicks, sparking critics to call for an apology.

Lin's experiences were not unique; indeed, many other Asian Americans have faced stereotypes in sports. Since Jeremy Lin, there have not been many Asian American players who have been as successful as him, showing that the challenges he faced are still present, if not even more. Here, I review social scientific perspectives on the experiences of Asian Americans in basketball, focusing on the stereotypes these players face on and off the court. First, I define stereotypes in a general instance making examples from not just race, but also gender. Next, I discuss stereotypes applied to Asian Americans specifically, and how those might apply to basketball. Then, finally, I show the impact of stereotypes upon Asian Americans, specifically, the effects on a player's mental health.

What are Stereotypes?

Stereotypes are a major societal problem where there are positive and negative beliefs people hold about a certain social group (Jhangiani et al, 2022). These beliefs are very widespread, taking many different forms, and often causing negative effects. People can stereotype based on many different social categories, such as gender, age, nationality, and race. Stereotypes based on race have a long history and appear across many cultures. In the United States, race is an important social grouping from which stereotypes arise. Even the concept of "race" itself is socially constructed by society. That is, the idea of "race" was culturally constructed and is not biologically determined (Gannon, 2024). Moreover, the idea of separate racial groups with separate roles and statuses in society can be generalized to the concept "social categorization" (Tajfel et al., 1971).

This concept can be seen all the way back in infancy; children begin to form general ideas of culture significant to the social group, based on race, gender, attractiveness, and more. Though in a more general and simplified view of the differences, children unconsciously make these assumptions whether they are positive or negative. Moreover, the average person also has initial thoughts. With more social interactions, life experience, and different influences, everyday people unconsciously categorize sets of people based on initial thoughts and ideas. For example, in gender, women are seen, very commonly, and treated as “weak” or “submissive” before proving to society that they are not. It takes women extra effort to fight against the stereotypes laid upon them – grouping them together – even when most of the perspectives do not suggest who they truly are. In another instance, we can see all Black people being categorized as athletically gifted but academically less capable, prone to aggression, and exposed to less beneficial environments (Melson-Silimon, 2024). Although some people match the stereotypes correctly, it is risky to oversimplify a person's character because of the fact that each individual has an experience exclusive to them. Indeed, these stereotypes in which humans socially categorize can support an act of wrongdoing: prejudice.

Prejudice is a negative attitude toward an individual based on their social group membership. Significant media attention has been paid towards racial discrimination facing Black people in the United States. In recent years, a man named George Floyd was killed by White police officers after being suspected of a crime (BBC, 2020). The responding officer's use of force was uncalled for, and resulted in Floyd's death. This example of police brutality is just one of many other discriminating scenarios minorities face in their everyday lives. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, hate crimes against Asian Americans spiked. Particularly, Asians of all ethnicities faced backlash and blame for something they are unrelated to. A great number of Asians also endured random attacks of violence because of their apparent race. In the Asian community, people have gathered to fight against these unjust events, creating a movement known as “Stop Asian Hate” (AAPI, 2020).

Often, many people have incomplete information of a person, forcing them to belong in a certain social group, without the consideration of their unique ability or character. An act of individualization can solve the issue of failing to see people for who they are rather than solely as a member of the group they are a part of. When someone is stereotyped, they are seen as a member of a social group, and not for their unique characteristics. A way to combat ignorance is to grow closer connections between one another and find similarities. Finding similarities supports recategorization of a person from being an outsider to being someone who is accepted into a group.

Stereotypes in Asian American Communities

While many different communities are impacted by stereotypes, the experiences of Asian Americans reveal another layer of how prejudice operates; especially in spaces like basketball, the perception of masculinity and ability are complex in the intersection between culture and sport. The prejudice in Asian American basketball reaches far beyond present disadvantages, tracing all the way back to long-standing roots in cultural differences leading to stereotypes and historical narratives that have shaped how Asian Americans are perceived. Specifically, a significant event in history is the contribution of Chinese workers to building the transcontinental railroad. Many Chinese immigrants sought to make money despite very low rates, extremely dangerous environments, and unfair treatments; nevertheless, the railroad companies turned a blind eye. These unjust values transfer to present day perspectives and cultural norms against Chinese Americans, even Asians in general. A common conception people have against people

of Asian descent – Chinese or not – is that they are seen as inferior and expected to work beyond the standard, much like the history of Chinese laborers during the railroad era (Miner, 1975). Asian workers are very prominent in the work force for many companies today, yet they lack representation in top leadership positions (Lu et al., 2020). This underrepresentation connects to the fact that Asian Americans are not expected to hold high impact roles, in other words expected to be more timid.

Although not limited to this single stereotype, Asian Americans also face stereotypes in academics. These portrayals create many different problems as Asians are pressured to embody the image of a “model minority” who is quiet, diligent, and smart. People also simultaneously reject them from areas that require physical dominance, leadership, or even charisma (Lee, 2016). The idea of a “model minority” contributes to limiting the opportunity and ability for many Asian Americans to fulfill their whole potential in whatever they pursue. Similar to gender roles, Asians are expected to follow norms and habits put upon them by onlookers regardless of their experiences in life. Some examples of what an Asian American should live to be are: Academically strong, law-abiding, and studious. Although these traits are “positive”, they place unnecessary pressure on Asian Americans to reach this high standard. What makes these stereotypes dangerous is that they flatten a continent’s worth of culture and thousands of years of history into one singular image, erasing the individuality of millions of people.

While many people are unaware of the uniqueness in each person, they are innocent to the fact that between each Asian culture there are many different ethnicities such as Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese in the United States. Many see it as easier to generalize Asian Americans to a singular group rather than individualize each person's differences. Generalizing stereotypes do not make distinctions accurately to describe each Asian person, often misdefining a person's character or personality. For example, Asian Americans can also break free from the “model minority” behavior and become people with unique hobbies or talents – athlete, entrepreneur, and celebrity. These oversimplifications ignore the complexity and values not just between the different types of countries but the diverse variety within them. Ultimately, stereotypes confine the Asian group rather than define, thus preventing them from succeeding in many specific opportunities in the world.

Stereotypes Against Asian American Basketball Players

These longstanding stereotypes carry into competitive spaces like basketball, where they directly shape how Asian American athletes are perceived. They face discriminatory stereotypes similar to the outside world; for instance, being respected for diligence but denied recognition in leadership, influence, and strength, reinforcing the same barriers they fight in their everyday lives (Lee, 2016). As Asian Americans are subjected to being the “model minority” on and off the court, it automatically makes another player of a different race believe that an Asian basketball player will not contribute or be any threat. These stereotypes that pass through another player's mind are not always conscious. Players may not always be aware of their stereotypes about Asian players, but they may unconsciously assume a lack of ability at first sight. It isn't just players of other races who have pre-conceived notions but coaches, fans, and Asian Americans themselves who bring down the image of the whole community of Asian Americans hoopers. Beyond these surface level exclusions, these perceptions impact real opportunity for Asian basketball players as they have more to prove than another player who's not battling stereotypes.

Even within the game, stereotypes of Asian American athletes create pressure that psychologists call “stereotype threat.” Stereotype threat occurs when an individual is concerned

about confirming a negative stereotype directed at them or a group they are a member of (Stone et al., 1999). For Asian Americans, stereotypes that they are less athletic may influence them to perform worse than their true abilities. For Asian American basketball players, these stereotypes may work to degrade their ability but can also give Asians players motivation to prove others wrong. However, this may also hold pressure against the player themselves to perform well. They carry a constant burden to make sure they don't confirm what the stereotypes hold against them, and this pressure becomes especially important in high-stake situations. For instance, an Asian American player stepping up to the free throw line might become hyper-aware of the expectation that Asians lack athletic ability, and that awareness alone increases the chance of missing. This stereotype threat process can lead individuals to confirm stereotypes unintentionally. While stereotypes for Black and White basketball players aren't necessarily negative, for example being able to jump or shoot the basketball, it may give them a boost of confidence, while also providing pressure in a negative sense similar to Asian players. Ultimately, these stereotypes don't just harm Asians but also the whole community of basketball players who all have something to prove.

With high pressure moments in basketball, Asian Americans don't just experience the outcome of the situation but face the effects of stereotypes of ability in the long run. This often turns into mental health challenges resulting in stress worrying about self-doubt, identity, and worth. Asian American basketball players may experience heightened self-doubt because of their minoritized racial identity (Tran, 2020). This doubt can come both from their interactions with other players, but also from within themselves. For example, when being a minority in the game of basketball, Asian American players are doubted in many different levels of basketball because of the lack of representation in these places, often feeling pressure from other people. Outside perspectives may view and comment on Asian American players to be not as fit for the sport than other ethnic groups. The effects of these beliefs transfer to a societal norm which makes everyone discount any and all Asians who attempt to break free from this curse. The anxiety of expectations can lead Asian American players to hesitate with their skill rather than perform at the top of their ability. Returning to Jeremy Lin, in sharing his experiences he stated, "I've always had a target on my back, just because of what I looked like... People were so quick to minimize anything and everything I've done. There are times where I would clearly accomplish something amazing. There would be a very minimal type of recognition after. I would start to minimize my own accomplishments, because I felt like nobody else really understood or cared, and so it even affected the way that I viewed myself." Even despite this, he succeeded; Jeremy Lin faced these problems and still pushed through (Yam, 2021).

Many outside opinions can alter the mindset of an Asian American athlete but the ones that affect the players the most are the internal beliefs. Many players may feel misplaced when being the only Asian American and have a sense of duty to perform for the role of someone to "carry" the Asian culture forward. Thoughts of failing have a significant impact on the physiological aspect of the player as the thought of winning is overshadowed by doubt that may linger in the back of the mind. The lack of full confidence can impede the player and self-sabotage their chances for success (Rinaldy et al., 2022). For instance, the slightest belief of failing not only for you but failing all the Asian Americans who count on you to succeed can falter full faith. In addition, some Asian American athletes may buy into negative, misleading stereotypes about Asian athletes as a whole. The athletes then automatically identify themselves as not only a part of the group but sharing the same misleading attributes, that they are not natural athletes or basketball players (Cheryan, 2000). A quote by a former division 1



basketball player, Sai Tummala Reads “This lack of public representation is what has developed into a further convincing point within the South Asian American community as to why a career in basketball is unattainable” (Iyer, 2019).

Self-doubt can have negative effects beyond just athletic performance, it can also have negative mental health consequences. In many cases, athletes are held to more than just sport but mainly education. With expectations in education and sport, stress stacks up in an athlete's mind. More specifically, in many cases Asian kids have higher standards of education placed upon them by their parents even when the kid has more commitment or drive for sports. For some Asian student-athletes, they may have less parental support for their athletic ambitions. This can create even more pressure on the athlete dealing with two significant commitments: sports and school. A study observing the amount of depressive symptoms between multiple ethnic groups showed one-third of Asian Americans had functionally impairing depression, compared to one-fourth of White athletes (Chao, 2022). This research highlights the fact that many Asian American basketball players are experiencing mental health challenges both in sports and in their life in general (Tran, 2020).

Combating Asian American Stereotypes

In summary, the effects of stereotypes don't benefit Asian hoopers, but how does society, as a whole, combat this unconscious trend against certain groups? The idea of sparking change starts with giving equal or more opportunity and also diversifying the perspective of Asian American basketball players. Understanding that some examples of stereotypes apply to ethnic groups other than Asian Americans can help people realize most beliefs don't apply to a lot of the Asian American population but can be generalized to the whole population. While the idea of Asian Americans being labeled as a “model minority” reinforces them being intelligent, submissive, and hard-working, it ignores the diverse population of Asians who do not fit this narrow mold. Asian American basketball players do possess athletic ability and can compete at the highest levels; these athletes do not fit into the categories society places them in, like the “model minority.” This group of athletes are being limited in their opportunities because of these perspectives (Lee, 2016). Overall, there is no problem being realistic but when people begin holding false narratives and stereotypes about Asian athletes, then will these athletes face discrimination and bias.

How can we dismantle these stereotypes? Coaches can start by evaluating Asian American players to the same standard as other athletes. Coaches should not evaluate based on race; instead, they should look at their players' skill, character, and drive. Adding on, fans also shouldn't hold different athletes to different expectations. These fan biases might transfer to the Asian American players, who might struggle with these perceptions being placed upon them. Asian American players should ignore these stereotypes and not compare themselves to other players. As this problem is common for many, Asian hoopers should mentor and warn younger athletes, sharing their experiences and ways to support the next generation.

Finally, more academic research needs to be done to understand the complexity of stereotypes affecting Asian American athletes. For example, psychological processes such as stereotype threat could be applied to understand these athletes' experiences. More rigorous research could help draw attention to the challenges faced by Asian American hoopers. By continuing to promote fair opportunities, celebrating successful Asian hoopers like Jeremy Lin, and encouraging people to look beyond stereotypes. Society can create a more inclusive environment where talent is recognized and respected. This shift not only benefits Asian



American players, but also enriches the game of basketball as a whole, making it into a sport without limitations and prejudice.



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