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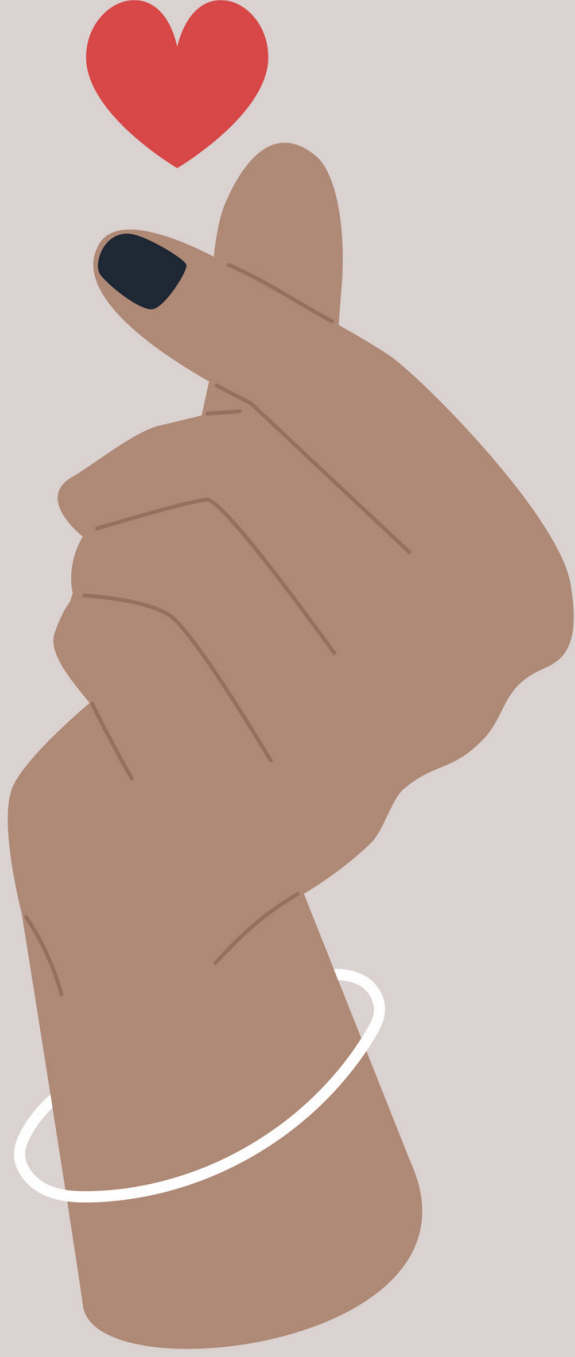
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Why does a Black girl's love for K-Pop, anime, and Asian fashion sometimes feel like a battlefield?

By Nyasha Oliver





Khia Baxter has been down with Asian pop culture since she was 13 years old. An older cousin put her on, lending her issues of Japanese fashion magazines like *Vivi* and *Egg* and showing her YouTube videos of Japanese singers, such as Koda Kumi, Utada Hikaru, and Crystal Kay. But the rest of her family wasn't quite here for her newfound interests at first. "They thought I was neglecting my St. Lucian heritage to be Asian," Khia, now 18, says. "My mum used to think I was trying to be Blasian or Asian just because my wardrobe and interests were different. It was so annoying."

Growing up, Khia, who lives in Manchester, U.K., was expected to uphold certain identity values. She was supposed to involve herself in Black-only spaces, listen to hip-hop and R&B, and rock streetwear 'fits. But she refused to put herself in a single-culture box; refused to live her life as the monolith mainstream media often portrays Black girls to be. And while it was high-key frustrating to feel like her fam didn't understand who she really was, Khia is thankful for the connections she made online through Black Girls Anime and Black Girl Nerds. "I'm just glad I've found these community spaces to talk about anime, Japanese culture, and being an outsider in a non-Black space."

Over time, Khia's fam started to come around. When they saw her talent for making clothes for cosplayers and teaching beginner Japanese to anime fans online, they respected the hustle. A couple years ago, Khia's mom even consented to letting her take a two-week trip to Japan with her older cousin and some friends, which helped solidify her love for this culture even more.

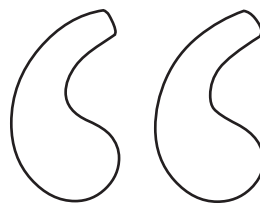
Asian pop culture includes entertainment, fashion, literature, food, and beauty that originates from Asian countries and the diaspora, particularly from China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan — the most popular being Japanese anime and Korean pop music. Both the K-pop and anime

industries generate hella stacks. In 2020, the global anime market was valued at \$24.23 billion and is predicted to reach \$43.73 billion by 2027, according to data from Brandessence Market Research. The K-pop industry generated \$40.2 million in album sales as of December 2020, as reported by the Korean Association of Music Contents.

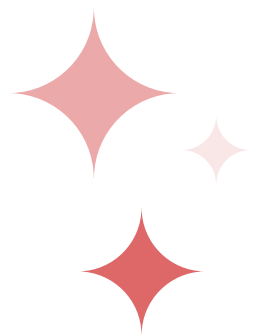
But why do some people have such an issue with Black girls liking Asian pop culture so much in the first place? Why are Black girls sometimes stereotyped and made to feel like they'll have their "Black card" revoked if they don't keep these interests on the DL? "I think that being Black can feel like it comes with a lot of pressure. How we dress [and] talk; our hair and our mannerisms are often under scrutiny, and there are pressures to be a certain way," says Jessica Lowe-Mbirimi, a cultural anthropologist based in the U.K. And when the identity critics are in your own family, things can feel extra difficult.

Growing up in Indiana, 18-year-old Reiana Marquez fell hard for the APC world from watching Toonami when she was 7 or 8. Her first anime was *Michiko & Hatchin*, and from there, she got down heavy with manga, K-pop, Asian street fashion, and Korean variety shows. Her boyfriend and friends share her interests in all things APC and became a safe space for her. But like Khia, Reiana has also been hit with a bit of shade thrown by some of her family members. A few have accused her of wanting to be Korean or Japanese, and she says her mom often makes a point of reminding her she isn't an anime character.

At first, it made Reiana feel that her community thought she was rejecting them, thought she was putting another culture over her own. But that wasn't it at all. IRL, there are just aspects of Asian pop culture that make her happy, and it's as simple as that. "I don't favor one thing over another. I am a person of the universe; there are many aspects of who I am," she says. "Anime/manga has [a special power] of bringing out a version of



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yourself that you feel most connected to. These qualities were always inside of me, but watching anime and learning lessons from them helped me to realize many things within myself that I was still developing or never even knew. You can still be proud of your heritage and stay true to who you are, while still appreciating aspects of other cultures.”

Her squad has helped her realize a lot of negative comments stem from a lack of understanding, other people’s insecurities, and even envy from those who aren’t quite sure how to embrace their own true selves yet, so Reiana has learned not to allow other people to influence the way she feels about herself. She admits building up that confidence can take some time, but the result is living that #unbothered life. “I get many people confiding in me and asking about my confidence in publicly expressing and sharing my love for Asian culture. I [tell] them they should never be ashamed to be who they are to love what they love and share it with others,” she says. “[This is] how you build connections and opportunities for yourself. Don’t halt future blessings just because of what someone may say or think of you.”

Simone White can relate. What first began as a love of anime, J-pop, and K-pop the summer before high school soon gave way to another passion. It all started when a friend messaged her about BTS, Korea’s best-selling boy band. From there, the 17-year-old Florida girl’s fandom grew, and artists such as Monsta X, TXT, Taemin, and STAYC also made it onto her faves list. From the album designs to the live performances, K-pop brought a familiarity and comfort that Simone vibed with; the influence of African-American hip-hop and R&B was obvious, as K-pop companies regularly work with Black producers and choreographers, such as Tiffany Red and Jonté Moaning.

Music was just the beginning, though, and after a while, Simone developed a strong love for Korean fashion, too. “I spent

countless days watching Seoul fashion week videos and vlogs,” she says. “This has made me find my love for fashion and because of that, I will be majoring in fashion merchandising and apparel design [when I start college].”

And while Simone has been lucky to have a circle of friends and family who support her interests, when it comes to social media, she’s seen some disturbing

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things cross her TL — from other Black people questioning the Blackness of BTS fans to tweets calling Black girls out their names for liking K-pop. “I have seen many people on the internet saying that all Black K-pop fans are ‘Koreaboos’ and that we have a fetish or obsession with Korean culture,” she says. “It made me frustrated because as a Black K-pop fan, [I] listen to the music simply for entertainment. [I] never try to imitate or mock another race because [I] know how it feels when it happens to us. This comment made me feel like I was generalized and stereotyped around something that isn’t true.” She doesn’t pay these ignorant comments too much mind, though; she likes what she likes and that’s all that matters.

“Individuality should be praised,” says Lowe-Mbirimi. “There is no one way to be Black. We are not Black because we

only want to listen to [Black artists, for example]; this rhetoric is outdated and does not allow Black girls to have agency and be authentically themselves.” And that’s on period.



Khia Baxter, 18



Reiana Marquez, 18



Simone White, 17



Illustration Credit: alashi/isockpota.com