"THE ASIAN FRAT": RACIALIZED STATUS AND STEREOTYPES IN THE FIELD OF FRATERNITIES AT AN ELITE UNIVERSITY

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This paper applies Bourdieusian field theory to examine a predominantly East Asian but historically White fraternity at an elite university in the Northeast United States. Drawing upon interviews and participant observation, the study explores the symbolic violence experienced by members of the fraternity. The analysis demonstrates how different forms of capital become racialized within the field of fraternities, revealing important insights into how both new racism and old-fashioned racism are experienced and perpetuated through organizational structures. As such, this paper provides a valuable case study contributing to scholarship on anti-Asian racism, organizational theory, and fraternity studies.

Keywords: meso-level racism, Asian masculinity, Bourdieusian field theory, new racism, fraternity

Many scholars have documented the rise of a new form of racism in the United States (Bobo, et al., 1997; Carr, 1997; Kinder & Sears, 1981; McConahay & Hough, 1976; Pettigrew, 1979; Smith, 1996; Sniderman et al., 1991). New racism refers to the predominant racial structure in the United States that is defined by

> the increasingly covert nature of racial discourse and racial practices; the avoidance of racial terminology and the ever-growing claim by whites that they experience "reverse racism"; the elaboration of a racial agenda over political matters that eschews direct racial references; the invisibility of most mechanisms to reproduce racial inequality; and, finally, the rearticulation of some racial practices characteristic of the Jim Crow period of race relations (Bonilla-Silva, 2021, p. 18).

Alongside new racism, a new racial ideology called colorblind racism has become pervasive in the United States, which has been described as "the superficial extension of the principles of liberalism to racial matters that results in 'raceless' explanations for all sort of race-related affairs'' (Bonilla-Silva, 2015, p. 1).

These relatively novel conceptions of racism differ from Old-fashioned racism (Lajevardi & Oskooii, 2018), which, despite the "post-racial" narrative of the 2010s, remains ubiquitous in society

(Bhopal, 2018). This persistence is evidenced by acts of racism that have sparked national outrage, such as anti-Asian hate crimes during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gover et al., 2020). Although the symbolic violence against Asian men studied in this paper operates primarily through covert, institutional mechanisms characteristic of new racism, recent instances of anti-Asian violence demonstrate that these subtle forms of discrimination coexist with, rather than replace deep-rooted, overt racism in the United States.

Old-fashioned racism and new racism are not produced in a vacuum; they are expressed in institutions and organizations, otherwise known as the meso-level. Victor Ray (2019) made an important argument that organizations are an arena where the racial order is preserved and challenged. Ray argued that race is constitutive to organizations and that organizations are fundamentally racial structures. Ray made a compelling case for the need to incorporate a race-conscious lens into organizational studies and developed a theoretical framework for understanding organizations as racialized (Ray, 2019). Several studies have applied Ray's concept of racialized organizations to fraternities, analyzing race and masculinity meaning-making in college campus-based organizations. Some have focused on the Whiteness of fraternities and sororities (Harris et al., 2019; Hughey, 2010), while others have concentrated on analyzing non-White fraternities as affinity spaces (Guardia & Evans, 2008; McClure, 2006). Some researchers have studied Asian American interest fraternities, groups that seek to provide culturally responsive and inclusive fraternity spaces, focusing on the intersection of race and masculinity in such organizations (Parks & Laybourn, 2016; Tran & Chang, 2019).

This paper studies the Asian frat, a historically White fraternity that became predominantly East Asian over time at an elite, liberal arts university in the United States (hereafter "Ace University"). Applying Ray's concept of racialized organizations, this study examines how the Asian frat fits into the broader field of fraternities at Ace University. This case is particularly relevant for understanding the implications of organizational racialization due to the highly racialized nature of fraternity social networks and their embedded racial dynamics.

The Asian frat stands apart from existing literature on Asian fraternities as racialized organizations in two main ways. First, while previous studies have examined the intersection between Asian masculinity and fraternities, none have applied Bourdieu's field theory to understand the underlying power dynamics that produce meso-level racism towards Asian men. Second, unlike the Asian American interest fraternities examined in the literature, the Asian frat does not share founding principles of inclusivity. On the contrary, the Asian frat is a chapter of a historically White national fraternity that became predominantly Asian in membership over time. As such, the Asian frat presents a uniquely valuable case for understanding meso-

level racialization in contemporary American society. Unlike Asian American interest fraternities, which are purposely founded to create inclusive spaces, the racialized reputation of Ace University's Asian frat despite its historically and nationally predominantly White reputation, offers insights into how racial dynamics operate within established institutional structures. While this study focuses on fraternity life at one elite university, its theoretical implications extend to broader questions about how organizational fields mediate racial hierarchies.

Past research on racism towards Asian Americans in the United States has relied on micro-level insights from interviews and macro-level findings from quantitative datasets. Such work has demonstrated the racism embedded within the model minority myth (Chou & Feagin, 2015; Lee, 2015), the emasculating stereotypes faced by Asian American men (Chen, 1999), the systematic discrimination towards Asian American men in the dating market (Kao et al., 2018), and the underrepresentation of Asian American men in private sector leadership (Yu, 2020). Building on existing scholarship on racism towards Asian Americans, this study uses a meso-level lens to understand the member experiences of the Asian frat. How does organizational affiliation mediate individual experiences of racism? How are racial stereotypes that undergird the racial order perpetuated at the meso level? More specifically, how does the field of fraternities at Ace University structure the relationship between types of capital and racial hierarchies? Focusing on the Asian frat at Ace University, this paper shows how Asian American men's experiences of negative stereotypes are structured at the organizational level within the context of colorblind rhetoric that obscures their lived experiences of meso-level racism.

Methodology

Researcher Positionality

My positionality as a member of the Asian frat served as one of this study's greatest strengths and limitations. I joined the Asian frat in my first year of college and stayed involved in various capacities throughout the next four years as a member, recruitment chair, vice president, and president. My positionality as a deeply involved member of the Asian frat provides several distinct advantages to the study, namely my insight into the tacit understandings within the field of fraternities at Ace University and my relationships with other members of the Asian frat. On the other hand, my lived experience as a member of the fraternity also biases my point of view and analysis. Recognizing the implicit and often subconscious nature of researcher bias, I sought to treat my experiences and opinions about the Asian frat as one among the many voices that constituted the fraternity. I centered the voices of my interviewees in the analysis of the field of fraternities, grounding all theoretical concepts in quotes from the interviews.

Institutional and Organizational Context

The institutional and organizational context of Ace University and the Asian frat are important to understand and consider when reading the findings of this study. Ace University is a mid-sized university located in an urban area in the Northeast United States. With a 5-10% acceptance rate, Ace is an incredibly selective research university that is well-renowned for strong academics. The student body of Ace is approximately 30% White, 20% Asian, 15% Hispanic, 10% Black, 20% International (who are not assigned a specific race), and 5% other races. Approximately 15% of students are members of a fraternity or sorority, which are not officially affiliated with the university. There are no inter-fraternal organizations or governing bodies at Ace University.

The Asian frat was first founded approximately 35 years ago as a chapter of a predominantly White, national fraternity. During its early years, the fraternity was known as the most racially diverse fraternity. As time progressed, the fraternity maintained its racially diverse reputation, despite being a majority White. In the 2010s, the proportion of East and South Asian members, which had been about 30%, slowly increased until the fraternity was made up of 70-80% Asian members by 2023 when this study took place. The fraternity's racial composition radically differs from the majority of other chapters at other universities, which are predominantly White. This particular fraternity was selected because of its accessibility to the researcher and its interesting reputation as a low-status, racialized organization.

Methods

I combined in-depth interviews with members of the fraternity and participant observation of chapter meetings and social events to analyze the Asian frat, using organizational field analysis to frame my findings in a way that encompasses micro-, meso-, and macro-level considerations. I conducted 17 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with members of the Asian frat, either alone or in groups, interviewing a total of 22 fraternity members from August to December 2023. Interviews lasted anywhere from thirty minutes to an hour and were purposively sampled to attain representation with regard to class year, race, and sexuality. During the interviews, I had open-ended conversations with various brothers in the Asian fraternity about their experiences with the fraternity and impressions of broader social perceptions of the fraternity. The interviewees were all assigned pseudonyms and tagged with their graduation year at the time of the interview (e.g., "John ('26)" would refer to a member of the class of 2026, or a sophomore at the time).

The other form of data collection that I used in my analysis was participant observation, namely my four years of experience as a member, recruitment chair, vice president, and president of

the Asian fraternity. As one of the older current members in the fraternity, I participated in and observed the various functions of the fraternity over multiple leadership cohorts, including external social events, the induction process, and internal meetings. The countless conversations and insights from my time in the fraternity helped me better understand micro- and macro-level comments about the Asian frat during interviews and formed a contextual backbone upon which I could layer the findings from the in-depth interviews.

This study utilized Mustafa Emirbayer and Victoria Johnson's (2008) methodological proposal to employ Bourdieusian field theory at an organizational level. Bourdieu's field theory, with its emphasis on how power relations structure social spaces through different forms of capital, provides insightful analytical tools for understanding how racialized organizations operate. By examining how racial hierarchies shape the distribution and valuation of capital within organizational fields, we can better understand the mechanisms through which racial inequality is reproduced at the meso level. Emirbayer and Johnson's relational agenda for organizational research argues for a more effective usage of Bourdieu's field theory to study organizations, specifically with regards to employing the concepts of capital to better illustrate how fields are constructed and the links between the micro, macro, and meso levels (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008).

I draw upon Ray and Emirbayer and Johnson in my analysis of the Asian frat, using Emirbayer and Johnson's (2008) organizational field analysis to analyze meso-level outcomes while grounding my insights in Ray's (2019) understanding of race as constitutive to organizations and organizational outcomes. The joining of these two works of scholarship provides a holistic, relational account of the Asian frat and the field of fraternities at Ace University with a focus on the study's implications towards the role of the meso level in the contemporary racial order.

Theoretical Overview

I would first like to define the theoretical concepts that I will use in my analysis of the Asian frat. One of the most important concepts in my analysis is the field. Field is a central concept in Bourdieusian theory as a type of theoretical frame that a researcher can use to conceptualize a domain of activity in the social world, with a particular focus on the distribution of power and the ongoing struggle for power within the field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 104-108). In his own words, Bourdieu defines a field as

> a network, or configuration, of objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they imposed upon their occupants, agents, or institutions, by their present and

potential situation (situs) in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions. (domination, subordination, homology, etc.; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 97)

As seen in Bourdieu's articulation of the concept of field, the types of capital at play within a field are central to the structure of and struggles within the field. Bourdieu defines capital as

accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its 'incorporated' embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor. (Bourdieu, 2018, p. 79)

The distribution of and differential value of the various types of capital in a field reflects the internal logic and positionality of the actors within.

The final key Bourdieusian concept that I deploy in my analysis of the Asian frat is habitus. Bourdieu identifies habitus as a form of "embodied" capital, in which the past experiences and conditions of an individual shape how they interact with the world. In a sense, habitus can be understood as an internal reflection of the social structures that individuals inhabit. The habitus of individual actors shapes what courses of action they see as possible and desirable (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Results

In this section, I provide an overview of the organizational field analysis of the field of fraternities at Ace University, drawing upon quotes from the rich qualitative data in my interviews with members of the fraternity and relying on the Bourdieusian concepts of field, capital, and habitus to illustrate how status is conceptualized among fraternities at Ace University. In particular, I highlight the meso-level symbolic violence against Asian American men in the field of fraternities at Ace University.

Constructing the Organizational Field of Fraternities

The first part of my analysis consisted of constructing the field of fraternities at Ace University through members of the Asian frat's insights about the relevant forms of capital in the field. As Bourdieu put it, "In order to construct the field, one must identify the forms of specific capital that operate within it, and to construct the forms of specific capital one must know the specific logic of the field" (Bourdieu

& Wacquant, 1992, p. 104). As such, I derive and define the types of capital that operate in the field of fraternities based on interviews with members of the fraternity. My conversations with brothers in the Asian frat demonstrate an assumption that there are five types of capital operating within the field of fraternities at Ace University, namely economic, social, cultural, erotic, and symbolic capital. Put together, these five types of capital constitute a field-specific capital I call clout. I loosely draw from Catherine Hakim's concept of "erotic capital" (Hakim, 2011) and Bourdieu's discourse on economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) to categorize the types of capital in the field of fraternities, but I exclusively rely on interviews with members of the fraternity to define each type of capital. The field-specific capital I refer to as clout is based on my interviewees' discourse on status in the field of fraternities at Ace University. Clout, to my interviewees, was a proxy for status and power in the field.

Economic Capital: Parties and Alumni

Economic capital refers to the amount of wealth associated with a fraternity. The main ways that fraternities demonstrate and exercise their economic capital are through more extravagant parties and a wealthy alumni base. Theo ('26) emphasized this point, describing how one of the high-status fraternities at Ace University threw "a $5,000 budget party this Friday. Are you serious? They have eight bouncers they hired. Yeah, it's actually crazy." Steven ('26) discussed a different high-status fraternity, explaining how it "has a shit ton of money to throw, which means they can do a lot more cool things: hire DJs, the flame thing, the mariachi band." As these quotes from brothers demonstrate, often flashier and more expensive entertainment at parties adds to a fraternity's status.

The other form of economic capital in fraternities is wealthy alumni. Wealthier alumni are associated with donations to the fraternity, which then supports more expensive parties. As Shawn ('26) described, "These frats have more alumni supporting them; they have a lot more donations coming in, and they have a lot more money to spend on their social scene." In general, the wealth of the high-status fraternities' alumni bases is a highly salient part of their reputations. Kevin ('25) explained how race could potentially be a part of certain fraternities' associations with wealth:

> I think race could be a factor here, in one group looking established, like legacy, old money type vibe. Something that is Ace, almost because of how long they've been here, the kind of alumni they have … I think race probably connects to that.

Kevin was the only interviewee to point out the associations of Whiteness with the status quo and old money, which carries over at the organizational level.

Social Capital: Partygoers and Mixers

Social capital refers to the perceived status value of the fraternity members and people who socially associate with the fraternity by attending events such as parties, mixers, and formals. Many high-status individuals associate with high-status fraternities at Ace University. As Ben ('24) described, "They [high-status fraternities] tend to attract a lot of the partying type at Ace, the kids who are really popular in high school." Shawn ('26) elaborated on the demographic of those associated with high-status fraternities, explaining how

> from an outsider's point of view, it does feel like there are more wealthy people. Not just wealthy people, but also people who are doing exceptionally well on campus, like exceptional athletes in the big sports … it's hard to pinpoint a one-to-one reason, but if you were to sum it up, I'd say that the more popular people go to these [high-status] frats.

A key marker of social capital is with which groups a fraternity mixes. Andrew ('25) discussed how he thought

> that [mixers] actually play into why there's a perception of [high-status fraternities] being cooler because they tend to have a lot more mixers with different campus groups, which are considered cooler because of either exclusivity or all sorts of things.

As Andrew explained, the types of groups that a fraternity mixes with signal the fraternity's status and are associated with the fraternity's level of social capital.

Fraternities with high levels of social capital become sites where high-status individuals reproduce their status. Ethan ('25) described how high-status fraternities' relationships with high-status sororities establish their standing as a site of building and maintaining social status:

> It's to maintain this certain social status that they think they have because they're there every weekend. Oh, you have to go to [high-status fraternity] late night because you're known as a regular and that sets you up for, if you're a girl, sorority rush, or future, I don't want to say opportunities, but certain parts of a future.

Eli ('24) explained how people associated with high-status fraternities use social media as a means to signal their affiliation with the fraternity's social capital:

> Every time somebody goes to a party on [the main frat row] they post it on Instagram … because they want people to see that and be considered as part of that high-value social group. That value is based, in my opinion, purely on perception.

Cultural Capital: Partying and Tastes

Cultural capital in the field of fraternities refers to the embodied socialized tendencies of individuals that make up fraternities. Certain preferences are more valued by high-status fraternities, such as prioritizing partying, liking certain sports, or eating at expensive restaurants. These preferences result in a group of people with similar dispositions and shape a self-perpetuating organizational culture. Ben ('24) described how

> they [high-status fraternities] are the place where people who are more inclined to do things, like party more often, go, so when people like that want to join a fraternity, those are the spaces they know … and then that builds a culture of people who enjoy partying, are incredibly social people.

Besides preferences for partying, brothers of the Asian fraternity also describe how high-status fraternities at Ace University are also associated with stereotypical, hypermasculine, fraternity behavior. Harry ('24) discussed an anecdote of his experiences with the stereotypical fraternity hypermasculinity of high-status fraternities when he was a first-year:

> I went to events for [high-status fraternity]; I went to events for [other high-status fraternity]. There were just guys smoking cigarettes inside of a house, drinking beers, and I would go up and try to talk to them and they wouldn't even look at me because maybe I didn't fit that super masculine frat bro ethos. They offered me a cigarette and I was like, no, I'm good. They offered me, like do you want to drink, and it was a fucking Tuesday, so I said nah, I'm good. It just felt like there was a lot of pressure to fit in.

Harry's anecdote demonstrates how the personal preferences of the members of fraternities lead to a form of embodied cultural capital that is associated with status in the field of fraternities at Ace University.

Erotic Capital: Hot or Not

Erotic capital refers to the romantic and/or sexual desirability of the fraternity members. Erotic capital plays an important role in securing mixers with high-status female groups (such as sororities and athletic teams), attracting partygoers interested in hooking up, and conforming to the image of a stereotypical fraternity, thus attracting both partygoers and prospective new members. Anthony ('24) described the usual physical appearance of members of high-status fraternities, saying that

> A lot of it boils down to physical appearance and attractiveness. Obviously, beauty is subjective, but there is a lot of objective in it. If you're tall, if you're athletic, humans are going to be programmed to be more attracted to that and a lot of that obviously factors into popularity … [high-status fraternity] has a bunch of soccer players in there, like varsity athletes. These are people that work out all the time.

Riley ('26) emphasized the role of race, explaining that "in your traditional American college campus, the White guys are a lot of people's types. It's pretty common for people to like White guys … and that's just European conventional beauty standards, American beauty standards." Anthony and Riley's descriptions of physical attractiveness that members of high-status fraternities embody demonstrates a normative beauty standard for fraternity men that gives fraternity status in the form of erotic capital.

Symbolic Capital: Looking the Part

Symbolic capital in the field of fraternities at Ace University refers to (a) a fraternity's association with the university's "frat row," (b) the difficulty of the fraternity's new member initiation process, (c) how exclusive the fraternity is perceived to be, and (d) how similar brothers' physical appearance is to the stereotypical notion of a "frat bro." Together, these four factors make fraternities seem more legitimate—more "fratty"—which provides significant status to fraternities.

To begin with fraternities' association with "frat row," there is a street at Ace University where the high-status fraternities have houses in close proximity to one another. Ben ('24) described how the street "just has that kind of reputation where everyone thinks of them as the frat row." The street is the most common destination for partygoers seeking to get into an exclusive party, and the fraternities on the street have close ties with other high-status social groups on campus.

Another factor that affects a fraternity's level of symbolic capital is the perceived difficulty of a fraternity's new member initiation process. Drew ('26) discussed how

there's a certain aspect of the hierarchy that has to do with the difficulty of the initiation process … and that ties back into notions of like, oh, it's not really a real frat … whereas [high-status fraternity] and [other high-status fraternity] are a lot of White finance guys who have to go through a fuck ton for their initiation process, so, it's more like a real frat, and a real frat might know how to throw better parties.

A difficult initiation process is an important status marker for high-status fraternities, a sort of badge of legitimacy that identifies them, as Drew describes it, as a "real frat."

The third factor that impacts a fraternity's level of symbolic capital is the fraternity's perceived exclusivity. For fraternities at Ace University, exclusivity is expressed in two main ways: joining the fraternity and getting into fraternity parties. Similar to a location on the "frat row" and a difficult initiation process, exclusivity operates as an important marker of status and a component of symbolic capital.

The fourth and final factor that contributes to a fraternity's level of symbolic capital is how average fraternity members' physical appearances compare with that of a stereotypical "frat bro." As Anthony ('24) put it, "We [Asian frat members] don't look like that [stereotypical frat bro]. We don't look like what people are like, okay, we're cool. Like jocks." Anthony emphasized the importance of being tall and athletic to look the part. Such physical appearances of members of a fraternity help produce a sense of legitimacy regarding the fraternity, contributing to its symbolic capital.

Field Specific Capital: Clout

The five types of capital that operate within the field of fraternities at Ace University—economic, social, cultural, erotic, and symbolic—collectively contribute to a type of capital specific to the field itself. Brothers in the Asian frat referred to this capital as clout. Shawn ('26) mentioned the relevance of the "clout aspect, like how popular the frat is, how exclusive it is, how hard it is to get into those parties." As Shawn illustrated, clout is colloquially understood as the capital that represents a fraternity's popularity and status at Ace University.

According to Emirbayer and Johnson (2008), field-specific capital "enables the dominant(s) within that field to exercise power over the field as a whole … [and provides] the capacity to produce the recognition of the legitimacy of this distribution among other parties" (p. 13). In other words, the higher levels of clout among certain fraternities establish them as the legitimate standard for fraternities within the field. This influences individuals outside of the field of fraternities, as they see certain fraternities as more desirable and/or legitimate than others, as well as those inside of the field of fraternities,

who are left with the decision to aspire towards or reject the standard that high-status fraternities create within the field. Vladimir ('24) described an example of this

> in the potential new members who choose the [frat row] frat over [the Asian fraternity] because they feel that the [Asian] frat is kind of beta, weak. And in response, some of the brothers might feel insecure about their social status.

Though clout is a form of capital that primarily operates on the macro level, it has downstream effects on individual fraternity members on the micro level, as Vladimir points out.

Figure 1
Types of Dominant Capital in the Field of Fraternities at Ace University
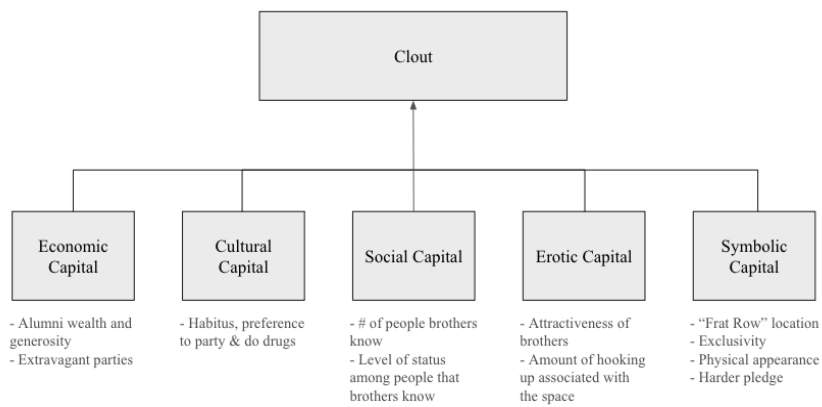
The field of fraternities at Ace University bifurcates into two groups, Perceived Dominant Fraternities and Perceived Non-Dominant Fraternities, based on each fraternity's levels of clout. Anthony summed up the hierarchy as

> you have your, quote unquote, top frats. Those are the ones on [frat row], like [the fratty frat], [the international frat], they mix with all the popular sororities. They're just traditionally more fratty, and I guess that's what different female groups want to be surrounded by. I don't really see tiers as we have less than 10 frats and 4 sororities. It's not really tiers, it's really just, like there are the ones that mix with sororities, the ones on [frat row] and the other ones not on [frat row].

As Anthony explained, the Perceived Dominant Fraternities are defined by high levels of clout, while the Perceived Non-Dominant Fraternities have low levels of clout.

The Asian Frat's Field Position

The Asian Frat falls into the Perceived Non-Dominant category due to its relatively low levels of economic, cultural, social, erotic, and symbolic capital. While the Asian frat is not seen as poor, it lacks the reputation of holding extravagant parties and an extremely wealthy and generous alumni base that defines the Perceived Dominant Fraternities. Theo ('26) spoke to the Asian frat's lack of extravagant parties, explaining that "we just don't have the money to throw like they [the high-status fraternities] do." Ethan ('25) explained how the Asian frat does not "have a particularly strong connection to our alumni," but added that

> We have really rich alumni as well, but people aren't really talking about it because they're not exposed to it on an everyday basis so we don't see, I guess, the benefits of it in ways that other frats do.

The Asian frat also has low levels of social capital due to limited high-status connections and social circles. Many brothers, especially older ones, noted how the members of the Asian frat largely belonged to the same social circles, which limits the fraternity's reach on campus. Eli ('24) pointed out how "it's kind of closed off in terms of social circles; everyone who joins is within the same groups." Steven ('26) made a similar point, mentioning how "we're Asian, we're very homogenous, the pre-professional thing … people that want to go to [the Asian frat] and join [the Asian frat] are all kind of the same type of person."

The Asian fraternity also has lower levels of cultural capital in the field of fraternities at Ace University because most brothers do not embody the type of habitus common in members of the frat row fraternities. Kevin ('25) described members of the Asian fraternity as "a group of folks who do frat things but probably wouldn't consider themselves fratty people." Steven ('26) directly contrasted members of the Asian fraternity with members of high-status fraternities:

> I think the people in [the Asian fraternity] are very nice compared to other frats … which I think is one of the reasons that [the Asian frat] gets a lot of shit for being, you know, a starter frat.

Members of the Asian fraternity also tend to be academically and pre-professionally focused, which leaves partying as a lower priority for the average member compared to high-status fraternities. As Ben ('24) put it, "[the Asian fraternity's] culture is very much work hard, play hard type thing where we're always working towards something, but we know how to take time off."

With regard to erotic capital, brothers in the Asian frat note how Asian men are often "not people's type," or are seen as less attractive. Andrew ('25) explained how "I don't know if there's any frat that's considered the de-facto hot frat, but I feel like [the Asian frat] is sometimes seen as the 'not hot' frat." Anthony ('24) discussed how members of the Asian frat were "obviously a bunch of great guys, very nice guys, but skinny, glasses, you know, very typical Asian stereotype. You don't fit the beauty standards in those places [high-status fraternities]."

The Asian fraternity also has low levels of symbolic capital given its perceived distance from the notion of "frattiness" shaped by the fraternities on frat row. This perception is largely shaped by (a) the Asian frat's physical distance from "frat row," (b) the relatively easier initiation process, (c) the lack of exclusivity, and (d) the physical attributes of members of the Asian fraternity. With regard to the Asian fraternity's location, Ben ('24) noted how

> to come all the way out to [the Asian frat] just for this location, we'd have to be doing more … whereas frat row, they can just go and most of the time they're throwing an event they can try and get into.

The Asian fraternity's physical distance from the frat row excludes it from the symbolic capital that a location on frat row provides. Members of the Asian fraternity also mentioned how the fraternity's initiation process is also seen as easier, leading to lower levels of symbolic capital.

The Asian fraternity's lack of exclusivity in its new member selection process and parties also contributes to low levels of symbolic capital. Kevin ('25) spoke to the Asian fraternity's lack of exclusivity in its new member selection, or deliberations, saying that

> Our deliberations definitely do cut people, but I don't think there's the same kind of feeling of exclusivity or there's a lot of value folks think of being in [high-status fraternity] or [other high-status fraternity] as being in [the Asian frat].

Ethan ('25) emphasized how parties at the Asian fraternity are "not exclusive and so accessible to first-years that it gives us less clout."

The final factor contributing to the Asian fraternity's low levels of symbolic capital is the physical attributes of its members. As a predominantly East Asian group that does not draw heavily from varsity athletic groups, members of the Asian fraternity do not phenotypically adhere to the White, "buff" stereotype of a fraternity member. As Anthony ('24) put it,

> *If you're going to be taking a picture at a frat, do you want a heavyweight crew guy in the background, like a linebacker on the football team in the background, or do you want a bunch of skinny Asian guys in the background?*

The Asian fraternity's low levels of economic, social, cultural, erotic, and symbolic capital constitute the group's low levels of clout, a type of capital specific to the field of fraternities at Ace University. Shawn ('26) discussed the Asian fraternity's low levels of clout, explaining how "they [high-status fraternities] have more social clout … which I guess [the Asian frat] has less of compared to a lot of the frats." The Asian fraternity's low level of clout subsequently structures its subordinated position as one of the "Non-Fratty Frats" in the field of fraternities at Ace University.

Meso-Level Symbolic Violence

One main implication of the Asian frat's position in the field of fraternities at Ace University is symbolic violence against Asian masculinity. In the case of the Asian frat, symbolic violence occurs internally when Asian frat members understand the fraternity's subordinated position in the field as an at least partial consequence of a broader societal understanding of Asian men as less masculine and less attractive. Externally, this symbolic violence is further perpetuated when other fraternity members and/or fraternity partygoers extend racialized logic to the Asian frat's subordinated position in the field, invoking stereotypes such as "Asians can't party" and nerdiness to the Asian fraternity. Although this symbolic violence is distinct from any physical form of violence, the harmful stereotypes embedded in such understandings of the Asian frat perpetuate a negative racial ideology towards Asian men.

For many Asian members of the fraternity, the symbolic violence towards Asian men in the field of fraternities compounded past experiences of racism that they experienced as direct, interpersonal reactions and/or as broader societal narratives about Asian masculinity. Malachi ('25) emphasized the role of racial stereotypes in the fraternity's reputation, explaining that

> *As we're all aware, because we're known as the Asian frat, people think they're all nerds, they don't really know how to party. I've heard people say that stuff before. I think that feeds into the racial stereotypes around Asians just in general and, you know, being known as the Asian frat. Those perceptions influence how the fraternity is judged by people.*

Adrian ('25), who grew up in the United States, expressed an acknowledgment and resigned acceptance of anti-Asian prejudice in

American society, saying that

> Growing up as an Asian, I've already accepted the fact that I may experience some sort of discrimination, especially for me, when I was growing up, I had a lot less Asians growing up around me. So I feel like maybe I've gotten accustomed to it.

Non-Asian members also pointed to the application of anti-Asian stereotypes to the Asian fraternity. Kyle ('26) shared his experiences with external perceptions of the Asian fraternity as well, explaining that the broader reputation of the frat was that it is "kind of nerdy, very Asian, it's more focused on long-term outcomes and it's probably not as crazy as most other fraternities, especially [high-status fraternity] and [other high-status fraternity]. Also, that would come with, I suppose, more virginity." As the Asian and non-Asian members of the Asian fraternity demonstrate, racialized understandings of Asian men are often invoked in the reputation of the Asian fraternity.

Other brothers could not think of any reason why the Asian fraternity was often seen as the least cool fraternity on campus, despite throwing very popular and well-attended parties, besides anti-Asian bias. James ('25) said,

> I might be going out on a limb here and going full conspiracy theory, but I swear us being the Asian frat just makes us, like, there's a sort of implicit racism at Ace. And I don't know, we just happen to be bottom barrel in every discussion, like on Fizz for example. There's just so much [Asian frat] hate for absolutely zero reason at all except for [Asian frat] hate … no other frat receives a similar level of treatment, and I swear it's because we're the Asian frat.

Jacob ('26) expressed similar sentiments, saying that

> You could probably go to anyone at Ace and ask which frat on campus you think has the least clout, and 99% of people would say [the Asian frat]. I don't really think it's a coincidence because there's not much interest from different organizations wanting to mix with us. But then you'll ask people, why do you think [the Asian frat] has the least clout? And then there's never really a solid answer why … it probably has something to do with the fact that we are the Asian frat, and White dudes inevitably may appeal more.

Andrew ('25) explained how as an international student, he "first started to understand the concept of anti-Asianness, like being Asian isn't cool; the Asian frat isn't as cool back in first year," when he decided

to join the Asian frat:

> I came in as a first-year and throughout the first semester I'd go to [the Asian fraternity] … I mentioned that to some suitemates, or other people, and they'd be like "oh, you're going to the Asian frat, right? I heard that one was kind of bad." I would ask why, and they would say, "I don't really know why, but I just heard it's bad."

While such experiences were not enough for Andrew to automatically suspect anti-Asian prejudice associated with the Asian fraternity, he also recounted comments on Fizz such as, "oh there is no one hot in [the Asian frat]." Andrew was still hesitant to definitively point to such comments as racism or prejudice. However, he connected such experiences with broader societal anti-Asian prejudice, saying that

> Part of me feels like part of this might be racially motivated because I do feel like there is a lot of anti-Asian hate that's going on throughout America, this feeling that Asian guys aren't as cool as other guys.

Despite such anecdotes, individual experiences of symbolic violence towards Asian men in the context of the Asian fraternity were not universal among the brothers of the Asian fraternity. Some brothers rejected claims that racial stereotypes were used in negative ways against the Asian fraternity, such as Jeremy ('25), who said that "I haven't really felt any negatives about being in [the Asian frat] or anything like that." Ethan ('25) also disagreed with the claim that anti-Asian racism affected the Asian fraternity, saying "I don't think it's that deep necessarily, like I don't think it's rooted in racism against Asians or anything." Ethan went on to explain how he thought negative comments against the Asian fraternity were more of a product of the fraternity's existing reputation than racism. Some brothers agreed with Ethan, claiming that race did not play a significant role in establishing status among fraternities at Ace University.

A few of the brothers who rejected race's role in fraternity status justified the fraternity's low status by pointing to how current members of the Asian fraternity fit the stereotypes often attributed to Asian men. Anthony ('24) explained how

> I think right now we are kind of aligned with the stereotypes of being an Asian organization of a bunch of stereotypical Asian CS [Computer Science] guys, right? Like, if we had people who actually party a lot, who like to have fun, at least more than the people who are currently in [the Asian frat] right now, I think that would show over time. I think in a place like Ace, you know, I think this is a school that doesn't ride on preconceived ideas of people. People are generally very open-minded here.

Nick ('24) similarly believed that "at Ace, Asian guys can be whatever type of guy they want," but added a caveat that

> there's still some amount of bias just in society in general, where Asian guys are nerdy dudes, that is inherently at odds with the metrics for the tier list [of fraternities at Ace University]. I think Ace does a pretty good job of overcoming it, but no subculture is gonna be perfect.

Discussion

In this section, I consider how the field of fraternities at Ace University operates as a meso-level racial project that shapes how "human identities and social structures are racially signified, and the reciprocal ways that racial meaning becomes embedded in social structures" (Omi & Winant, 2014, p. 28). More specifically, I analyze two key mechanisms through which meso-level racism is both produced and obscured: (a) through racialized ideas embedded in the field's internal logic, and (b) through the complex racialization of capital.

Racialized Ideas Embedded in the Internal Logic of Fields

This study's analysis shows how meso-level racism towards Asian American men is perpetuated by the internal logic of the field, which systematically advantages Whiteness and produces symbolic violence towards Asian masculinity at an organizational level. The normative idea of what a "frat bro" looks like invokes an intrinsically racialized image of a wealthy, hypermasculine, heterosexual White man, one that is associated with the dominant fraternity in the field of fraternities at Ace University. Other fraternities in the field of fraternities are perceived relationally to this ideal, subsequently reaffirming the dominated status of low-status fraternities through their perceived distance from "frattiness." Racialized, non-White fraternities such as the Asian frat particularly suffer from this relational calculation of status, as their organizational identity is marked by deviation from the field's White masculine ideal.

The Whiteness associated with the symbolic idea of what a "frat bro" and fraternity looks like is specific to the field of fraternities at Ace University as part of an internal logic that is accepted as the dominant narrative in the field. In a sense, the field of fraternities at Ace University can be understood as a "White Space" in which Whiteness operates as a credential and non-White people and organizations are seen as a deviation from the norm (Anderson, 2015). This study expands upon Elijah Anderson's formulation of "The White Space" by adding an empirical case of how Asian individuals and organizations experience White spaces within higher education.

Building on recent scholarship arguing that most institutions of

higher education in the United States are historically White colleges and universities that reproduce Whiteness through White curriculum, White climate, and White names, statutes, and traditions (Bonilla-Silva & Peoples, 2022), this study demonstrates how White supremacy is also reproduced within extracurricular fields. The case of the Asian frat reveals how organizational structures within such fields can simultaneously perpetuate racial hierarchies while obscuring their operation through seemingly race-neutral evaluations of status and belonging.

Complex Racialization of Capital

This study reveals how the complex racialization of different forms of capital in the fraternity field serves to obscure meso-level racism at Ace University. Drawing on Bonilla-Silva's (2015) conception of new racism—the subtle, institutional, and seemingly nonracial mechanisms that comprise post-racial America's racial regime—this analysis demonstrates how racial hierarchies are maintained through the differential racialization of capital. Members of the Asian fraternity perceive only two of the five legitimate forms of capital in the fraternity field, erotic and symbolic capital, as directly racialized through explicit stereotypes about Asian masculinity. The other three forms—economic, social, and cultural capital—are understood as indirectly racialized through their relationship to supposedly race-neutral markers of status. This partial racialization produces a complex organizational hierarchy where racial stratification is simultaneously obvious yet difficult to name or challenge.

This ambiguity enables and reinforces colorblind interpretations of fraternity status hierarchies. Even as members of the Asian fraternity experience symbolic violence against their masculinity and organizational identity, many resort to race-neutral explanations for their fraternity's low status. This pattern reflects broader findings about how contemporary racial meaning-making operates through seemingly neutral institutional mechanisms (Emirbayer & Desmond, 2015). The partial and covert racialization of capital thus emerges as a key mechanism through which White supremacy is reproduced in the fraternity field. By obscuring how different forms of capital are racially marked and valued, this process maintains racial hierarchies while making them appear natural and race-neutral. This finding extends our understanding of how new racism operates at the meso level, showing how organizational fields can simultaneously perpetuate racial inequality while providing institutional cover for its continued reproduction.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates how organizational fields with entrenched Whiteness continue to perpetuate racial hierarchies, even as

mainstream perceptions of Asian masculinity show signs of change (Chong & Kim, 2022). Through examining a historically White fraternity that became predominantly East Asian over time at an elite university, this research reveals two key mechanisms through which meso-level racism operates: (a) through racialized ideas embedded in organizational fields' internal logic, and (b) through the complex racialization of different forms of capital that simultaneously perpetuates and obscures racial hierarchies.

This analysis makes several important theoretical contributions. By applying Bourdieu's field theory to examine how new racism operates at the meso-level, this study illuminates how organizational structures mediate racial inequality in contemporary higher education. The case of the Asian fraternity demonstrates how Bonilla-Silva's (2021) characteristics of new racism—particularly its covert nature, avoidance of racial terminology, and subtle mechanisms of reproducing privilege—manifest within organizational fields through the differential racialization of capital. Furthermore, this research extends our understanding of how Asian American men's historically subordinated position in America's racial hierarchy of masculinity (Nguyen, 2014) is maintained through organizational structures and practices.

While this study focused on a single fraternity at one elite institution, its theoretical insights about how organizational fields structure racial inequality have broader implications. Future research could expand this analysis in several directions: comparing predominantly Asian fraternities across different institutional contexts, examining how other racialized organizations navigate predominantly White fields, and investigating how changing perceptions of Asian masculinity interact with established organizational hierarchies. Such work would further illuminate how meso-level structures mediate the relationship between shifting racial ideologies and persistent racial inequalities in contemporary American society.

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