

## A Study on the ABG, a Racialized, Gendered Social Label

*Sammy Wu*

### **Abstract**

The Asian Baby Girl (ABG), a racialized and gendered social label, is a recent social phenomenon occurring within the Asian American community. It is a new Asian American archetype amongst the Dragon Lady, China Doll, and Lotus Blossom that targets and constructs racialized femininity. Hinging on its visual appearance, the ABG is a persona whose performance evokes positive and negative connotations due to its ability to subvert Asian American stereotypes and create a hybridized Asian American persona, while also creating new and restraining stereotypes imposed onto Asian American women. This study intends to investigate how this new racialized and gendered social label, the ABG persona, impacts the experiences of Asian American women by focusing on the allure and rejection of the label, and the operation of this label under the male gaze and within academic and professional settings.

## **Introduction**

Within the post first-generation Asian American population, a new sexualized female archetype has risen as individuals find a balance in their bicultural Asian and American identity: the ABG, an abbreviation for Asian Baby Girl/Gangster. The term ABG was coined around the 1980s to describe Asian American women with relations to gang culture and violence. The qualities of an ABG acted as an antithesis of American expectations and Asian community values of the submissive and complacent Asian woman. The ABG instead embodies agency, sexuality, beauty, and boldness. Being a contradiction to the expectations of an Asian woman the ABG garners negative implications of promiscuity, aggression, uneducated, and violence.

In the recent decade, the ABG label has dominated post first-generation Asian American social communities and has evolved into an aesthetic associated with dyed hair, false eyelashes, boba, Greek life, and raves. The connotation of gang culture, aggression, and violence has become loosely, but not completely, dissociated with the ABG label, especially to younger generations. However, the emphasis on confidence and sexuality remains and evokes similar negative connotations.

From the experiences of my Asian American female peers, the term ABG is something prescribed to people—not self-proclaimed. They feel disdain towards the label, not wanting to be perceived as someone related to gang activity or as someone who is unintelligent and only focused on drugs and parties. These Asian women shared their struggle in balancing social and racialized expectations: appearing as the sexy and aggressive ABG, or the studious and complacent Asian girl. Drawing from their narratives, contextual circumstances dictate when to

embody certain Asian female personas.

In an attempt to understand how Asian American women navigate their social landscape and how the gendered and racialized social label ABG impacts the experiences of Asian American women, this research will investigate the lives of post first-generation Asian American UC Berkeley female students, as the ABG label is constructed by, for, and about post first-generation Asian Americans. The ABG label, a recent social phenomenon, provides a time-specific context on narratives of Asian American women within the 21st century. I believe the importance of this study relies on the emphasis of the racialized and gendered identities of the ABG label because it provides insight as to how intersectionality, specifically between gender and race, impacts the lives of Asian American women.

This paper proposes a study on how post first-generation Asian American UC Berkeley women students are impacted by the racialized and sexualized social ABG label, as they negotiate with social, racial, and gendered expectations and personal identity.

## **Literature Review**

The term ABG is nonexistent in academic scholarship on the post first-generation Asian American experience. *“The Rise of the ABG”* by Vicki Li (2020) denotes the ABG (Asian Baby Girl/Gangster) as a stereotype applied to Asian women raised in Western countries. The ABG has “dyed her hair some color of balayage, usually blonde, [and] sports false eyelashes on the daily.”<sup>1</sup> The description provided by Li can be seen as the definition of the ABG currently in 2022, a definition that lacks historical and gang cultural context. *“Sad & Sexualized: The*

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<sup>1</sup> Vicki Li, “The Rise of the ABG,” *The F-Word Magazine*, March 7, 2020, <https://upennfword.com/2020/03/07/the-rise-of-the-abg/>.

*Renaissance of the ABG*” gathered from a Reddit post that the “Asian Baby Gangster, [is] a term popularized among the Asian diaspora in the late 1990s to the early 2000s” and typically referenced towards “‘gangbangers,’ ‘sex workers,’ and ‘drug dealers.’”<sup>2</sup> Being a socially constructed label that impacts the post-first generation, the children of Asian immigrants, it is important to investigate what factors contribute to Asian American identity formation, specifically through the intersectionality between race and gender.

*“Asian American Women and Racialized Femininities: “Doing” Gender Across Cultural Worlds*” by Pyke and Johnson (2003) describes Asian American identity and femininity formation to be based on the negotiation and conflict between Asian and American gendered identities. Pyke and Johnson describe this conflict by discussing how media portrayal maintains white femininity as the superior form of femininity, an embodiment of strength and individuality, over Asian femininity, associated with submissiveness and constraints. These controlled images of white and Asian femininity creates an ultimatum where Asian American women must choose between the white “world of gender equity and Asian worlds of gender oppression,”<sup>3</sup> encouraging them to reject their ethnic culture . However, by acting outside ethnic gender expectations, these women “risk challenges to their racial identity”<sup>4</sup> Thus, Asian American women can feel torn between two different portrayals of femininity.

*“Hell’s a poppin’: Asian American Women’s Youth Consumer Culture*” by Lim (2004) paves a third path outside this binary of Asian and American. By creating “a gendered,

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<sup>2</sup> Sabrina Qiao, “Sad and Sexualized: The Renaissance of the ABG,” *Culturas*, February 14, 2021, <https://culturas.us/2021/02/14/sad-sexualized-the-renaissance-of-the-abg/>.

<sup>3</sup> Karen D. Pyke and Denise L. Johnson, “Asian American Women and Racialized Femininities: “Doing” Gender Across Cultural Worlds,” *Gender and Society* 17, no. 1 (Feb. 2003): 43. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3081813>.

<sup>4</sup> Pyke and Johnson, “Asian American Women and Racialized Femininities,” 49.

ethnicized, and generational identity that vacillate[s] between Asian-ethnic and distinctively American,” Asian American women can redefine femininity for themselves while also including “Asia within the definition of American cultural citizenship.”<sup>5</sup> The ABG label can be seen as a hybridized response to the binary of Asian and American culture—an opportunity to act as a “celebration and affirmation of a positive identity, as well as a proactive strategy that challenges negative stereotyping.”<sup>6</sup> This label can then become either a source of empowerment that deviates from the controlled images of femininity or as an added constraint within the Asian American bicultural experience as another archetype of Asian femininity.

In this conflict between Asian and American, Asian Americans would attempt to appear more American by “participating in mainstream cultural activities.”<sup>7</sup> One of these activities was Import Car Racing, debuting in the early 1990s, which acted as “a cultural space for Asian American youth to form a pan-ethnic community and also allow Asian American males to construct and assert an unequivocally masculine, hyper-heterosexual identity” to subvert the weak and effeminate image of Asian males portrayed in America.<sup>8</sup> However, they also alienated and exploited their female counterparts by accessorizing and sexualizing them during their events.

Inversely, *“No Lattés Here”: Asian American Youth and the Cyber Café Obsession* describes how Asian American males find status, power, and community via gaming in Internet Cafes to maintain their status and masculinity. This maintenance includes excluding the

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<sup>5</sup> Shirley J. Lim, “Hell’s a Poppin’ : Asian American Women’s Youth Consumer Culture,” in *Asian American Youth: Culture, Identity and Ethnicity*, ed. Min Zhou and Jennifer Lee (New York: Routledge, 2004), 106.

<sup>6</sup> Victoria Namkung, “Reinventing the Wheel: Import Car Racing in Southern California,” in *Asian American Youth: Culture, Identity and Ethnicity*, ed. Min Zhou and Jennifer Lee (New York: Routledge, 2004), 171.

<sup>7</sup> Lim, “Hell’s a Poppin’,” 104.

<sup>8</sup> Namkung, “Reinventing the Wheel,” 26.

“stereotypical Koreatown girl,” an attractive Asian woman who “dress[es] up every time you go out and wear[s] a lot of make-up.”<sup>9</sup> These Asian men treated women as inferiors to uphold their self esteem, disdaining the women for dating outside of their race and accusing them as women only attracted to men with money.

These articles focus on second-generation Asian American ethnic identity formation via male-centered spaces and largely ignore the narratives of Asian American women. “*A Shortcut to the American Dream?: Vietnamese Youth Gangs in Little Saigon*” by Vigil, Yun, and Cheng (2004) focuses on the formation of Vietnamese gangs due to intergenerational disconnect within the household and the need for ethnic protection and community. However, they do not address the Asian American women experiences within these gangs other than co-ethnics, members of their ethnic and racial group, regarding them as “gang whores,” dismissing the female experience.<sup>10</sup> Women were not highlighted within the literature but instead utilized as objects that were acted upon. This paper aims to center the experiences of Asian American women as they negotiate with their bicultural identities and expectations.

## **Methodology**

To gain a better and personalized understanding as to how the racialized and gendered social label ABG impacts the experiences of Asian American women, I conducted a qualitative approach by interviewing Asian American women. This personalizes the conceptualization of the ABG label and centers Asian American women and femininity within

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<sup>9</sup> Mary Y. Dancino and Linda T. Vo, ““No Lattés Here”: Asian American Youth and the Cyber Café Obsession,” in *Asian American Youth: Culture, Identity and Ethnicity*, ed. Min Zhou and Jennifer Lee, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 186.

<sup>10</sup> Steve C. Yun and Jesse Cheng. “A Shortcut to the American Dream?: Vietnamese Youth Gangs in Little Saigon,” in *Asian American Youth: Culture, Identity and Ethnicity*, ed. Min Zhou and Jennifer Lee (New York: Routledge, 2004), 207-220.

the discourse. In acknowledgement of my position as an Asian American male, I hope to uplift and center femininity and the Asian American woman experience within my research through the sharing and focus of their narratives.

In approaching a qualitative analysis, I constructed my interview questions on the experiences of my participants, with an emphasis on how they felt about those labeled as an ABG, including themselves if applicable. The construction of the interview questions focused on the stereotypes of Asian women, the emotions felt when interacting with the ABG persona, the ABG aesthetic, and how the ABG label is negotiated among men in different scenarios, such as academic, professional, or social.

Within this study, four post first-generation identifying Asian American women were recruited by word-of-mouth and subsequently volunteered to be interviewed. In maintaining a conduct of confidentiality, no real names will be used. My participants were either East or Southeast Asian. Although I did not avidly pursue specific ethnic identities, I interviewed primarily East and Southeast Asian identifying women, as the ABG label is usually attached to those with East and Southeast Asian physical features.

Of the four participants I have interviewed, two participants neither proclaim to be ABGs nor have they been described as this label: Zoe, a Hmong American, and Luna, a Filipino American. The other two interviewees have been labeled as ABGs: Minnie and Kat, both who are Korean American. Within my sample, no participants have self-proclaimed to be an ABG.

## **Findings**

### *The ABG, a Racial and Visual Formation*

Although it is difficult to concretely define the ABG persona, all of my participants agree that it is racial and gendered archetype that hinges on its visual aesthetic. Kat referred to the persona as a checklist. “You have to check each box as you go down or else you’ll fail the [ABG] test. The first one is absolutely appearance. If you fail the appearance, then you’ll most likely fail the identity test entirely. Certain behavior and certain personality types can enhance the identity and make it seem stronger for individuals, but it’s not necessarily a requirement.” The ABG visual aesthetic is the defining attribute of the labeling process and ascription to the ABG identity, which can be enhanced by the actions and lifestyle associated with this visual persona. The aesthetic details of the ABG, noted by all of my interviewees and “*The Rise of the ABG*” by Vicki Li (2020) have three important factors: false lashes, dyed bleach blonde hair, and acrylic nails.

Minnie emphasized the ABG persona’s reliance on its visuality by suggesting that the ABG labeling process is not solely dependent on the public’s perception, but also on personal maintenance. She asserted that there are multiple ways to ascribe to an identity without outwardly saying so. “Once I started putting on lashes, I could not stop. I have to put them on every single day now. This is my new identity. This is who I am and how people perceive me.” For Minnie, visuality was an assertion of how she wanted to be perceived. This assertion required financial and emotional maintenance, as Minnie spent money, time, and energy to look like an ABG.

Luna and Minnie argued that the ABG identity “emerges when [Asian Americans] come into college ... They are now trying to define a new social identity for themselves.” Luna

expanded on this social identity construction by conjoining it with race relations. Comparing her own experience attending a white dominated school and then attending a Black and Brown dominated school, Luna argued that the ABG persona was constructed as Asian American youth “were trying to ground themselves in relation to either end of the [Black and white] racial spectrum.” In the presence of whiteness, she and her peers were worried about fitting in with their counterparts of higher socioeconomic status. However, in a Black and Brown school, where most students are of similar socioeconomic status, the absence of class discrepancies made students worry about fitting in culturally. Luna believed that Asian American youth responded to this worry by borrowing and appropriating Black and Brown cultural trends for personal cosmetics and acceptance, thereby constructing the ABG visuality. Luna and Kat agreed that the ABG inherently has a white-Asian relationship, as it is a beauty standard constructed by Asian American women in Western and American settings – a hybridized response to “cultural [beauty] standards of whiteness that a lot of Asian people can't meet.” Luna believed that by cultivating their own standard of beauty, “ABGs are able to break away from European standards of beauty.”

Each interview subject acknowledged the ties the ABG persona has to Black and brown communities as well as the ties it has to gang culture. Luna and Minnie recalled the aesthetic of the ABG to be related to Black hip-hop culture, which includes acrylic nails and hoop earrings. Minnie mentioned that the ABG was once known as the Asian Baby Gangster, a title “reserved purely for Asian girls that were dating guys in gangs.” However, all of the interviewees agreed that this association of the ABG archetype with gang communities has been long forgotten and

unacknowledged, as they either learned about this relation recently, in passing, or were simply unable to discuss further. To mark this distinction, my participants referred to the ABG related to gang culture as the “old ABG.”

Although the ABG persona is still connotated with certain personality traits or characteristics, many of my participants believed this association has become less prevalent due to the persona’s dependency on its visuality. Kat credits this lack of personality association to the formation of the ABG persona by Asian Americans themselves. “Because the ABG identity was created internally by the Asian community, we were more able to exclude those generalizations in personality types, whereas the stereotyping of Black women and Latina women were more so the white population ascribing these personality traits upon them to further segregate and discriminate against them.” Since the ABG label was created by the Asian American community, Kat believes that the label avoids being stereotyped by other racial groups, referring to the “angry Black woman” and the “spicy Latina.” This does not mean that the ABG is immune to personality associations, as all my participants do ascribe certain attitudes to the label. However, they all do assert that the ABG is mainly determined by their appearance.

### *The Allure of the ABG*

Although all of my participants did not label themselves as an ABG, nor did they want to be labeled as one at the time of their interview, two of my participants felt the allure of the label ABG, specifically during their high school years.

Luna shared that when she first saw an ABG-appearing individual, she felt jealous,

unsure if she was attracted to the ABG or wanted to be one herself. “I know I wanted them,” Luna said. “But then I think having that title distinguished them from other girls. I wanted to be set apart in my own way too.” The allure of the ABG persona lies in its ability to distinguish those who were granted its label. Luna said that because the ABG title acted as a distinguishing factor between ABGs and other girls, it made her feel inferior in comparison. She believed that the beauty of the ABG was not the only distinguishing factor, but that the confidence they exuded set them apart. Luna called them “bad bitches” to exemplify this confidence. This self assurance caused Luna to be unsure whether or not she should, or even could, interact with ABGs.

In contrast to Luna’s experience, Minnie experienced being labeled the ABG persona when she wore false lashes and updated her makeup aesthetic, copying the visuals of an ABG peer. She said that part of the allure of the ABG persona was the ability to subvert pre-existing notions and stereotypes of Asian American women. Her peers viewed her as an “Asian nerd” who only studied.

“Asian girls were just viewed as nerdy and [not] cool,” Minnie said. “But this new category of Asian woman allows me to be cool, or like a party girl, a different version of what people think an Asian girl is.”

The ABG label gave Asian American women a new way to distance themselves from pre-existing stereotypes while also providing an identity for them to embody. This change in physical appearance and the prescription of the racialized and gendered label created a persona of someone sociable, exciting, and fun. Minnie was allured by this sociable persona, as it

provided a possibility to escape the Asian nerd motif and become the “popular girl” she idolized in the media. The ABG label granted mobility and accessibility to socially desirable experiences and communities. The allure of the ABG label also enraptured the interest of non-Asian and non-female-identifying individuals. Minnie said that after being labeled as an ABG by her peers, her social status was elevated and she received more attention from her peers, becoming an immediate romantic prospect. As she experienced these social changes in accordance to her new ABG aesthetic, Minnie said other Asian American girls began copying her for the same social benefits.

### *Rejection*

All of the interviewees did not want to be labeled as an ABG. Although some felt the allure in the past to be labeled as one or experience the social graces the label provided, they were all adamant in not conforming to the ABG persona.

#### Rejection: Nerd to Dumb Blonde

Luna recalled experiencing confusion and offense when called an ABG by her peers. Although she knew they were “referring to the aesthetic,” Luna did not want to be perceived as an ABG. She “associated [the label] with a certain type of person,” whom she called an “airhead.” Luna, as well as the other participants, assumed that the ABG is unintelligent and uneducated.

However, Luna’s assumption of the non-career/academic-focused ABG contradicted the ABG individuals she knew personally – people she described as career and academically

focused. “The people that I have seen morph into ABGs are smart kids,” Luna said. “I’m thinking it’s not so much that they are airheaded, but that it’s a performance. They are dumbing down to make themselves more attractive or socially acceptable in a certain way. Maybe another way for them to break away from that Asian nerd kind of stereotype.” Luna’s assumption of the performance to maintain the ABG persona is compatible with the experiences my participants provided about the allure of the ABG identity: an opportunity to subvert the Asian nerd stereotype. This claim, however, would need the insights of self-proclaimed ABGs to provide perspective as to why an “airheaded” image is conjured or performed.

Minnie’s experiences showcase the impacts of Luna’s and the public’s assumptions of the ABG being unintelligent and uneducated, as she felt the repercussions of being perceived as one. Minnie recounted that she began to be uncomfortable with the label ABG when she attended UC Berkeley, a university with a larger Asian American demographic than her home community. She recalled not wanting “to be called an ABG, because going to STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math] classes, [she] got stuck with the stereotype of being stupid.” Her reaction against the ABG label was a response to how people perceived her. Reflecting on her experiences, Minnie equated the ABG as the Asian American counterpart to the “dumb blonde” stereotype, a label typically placed upon blonde white women describing them as unintelligent and oblivious. Although Minnie originally found the ABG label empowering in subverting the Asian nerd stereotype, she experienced the negative perceptions of her peers seeing her as unintelligent. Afterward, Minnie rejected this ABG label because of “want[ing] to be respected... [and] to be seen as somebody who can do well in [their] classes.” By actively trying to subvert

the Asian nerd stereotype, Minnie found herself in the pitfalls of the ABG persona. By escaping the notions of one Asian American stereotype, she found herself trapped in another.

### Rejection: A Hollow Identity

Each interviewee believed that the ABG persona ultimately diminishes the identity of Asian American women who are labeled as an ABG, stripping them of individuality to fit the generalized category. Kat warned that the ABG will eventually undergo a realization:

“Once you accomplished [being an ABG], then you start to realize there are lots of different aspects to your own personal identity that probably developed at that time that are not encompassed within the identity.”

In reference to her checklist metaphor, she described that Asian American women donning the ABG persona will have qualities that do not fit the ABG category. These qualities will be simply ignored, invisibilized, and disregarded.

Because of the persona’s reduction of a person’s identity, Kat asserts that the ABG label is derogatory and demeaning. The ABG persona and performance results in a hollow identity, preventing Asian American women from growing into their potential as they are limited to the expectations of what they should be.

In wanting to recognize and honor their own personal experiences, characteristics, and qualities, all of my participants actively rejected the ABG label as a form of resistance. Minnie said she acknowledged the limitations and restraints of the ABG label and discovered her own multifaceted identity. “I view myself as a completely separate entity than that [persona] ... As I went throughout my life, I realized these traits of myself don’t fit that label. I don’t want to be

encased as an ABG.” However, the social expectations and perceptions from close communities and the public are strong shackles that prevent Asian American women from escaping the ABG label.

Kat describes Asian American women who proclaimed themselves as ABGs as a result of “wanting to possess a distinct identity in society and wanting to have something to fully ascribe [the self] to, that is already defined.” However, once distinguished as an ABG, they enter the pitfalls of the label. The ABGs are generalized by the label and are unable to escape due to the perception of others. “There are individuals who want to come out of that identity but they are so heavily prescribed to the institutions they are a part of that they can’t shed that identity themselves,” Kat said when talking about ABGs in Asian Greek life. These individuals would uphold the persona when interacting with peers within these institutions but abandon the persona outside of those circles. The confining nature of the ABG label is an ironic result when compared to its original allure of providing a distinct identity. It is important to recognize that the ABG persona can be a stepping stone to one’s personal identity formation, but should not be the finality of one’s identity.

### *Operating Under the Male Gaze*

In regards to America's patriarchal landscape, it is important to examine how this racialized and gendered social label operates under the male gaze. Minnie believed that the practice of generalizing, fetishizing, and stereotyping women is performed typically by men. “I feel like men are usually the ones who generalize women the most. They clump women into these categories based on their race. For Asian girls, it’s being an ABG or submissive ... It’s part

of fetishization and sexualization.” According to Minnie, men who label women as an ABG are also restraining women to the persona. Not only did Minnie, Luna, and Kar feel limited by the label, but they also felt violated and demeaned when men viewed women as an ABG.

Although my participants were uncomfortable being labeled by men, especially those with sexual and demeaning motives, two of my participants acknowledged that part of the allure in being labeled as an ABG was male validation. “I would see my friends getting boyfriends and stuff. I wanted a boyfriend. I want guys to think I’m pretty. The minute I found out what an ABG was and what it could do for me, I wanted to be [an ABG] for the male validation.” The epitome of the attraction of the ABG label for Asian women is to be seen as attractive. This position of attraction is arguably very different from being sexualized by men because it is a result of the ABG’s decision to be viewed as one—it is with her own agency. In discussion about attraction, Luna perceived “the ABG persona or stereotype [as] something that is very heterosexual ... Particularly in the [gender] roles that they expect their partners to take up.” When discussing the dating preferences of the ABG, all of my participants mentioned the ABB, also known as the “Asian Baby Boy” or the “Kevin Nguyen,” the male equivalent and the expected dating prospect of the ABG due to their shared connotations and compatible aesthetics. The ABB is stereotypically described, concurred by Minnie, as someone who “drives a Lexus, has the arm tattoo, games, [and] is toxic” – a hyper-masculine persona used to subvert the historic emasculation of Asian men in America. Although none of this study’s subjects discussed being involved with an ABB, they agreed that engagement with the ABB tends to result in a toxic relationship due to the gendered expectations they have on their female partners.

Minnie said this expectation was reflected in a previous relationship with a partner who perceived her as an ABG. Minnie stated that she was stuck in a cycle where she had to prove that she was more than just a stereotype, due to her appearance. Minnie said her partner was surprised when she was skilled in her Computer Science classes and that he would downplay her accomplishments. “He wanted me to be stuck in this realm. I couldn't be smarter or better than him. But I also had to be worthy enough to be dating him.” This limbo and male expectations of the unintelligent ABG complicates and toxifies the dating lives of Asian American women. As Asian American women utilize the visual performance of the ABG and display their personal skill sets, they can subvert gendered expectations and threaten the status and superiority of their male partners.

#### *ABG in Academic/Professional Settings*

The public perception of the ABG as unintelligent and uneducated emphasizes the importance of examining how these women navigate academic and career settings, where they are unwelcomed and expected to fail. Zoe expressed concern for the ABG's navigation of professional and academic spaces, acknowledging the obstacles Asian American women already face. “I don't think [ABGs] are taken seriously. I know a lot of ABGs who work hard... I think appearance plays a big role — appearance already plays a role as an Asian woman.” Zoe discussed how Asian American women were stereotyped to be incapable of leadership and assertiveness, qualities valued in American professional settings. Although seen as bold, the ABG persona depicts Asian American women as unprofessional given their stereotyped visual and social performance. Zoe states that Asian American women, especially the ABG, have to

negotiate between their beauty and intellect in order to succeed in academic and professional settings.

Kat asserted that this negotiation between beauty and intellect is an experience that many women face in their professional lives. “It does not matter if you’re an ABG or if you’re a white woman, a Black woman, or a Hispanic woman ... [Due to] colonialism and the exclusion of different ethnicities, you have to assimilate to their cultures and to their standards to put yourself to the advantage.” Kat believed that in order to succeed, one must adapt to the standards of the dominating society. The ABG must negotiate how they want to be perceived, as the persona may create obstacles in one’s career. To not perform as an ABG is then an active decision for the benefit of their own success.

Minnie experienced negotiating on how to visually present herself, deciding whether or not to conduct her performance of the ABG persona in a professional setting.

“When I went to my internship, I was like, ‘How do I make myself look as professional as possible?’” Minnie said. “I have to get my acrylics off. I have to go lighter on my makeup. I’ll change my appearance based on wherever I’m going. For work, I’ll be less of an ABG.” By refusing to don the ABG persona, understanding that people would disapprove of her appearance, Minnie believed that she would be able to navigate her career with more ease.

“[The ABG label] is more disadvantageous in settings where your achievements and your situation is reliant on how other people perceive you,” Kat said. She argued that the ABG performance is more volatile in professional settings than it is in academia. Minnie and Kat believed that although ABGs are not respected in academic spheres, they are able to

prove themselves through their skills and work; their success (via grades) are reliant on their own effort. This is not the case in professional settings, as success in the forms of opportunities and promotions are provided by a superior who perceives them. The ABG persona is then disadvantageous as many would engage with the visuality negatively.

### **Limitations**

This research does not contain the experiences of those who both identify and are labeled as an ABG. These unexplored personal narratives can provide a more nuanced understanding of Asian American femininity and how they navigate both Asian and American communities. This would allow us to more fully understand the allure to self-identify as an ABG, a question that this paper's subjects could not fully answer.

This research contributes to understanding the Asian American experience by centering Asian American women experiences on a topic that is often overlooked and dismissed: the ABG. This research also provides a temporal understanding of the Asian American experience due to the popularity and recent trend of this persona.

### **Discussion**

The ABG is a racialized and gendered social label that hinges upon its visual aesthetic of false lashes, dyed hair, and acrylic nails and is enhanced by specific lifestyles and actions. It is a persona of a complex racial formation. The ABG is a beauty aesthetic that draws from the Black and Brown communities' culture, while also moving away from Asian beauty standards towards white Eurocentric beauty standards. It is difficult to argue if the ABG privileges herself upon the

proximity to whiteness, as the ABG label draws from both ends of the American Black and white racial binary. By drawing from these ends of the binary, the ABG is able to distance themselves from preexisting stereotypes of Asian Americans. At its core, the ABG is a hybridized response, combining and negotiating Asian and American cultures, experiences, and beauty, for Asian Americans to form an identity they can utilize for their own growth and identity formation. The ABG represents agency within the Asian American community as it is an identity constructed within the community internally, instead of being a stereotype formed by and for a white patriarchy to uphold racial and gendered power.

This agency and resistance, however, still faces challenges from the white patriarchy as it operates under the male gaze and within academic and professional settings, showcasing the historic obstacles Asian American women face due to systemic racial and gender discrimination. The ABG, although created by Asian Americans to subvert the connotations of docility and submission, now must contest those assumptions alongside the perception of being unintelligent and uneducated. By creating a new conception of beauty, they also must face the fetishization and gender roles placed upon them by their male coethnic and outer-ethnic counterparts. The ABG becomes a performance that Asian American women can activate for their own social benefit but typically avoid in professional settings to increase their chances of success, revealing the challenges Asian American women face to be considered both beautiful and successful.

Ultimately, the ABG is both wanted and rejected. It is an ironic cycle. The allure of the ABG is in its ability to provide a distinguishable identity and status, as well as its ability to subvert Asian American stereotypes. However, by donning this persona, the ABG, in itself,

becomes a new stereotype to overcome. The ABG becomes a limiting and restraining identity that diminishes and generalizes distinguishable qualities of an individual. It is difficult to call the ABG an identity when, from the interviewees' experiences and opinions, the ABG is more so a persona, a performance conducted by Asian American women to express themselves. The ABG is a stepping stone to one's identity, and not a finality, as its restraints prevent one from actualizing an identity.

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