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Honorary Whites vs. Yellow Peril: How Social Media Altered Asian Identity Throughout the Pandemic

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Honorary Whites vs. Yellow Peril: How Social Media Altered Asian Identity Throughout the Pandemic

As Covid-19 swept through the nation in the spring of 2020, uncertainty and fear spread even faster as frightening headlines dominated social media and news sources: “US Death Toll in the Coronavirus Outbreak Passes 80,000;” “New York Ventilator Shortage May Force Machine Sharing, but it’s Risky;” and “WHO Concerned Over Rapid Escalation in COVID-19 Spread.” With few answers to settle their fears, many Americans turned to point fingers at the Asian community. For instance, Donald Trump referred to the virus as the “Kung Flu,” placing an even larger target on Asian Americans. The resulting blame towards Asians led to a 339% increase in anti-Asian hate crimes nationwide, sparking discussions about Asian identity on multiple social media platforms (Yam np). Angela Gover, Shannon Harper, and Lynn Langton, professors and researchers of criminal justice at the University of Colorado Denver and Iowa State University, write in 2020, “Asian Americans have also reported a surge in a second epidemic targeting them specifically—racially motivated hate crimes involving physical violence and harassment—despite the disease impacting people of all races/ethnicities” (648).

Growing up in Acton, a Boston suburb with approximately one-third of the town identifying as someone of Asian descent, I never saw myself as a minority. In my mind, if I identified as a person of color, I minimized the racism and discrimination members of the Black and Latinx communities face. Jingqiu Ren and Joe Feagin, graduate student and professor respectively, at Texas A&M University’s Department of Sociology, provide an explanation for my thought process using the “model minority” myth, which originated in the 1960s, in their 2020 article “Face Mask Symbolism in Anti-Asian Hate Crimes.” They claim that the concept of “model minority” separated Asians from other people of color, “weakening

the coalitional efforts and power of people of color as a whole” (755). Ren and Feagin argue that when Asians wear face masks during the pandemic, others perceived them “as diseased and framed them as the source of the pandemic, portraying them as particularly weak or sickly individuals” (749). And for that same reason, 80% of those targeted in the anti-Asian hate crimes were female, revealing “a male-sexist framing of women as a distinctively weak population segment” (Ren 752).

But Asian women being disproportionately attacked goes against the traditional pattern of victims in most violent physical assaults, such as muggings and homicides. Men are almost twice as likely to be victims of violent crimes compared to women and more likely to be attacked by strangers, which most of the perpetrators in these AAPI hate crimes were (Turnpenney np). And typically, when women are attacked, it is by someone they had a current or former intimate relationship with (Turnpenney np). This deviation from the trend of victims could be because Asian women have historically been viewed as submissive. Aki Uchida, a member of the University of California San Diego’s Department of Communications, argues in 1998 that “the stereotype of the Oriental Woman as exotic, submissive, and subservient, or sinister, treacherous, and lecherous still predominates, as if the century of life experiences of Asian women in the United States has had little impact” (167). This image of a submissive woman contrasts drastically with the stereotype of other minority women. For instance, Black women are often portrayed as angry and strong. Like the model minority myth, this specific stereotype against Asian women further separates Asians from other racial groups, making it difficult for me to view Asians as a minority.

However, my experience of growing up in a town with significant Asian representation does not apply to all Asian Americans; many Asian Americans have always considered

themselves as people of color and victims of xenophobia and racism. Hannah Tessler, Meera Choi, and Grace Kao, members of Yale's Sociology Department, take an opposing stance to Ren and Feagin's argument regarding Asian identity in the US, arguing that Asian Americans historically have always been viewed as a threat in their 2020 article "The Anxiety of being Asian American: Hate Crimes and Negative Biases during the COVID-19 Pandemic." Citing examples of the "Yellow Peril" from 1900 when San Francisco authorities quarantined Chinatown residents, "believing that the unclean food and Asian people were the cause of the [bubonic plague] epidemic," they argue that the reason behind the scapegoating of Asians during periods of panic is "when moral panic arises, foreign bodies, typically the undesirable and 'un-American' *yellow* bodies, may be seen as a threat that can harm pure white bodies" (640). The idea of pitting "yellow" versus "white" bodies against each other contradicts the common ideology that Asians are perceived as "honorary whites" or model minorities (Tessler et al. 637).

But how Asians respond to being pit against "white bodies" depends heavily on context. For instance, often Asians find themselves in limbo where they are neither seen as pure as Caucasian individuals yet are pit against other minority groups due to the "model minority" myth. And for me, that was the case growing up. Despite not viewing myself as a person of color, I also knew I was different from my white peers. Classmates complained that my mom's homemade dumplings stunk up the cafeteria, made fun of my small eyes, and I even felt embarrassed by my parents' Chinese accent when they met my white friends. It was not until I saw Instagram posts and stories during the pandemic regarding AAPI hate crimes that I finally came to peace with my Asian identity.

Anti-Asian hate crimes garnered the most attention on social media following the March 2021 Atlanta spa shooting that killed 8 individuals, 6 of whom were women of Asian descent.

And with 5 of the 6 Asian women killed being spa employees, a typically low wage job, these women did not fit the typical “model minority” image. The shooter’s targeted rampage against Asian women received nationwide attention, and soon after, the #StopAsianHate movement began trending on all forms of social media. With 1.8 billion views on TikTok, 560 thousand posts on Instagram, and 371 thousand Facebook users posting under the hashtag, awareness surrounding anti-Asian hate crimes was at an all-time high during the pandemic.

Through conducting a survey of 36 college students who either attend WashU or grew up in Acton with me, I found that approximately 92% of the respondents indicated “yes” when asked if they had “experienced an increase of awareness regarding Asian hate crimes and discrimination as a result of social media during the pandemic.” And while social media during the pandemic did play a large role in drawing attention to the issue of xenophobia against Asians in the US, it also caused many Asian Americans to reflect inward on how they view their cultural identity. For many Asian Americans, including myself, the #StopAsianHate movement shifted the way we viewed ourselves as a minority group. For the first time, I saw myself as a person of color rather than an “honorary white”—and I am hardly likely the only one.

The debate among scholars of whether Asian Americans are perceived as “model minorities” or foreign bodies by both themselves and other races extends to the general public as well. In my survey, when respondents were asked, “prior to Covid-19, did you consider Asians people of color,” 78% said “yes,” while 22% chose “no.” A large reason why almost one-fourth of the respondents did not consider Asians as people of color prior to the pandemic could be due to their economic backgrounds. Due to the limited reach I have, all of the respondents came from underclassmen WashU students or my Acton high school peers. With

WashU and Acton having above-average household incomes, the “model minority” myth is more likely to influence how they see themselves as often people of color connote lower-income individuals. And while there were no significant patterns in how respondents answered that question based on where they grew up, their gender, or whether they identify as part of the AAPI community themselves, there was a noticeable pattern in those that changed their stance on how they view Asians as a result of social media during the pandemic.

5 of the 36 respondents, approximately 14%, switched their answer from “no” to “yes” when later asked if they “consider Asians as people of color today.” And of those 5 respondents, all of them grew up in liberal states with significant Asian representation, such as Massachusetts and California, where the “model minority” myth likely influenced their opinions. However, despite finding a pattern in the respondents’ geographical location, there was a 3:2 ratio between not identifying as part of the AAPI community and identifying as a person of Asian descent. Similarly, there was a 3:2 ratio between identifying as female versus male. Therefore, based on my own survey results, gender and identifying as part of the AAPI community seems to have little impact on changing how one views Asian identity in response to social media’s representation of AAPI hate crimes during the pandemic. But due to the small size of individuals I surveyed, there could be a more significant relationship between one’s gender and race and their views on Asian identity in reality.

In 2021, scholars Hanjia Lyu, Yangxin Fan, Ziyu Xio, Mayya Komisarchik, and Jiebo Luo, members of the University of Rochester’s data science and political science departments, conducted their own study of public opinion toward the #StopAsianHate movement that resulted from the Atlanta spa shootings, as reflected in their article “Understanding Public Opinion Toward the #StopAsianHate Movement and the Relation With Racially Motivated

Hate Crimes in the US." Specifically, they analyzed the user characteristics of Americans who tweeted posts including relevant hashtags such as #StopAsianHate and #AntiAsianHate between March 18, 2021, to April 11, 2021.

The study concludes that women, younger adults, and Asian and Black communities were more likely to participate in the movement. Specifically, they find that “women are more likely to state direct support and demand for policy than men” as “men tend to discuss in a more general way” (Lyu et al. 10). A large reason behind this could come from Ren and Feagin’s work which articulates that since Asian women are being disproportionately targeted, these AAPI hate crimes become an issue of both racism and sexism. The number of female victims attacked makes the increase in AAPI hate crimes especially concerning for women, who also historically tend to be at the forefront of social justice movements (Lauterbach et al. np). Another potential reason behind the difference between men’s and women’s tweets could be that women have experienced a greater increase in anxiety when in public following the increase in anti-Asian hate crimes. From my survey, 11 out of the 12 individuals who indicated “yes” when asked if they “experienced an increase in anxiety when going out in public as a result of the increase in AAPI hate crimes” identified as females and part of the AAPI community. The increased fear for their safety could result in a more urgent underlying tone to their tweets when participating in the #StopAsianHate movement.

This study also finds that places that experience the most racially motivated hate crimes have the lowest percentage of negative opinions reflected on social media towards the #StopAsianHate movement. The study defines a negative opinion as tweets that encourage “tension between Black and Asian communities, [incite] anti-Asian sentiment, and [justify] that hate is not the reason for the attacks” (Lyu et al. 7). The authors suggest that “people who

have not encountered hate crimes might express negative opinions because they do not have the related experience ... [T]hus making it harder for them to understand the seriousness of hate crimes” (Lyu et al. 10). However, since Lyu’s study only analyzed tweets and did not consider any other social media platforms, I conducted my own hashtag analysis on TikTok, the social media platform primarily used by Gen-Zs, to see if Lyu’s study could be applied to today’s youth, who are more vocal about social justice issues compared to other generations (Baxter np). And I found similar results to Lyu’s Twitter analysis despite Gen-Zs being less likely to use Twitter as their primary social media platform (Sivadas np).

For instance, when analyzing TikToks under the #StopAsianHate, 14 out of the top 15 most viewed TikToks were made by female users, indicating that, like on Twitter, females are more likely to vocally participate in the movement. However, a counter explanation to this stark contrast between male and female participants within the top fifteen posts could also be that TikTok is 50% more popular with Gen-Z females than males, making TikTok a skewed platform to analyze (Year13 np).

So, while my survey of Gen-Z individuals seems to find that gender plays little to no role in shifting whether one views Asians as people of color in response to social media’s representation of AAPI hate crimes in the pandemic, gender does seem to play a significant role in how likely one is publicly vocal on social media regarding the #StopAsianHate movement. By combining Lyu’s findings, that women are more likely to advocate for direct support and better guns laws than men on Twitter, my similar findings on TikTok, and my survey responses indicating that women of Asian descent are facing increased anxiety when going out in public, it seems clear that the #StopAsianHate movement has had a larger impact on women’s self-conception of safety and racial identity compared to men (Lyu et al. 7).

And even though historically female fragility has been used to rally male paternalism and support, since the victims are not white, AAPI hate crimes seem to be less likely to activate American male paternalism. Jean McMahon and Kimberly Kahn from Portland State University's Department of Psychology supported this in 2017 and found that protective paternalism relates to anti-minority racial attitudes (591). They conclude that "although the desire to protect a loved one from harm is not inherently sexist or racist, beliefs about the fragility of White women are entwined with racial prejudices, whether directly espoused by White supremacists or unconsciously activated by salient threats" of increases in violent crimes (McMahon 603). With typical male support towards female victims being rooted in racial motivations to protect women, men of all ages and across multiple social media platforms are much less likely to participate in the #StopAsianHate movement. Without the typical paternalistic motivations, men, especially white men, are less likely to advocate for direct change, perhaps because 80% of AAPI hate crimes target women, preventing men from understanding the fear Asian women now face. But how does female fragility impact women's self-perception of their safety?

In my survey, all 5 women that did not identify as members of the AAPI community claimed they did not experience an increase in anxiety following the increase in anti-Asian hate crimes. This statistic stands in stark contrast as the majority of AAPI-identifying females, 11 out of the 18, indicated that they did experience greater anxiety. While the reason behind this discrepancy could be because Caucasian women did not feel racially targeted by these hate crimes, it could also be because they are used to their white fragility benefiting them. They feel less at risk knowing that men may come to their protection in the case of an attack, but that sense of security does not extend to Asian women in the same manner.

Even though the majority of my female Asian survey respondents had nothing in common with the 6 victims of the Atlanta spa shooting beyond ethnicity and gender, the fear that they could easily be grouped into a simple category of “Asian female” induced anxiety for most. The 6 women from the Atlanta shooting were all between the ages of thirty-three and seventy-four and immigrated to America, having grown up in East Asia (“Atlanta Spa Shootings: Who Are the Victims?”). And while my survey respondents were all pursuing a college education, likely to come from middle to upper-income families, and grew up in the States, being Asian American versus Asian was not going to save them in the split second it takes for someone to pull a trigger.

As an Asian American woman myself, I became increasingly aware and paranoid about my surroundings when going out in public this summer. When riding the subways in New York City this summer, I made sure to stand against the walls while waiting, fearing that if I got too close to the tracks, I would become the next major headline news in the morning. My mom even went so far as to tell me to wear sunglasses when walking in public in hopes that people wouldn’t notice I was Asian. And while I was raised to be proud of my culture growing up, this summer my mindset shifted: if I could appear white, I should. I discovered that I was no longer anything close to being an “honorary white” by nature, and as a targeted person of color, I had to actively white pass to achieve the safety I previously took for granted.

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Appendix

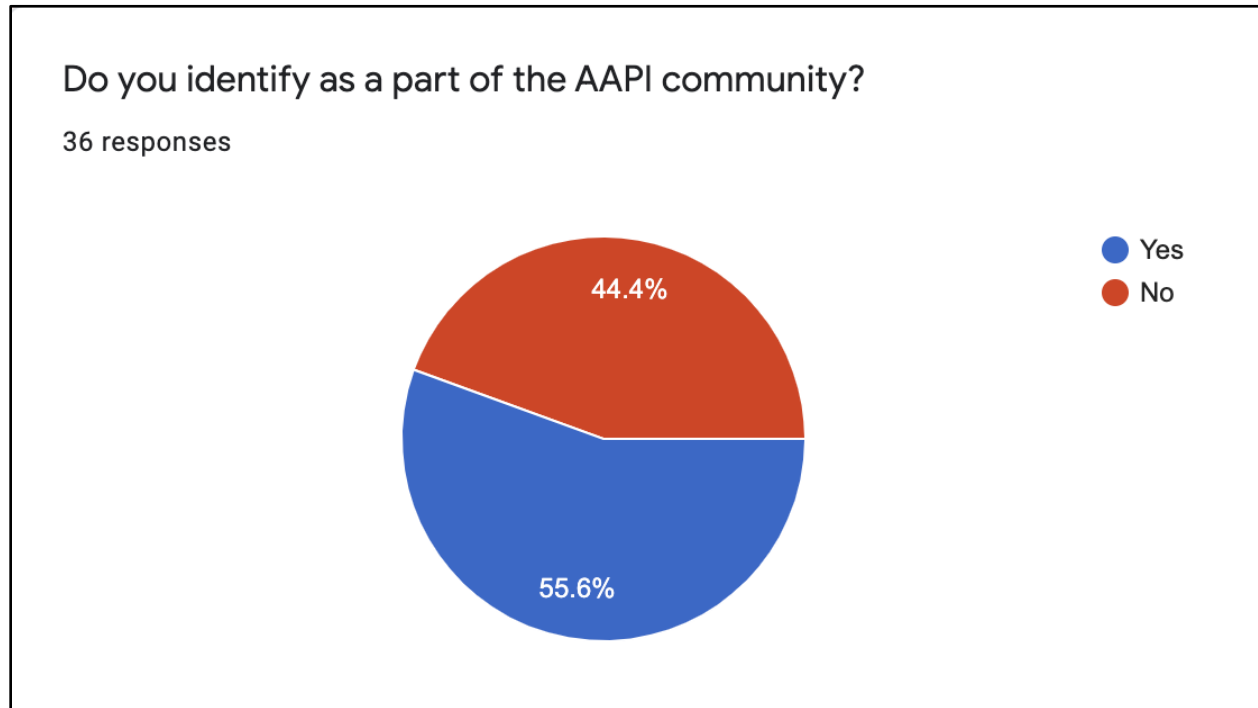


Figure 1: Survey Question #1

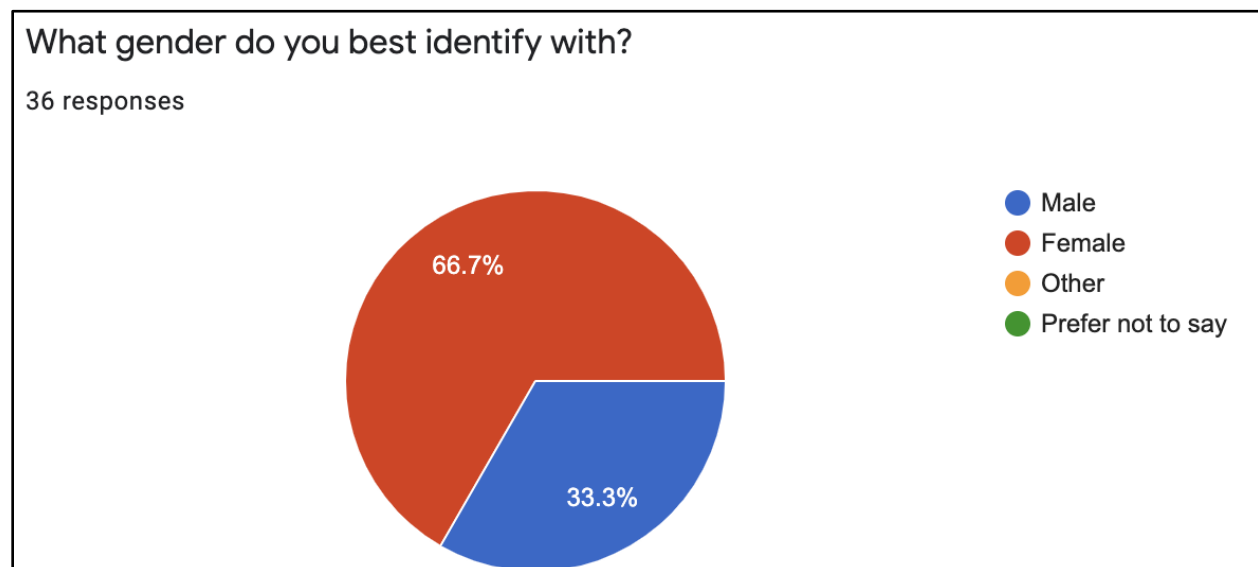


Figure 2: Survey Question #2

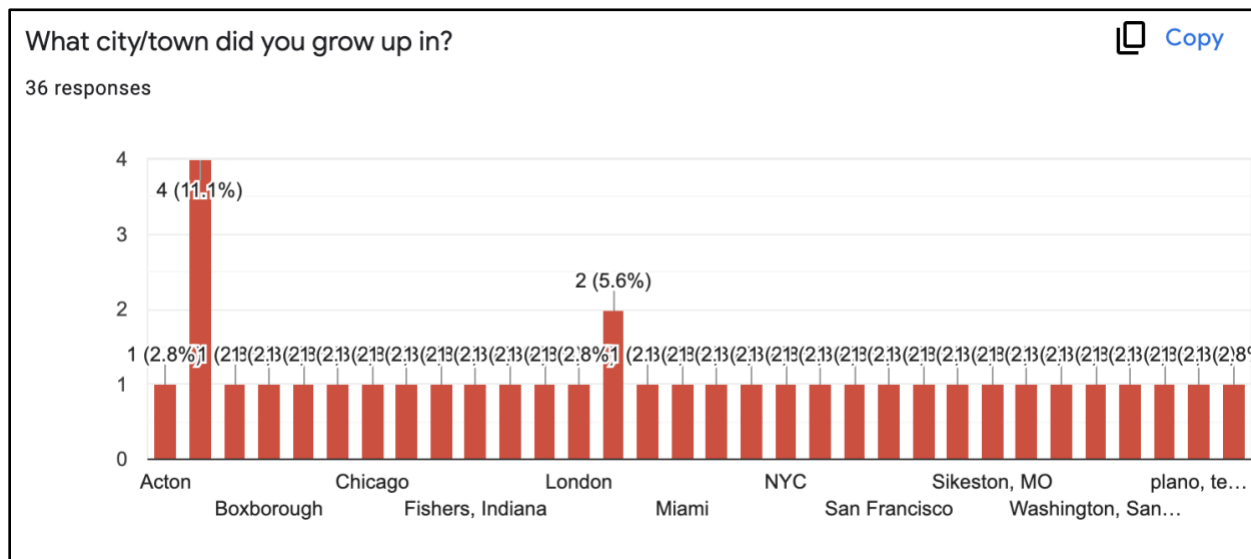


Figure 3: Survey Question #3

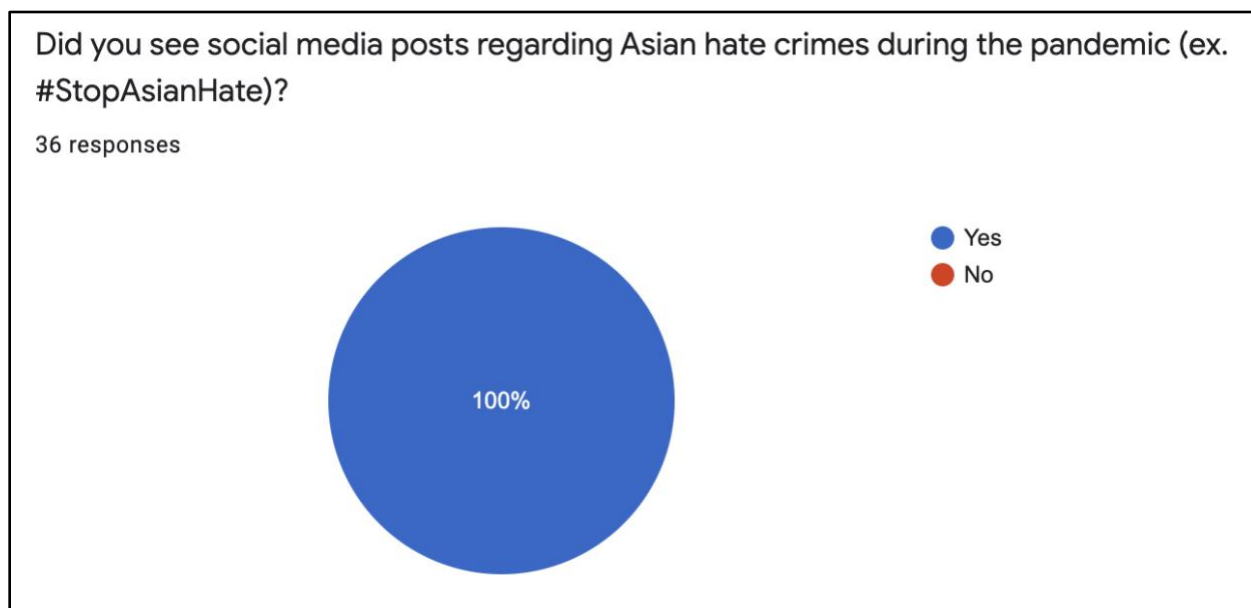


Figure 4: Survey Question #4

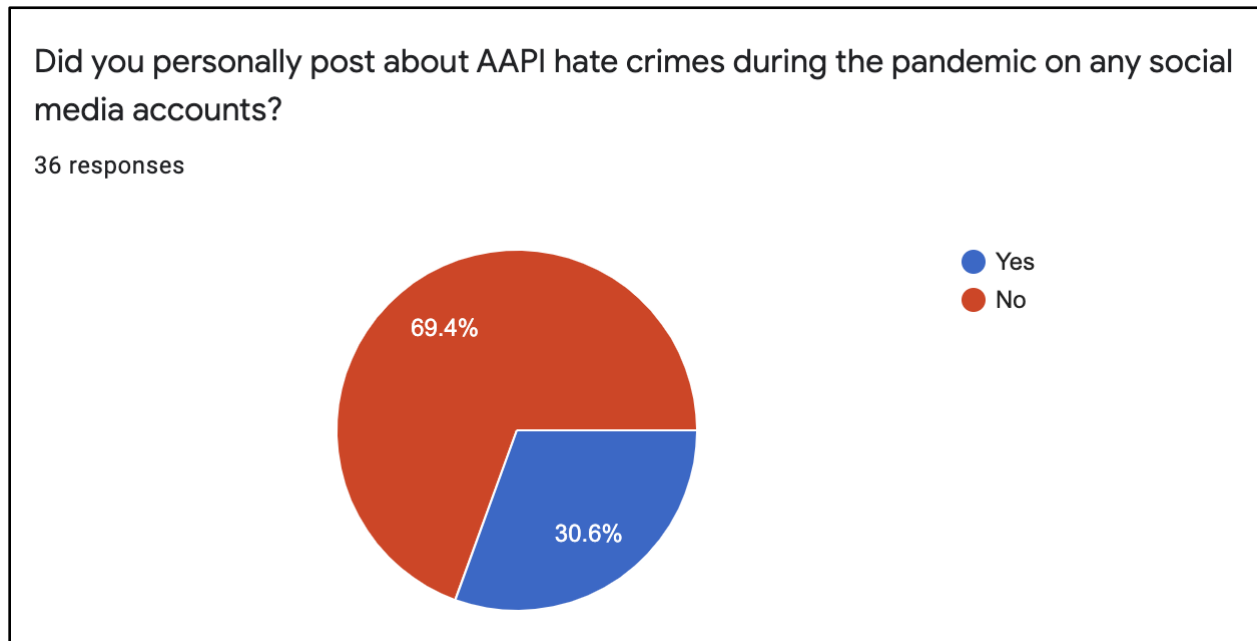


Figure 5: Survey Question #5

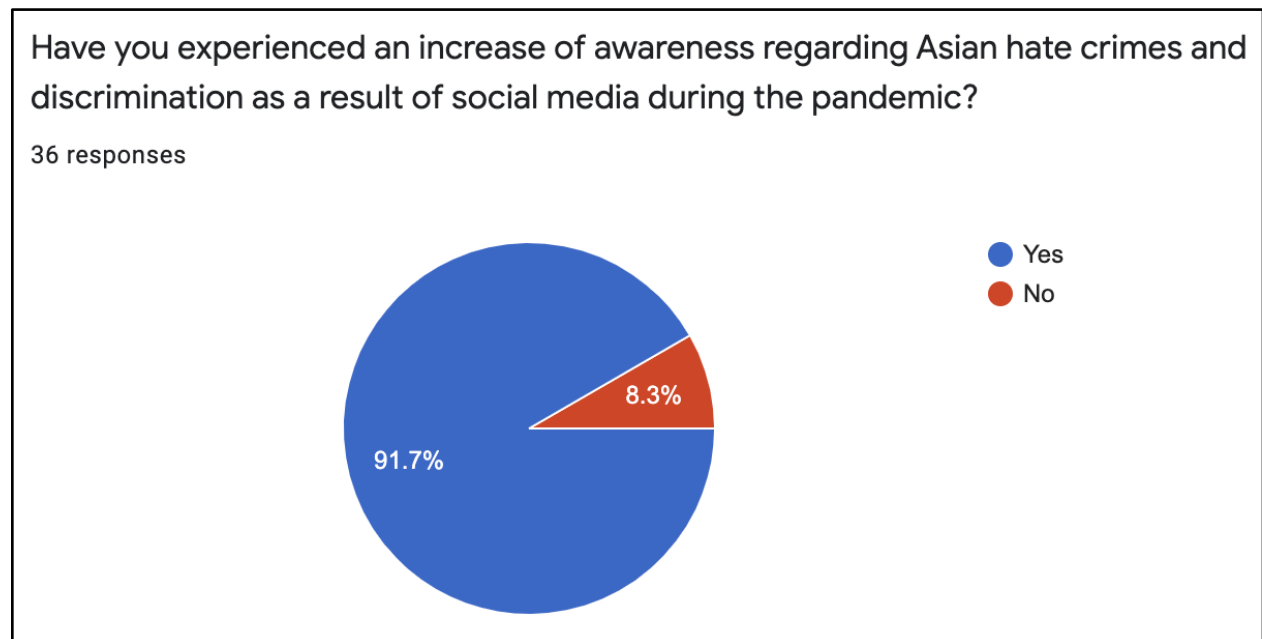


Figure 6: Survey Question #6

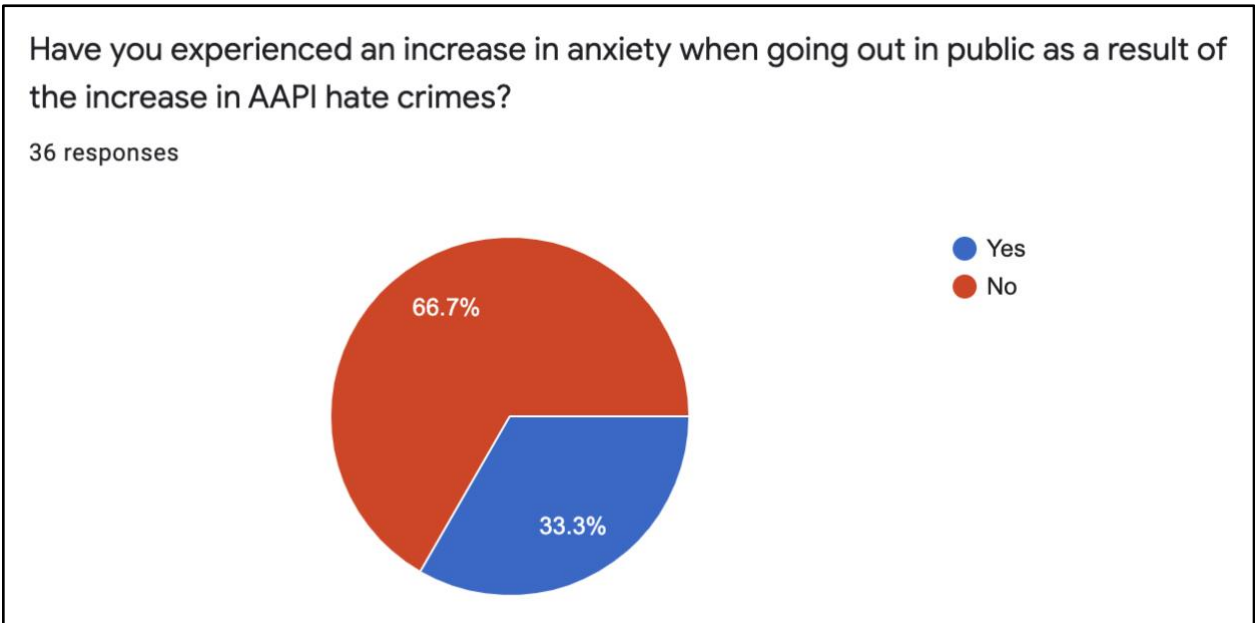


Figure 7: Survey Question #7

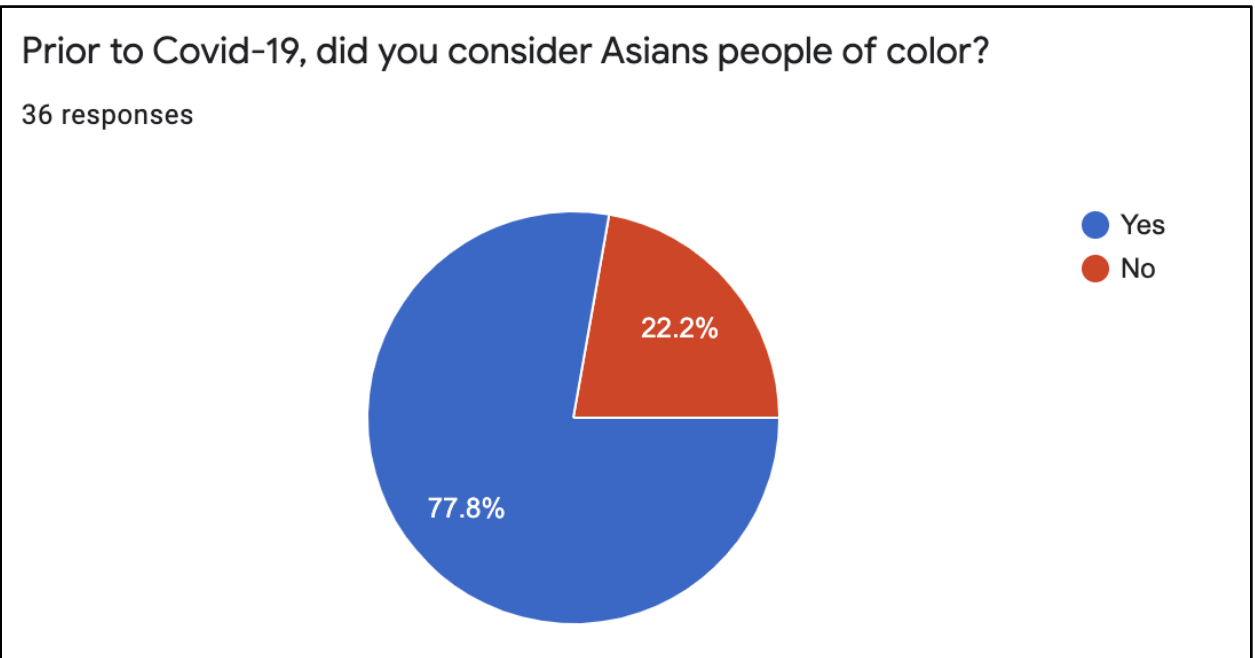


Figure 8: Survey Question #8

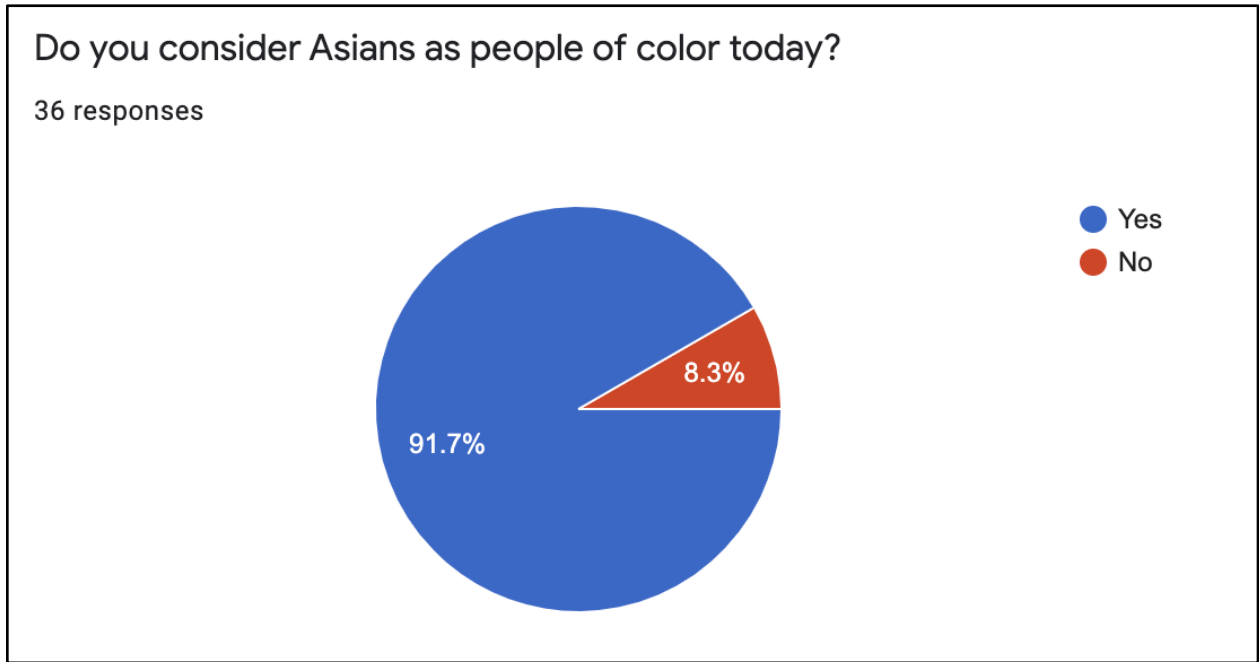


Figure 9: Survey Question #9