



**TOKENS ON THE SMALL SCREEN:
Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders
in Prime Time and Streaming Television**

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TOKENS ON THE SMALL SCREEN: ASIAN AMERICANS AND PACIFIC ISLANDERS IN PRIME TIME AND STREAMING TELEVISION

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This report sheds light on the representation of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) on television. We examine broadcast, cable, and digital platform television shows in the 2015–2016 season to measure the number of AAPI series regulars and how they fare in settings, screen time, relationships, stereotypes, and storylines. A total of 242 TV shows and 2052 series regulars are examined. This is a ten-year follow up study to our [2005](#) and [2006](#) studies of AAPIs in prime time broadcast television.

Asian American/Pacific Islander (AAPI)	Person of Asian or Pacific Islander descent
Monoracial AAPI	Person of a single or multiple Asian or Pacific Islander ethnic heritage
Multiracial AAPI	Person of Asian or Pacific Islander heritage and non-Asian heritage
Series Regulars	The main cast of a TV show. The premise and storylines revolve around series regulars, making them the most coveted roles in any television series. ¹

STUDY HIGHLIGHTS

TV SO WHITE: Whites dominate the television landscape, making up nearly 70% of television series regulars compared to monoracial Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders who comprise only 4%. Pacific Islanders make up only 0.2% of series regulars, which is half of their U.S. population.

MISSING: A full 64% of all shows do not feature a single AAPI series regular. In contrast, 96% of TV shows have at least one White series regular. Furthermore, the majority of shows set in AAPI-dense cities including New York and Los Angeles have no AAPI series regulars.

ISOLATED: Intimate relationships add to a character’s depth and draw an audience into that character’s development. Three times as many White series regulars as AAPIs have romantic and/or familial relationships on shows featuring AAPI series regulars.

LOW VISIBILITY: 87% of AAPI series regulars are on-screen for less than half an episode and 17% of AAPI series regulars have the lowest screen time on their show. Audiences also see White series regulars on-screen 3 times longer than AAPI series regulars.

TOKENS: 68% of TV shows featuring AAPI series regulars have ONLY 1.

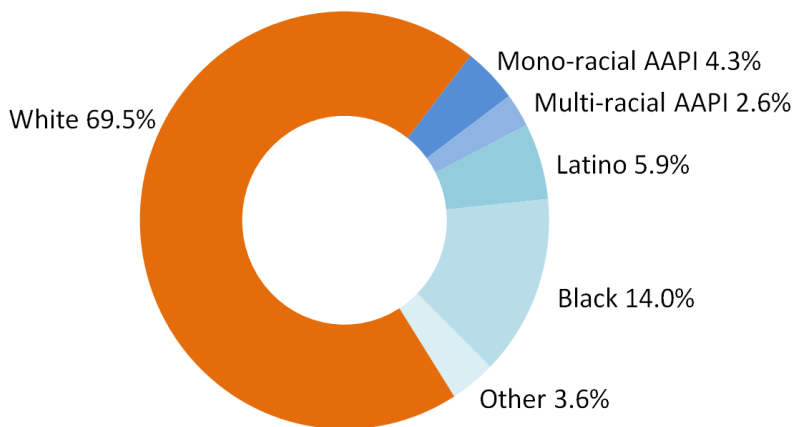
SEGREGATED & ENDANGERED: Over one-third of all AAPI series regulars appear on just 11 shows, over half of which have been cancelled.

STEREOTYPED: The television landscape continues to be littered with problematic racial stereotypes, including forever foreigner, yellow peril, model minority, emasculated men, exoticized women, sidekicks to White characters, whitewashed characters, and White experts.

EXEMPLARY: Some shows include exemplary and multifaceted representations of AAPIs, including: *The Night Of* (HBO), *The Walking Dead* (AMC), *Master of None* (Netflix), and *Fresh Off the Boat* (ABC).

TV SO WHITE

TV Series Regulars by Race



Total Series Regulars: 2052

PACIFIC ISLANDERS

4 series regulars:

1. Dwayne Johnson on *Ballers* (HBO)
2. Uli Latukefu on *Marco Polo* (Netflix)
3. Keisha Castle-Hughes on *Roadies* (Showtime)
4. Cliff Curtis on *Fear the Walking Dead* (AMC)

0.2%

of all series regulars, half of their U.S. population

Television vs. U.S. Population

	TV Series Regular %	U.S. Population % ²
AAPI (monoracial)	4.3%	5.9%
Black	14.0%	13.3%
Latino	5.9%	17.8%
White	69.5%	61.3%

96% of TV shows have at least one White series regular.

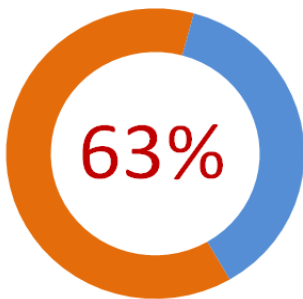
MISSING IN ACTION



TV shows out of 242 have **no AAPI** series regulars.

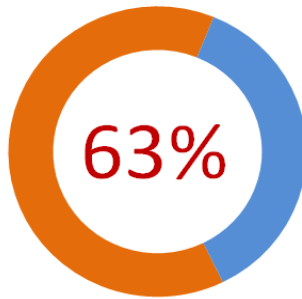
TV shows across **every television platform** have **NO AAPI Series Regulars**.

Broadcast TV
ABC, CBS, CW, FOX, NBC



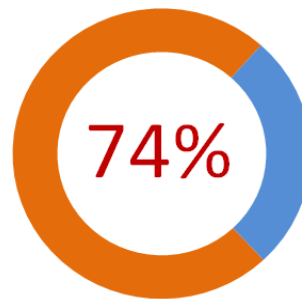
Total Shows: 104

Basic Cable
Top 25



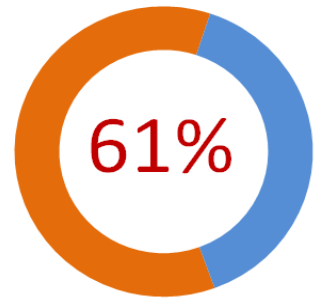
Total Shows: 71

Premium Cable
Cinemax, HBO, Showtime, Starz



Total Shows: 34

Streaming TV
Amazon, Hulu, Netflix



Total Shows: 33

■ NO AAPI Series Regulars

A **majority** of shows set in **high AAPI-populated cities** have **NO AAPI** series regulars.



ISOLATED

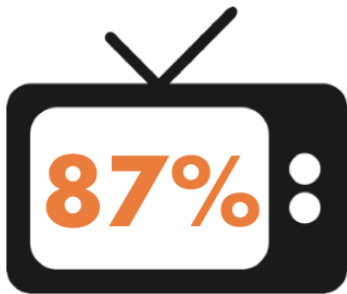
Even on shows featuring AAPI series regulars, **3 times** as many **Whites** are in romantic and/or familial **relationships**.



LOW VISIBILITY

Even on shows where they are series regulars, **AAPIs barely** appear **on-screen**.

Out of 142 AAPI series regulars...

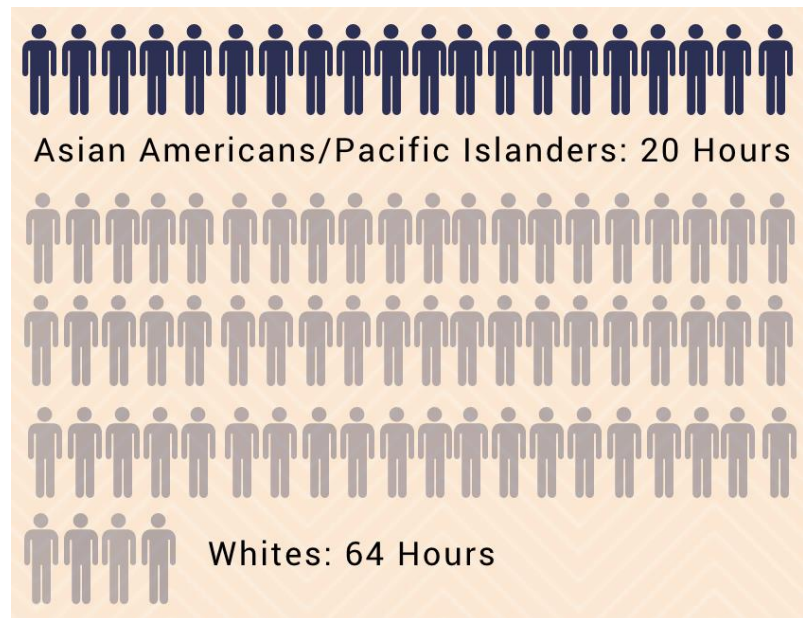


are on screen for **less than HALF** an episode

17%

have the **LOWEST SCREEN TIME** on their show

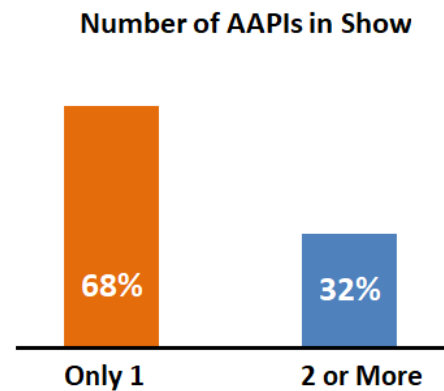
On shows featuring AAPIs, Whites are on-screen more than **3 times** longer.



TOKENS

“There can be one, but there can’t be two.”
–Dev, “Indians On TV,” *Master of None* (Netflix)

A majority of shows featuring AAPIs (68% of 87 shows) have **ONLY 1 AAPI** series regular.



SEGREGATED AND ENDANGERED

Over **one-third** of all AAPIs appear on just **11 shows**. Over **half** of these shows have been **cancelled/not renewed** at the time of this Report, **cutting** overall AAPI representation by **21%**.

Show Name	# of AAPIs
1. <i>Marco Polo</i> (Netflix, cancelled)	14
2. <i>Fresh Off the Boat</i> (ABC)	5
3. <i>Dr. Ken</i> (ABC, cancelled)	4
4. <i>Master of None</i> (Netflix)	4
5. <i>The Man in the High Castle</i> (Amazon)	4
6. <i>Hawaii Five-0</i> (CBS)	3
7. <i>The Night Of</i> (HBO, no plans for renewal)	3
8. <i>Wrecked</i> (TBS)	3
9. <i>Recovery Road</i> (ABC, cancelled)	3
10. <i>Truth Be Told</i> (NBC, cancelled)	3
11. <i>Hell on Wheels</i> (AMC, cancelled)	3

10%
of AAPI series regulars
appear on the
same show:
Marco Polo
(Netflix)

PERSISTENT STEREOTYPES

Many plotlines and character portrayals draw on **negative representations of AAPIs**.

Forever Foreign: Uncivilized and Mysterious Strangers

On *Silicon Valley* (HBO), AAPI character Jian-Yang's broken English and heavily accented dialogue are frequent punchlines of jokes. Both *Criminal Minds: Beyond Borders* (CBS) and *Deadbeat* (Hulu) have problematic "Asian" musical interludes when AAPI characters appear on-screen in the episode, signaling their difference from the other characters.

Yellow Peril: Dangerous Villains

On *Wrecked* (TBS) a White male airplane crash survivor questions whether fellow AAPI passenger Pack Hara "might be a terrorist." Japanese pirates kidnap and torture Americans on *The Last Ship* (TNT). *Major Crimes* (TNT) features Korean Americans running a fraudulent plastic surgery ring in Koreatown. On *The Man in the High Castle* (Amazon), two Japanese men torture a White woman and a third tries to sexually exploit her.

Model Minority: Odd Nerds

On *Truth Be Told* (NBC), when asked how her mixed-race daughter Sadie is doing, AAPI character Tracy replies, "When she sleeps, her little half-Asian brain is putting it together." *Second Chance's* (FOX) AAPI character Otto "thinks in code," creates a unique language to communicate with his twin sister, and dresses in ill-fitting clothing. On *Chicago Med* (NBC), a White female patient declares, "Orientals make the best doctors" due to their "math skills." In response, Korean American character Dr. Ethan Choi laughingly quotes Confucius.

Gendered Stereotypes: Emasculated Men and Exoticized Women

On *Two Broke Girls* (CBS), characters constantly ridicule AAPI character Han Lee for his perceived inability to have successful romantic or sexual relationships. *Young and Hungry's* (Freeform) AAPI character Elliot Park is infantilized when his housekeeper jokes that if he adopts a child, he can wear the child's hand-me-downs. On *Vice Principals* (HBO), a neighbor insults Christine, Lee Russell's Korean wife, by referencing "mail order brides."

Whitewashed and White Authorities on Asia

On *Hawaii Five-0* (CBS), a Japanese-speaking White man is the head of a Yakuza criminal ring. On *The Last Ship* (TNT), Sasha Cooper, a White woman, is the "expert" on China, even speaking Mandarin with President Peng. These White characters are presented as knowing more about Asian countries, culture, and/or language than the Asian American series regulars on those shows.

EXEMPLARY SHOWS

Of shows that include at least one AAPI series regular, a handful stand out as exemplary in their development of multifaceted AAPI characters, garnering high ratings and/or awards for their efforts. Some of these shows actively engage with racial concepts, offering characters that work against problematic stereotypes rather than reinforce them. Other shows display well-rounded AAPIs who are engaged in their family life, enter into romantic relationships, and are equal partners among series regulars instead of playing the sidekick, villain, or comedic foil. Four exemplary shows are highlighted here:

The Night Of (HBO) is a 2017 Emmy-nominated limited series that stars Riz Ahmed (who is also nominated for an Emmy Award for Outstanding Lead Actor in a Limited Series, as well as an Emmy Award for his guest appearance on HBO's *Girls*). He plays Naz, an everyman character who was at the wrong place at the wrong time. In prison, he is betrayed and victimized but does not take revenge. Instead of taking a plea bargain, he chooses to risk trial (and stay in prison) to prove his innocence. He is portrayed as strong-willed, moral, thoughtful, and completely relatable. His father is a taxi driver and his family is shown sympathetically as they cope with their son's wrongful arrest. The show even addresses racist perceptions of Pakistanis, as the White female defense attorney says to the press: "This is not a level playing field here. The victim is an upper class Caucasian, the accused: a striving member of one of the most reviled ethnicities in America."

Master of None (Netflix) is an Emmy-award winning series that is certified "100% fresh" on Rotten Tomatoes. The show features four AAPI series regulars, offering viewers multiple and varied representations. Indian American Dev Shah, played by Aziz Ansari, is by all definitions a leading man. He appears in multiple contexts: auditioning for roles as an actor, recounting memories with his immigrant parents in their family home, hanging out with friends at local restaurants and bars, and sharing intimate moments with romantic partners. *Master of None* is also one of the only shows to openly address institutionalized racism. Dev directly critiques inequalities in Hollywood, including: Brownface performances by White actors, the stereotypical roles Indian actors are offered, and the tokenization of AAPI actors on television since, "There can be one, but there can't be two." He even refuses a casting director who asks him to perform "an Indian accent" during an audition. Using humor and humanization, *Master of None* invites audience members to identify with and understand Dev's point of view, challenging racism and White supremacy while doing so.

The Walking Dead (AMC) is considered one of the most popular basic cable shows, routinely drawing in some of the highest ratings on both basic cable and broadcast TV. While the show features a large, racially diverse cast, Korean American Glenn Rhee (played by Steven Yeun) offers viewers one of the most relatable, complex, and beloved AAPI characters on TV. For over six seasons, viewers have watched Glenn evolve from a plucky foraging survivor in a post-apocalyptic zombie world to an invaluable leader, often serving as the group's moral compass. Adding to the complexity of his character, Glenn's romantic relationship with Maggie also breaks the typical asexual, Asian American male mold. Their relationship, which includes a marriage proposal and pregnancy, is a symbol of love, hope, and humanity. Fans' overwhelming and emotional response to Glenn's brutal death during the Season 7 premiere further reflects the cultural importance of his character.

***Fresh Off the Boat* (ABC)** has been ranked as Tuesday night’s top comedy.³ Nearly 20 years after *All American Girl* was cancelled, viewers are finally able to see another Asian American family on broadcast prime time TV. *Fresh off the Boat* centers around the Huangs, an intergenerational family including a Taiwanese grandmother, two Taiwanese immigrant parents, and three Asian American boys growing up during the 1990s in suburban Orlando, Florida. Viewers are invited to see how Louis, played by Randall Park, and Jessica, played by Constance Wu, tackle parenting while also figuring out ways to integrate into American culture. On the surface, Jessica may seem to embody the “Tiger Mom” stereotype—the cold and unlikeable Asian American matriarch who disciplines with an iron fist. But viewers also see Jessica as a devoted, nuanced, sensitive, and occasionally flawed character who fumbles through parenting as she navigates cultural differences. Their oldest son, Eddie, played by Hudson Yang, offers a comedic yet realistic portrayal of how second generation AAPI youth negotiate their cultural citizenship as both Asian and American.

KEY FINDINGS

TV SO WHITE

There are more Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders on television today than a decade ago, when they comprised only 2.6% of broadcast series regulars⁴. Still, only 4.3% of series regulars on television and streaming services today are played by monoracial AAPIs, lower than their U.S. population share of 5.9%. Pacific Islanders are virtually invisible on television, with only 4 series regulars, representing only half of their share of the U.S. population. In contrast, Whites are nearly 70% of all series regulars, higher than their U.S. population share of 61.3%. A full 64% of shows exclude AAPIs from their casts. In contrast, 96% of all shows have at least one White series regular.

AAPI ACTOR ETHNICITIES & GENDER

The sample of 142 AAPI actors includes 21 different ethnicities, plus one of unknown origin. The most prevalent ethnicities correspond to five of six of the most numerous Asian groups in the United States (Chinese/Taiwanese, Indian, Korean, Filipino, and Japanese).⁵ Filipino actors are underrepresented at a deficit of 7% while Vietnamese actors are also grossly underrepresented, with less than 1% representation on television.

Asian Actor Ethnicities Compared to U.S. Population

Ethnicity	AAPI Ethnicities, U.S. Population % ⁶	AAPI Ethnicities, TV Series Regular %
Chinese/Taiwanese	23%	28%
Indian	19%	20%
Filipino	18%	11%
Korean	9%	15%
Vietnamese	9%	<1%
Japanese	7%	9%

AAPI Actor Gender

AAPI male and female actors are represented at near parity, with men (at 3.7%) just slightly higher than women (at 3.3%). Greater differences emerge when screen time and character relationships are considered. With nearly 11 total hours of screen time, AAPI male actors are on-screen almost two hours longer than AAPI female actors.

Gender	Total Screen Time
AAPI male actors	10 hours 41 minutes
AAPI female actors	8 hours 53 minutes

More AAPI female characters are in romantic and/or familial relationships than AAPI male characters. Approximately 56% of AAPI female characters are in romantic relationships, compared to 43% of their male counterparts. Furthermore, only 39% of AAPI male characters are in familial relationships compared to 56% of AAPI female characters.

MISSING IN ACTION

Regardless of the viewing platform, audiences may never see an AAPI regular on-screen, effectively erasing the AAPI population from a large portion of the television landscape. There are 155 shows that do not feature a single AAPI series regular. AAPIs are missing from 63% of broadcast shows, 63% of basic cable shows, and 74% of premium cable shows. While streaming television platforms, such as Amazon, Hulu and Netflix, feature the highest percentage of shows with AAPI regulars, 61% of streaming shows also lack an AAPI series regular.

Shows set in U.S. cities with high percentages of AAPIs should include greater numbers to reflect the accurate racial demographics of the environment. Yet, many shows set in AAPI-dense regions do not include (m)any AAPIs, further contributing to their erasure from the TV landscape. For all shows set in New York City (13% AAPI population), 70% do not feature a single AAPI series regular. Similarly, 53% of shows set in Los Angeles County (14% AAPI population) do not feature an AAPI series regular. Though they make up a handful of the 87 shows, series set in Seattle, San Francisco, and Hawaii have lower numbers of Asian Americans or Pacific Islanders compared to their regional population concentrations. After Sandra Oh's departure from *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC) in 2014, the show's cast no longer features an AAPI regular despite being set in Seattle (14% AAPI population). *Fuller House* (Netflix), which is set in San Francisco (33% AAPI population), is also missing an AAPI regular. While *Hawaii Five-0* (CBS) features multiple Asian American series regulars, the show does not include a single Pacific Islander series regular in the 2015-2016 season, despite their high concentration in the state (10% Pacific Islander population).⁷

ISOLATED

Intimate relationships (romantic and familial) add to a character's complexity and draw an audience into that character's development throughout the episode and series. A comparison of the percentage of intimately involved characters portrayed by AAPI actors to those portrayed by non-AAPI actors reveals that AAPIs are largely isolated relationally from other characters. Three times as many White series regulars as AAPIs have romantic and/or familial relationships on shows featuring AAPI series regulars.

LOW VISIBILITY

Screen time indicates the prominence of the characters in the narratives of their respective programs. Even on shows where AAPI series regulars appear, they are eclipsed by their White counterparts, who are on-screen more than 3 times longer. AAPI series regulars are on-screen for a total of 20 hours while White series regulars dominate the small screen at 64 hours. This lack of visibility is further demonstrated by the fact that a whopping 87% of AAPI series regulars appear on-screen for less than half the total show time of the episodes coded. Furthermore, 17% of AAPI series regulars have the LOWEST screen times of all series regulars on their respective shows.

TOKENS

More than two-thirds of the 87 shows feature only one AAPI series regular. As Aziz Ansari's character, Dev Shah, observes in *Master of None* (Netflix), the television industry is often unwilling to cast more than one Asian actor per show for fear of stepping over an imagined threshold, creating an 'Asian show.' The effect of this practice is increased potential for tokenization within the show context. AAPIs are often cast as sidekicks or supporting characters. There is often a lack of character depth and exploration of AAPI-related themes.

Of all four TV types, broadcast television is best at casting more than one AAPI actor per show, with basic cable and streaming doing second and third best at developing shows with more than one AAPI actor. Premium cable exhibits paltry outcomes on this measure—only two shows in premium lineups are cast with two or more AAPI actors.

SEGREGATED AND ENDANGERED: AN UNSTABLE FUTURE

AAPI actors are segregated on two ends of a spectrum of representation. As mentioned above, most shows feature just one AAPI actor. However, on the other end of the spectrum, one-third of all AAPIs are concentrated on just 11 shows. Without these 11 shows, AAPI representation would drop by a hefty 34.5%. One show, *Marco Polo* (Netflix), hosts 10% of all AAPI series regulars. It was recently cancelled, thereby delivering a significant blow to the overall number of AAPIs on TV. In all, over half of the shows with three or more AAPIs have been cancelled at the time of this Report, cutting AAPI representation by 21%.

AAPI-dense shows are tokens within the overall universe of 242 shows (4.5%). When AAPIs are concentrated at this end of the spectrum, their representation is at greater risk of decimation when networks decide to cancel even one show.

METHODS

Using quantitative and qualitative content analysis, we systematically investigated the presence and representation of AAPI actors and characters on 242 prime time first-run scripted television and streaming programs airing between September 1, 2015 and August 31, 2016.⁸ Prime time shows on broadcast television, basic cable, and premium cable air from 8pm to 11pm. All streaming shows were treated as prime time and included in the study. Basic cable entertainment networks were selected based on top 25 highest ratings in 2015 and whether they featured first-run scripted programs.⁹

We examined the following networks:

TV Type	Network	TV Type	Network
Broadcast	ABC	Basic Cable	A&E
Broadcast	CBS	Basic Cable	AMC
Broadcast	CW	Basic Cable	Bravo
Broadcast	FOX	Basic Cable	Comedy Central
Broadcast	NBC	Basic Cable	Freeform
TV Type	Network	Basic Cable	FX
Premium	Cinemax	Basic Cable	Hallmark
Premium	HBO	Basic Cable	History
Premium	Showtime	Basic Cable	Lifetime
Premium	Starz	Basic Cable	Nick at Nite
TV Type	Network	Basic Cable	OWN
Streaming	Amazon	Basic Cable	Syfy
Streaming	Hulu	Basic Cable	TBS
Streaming	Netflix	Basic Cable	TNT
		Basic Cable	TV Land
		Basic Cable	USA

The first phase of coding tabulated the racial, ethnic, and gender demographics for each of the 2052 series regulars, as well as the genre and geographic setting for all 242 shows in the sample. Broadcast, cable, and streaming TV websites were triangulated with commonly used internet databases such as IMDB and Wikipedia to determine the series regulars for each show and the racial and ethnic backgrounds of each actor.

The second phase of coding and analysis sampled one episode from each show featuring at least one AAPI series regular (n=87). We used a random number generator to select episode four in the season. By the fourth episode, audience members are more likely to be “hooked” with characters and plotlines further developed.¹⁰ If all AAPI series regulars were not featured in episode four, we selected the next available episode in which they all appeared, if any. We further examined the sexuality, screen time, occupation, relationships (romantic, familial, and friendship), name, accent, and languages spoken by each AAPI series regular. In-depth qualitative analysis of the subsample captured the nuances of AAPI representation to accompany the quantitative data.

Screen time was measured by watching the selected episode and tracking each series regular’s time on-screen. The principal investigators normed the coding procedure scheme by analyzing one universal episode and comparing tracked minutes-seconds. To ensure reliability between coders, the same episode from the sample was coded by all coders independently. The observed frequency of agreement, based on the calculation of kappa, indicated substantial to almost perfect agreement between the principal investigators. Research assistants were trained by coding the same universal episode and supervised by principal investigators.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Endnotes

¹ Dean, Kyle. 2012. "Actorpedia Part 2: Hollywood Definitions." Retrieved September 10, 2017. (<http://www.casttalent.com/blog/2012/01/actorpedia-part-2-hollywood-definitions/>)

² United States Census Bureau. 2016. "Quick Facts. Race and Hispanic Origin. July 1, 2016 (V2016). Retrieved September 11, 2017 (<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/RHI825216#viewtop>).

³ Kissel, Rick. 2015. "Ratings: CBS Wins Tuesday Behind 'NCIS'; ABC's 'Fresh Off the Boat' is Night's Top Comedy." *Variety*. Retrieved September 8, 2017 (<http://variety.com/2015/data/ratings/ratings-cbs-rolls-tuesday-behind-ncis-abcs-fresh-off-the-boat-nights-top-comedy-1201431090/>).

⁴ Chin, Christina, Meera E. Deo, Jenny J. Lee, Noriko Milman, and Nancy Wang Yuen. 2006. "Asian Pacific Americans in Prime Time: Setting the Stage." Asian American Justice Center, Washington D.C..

⁵ Other ethnicities include Malaysian, Singaporean, Cambodian, Pakistani, and Indonesian. Pacific Islanders remain virtually invisible.

⁶ United States Census Bureau. 2015. "American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates. Table B02018." Retrieved September 2, 2017 (<https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=bkmk>).

⁷ United States Census Bureau. 2010. "Quick Facts. Los Angeles County, New York City, Seattle City, San Francisco City, Hawaii State. Race and Hispanic Origin. April 1, 2010." Retrieved September 11, 2017 (<https://www.census.gov/.../HI.../PST045216>).

⁸ Specifically, we analyzed shows from five broadcast networks, 16 of the top 25 basic cable networks, four premium cable networks, and three streaming services (we excluded reality, animated, and children's shows).

⁹ Kissel, Rick. 2015. "Ratings: AMC, Discovery, Cartoon Network Are Cable Standouts of 2015." *Variety*. Retrieved January 8, 2016 (<http://variety.com/2015/tv/news/2015-cable-ratings-amc-discovery-cartoon-network-1201666316>).

¹⁰ Kastrenakes, Jacob. 2015. "Netflix Knows the Exact Episode of a TV Show That Gets You Hooked." *The Verge*. Retrieved January 8, 2016 (<https://www.theverge.com/2015/9/23/9381509/netflix-hooked-tv-episode-analysis>).