

**UNBREAKABLE DONG NGUYEN:
REAFFIRMING ASIAN-AMERICAN MASCULINITY
IN THE SERIES *UNBREAKABLE KIMMY SCHMIDT***

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Abstract

Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt (2015) is an American sitcom that explores the Asian-American immigrant Dong as he seeks acceptance of his masculine identity in the society. While many studies have discussed the stereotypic perceptions of Asian-American men in television series, they scarcely analyze how the individuals attempt to reaffirm their own masculinity. Toward this end, this article aims to analyze how Dong as an Asian-American man expresses and reconstructs his masculinities. It examines Dong's character, his interracial relationship with a white woman, and his interracial competition with a white man by using Iwamoto and Liu's framework of Asianized and transgressive attributions. The analysis found that Dong embodies a multidimensional masculinity that is different from hegemonic white masculinity. As an Asian-American man, Dong appears to be creating a new, more flexible masculinity, one that is linked with certain feminine characteristics.

Keywords: *representation; Asian-Americans; Asian masculinity stereotypes; American television series; character analysis*

Introduction

"We're the information givers. We're the geeks. We're the prostitutes."

The term "Asian American" generally refers to a diverse group of Asians living in the United States, including Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Asian Indians. Looking for the reality that it mirrors, it is not a secret that Asian-Americans, particularly the men, have been given the types of roles mentioned above for the most of their lives. The stereotypes portray contradictory views on Asian-American men as members of a privileged gender group yet subordinate racial groups. Adichie (2009) has once stated that the problem with stereotypes is that it takes one story as the whole point-of-view, rendering the narrative to be incomplete. In parallel with the statement, Asian-American men have been stereotyped on the base of their masculinity since their large-scale immigration in the 18th century, which certainly influences how they are also represented in Hollywood movies and television series. The labels of being a passive geek, a prostitute, or a criminal haunt their

subordinated masculinity to the point where they start to believe that those stamps define their true identity. However, as the age of self-awareness grows against racism and genderism, Hollywood starts making progress in crafting their Asian-American male characters by trying to subvert those stereotypes, such as the Netflix sitcom *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*. The series, known for its ironic humor, is set to bring up these issues through their characters and challenge the society to see beneath the stereotypical images that are presented. It presents a path to negotiate these issues, in which one of them is tweaked through the eyes of the Vietnamese-American character Dong Nguyen.

Set up in New York City, *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* follows 29-year old Kimmy Schmidt (Ellie Kemper) who tries to adjust her life after being rescued from a doomsday cult which held her and three other women for 15 years. As she adapts to her new life, she befriends several peculiar people, including an illegal Vietnamese immigrant named Dong Nguyen (Ki Hong Lee), who is desperate to be an American citizen. While studying in the same G.E.D. class with Kimmy, he works as a delivery guy in a downtown Chinese restaurant. He frequently hangs out with Kimmy to teach her math and to learn about American pop culture together, and he soon attracts her with his witty and sweet personalities. Later, his position as her major love interest is interrupted by the appearance of the Connecticut-born, English-accented speaking bachelor Logan. However, he triumphs as Kimmy confesses her feelings to him in the end.

Many scholars have agreed that stereotyping Asian-American men is done to emasculate their masculine identity. Chua and Fujino (1999) examined that the feminization and hypersexualization of Asian-American men simultaneously threaten and disempower their position in the social hierarchy of race and gender. In addition to the disempowerment of Asian-American masculinity through stereotypes, Nemoto (2008) argued that they also allow the hegemonic white masculinity to be the sole center of what 'true masculinity' looks like. As seen in the introduction of Dong in the series, his docile personality and broken English puts him in a situation where he could easily be discredited by his predominantly white surroundings. Liu (2002) followed with an argument that the incapacitated position of Asian-American men in regards to their masculine identity by concluding that they are incapable of reshaping their unique maleness. However, Nemoto detracted by using the cross-racial relationship between Asian men and white women as the base of redefining their masculinity. Iwamoto and Liu (2009) pressed further that aligning femininity and masculinity in Asian-American men allow them to take advantage of the stereotypes to form a new set of Asian-American masculine identity.

Although several studies have discussed the means of redefining Asian-American masculinity, they lack in discussing the portrayal of remasculation in the mainstream Hollywood media. Therefore, this article aims to disclose the question of how the reinvention of Asian-American masculinity is depicted in Hollywood, notably in the television series. This article will try to demonstrate the complex fluidity of Asian-American masculinities and construct an approach to bargain the hegemonic masculinity. By using Derek Iwamoto's framework of Asianized attribution as a strategy to negotiate a new form of masculinity and analyzing the cross-racial relationship of the characters, this article argues that *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* presents how Asian-American masculinities are not cased in certain hegemonic qualities, but rather a flexible unification of feminine and masculine characteristics.

Dong and His Multidimensional Masculine Identity

As established earlier, *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015) composes stories about characters who take an effort in breaking away from stereotypes and labels which are ingrained by the common society, including the Asian character Dong Nguyen who is trying to step away from the stereotypes regarding his masculinity. These stereotypes of Asian masculinity are regarded by Iwamoto and Liu (2009) as Asianized attributions, the pivotal Asian characteristics like passive demeanour and diligence, which are negatively evaluated in a social and formal relationship. The conflicting behaviour which lightly conforms to hegemonic characteristics, such as the threatening aggressive behaviour and elevating achievements, is widely known as transgressive attributions. A reading of this series through Iwamoto and Liu's framework of Asianized and transgressive attributions as the intersection of social elements contributes to the construction of multidimensional Asian masculinities as experienced by Dong, that sees the changes from the one-dimensional caricature portrayal into a development of a complex "new Asian male" image.

In his introductory arc, Dong is presented to be a charming, young Asian male immigrant who studies in the same GED class with the titular character Kimmy Schmidt and tries to learn as many things about America as possible. Dong epitomizes his eagerness to absorb all things Americanized in the minute 03:35 to minute 03:43 of the sixth episode. He obediently tunes in on the baseball film that is not related to his GED class provided by a lazy, white, male teacher with a thought that the teacher and his lessons might help him pass the class and become a 'true American' although the teacher is on the verge of rendering him completely gullible in reality. Thus, what Dong does in his initial introduction is conforming to a concept that Chua and Fujino (1999) referred as model minority by suggesting that Asians and Asian-Americans are "highly self-reliant, economically successful, and politically non-resisting". By diligently complying with the almost non-existent lesson taught by a white male teacher, he has embodied the stereotype of non-resistance, particularly to the white authority. Furthermore, this model is also reflected in the minute 05:29 of the eighth episode where he is seen to be a Chinese delivery guy and from the minute 11:11 to minute 11:15 of the tenth episode where he tells Kimmy that he sleeps on the floor of the kitchen of the restaurant that hires him. It means that Dong is heavily insinuated to come to America alone with a small amount of money, emphasizing the demeanour of being independent despite struggling economically.

The portrayal of model minority stereotype fits the characteristics of Asianized attributions, including agreeable and modesty, that, as quoted by Iwamoto and Liu (2009), to be "deviant forms of masculinity and not being what society considers as a real man". It means that the attributions provide a risk of Dong being portrayed as a one-dimensional character with a masculine identity that is less dominant than white men and more similar to the feminine characteristics of women, which will simplify him as a character to be ridiculed. Nevertheless, as Dong paves his story in the series, the attributions do not define the whole personality of Dong, instead, they contribute as a part of him that Chen (2009) called as social identity, or an Asian masculine characteristic that is defined as an ideal that is publicly perceived to be common in the society. This concept is further highlighted in the minute 10:51 to minute 11:12 of the eighth episode,

***Dong:** Okay, Kimmy, try this one, “Instead of paying his credit card, Caesar spends his last \$30 on Powerball tickets. When he wins, should he take the lump sum or the annuity?”*

***Kimmy:** I don’t know.*

***Dong:** Lump sum. Money makes money.*

***Kimmy:** Wait, how? Like... sex?*

***Dong:** It’s just compounding interest. Here.*

From the dialogue above, to have Kimmy taking Dong as her tutor for math due to his extensive knowledge of the subject complies with the characteristics in Asianized attributions that are distinctive Asianized intelligence on math and Asian wisdom. Again, these attributions fall to the ideals of Asian masculine identity commonly accepted in the society, which result in legitimizing the Asianized attributions as the social identity of Dong’s masculinity.

Aside from social identity, Dong embodies another part of identity that contributes to defining his masculinity as a whole, that Chen (2009) referred as personal identity, an Asian masculine characteristic that is personally chosen by his own conscience to define his masculine identity. What lies in his personal identity might be incongruent to the common masculine characteristics of Asian men defined by the public perception. In the scene, from the minute 02:42 to minute 02:52 of the sixth episode,

***Dong:** Hello, I’m Dong*

***Kimmy:** (holding back her laugh) Hi, Dong... I am Kimmy.*

***Dong:** (smirks) In Vietnam, “Kim-mi” means penis.*

From the dialogue above, his first introduction to Kimmy as well as to the series is imbued with the potential racism surrounding his masculinity, as seen in Kimmy’s gleeful reaction when Dong introduces himself as his name is a slang for male genitals in America. He responds by joking back her name is also a slang for male genitals in his home country. Again, when Kimmy accidentally makes hand gestures that are offensive to Dong’s Vietnam upbringing in the minute 07:01 of the eighth episode, he interjects with “What is wrong with you?!” to reprimand her. These two scenes present an example of transgressive attributions, which are assertiveness and confidence. He includes these attitudes, which are more congruent with the characteristics of the hegemonic male, to assert his masculinity as an Asian man as well as to defend his masculinity from continuous emasculation. By showcasing these attitudes as his personal choice of masculine characteristics that define him, they establish the transgressive attributions as the personal identity of Dong’s masculinity.

Having established the social and personal identities of Dong’s masculinity through the Asianized and transgressive attributions respectively, Dong redefines himself as a new Asian-American male who centers around the development of multidimensional masculine identity which, as defined by Chen (2009), does not segregate his feminine and masculine characteristics, or in this case is the Asianized social identity and transgressive personal identity, into separate entities. Attributing to Ethier and Deaux’s (2001) bases of salience, as quoted by Chen (2009), these oppositional characteristics are integrated into one holistic identity that is salient and fluid. In the scene, from the minute 21:50 to minute 22:17 of the eighth episode,

Kimmy: Dong, your English, it's amazing!

Dong: From hanging out with you, Kimmy. You make my English better. So, study buddies?

Kimmy: (trying to shake hands with Dong, but suddenly retracting it) Oh, sorry. I forgot you don't touch

Dong: (seizing her hand so he could shake it, looking in awe)

From the dialogue above, it could be elaborated that by becoming study buddies, Kimmy has helped Dong improving his English vocabulary so that he is very grateful for having her as his friend and study buddy. Furthermore, his gratefulness is shown by him initiating a handshake with Kimmy, which is an act that defies the cultural norm of his country that says to not touch a woman who is not his wife. Contributing this scene with the multidimensional masculine identity, Dong's gratefulness reflects the attitude of Asianized identity, while his initiative to shake her hands reflects the assertive and aggressive attitudes of his transgressive identity. It means that these multidimensional aspects have been fully congregated into Dong's newly redefined Asian masculinity, as he could easily integrate both attributions for his one goal, which is to stay friends with Kimmy. As Dong looks at their hand shake in awe, he realizes that this reformed Asian masculinity is the answer for his search to seek acceptance of his masculinity in the society.

Hence, through the further analysis of several episodes of the series, it could be inferred that the attribution of Asianized and transgressive attitudes reinforce the reaffirmation of Dong's masculinity into a fluid multidimensional masculine identity that neither differentiates the feminine nor masculine characteristics, but instead treats them as one and the same. By taking this multidimensional masculine identity into the account, Dong applies his new masculinity to his relationship with a white woman and rivalry with a white male, which will be explained in the following the subchapters.

Dong and His Interracial Relationship with Kimmy

Throughout his story arc in the series, Dong is notably seen to actively pursue a romantic relationship with Kimmy, who has been his friend since their first meeting in their GED class. For Dong, Kimmy is illustrated as a kind and thoughtful friend who understands the seclusion of being 'different' from the society because she is also considered different due to her status as the 'mole woman' who has just gotten out from a bunker after living there for nineteen years. Therefore, his purpose to build an interracial relationship with Kimmy is opposed to what Nemoto (2008) considered to be a 'jockey' for his position to rise as an honorary white man; instead, their relationship is used to negotiate his form of multidimensional masculinities so that it could be accepted as a masculinity that is normalized in the society. This purpose is reflected in the minute 21:29 to minute 21:33 of the eighth episode where Dong hopes that men will look up on him someday and congratulate him for being successful in life and romance because of his "nice teeth" and quirky Asian attitude. It means that Dong believes that his multidimensional Asian masculinities might negotiate the hegemonic masculinity.

To "bargain" his masculinity in an interracial relationship means that he is conceptualizing a strategy to reaffirm his masculinity, that is according to Chen (1999), as quoted by Nemoto (2008), "...by consciously trading on, or unconsciously benefitting from,

the privileges of race, gender, class, and/or sexuality” (p. 83). From that concept, Chen (1999) offered four strategies in the strategy of hegemonic bargain: *compensation*, where an Asian male tries to undermine negative stereotypes of Asian masculinity by fully embracing hegemonic characteristics; *deflection*, where an Asian male tries to divert the attention of his personal shortcomings associated with negative Asian stereotypes; *denial*, where an Asian male rejects any racial stereotype and believes that he is a “white” man; and *repudiation*, where an Asian male is aware of racial stereotype and rejects the hegemonic masculinity by boosting a self-pride as an Asian man. In building his relationship with Kimmy, Dong exclusively takes on the strategy of repudiation, by utilizing his multidimensional Asian masculinity formed by the salience of his Asianized and transgressive attributions.

Kimmy: *My boss is a real B-I-T of a J-E-R-K*

Dong: *I am sorry. But you're not allowed to be sad in Central Park! I came to New York because of movies like Wall Sugar*

Kimmy: *Wall Street.*

Dong: *Home By Myself Again.*

Kimmy: *Home Alone 2.*

As seen from the dialog above in the minutes 13:43 to 13:57 of the eighth episode, Dong expresses a thoughtfulness by pausing their study session and recalling his immigration story to New York so that he could distract Kimmy from her problem. As he mispronounces the title of the films that inspire him to move to the city, he intentionally succeeds in lifting her spirits up. This action presents a fluid repudiation strategy which highlights his multidimensional masculinity formed by the unification of Asianized and transgressive attributions. His thoughtfulness mirrors the characteristic of being helpful in the Asianized attitude while the lighthearted humor he brings to her reflects the confidence of transgressive attitude.

Likewise, Dong displays another demonstration of his multidimensional masculinity when he expresses an immense regret for ruining her birthday the night before and tries to lighten up her mood from the minute 11:44 to minute 12:00 of the tenth episode. He tells her, “Kimmy, I’m afraid I ruined everything between us. It’s just, I have so much fun with you,” as an apology and confession to show how much he is grateful to have her as his friend. Later, he lifts her dampened spirit by goading her, “Remember when we took the tram to Roosevelt Island?” so that she could also reminisce their trip together with him and let go of her saddened mood. Again, this scene displays another example of his fluid repudiation strategy, where his apology reflects the politeness imbued from the Asianized attributions and his initiative to lighten her spirits up reflects the assertiveness of the transgressive attributions. By showcasing his multidimensional Asian masculinity through the repudiation strategy, Dong is trying to prove that his masculinity is perfect to aid Kimmy in her best and worst moments. Therefore, as Kimmy admits her feelings to him in the minute by saying, “You’re kind, and you’re funny, and both our names mean ‘penis’, and I don’t want to be your friend either because I *like* you,” she has reaffirmed his multidimensional Asian masculinity as the ideal form of masculinity in building an interracial romantic relationship.

In short, by taking the advantage of the hegemonic bargaining strategy of repudiation, Dong manages to weave a romantic relationship with Kimmy as an exemplar that his multidimensional Asian masculinity formed by the unification of his Asianized and

transgressive attributions could be accepted as a common societal ideal of masculinity that works in building and maintaining an interracial intimacy with a white woman. However, this succession does not come easily for Dong, as he has to face a hurdle that comes in the form of a white male rival, which will be elaborated in the following subchapter.

Dong and His Interracial Competition with Logan

During Dong's attempt of romantic advances towards Kimmy, he finds himself encountering a problem in the shape of Logan Beekman who is also a love interest of Kimmy. As opposed to Dong, Logan embodies the perfect image of hegemonic American masculinity ideals that is being a handsome, wealthy Connecticut-born white man who leads a company inherited by his family and rides horses as a hobby. On the other hand, despite the fair independence that Dong exerts, he embodies neither wealth nor athleticism that the hegemonic ideals demand. The appearance of Logan as a rival for Dong in pursuing a relationship with Kimmy echoes what Nemoto (2008) has pointed out as cross-racial competition in pursuing intimacy towards white women, where white men serve as the more superior romantic partners and become a boundary for Asian-American men to achieve exclusive position in hegemonic masculinity through a relationship with white women. An illustration of this concept is apparent in the scene of the eighth episode, marked from the minute 23:49 to minute 24:10, where Dong accidentally sees Logan and Kimmy dining in a fancy restaurant. Seeing how happy the pair is in the restaurant, Dong realizes that the poshness of Logan's masculinity might win her over instead of the humble masculinity that Dong embodies, so he feels dejected and lost.

However, the feeling of dejectedness does not dampen Dong from pursuing a relationship with Kimmy, instead, he uses it as a motivation to work harder on getting her love for him. By entering himself into a cross-racial romantic competition, Dong follows the gender strategy in negotiating masculinity by exercising the repudiation strategy that, as Nemoto (2008) stated, is geared to detest completely on the idea of hegemonic masculinity. He utilizes this strategy by bargaining the equity of his Asianized and transgressive attributions as a fluid, multidimensional Asian masculinity to attract Kimmy and challenge the image of 'perfect man' exuded by Logan, so Dong could drive Logan out of the competition and become the sole winner in this cross-racial race for intimacy with Kimmy.

During the minutes 10:23 to 10:45 of the ninth episode, Dong and Logan meet each other for the first time in front of Kimmy's apartment. They are seen to be gazing at each other warily and converse with mild tension,

Logan: Are you also Kimmy's boyfriend?

Dong: Boyfriend? No, I saw she was running low, so I went outside and this fell off an air conditioner and onto my head. I didn't do it because I'm her boyfriend. Where would I even take Kimmy out on a date? Ice skating and then hot chocolate, and it starts to snow and we fall to the ground, and we make snow oxen? As if.

Then, the above conversation is followed by their confrontation near the snack bar in the minute 17:14 to minute 17:32, which could be seen below,

***Logan:** And my assistant bought the presents for Kimmy. I just assumed the bike was one of them. It was an honest mistake.*

***Dong:** I built that bike because Kimmy is special to me.*

***Logan:** I know. I've been watching you, staring at her, all excited like a little boy who picked the lock on his daddy's Jodhpur armoire.*

***Dong:** Your experiences are not universal!*

From the two confrontations between Dong and Logan, it is noticed that Logan truly utilizes the ideals of wealth, such as fine dining and lavish presents, to captivate Kimmy in liking him. Similarly, he exerts the same ideals to intimidate Dong to step out from the competition. Logan sees Dong as a lesser rival because of his poor economic and social power; hence, Logan threw the comment “a little boy” and took credits of Dong’s present to Kimmy so that any chance of Dong getting her love is crushed. Instead of staying silent, Dong tries to dismay Logan from his winning position by adopting the repudiation strategy during their confrontation. As seen from their interaction in the birthday party, Dong responds to Logan’s statements by criticizing the classic dating moves that Logan does to Kimmy.

This response implies that the romantic execution that Logan does is too old school to coincide with how the modern world works, thus, Dong proclaims that the scope of Logan’s romantic experience is limited. Furthermore, it also points out the lack of emotional sensitivity from Logan, which is previously implied when Logan states that he orders his assistant to buy the presents for Kimmy. It means that Logan only thinks of presents that are suitable for his liking without understanding or acknowledging what Kimmy likes and needs. The implication of his lack of emotional sensitivity is also insinuated during their first meeting, where Logan asks if Dong is also Kimmy’s boyfriend because he brings ice to the party. Dong’s mocking response emphasizes this lacking aspect of Logan, whereas Dong carrying the ice based on his awareness of what Kimmy needs, Logan only does it because she asks him to as her boyfriend. The strife between Dong and Logan presents the shift to transgressive attitude exuded by Dong, which stems from his internal jealousy and the feeling of emasculation after he realizes that his romantic accomplishments are overshadowed by the figure of a white man.

Having an Asian-American man with lesser status like Dong challenging a dominant white man like Logan gives a threatening feeling to the comfortably powerful position of hegemonic masculinity that Logan places himself in. In the scene of the tenth episode, marked in the minute 22:42 to minute 23:10 below,

***Logan:** It’s like at school when I used to run the hurdles, but they would remove all my hurdes. That way I almost always won.*

***Kimmy:** Yeah. Dong’s out of the picture. He’s not even in New York anymore.*

***Logan:** He’s not even in the United States.*

***Kimmy:** What are you talking about? Do you know about the immigration thing?*

***Logan:** All right, look, I am not ashamed to admit it. I called them. [...] Kimmy, that man attacked me and he was in the country illegally. Daddy said I should tell.*

From the dialogue, it could be seen that Logan is trying to apologize to Kimmy for ruining her birthday party by taking her out on a lunch date. However, it is clear that the

lunch is to celebrate the triumph of succeeding in removing the hurdle that blocks him away from having a conversation with Kimmy and staying on top of the masculinity chain. He eliminates Dong from the rivalry picture by alerting the immigration officers to deport Dong out from the country, which showcases a dominant power and status from Logan. This situation is a complete opposite of the apology that Dong enacts to Kimmy. His genuine apology and confession, as well as his support on Kimmy's decision to be only friends with him from the minute 11:44 to minute 12:00 of the tenth episode, show that he genuinely respects and cares for her. By reacting furiously over Logan's vile actions against Dong, Kimmy realizes that her relationship will only fulfill Logan's ego as a white man which, as mentioned by Demetriou (2001), capitalizes the domination on other social hierarchy by using the recognition of a white woman. Instead, she regards the selflessness and boldness of Dong as a showcase of masculinity that is pure, for they are authentically defining Dong as who he is without resorting to selfish decisions that would make her feel unhappy.

Thus, as Kimmy chooses Dong as her romantic partner, she has accepted that his fluid, multidimensional masculinity formed by the salience of his Asianized and transgressive attributions is the better masculinity and exerted to captivate the woman of his dreams instead of the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity. Her view can also be further interpreted as how white women perceive Asian-American men as being more nurturing and caring, in contrast to their views of white men like Logan, which embody American norms of masculinity.

Conclusion

Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt (2015) presents a story about people coming from different yet marginalized backgrounds who seek acceptance from the society, including Dong, an Asian-American, who is trying to find a stance where his notion of masculinity could be accepted. By analyzing the dialogue and relationship between characters of the series through Iwamoto and Liu's (2009) framework of Asianized and transgressive foundations, it could be concluded that Dong represents Asian-American men's agency in negotiating and reconstructing their masculinity and identity. He (re)constructs his masculinity by integrating his Asianized attitudes as his social identity and transgressive attitudes as his personal identity. In so doing, he then creates one fluid, Asian-American masculine identity. He takes the construction to negotiate his position in the social hierarchy of masculinity by weaving a relationship with a white woman and challenging the white male rival in the realm of romantic advances. On that note, Asian-American masculinity is portrayed as having multidimensional aspects which defy the expectations of hegemonic white masculinity.

In the end, Dong's notion of Asian-American masculinity could be recognized as a societal paradigm of masculinity. Embracing masculinity means being fluidly masculine, that is to acknowledge one's feminine and masculine characteristics as equally prominent. From that admission, Dong exemplifies that one could take advantage of his Asian-American masculinity to fulfil his goal as an Asian immigrant without conforming to the glorified hegemonic white masculinity nor is he dismantling his cultural identity so that he can be perceived as a 'real' man.

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