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Original Article

Stifled, invisible, and threatened: cultural appropriation in K-pop through the lens of identity-negotiating fans of color

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Abstract

Through a series of in-depth interviews, this article investigates how fans of color negotiate incidents of cultural appropriation in K-pop. Respondents employed various coping mechanisms to navigate the impact of such offenses while simultaneously grappling with the dissonance arising from negotiating alienating rhetoric and their own cultural identities. Criticism of cultural appropriation incidents was met with severe backlash, particularly exacerbating the marginalization faced by Native American fans who encountered underrepresentation and limited support. Drawing attention to the paradoxical interplay of globalization and ethnic nationalism in Korea, this research unveils a troubling cycle in which incidents of cultural appropriation in K-pop silence and render fans of color invisible within hostile environments.

Keywords: cultural appropriation, fandom, global cultural flows, K-pop, racial hierarchy.

Despite receiving global recognition and success, a multitude of performers in the K-pop industry have been subject to criticism for appropriating elements from other cultures. Examples include artists from Blackpink, BTS, Exo, and Got7 wearing dreadlocks, cornrows, or box braids (AllKpop, 2017; Ke, 2022), T-ara using headdresses and war paint as aesthetic accessories (Ngamlana, 2018), Mamammoo wearing blackface during a concert (Herman, 2017), Wendy of Red Velvet mimicking a stereotyped African American woman on a game show (AllKpop, 2018), and Jihyo of Twice wearing a stereotypical Native American costume for Halloween and introducing herself as "Indian Jihyo" (Koreaboo, 2018). Scholars such as Jung (2014) have highlighted a global K-pop cultural dissemination model, or online social network distribution practices that allow for "simultaneous, multidirectional and transnational circulations" (p. 114) in which the media functions as a mechanism of social accountability and space for debate regarding what someone should be held accountable for and how (Bonner, 2009). With the proliferation of social media and a parallel surge in demand for political correctness and accountability, K-pop fans are no exception to using their social media presence to point out perceived wrongdoings of public figures. In response to incidents of cultural appropriation, fans have organized awareness campaigns and written collective letters to companies asking for a public apology. Yet on the opposite end of the spectrum, fans have covered up missteps and toxic behavior, promoting ignorance toward artists they feel loyal and protective of (Tantra, 2020). Previous studies on related topics have primarily focused on descriptive analyses examining African American music traditions in K-pop (Anderson, 2016), exploring the performance of Blackness in the K-pop industry by closely reading K-pop performers' bodies as they appear in music videos (S.Y. Kim, 2020), or investigating the authenticity of South Korean hip hop culture (Hare & Baker, 2017). Through a series of in-depth interviews with K-pop fans of color, this study addresses a gap in the literature by examining the impact of cultural appropriation on K-pop fandoms and its wider implications.

Literature review

Situating cultural appropriation within the Korean wave

Despite its ubiquitous use across a variety of disciplines, the term appropriation "remains conceptually unstable" (Ashley & Plesch, 2002, para. 1). Theorists such as Said (1978) have resorted to a binary cultural relations model in which one prevailing culture appropriates a weaker, other culture that lacks any say in its representation; however, postcolonial scholars such as Parry (1987) have argued such an approach reinforces the dominance of the West, thus have advocated a comprehensive model that recognizes the diverse and dynamic discursive practices of imperialism. To parse out varying degrees of power and resistance, Rogers (2006) suggests a retheorization of cultural appropriation by defining four types: cultural exchange, dominance, exploitation, and transculturation. As the level of power of the parties involved and the nature of their interaction is central to this retheorization, K-pop most closely fits the definition of transculturation, or "cultural elements created from and/or by multiple cultures (. . .) multiple cultural appropriations structured in the dynamics of globalization and transnational capitalism creating hybrid forms" (p. 477).

Within the context of globalization, the Korean Wave has been characterized as a meaningful contra-flow against the Western-dominant global flow of transnational pop culture (Ju, 2018). Contra-flows refer to media flows that do not originate from a dominant central source, such as the US, but instead from other global peripheries (Thussu, 2006). A term used to describe the international spread of South Korean cultural products, the "Korean Wave" or "Hallyu" first emerged as a cultural phenomenon with the popularity of megahit dramas in East and Southeast Asian regions and has since captured North American and global audiences with the rise of K-pop culture fandom (Lansky, 2012). The Korean Wave demonstrates how "a country 'in between' can find a niche

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and reposition itself as an influential cultural mediator and creator in the midst of global cultural transformation" (Ryoo, 2009, p. 147). As captured by the cultural hybridization thesis, local agents "appropriate and articulate" global cultural forms to create a combined expression and new cultural space by embodying local tastes and traditions (Ryoo, 2009, p. 137). K-pop stars frequently diminish their Korean identity to appear more globalized (Jung, 2010), and the genre's success on a global scale can be attributed to the downplaying of traditional cultural traits, allowing for easy translatability (Lie, 2012).

While hybridity is what has enabled K-pop to easily cross foreign borders, the same cannot be said of the way foreigners are embraced in reverse. Although South Korea transitioned from emphasizing ethnic homogeneity as a source of pride to adopting more liberal immigration policies and promoting itself as a "multicultural" society in the early 2000s, migrants continue to face intersectional discrimination due to their working-class status, darker skin, and limited Korean language skills (H.A. Kim, 2020; Udor & Yoon, 2022). According to Pak (2002), Koreans hold feelings of inferiority when compared to White people, and their biases including the perception of "dark Southeast Asians" as inferior, are passed down through generations due to the lack of attention to racial discrimination in school curricula. For over three decades, Korean media has featured negative depictions of individuals of African descent that are widely accepted as "normal" comedy, and blackface has been used to both mock and legitimize negative stereotypes of Black individuals (Han, 2015). An analysis of Korean media discourse on migrants over two decades further demonstrates that migrants are often victimized and objectified, with racial prejudice concealed beneath the cliché rhetoric of political correctness and multiculturalism (Kim, 2012). Han (2012) describes the phenomena as a result of "nouveau-riche nationalism," in which Koreans rode the wave of explosive economic success to indulge in their ideology of "pure-blood" nationalism, using their platforms to display prejudices against foreigners outside their mono-racial heritage. In the context of globalization and media flows, marginalization is characterized as the systematic sidelining of individuals from mainstream discourse, leading to media invisibility or portrayals through marketable stereotypes, reinforcing a system of media privilege (Carilli, 2021). Despite K-pop's dominance in the global media environment, the racial attitudes reflected in Korean popular culture raise questions about whether their media content and interactions with others will become truly globalized (Han, 2015).

Cultural appropriation and K-pop fandom dynamics

K-pop has served as a genre uniting people from a variety of societies and communities across the world, driven by new media technologies that mobilize fan-based net activism (Jung, 2012). As the construction of identities is often examined at the intersection of fan studies and critical race theory, it is important to recognize that fan identity cannot exist independently of race, sexuality, or class; speaking on or being silenced about such subjects shapes the portrayal and perceptions of a "normalized" fan (Gatson & Reid, 2012). Addressing a conspicuous absence of race in fan studies, Pande and Moitra (2017) draw upon cybercultural and postcolonial theories to argue for the characterization of media fandom as a "postcolonial cyberspace." Though marketers and creators can observe fans and fans have unprecedented opportunities to talk back, such acquired leverage is not distributed equally due to traits of one's fan identity, including race, gender, and sexuality (Pande & Moitra, 2017).

K-pop fandom has demonstrated a history of activism, encompassing efforts such as hosting fundraisers, advocating for the rights of young artists, volunteering during emergencies, and supporting various charities (Jung, 2012). Notably, they have contributed over $1 million to the #BlackLivesMatter movement, used K-pop fancams to counteract racist accounts and hashtags, and even disrupted Trump rallies (Bruner, 2020). Amid the post-pandemic surge of anti-Asian hate, K-pop group BTS visited the White House to speak out against racism; their message was shared and amplified by ARMY, BTS's official fandom, which has been recognized as one of the most influential and devoted supporters in the music industry (Venkatraman, 2022). While some K-pop fans have gained recognition in the media for their influential role in political activism, others have raised concerns about the underlying hypocrisy of such actions. When fans voiced their discontent over incidents of cultural appropriation, they were overshadowed by other fans solely focused on protecting the reputation of their favorite idols (De Luna, 2020). Tantra (2020) uncovered instances where activism displayed by certain K-pop fans could be characterized as performative, for when an African American fan expressed apprehension regarding cultural misappropriation, they were swiftly dismissed and labeled as "antis" or "haters" (Tantra, 2020). Moreover, some fans invoked an artist or group's previous political activism as a defense against accusations of problematic behavior, suggesting that their charitable contributions negated any possibility of racial bias (Herbrink, 2020, p. 37). While scholars, including Jin (2016), highlight the importance of contextualizing local cultural formations within global structures by examining historical components, not all K-pop fans share the same perspective on the cultural understanding K-pop artists should possess concerning their diverse audience.

Method

This article addresses the following research questions: How do K-pop fans of color negotiate critique against incidents of cultural appropriation with their identities as K-pop fans? By extension, how do K-pop fans of color negotiate their identities as K-pop fans with their own cultural identities? And finally, do incidents of cultural appropriation in K-pop create opportunities for fans to reflect on broader racial implications and act upon them?

In order to address these research questions, in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 K-pop fans from the fall of 2020 until the summer of 2022. Five initial interviews were conducted with the help of Professor CedarBough Saeji, who posted a Tweet directing interested K-pop fans to the researcher, after which a snowball sampling method was employed due to its suitability for sensitive or private topics that require insiders' knowledge to locate potential participants (Noy, 2008). This study focused on K-pop fans in the US, which is the center of hegemonic media flows and home to a significant population of "ultra-socially engaged" K-pop fans (Herman, 2019, para. 1), making K-pop a meaningful contra-flow that challenges the Western dominated music industry (Ju, 2018). In-depth interviews were selected as the primary data collection method due to their ability to elicit

detailed perspectives, personal experiences, opinions, and emotions from participants (Milena et al., 2008). Interviews were conducted online through Zoom, averaging approximately 70 minutes each. Respondents ranged in age from 17 to 37 years old and identified with diverse backgrounds (See online supplementary material Table S1): nine Native American respondents (seven female, one male, one transmale and two-spirited); eight African American respondents (seven female, one non-binary); one Egyptian American respondent (female); one Native American and Mexican respondent (female), and one Barbadian respondent (female). All respondents identified as K-pop fans of color, with years as K-pop fans varying from three to 10 years.

To prepare interview questions, the researcher conducted comprehensive online research employing a broad array of platforms, including Google, YouTube, and Twitter, to conduct keyword-based searches pertaining to cultural appropriation in K-pop. The researcher acquired a comprehensive understanding of instances that K-pop fans discerned as instances of cultural appropriation and delved into the rhetoric characterizing online reactions and discussions on the subject matter. Prior to each interview, the researcher actively sought informed consent from the participants, thereby establishing a foundation of trust and fostering a secure and confidential environment. Participants were given the choice to remain anonymous, thus further ensuring their comfort and well-being. To cultivate a relaxed atmosphere, the researcher initiated the interviews with informal inquiries pertaining to the interviewee's favorite artists and involvement in fandom activities, gradually transitioning towards more substantial topics. Furthermore, the researcher maintained an ongoing line of communication following the interviews, reaffirming the participants' privacy preferences and extending an invitation for them to share any additional thoughts or concerns that they wished to express.

Results

Developing coping mechanisms for repeated incidents of cultural appropriation

All participants had encountered instances of cultural appropriation in K-pop or engaged in online conversations about such incidents, with all but one experiencing a situation where a K-pop artist they admired appropriated their own culture. Terms most frequently used by participants to describe their initial raw reaction when confronted with such incidents included pain, shock, anxiety, annoyance, and sadness. One respondent recalled Oh My Girl Yooa's promotional activity for "Bon Voyage," in which she wore face paint that has historically been used for the promotion of racist tropes (Li, n.d.):

> As a Native person, it's painful. I know what my ancestors have gone through and how their culture was taken from them by force (. . .) to see it reduced to that when we're trying to preserve it is hurtful. (Respondent five, Native American female)

Multiple respondents expressed that while every incident was upsetting, they were not surprised by them, and in some ways expected them to occur. One respondent described that there was always a sense of anxiety among fans (Respondent two, African American non-binary), who reacted with an attitude of "a deep sigh (. . .) here we go again" (Respondent seven, African American female) that left fans feeling "shocked but numb" (Respondent eight, African American female).

In response to the impact of such incidents, interviewees employed various strategies including humor, intellectualization, compartmentalization, and cutting ties. They particularly made an effort to place incidents of cultural appropriation in K-pop within a historical context, connecting them to the roots of the symbol, ritual, style, or behavior that was being appropriated. Respondent one, who identified as African American, noted the frustration of discussing cultural appropriation because adornments on idols were becoming increasingly divorced from their context, adding: "You can tell people cornrows are a product of slaves having to hide rice in their hair, but if you don't have that cultural context, you just keep seeing the same image after image (. . .) Then, what reason do you have you modify and change your behavior?" As did many other African American interviewees, respondent one addressed the Black Lives Matter movement, explaining that "our people generally use humor to overcome struggles." She noted that African American K-pop fans often made jokes about such incidents in the community as a way of overcoming trauma, similar to the way they coped with incidents of police brutality and systemic racism, explaining that "you have to laugh at the absurdity. Like these police that are supposed to serve and protect us, are they really serving and protecting us [laugh]?"

In addition, the participants voluntarily engaged in critical self-reflection regarding how their cultural background shaped their upbringing and influenced their perceptions of cultural appropriation in K-pop, even though the researcher had not specifically prompted such introspection. Reflecting on K-pop groups' use of *Aladdin*-esque outfits, one Egyptian American K-pop interviewee explained that she did not want to see images of her family's life as an aesthetic, yet it was "harder to parse because we grew up with them":

> I brushed off people reducing my culture (. . .) I experienced microaggressions since I was young, with other kids asking why is your skin darker, why does your hair look like that? I thought, why should they know any better? I was trying to temper the severity of it by telling myself, they might not be as aware as I think. (Respondent three, Egyptian American female)

Similarly, many participants engaged in critical reflection but soon dismissed the K-pop artists as simply unaware or compartmentalized their offenses. One interviewee noted that they did not think "the majority is mocking and malicious," yet pointed out that Mino of Winner wearing a Rasta wig was "much worse" than J-Hope of BTS wearing gel twists in a music video (Respondent two, non-binary African American). Similarly, while blackface was unanimously condemned and deemed unacceptable, participants brushed off other offenses and instead emphasized the homogeneity of Korean society and their consequential lack of understanding of other cultures. One respondent shared her opinion that "South Koreans have no cultural diversity as we do, so I try to be understanding in that way. I just wish they did a little more research to know the meaning behind things and understand things" (Respondent 16, Mexican and Native American female). Another Native American fan acknowledged Koreans' lack of understanding but said they were "pissed" to see Twitter threads among fans who were "surprised we [Native

Americans] have electricity or the Internet. That's the level of education we're dealing with" (Respondent nine, transmasculine, two-spirited Native American).

The K-pop group Dreamcatcher was particularly problematic for Native American fans. Respondent nine, who identified as a transmasculine, two-spirited Native American person, explained that during a push for unity in the 1970s among indigenous tribes, cultural items such as dreamcatchers were shared as a means of gaining political and economic power. However, they explained that the movement has since been abandoned and that the dreamcatcher is part of a "closed culture" for specific tribes. When the K-pop group Dreamcatcher made a comeback with each member using indigenous and sacred colors, he said it was "horribly offensive" as if they were saying: "We saw all your petitions and emails and stole more shit." Respondent 14, a Native American male K-pop fan, also said he actively avoided listening to them because he felt they were entirely profiting off Native American culture.

All respondents noted that while there have been some instances in which companies put forth a formal statement of apology and made amends, most instances of cultural appropriation were not followed up with any action. Nearly every single respondent expressed the sentiment that they were not being heard. "It keeps happening, and there's not even communication (. . .) They don't hear it," respondent seven said (African American female). Respondent two, an African American non-binary K-pop fan, recalled that Mnet MAMA awards had asked fans to submit their videos but left out those from fans of color, lamenting that "consistently, Black and Brown fans are erased from official media and erased in conversations about K-pop fans." Similarly, numerous participants expressed that they felt comparatively deprived of the full experience of being a K-pop fan.

The most proactive coping mechanisms employed by fans were distancing themselves from artists or cutting complete ties with them. Respondent one noted she would listen and engage with artists but refrain from buying an album, as "keeping those levels in check" would reduce her chance of being hurt and offended (Respondent one, African American female). Respondent six, an African American fan, noted that she did not support any groups from SM Entertainment because "if it continuously happens after 10 years, it means they don't care, and they're going to keep doing it." Respondent nine, a Native American transmasculine, two-spirited person, expressed how much it "sucked" but that they had to get rid of all BTS memorabilia they owned because they "felt sick" and "moving on from the group meant something." As fans of color exercised more caution with purchases, they questioned whether it made financial sense for K-pop artists and their companies to repeat the same mistakes. Respondent five, a Native American female fan, explained that a significant portion of content comprising the fandom economy was created or managed by K-pop fans of color and that fans turning away from K-pop acts due to the mishandling of such incidents would lead to declining profits.

Managing the dissonance of negotiating fan vs. cultural identities

Though fans employed various coping strategies to handle the pain of seeing their cultures appropriated in K-pop, they experienced a sense of dissonance while reconciling their fan identities with their cultural identities. Some fans cut out or distanced themselves from artists who repeatedly appropriated other cultures, yet many admitted resorting to other coping mechanisms, as they could not entirely give up K-pop. An alternative to White-dominant media, K-pop was a special genre and space for respondents as they felt more accepted and recognized elements of their own culture. However, this source of comfort and pleasure appeared to betray them, ultimately reinforcing their sense of distress and marginalization:

> K-pop is attractive because so much of it is based on my Black culture (. . .) I don't want to have to give it up, but I just want them to know *we* admire K-pop too (. . .) White people are not the only people that matter. (Respondent four, Barbadian female)

This sentiment resonates with the criticism faced by White artists like Gwen Stefani, who has faced frequent criticism for exploiting other cultures; Stefani recently encountered backlash for claiming "I'm Japanese" when questioned about her extensive use of the Harajuku subculture (Mendez II, 2023). A Twitter user responded, "I'm here for the Asian community flaming Gwen Stefani for her years of racism, cultural theft, and Orientalism. Now, keep that same energy and call out K-pop and the cultural appropriation by Asian musicians who profit from Black culture while being anti-Black" (Ojewumi, 2023). Respondents similarly expressed that cultural appropriation in K-pop felt more distressing than in other contexts, as it involved one marginalized group appropriating from another:

> Native people are ignored in America. There is a part of me that enjoys seeing people that aren't White; they're like my heroes. But they also make me feel like I've been forgotten. I don't have any control over the situation (. . .) It's quitting K-pop or enjoying the parts of it that are for me. (Respondent five, Native American female)

Another Native American participant who was drawn to K-pop due to her aesthetic similarities with Asians found a sense of belonging among performers with dark black hair and pale skin. While she now actively educates others on cultural appropriation, she confessed to previously being part of the problem, stating, "It was difficult to address [incidents of cultural appropriation] for a long time. Even when something bothered me, it was my safe space, which I protected by enabling it" (Respondent 12, Native American female).

Respondents justified their continued support of an artist by recognizing their mistakes and engaging in a rationalization process, collectively articulating their exasperation towards fellow fans who appeared oblivious to the notion that one can harbor admiration for an artist while simultaneously exercising critical scrutiny. However, when these fans voiced their opinions on cultural appropriation incidents through social media platforms, they often encountered severe backlash, with consequences ranging from doxing to death threats. One particularly harrowing account came from respondent nine, a Native American transmasculine individual who identifies as two-spirited. They recounted the traumatic experience of receiving a death threat, revealing that the perpetrators had gone to great lengths to unearth the death rites specific to their tribe. This alarming incident led the respondent to deactivate their Twitter account and shift their musical preferences towards Korean hip hop. Similarly,

respondent 20, a female Native American participant, explained that those who resorted to sending death threats were driven by a desperate desire to "do anything they can to make their cherished artists seem perfect and angelic."

Marginalization within K-pop fandom: from underrepresentation to historicization

Many respondents emphasized the prevalence of anti-Blackness in online K-pop fandom communities, particularly among White fans, which created tensions and strained relationships within the fandom. Respondent two, an African American non-binary respondent, described the fandom as "anti-Black in pretty chunky pockets," pointing to former President Trump-supporting sisters in Florida with a significant following base. Following anti-Black backlash from BTS fans, they said they were forced to have a retrospective and found it extremely difficult to continue supporting the group. Echoing similar sentiments, respondent 20 (Native American female) noted it was as if "there is nothing in-between canceling or defending. I hate it when I am racially framed, but when fans are White, they're a lot more naïve and arrogant."

Due to divisions in the fandom, participants noted that their degree of trust or interaction with other fans depended significantly on their cultural background. Addressing the rift between White K-pop fans and fans of color, respondent 14 (Native American male) explained that he felt he could trust another fan more and let out a sigh of relief if he learned they were a person of color. However, participants noted that they also received dismissive comments from other fans of color, such as "why are you getting upset over it? It's just a hairstyle" or "it's just a teepee," and were called "dramatic" or "overreacting" when they pointed out incidents of cultural appropriation. Respondent 17, a Native American female fan, recounted the time a music video featuring artists wearing colored headdresses and dancing around a campfire was removed by a company; however, others claimed no wrongdoing and re-uploaded it, which felt to her like "an extra punch and a slap across the face." As a consequence, fans of color had to constantly question their relationships with other fans:

> It's a weird grieving process (. . .) I don't want to let this affect my music and experience and friends, but I have to ask myself: Am I okay being friends with people who support that? Am I comfortable and OK with fans as long as they acknowledge the pain it causes and can say, "my favorite is being racist?" (Respondent nine, Native American transmasculine, two-spirited person)

Participants revealed that navigating the complex dynamics within the K-pop fandom, where cultural differences and varying levels of understanding led to conflict and questioning of relationships, was a constant challenge that shaped their experiences as fans.

Among K-pop fans of color, Native American fans felt further silenced as they struggled with underrepresentation and limited support from other fans of color. All Native American K-pop fans expressed sentiments that they felt less heard compared to fans of other cultural backgrounds and drew a parallel between being overlooked in the fandom with the way Native Americans were treated outside the realm of K-pop. Respondent 12 (Native American female) explained that "our voices aren't heard here [outside of K-pop] either, so it hurts that we're being portrayed in a cartoonish and stereotypical way when we're not being heard even in our home country." On a similar note, respondent 16 (Mexican and Native American female) added that the way Native Americans were not heard in K-pop compared to other groups could be said about "every space," as she felt they were "constantly overlooked" due to their limited representation.

A prevalent theme brought up in interviews with Native American K-pop fans was their historicization, or the many ways in which they were treated as if being nonexistent. "Native American culture is being swept under the rug because they think we don't exist," respondent 14 said, adding that he was asked in multiple settings if "there are still Native Americans and teepees." Respondent 9 also referenced a tweet they had read: "It said, 'I was trying to find my grandma's slippers in a museum.' In other words, they're searching for our bones while we are standing right in front of them. They probably don't know much because they assume we're dead."

Native American participants attributed their diminished voice within the K-pop fandom to their smaller population size compared to other demographic groups. Respondent 8 (African American female) mentioned that Native Americans make up less than 2% of the US population, and that when cultural appropriation discussions arise, they usually focus on African American culture. Most Native American fans echoed the sentiment that Native K-pop fans struggle to make their concerns heard due to their limited numbers, which was experienced outside the realm of K-pop:

> All cultural appropriation is bad, we're just talked over way more. Other voices are way louder, they push us aside. It's just that Native American voices are talked over way more in America. (Respondent 16, Mexican and Native American female)

While contemplating the reasons behind the diminished resonance of their voices compared to other groups, Native American K-pop fans often conveyed passive resignation, accepting that their concerns were routinely sidelined or deemed insignificant. Fans of color who attempted to educate others about cultural appropriation described feelings of fatigue and exhaustion, with Native American fans in particular feeling a heightened need to exert themselves just to be heard. Respondent 15, a Native American female, described this as "a lot of emotional work," and when others refused to listen or attacked her, prayer became her only refuge. Respondent 17, who once actively educated others on K-pop Twitter, acknowledged that she no longer possessed the energy to consistently reiterate her perspectives and opted for deeper self-reflection instead. External pressures, personal choices, fear of backlash, and fatigue led Native American fans to increasingly self-silence. Consequently, this further marginalized them within the broader community of K-pop fans of color, intensifying the struggle for their voices to gain recognition and resonance.

Conclusion

Through a series of in-depth interviews, this study aimed to understand how K-pop fans of color navigate and interpret incidents of cultural appropriation, with a particular focus on their capacity to engage in critical reflection and act upon their insights. While K-pop's success is often attributed to its hybrid nature, where "traces of other cultures exist[ing] in

every culture" (Kraidy, 2008, p. 148), this study acknowledges that such a generalized perspective overlooks themes of power and inequality. Cultural appropriation in K-pop differs from contra-flow or a re-appropriation, in which local actors subvert or resist Western hegemonic media influences; rather, one marginal group exploits yet another. K-pop fans of color felt betrayed by a genre they had embraced as an alternative to White-dominated media, where they once found acceptance and cultural resonance; thus, their sense of marginalization was exacerbated. As K-pop fans' engagement with a comparatively marginalized music preference is complicated by their diverse cultural backgrounds, this study argues that addressing cultural appropriation in K-pop is essential for fostering a more inclusive environment for fans of color who seek representation and validation within the genre. Although numerous K-pop companies have issued apologies for past errors, incidents of cultural appropriation continue, and critical feedback frequently goes unnoticed.

This research further highlights that incidents of cultural appropriation in K-pop should not be dismissed, as they create hostile and often dangerous online environments for K-pop fans of color. Those who even merely pointed out incidents of cultural appropriation were subject to severe backlash and hateful comments, leading to extreme consequences such as doxing or even death threats. A racial hierarchy within the fandom formed through discourse about incidents of cultural appropriation left Native American fans feeling further silenced, who faced underrepresentation and limited support from other K-pop fans of color. Moreover, despite their varied positionalities and individual coping mechanisms, respondents unanimously expressed that K-pop should refrain from presenting their cultures in disrespectful and stereotypical ways that appear performative. They emphasized that, for a respectful and accurate representation of cultural elements, K-pop companies and artists would need commit to sincere engagement and dedicated effort.

As K-pop fans navigated the dissonance of negotiating alienating rhetoric with their cultural identities, they employed various coping mechanisms, such as downplaying the seriousness of incidents, using humor, intellectualizing, and compartmentalizing. One approach to reconciling their identities as K-pop fans and people of color involved pointing to South Korea's homogenous demographic and dismissing K-pop idols as uninformed; however, this rhetoric perpetuates the cycle that allows Korean media to depict foreigners in a negative light and ignore issues of race. Historically, Korean media has often disseminated stereotypes and reinforced negative depictions of foreigners, reflecting a "nouveau-riche nationalism" and underlying racism within Korean society (Han, 2015; Pak, 2002). African individuals confronting racism in Korea often faced negative consequences, as evidenced by Ghanaian TV personality Sam Okyere who, after criticizing Korean high school students for wearing blackface, faced public backlash including an online petition for his deportation and loss of professional opportunities (Udor & Yoon, 2022). Koreans criticized Okyere for overreacting and reprimanded him for trying to educate Koreans, arguing that blackface was merely a representation "because the skin color of Black people is black. What is uncomfortable about that?" and adding insult that "if you had gone to another country, you might have earned some money working in a factory" (Sim, 2020). Notably, this dismissive and hostile rhetoric mirrors those of K-pop fans who attack fans of color for pointing out incidents of cultural appropriation. This study argues that Korea's paradox of rapid globalization and robust sense of ethnic nationalism is embedded in incidents of cultural appropriation in K-pop. Globalization and K-pop's rise in popularity may have sparked discussions about multiculturalism in Korea, but a significant gap persists between rhetoric and actual change in attitudes and behaviors, resulting in continued marginalization of the underrepresented (Kim, 2012). Therefore, instead of merely celebrating K-pop as an alternative to Western-dominated pop culture, recognizing the complex historical, economic, and social forces that contribute to cultural appropriation is vital for preventing further marginalization of fans of color within the K-pop community.

This study is not without limitations, as it primarily focused on two groups of K-pop fans of color. Future studies should broaden the scope of investigation to encompass other cultures, examining diverse dynamics of racial hierarchies within K-pop fandoms and their implications. Nevertheless, this study represents a substantial contribution to limited existing literature addressing issues of power and inequality in K-pop fandoms. The findings highlight that cultural appropriation in K-pop does not just alienate fans of color; it also fosters a harmful cycle whereby certain fans face escalating marginalization within hostile fandom environments. Beyond its academic significance, this study may serve as a timely reminder for K-pop industry leaders that with the genre's significant role in global cultural dynamics, an inherent responsibility follows.

Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available at Communication, Culture and Critique online.

Data availability

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research supporting data is not available.

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