The Impact of 'Yellow Fever' on the Mental Health of Asian Women in Europe

Eileen Clara Zhang

Department of Positive Clinical Psychology and Technology, University of Twente

BSc Thesis PSY

Yudit Namer PhD and dr. Marlon Nieuwenhuis

Date: 19.06.204

During the preparation of this work, I used Grammarly to check grammar and spelling. After using this tool/service, I thoroughly reviewed and edited the content as needed, taking full responsibility for the final outcome.

Abstract

Yellow Fever, the fetish of white men on Asian women (more than men), is a widespread phenomenon that infiltrates the economy, media, and the everyday life of the women and men who are being fetishised. Regardless of the common knowledge that this racial fetish exists, there is little to no research about the effects it has on the mental health of the affected. This study directs its attention towards Asian women, as they are often subject to power imbalances with White men. It specifically investigates the European context, departing from the prevailing focus on Yellow Fever research, which predominantly centres on Asian women in the United States. Resultingly, this qualitative study aimed to investigate the impact of Yellow Fever on the mental health of Asian women in Europe. For this study, two focus groups comprising five and four participants, respectively, consisting of Asian women living in Europe, were interviewed. A thematic analysis was conducted to explore the common themes across the two focus groups. The analysis resulted in five main themes, namely, Self-Esteem (I), Hypervigilance (II), Pressure to Conform to Stereotypes (III), Perceived Lack of Agency (IV), and Intuitive Recognition of Ethical Dissonance (V). The aforementioned themes of this study are in line with the findings of literature about the impact of other racial fetishes on well-being in other ethnic groups. In the future, studies should aim at establishing questionnaires that can assess the level of Yellow Fever experienced. This could be used to see if there is a correlational relationship between mental health problems and the level of YF experienced. Moreover, researchers should try to include Asian communities in their research about racial fetishes and their impact on the affected.

The Impact of 'Yellow Fever' on the Mental Health of Asian Women in Europe

When sitting with a group of Asian-looking women and the question *Has any of you ever been hit on by white men just because you look Asian?* comes up, you will see a lot of nodding. Similarly, when you ask *Has anyone ever been called "exotic", "oriental, or a "mail-order bride"?* nearly everyone will have a story or two to tell.

It should come as no surprise that these are situations commonly occurring in Western society when the Western entertainment industry heavily feeds into this stereotypical narrative of Asian women being overly sexual or just an object to please a white man. Examples of this can be found in a variety of films and TV series (Framke, 2021). In Stanley Kubrick's "Full Metal Jacket" (1987), a Vietnamese sex worker is portrayed saying phrases like "me so horny," "me sucky sucky," and "me love you long time" to two white American soldiers. Stereotypes have not declined as illustrated by recent TV with a Family Guy episode (Airport '07) being aired in 2007 which shows a group of Thai girls fleeing the trunk of a car and a garage in their underwear all the while a white man says to not worry about them escaping because "they're tagged.".

All these above-mentioned stereotypes of Asian women being overly sexual and an object to please white men lead to the basis of a racial fetish called *Yellow Fever* (YF) which shows itself in "a preference for Asian women (and men)" (Zheng, 2016, p.401).

In 2023 Pornhub reports racial fetishes accounted for 9 of the top 30 search phrases. Six of the nine search phrases connected to racial fetishes were related to Asian women, with "hentai" being the most searched from 2023 to 2021 on Pornhub, replacing "Japanese" in 2019 and ranking second after "lesbian" in 2018. There were no reports for 2020.

Even though research does not specifically state that men with Yellow Fever target Asian women more than Asian men most research justifies their focus on Asian women with the power

imbalance in relationships between white men and Asian women (Chou, 2012; Patel, 2009, Forbes et al., 2023). This aligns with Raewynn Connell's Theory of Gender and Power which explores the interplay between gender, sexual inequality, and power dynamics. Central to her theory is the concept of "hegemonic masculinity," which characterises the dominant societal notion of men as being authoritative, dominant, and respected. This ideal often privileges white men, reinforcing their social status (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Conversely, Asian women experience marginalization due to both gender-based discrimination and racial stereotypes. These stereotypes shape societal perceptions of Asian women, contributing to YF.

With dominance or hegemony, a certain "taken-for-grantedness" comes along, which shows itself in the natural expectancy of the lack of consequences and accountability visible when confronted with questions as to why some men prefer Asian women (Hearn, 2004, p.55). The display of privilege and response of many men can be summarised in a quote from qualitative research conducted by Kim (2010) in which a man said:

Why is it okay for example, for a man to like and be attracted to blonde girls? Why don't they have a blonde fetish that is looked down upon? So what if a white guy happens to think that Asian women are the most beautiful in the world? Why is that so wrong?

According to Robin Zheng, who was instrumental in expanding the conceptual understanding of YF, this statement is a prime example of the *Mere Preference Argument* (MPA) which states that there is nothing ethically wrong with appreciating the racial features of a person because it is the same as appreciating non-racial features (Zheng, 2016). To believe MPA is true, the concept of *Minimal Race* needs to be assumed which states that people are grouped based on physical traits and geographic location but without the attached stereotypes (Anderson, 2010, as cited in Zheng, 2016). The attraction would need to be driven by genuine human connection and race with its underlying elements would not be a determining factor. However, based on the

stereotypes that are highly prevalent in Western society *Minimal Race* is an ideal that we can work towards but not a concept that is realistic as of now (Anderson, 2010, as cited in Zheng, 2016).

To understand YF, it is necessary to analyse the origins of the stereotypes that form the basis of this racial fetish. When examining the history of these stereotypes, colonial and imperialistic times seem to play a big part especially as countries such as England, the Netherlands, France, and Germany colonised countries in Asia such as Thailand, Malaysia, and parts of China which lend room for White Sexual Imperialism to emerge (Bohnke, 2021; Fisher, 2015; Research Guides: Southeast Asia Research Guide: Imperialism, Colonialism, & Nationalism, n.d.). White sexual imperialism refers to the historical and ongoing exploitation, domination, and imposition of Western, specifically white, sexual norms, values, and practices onto non-white cultures and individuals, often resulting in the erasure, suppression, or marginalisation of diverse sexual identities and expressions (Woan, 2008). The perceived hyper-femininity that white men project on Asian women was the perfect counterpart for the hypermasculinity that was a fundamental trait for men in colonial times. This was supported by the belief that being conquered is a female trait and conquering is a male trait, due to the gender roles that used to be common during colonial times (Prianti, 2019). Moreover, the gender norms during the colonial era furthered the wish for a perfect housewife who was only there for the needs and enjoyment of men (Prianti, 2019). Asian women and white women were pitched against each other, with Asian women fitting into the White Male Fantasy better because of the perceived lack of drive for equality (Cho, 1997). This fantasy of the perfectly feminine women combined with the belief of white men that they are superior and therefore entitled to the body of Asian women, continued to foster the stereotypes that are the root of YF (Woan, 2008).

From the colonial period, two main stereotypes are still prevalent today. On the one hand, the dragon lady, who is "seductive" and "treacherous" and on the other hand, the lotus blossom who is "docile" and "domestic" (Zheng, 2016, p.405). Not only do these stereotypes impact the perception of Asian women in the public and private, but in 1875, the United States (US) passed the Page Act that prohibited Chinese women from entering the US on the assumption that they must be sex workers and trying to seduce white men (Patel, 2009). Today, laws like the Page Act do not exist anymore; however, sex tourism, since the American-Philippine War, is still a factor that contributes to YF (Woan, 2008; Zheng 2016). White men from Europe and the US travel to Southeast Asia to engage in sexual acts with Asian sex workers because of one of the three main reasons mentioned by Garrick (2005). They either live out their fantasies based on the submissive stereotypes that Asian women are portrayed as, or the "white knight" that engages in paid sex to help the women financially, or white men who use the paid intercourse to increase their low self-esteem (Garrick, 2005). Moreover, Asian mail-order brides, women who are put in catalogues to be chosen by men for marriage, still seem to spark the interest of some men, 94% of them being white and on average 20-50 years old with the wish for the girls to not be "too educated" or still mouldable (Patel, 2009). This study was conducted in the US. As the cultures and histories of the US and Europe are similar, it is to be expected that European men have shown interest in purchasing mail-order brides from Asia (Cudowska, 2016). There are several laws in the US as well as different countries in Europe such as the UK and Ireland that try to decrease the immigration of mail-order brides because of the danger of domestic violence for women (Cudowska, 2016). Literature search for an overview of the specific ethnicities that mail-order brides have, has been unsuccessful.

Literature states that these stereotypes can, for example, be found in pornography, where Asian women are more often portrayed as rape victims than any other ethnicity. For instance,

Gosset & Byrne (2002) conducted a content analysis of websites where rape is portrayed in porn and found that half, namely, fifteen out of the thirty rape websites investigated referenced Asian women either textually or visually, whereas no reference was made to Black women or white women in this study. The dangers of race-specific pornography were also examined in an essay written by Woan (2008) who reasons that race-specific pornography that shows race-specific sexual violence essentially is violent race-specific pornography which has been proven to put the victims of that race at a greater risk of being a victim of sexual violence. Even though statistics have stated that Asian women are put in a more violent sexual context there has been little to no research conducted on the risks of sexual violence implied and directed towards Asian women (Forbes et al., 2023).

The fetishization of Asian women not only subjects them to heightened risks of sexual violence due to stereotypes of submissiveness but also exposes them to significant mental health challenges, including depression and anxiety, underscoring the detrimental impact of racial fetishization on both physical safety and psychological well-being. Asian women often face fetishization in various contexts, such as being labelled as "sexy Asians" instead of just "sexy" and being targeted for sexual violence based on the belief that they are submissive and less likely to report (Zheng, 2016; Woan, 2008).

Apart from physical dangers to one's safety, Asian women are also at relative risk for mental health issues caused by confrontation with YF such as depression, anxiety, and disordered eating (Forbes et al., 2023). The minority stress model can be applied in this case because it describes "stress processes related to stigma and prejudice, including experiences of prejudice and discrimination events and conditions, the expectations of prejudice and discrimination, [...] and internalization of societal stigma" which is what Asian women go

through because of YF. Meyer (2003b) has shown that minority stress significantly differs from general stress which makes it a unique source of stress.

Minority stress includes the experience of discrimination and prejudice which is congruent with the experiences Asian women have, whether that is portrayed via the media or in their personal lives. After reoccurring instances of discrimination and prejudice it can lead to the expectation of prejudice as shown in Meyer's (2003b) minority stress model. The expectation of prejudice which could also be labelled as hypervigilance shows itself among other things in the worry of being perceived as a prostitute, not because of one's actions but because of the stereotypes people have around one's ethnic group and sexuality (Zheng, 2016). As the stereotypes and prejudices are so rooted in white culture and its media, as explained previously, it is logical that Asian women internalise the stereotypes of over- or under-sexualised women (Gupta et al., 2011). Furthermore, the stereotype that only less-desirable men are interested in Asian women and therefore Asian women are less desirable, is a belief that is internalised in the minds of Asian women (Zheng, 2016).

Minority Stress has been proven to negatively impact health and mental health (Flentje et al., 2019). Hypervigilance, as part of minority stress, is seen as a major contributor to health problems such as depression, hypertension, obesity, and sleep difficulties, more for Blacks, Latinx, and Asian Americans than White Americans (Hollinsaid et al., 2023). Moreover, mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, greater psychological distress, as well as post-traumatic stress disorder, and substance use have been associated with Minority Stress in Asians (Lei et al., 2022). Furthermore, qualitative research has also shown that being exposed to racial stereotypes for a consistent time can lead to compromised mental health and negative emotional coping which can lead to diminishing quality of life (Abulencia et al., 2022).

While research has acknowledged the complexities of racism and sexism, a thorough examination of racial fetishism's impact on Asian women, such as YF, remains underexplored (Forbes et al., 2023). In the past, despite its profound consequences, literature had often failed to research this intersectional issue, with many studies on racial fetishes excluding Asian women from their research (Sue et al. 2009). In the past years, there has been an increase in the inclusion of Asian women in research on racial fetishes, however, most of the recent literature on the effects of racial fetishes on Asian women is focused on Asian trans women rather than Asian cis women. This gap was interpreted based on the literature search conducted by the researcher. Lastly, most research has been conducted with Asian Americans or in the US, overlooking the perspectives and experiences of Asian women in European countries even though some also have colonial history (Fisher, 2016).

The lack of research as well as the consequences on the women give more than reason to explore the effect of YF on the mental health of Asian women which is what this study aims to explore. Based on this information, the following research question was addressed in this qualitative research: How does YF impact the mental health of Asian women in Europe?

Methods

Study Design

This cross-sectional qualitative study used semi-structured interviews conducted in the form of two focus groups, respectively, about the experiences of the participants with YF and how it impacted their mental health.

Participants

To be eligible for this study, individuals needed to (a) either be female, (b) be of Asian descent (c) living in Europe, (d) be proficient in English, and (e) have experienced YF. A sample size of ten participants was aimed for, however, due to some technical difficulties nine

participants were able to take part in the research. Five took part online and four met in person to take part in the focus group. It was desired to speak to as many women from different geographical backgrounds considering their country of residence in Europe as well as their country of origin in Asia.

The final sample consisted of nine individuals who agreed to participate and for their data to be used in this research. Their ages ranged between 20 and 24 years and they all identified as female. The participants' ethnic backgrounds included Chinese, Hong Konger, Indonesian, Malaysian, Singaporean, South Korean, and Vietnamese. All but one participant had lived in or had mixed heritage from countries such as Bolivia, the Czech Republic, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, and England. Seven of the participants were Bachelor students and two had just finished their bachelor's degree at a university.

Materials

Informed Consent and Demographics Form

At the beginning of each meeting, the participants were given a document informing them about the procedure and asking for their written informed consent to participate and their data being used for this study (Appendix A).

Interview Questions and Probes Slides

To keep a semi-structured conversation with the participants, the researcher predetermined three open questions for the participants to answer which were decided upon in consultation with the supervisor.

1. How did your "Asian" identity influence your experience with men?
2. Describe a situation in which you felt you were confronted with Yellow Fever (the racial fetish of white men on Asian women and men). How did you feel?
3. How did your exposure to Yellow Fever affect your mental health?

Moreover, five presentation slides entailing five direct quotes from Kim's (2010) qualitative research were designed to gain information about the participants' feelings and thoughts when confronted with and reading quotes about YF (see Appendix A).

Technical Applications

Microsoft Teams application (Version 24102.2223.2870.9480) was used because it is free to use, has no time limit, and is approved by the BMS' ethics committee because of data protection reasons (Gauthier & Husain, 2021). Furthermore, meetings can be recorded and transcribed with this application which was shown to be a helpful first step in data management (Self, 2021).

To transcribe the focus groups the automatic transcription software by Microsoft Teams was used as well as the latest version as of January 2024 of Amberscript.

Procedure

Participants for this study were recruited in March 2024. Convenience sampling was used as sampling method due to the restraint access to the target population (Jager et al., 2017). To reach as many members of the population as possible, the researcher posted an invitation for the target population to take part in the study on her Instagram account as well as asked women in her social network who fulfilled the inclusion criteria. Individuals who were interested in this research contacted the researcher via Instagram or WhatsApp and meetings for the focus groups were scheduled. Depending on the location of the individuals, they were assigned to an online focus group, or an in-person focus group.

The data collection took part between March and April 2024. As this study is qualitative, interviews with two focus groups were conducted to gather the thoughts, insights and emotions of Asian women who have been confronted with YF. This study was approved on 19.03.2024 by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Behavioural, Management and Social Sciences (BMS) of the University of Twente in the Netherlands before its execution (request number: 240350).

The online focus group meeting was conducted on the 24th of March 2024 using Microsoft Teams. The online focus group consisted of five women and the researcher. After an initial welcoming round and signing the informed consent, the researcher reminded the participants that they were free to leave at any point and there were no repercussions. Moreover, they were informed that they were not obligated to say anything if they did not want to and that they could withdraw any statement made during the meeting later. The researcher's camera was always turned on as well as their microphone to establish rapport via minimal encouragement (Dion Larivière et al., 2022). The researcher shared her screen to show a PowerPoint presentation that included the three questions as well as the five direct quotes in total. The questions and quotes were discussed by the participants sequentially. The online session lasted 51:04 minutes.

The in-person focus group was conducted on the 11th of April 2024 on the campus of the University of Twente. This focus group consisted of four women and the researcher. For the questions and quotes, the same PowerPoint presentation was used, and the informed consent was signed on the researcher's iPad. The interactions were recorded on the researcher's iPad and phone simultaneously. Like the online focus group, the participants were reminded that they could leave at any point without repercussions and any statements that they have made could be retracted. The questions and quotes were also discussed sequentially. The in-person session lasted 50:36 minutes.

In both focus groups, the researcher did not read the direct quotes aloud to avoid any possible triggers. This decision was based on research showing that reading something themselves has less emotional impact on the reader compared to hearing it being read aloud (Kolk & Bessel, 2014b). The researcher also tried to keep most of the replies neutral but respectful so as not to influence the participants in their answers.

Data Analysis

Transcripts

The interview transcription and storage were handled by the researcher. Following UT guidelines (University of Twente, 2024), the recordings and final pseudonymised transcripts were stored on the researcher's secure OneDrive. The recordings and transcripts are going to be deleted in August 2024 from the researcher's device and were transferred to the supervisor for secure storage.

To create the final pseudonymised transcripts, the automatically generated transcripts were adapted by the researcher. While doing so they were checked for accuracy via reading the transcript and listening to the audio simultaneously and adapted if the audio and transcript were not congruent. Aspects such as coughs or stutters were removed from the transcripts. Parts of the transcripts that were excluded were due to technical difficulties (e.g., Connection on Microsoft Teams unstable) or because they included background noise. Any data that could help to identify the participants was exchanged with an X to ensure the participant's anonymity. Moreover, each participant was assigned a reference number to ensure pseudonymisation. Once the transcripts were finished, each document was checked for accuracy and anonymity.

Thematic Coding

The data analysis and the establishment of codes, themes, and sub-themes were handled by the researcher. The computer software ATLAS.ti version 22.1.3 was utilised to facilitate the management and comparison of data among transcripts (Ngalande & Mkwinda 2014).

To analyse the data obtained from the focus groups, reflexive thematic analysis was employed to gain an understanding of the underlying themes of the impact of Yellow Fever on the mental health of Asian women. After the transcribed interviews with the focus groups were read by the researcher, relevant excerpts fitting the research question were openly coded (Corbin

& Strauss, 2008). Most parts of the transcripts were coded since most of the data was considered relevant to the research question.

Once the initial codes were determined during the first round of coding, they were observed in the scope of the research question. Examining which codes not only represented a pattern in the transcripts but also added crucial information in answering the research question was the next step. Codes such as *Coping with Yellow Fever* showcased that there was a pattern in the transcripts about how the participants coped with YF, however, it was deemed not to be crucial to answering how it affects mental health. Therefore, this code and other codes that did not answer the research question were excluded from the final list of codes. After careful consideration, the codes that did answer the research question were included in the final codes which were used on all the data and then subsequently combined to form the initial themes and sub-themes.

Similarly to the codes, the themes and sub-themes were examined and reflected upon. This was done by trying out different names for various themes and sub-themes to find the ones that were most fitting and easily understandable without having to read the transcripts beforehand. Moreover, the emerged themes and sub-themes were checked to be mutually exclusive to ensure clarity and prevent overlap. In the case that certain themes were not mutually exclusive, a new theme and sub-theme were created to include all relevant codes. Lastly upon final reflection and going over the codes and the corresponding quotes, the themes and sub-themes were adjusted.

To deal with intersubjectivity, the finalised codes, themes, and sub-themes were reviewed by the first supervisor and feedback was discussed and incorporated.

Researcher Characteristics and Reflexivity

I have been confronted with YF for most of my life and I know how it has affected my mental health. This has helped me find this research topic however it is possible that because of my own experiences and my sensitivity to this topic have shaped the way I view literature and the data collected in my study. Someone who has not experienced being subjected to YF or someone who is white and does not need to concern themselves with the possibility of experiencing racial fetishes might have approached the topic differently by choosing different questions or quotes. Moreover, as my supervisor's field is racism and mental health, the supervision has impacted the way I look at literature and the literature I have focused on. The knowledge about some theoretical frameworks that are substantial parts of this thesis is because of discussion with my supervisor.

Moreover, I look Asian, and my name is Asian which creates an in-group of Asian women who have experienced YF and an out-group of White men with YF. When an in-group is threatened by a certain situation or another outgroup, trust-related emotions increase (Voci, 2006). People who trust each other are more likely to share their knowledge and experiences (Belli & Broncano, 2017). Therefore, the experiences that the participants have shared might have been different would the researcher not have been part of their in-group.

Results

The thematic analysis revealed various impacts on the participants' mental health. Resultingly, the main five themes established in this study were: Self-Esteem (I), Hypervigilance (II), Pressure to Conform to Stereotypes (III), Perceived Lack of Agency (IV), and Intuitive Recognition of Ethical Dissonance (V). An overview of the final main themes, sub-themes and codes can be found in Table.1

Table 1

Main Themes, Sub-Themes and their Subsequent Codes Established for this Study

Themes	Corresponding Codes
MT 1: Self-Esteem	Getting Validated, Insecure, Overgeneralisation, Otherization, Objectification, Self-Doubt, Feeling Less Than, Comparison, Humiliated, Disempowering
ST 1.1: Seeking External Affirmation of Self-Worth	Getting Validated, Insecure
ST 1.2: Dehumanization, Infrahumanization, and Stereotyping	Overgeneralisation, Otherization, Objectification
ST 1.3: Self-Doubt	Self-Doubt, Feeling Less Than, Comparison, Humiliated, Disempowering
MT 2: Hypervigilance	Being Scared, Relief, Purposefully Acting Contrary to Stereotypes, Avoidance of White Man, Change in Behaviour
ST 2.1: Consequences of Hypervigilance	Purposefully Acting Contrary to Stereotypes, Avoidance of White Men, Change in Behaviour
MT 3: Pressure to Conform to Stereotypes	Seeking Validation, Internalising Stereotypes Get Validation
MT 4: Perceived Lack of Agency	Defeat
MT 5: Intuitive Recognition of Ethical Dissonance	Shocking, Uncomfortable, Weird, Disgusting, Anger, Sadness, Confrontation

Note. Main Theme (MT); Sub-theme (ST)

The first main theme, Self-Esteem, was interpreted because YF was observed to exert a notable impact on the self-esteem of participants, eliciting a diminishment in their sense of personal worth. This was characterised by a perception of diminished desirability, objectification, and the belief that they were exclusively sought after by individuals deemed less desirable. Consequently, this implies easier access stemming from a perceived comparative lack of desirability relative to other female counterparts. This was illustrated by what was said by a participant in answer to the question "How has Yellow Fever impacted your mental health?":

I definitely, you know, felt in the beginning that I need to seek sort of a white man validation

because I was born and raised in a predominantly white country. So for me, the goal was

really to be attractive for them and then I basically changed my narrative because what I was

desired I was questioning if it's because of me, my character, my personality, or because the

way how I look. (P5, Focus Group 1)

The first sub-theme of Self-Esteem was determined to be *seeking external affirmation of self-worth*. Seeking external affirmation of self-worth is a possible way in which YF impacts mental health as Asian women were made to feel insecure and as if their self-worth is decreased. This leads them to look for external validation which became evident in the experiences of the participants:

And in my opinion, he was like so out of my league like when I look back, he was not. I was so surprised that he wanted to date Asian girls. So I first I was really happy. (P8, Focus Group 2)

It's nice that I've learned more about it and gained more confidence. I'm good with setting my boundaries, but I know I wasn't like that before and I would accept situations that they would objectify me. (P4, Focus Group 1)

In the second sub-theme, the responses have been combined that show that YF impacts women's mental health through *Dehumanization, Infrahumanization, and Stereotyping*. YF stems from stereotypes held by white men about Asian women, overlooking individual realities. Women are objectified based on physical appearance, becoming mere objects to project desire upon. Despite phenotypic differences among Asian women, they are homogenised in the eyes of men with YF. This reduction to objects of desire reflects dehumanization, rooted in stereotypes. The extent of dehumanization varies based on the intensity of YF in men. Those with a strong fetish might see Asian women solely as an object for their desire rather than a human (dehumanisation), whereas men with a less strong fetish might see Asian women as human but less human than their ingroup (infrahumanization). Some of the participants had vivid recounts of situations in which their feelings can be summarised under this sub-theme.

And also I had a boyfriend at some point and I knew he liked anime a little bit, but not to the

point that I was like... And then at some point, like he mentioned to me that he exclusively

watched like hentai [pornography that mainly depicts anime characters]. And that did like,

like the objectification part that made me think like, oh, like when we do that kind of stuff, are

you just thinking about this hentai or are you actually like being intimate with me? (P8, Focus

Group 2)

We're just friends with benefits and then he told me as I went to his place for in the evening,

so it was just to sleep with each other. And then he told me, like I watched Asian porn before

you came. And I didn't know what to do, it was really uncomfortable. (P4, Focus Group 1)

Not only do Seeking external affirmations and dehumanising as well as stereotyping impact self-esteem but also *Self-doubt*. According to the participants, YF and the consequent beliefs make them doubt their worth and desirability:

I mean, I think it just puts a lot of doubt and insecurity in yourself. And like, you know, am I

really attractive? And every time I go on a date with someone, it's like in the back of my mind.

(P7, Focus Group 2)

The second main theme is *Hypervigilance* with its sub-theme *Consequences of Hypervigilance*. Experiencing YF is uncomfortable and feels unsettling for women which leads to them constantly being cautious and anxious about whether a situation that includes YF arises. Hypervigilance includes being anxious about a certain situation arising which leads to an avoidance of the context in which the situation, in this case confrontation with YF, occurs. The participants of this study mentioned changes in their behaviour that might not align with their natural behaviour to avoid being confronted with YF and a constant underlying anxiety and fear of being in a situation that includes YF:

Every time I go on a date with someone, it's like in the back of my mind, I'm like, oh, are they going to be weird about it? Or are they actually interested in me as a person? (P7, Focus Group 2)

I'm not avoiding the white man anymore, but I used to do that and I think also I used to be, really maybe personal, but like I used to be really submissive and now I turned into more dominant. Maybe because of this. (P4, Focus Group 1)

Pressure to Conform to Stereotypes is the third main theme. As stereotypes are not representative of reality but the traits that some people find desirable are the ones that are rooted in stereotypes, there is a certain pressure to confirm those stereotypes to get external validation. This can be linked to the sub-theme 1.2 *Dehumanisation, Infrahumanisation, and Stereotyping* as Asian women are consciously and sub-consciously told that they are only desirable if reduced to stereotypes and objects to project desire upon. This, in turn, increases the pressure to conform to stereotypes to be desirable in romantic and sexual settings. The pressure to conform can be illustrated in the following quote:

What did I do wrong to get like this relationship and I just like question myself, Did I not fit in those prejudice[s] they have in the box, they have in their mind and yeah totally insecurities. (P1, Focus Group 1)

The constant contact and pressure that comes along with stereotypes and YF portrays the situation as hopeless which leads many women to accept the stereotypes and the subsequent behaviours which in turn leads to a feeling of defeat. These were the feelings that were shared and combined in the theme of *Perceived Lack of Agency* and are evident in a quote from Participant 8:

I always used to think that I either had to date someone who was an Asian fetishizer or no one at all. someone who would like me for my genuine interest when I was younger.

[...] eventually, you feel like this [explaining that the stereotypes that YF is based on are false] is useless. (P1, Focus Group 1)

The last theme in the thematic analysis is *the Intuitive Recognition of Ethical Dissonance*. As the participants shared in the focus groups, when being confronted with YF there were a range of emotions that they felt such as being weirded out, sadness, or disgust. In situations in which YF was exhibited, their feelings and emotions told them that how they were being treated and perceived was not ethical. In both focus groups, the participants voiced that they were angered and frustrated as this has been occurring throughout their whole life and it felt like there was nothing that they could do to change the narrative. Participant 9 makes a strong comparison in the following quote as well as Participant 7 who tries to verbalise her ethical dissonance with the topic:

"Feels like a serial killer talking about his victims." (P9, Focus Group 2)

I feel disgusted. You know like it feels upsetting that so many men want to put like us, me, in a box and, you know, it makes me feel uncomfortable and I don't want to really interact with these kinds of people. (P7, Focus Group 2)

Discussion

This study utilised thematic analysis to identify five main themes about the influence of YF on the mental health of Asian women living in Europe. This research has demonstrated that YF affects individuals' self-esteem in several ways. The participants felt that their Asian phenotype has led society and themselves to view them as less desirable, the attention of white men was not genuine but rather that they were viewed primarily as representatives of their ethnic group, and some felt that they were considered less appealing compared to white women which led them to seek approval from white men. The desire to obtain that approval might stem from an unconscious desire to demonstrate their value to receive white men's attention. These findings

are in line with the minority stress model by Meyer (2003) as the participants related stereotypes and the perception of Asian women in western society to themselves as an individual. The internalisation of these racist and sexist stereotypes decreases Asian women's self-esteem. In his Social Comparison Theory, Festinger (1954) states that individuals determine their social and personal worth based on comparison with others. For Asian women, being seen as less desirable than white women for white men, can increase their desire to be with a white man to gain their approval.

Another theme that was analysed in the transcripts was the concept of hypervigilance. Participants expressed a sense of wariness while engaging with white men due to their fear or annoyance of encountering individuals with a sexualised fetish. These emotions were further mentioned as explanations for why certain participants deliberately avoided interactions with white men and instead prioritised forming relationships, and in some instances, even friendships, with individuals from other racial backgrounds. Hypervigilance is also included in the minority stress model where it has been suggested to increase the risk for mental health problems. Hypervigilance can be seen as stigma-related stress which was suggested to increase emotion dysregulation, social and interpersonal problems, and cognitive processes (Frost & Meyer, 2023). Similar results about the negative impacts of Hypervigilance on mental health have been found in Black Americans (Irani & Hudson, 2020).

Moreover, this research study identified the pressure to conform to stereotypes as the third theme. The participants expressed experiencing pressure to adhere to the stereotypes that perpetuate the attractiveness of Asian women to those with YF. The pressure to conform to such stereotypes has not been mentioned in any of the literature in the literature search for the impact of YF, however, research has linked the pressure to conform to have an impact on the level of self-esteem which is related to eating disorders (Sowislo & Orth, 2013; Mora et al., 2017).

The feeling of pressure is associated with the fourth theme, known as perceived Lack of Agency. This theme encompasses the sense of despair many Asian women experience, as they believe they have no power to alter the way they are seen based on stereotypes. The feeling of hopelessness is exacerbated by their intuitive recognition of ethical dissonance, which is the fifth theme. Given that the participants are Asian women, they possess a deep understanding that these stereotypes do not accurately depict Asian women. Consequently, they possess an innate awareness that it is unjust for white males to treat, perceive, and evaluate Asian women only based on the concept of YF. The participants reported feelings of frustration and anger which can be seen as an additional minority stressor (Liang et al., 2007). Moreover, as the participants in this study experience ethical dissonance most of the time, it can be linked to rumination which has been suggested to mediate the association of minority stress and depression in people with minority status (Sarno et al., 2020).

Strengths and Limitations

As the participants were geographically spread through Europe, an online and an in-person focus group was conducted. Due to technical difficulties, a prospective participant had to withdraw from the study. This is unfortunate because their ethnic composition differed from that of the other participants, and valuable data may have been obtained from their inclusion. Additionally, more varied data would have been collected if another generation other than Generation Z (born 1997-2012) had been included in the focus groups (Geiger, 2024). The stereotypes that YF is based on were more prevalent in media in the early 2000s than now. Films such as Charlie's Angels (2000) or Kill Bill (2003) all employ the stereotype of the Dragon Lady. Asian women who are part of Millennials (born 1981-96) or Generation X (born 1965-80) might have had other experiences and a different point of view on these experiences and how they affected them mentally and long-term which would be interesting for this study (Geiger, 2024).

For future research in this field, it might be helpful to level the degree of knowledge of YF before going into the focus groups. There were quite a few differences in the extent to which people knew which behaviour was included in YF. The lack of knowledge could have impacted their ability to spot YF behaviour in their past and share their experiences. To ensure that all participants operate on the same level, some non-biased reading material could be handed out before the focus groups or some more definitions and examples could be shared. Another possible limitation of the study could be the positionality of the researcher. Due to their personal experiences with YF, the research could have been biased and some possibilities were left to be explored. Moreover, the researcher was the only person who coded the transcripts and analysed them which could lead to even more biases.

Despite its limitations, this study was able to produce some more insight into the effects of YF on the mental health of Asian women in Europe. The positionality of the researcher could also be seen as a strength of this study as the researcher was able to connect with the participants and create an in-group in which they shared experiences that they might not have when talking to non-Asian women. Moreover, because of the researcher's positionality, the literature could have been interpreted in an established context as the researcher was aware of YF and how it felt to be subjected to it before starting this research. Furthermore, because of the diversity in ethnicities, this study managed to get a thorough understanding of how YF impacts the mental health of Asian women living in Europe. Moreover, the set-ups of the participants were varied so this study included students who have lived in Europe all their lives, lived in Asia for most of their lives, and switched back and forth between continents. Some of the participants were mixed (European and Asian) or fully Asian or adopted by white parents. The variety in ethnic backgrounds was facilitative for the variety of different experiences shared in the focus groups.

Moreover, it is interesting to mention that before the sampling there were some concerns about not getting enough participants because of the small inclusion criteria of the study. However, it was easy to sample the participants that fit the inclusion criteria of being confronted with YF which shows that experiences with YF are widespread in the Asian community. The lack of academic literature about the effects of YF on mental health is concerning especially because it has been proven time and time again that it harms Asians across the globe. Including the Asian community in research about the impact of racial fetishes on mental health could help come up with tools to work against those racial fetishes. The reduction of racial fetishes could in turn help to counteract the increase in mental illnesses globally (Richter et al., 2019). To decrease the impact of racial fetishes, especially YF on Asian women, various research should be conducted. Establishing a questionnaire that measures the level of YF experienced could greatly aid research to investigate correlations between different mental health problems and YF. This could help to underline the severity of the impact of YF and could be used as a reason to start educating Asian women on how to cope with being confronted with YF but also educate white men on the reality of Asian women rather than the stereotypes on which YF is based. Concludingly, it can be said that not just Asian women would benefit from further research into the topic of YF and its effects, but it could also help to create a more honest and truthful dialogue between genders, ethnicities, and cultures.

Conclusion

This qualitative study found that YF impacts the mental health of Asian women in Europe in a variety of ways namely Self-Esteem, Hypervigilance, Pressure to Conform to Stereotypes, Perceived Lack of Agency, and Intuitive Recognition of Ethical Dissonance. Generally, YF seemed to impact the mental health of Asian women negatively and the experiences that they had with YF seemed to shape their behaviour. The evidence of this study

can serve as evidence for the importance of research done on the impact of racial fetishes on

mental health in Asian women.

References

Abulencia, K., McLaren, C., Vahabi, abulM., & Wong, J. P. (2022). Racialized-gendered experiences and mental health vulnerabilities of young Asian women in Toronto, Canada. *Witness*, *4*(2), 17–30. https://doi.org/10.25071/2291-5796.125

Belli, S., & Broncano, F. (2017). Trust as a Meta-Emotion. *Metaphilosophy*, *48*(4), 430–448. https://doi.org/10.1111/meta.12255

Bohnke, C. B. (2021, March). A shared history: How a German colony laid the groundwork for the alliance between Nazi Germany and imperial Japan. *History Today*. Retrieved June 11, 2024, from https://www.historytoday.com/archive/history-matters/shared-culture

Cho, S. K. (1997) 'Converging Stereotypes in Racialized Sexual Harassment: Where the Model Minority Meets Suzie Wong.' *Journal of Gender, Race and Justice*, 1, 178–211.

Chou, R. S. C. (2012). *Asian American sexual politics: The Construction of Race, Gender, and Sexuality* [E-Book]. Rowan & Littlefield Publications. https://books.google.ie/books?id=FaouIMuKoFoC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Asian+American+Sexual+Politics:+The+Construction+of+Race,+Gender,+and+Sexuality&hl=&cd=1&source=gbs_api#v=onepage&q=Asian%20American%20Sexual%20Politics%3A%20The%20Construction%20of%20Race%2C%20Gender%2C%20and%20Sexuality&f=false

Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity. *Gender & Society*, *19*(6), 829–859. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications, Inc. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452230153

Cudowska, M. (2016). Mail-Order Brides and Marriage Migration: A Comparative study of the problems in the U.S., Great Britain and Ireland. *Miscellanea Historico-Iuridica*, *15*(1), 351–370. https://doi.org/10.15290/mhi.2016.15.01.21

Dion Larivière, C., Crough, Q., & Eastwood, J. (2023). The effects of rapport building on information disclosure in virtual interviews. *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology, 38*(2), 452-460.

Emler, N. (2001). Self-esteem. *The costs and causes of low self-worth.*

Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relations*, *7*(2), 117–140. https://doi.org/10.1177/001872675400700202

Fisher, M. (2015, February 24). Map: European colonialism conquered every country in the world but these five. *Vox*.

Flentje, A., Heck, N.C., Brennan, J.M. et al. The relationship between minority stress and biological outcomes: A systematic review. *J Behav Med* **43**, 673–694 (2020). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10865-019-00120-6

Forbes, N., Yang, L. C., & Lim, S. (2023). Intersectional discrimination and its impact on Asian American women's mental health: A mixed-methods scoping review. *Frontiers in Public Health*, *11*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2023.993396

Framke, C. (2021, March 18). Variety. *Variety*. https://variety.com/2021/tv/opinion/hollywood-complicit-violence-against-asians-in-america-1234932858/

Frost, D. M., & Meyer, I. H. (2023). Minority stress theory: Application, critique, and continued relevance*. Current Opinion in Psychology, 51*, 101579. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2023.101579

Garrick, D. (2005). Excuses, excuses: Rationalisations of Western sex tourists in Thailand. *Current Issues in Tourism*, *8*(6), 497–509. https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500508668233

Gauthier, N. H., & Husain, M. I. (2021). Dynamic security analysis of Zoom, Google Meet and Microsoft teams. In *Communications in computer and information science* (pp. 3–24). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-72725-3_1

Geiger, A. (2024, April 14). Defining generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins. *Pew Research Center*. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/

Gossett, J., & Byrne, S. (2002). "Click here." *Gender & Society*, *16*(5), 689–709. https://doi.org/10.1177/089124302236992

Gupta, A., Szymanski, D. M., & Leong, F. T. L. (2011). The "model minority myth": Internalized racialism of positive stereotypes as correlates of psychological distress, and attitudes toward help-seeking. *Asian American Journal of Psychology*, *2*(2), 101–114. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0024183

Hearn, J. (2004). From hegemonic masculinity to the hegemony of men. *Feminist Theory*, *5*(1), 49–72. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700104040813

Hollinsaid, N. L., Pachankis, J. E., Bränström, R., & Hatzenbuehler, M. L. (2023). Hypervigilance: an understudied mediator of the longitudinal relationship between stigma and internalizing psychopathology among Sexual-Minority young adults. *Clinical Psychological Science*, *11*(5), 954–973. https://doi.org/10.1177/21677026231159050

Irani, K., Serwin, A., & Hudson, D. (2020). Investigating vigilance: A new way to account for the effects of racism on health inequities. Journal on Race, Inequality, and Social Mobility in America, 2(1).

Jager, J., Putnick, D. L., & Bornstein, M. H. (2017). II. MORE THAN JUST CONVENIENT: THE SCIENTIFIC MERITS OF HOMOGENEOUS CONVENIENCE SAMPLES.

Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, *82*(2), 13–30.
https://doi.org/10.1111/mono.12296

Keum, B. T., & Wong, M. J. (2022). Congruence and discrepancy in Asian American women's
perception and stress appraisal of gendered racial microaggressions: Relationships with
depressive symptoms and internalized racism. *Frontiers in Public Health*, *10*.
https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2022.954897

Kim, B. (2010). Asian Female and Caucasian Male couples: Exploring the attraction. *Pastoral
Psychology*, *60*(2), 233–244. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-010-0312-9

Kolk, V. D., & Bessel, A. (2014b). *The body keeps the score: brain, mind, and body in the
healing of trauma*. https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BB19708339

Lei, N., Velez, B. L., Seoud, J. M., & Motulsky, W. N. (2022). A test of minority stress theory
with Asian Americans. T*he Counseling Psychologist*, *50*(7), 1009–1038.
https://doi.org/10.1177/00110000221107554

Liang, C. T. H., Alvarez, A. N., Juang, L. P., & Liang, M. X. (2007). The role of coping in the
relationship between perceived racism and racism-related stress for Asian Americans:
Gender differences. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *54*(2), 132–141.
https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.54.2.132

Meyer, I. H. (2003). Prejudice, social stress, and mental health in lesbian, gay, and bisexual
populations: Conceptual issues and research evidence. *Psychological Bulletin*, *129*(5),
674–697. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.129.5.674

Mirahmadi, S., *, Lindloff, M., MSc, & Calogero, R., PhD. (2023). Examining the Relationship
between Racial Fetishism and Mental Well-Being in Women of Colour. In Western
University, *WUPJ* (Vol. 11, pp. 74–75) [Journal-article].

Mora, F., Rojo, S. F., Banzo, C., & Quintero, J. (2017). The impact of self-esteem on eating

disorders. *European Psychiatry*, *41*(S1), S558.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eurpsy.2017.01.802

Ngalande, R. C., & Mkwinda, E. (2014). Benefits and challenges of using ATLAS.ti. https://doi.

org/10.14279/depositonce-4848.

Patel, N. (2009) 'Racialized Sexism in the Lives of Asian American Women'. In C. Raghavan,

A. E. Edwards, and K. M. Vaz (eds.), *Benefiting by Design: Women of Color in Feminist*

Psychological Research (Cambridge Scholars Publisher), 116–28

Pornhub. (2018). The 2018 year in Review. Pornhub Insights.

https://www.pornhub.com/insights/2018-year-in-review

Pornhub. (2019). The 2019 year in Review. Pornhub Insights.

https://www.pornhub.com/insights/2019-year-in-review

Pornhub. (2021). The 2021 year in Review. Pornhub Insights.

https://www.pornhub.com/insights/yir-2021

Pornhub. (2022). The 2022 year in Review. Pornhub Insights.

https://www.pornhub.com/insights/2022-year-in-review

Pornhub. (2023). The 2023 year in Review. Pornhub Insights.

https://www.pornhub.com/insights/2023-year-in-reviewPrianti, D. D. (2019). The

Identity Politics of Masculinity as a colonial legacy. Journal of Intercultural Studies,

40(6), 700–719. https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2019.1675612

Richter, D., Wall, A., Bruen, A., & Whittington, R. (2019). Is the global prevalence rate of adult

mental illness increasing? Systematic review and meta-analysis. *Acta Psychiatrica*

Scandinavica, *140*(5), 393–407. https://doi.org/10.1111/acps.13083

Sarno, E. L., Newcomb, M. E., & Mustanski, B. (2020). Rumination longitudinally mediates the association of minority stress and depression in sexual and gender minority individuals. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, *129*(4), 355–363. https://doi.org/10.1037/abn0000508

Self, B. (2021). Conducting interviews during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. In *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research* (Vol. 22, No. 3).

Sowislo, J. F., & Orth, U. (2013). Does low self-esteem predict depression and anxiety? A meta-analysis of longitudinal studies. *Psychological Bulletin*, *139*(1), 213–240. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0028931

Sue, D. W., Bucceri, J., Lin, A. I., Nadal, K. L., & Torino, G. C. (2009, August). Racial microaggressions and the Asian American experience. *Asian American Journal of Psychology, S*(1), 88–101. https://doi.org/10.1037/1948-1985.s.1.88

Voci, A. (2006). The link between identification and in-group favouritism: Effects of threat to social identity and trust-related emotions. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *45*(2), 265–284. https://doi.org/10.1348/014466605x52245

Wadsworth, M. E. (2015). Development of maladaptive coping: a functional adaptation to chronic, uncontrollable stress. *Child Development Perspectives*, *9*(2), 96–100. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12112

Woan, S. (2008). White Sexual Imperialism: A Theory of Asian Feminist Jurisprudence. *Washington and Lee Journal of Civil Rights and Social Justice*, *14*(2), 275. https://scholarlycommons.law.wlu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1243&context=crsj

Zheng, R. (2016). Why yellow fever isn't flattering: A case against racial fetishes. *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, *2*(3), 400–419. https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2016.25

Appendix A

Informed Consent Form: Impact of Yellow Fever on the Mental Health of Asian Women in Europe

Researcher: Eileen Clara Zhang

email: e.c.zhang@student.utwente.nl

phone: +491776080277

This research study explores the impact of Yellow Fever on the mental health of Asian women residing in Europe. This study aims to address the lack of research in this area, as racial fetishisation has been shown to affect mental health, yet Asians have historically been excluded from such studies. Participation in this study involves joining a focus group discussion where you will be asked questions regarding your experiences with Yellow Fever and its effects on your mental health. The focus group discussions will be audio-recorded for research purposes. You will also be presented with direct quotes related to Yellow Fever to provide your reactions. Potential risks of participation include psychological discomfort or stress due to sharing personal information and recalling uncomfortable experiences. Additionally, participants may feel confronted by the topic of racial fetishisation. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or repercussion. Furthermore, you may retract any statement you have made during the discussion without consequences. Your identity and any information you provide during the focus group discussions will be kept confidential. Audio recordings will only be accessible to the research team and will be stored securely. Your name will not be associated with any quotes or findings from the study. If you have any questions or concerns about the study or your participation, please feel free to contact Eileen Clara Zhang (email; e.c.zhang@student.utwente.nl; phone: +491776080277). By participating in this study, you acknowledge that you have read and

understood the information provided in this consent form. You voluntarily agree to participate in

the research study outlined above.

Participant Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix B

Quote 1:

QUOTE 1

"They look exotic, their black thick hair, smooth skin, their petite frame; all are symbols of mystic and beauty."

5

Quote 2:

QUOTE 2

"I like their mannerism. How they walk, stand, sit and look. They are not pretentious. They don't wear clothes white girls wear, and they are not high maintenance. They don't wear heavy make-up. They are different."

6

Quote 3:

QUOTE 3

"I see Asian women as beautiful, sexy, intelligent, successful, professional, caring, family-oriented. I think it's the combo of beauty and brains that I'm so attracted to in Asian women. It seems so much more difficult to find a non-Asian woman who is both beautiful and intelligent. It's almost one or the other but not both …. But I do find that there are a lot of beautiful Asian women that are educated, successful, and intelligent."

7

Quote 4:

QUOTE 4

"They are not submissive . . . . I don't believe in that kind of
fantasy or fetish …. They are submissive in the bed. The
sex is better. Fun, loving, and healthy. They enjoy the sex,
but for [white women], it's a job. Boring, restricted and
limited. They are willing to experiment, and it's natural.
They enjoy kinky sex, like spanking. If I [would] spank [a
white woman] while during sex, they'd yell at me and [and
tell me to get] out of the bed. But Asian [women] wouldn't
do that. They enjoy it. They are not submissive socially in
public, but in bedroom, YES."

[8]

Quote 5:

QUOTE 5

"They are not submissive … [there are] cultural
differences. Women serve the men; they do things for
him that the western culture has long forgotten. It's hard
to pin point, and I'm not saying that western women don't
take care of their men, it's just the way Asian women go
about it. The presence, the mannerism, the movement of
their bodies that are attractive to some of us. And again
these things I am speaking of don't pertain to all Asian
females, but this is the general belief or idea, I think that
we men carry … we men want a princess in public and a
whore in the bedroom. Simple as that…."

[9]