

The Double-Commodification of the Filipina: Neocolonial Exploitation in the Entertainment Era

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Abstract. Even in the absence of explicit colonizer presence, the Filipino government has profited off the sexualization of Filipinas under the white male gaze, enabling a thriving sex tourism industry and mail-order bride market which pumps foreign currency into the national economy (Cunneen & Stubbs, 2000). Thus, Filipinas use the awareness of their exoticism as a ‘survival’ mechanism to circumvent increasingly restrictive immigration policies and a dwindling local economy – at the risk of their own lives (Cunneen & Stubbs, 2000). Filipinas being marketed as marriage and sexual commodities to white men have been studied extensively – a new phenomenon has arisen in response to these relationships. The following paper will be concerned with outlining this ‘double-layered commodification’ phenomenon whereby Filipinas are first commodified through the origins and continued existence of the mail-order bride and sex tourism market, and then the new commodification of these relationships as entertainment products. As audiences consume the new entertainment product, underpinning systems of inequality, already obscured by the mail order bride and sex tourism market, are further obscured. Moreover, increased engagement with the product only promotes the propagation of the commodity, further reinforcing and feeding into underlying systemic inequality. This paper will outline this process through (1) a literature review detailing preconditions of Filipina commodification and the mail order bride/sex tourism market and (2) an analysis of YouTube comments under clips from Rose and Ed’s segment on TLC’s *90 Day Fiancé*, a TV show that follows the love stories of international couples. Ultimately, this paper will bridge the literature and empirical data together to outline and propose this ‘double layer commodification’ process.

Introduction

In 2020, TLC's program *90 Day Fiancé* debuted a segment following the love story of 23-year-old Filipina Rose Vega and 54-year-old 'Big Ed', a couple who had met via Facebook and were now meeting in-person for the first time.¹ The segment was hugely popular, with the clips amassing a total of 99.1 million views on TLC's YouTube channel since its original release in 2020. For the most part, audiences fell in love with Rose, praising her resilience through each painful episode of her relationship with Ed. The publicity following the show dramatically changed Rose's life, going from living in a cement and metal-sheet home to a two-storey house and lot with her family. And in the meantime, Ed was made the laughingstock of the internet. To the audiences of *90 Day Fiancé*, Rose is a modern female success story in every way: using her 'exotic femininity' to her advantage, she had made a mockery of the sad foreign man who thought he could make a fool of her and has come out of it independent and self-sufficient. The current audience's overwhelming support for Rose reflects a dramatic shift from previous depictions of Filipina mail-order brides that portrayed these women as immoral, selfish women leeching off foreign men (Cunneen & Stubbs, 2000). Instead, *90 Day Fiancé* viewers praise Rose: rather than vilifying her use of her 'exoticness' as predatory, they instead hail for her clever subversion of the male fantasy for her own personal gain. However, the paradox of audiences praising Rose's agency is that her search for autonomy required a complete surrender of it. There is a sense of awareness about her appeal, and in that is also an understanding of Filipinas' position of subordination.

American military presence in the Philippines in the early and mid 1900s cultivated a burgeoning prostitution district around the bases for soldiers' rest and relaxation – a prostitution district that still lives on today as a popular site for sex tourists (Ralston & Keeble, 2009). A report by the Philippine Women Centre of B.C (2000) found that at the beginning of the 2000s, the Philippines topped all other countries in Southeast Asia for the number of women in prostitution, standing at 600,000. And in response to increasingly strict immigration laws abroad and the dwindling economy in the Philippines (Root et al., 1997), Filipinas turned to arranged marriages to foreign men in 'First World' countries through mail-order bride sites, 'pen pal' sites, and sex tourism agencies to help provide for their families and carve out pathways to immigration (Cunneen & Stubbs, 2000; Root et al., 1997). Filipinas who enter these marriages face a disproportionate risk of violence compared to women in the general population of their new host countries. According to Cunneen & Stubbs (2000), the representation of Filipinas among victims of domestic

¹An important note: it could be argued that Rose was truly interested in Ed. While this may well be the case, the television show places heavy emphasis on storylines implicated with mail-order bride-related issues (eg. The premise of the show predicated on the K-9 visa, Rose's sister asking Ed for money, Ed's friends fearing he's being 'scammed'). For this reason, the audience is led to interpret the storyline in this manner. As audience consumption of *90 Day Fiancé* is the focus of the second part of this paper, the relationship will be viewed through the lens of the mail-order bride market.

violence-related homicides stands at six times that of the general Australian population, speaking to the dangers of the culture of white supremacy. These conditions have set the stage for shows like *90 Day Fiancé*, which capitalize on men like Ed travelling across the globe to find their perfect foreign wife. And yet all of this is concealed under the guise of selling a story for the sake of reality TV. The entertainment value of the show generates audience responses that validate these systems of inequality in the name of a false sense of individual female liberation.

The following paper will analyze this double-layered commodification of Filipino mail-order-brides and prostitution through a number of theoretical lenses including Marxist understandings of class and commodity fetishism, Frantz Fanon and W. E. B. DuBois' theories of race, various Filipino scholars' work on the condition of Filipinos, and some mention of work by feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman. It will take an intersectional approach to understanding the historical and contemporary oppression of Filipinas and attempt to interpret the implications of audience responses to these 'success stories.' It will begin by discussing the conditions set by the colonial period that enable the first commodification of Filipinas as sex objects. It will then propose the existence of a second layer of commodification which capitalizes on relationships formed through sex tourism and mail-order bride markets to produce entertainment commodities. This will be done using primary research on audience responses to the TV program *90-day Fiancé*, taking a sample of 600 comments from the YouTube comments section of Ed and Rose's segment on the show to understand audience responses. The findings from this analysis will then be connected to existing literature to deepen an understanding of the current state of Filipina objectification in the entertainment and mass media age. Ultimately, this paper will use these theories to argue that these two layers of commodification work in tandem to conceal the continued oppression of Filipinas and justify global systems of inequality that 'necessitate' mail order bride markets and prostitution.

Creating Oppression: Theories of Colonization, Race, and Gender

In recent history, voices calling for the empowerment of women have advocated for fighting against the image of the woman as docile and demure. Such arguments begin with the work of feminist scholars such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who scrutinizes these restrictive roles for women (Perkins Gilman, 1898). Pointing out the relative agency and productivity that the female sex has in other animal species, Perkins Gilman criticizes the patriarchy in subordinating women and creating cultural scripts that marginalize them (Perkins Gilman, 1898). While she is somewhat cognizant of women in other societies as having a better social position (Perkins Gilman, 1898), her explanation for this lies almost exclusively in economic relationships. While certainly important, her analysis

discounts the role of particularly Western social institutions' roles in moralizing and oppressing women, not to mention omitting conversations of race. Looking at the position of Filipinas before and after colonization can provide important insight into how women have been oppressed and the role of Western institutions (beyond the economy; including legislation, education, and religion, among others) that have factored into this oppression. In the Philippines, these Western institutions form the first layer of Filipina oppression: creating the conditions that enable the commodification of Filipinas.

From what is known of Filipinas' position prior to colonization (and when looking at indigenous groups that maintain their customs) women enjoyed an equal position to men. In an ethnography by an American anthropologist dated in 1943, the author writes of the Filipino people: "It is difficult to imagine an attitude of more complete non-discrimination between the sexes" (Kroeber, 1943, pp. 155). Far from their counterparts in the West, Filipinas enjoyed privileges such as the freedom to dissolve marriages, own property, and manage income and wealth (Kroeber, 1943; Benitez et al., 1937). But when the Spaniards arrived in 1521, so did Christian moral standards of women's place in society. More specifically, women are entirely reliant on men, highly restricted, and relegated to the 'nonprofitable' housework so criticized by Perkins Gilman (Aguja, 2013). While interpretations of women in the bible have changed over the years, those at the time stressed the need to control women (Aguja, 2013). From the temptation of Eve who unleashed suffering unto humanity to the words of prominent Christian figures such as Saint Augustine proclaiming that women are "unstable animals," misogyny was coded into the Christianization of Filipinos (Aguja, 2013). Archived letters detailing the voyage of colonizer Miguel López De Legazpi in the Philippines denounce the insolence of the Filipinas roaming freely around the trading zones, "an evil which Legazpi, although he posted sentenials [sic], was unable to stamp out" (Blair & Robertson, 1907). With the imposition of Christian moral standards and the enforcement of a racial hierarchy, Filipinas were doubly oppressed as women and 'natives' (Aguja, 2013).

Like many other colonial subjects across the globe, the introduction of racial hierarchies brought about an internalization and awareness of Filipino's own inferiority, what W. E. B. DuBois refers to as the 'double consciousness' and what Fanon describes extensively in his own work on colonial mentality (DuBois, 1903; Fanon, 1952). Filipino psychologist E. J. R. David furthers Fanon's work in his own book, *Brown Skin, White Minds*, detailing the specific manifestations of colonial mentality in the Philippines and how the internalized psychological processes borne from both Spanish and American colonization primed Filipinos to praise, prize, and serve white people (David, 2013). Much like Fanon's observations, this internalized inferiority culminates into a desire to abandon their heritage and completely assimilate themselves into white society (Fanon, 1952). This is evident in the mass migration of Filipinos outside of the country, the disdain with which such immigrants speak about the Philippines and their heritage, but also in the presence of unconscious psychological bias (David, 2013). In one of the various psychological studies by E. J. R. David and Sumie Okazaki, when presented with Filipino-related stim-

uli prior to completing a fill-in-the-blank task, participants were more likely to complete the ambiguous word ‘_ _ _ ERIOR’ (which could be completed in other ways including ‘interior’, ‘exterior, etc.) with the word ‘INFERIOR’ (David, 2013). In contrast, when primed with American-related stimuli, participants were more likely to complete the ambiguous word with ‘SUPERIOR’ (David, 2013). To test the replicability of these results, the same study was also carried out recruiting participants from a regional Filipino conference, under the assumption that these individuals would be more likely to take pride in their heritage (David, 2013). Despite this, researchers observed the same patterns (David, 2013). The forces of colonization consequently guide how one experiences and operates in the world: as a racialized body first and a person second (Fanon, 1952). And in the words of DuBois, awareness of one’s position of inferiority, or the awareness that all interactions will be colored by others’ responses to their racialized body thus creates an awareness that one cannot exist as their authentic self in the world (DuBois, 1903). But here, one may also notice a gendered lens to Filipina double-consciousness: not only is she aware of her Filipino-ness but is also aware of her womanhood in the context of her Filipino-ness.

Also worthy of note is the thought processes of the oppressors in justifying the commodification of Filipinas. Nestled at the gateway between the Americas and East Asia, the Philippines was an important strategic location for the American military (Ralston & Keeble, 2009). After claiming the Philippines from the Spanish, the Philippines would enter yet another period of colonial rule (Ralston & Keeble, 2009). Combined with a decline in the agricultural sector, Filipinas were pushed to the cities, finding work as prostitutes for American soldiers around the military bases (Ralston & Keeble, 2009). Thanks to the Filipino and American governments’ promotion of prostitution as a legitimate need for the rest and relaxation of soldiers, a booming sex district was born (Ralston & Keeble, 2009). In another callback to Fanon’s work, once the American men returned to the United States to find women’s power movements in full swing, Filipina women were made even more attractive for what they lacked compared to white women: a sense of liberation² (Ralston & Keeble, 2009). As a result, much like Fanon’s observations of how the racialized person exists not as themselves, but in relation to their white counterparts (Fanon, 1952), the appeal of Filipinas is tied directly to their white counterparts. These attitudes continue to this day, with Ralston & Keeble’s (2009) ethnography on sex tourists in the Philippines noting that a very common point of conversation among the men is their disdain for liberated white women and their subsequent preference for the affectionate, kind Filipino girls. Following this logic, to foreign men, Filipinas are compliant, submissive, and prizing the attention of white men – all qualities borne from internalized racial inferiority – which makes them the perfect wives (Ralston & Keeble, 2009). All these elements: the double-

²This is not meant to insinuate that Filipinas are docile or submissive, as this would only reproduce the silent stereotypes that Filipina feminism aims to resist. Rather, this is intended to highlight the extent to which Filipinas became aware of their subordinate position in the ‘racial hierarchy,’ and that as a result of colonization the general social climate had become such that ideas of the ‘well behaved Filipina woman’ set stricter limits on the extent to which this liberation may be practiced and how well it would be received.

consciousness, internalized racial inferiority, dependency on men, and an openness and desire to be a part of the colonizer's world all culminate into the first layer of Filipina commodification: the mail-order bride market.

Marx and Mail-Order Brides

In her book *Women and Economics*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman states that the work done by women is unproductive, and the deskilling of women in the home contributes to their increasing dependency on men (Perkins Gilman, 1898). While this was certainly true in an industrial context, in a service economy, especially in a country that relies so heavily on tourism and entertainment, 'feminine' work is now productive work. Somewhat tragically and prophetically, Perkins Gilman states that it would be barbaric and inhumane if women were quantified for the quality of their work as mothers (Perkins Gilman, 1898) – but this is precisely the current experience of Filipinas. Filipino immigrants are undergoing a 'feminization of migration,' in which females are disproportionately represented among immigrants (Philippine Women's Center of B.C, 2000), but more importantly, they are quite literally being commodified for their potential as wives. Cunneen & Stubbs (2000) detail the disturbingly dehumanizing processes through which foreign men can 'purchase' Filipinas, including 'add to order' buttons, filtering by age, height, and weight, and freebies of wallets and erotica with one's 'order.' Though published nearly 22 years ago, upon investigation of the sites mentioned in the paper, it was discovered that some of them are still very active.

When describing the mail-order bride in the context of commodification, it is firstly important to understand mail-order brides in the context of Marx's models of labor, production, and his definitions of commodities. In Karl Marx's original work on commodity fetishism, he described a process whereby the increasing degrees of separation between producer and consumer under industrial capitalism have erased the personal and social nature of transaction (Marx et al., 1981; Marx et al., 1993). Prior to industrial capitalism, transactions formed direct social connections between producer and consumer: consumers knew the work being put into their commodities, and knew the people behind the production (Marx et al., 1981; Marx et al., 1993). This encouraged consumers to pay for commodities in direct proportion to the value of the commodity as well as the labor put into it (Marx et al., 1981; Marx et al., 1993). But without those bonds, value can be assigned without consumers having to consider the work put into the commodity: thus to the consumer under capitalism, the commodity exists divorced from human hands, what Marx called 'commodity fetishism' (Marx et al., 1981; Marx et al., 1993). As such, items can be priced and revenue can be distributed to maximize profit for capitalists while minimizing earnings to the workers who put the labor into producing said commodity (Marx et al., 1981, Marx et al., 1993). As Marx discussed commodity fetishism, production,

and labor, most of his work focused on the production of material goods (Marx et al., 1993; Marx et al., 1981). This is to be expected, as he was writing within an industrial context. However, within a mail-order bride market, the ‘commodities’ are individuals themselves: Filipinas as the idealized image of the perfect wife. On the Filipina’s part, therefore, ‘labor’ is all that being a wife to a foreign man entails. And, like Marx’s understanding of creating commodified products, the laborer, the woman, is subordinate to this product of her labor (Marx et al., 1981). For some of the few women who do try to detach themselves from this ‘product’ they have generated and find a sense of independence away from their husbands, they pay with their lives (Cunneen & Stubbs, 2000). And even for those who don’t, a report by the Development Action for Women Network (DAWN) based in the Philippines found that Filipinas who return from sex work in Japan describe a sense of dissociation, and describe themselves only in physical terms rather than other traits (Montañez et al., 2003), a marker of the all-encompassing and individual-erasing nature of their labor (Marx et al., 1981).

Key to a Marxist analysis of the mail-order bride market is understanding the earnings of their labor (Marx et al., 1981). Beyond securing a life for themselves, Filipinas ‘labor’ for their families, with many Filipina mail-order brides sending remittances back home (Philippine Womens’ Center of B.C [PWCBC], 2000). Filipinos abroad, including mail-order brides, are the Philippines’ top generator of foreign currency (PWCBC, 2000), to the point where emigration is even endorsed by the World Bank and International Money Fund as development strategies (Ralston & Keeble, 2009). Human capital also stands as the nation’s number one export (PWCBC, 2000). Profit generated by the labor of the women, therefore, is appropriated by the government and the initial commodification of Filipinas must be understood as an exploitative relationship. One example is the government support of Filipinas sent to work in Japan as ‘Performance Artists.’ These women are scouted by ‘talent agencies’ that recruit young Filipinas to work as ‘Performance Artists’ in Japanese entertainment bars, but upon arrival are confronted with numerous responsibilities not mentioned in the job description including going on dates with patrons (many of which end with intimate activity) (Montañez et al., 2003). Though the government outwardly condemns the practice, institutions made by the government to protect the dignity of these women partake in issuing the ‘Artist Record Books’ required for these women to continue their work in Japan (Montañez et al., 2003). In summary, exploitative sexual labor practices must be understood as a practice of commodification by a government that appropriates their earnings – not just objectification by individuals.

The commodity fetishism involved in purchasing Filipina mail-order brides is extensively discussed in existing literature. In a quite literal fetishization of Filipinas, consumers (white men) idolize the image of a perfect wife, concealing all that is behind the labor that goes into creating that product. What is less obvious is the role that television programs and popular responses to these stories play in validating systems that continue to commodify Filipinas. This paper will now turn to *90 Day Fiancé* as an example.

Methodology

The following analysis will focus on the case of Ed and Rose, a couple consisting of Ed, a white male from the United States, and Rose, from the Philippines. The most recent 100 comments on 6 clips relating to Ed and Rose's segment on TLC's YouTube channel were collected, totalling to 600 comments. Though the most popular comments could have been sampled, the most recent comments were deemed to be more reflective of the general population, including more distasteful comments that may not be widely accepted by viewers but are still important in understanding a general population's response to the show. Comments were entered into NVivo coding software, where open coding was performed on the comments. Coding methods were derived from Johnny Saldaña's 2016 coding manual (Saldaña, 2016). Codes were then aggregated into common themes found among the comments.

Results

Audiences may interact with the show through the act of sharing, liking, and commenting, all of which indicate engagement with the entertainment commodity. Many comments are indicative of the interpretive nature of watching a reality TV show.³ In line with Saldaña's (2016) coding methods, multiple processes were coded throughout the transcripts that displayed how audiences engage with the show. These codes included processes such as interpreting (2) (3) and empathizing (1).

- (1) God she must hate herself for dating this asshole. I'm so sorry for her, I really am !!! That her circumstances were that bad that she needed to be intimate with that horrible person. I can't even imagine what she's been through ..
- (2) Rose looks disappointed somewhat. Sitll trying to digest the truth about his appearance. Whatever she is saying to him, sounds more like she is being polite and not offend him.. but Ed has many doubts for the start itself.. like STD? Really..
- (3) Ed's main issue was he saw her as a mindless trophy/fantasy that he could mold. But not being fluent in a particular language and being a fool are two different things.

³Each comment is intentionally so written. Spelling and grammatical errors are transcribed verbatim, as corrections may change the meaning of the message or the intended informality of the digital space.

As reality TV is ultimately a storytelling medium, following characters throughout the story arc are a large part of consuming entertainment commodities. One common response among the comments analyzed included praising Rose. Comments about Rose also tended to empower Rose and praised the success she saw after the show. Many comments praising her success included terms such as “better life” and “upgrade.” Notions of ‘hard work’ and ‘upgrading’ as seen in (4) and (5) praise the ‘work’ she did to get where she is today. Exactly what this ‘work’ is will be interpreted in the discussion section. Notions of ‘upgrading’ also appear to be tied to a global hierarchy of countries as seen in (5) which rest on the implied inferiority of the Philippines. Colloquial phrases such as ‘yass’ (4) and ‘Queen’ (6) are also terms that are commonly associated with feminine role models, implying a degree of admiration, idolization, and highlighting the exceptionalism of a subject.

- (4) This was recommended to me after I watched Rose's new home tour 😊. She worked hard to provide a better life for her family without a man. Yass Rose 🌹👩🏻
- (5) Wow, Rose really upgraded! Maybe one day she'll be living in my country.
- (6) I just watched Rose's video of her renovating her room and came back to see this. Pretty amazing how Rose has come up. Queen 😊😊

Rose also supplemented the entertainment quality of the show, with many comments responding to her reactions, emotions, and attitude throughout the show, indicating investment and connection with Rose as a character.

Of the 600 comments analyzed for this paper, 157 in some way mocked or insulted Ed, by far the code with the largest number of recorded cases. Common points included his needing to go to another country to search for women and his intolerance of the living conditions in the Philippines, but by far most comments mocked his physical appearance.

- (7) Deep inside rose mind is I CANT BELIEVE THAT THERE IS A DWARF IN FRONT OF ME. 🤡🤡🤡 i watched long time ago but can't still stop laughing watching this again 🤡🤡🤡
- (8) The way the sister was looking at ed with otter confusion and wtf is this 🤡🤡 I don't blame her 🤡
- (9) My mom said “HE HAS NO NECK HOW WILL HE GET TO TURN TURN VERY SHORT NO KISS FOR HIM” i bearsts in tears and laughed 😂😂😂😂😂😂😂

Many comments about his appearance tended to especially belittle him in a way that emasculated him, with words such as “baby” or “little” appearing frequently among emasculating comments as seen in comments 10-12. These comments were frequently accompanied with phrases such as “lol” (laughing out loud), “lmao” (laughing my ass off), emojis indicating laughter (such as the sobbing emoji, laughing crying emoji, or other smiley emojis), or other expressions of amusement or laughter.

(10) Oh my God! Is he wearing tights or leggings with his baby boy shorts?...lol

(11) Discusting little man without neck

(12) He should be referred to as Rosemarie's baby.

These expressions of amusement indicate that the show succeeds in eliciting response from the audience, a key component in the consumption of reality television. Important to note is that this comedic value also enabled the propagation and longevity of the entertainment commodity through processes of sharing the show with others (9) or rewatching the show (7). Other emotional responses to the show notably included expressions of disgust or anger. Though many of these comments did seem to acknowledge the problematic power dynamics at play in the relationship, very few comments recognized systems of oppression at play. Rather, the vast majority of these expressions of disgust were displaced onto Ed, who is portrayed as the ‘bad actor’ in the situation. This ‘individualization effect’ was also applied to Rose and her family, with some comments blaming Rose or her family’s greed.

(13) Never understood. How men can be that stupid About trying to get love in such poor part of the world.

(14) I get he’s more reserve then ED but going to a third world country for love and some badussy is the most failed man with negative testosterone move

(15) Im sure her dad forced her 😏😏

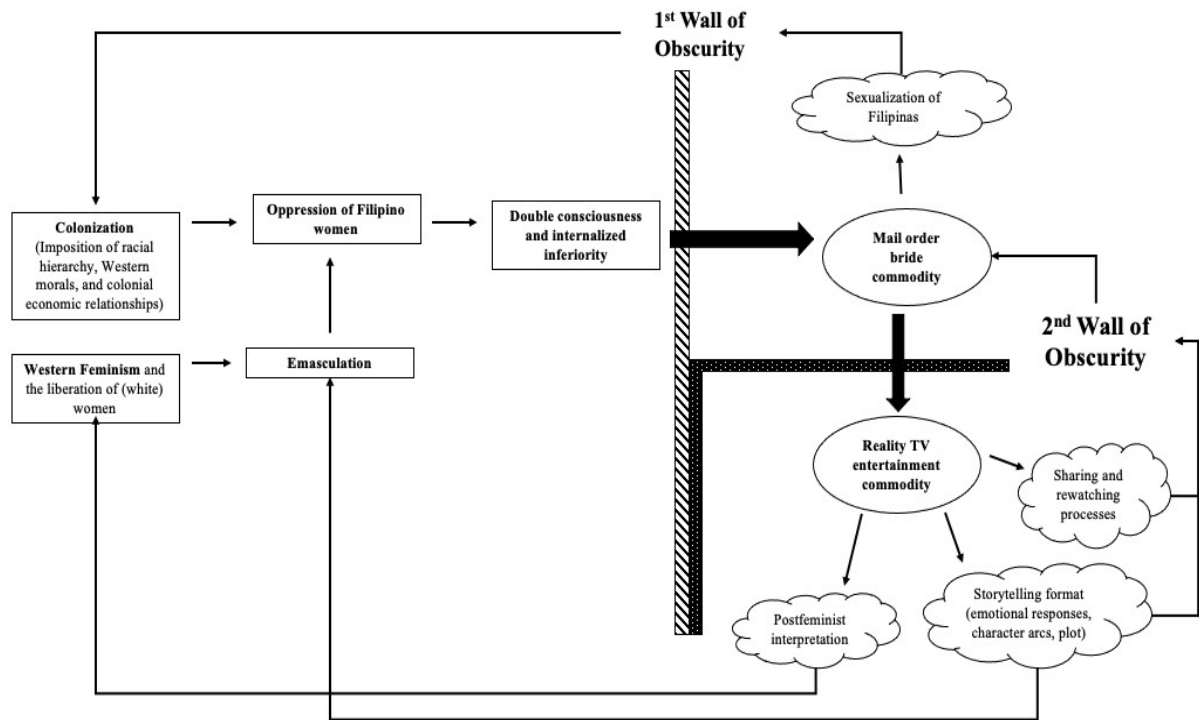
(16) Anything for the US Citizenship 🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏

The next section will attempt to summarize and interpret the aforementioned findings by incorporating the results with theory discussed in previous sections and expanding on those theories.

Discussion

Up to this point, this paper has discussed the first layer of commodity fetishism and has also outlined through empirical evidence how audiences engage with the new entertainment commodity. This section will proceed to interlink these two layers through integrating previous theory with the data gathered. It will outline how these two layers of commodity fetishism interact and reinforce one another to generate a more complex understanding of Filipina oppression in a contemporary entertainment age. To aid in illustrating these processes of interaction and reinforcement, refer to Figure 1.

Figure 1. Model of Double-Layered Commodification.



The processes on the leftmost side of the diagram are largely what have been discussed in the literature review section of this paper. Here, two ‘lines of processes’ can be observed: processes of colonization (the upper row of processes), and gendered processes (the lower row). Both have been previously discussed in the literature review and theoretical overview, and the diagram illustrates the interconnectivity between these systems of gender and colonization. The diagram also makes a new intervention in understanding the persistence of these systems. It includes the commodities that have arisen from these systems and highlights how consumption (fetishization) of these commodities generates

a cyclical reinforcing effect of inequality maintenance and commodity production and consumption.

As a short summary of the model, colonization's unequal distribution of wealth, construction of a racial hierarchy, and Western morality create the preconditions for the social and economic subordination of Filipinas. The oppression of Filipinas is reinforced by Western feminism creating a sense of emasculation in white men, leading them to seek companionship in disadvantaged foreign women. Awareness of and immersion in these systems creates a double consciousness and internalized inferiority that manifests in the existence of mail-order bride partnerships as a survival tactic: the first commodity. Then, reality television has stepped in and commodified the first commodity, generating a new entertainment commodity.

Another key intervention of the diagram is the inclusion of 'walls of obscurity': mental barriers formed through the process of commodity consumption (and thus commodity fetishism) that obscure the underlying oppressive systems of colonization and gender. Therefore, as entertainment commodities (reality TV) commodify existing commodities (mail-order brides), the original systems of oppression are increasingly concealed through new walls of obscurity. This 'multilayered obscurity effect' is illustrated in a double-layered wall that now stands between the 'reality TV' commodity and the underlying systems. It is important to understand that these walls of obscurity do not erase these underlying systems, but make it so more effort is required to see them. Specific mechanisms of obscuring (and therefore processes of fetishization) are illustrated in cloud bubbles and are what have been gathered as primary data for this paper. This paper will now turn to a deconstruction of the primary data to illustrate these processes at work.

Gendered Processes: Interpretations and Constructions of Men and Women

To begin, highly gendered processes are present in the data: namely, the construction of men and women. Previously, the implications of Western feminism's success on the desirability of Filipinas to white men was discussed. One other effect of the progress of Western women has also been ideological changes within the field of feminism. At least in the West, feminists have succeeded in achieving the basic demands outlined by the work of classical feminists like Charlotte Perkins Gilman (successes which have mostly been restricted to white, cisgender, heterosexual women). In response, the trend that has arisen in recent years is a tendency towards 'postfeminism.' Postfeminism stresses the power of women as consumers and the market's power in shaping social institutions, and as such tends to take an individualized and therefore neoliberal approach towards female liberation (Banet-Weiser, 2018). It is a micro-level approach about how women choose to operate within the patriarchal system rather than problematizing it (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Postfeminist approaches also tend to take a highly narrow understanding of female oppression which does not integrate intersectional approaches (Banet-Weiser, 2018). In

doing so, postfeminism denounces the need for feminism so long as the individual takes the initiative to find her own freedom, thus invisibilizing intersectional feminist struggles such as the struggles of Filipinas (Banet-Weiser, 2018). These sentiments were seen continuously throughout the discourse analysis data, as evidenced in comments praising Rose's success. Comments that praised her tended to include notions of her initiative and hard work, which stand in line with neoliberal postfeminist ideas of liberation. These comments also perceived her success as a woman as divorced from her position as a Filipina, thus ignoring the differential inequality that she faces, which also stands in line with postfeminism's tendency to lack intersectionality. Through the lens of postfeminism, Rose is interpreted as agentic and autonomous despite the position of vulnerability that she and women like her must put themselves into (and as discussed previously, sometimes with lethal consequences). Understanding these audience responses can provide important insight into the state of feminism today. Considering how responses to Rose's segment of *90 Day Fiancé* validated rather than problematized these unequal dynamics in the name of entertainment due to their postfeminist stance, the cycle of oppression and commodification continues (Figure 1). In this way, the continued oppression of Filipinas is at the hands of 'feminism'⁴ itself.

As discussed previously, the empowerment of Western women has prompted the withdrawal of white men from Western dating pools and incentivized partnerships with foreign women including Filipinos. A lot of the appeal of foreign sex tourism or partnerships is rooted in a sense of emasculation or a need to affirm one's masculinity, either due to spitefulness towards feminism or women not finding them attractive (Cunneen & Stubbs, 2000; Ralston & Keeble, 2009). As evidenced in the abundance of emasculating responses to Ed, participating in Ed's emasculation is a strong driver for engagement with the show. Often accompanied with expressions of amusement, comments often called his appearance "disgusting," comparing him to a baby, and generally expressing shock as to how he could possibly attract a woman. These comments unknowingly affirm the very reason why Ed and men like him participate in sex tourism and foreign partnerships (Ralston & Keeble, 2009). Moreover, not only do these comments continue to perpetuate the cycle of emasculation and predation, but they also obscure the danger inherent in this predation. Previous literature has asserted the heightened risk of Filipinas who enter these partnerships. But by emasculating, infantilizing, and mocking Ed, the potential for problematic or dangerous outcomes are obscured. Such responses and interpretations contribute to the continued preference for foreign women, contributing to the subordination of Filipinas. Not only does this emasculation factor contribute to engagement with this particular segment of *90 Day Fiancé*, but it was popular enough that Ed returned on TLC with multiple recurring segments on *90 Day Fiancé* spinoff shows such as *90 Day Fiancé: Happily Ever After* and *90 Day Fiancé: The Single Life* (TLC, n.d). In

⁴Scare quotes are used intentionally here to emphasize that rather than being a valid feminist approach, postfeminist feminism is more of a misguided but highly popular interpretation of feminism compared to the many other existing feminist traditions that are more inclusive of universal female liberation.

short, emasculation from audiences, one form of engagement with and fetishization of the entertainment commodity, obscures the effects of emasculation and reinforces cycles of commodifying Filipina women to fulfill a need to reassert one's masculinity (Figure 1).

Bad Actors, Not Bad Systems

Critical to an understanding of how engaging with entertainment commodities contributes to the ongoing obscuring and maintenance of systems of inequality is understanding how the storytelling nature of reality TV personalizes system-level issues. Or, in other words, how system-level issues are displaced onto individual 'bad actors,' taking the liability away from the systems that enable their behavior. This process of 'personalization' was a strong theme seen in the data. Viewers had tended to blame Ed for Rose's mistreatment or blame his personal desperation and lack of appeal for his decision to search for foreign wives. Both behaviors, which are rooted in colonial-era racial hierarchies and gender dynamics respectively, are instead personified by Ed's existence. This enables audiences to have an individual to focus their attention and direct their blame to, obscuring the mail-order bride market and the demand for mail order brides as sexual commodities (Figure 1). Instead, this relationship is interpreted as a one-off, individual instance. And comments that do recognize the sexual exploitative undertones of the relationship (those able to see past the 'second wall of obscurity' created by reality TV) still fail to recognize the colonial-racial roots of the exploitation of Filipinas, and isolate the sin of sex tourism to the individual men participating in it (and can therefore be said to fail to see past the 'first wall of obscurity'). Colonial exploitation is thus reinforced as sex tourism continues to make a profit and television networks continue to create new entertainment products that generate profit (Figure 1).

Watching Practices Indicating Engagement with Commodity

Finally, the ultimate goal of the commodity under capitalism is to produce more of itself to generate maximum profit. Establishing that viewers are engaging with the TV show, sharing the TV show bringing in new viewers (consumers), and rewatching the show indicates that the entertainment commodity is successful. Marxist analyses of consumption stress that it is crucial to understand that consumption under capitalism obscures exploitative production processes (Marx et al., 1981; Marx et al., 1993), and analyzing audience responses to *90 Day Fiancé* provide empirical support for what Marx theorized. The success of the commodity promotes continued production, which creates cycles of exploitation that continue to go unacknowledged.

Conclusion

This paper has provided a new way of understanding Filipina commodification by identifying the phenomenon of double commodification, with each new layer further obscuring underlying systems of inequality. It has also deconstructed the mechanisms by which this obscuring happens by applying a Marxist commodity fetishism lens to understanding engagement with commodities, particularly entertainment commodities. Through an analysis of Youtube comments on clips of *90 Day Fiancé*, a television show that commodifies relationships that are themselves built on commodification enabled by systems of colonization and gender dynamics, this paper has interpreted how audience engagement with entertainment commodities are reflective of this ‘double-layered commodification’ process. The information gathered from the literature review and primary data analysis allowed for the proposal of a model that illustrates the cyclical process of commodity fetishism fortifying walls of obscurity, which in turn uphold systems of inequality that give rise to further commodification and commodity fetishism. Some of these mechanisms of fetishization include postfeminist interpretations of female empowerment, the storytelling format of reality TV displacing system-level oppression onto personified ‘bad actors,’ and watching practices promoting the propagation of the new entertainment commodity. As this entertainment commodity obscures the pervasiveness and harm of the mail-order-bride and sex tourism markets, the original gender dynamics and colonial relationships underpin the continued exploitation of Filipinas. Expanding beyond Marx’s original conceptualization of commodity fetishism, in a post-industrial era where human bodies are themselves capital, it is vital to understand who is most vulnerable - and how that vulnerability can be multiplied by the effects of race, colonial history, and gender. Though Rose has seen her success from the show, many women are not as lucky. Thus, this paper calls for a more intersectional, global, and especially anticolonial direction for feminism: while (some) Western women have earned their freedoms, feminism is far from over.

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