



Hmong Innovating Politics

# AANHPI AUDIENCE RESEARCH AND PERSONAS

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## UNDERSTANDING MILLENNIAL & GEN-Z ASIAN AMERICAN AUDIENCES

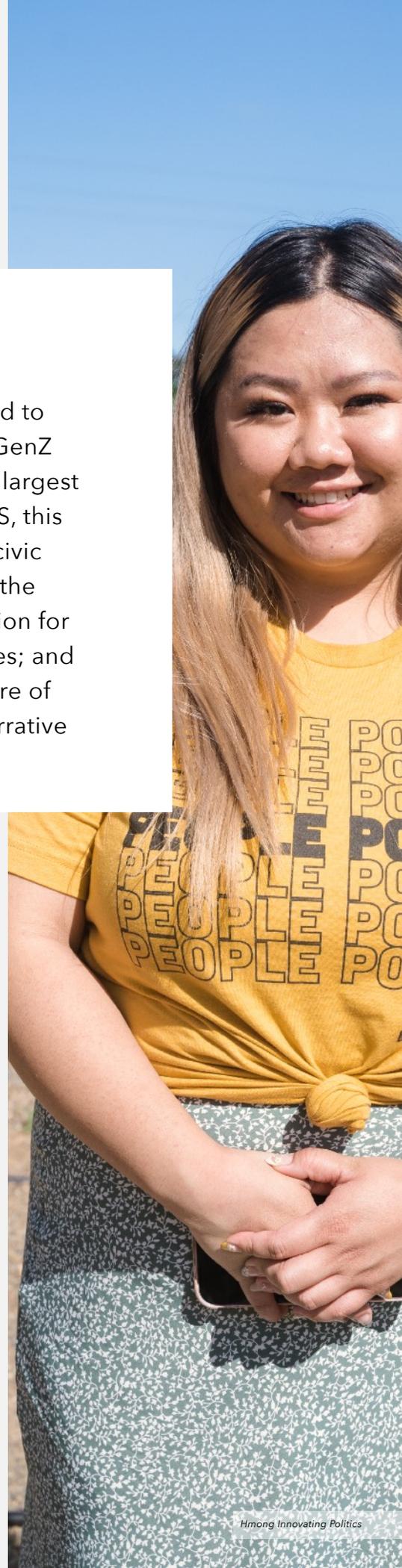
Asian American Futures and Activate California recently partnered to conduct audience research to better understand Millennial and GenZ Asian Americans as an initial step in our work. Despite being the largest demographic within the community, at 57% of all Asians in the US, this group is often overlooked in research and in political, narrative, civic and donor engagement. We aimed to close a knowledge gap in the movement; uncover narrative opportunities to build a shared vision for Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander communities; and define audience personas that would help paint a nuanced picture of Millennial and GenZ AAPIs. We worked with Kana Hammon, a narrative strategist and researcher, to conduct the research.

Through in-depth surveys and qualitative research, we found that...

- Isolation and pain dominate what it means for our audience to be AANHPI
- Our audience feels the weight of big issues in the news, but doesn't closely follow politics or issues
- Connection to one's heritage helps build confidence, but not necessarily pan-AANHPI identity

We believe we can build narrative power by increasing a sense of confidence and agency in identifying as Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander by...

- Ensuring that representation highlights the diversity of our communities and positions individuals within a larger, Asian American and/or NHPI context



- Actively shape an Asian American culture and history in the diaspora that people can be proud of
- Build community through shared experiences and values

We also defined six distinct audience personas:

- *Pragmatic Strivers*: Hard workers who lean into immigrant sacrifice and representation
- *Compassionate Peacekeepers*: Big-hearted helpers who yearn for belonging in dominant culture
- *Independent Skeptics*: Young people seeking validation of their unique identities & experiences
- *Inclusive Optimists*: Proud AANHPIs who strive for inclusion and equity for all people
- *Cultural Experimentalists*: Progressives shaping an inclusive AANHPI culture in the diaspora
- *Rooted in Heritage*: People reconnecting to their heritage and keeping traditional culture alive

Our research was focused more specifically on an Asian American audience. We included NHPIs as interviewees and survey respondents to understand where relevant overlaps-and limitations-existed. We are beginning a separate, culturally-informed narrative research effort led by and for NHPI communities in 2023 to ensure that that their unique voices, experiences and narratives are fully represented.

## ABOUT AAF & ACTIVATE CALIFORNIA

**Asian American Futures** (AAF) was founded in 2020 to ensure that Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) are an essential part of the American narrative. The mission of AAF is to ensure AAPI communities are SEEN, HEARD, EMPOWERED and UNITED. AAF is a dynamic organization that cultivates emerging leadership among AANHPI students, professionals, philanthropists, and other community members; and provides support and programming to small and emerging grassroots organizations focused on strengthening the AANHPI movement and building power in our communities.

**Activate CA** is a program of Asian American Futures that catalyzes power building efforts in California with a specific emphasis on incubating leadership in historically disenfranchised AAPI communities, accelerating the growth and development of AAPI organizing, and exploring strategies to advance a shared AAPI narrative.

This project was lead by researcher and narrative strategist **Kana Hammon**. Kana is a fourth-generation Japanese American narrative strategist and nonprofit leader with 10 years of experience launching programs, organizations, mobile apps and digital campaigns. In addition to Asian American Futures, Kana has worked with the May 19th Project, the Butterfly lab for Immigrant Narrative Strategy at Race Forward, Emerging Radiance, Omidyar Network and YCore.

# AN ASPIRATIONAL AANHPI FUTURE

Asian American Futures and Activate California's goal with narrative work is to **build power for a powerful, AANHPI majority**. Issues like school admissions and anti-Asian violence show that despite opinion polling indicating that the majority of Asian Americans support criminal justice reform and affirmative action, conservative ideas dominate the conversation—and others' perception of our community's stance on these issues. Building narrative power requires an ecosystem approach. We need to mobilize all of our tools, including journalism, storytelling, arts and culture work, organizing, policy, strategic communications and more, to envision and communicate a shared vision for AANHPI communities.

In narrative strategy, we call this shared vision a "deep narrative system." A deep narrative system offers a tangible destination for narrative work. We know the narrative system that defines our current status quo. It's a world where Asian Americans are viewed as perpetual foreigners, through a lens of xenophobia and White supremacy. It's a world where scarcity mindset and assimilation have taken root, and where AANHPIs experience judgment and gatekeeping based on an impossible standard of authenticity that invisibilizes many people in the community. For NHPi communities, the status quo is often invisibility. We also know that these narratives have been internalized by many members of our community.

We've also defined the deep narrative system for our aspirational future, based on the ideas that activists and community organizations are already propagating. It's a future where AANHPI communities recognize their interdependence, where they practice community care and where they stand in solidarity with other communities. It's a future where we are proud of our diversity, and include the many identities, ethnicities and experiences in the AANHPI umbrella. It's a future where we belong in American culture and are represented, with intersectionality in mind, in popular culture and media. And, it's a future where indigenous and colonized communities can determine their future beyond war, imperialism and violence.

For Asian Americans specifically, we hypothesize that pride in being Asian American matters. Aspirational narratives will have more traction if we can strengthen the foundation on which identity, culture and issues rests. So many Asian Americans, especially East and Southeast Asians, have been mobilized by anti-Asian violence. They are motivated by fear, anxiety and anger: powerful emotions that can quickly lead to burnout. We posit that narratives will be stickier when these negative emotions are balanced by positive frameworks like a sense of linked fate, care, love and pride.



## OUR PROCESS

We looked for clues for how to close the gap between the status quo and this aspirational future through a survey and in-depth qualitative interviews. Asian American Futures' audience includes Millennial and GenZ Asian Americans ages 15-40. We chose this audience because we wanted to fill two gaps. First, this audience is under-engaged as volunteers, donors and future activists in the Asian American movement. Second, although the movement has made great strides in expanding Asian American research and

disaggregating by ethnicity, so little research focuses on this demographic specifically. If we want to stop depictions of us as a monolith, we need to start demonstrating the diversity and dynamism of our communities with much more depth. Given that our project was qualitative in nature, that it was partly focused on California and that reaching a younger, AANHPI audience through any survey or polling tool is immensely difficult, we were limited in achieving a scientifically representative sample. Instead, our research is a starting point in understanding a strategic audience.

We convened an advisory circle of seven experts in research, movement building and narrative, to ensure that our research would follow sound practice and offer useful insights to the movement. This circle included Nadia Belkin (Asian American Power Network), Jeff Chang (Author and Narrative Strategist), Peter de Guzman (Tufts CIRCLE), Dora Guo (Xin Sheng Project), Tiffany Huang (University of Pennsylvania), Timmy Lu (AAPI Force Education Fund) and Karthick Ramakrishnan (California 100).

Our research provides a key starting point for AAF and others to conduct additional research that fills remaining gaps, demographic and otherwise. For example, we chose to focus on Asian Americans first, before venturing into perceptions of Asian Americans held by non-Asians. While our research focused on Asian Americans, we did include NHPI interviewees. These interviewees fit in our personas, however, we highly recommend a separate research process conducted by, for and about NHPI communities.

We first distributed a screener survey that collected 200 responses from Millennial and GenZ AANHPIs. It asked questions about demographics, identity, religiosity, linked fate, experiences of discrimination, class background, economic mobility, education, occupation, issue opinions and values, including free response questions. Most responses were sourced via ads on Instagram and TikTok, with additional posts shared by Gold Futures Challenge grantees, on Reddit and in AANHPI employee resource groups at large companies.

As expected, NHPI audiences were more difficult to reach, making up only 4% of survey responses. South Asians were only 15%, possibly because many in this group do not identify as AANHPI. Over 10% of respondents self-identified as non-binary or another gender. Only 2% of respondents self-identified as Republican.

We are confident that the demographic markers that are traditionally used to segment audiences in movement and political work, like age or ethnicity, are limited when describing the diversity of experience and thought within our community. Still, we know that some demographics, like immigration generation or language proficiency, can be useful shorthands when more comprehensive data is limited. We are excited to hear how movement organizations are understanding audiences that were less visible or not included in our research.

Our next step was to interview 28 survey respondents in 75-minute interviews. We asked about their survey responses, identity, experiences as AANHPIs, top of mind issues and either their dreams for the future of AANHPI communities or to share examples of how their perspective on AANHPI identity and experience had shifted over time. They also took the OBI Audience quiz to expand our understanding of their attitudes, values and cultural consumption. The four distinct audiences in the OBI segmentation have become a standard in narrative strategy and could help increase the accuracy of content testing in the future. Where are audiences starting?



## WHERE ARE AUDIENCES STARTING?

Dominant narratives about authenticity, scarcity, assimilation and White supremacy have been effective at dividing AANHPI communities. **Nearly everyone we spoke with felt isolated-from their family, community, heritage, ethnic or racial group, other AANHPI people, or even their parents.** When asked why, they pointed to the lack of representation of their sexuality or ethnicity; language gaps; class differences between themselves and others; perceived lack of authenticity; or differences in experiences of being AANHPI. Even those who felt connected to their heritage or grew up in a strong ethnic community reported feeling this way once they encountered other AANHPIs.

**Interviewees felt the weight of macro issues in the news, but most did not closely follow politics.** Gun violence, abortion access, climate change or anti-Asian violence came up frequently, as these issues dominated the news during the interview period. Rather than demonstrating an analysis of the opinions,

debates and key players involved in an issue, interviewees focused on feelings like fear and anxiety. The political process was not an obvious solution to the issues affecting AANHPIs, even for a group with high, self-reported rates of civic engagement.

We hypothesized that a strong connection to heritage or growing up in a large ethnic community would be a predictor of pride in one's identity. **We found that connection to one's heritage can be transformative for a sense of personal pride, but it doesn't always translate to pride in pan-AANHPI or Asian American identity.** In some cases, interviewees saw "Asian American" as a default or a shorthand, not a political or cultural identity. In other cases, their connection to heritage was mediated through authenticity or symbolic ethnicity.

## NARRATIVE OPPORTUNITIES

If building narrative power rests on strengthening a sense of pride and agency in being Asian American, interviewees offered many clues to building that pride.

**Representation must show the diversity of our community.** Interviewees were excited by the growing number of Asian American celebrities, musicians, actors and films, from Ms. Marvel to Shang-Chi. Yet, those who held multiply-marginalized or minority identities still felt isolated by current representation efforts.

Representation of AANHPI communities needs to celebrate our full humanity, and include not just many ethnicities, but a range of abilities, sizes, ages, genders, sexualities, cultural practices and more. Representation should help situate individuals within a larger, diverse and inclusive community of AANHPIs who share a progressive vision for the future.

To that end, we saw an immense opportunity to **shape an Asian American culture in the diaspora that we are proud of.** We recognize how much pain and loss the Asian American community feels as a result of assimilation, authenticity traps or intergenerational trauma. Culture-shaping is one way to transform pain into pride and forge an intergenerational link that feels missing to so many people.

Culture-shaping is already happening, even if it's not described in those terms. When asked to show or describe the best of Asian America, interviewees shared images of artists like MC Jin or Anderson .Paak, instagram posts of Asian American-focused mental health accounts, Asian American politicians, and scenes from the Asian American movement like *Gidra* magazine or protest scenes that root this culture in progressive activism and solidarity. These

cultural elements might be unfamiliar to an Asian person outside of the US, but they were often referenced as points of pride for those who grew up here.

Culture-shaping is one area where Asian American, Pacific Islander and Native Hawaiian communities may differ. We are inspired by the ways Native Hawaiian activists are reclaiming connections to land, language and culture that were severed through colonialism and occupation, even if they verge on reinforcing authenticity. We also know that cultural expression for Pasifika communities may center music, dance and oral tradition more than Asian American culture. We see these as positives and don't seek to elevate a sense of cultural lumping that rings artificial.

Both representation and culture-shaping risk elevating symbolic action. The activists and organizers we interviewed reminded us to remember the relational aspects of politicization. They emphasized the need to **build community over shared experiences and values.** Interviewees described the friendships they forged volunteering in Chinatown or joining an outdoors group for Asian Americans. They were inspired by ways people in the Asian American movement combined politics, identity and community.

# AANHPI PERSONAS

The next piece of our research was to define distinct audience personas. Personas are fictional, composite characters, based on real interviews. They are commonly used in narrative and strategic communications to understand audiences' motivations, values, beliefs or opinions with depth and complexity. We identified six:

**Pragmatic Strivers** show their pride in being AANHPI by honoring their immigrant relatives' sacrifices through hard work and achievement. They feel disconnected from their culture or heritage and instead bond over shared experiences of immigrant sacrifice. They are skeptical of pan-AANHPI unity but value Asian representation. They are still working through the difficulties of not belonging and deeply feel the pain of anti-Asian violence.

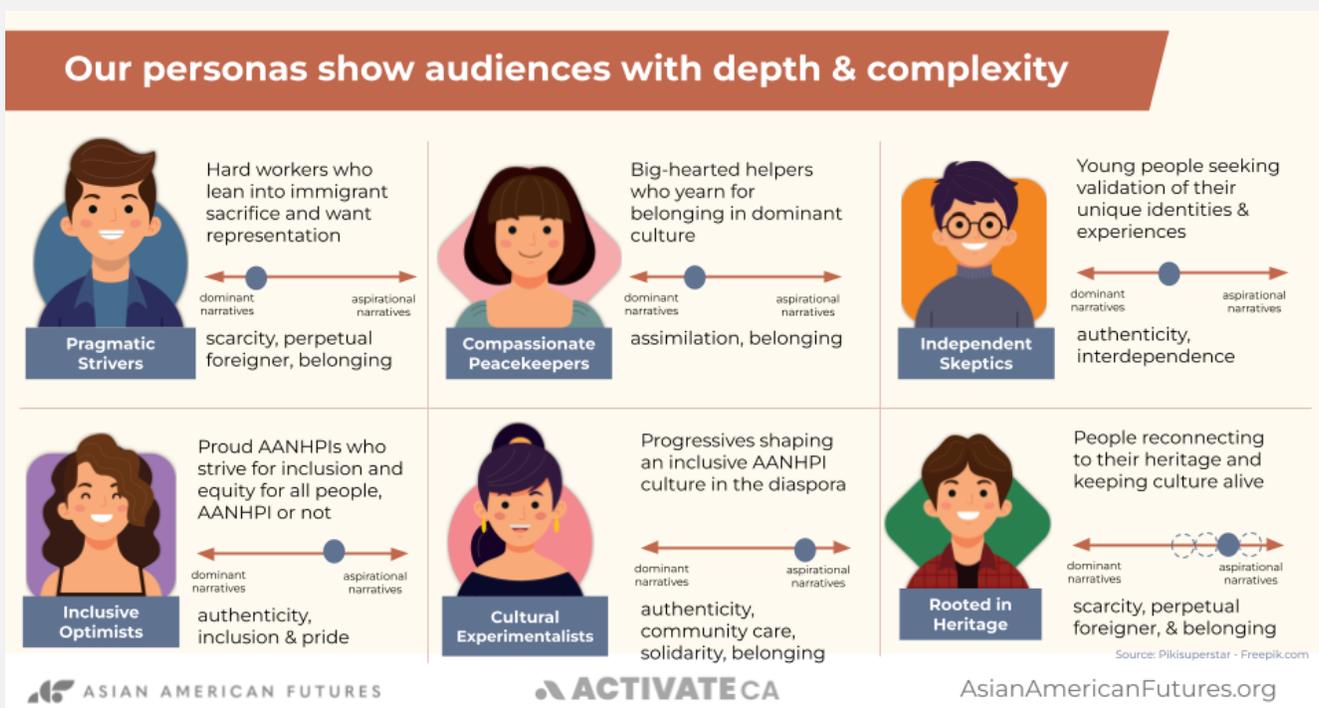
**Compassionate Peacekeepers** are proud of being AANHPI when they show-off the best parts of their community. They love sharing their culture and being good role models for others--in their community and externally--so that they can be accepted and seen in a positive light. They see a path to prosperity and belonging through individual effort and treating one another with kindness.

**Independent Skeptics** believe being AANHPI means being disconnected from their heritage and from people who share their unique experience. They want to feel proud and celebrate diversity but never quite feel like they belong, because belonging is still dictated by people in dominant White and/or AANHPI culture. They may feel more comfortable with people who share one of their identities.

**Inclusive Optimists** are proud to be AANHPI when they can connect over shared experience, try each other's food and support each other's causes and communities, even if there is not a 100% overlap. They do their best to include people of all ethnicities, sizes, sexualities, religions and more. They have been on their own journeys to feel pride in their heritage and want others to feel that pride, too. They believe creating pan-AA/NHPI spaces is more important than sharing everything.

**Cultural Experimentalists** are proud to be AANHPI when they build on the practices, values and ideas in the Inclusive Optimists persona to create the culture and identity they want to see. All cultures have room to evolve and grow. They're leading the way by choosing meaningful parts of their heritage to share with their children, aligning their careers with their values, standing in solidarity with other groups and finding alternatives to the problematic aspects of our culture or narratives.

**Rooted in Heritage** are proud to be AANHPI when they feel connected to their cultural roots. They feel comfortable in their present-day ancestral communities and they're likely learning or are proficient in their heritage language. They've sought out additional opportunities to strengthen those connections on their own, through work, education, volunteering, with their children or from their parents.



## LEARN MORE

We are excited to share in-depth findings with AANHPI organizations, activists and funders through briefings and conversations tailored to your interests. Please reach out to AAF Executive Director Reshma Shamasunder ([reshma@asianamericanfutures.org](mailto:reshma@asianamericanfutures.org)) or Activate California Director Jonathan Tran ([jonathan@activateca.org](mailto:jonathan@activateca.org)) if you are interested in...

- A briefing sharing in-depth findings with you or your organization
- Applying our findings, especially the narrative personas, to your current work. We are actively looking for movement partners with whom we could partner to test content and develop a toolkit or case study for others
- Joining a future narrative lab that advances ideas in these findings
- Supporting our narrative efforts, including a narrative lab