Drinking the KATSEYE Kool-Aid

Minority Representation in the Postfeminist Era

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Abstract

In 2025, the clothing brand GAP released its Better in Denim commercial, a video posted to YouTube featuring global girl group KATSEYE, a pop group formed by Korean entertainment conglomerate HYBE in collaboration with American record label Geffen Records. The group consists of members from various global backgrounds, including women of Indian Tamil descent, Filipino descent, Cuban and Venezuelan descent, South Korean descent, Singaporean and Chinese descent, and Swiss Ghanaian descent, respectively. Much of the discourse found in the audience reception to KATSEYE praises their ethnic diversity and commends their perceived attractiveness.

Because there is little literature regarding racial diversity within K-pop groups, the purpose of this essay is to reveal why audiences might uncritically praise KATSEYE for appearing to subvert rigid hegemonic standards of the Eastern and Western entertainment industries. In this essay, I argue that, despite the veneer of progress for representation for people of color, KATSEYE maintains the oppressive features of performative femininity, and their upholding of these rigid ideals softens the audience's defences to make them easily acceptable. KATSEYE's ethos, built on plastic representation of minorities and empowerment through self-sexualization, silences the audience's true concern for how these industries practice commodity fetishism on women of color. Through a discourse analysis of YouTube comments underneath the Better in Denim commercial, this essay aims to unravel the modern narratives of ethnic representation and performative femininity through post-racial theory and post-feminist theory.

Keywords

Post-Feminism, Post-Racism, Asian American Representation, Representation, Women of Color

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ISSN 2817-2051

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Introduction

In 2023, the K-pop industrial conglomerate HYBE entered a joint venture with American record label Geffen Records to form a group with international applicants to target a global audience. Sarah Olutola describes the state-supported K-pop industry as a "star production system that grants music labels the power to market, promote, and tightly control… youths looking for fame" (2024, p. 540). HYBE understood that K-pop entered US mainstream consciousness during the COVID-19 pandemic, seeing quarantined fans discover Korean entertainment and subsequently created *The Debut: Dream Academy*, a survival reality TV show premiering on YouTube in September 2023 (Olutola 2024). By November 2023, the six most-voted contestants debuted as the global girl group KATSEYE ("KATSEYE", 2025).

The show emphasizes the members' global backgrounds: Sophia Laforteza, of Filipina ethnicity and American nationality; Lara Raj, of Indian Tamil ethnicity and American nationality; Daniela Avanzini, of Cuban-Venezuelan ethnicity and American nationality; Yoonchae Jeong, of South Korean ethnicity and nationality; Megan Skiendiel, with Singaporean-Chinese ethnicity and American nationality; and Manon Bannerman, of Swiss-Ghanaian ethnicity and Swiss nationality ("KATSEYE", 2025). In 2023, at the outset of the group's debut, the members, called 'idols' in K-pop, were just 16 to 21 years old.

In August 2025, the clothing brand GAP released its *Better in Denim* commercial featuring KATSEYE, following the dance-heavy creative direction long championed by GAP's commercial branding (Laubacher, 2025). As of October 19, 2026, the ad currently sits at 89 million views on YouTube. Much of the discourse found in the comments of the video praise both the group's attractiveness and ethnic representation, which can be understood through bell hooks' concept of 'Otherness' (2015). According to hooks, diversity politics has the greatest impact in advertising (2015). Market surveys reveal the extent to which poor people of all ethnicities consume products, making it evident that these markets can be appealed to with advertising (hooks, 2015). hooks states "ads that focus on Otherness make no explicit comments… rely[ing] solely on visual messages," (2015, p. 372). This paper uses hooks' framework to make sense of how ethnicity acts as 'spice' for the GAP brand.

Similarly, Jessalyn Keller (2014) describes how Tyra Banks, a black supermodel, successfully infiltrated the mainstream through "sustained promotion of highly disciplined female bodies that conform to normative notions of white femininity" (p. 148). KATSEYE's

polished appearances align with these notions, whilst upholding several themes of Rosalind Gill's (2007) definition of postfeminist sensibilities, which claim women no longer need equality and can instead achieve empowerment through individual choice and self-fetishization. Due to KATSEYE's novelty and recency in the industry, there is a lack of literature reflecting on the racial diversity within K-pop groups and, therefore, global audiences credulously praise KATSEYE for appearing to subvert rigid hegemonic standards of the K-pop industry by simply existing as Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) women. I argue that despite the appearance of progress for people of color, KATSEYE maintains the oppressive features of performative femininity, and their upholding of these hegemonic ideals can soften the audience's defences and make them easily accepted and palatable. Through discourse analysis of YouTube comments under the *Better in Denim* GAP ad, I uncover the postracial and postfeminist ideals that remain entrenched in KATSEYE's perception.

Methodology

Keller (2014) "sample(s) texts purposefully chosen based on inclusion of themes and ideas that are privileged in postfeminist and neoliberal discourses" (p. 148). Drawing upon this method, I selected specific comments under the *Better in Denim* ad (GAP, 2025) on YouTube. The platform uses an Artificial Intelligence tool to sort comments into categories with similar themes. I am sampling through the categories the platform deems 'most relevant', a metric likely grounded on the repetitive use of certain key terms. Comments for discourse analysis were selected based on Gill's (2007) postfeminist notions, specifically the themes of individualism and empowerment, the shift from objectification to subjectification, and the commodification of difference. The three YouTube AI categories I will be looking at are "Ad and group praised", "Dance and choreography makes ad great", and "Ad effectively shows jeans' flexibility," and I am analyzing a total of twelve comments. The ad was produced by a North American clothing brand, posted on a North American-based media platform, and the comments selected are in English. Cultural contexts are important in understanding audience perception, and because comparison of Eastern and Western audience perspectives is outside of the scope of this paper, my analysis takes the assumption of how Western audiences receive and perceive KATSEYE.

In the first group of comments, "Ad and group praised", a positive view of the ethnic diversity of the members is observed. In the second group, "Dance and choreography makes ad great", we see an infatuation with the girls' attractiveness. In the third group, "Ad effectively

shows jeans' flexibility", commenters remark on the members' range of aesthetics and bodies. I will use the first group of comments to discuss KATSEYE's reliance on ethnic differences and postracial narratives, and the second group of comments to elaborate on the members' performances of femininity. Finally, I will explore the audience's perceptions and illusions of variety using the third group of comments.

Analysis

"Ad and group praised"

In her 2017 article "In the Time of Plastic Representation," Kirsten Warner describes how the presence of images of people of colour in mainstream movies and music videos seem to act as a visual marker of societal progress. Warner (2017) argues that these visuals become "malleable signs" whose origins and intentions can be misconstrued according to whoever is presenting them (p. 34), which is exactly what is seen with HYBE and Geffen's creation and presentation of KATSEYE to gain praise. Commenters refer to KATSEYE as "beautiful, talented" (Fig. 1). Seeing as 2025 brought forward a rise in fascism in North America (Manfredini & Acquistaspace, 2025) to accompany enduring standards of paleness in K-pop, audiences could appreciate that they were "so diverse for this moment" (Fig. 2). This reflects the ways in which 'plastic representation' tempts audiences to believe "some measure of progress, no matter how hollow, has been attained" (Warner, 2017, p. 37), and the responsibility of social change and justice now rests on these six girls' career choices.

Figure 1: *Screenshot of comment under Better in Denim YouTube video, under AI topic: "Ad and group praised"*

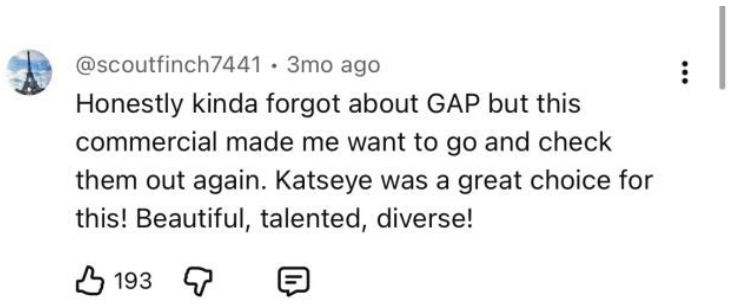
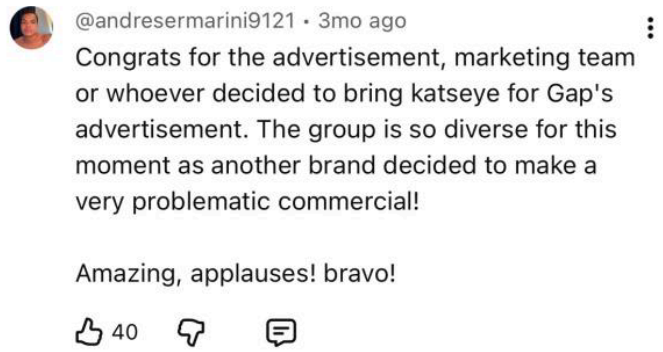
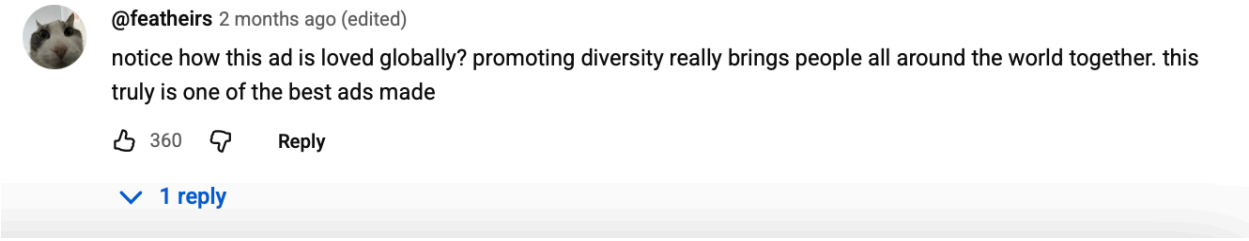


Figure 2: *Screenshot of comment under Better in Denim YouTube video under AI category "Ad and group praised"*



There is a provocation of the idea that audiences of different demographics may be excited at the sight of racialized entertainers on screen and praise ethnic diversity as an accessory, not a core fundamental to the mainstream visual culture. Commenters struck with awe in viewing these women of colour pay little attention to the systematic problems faced by such black and brown bodies. In fact, by focusing on the individual successes of these women, experiences of racism become framed in "exclusively personal terms" (Gill, 2007, p.153), and larger injustices for black and brown bodies are neglected entirely. This is because there are no concrete changes, and the only gain in this superficial ethnic representation is the employment of these six girls by major conglomerates (Warner, 2017).

Figure 3: *Screenshot of comment under Better in Denim YouTube video under AI category "Ad and group praised"*



The *Better in Denim* commercial may be "loved globally" (Figure 3) because hiring women of colour provides the mainstream music and fashion industries a new product to commodify. hooks (2015) states, "the commodification of Otherness has been so successful

because it is offered as a new delight, a more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling" (p. 36), with the normal practices of the K-pop groups mainly showcasing those of East Asian descent. This discourse of the comments in Figures 1-5 viewing diversity as an accessory refers to the idea of what a normal K-pop star looks like, often characterized by their "porcelain white skin" (Olutola, 2024, p. 543). "KATSEYE's diversity" may be "everything" (Figures 4 and 5), but they are still ethnic women operating within a predominantly light-skinned K-pop industry. Subscribing to the notion that social systemic change has been achieved by their industry employment alone dismisses "the very real history of racism which continues to affect people's lives" (Keller, 2014, p. 149). Denying inequalities and claiming that "promoting diversity really brings the world together" (Figure 5) hollows all the cultural substance and historical struggle behind each of the girls' ethnic origins.

Figure 4: *Screenshot of comment under Better in Denim YouTube video under AI category "Ad and group praised"*

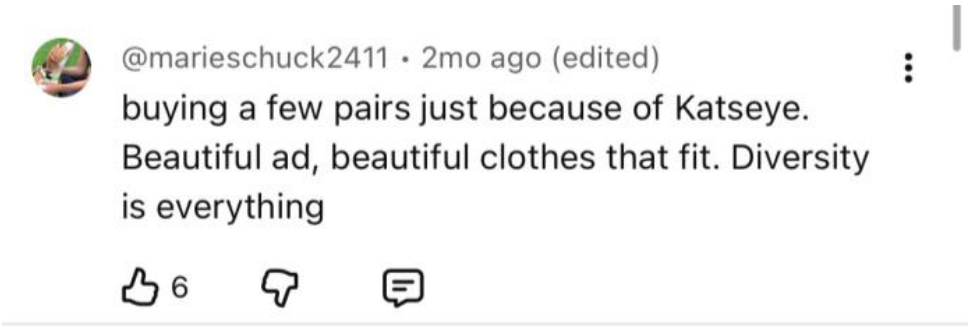


Figure 5: *Screenshot of comment under Better in Denim YouTube video under AI category "Ad and group praised"*



Audiences, particularly those from marginalized ethnic demographics, are lured by KATSEYE's insistence on diversity and "the promise of recognition and reconciliation" (hooks,

2015, p. 370). This superficial guise put on by HYBE and Geffen attempts to hide the fact that these major conglomerates do not care to mend racist histories through ethnic representation, but rather deny all historical connection and use ethnicity as a bit of "spice [or] seasoning" to decorate the mainstream culture (hooks, 2015, p. 366). In this way, KATSEYE's commercial with GAP inspires postracial discourse that confuses diversity casting for real sociopolitical change and attempts to solve the issue of racism for six individuals, rather than for all people of colour.

"Dance and choreography makes ad great"

When the "dominant culture demands that the Other be offered as a sign that progressive political change is taking place", the marginalized ethnicity must assume the most recognizable form (hooks, 2015, p. 370). This is to say that minorities must don the aesthetics that mainstream culture values to be accepted. Indeed, Keller (2014) argues that a black woman can attain market success, but only because she performed the hegemonic femininity Western consumers have grown accustomed to (p. 148). This same femininity can be observed in the GAP commercial, with commenters praising KATSEYE for being "just six confident, attractive, young women dancing in fitted denim clothes" (Figure 6).

Figure 6: *Screenshot of comment under Better in Denim YouTube video under AI category "Dance and choreography makes ad great"*



There is a noticeable overlap between Western and Eastern beauty standards. Particularly, the "slender bodies, long legs, porcelain white skin, …doe eyes" (Olutola, 2024, p. 543), and hyper-girlish styling in K-pop mirror the Western standard of "tall, slim, hairless body, long hair, clear white skin, manicured nails and fashioned in expensive, trendy, feminine clothes" (Keller,

2014, p. 151). Gooyong Kim (2020) confirms that the femininity KATSEYE embodies is "hybridized between K-pop's traditional gender norms and the neoliberal hegemonic cliché of female empowerment through sexualization in order to address the society's changing needs" (p. 137). Here, HYBE and Geffen address the expanding Western audience's taste by merging K-pop's docile, girlish aesthetics with North America's thirst for sexualization. This was successful when K-pop group BLACKPINK adopted a "neoliberal aesthetic of female empowerment akin to contemporary African American female rap artists - one that conflates cisgender female beauty and… unapologetic confidence" (Olutola, 2024, p. 543). The commenter in Figure 7 states, "the girls are pretty and sexy while dancing seductively to the music. I wanted to wear what they were wearing so I can look and feel that way too". This comment discursively illustrates how this specific postfeminist sexualization is found not only to be demonstrated by the KATSEYE members themselves, but by those idolizing them as well. The way these feminine appearances are talked about demonstrates that hegemonic normative female beauty permeates global audiences. The KATSEYE members are moulded into this hegemonic standard of beauty because, in both North American and Korean industries, it is the most recognizable form.

Figure 7: *Screenshot of comment under Better in Denim YouTube video under AI category "Dance and choreography makes ad great"*

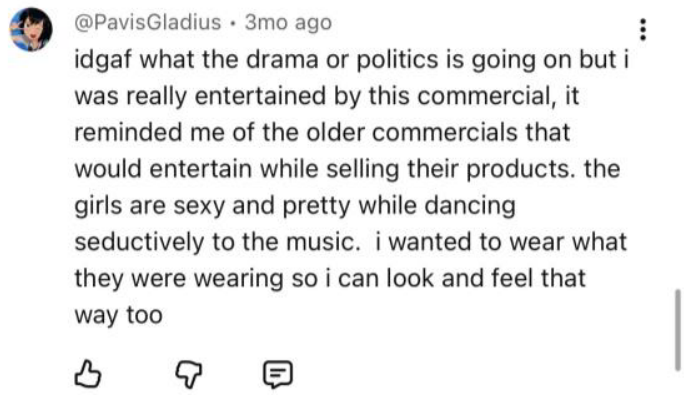


Figure 8: *Screenshot of comment under Better in Denim YouTube video under AI category "Dance and choreography makes ad great"*

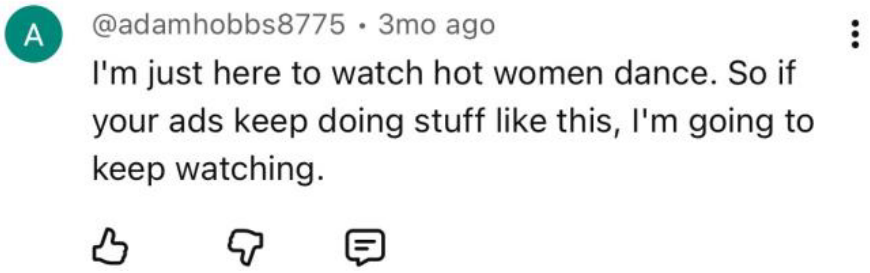
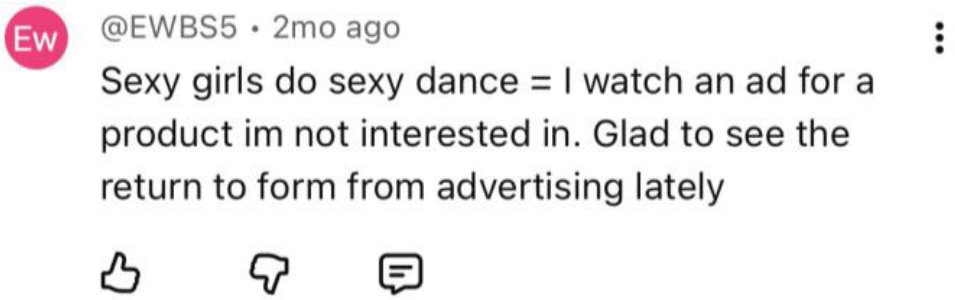


Figure 9: *Screenshot of comment under Better in Denim YouTube video under AI category "Dance and choreography makes ad great"*



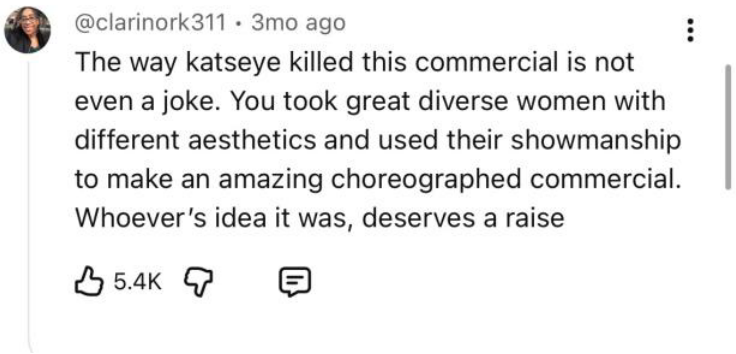
A major factor of empowerment through sexualization is the perceived choice that the given female idol is making in their self-presentation. In order for this postfeminist sexualization to work, there must be an assumed consent from the female idol to objectify themselves, which Gill calls the freely chosen will of "active, confident, assertive female subjects" (2007, p.153). The commenters will watch the GAP commercial just to see "hot women" or "sexy girls do [a] sexy dance" (Figures 8 and 9), even if they are "not interested in" (Figure 9) the actual product. One commenter says, "the girls are… sexy while dancing seductively to the music" (Figure 7), consequently giving rise to the idea that these women themselves opted for their styling and created this choreography. However, the hierarchical institution of K-pop aims to produce "profitable, homogenized, disposable commodities" (Kim, 2020, p. 138), and stifle "artists from directly marketing their music to consumers" (Olutola, 2024, p. 540). Therefore, female idols have no control over the creative direction of their presentation. In fact, like posed dolls, they "wear what they are told to wear; they sing what they are told to sing; and they move and behave as they were told to move and behave" (Kim, 2024, p. 138). Within the K-pop industry, there is

no existing individual choice that postfeminist sexualization claims to have. KATSEYE's self-sexualization and perceived confidence merely create the illusion of choice, but the members do not empower themselves through self-objectification. Rather, the conglomerates HYBE and Geffen curate a calculated show of confidence to satisfy Western appetite and ensure market success.

"Ad shows jeans flexibility"

Gill's (2007) postfeminist idea of the commodification of difference centers on differences between genders. In this case study, as I argue in the following comments, the apparent differences among the diverse women are commodified to sell the product: the garment. While these ethnic differences are used to sell a product, those differences have been cosmetically refined. What makes K-pop groups globally appealing is the "carefully crafted aesthetic" of members' well-manicured physical features, the result of numerous plastic surgeries and strict diet plans (Olutola, 2024). Besides each of the members' thin bodies, virtually all of them have had some sort of visible cosmetic enhancement. When comparing the members' facial visuals in the 2025 commercial with the 2023 YouTube show, bigger lips, structural nose changes, and doubled eyelids can be observed.

Figure 10: *Screenshot of comment under Better in Denim YouTube video under AI category "Ad shows jeans flexibility"*



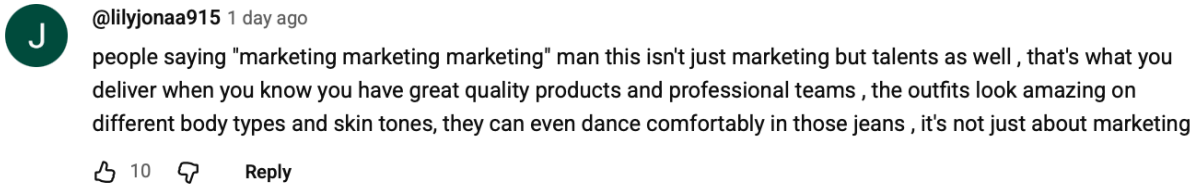
Irony appears in the comments' discourse. The claim of "great diverse women with different aesthetics" (Figure 10) ignores the industry's careful assembly of specific features to sell this group. "By taking various bits from different types of desirable femininity" (Kim, 2020, p.138), HYBE and Geffen have precisely selected the ethnic features which they believe to be the most visually profitable. What is especially regressive about this discourse is that audiences

uphold the belief that these brands care to represent ethnic women, while these major conglomerates make an active effort to erase features that are typical of the members' ethnicities. Warner (2017) states that when audiences buy into the belief that social progress has occurred due to visible racial difference, "less time has to be devoted to… appreciating the meaningful cultural and historical differences of those bodies" (p. 36). These meaningful differences, flat noses, hooked bridges, or monolids, are not being appreciated; they are being intentionally erased. Any aspects of culture that are not deemed aesthetically profitable enough are excluded. Commenters use these BIPOC women as societal markers to indicate marginalized groups are embraced, yet the very features that make them ethnically recognizable are forcibly changed. HYBE and Geffen would like the credit for the diversity hires but would like nothing to do with the accompanying cultures.

Figure 11: *Screenshot of comment under Better in Denim YouTube video under AI category "Ad shows jeans flexibility"*



Figure 12: *Screenshot of comment under Better in Denim YouTube video under AI category "Ad shows jeans flexibility"*



The commenter in Figure 11 says the commercial "has a wide range of people (even if they're all slim fit, they have different base body types/shapes) looking great in denim," and the commenter in Figure 12 says "the outfits look amazing on different body types and skin tones". The perceivable difference in bodies, ethnic difference, is commodifiable enough to sell the product, the denim, so much so that there is no longer a desire to see diverse bodies. Praising hard, disciplined bodies gives power to the idea that because the girls are ethnically diverse, their thin body shapes must be as well. According to this discourse, because ethnic diversity has already been achieved, body-shape diversity must have been as well. Regardless of the different colours of hair dye and clothes, the members still showcase "a slender body, with a similar height and fair skin" (Kim, 2020, p.140), and, within KATSEYE, hardly any deviance from this visual conformity to normative femininity is seen. The commenters' discourse praising the display of a wide range of bodies reveals real dissonance within an audience's perceptions of diversity hiring. The audience's awe of seeing BIPOC women can extend so far that it nullifies the real social desire to see bodies in entertainment that do not fall under the harsh discipline of being slender and fair-skinned.

Discussion and Conclusion

It is impossible not to see the post-racial and postfeminist discourse present in the audience reaction to KATSEYE. These six young entertainers have been placed atop a pedestal as signifiers for social change that is as global and far-reaching as their GAP advertisement. If the *Better in Denim* commercial is what audiences expect to see as a good representation of "different body types and skin tones" (Figure 12), then the desire to reach better social equality for the races and the sexes has been hindered. KATSEYE's imagery replaces the "harsh reality of women's lives with a superabundance of images that magically satisfy the desire for economic,

political, and social mobility" (Kim, 2014, p. 147). KATSEYE's perception, built on plastic representation of minorities and postfeminist empowerment through sexualization, silences the audience's true concern for how these industries practice commodity fetishism on women of colour. In fact, the positive discourse within this audience reception retains power in the people who already had it: the major conglomerates HYBE and Geffen. If the only reason minority representation is included in visual entertainment is so that it can be commodified and stripped of its culture, then these minority representations fail to "ignite critical consciousness" in the audience that demands more of the entertainment industry (hooks, 2015, p. 375). Similarly, if racial differences are only used to stimulate hegemonic culture, then racialized groups can only show up and perform as versions of the hybridized feminine standard in which women must "voluntarily contribute to perpetuating centuries long gender oppression" (Kim, 2020, p. 149). Regardless of the facade of social progress for people of colour, KATSEYE perpetuates the oppressive standards of performative femininity, and their maintaining of such ideals can lower an audience's defences and make them easily digestible.

These major Korean and North American industrial conglomerates are using and discarding ethnic otherness for commercial gain. Just as bell hooks (2015) predicted, the "Other will be eaten, consumed, and forgotten" (p. 380). Despite marginalized ethnic groups' gratitude for this representation and inclusion, audiences should remain critical of the superficially diverse girl groups presented to us, as they are still operating within a strict hierarchical system. A starving audience will eat anything, and when Western and Eastern entertainment have long favoured pale, thin bodies, perhaps coloured thin bodies offer enough novelty to satisfy the masses. Oppressive standards of hegemonic femininity still prevail; they just encompass women of colour now too.

In understanding a Western perspective of accepting racial diversity in K-pop groups, it is suggested that future scholarship should move forward and identify privileged post-racial and postfeminist sentiments present in other girl group media. KATSEYE's commercial success ensures that audiences will inevitably be served more pop groups that are ethnically diverse while being aesthetically digestible. Therefore, it is necessary to examine perspectives beyond the Western audience.

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