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THE SEXUALIZATION OF ASIAN WOMEN IN THE KOREAN POP INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

The sexualization of Asian women has been used in global media to perpetuate negative stereotypes. This capstone considers how the hyper-feminization of Asian women builds from a long history of racialized and gendered media-based tropes from the United States (US). Specifically, how the racialized sexualization of Asian women is rooted in a prolonged history of Orientalism and thus should be examined to understand the beginnings of racialized terms. I examine Korean idol groups in light of the meteoric popularity of Korean media (or “Kpop”). A review of the literature on Orientalism and past Korean idol groups are analyzed to address how global audiences consume these groups through racialized and gendered stereotypes. I study how these idol groups strategically mobilize racialized and gendered tropes to gain popular traction among Western audiences. This foundation is applied to the success of Korean girl group Blackpink to examine how racialized and gendered stereotypes continue to impact how female idol groups are popularly perceived by American audiences. For example, past female Korean idol group, The Wonder Girls, utilized the China Doll stereotype - a trope historically associated with Asian women - when debuting in the US. Studying the role sexualization and sexual objectification play on the career success of Korean female idol groups reveals the challenges that female groups must navigate. To understand why South Korean entertainment companies deem it necessary to be noticed by the US audience, we must navigate the cultural hegemony of the US and its influence around the world as well.

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INTRODUCTION

Back in 2012, the United States was left in shock when Psy, a Korean man, made headlines for hit song *Gangnam Style*, the first YouTube video to hit one billion views. Psy's *Gangnam Style* was a huge success, both in South Korea and the United States (US), and many were left wondering whether more Korean artists would move to the west. Not until 2019 was BTS, a Korean boy group, able to move the hearts of many with their amazing choreography and handsome looks. Sweeping the United States one song at a time, BTS has truly proven themselves to be the most successful Korean boy group to come from a foreign nation, but in the midst of their success, another group was on the rise; Korean girl group, Blackpink. Blackpink had their time in the sun, but for a short while. The question is, why do girl groups, like Blackpink, experience challenges when transitioning from the Korean industry to the US industry?

An overview of Asian representation in the United States media reveals the rhetoric surrounding Asian women is often based on racialized and gender-based stereotypes. A primary reason for this is due to heteropatriarchy, which normalizes the racial sexualization of Asian women by referring to them as “exotic,” “passive,” and “submissive”. The management of Asian women's sexualization stems from patriarchal thinking which views a woman's sexuality as threatening towards society and to men themselves (Lee 1; Hwang & Parreñas 567; Skodati 92). In particular, Asian women are often referred to through stereotypes of the China Doll or the Dragon Lady. The China Doll stereotype paints an Asian woman as “submissive, delicate, and overly emotional” while the Dragon Lady is “cold and threatening” (Lee 1). Asian women are left to fall within either of the two archetypes which ultimately leads people to view them as nothing more than hypersexualized beings that can lead to the deconstruction of society.

Racialized and gendered-based stereotypes surrounding Asian women can most notably be traced back to Orientalism, a term coined by Edward Said to describe the depictions of the East as described by the West. Said states that Orientalism was given a presence within the West, but only through depictions that were understandable from a Western standpoint (Said 5). In other words, western audiences learned about the East through a stereotyped Western gaze. The West managed to control the perception of the East due to its dominance around the world (Said 7). In regards to cultural hegemony, the West has the upper hand which makes it difficult for the East to rid itself of Orientalist perceptions. When trying to establish themselves within a Western setting, Asian women are affected by these Orientalist perceptions the most.

Asian women are inserted into a world of racial sexualization due to Orientalism which has established the stereotype of Asian women being sexually desirable based on their “exotic” look, while also being hyper-feminized in the United States (“*The Korean Wave: Korean Media*” 108; Azhar et al. 289). Due to the racial sexualization surrounding Asian female artists in the entertainment industry, Korean girl groups face a challenging time when transitioning from Korean entertainment to US entertainment. For instance, The Wonder Girls, a Korean girl group, utilized the stereotype of the Asian China Doll, a cute and docile woman, when promoting their music in the United States (“*The Korean Wave: Korean Media*” 109). In this example it is notable how Orientalism has influenced the way in which artists promote themselves since the Wonder Girls felt it necessary to subject themselves to Western stereotypes.

Unfortunately the group did not reach a level of success that would have justified their stay in the US due to comments being made on their race, such as “all members looking the same”, but it is believed that their China Doll appearance catapulted the success of their song *Nobody* into the Billboard Hot 100 (“*The Korean Wave: Korean Media*” 111). Overall,

Orientalism influences the perception of Asian women as it is utilized for women's achievement in the United States. In regards to Korean female groups, the Wonder Girls' use of the China Doll trope influences the way in which future groups are promoted. To clarify, future girl groups are likely to utilize the same method as the Wonder Girls as it resulted in minor success among the Western audience. This can ultimately lead to the group not being taken seriously as they are not being true to the image they portray in South Korea. Similarly, the difference in media representation between male artists and female artists widens the gap between the artist's success and credibility.

In a general sense, female artists are subjected to more sexist roles in the music industry, such as being “arm-candy” or the sexy backup dancer (Aubrey et al. 494). In other words, their presence is used to bolster the status of men. After analyzing the role women play in music videos, it's demonstrated that female artists are more likely to be hyper-sexualized in comparison to male artists, consequently supporting the notion that a woman's appearance holds more value than their talent (Aubrey et al. 494). For this reason, Korean girl groups face an obstacle when marketing their music towards Western audiences as they are forced to endure the harassment of being racially sexualized for being both female and Asian.

As mentioned above, female artists are sexualized more often than male artists which can be demonstrated through media representation. Media representation, and constant objectification, of women influences gender roles and desensitizes viewers on sexual stereotypes, which leads female artists to be judged by their sexual portrayals instead of their talent (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro 809; Aubrey et al. 494). Images of female artists have seen a dramatic increase through the years, consequently leading to a form of hyper-sexualization based on the language that surrounds these images (Hatton & Trautner 257). For example, male images

rarely carry sexual language, but female images are described as giving off “nasty thrills”, or the women in the images are described as having “dirty minds” (Hatton & Trautner 273). Under those circumstances, the gap between male artists and female artists widens within the music industry because media representation forces women to be viewed as sex objects while men are viewed as respectable artists.

As previously noted, sexually objectifying women has an effect on the way in which female artists are perceived. These effects can be noted through the success of Korean girl group Blackpink, the most recent group to crossover into the United States. With the rise of popularity Blackpink has seen since their US debut in 2019, it is important to analyze how racial sexualization and gender-based stereotypes continue being utilized by Korean entertainment companies in order for their groups to establish footing among the United States music industry. Analyzing Blackpink's career will reveal how western audiences have come to perceive them as artists and will also reveal the similarities Blackpink shares with other Korean female groups that came before them.

Ultimately, the relationship between the United States and South Korea plays a role in regards to marketing methods Korean entertainment companies utilize for their artists. For context, South Korea has been under rule by China, Japan, and the United States. As a result, much of Korea’s government structure has been influenced by its colonizers (“*The Korean Wave: Korean Popular Culture*” 17). With this in mind, Korea recognizes the United States as an influential power that can provide them with many benefits, more specifically, economic prosperity. For this reason, the Korean government relies on Korean entertainment to gain the attention of the US audience to increase tourism, thus increasing their economy (“*The Korean Wave: Korean Popular Culture*” 13). Keeping this relationship puts pressure on Korean

entertainment companies to do whatever is necessary to keep the attention of the US, including subjecting their female artists to sexualized stereotypes.

By studying the role sexualization plays on the career success of Kpop girl groups, the lack of flexibility Asian women have to grow within the United States music industry will be recognized. Former Kpop girl groups will also be given credibility for their hard earned achievements after the failure to succeed in the US erased the achievements they earned, which were later passed on to current Kpop groups. Sexuality studies will benefit from studying sexualization through Korean entertainment mediums since the rise in popularity Kpop is receiving will result in an increase of Kpop girl groups, which will ultimately lead to an increase in racial stereotyping whose effects are yet to be studied.

CONSIDERATION AND REQUIREMENTS

Generally, the sexualization of women, in this case Asian women, is studied by analyzing media projects such as images or music performances. With this in mind, the primary research method will be reading and analyzing present research papers that discuss principles of sexualization and then applying those principles to Kpop idols. In doing so, this capstone project will not require any approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), however, these principles are unfamiliar to me, therefore, guidance from my faculty mentor will be required in order to gain a solid understanding on these concepts.

No approvals are needed for me to complete this project, however, the amount of literary research I find on Kpop in particular may be limited. Kpop is a relatively new genre to the United States, so the primary focus of recent papers is centered around the impact the genre has had on US culture. However, there is an abundant amount of information on the topics of

Orientalism and the racialized sexualization of Asian women. Therefore, the findings from these topics will be used as a foundation that may be applied to Kpop girl groups.

PRIMARY LITERATURE REVIEW

This study aims to uncover how the career success of Kpop girl groups, such as Blackpink, is affected by the long standing history of Asian female sexualization. To begin the research, a look into Orientalism must be performed due to its influence on our current society's views on Asian women. Stereotypes, such as the China Doll and the Dragon Lady, were established during these times and it is important to understand how and why these tropes have managed to keep themselves relevant for so long, and how they have managed to influence the representation of Asian women in the media.

How Orientalism Has Shaped the Views on Asian Americans

The Asian Mystique by Sheridan Prasso explains how Asian countries, commonly referred to as the East, have been described through four concepts; mystery, sex, fear, and desire (Prassol & Prasso 47). These concepts were drawn up by Western Europeans (or “the West”) who were attempting to understand Asian culture, but anything that references the East is only discussed within these contexts. The story surrounding the Empress Dowager of China is an example of how the West restricted the East within these notions. It is believed that the Empress Dowager is the initiator for the Dragon Lady stereotype due to her being an Asian woman in a position of power, which can be threatening to the West (Prassol & Prasso 47; Lee 3). After the death of the Empress, rumors started surfacing, many of which were claiming that her life was filled with “scandal, sex, and evil”, which were ultimately not true and simply a story told by falsified accounts (Prassol & Prasso 48). Another thing to note is how the West was fixated on the Empress Dowager, even after her death, which Prasso links with Western dominance over the East; by exploiting the false story of their Empress being sexual, the West can continue to paint the East as an immoral place in need of their saving (Prassol & Prasso 51).

Equally important, although eight other women ascended the throne after the Empress, the West continued to only discuss the Dowager of China since her falsified lifestyle of sex and scandal was more in line with the perspective the West had about the East (Prassol & Prasso 52). This implies that the West is only interested in discussing the East if they are alluding to sexual and mysterious matters, as recently stated when discussing the four concepts the East is described as. As previously mentioned, what is known about the East is created by the people from the West to reinforce their idea of Western civilization being the only way for the East to survive. Consequently, the stereotypical rhetoric about Asian women is based on mere hearsay and not actual fact.

As a result of the West creating stereotypes that continue being used, the East has taken a toll in terms of how its people, specifically their women, are discussed in a political sphere. Laws such as the Page Act of 1875 and the 1986 Immigration Marriage Fraud Amendment describe Asian women in terms of the Orientalists ideas created by the West, which are often sexualized. The current political climate surrounding Asian Americans in regards to the COVID-19 pandemic is a modern example as to how Orientalism continues to shape the narrative of the East being a threat to the West. To begin, the Page Act of 1875 prohibited the entry of Chinese women based on the speculation of their moral duplicity (Hwang & Parreñas 571; Zhu 18). The prohibition of Chinese women from entering the United States suggests that stereotypes, such as the Dragon Lady, are based on truth since it places blame for the disruption of society on Asian women. To further prove that Asian women are a threat, the Page Act specifically focuses on the exclusion of prostitutes due to their threat of deception and disease (Zhu 18; Muse 213; Hwang & Parreñas 572). By assuming all Chinese women to be prostitutes, the Page Act reinforces the preconceived ideas of Asian women being overly sexual and manipulative.

After the success of the Page Act, the United States created the 1986 Marriage Fraud Amendment based on the concern that Asian women would manipulate white men into marrying them for immoral reasons (Hwang & Parreñas 572). The amendment specifically benefited white men since no protection was granted to the woman if they were victims of domestic violence, and if her husband decided to divorce her before the two year residency period (Hwang & Parreñas 573). A consequence stemming from Orientalism is the idea that the white race is the most dominant race. With this line of thinking, Asian women are discarded when it comes to protecting the white male.

The latest illustration of Orientalism and its effects on Asian women comes from the harmful rhetoric created by former President Donald Trump when speaking on the COVID-19 pandemic. Phrases such as the “China Virus” and “Kung Flu” created a surge of violence against Asian Americans, but more specifically against Asian American women (Hwang & Parreñas 568). For this discussion, the Atlanta Massacre of 2021 where the lives of eight women, six being Asian American, will be discussed to reveal the ways in which Orientalism influenced media perception in regards to the women involved.

The shooting of 2021 is a visible representation on how female Asian bodies are viewed as disposable and irrelevant. Hwang and Parreñas (2021) state that the event perfectly illustrates Asian women as “villainous temptress,” a sexually desirable woman that is also a threat to the social order (Collins 1990, as cited in Hwang & Parreñas 2021). They continue their research by stating how the media painted the women as villains based on speculation that these women were sex workers because they worked in massage shops; an assumption that derives from the notion that massage shops are places of sexual services (Hwang & Parreñas 570). Hwang and Parreñas introduce the idea of gendered racialization and how it has made these women victims of

violence. Being both Asian and female made the women vulnerable to many forms of violence due to the existing sexual stereotypes surrounding Asian women. With this in mind, the media protected the image of the white perpetrator by justifying his actions as him trying to “eliminate his temptation” (Graziosi 2021, as cited in Hwang & Parreñas 2021). In other words, the hypersexuality of Asian women created the narrative that the white perpetrator was the victim all along, thus disregarding the lives that were lost; protecting the white male is more important than protecting the Asian female. Relegating the bodies of Asian women solely as objects of desire normalizes the violence they face and further solidifies their bodies as disposable.

In the final analysis, Orientalist illustrations negatively impact Asian people, more specifically Asian women, since these women do not fit into the stereotyped version of themselves. By reinforcing the idea that Asian women are sexual and immoral people through stories, amendments, and news coverage, the West continues to support the idea of Orientalism and continues to see itself as a savior to the East.

Media Representation and How it Sexualizes Asian Women

As a consequence of Orientalism, the way Asian women are represented in media, such as in stories like *Madame Butterfly* or print coverage like South Korean Ceci Magazine, as being hypersexual and immoral characters continues to drive Asian women towards hardships in their daily lives. Previously mentioned, sexualized images of Asian women were considered truth due to their constant circulation around the West (Lee 1; Hernández 2). With this in mind, the media began to portray Asian women within these spectrums which ultimately influence the way they are treated.

It’s been claimed that whiteness is the dominating race due to its way of normalizing their values upon other nations and by associating itself with the idea of social order (Kincheloe 1999,

as cited in Porter 2015; Hwang & Parreñas 567). Stories like *Madame Butterfly* illustrate the ways in which Asian women adopt these new values and how they can disrupt the social order by using their sexual prowess. The tale of *Madame Butterfly* tells the story of a Japanese girl, Cio-cio San, who falls in love with an American soldier who must return to the United States to find himself an American wife. The story follows Cio-cio San as she renounces her culture to assimilate into Western values in order to please her husband. Upon returning, Cio-cio San is informed of her husband's American wife and chooses to surrender her son to them, believing the child will have a better life, and then killing herself. *Madame Butterfly* is thought to be a story of unrequited love, but in reality it is a story that documents how Asian women are forced to assimilate themselves into western values to have an "easier life" and the act of killing themselves serves as a benefit to white men, in this case her husband, because it "purges the sin" of being with an Asian woman, thus relieving them of any burden (Porter 210; Lee 2).

Porter (2015) takes the story of *Madame Butterfly* and applies it to the case studies of three Asian American women who married an American man and moved from their home to the United States. Stories like *Madame Butterfly* create the picture that American men are saviors for Asian women in need of help, but the only way to receive their help is through assimilation. In Teresa's case, an immigrant from the Philippines going through a divorce, similarities between her story and *Madame Butterfly* are apparent in the sense that Teresa "relinquishes" her son to her husband with the belief that the American values will help him succeed, ultimately devaluating the influence of her own culture (Porter 213; Hwang & Parreñas 571). Connecting back to the idea of whiteness being the dominant race, the common theme among this case study, and *Madame Butterfly*, is how Asian women are constructed to be objects that must cater to the white man's values, or else risk losing him or making a mockery of him. Previously noted, the

representation of Asian women through the story of *Madame Butterfly* perpetuates the idea that Asian women are a burden to white men since their sexual prowess will disrupt the social order of their lives; in the case of *Madame Butterfly*, it will disrupt the life her husband has created back in the United States. The complete disregard the American soldier holds for the Japanese girl is further proof of how Asian bodies are disposable.

A more recent, and perhaps more noticeable, instance of Orientalism influencing the ways in which Asian women are perceived is through the South Korean fashion magazine *Ceci*. Due to whiteness being considered dominant, white women are placed as the standard of beauty other women of color should adhere to. The beauty of white women is considered to be “unparalleled” due to their moral character; an antithesis to the Asian woman’s immoral character (Conklin). With this intention, Asian women try to replicate these beauty standards that are uncommon to their race, such as blonde hair and double eyelids (Choi & Reddy-Best 1). When examining the prominence of whiteness in *Ceci Magazine* from 2013 to 2017, Choi and Reddy-Best (2021) find that Asian models are featured more frequently than white models, but their facial features conformed to beauty standards associated with white women (Choi & Reddy-Best 11). To continue, when analyzing the facial characteristics of the models, researchers found that 73% of Asian models had white-leaning characteristics, blonde hair and double eyelids, and only 26% had Asian-leaning characteristics, black hair and monolids (Choi & Reddy-Best 11). Choi and Reddy-Best (2021) concluded their work with the analysis that white beauty standards are valued in South Korea due to their prominence in *Ceci Magazine* (Choi & Reddy-Best 13). The work of Choi and Reddy-Best indicates that Orientalism is just as prominent in modern day as it was in the past.

The influence Orientalism has on our society, and our perception of Asian women, has clearly been used as a justification for the way Asian women are treated. Starting with the labeling of women as prostitutes through the Page Act of 1875, as villainous temptresses through the Atlanta Massacre, and even replicating white beauty standards for cosmetic purposes, it is evident that Asian women have been the ones to suffer the most at the hands of Orientalism. These images have managed to keep themselves relevant for so long because the West is the one creating the narrative which does not allow for any correction, thus allowing the media to represent Asian women as sexual and immoral characters.

SECONDARY LITERATURE REVIEW

It's been established that the West fuels itself through Orientalist beliefs surrounding the East; the West is the dominant power that has all the right answers and the East is a threat to this power. The part that is rarely spoken about is Asian women's vulnerability to Orientalism. They are painted as threats to the West's fight for dominance due to their distracting feminine wiles. For this reason, Asian women are most likely to experience gendered and racial sexualization. With this in mind, the principles that were discovered in the previous research will be applied to past and present Korean groups in the hopes of coming closer to the answer on how the career success of Kpop girl groups is affected by sexualization.

The Beginnings of KPOP: The Kim Sisters & BoA

After the Korean War, the United States was introduced to the Kim Sisters, a trio consisting of three Korean women, who knew how to sing and play many musical instruments. As their popularity around Las Vegas soared, the United States took advantage of their presence and paraded them as propaganda to justify their decision in defending South Korea during the Korean War (Prois; Seid 3). To the American people, the Kim Sisters represented the United

States' ability to save Eastern people from the danger of communism and themselves. This form of representation reveals that Orientalism continues to have a strong influence within the West in terms of deciding which race is superior and which is inferior. Furthering their political agenda, the Kim Sisters were also used to represent the appeal of the "American dream" - a normalized discourse which states that immigrants in the United States have equal opportunities to bask in the country's riches (Prois). Of course, this has never been the case, as seen with the Page Act of 1875 which prohibited the entrance of Chinese women based on moral duplicity; once more broadcasting how long Orientalism has survived (Hwang & Parreñas 571; Zhu 18). Clearly, the United States will only play the role of savior when it is beneficial for them. In this case, to condone their actions during the Korean War. The Kim Sisters being utilized as propaganda wasn't the only way the United States took advantage of them. While in the United States, the Kim Sisters experienced racial sexualization which would go on to affect their portrayal in the media.

The Kim Sisters made their official United States debut in the "China Doll Revue" which advertised them alongside "20 of the most beautiful Oriental showgirls" (Seid 3). The show extorted and sexualized the racial identity of the sisters' to fulfill the false stereotypes the American people had against Asian women. The sexual connotation following the words *China Doll* and *Orient* promote the show as a sexual experience American men can enjoy. Again, perpetuating the Orientalist belief that Asian women are simply objects of desire and nothing more. Due to racial sexualization, the media coverage surrounding the Kim Sisters began to describe them as sexy, but dangerous (Seid 3). Calling the Kim Sisters "dangerous" is a reminder of how the West often depicts the East as a threat, which is then extended to the way Asian women are perceived; placing them in a dangerous position of not being taken seriously. This

can be seen through the treatment the Kim Sisters face during appearances on the *Ed Sullivan Show* and the *Dinah Shore Chevy Show*.

After many guest appearances on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, a familial image between the sisters and the host was created; an image that perpetuated the stereotype that the Kim Sisters were in need of protection (Prois; Seid 6). The sisters referred to Sullivan as “papa” while on the show, which only highlights the paternalism that Sullivan took upon himself to perform. Sullivan’s acceptance of the role strengthens the belief that Asian women are in need of protection from a white male. It doesn’t help that Sullivan credited himself with “saving” the Kim Sisters from Korea, reminding the audience that the East is in need of saving (Seid 5). Different from their image on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, the *Dinah Shore Chevy Show* introduced the idea that the sisters will never belong in the American entertainment industry due to their lack of knowledge regarding American culture. This form of rejection can be labeled as the “forever-foreigner” which regards Asian entertainers as an “other” who will never find acceptance within the West due to their association to the East (Jung, *Playing the Race* 234). The Kim Sisters received this label due to Dinah Shore’s comments regarding the sisters’ inability to speak English. Unfortunately, with the label of the forever-foreigner tied to them, the success of the Kim Sisters was forgotten. It would be nice to say that times have changed since then, but almost sixty years later, other Korean female crossover groups would grab the attention of the American audience revealing just how little things have truly changed.

Due to the Orientalist stereotypes surrounding Asian women, the Kim Sisters experienced hardships in the United States, and BoA was no exception to these experiences. The only difference between the two young acts is how BoA’s image was heavily altered, not by the US media, but by her Korean company, SM Entertainment. The Korean music industry has seen

many groups try and fail to achieve fame in the United States, so when it was time to send one of Korea's most successful solo singers, SM Entertainment chose to go a different route and alter BoA's image into one that would be acceptable to the United States. Due to the effects of Orientalism, Asian artists are more often expected to extort their racial identity for a profit. Asian women specifically are forced to fall within either category of China Doll or Dragon Lady; BoA had to play with both (Jung, *Playing the Race* 220; Seid 4; Jung, *Kpop Female Idols* 107). The need for Korea to extort their artists in this fashion serves the West's ill conceived idea that they are superior since the East is continuously seeking their approval.

BoA's image alteration began with changing the meaning behind her name. Originally, BoA's name stands for "**Beat Of Angel**", but when promoting in the United States, her company thought it best to turn her household name into a slogan, "**Best Of Asia, Bring On America!**" ("BoA"; Jung, *Playing the Race* 221). The name change highlights the lengths Korean companies go to in order to gain footing in the United States, as they distance themselves from the East in an attempt to seem relatable to those in the West. BoA had to erase the original meaning to her name and conform into an acceptable slogan that the American audience can chant.

Not only was BoA's name altered, but her public image shifted from being an innocent girl in Korea to a sexualized woman in the United States. The release of her song "Eat You Up" is a prime example as to how BoA sheds her good girl persona and becomes the sexy woman every man fantasizes about. Unlike her previously released songs, which have innocent love themes, "Eat You Up" is explicitly about BoA's sexual desire. With lyrics such as "my appetite," "eat you up alive," and "demon in the night," BoA is painted in a harsh light that suggests she is on a sexual crusade that men must be cautious of (Jung, *Playing the Race* 222). The dangerous

Asian woman is a trope that has been left behind from the Orientalist stereotype, the Dragon Lady; BoA's sexual desire is a danger to all men who come near her. As a result, BoA must accept this Dragon Lady image and represent it in her music video.

SM Entertainment thought it best to release a Korean version and an American version of the song to appeal to fans from the East and the West. In the American version, BoA is dressed as a "prostitute" with her clothing of a black mini dress, revealing her shoulders and cleavage, all topped with a red lipstick and high heels (Jung, *Playing the Race* 223). The portrayal of BoA as a prostitute in her first ever US debut music video highlights the level of exoticism that the United States exudes onto artists from the East; BoA was forced to play to the Orientalist views of Asian women, hence, the reasoning behind her clothing. While playing up as the Dragon Lady, BoA transforms between the dangerous Dragon Lady and the innocent China Doll. She is seen acting submissive and vulnerable to lure her victims to approach her who she will then "eat up" to appease her sexual drive (Jung, *Playing the Race* 223). In this instance, BoA bounces between the China Doll, the submissive damsel, and the Dragon Lady, the manipulative temptress. Viewing Asian women in this light is the reason for why BoA's time in the United States lasted less than a year. Many of her fans were furious at her representation in the American version of the music video that SM Entertainment was forced to withdraw the version from its platforms (Jung, *Playing the Race* 226). As it's been shown, BoA's sexualization that was extorted to get her a footing within the United States, was the exact reason for her demise. Again reminding the audience of the harsh effects Orientalism has, especially on the success of Asian women.

Patterns Revealed Through the Wonder Girls & Girls Generation

While BoA may have been the first Korean crossover artist since the Kim Sisters, she was forgotten rather quickly considering her short time in the West. However, the Wonder Girls

and Girls Generation are a different story. Analyzing groups after the Kim Sisters and BoA, but before the introduction of Blackpink, will help in understanding the problem of racialized sexualization of Asian women from the East. Studying media coverage and talk show appearances will help reveal the treatment these girl groups endured during their time. These specific components have been identified as groups from the past and present share these experiences of being hassled by the media and attending talk shows in order to promote their music.

First, we must discuss the complete erasure of the Kim Sisters in the United States as it highlights the significant challenges experienced by Korean artists as they navigate public reception in the country. When audiences in the United States were introduced to the Wonder Girls, news articles quickly compared them to past US-based artists, such as the Supremes from the 1960s. However, the Kim Sisters, who were extremely popular during the 60's, are never mentioned despite sharing a closer career resemblance to the Wonder Girls (Liu, "Asian Superstars"; Seid 3). Refusing to mention the predecessors is a clear example of how BoA and the Kim Sisters were poorly received by the American music industry in spite of their accomplishments. The erasure of Asian artists serves as a reminder to the "forever-foreignness" label that hangs around Asian women when trying to promote in the United States; the West establishes their dominance over the East with the mistreatment of their artists. The "forever-foreignness" label acts as a barrier to Kpop girl groups as they are only allowed to behave in ways characterized by Orientalism.

The incessant need for the West to prove themselves as the dominant power has ultimately worked in their favor as their approval continues being sought for after many years later. Presently, Korean companies will begin molding their artists' image through a stereotyped

version of their racial identity in order to appear familiar to the West. The Wonder Girls promoted in the United States with a cute, bubbly, innocent look that is reminiscent of the China Doll persona. Their look was so popularized that news articles went on to write that the Wonder Girls were less controversial than the American girl group, the Pussycat Dolls. Specifically, *The Seattle Times* wrote that “unlike racy American girl groups such as the Pussycat Dolls, the Wonder Girls are much tamer,” implying that the United States understands their use of female sexualization as a method to success for their American artists, but Asian artists on the other hand must remain pure and innocent, hence the Wonder Girls’ use of the China Doll (Liu, “Asian Superstars”). However, similar to BoA’s experience, the Wonder Girls were forced to shed their innocent image and mold themselves into someone more provocative.

Their first US released song *Like Money* contained suggestive lyrics which implied that the girls would like to be mistreated and objectified. The lyrics “love me like money” and “love me like cars” compare women to material goods which emphasize the argument that Asian women attract the male gaze by becoming items of desire (Jung, *Kpop Female Idols* 112; Jung, *Playing the Race* 228). The Wonder Girls are also dressed in robotic bodysuits that outline their bodies to show off their curves; a very different look from the modest clothing they were sporting when their song *Tell Me* gained US attention. Similar to BoA, the Wonder Girls shed their good girl persona and replaced it by becoming sexual women. The American produced music videos BoA and the Wonder Girls released highlight how the United States view Asian women in an exoticized fashion with the help of racial and sexual imagery. Painting the Wonder Girls in a fetishized way creates consequences for the group as it allows news articles to write about the girls in Orientalist ways as well.

Rhetoric against Asian people has been rampant for years, and its effects are clear through the increase in violence surrounding Asian people during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Former President Trump used harmful rhetoric when speaking about the Coronavirus, going as far as to call it “the China Virus” or “Kung Flu” (Hwang & Parreñas 568). Referring to Asian people as a virus is nothing new to the American public considering that the Wonder Girls were also referred to as viruses that have spread across the United States. When writing about the Wonder Girls’ beginnings, *PopCrush* writes how Korea caught a severe case of the “*Tell Me Virus...Symptoms include...the cure is unknown*” (Liu, “Asian Superstars”; Hodoyan-Gastelum). The use of this language reveals how the United States perceives Asian people as a disease they must get rid of; a reminder of how the East is a threat. Speaking about Kpop idols in this manner conveys the idea that these idols will never rid themselves of the “forever-foreigner” label because of their association to the East.

After a minor success in the United States, the Wonder Girls head back to Korea leaving behind the nine member girl group, Girls Generation, in their wake. A pattern is recognized as Girls Generation follow in the footsteps of BoA and the Wonder Girls as they are forced to change from their sweet girl image to a more “mature, yet not overly sexy” image (Jung, *Kpop Female Idols* 113). Just as the Wonder Girls, Girls Generation saw no outcome from this image change, but instead gained fame through their appearance on the *Late Show with David Letterman* (Wang; Jung, *Kpop Female Idols* 114). While the sexy image wasn’t working for them, Girls Generation were still forced to extort their bodies while making guest appearances. Ditching the long gowns and modest clothing, the girls were dressed in an assortment of fishnet stockings and small shorts which were meant to reveal their bodies as they danced provocatively (Jung, *Kpop Female Idols* 116). This form of objectification reinstates the idea that Asian women

are purely objects of desire that are better looked at than heard from. The objectification then leads to Kpop idols not being taken seriously when discussing their music. Regardless of how talented Girls Generation is, their fame was short-lived due to the number of members in their group which the American audience found to be unappealing (Jung, *Kpop Female Idols* 116). For the number of members in the group to be the deciding factor on whether these girls made it or not is shocking, but not surprising as the West has constantly viewed the East as a threat when joined together.

METHODOLOGY

Studying this topic requires qualitative analysis over research papers that discuss the history of racialized sexualization and racialized stereotypes of Asian American women that are created through Orientalism and are strengthened through representations in the media. The themes that are discussed within these papers act as a foundation for the current research to build upon and to apply to the treatment Kpop girl groups are currently faced with. Specifically, this research looks into popular Kpop girl group Blackpink as a case study due to their rise in popularity within the United States. Themes that are found amongst the literature reviews of Orientalism and treatment of former Kpop girl groups is applied to Blackpink to reveal how the racialized sexualization of Asian women continues to influence the way in which media consumes these artists. In other words, the current research will look into whether the media continues to view Asian female artists through an Orientalist lens. The treatment former Kpop girl groups were faced with is also analyzed, and then applied to Blackpink, as it affirms whether or not the media continues to look at these artists as foreign.

Analyzing media headlines for Kpop girl groups reveals that the popularity of Kpop artists is compared to the popularity of Western artists. Implying that Kpop artists cannot stand on their own without the association of another familiar artist. This paper will also consider the way Blackpink is portrayed in their music videos. Analyzing their music videos will reveal the ways in which Blackpink is placed within the constraints of Orientalist tropes, such as the Dragon Lady and China Doll. In other words, promoting Blackpink through a stereotyped version of Asian women that the United States is familiar with will make them easier to be consumed by western audiences. The music video that is analyzed for this portion is “Ice Cream.” This specific song was chosen as it is the highest ranking song Blackpink has released

during their time in the United States, and for the collaboration with popular Western artist Selena Gomez (“Blackpink”; Trust). Both lyrics and video performance are analyzed to reveal how Blackpink is portrayed within Orientalist views.

Following their stardom, Blackpink’s appearances on the Jimmy Kimmel Show will be used to determine whether Kpop girl groups continue to experience sexual objectification in their performances. The interview portion of the show will also be analyzed to reveal if Blackpink is taken seriously as artists or whether they are viewed as spectacles the Western audience can entertain themselves with. To continue this idea of Blackpink being labeled as foreign, the recent surge in popularity Kpop is receiving has started a trend among award shows, specifically the American Music Awards (AMA), to create separate nomination categories for Kpop groups to be represented in. But the question is, why can’t US artists and Kpop artists be in the same category? Is there a difference between ‘Best Artist’ versus ‘Best KPOP artist’? Looking into the distinction of nomination categories will demonstrate the unavoidable gap that lies between Korean artists and US artists.

RESULTS

Analysis of Blackpink and their significance in the United States was analyzed through a series of media articles, commentary made on the group during talk shows, and music videos since their American debut. Current articles and commentary found on Blackpink were then compared to past articles, commentary, and treatment that former Kpop girl groups have faced during their time in the United States. This was done to determine whether the sexualization of Asian women affects the success of Blackpink.

Media Representation

The meaning behind Blackpink's name was taken out of context and turned into something that sounds eerily familiar to the Dragon Lady and China Doll descriptions. The name is separated into the categories of 'black' and 'pink'; black representing the group's fierce side and pink representing their loveable side (Benjamin). What is meant to be a representation of their group as female empowerment figures, is molded to fit the view of Americans' perception of Asian women; the fierce Dragon Lady, but also the loveable China Doll. The grasp Orientalism has on the West is unnerving since it has been seventy years since the departure of the Kim Sisters, and Korean crossover groups are continuing to face racial and sexual discrimination that goes on to affect their success in the United States.

From the research, it has been noted that media coverage finds a need to associate new Korean groups to Western artists. When discussing the success Blackpink has gained through the years, they are often compared to British girl group the Spice Girls due to their similar methods in practice of singing and dancing (Benjamin; Feeney). The need to associate Kpop idols to Western artists is a reminder of how the group will remain in their bubble of a "forever-foreigner". Artists from the East need to be connected to artists from the West in order

to demonstrate the influence the West has around the globe; a Kpop group must seem relatable to the American audience and cannot survive on pure talent alone.

Music Videos

Once they have established a footing in the United States, Blackpink releases their song “Ice Cream” which is about a woman expressing her worth to a potential partner. The meaning behind the song is the reason why many fall in love with Blackpink; they write songs that will empower women. Nevertheless, the lyrics themselves place the girls within the Dragon Lady stereotype as the lyrics promote the idea that they have a dangerous sex drive; similarly to BoA’s “Eat You Up”. For example, the chorus “look so good, look so sweet, lookin’ good enough to eat” suggests that Blackpink is ready to devour men in order to satisfy their sexual drive. The Dragon Lady stereotype that Blackpink implies through their lyrics is a reminder that Asian women are labeled as a threat to western civilization due to their sexual prowess.

In spite of Asian women being viewed as threats, the West continues to objectify them in order to strengthen the belief that Asian women can be ogled at and reminding the public that they are objects of desire. The lyrics “you could take a lick, but it’s too cold to bite me” and “baby, you deserve a treat” create an image that Blackpink are pieces of food that can be devoured by men to satisfy their impulse; a similar experience to the Wonder Girls who were objectified into material items. The male gaze has often been used as a way to dehumanize Asian women in order to establish male dominance. In this instance, Blackpink is being objectified by men to serve as a reminder of the superiority white men have over Asian women. Blackpink’s lyrics may characterize them as Dragon Ladies, but the music video portrays them as China Dolls. The girls are seen playing child-like games such as going down slides, playing with balloons, and playing with animals. This is done to depict the group as innocent girls in search of

a true love, but it is done in a manner that extorts the girls racial identity since they are placed within their Orientalist stereotypes.

Talk Show Commentary

Looking into the interview between Blackpink and late night host Jimmy Kimmel will determine whether or not the group is taken seriously in terms of their music, or whether they have been tagged with the “forever-foreigner” label. While many praised Kimmel for his respect towards the group, others believed that the questions regarding Blackpink’s English abilities was insulting considering the fact that Rose is from Australia and Jennie studied in New Zealand. People commented on how disrespectful it was for Kimmel to single out Jisoo, the member with the least English experience, and ask what her favorite English word was. Others took note of the infantilizing way he spoke to the girls with commenters stating that Blackpink “aren’t children” (“Jimmy Kimmel”). This comment comes from Kimmel’s line of questioning regarding the girl’s knowledge of American entertainment culture such as “Do you know about Coachella?” and “Do you know Will Smith?.” Jimmy Kimmel’s interview is a representation of how Kpop girl groups continue to be treated as outsiders who must be assimilated into American culture if they wish to become successful in the United States. The need to associate Blackpink with American culture through language, or through Hollywood film stars, is a reminder to the way the Kim Sisters were treated as forever-foreigners on late night shows. In this instance, Blackpink is treated as a novelty that the Western audience can entertain themselves with; reminding the audience that no matter how successful Blackpink becomes, they will always be foreigners.

Award Ceremonies

The creation of separate nomination categories for Kpop artists reinforces the idea that they will always be labeled as foreigners despite their success, which sometimes outweighs that

of Western artists. The most recent creation of such categories comes from the American Music Awards when they created a 'Favorite Kpop Artist' category to award the success of Kpop groups such as Blackpink (Ahn). The problem with this, however, is that in creating a separate category for Kpop artists the Western audience will continue to view them as 'different' from Western artists when, at the end of the day, Kpop artists and Western artists are still just artists. This new nomination excludes Kpop artists from participating in current categories that are primarily reserved for Western artists such as Best Artists or Artist of the Year. The exclusion creates an effect that the AMAs are "separate but equal" (Liu, "The 'Separate but Equal' Rules"). In other words, Kpop artists will still be recognized, just not as much as Western artists. While the AMAs isn't the first award show to create a separate category for Kpop, it is one of the biggest award shows to do so. Making its influence around the way in which these artists are viewed in the mainstream media much more impactful.

DISCUSSION

Examining the results reveals the relationship between Orientalism and the treatment Blackpink faces. It's been stated that Orientalism has a strong influence on the way the West views people from the East. Asian women in particular are forced to fit within the tropes of Dragon Lady and China Doll. Blackpink has faced this Orientalist perspective during their time in the United States. Starting with their name being misinterpreted from something empowering that is meant to enhance their power as women, to being devalued to just being "fierce" and "cute." On another note, Blackpink is not taken seriously as artists, but is instead taken as an object the United States can commodify. In other words, the United States uses Blackpink's popularity for their personal entertainment; a similar treatment that The Kim Sister faced during the 1960s.

In using Blackpink as commodities, the United States is able to mold them however they wish. An example of this can be seen through their performance in "Ice Cream" where the girls take the role of China Doll as they are infantilized based on their actions in the video. The group is sliding down child slides, playing in a ball pit, and playing with child toys. By infantilizing Blackpink in this manner, the United States places them within a sexualized version of the China Doll; the group is made up of adults being dressed as children to portray an image of innocence. Add this to the song's lyrics which can be interpreted as sexually threatening, which closely resembles the trope of Dragon Lady; Asian women who manipulate men through their sexual prowess. The usage of both tropes illustrates how Asian women are racially sexualized as their race allows the Western audience to depict them in an Orientalist way.

Orientalism continues to affect Blackpink's success as many of their achievements are not highlighted. When on interviews, the group is primarily asked about their knowledge of

American pop culture. In asking Blackpink these sorts of questions, it reinforces the belief that Kpop groups will never make it in the United States entertainment industry, and that they will always be foreigners. The interview between Blackpink and Jimmy Kimmel can be compared to the treatment The Kim Sisters faced on the *Dinah Shore Chevy Show* where comments were made about the group's inability to speak English. When Jimmy Kimmel presents a similar question to Jisoo, asking what her favorite English word is, it reminds the audience that these girls are just another group from the East that will experience a short moment in the sun. This idea is only strengthened through the American Music Awards decision to create an entirely separate category for Kpop artists. In doing so, the United States further emphasizes that Kpop groups are foreigners who can't amount to the same amount of popularity as their Western artists.

CONCLUSION

Orientalism influences the way in which Asian women are perceived in the media, and Blackpink is an example of how these perceptions can come to affect a Kpop group's career. Blackpink's time in the United States has been nothing short of successful, but the sexualization and treatment they face cannot be ignored. Through their music videos, talk show interviews, and media representation, it's clear that Blackpink are still considered foreigners despite the success and achievements they've earned. Instead of being taken seriously as music artists, the group experiences infantilizing forms of treatment, such as through the ways they are portrayed in their music videos and through the questions they are asked during interviews. Nonetheless, things have changed in the sense that Blackpink isn't experiencing blatant racism like The Kim Sisters were during their time, but that does not excuse the fact that Blackpink continues to be molded within the constraints of Orientalism.

Racial sexualization affects the career success of Blackpink through the additional challenges they must face due to them being Asian women. The United States has a long history of being influenced by Orientalism. From the establishment of policies, like The Page Act of 1875 and the 1986 Immigration Marriage Fraud amendment, to labeling former Kpop groups, such as The Wonder Girls, as viruses that we must cure. To navigate the United States entertainment industry, Blackpink is forced to objectify themselves in a way that makes them easier to be consumed by Western audiences. In doing so, Blackpink is only recognized through sexualized tropes brought on by Orientalism.

This capstone sought to reveal how the career success of Asian women in the Korean Pop industry is affected by sexualization. This paper analyzed the ways in which Blackpink, and other Kpop groups, continue utilizing gender-based tropes in order to establish a footing within

the United States entertainment industry. For future purposes, research on this topic can look into the ways the career success of Kpop boy groups is affected by sexualization and how Orientalism comes to affect Asian men. This research can also be expanded to include other artists from non-Western countries and examine how the United States utilizes gender-based tropes from other countries and how that is reflected in the media.

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