



Exploring K-pop artists' cultural appropriation through the lens of Thai K-pop fans' perceptions

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Abstract

There is currently a heated debate taking place amongst both scholars and fans concerning whether K-pop (Korean pop music) artists culturally appropriate foreign cultures into their music videos. This qualitative study seeks to fill the gap in the literature by examining the approach of Thai K-pop fans relative to this issue. The research draws on online interviews with Thai K-pop fans of various ages, as well as lengths of fandom. The findings demonstrate mixed opinions concerning the issue of cultural appropriation in K-pop. K-pop music is also identified as a new and distinct musical form of hybridity, with artists blending differing cultural elements into a Korean style. The study also examines how the blending of cultures, particularly elements of Black culture, may contribute to the global appeal of K-pop. Additionally, it identifies the failure to credit those aspects taken from Black culture or to acknowledge the related history of racism, including inappropriate behaviour towards other cultures. Thus, this study demonstrates a range of implications from cultural appropriation, in particular the need for appropriate recognition and respect towards other cultures.

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Introduction

Korean pop music (K-pop) is used to reference South Korean pop music, including idol pop music, which is characterised as featuring young and attractive same-sex groups, whose music features catchy refrains and unique dance moves (Yoon, 2018). K-pop has gained in global

popularity since the 1990s (Anderson, 2020), while the expansion of social media has allowed its popularity to transcend its country of origin and have a global reach, thus positioning K-pop artists at an international level (Garza, 2021). The transition of K-pop from a local and regional to a global phenomenon has provoked a debate relating to the issue of its artists' use of cultural

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appropriation (Ahn, 2023). To analyze this phenomenon in the context of K-pop, it is important to research its historical background, norms and associated stereotypes. Cultural appropriation refers to the act of taking, or using, aspects of another culture (e.g., cultural symbols, artifacts, and rituals) without sufficient understanding or respect (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023a). The term cultural appropriation was first introduced in the 1980s by scholars discussing issues such as colonialism and the relationships between majority and minority groups involving exploitative and disrespectful acts (Kendall, 2024). The term is often connected with the adoption of elements from non-Western or non-white cultures by Western or white people (Kendall, 2024), reflecting the power imbalance that arises when a culture is sold, shared widely and misrepresented and does not profit financially (Lalonde, 2021). Profit may be derived in several ways, such as by appropriating knowledge, spiritual practices, pieces of objects in museums and styles of art.

Crucially, when appropriation occurs, the marginalized culture is rendered invisible and stereotyped, as its identity is distorted or reshaped by the appropriator. For example, the Navajo Nation, a Native American tribe in the US, has had unique cultural objects appropriated by Urban Outfitters, a global retail company that sells traditional attire and jewellery under the label “Navajo” without having consulted or received consent from the Navajo people. For example, the company sells the Navajo Hipster Panty, Wide Navajo Scarf and Navajo feather earrings. This enables the company to profit from disrespecting the cultural heritage and identity of the Navajo, emphasizing the significance of respecting and preserving marginalized cultures from exploitation. Some challenge this view, arguing that cultural appropriation is rather cultural appreciation blending traditional artifacts using creativity and innovation. However, ultimately what is being discussed is clearly the theft and reproduction of the cultural property of another culture (Lalonde, 2021). Cultural appropriation occurs across a range of fields, e.g., visual art, fashion and music (Kendall, 2024). Recently, the discourse of cultural appropriation has transitioned from academic discourse into popular culture, especially in relation to music, and in this case the adoption of elements of Black culture by K-pop artists (Anderson, 2020). There have been a number of discussions in social media concerning the question of cultural appropriation, but there remains a dearth of empirical studies investigating the attitudes of K-pop fans towards this issue. Thus, this study seeks to fill the gap in the existing literature by focusing on the attitude of Thai K-pop fans towards the debate as to whether K-pop

artists can be seen to culturally appropriate other cultures in their music videos.

Research Question

The key research questions are as follows:

- (1) What are elements of foreign cultures that Thai K-pop fans notice in K-pop music videos?
- (2) Do Thai K-pop fans think that the use of foreign cultures in K-pop music videos is cultural appropriation? And if so, why?

Literature Review

There have been a number of debates concerning the issue of cultural appropriation by K-pop artists, particularly the use of Black music, as well as the wearing of clothes and jewellery identified with Black culture and the use of ‘blackface’ (i.e., the practice of wearing dark makeup to mimic the appearance of an individual who is Black) (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023b). This has led to accusations of K-pop artists using Black music (e.g., hip-hop, rap and R&B) without appropriate acknowledgement, thus implying it is their own music expression (Myung, 2021). K-pop artists who allegedly culturally appropriate include the Bubble Sisters (a K-pop girl group) in the Bubble Song music video (Han, 2015), Taeyang in the Ringa Linga music video (Kim, 2020), and Lisa (a member of the girl group Blackpink) in her music video “Money” (Lucas, 2021). However, some scholars have argued that Black music has historically experienced a symbiotic relationship with K-pop, due to the presence of African American soldiers in South Korea during the Korean War (Anderson, 2020). This suggests that, due to this deep connection between the two, K-pop cannot be considered to culturally appropriate Black music. Moreover, Black music can be seen to inform Korean music, including in aspects such as vocals, choreography and fashion (Cho, 2022; Kim & Saeji, 2021), as well as inspiring many Korean hip-hop artists, thus reflecting K-pop artists’ admiration of the Western musical forms of hip-hop and R&B (Lee & Kao, 2021; Song, 2019). Furthermore, the influence of Black music on K-pop can be seen as due to the recruitment of foreign composers, particularly those of African American descent (Yoon 2018). This suggests that K-pop labels and artists have not appropriated other types of musical genres, since the music itself is influenced (or made) by these Western composers. In addition to the use of Black music in K-pop, there remains the issue of cultural appropriation of Black fashion in music videos, e.g., outfits, jewellery,

and hairstyles (Cho, 2022). Moreover, several studies in the literature have highlighted that some K-pop artists have adopted Black hairstyles, e.g., cornrows, braids and dreadlocks (Cho, 2022; Myung, 2021). This has led a number of Black K-pop fans to criticize this emulation of Black clothing and hairstyles as a form of cultural theft (Ross, 2020), as well as reflecting insufficient awareness of the painful African history of exploitation and slavery (Chatman, 2020; de Luna, 2020). Black hairstyles, in particular, have a sensitive history, as cornrows were used by African slaves to hide rice and grains to enable their survival, while braids were employed to create maps that enabled them to escape (Craig, 2020). Thus, treating these hairstyles as a temporary fashion trend and costume without understanding the relevant history can be considered as an act of cultural appropriation (Chatman, 2020). By contrast, Cho (2022) argued that K-pop artists' emulation of Black clothing and hairstyles is due to an appreciation of Black culture, as demonstrated by the South Korean boy band BTS, whose members spent two weeks in Los Angeles with Black American hip-hop tutors. Finally, there is the issue of K-pop artists choosing to perform in blackface, which, as noted above, is defined as painting the face of a white (or light-skinned) person to portray a stereotypical version of one who is Black (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023b). Blackface can be seen to reflect cultural appropriation on the part of K-pop artists, as a result of their ignorance of the racist connotations of this gesture, thus provoking controversy and leading to a heated debate among K-pop fans (Chatman, 2020). However, Cho (2022) argued that K-pop artists are aware of this being a form of racial discrimination, as revealed by BTS, who showed their support for anti-racist action, particularly the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in the US. Furthermore, the fact that both BTS and the band's label have donated a million dollars of support to the BLM movement, suggests that K-pop artists tend to take a positive stand in supporting racial justice (Lee & Kao, 2021). It is notable that the existing literature tends to place an exclusive focus on the use of Black culture and music in K-pop, while paying little attention to other cultures, including that of India, despite the debate among fans about artists' improper use of Hindu religious symbols and Indian clothing. Similarly, criticism has been directed at the wearing of Bindis (a traditional Indian accessory worn only by married women on special religious occasions), and which should not be worn simply for aesthetic purposes (Sanghvi, 2020). Thus, K-pop artists' use of Bindis in their music videos without any knowledge of the religious and cultural implications can be regarded as cultural appropriation of Indian

culture (Jha, 2018).

As noted above, this study recognizes the lack of empirical studies investigating the attitudes of K-pop fans towards its artists' use of cultural appropriation. This is primarily due to the focus being primarily on alternative issues, including: firstly, fans' responses to non-Korean members (Ahn, 2023); secondly, Black culture in K-pop music videos outside the scope of cultural appropriation (Kim, 2020); thirdly, gender issues (e.g., Garza, 2021; Song & Velding, 2020); and fourthly, Korean fandom (e.g., McLaren & Jin, 2020; Min, Jin, & Han, 2019; Yoon, 2019). Thus, in order to address the gap in the literature, this current study focuses on the attitudes of Thai K-pop fans towards the issue of cultural appropriation of K-pop artists in their music videos. This is particularly due to Thai K-pop fans being regarded as forming one of the strongest fan bases in Southeast Asia, with Thailand now becoming a major K-pop market (Shoowong, 2023). When it comes to research into K-pop in the context of Thailand, empirical studies tend to direct their attention towards alternative areas, such as: firstly, the influence of Thai idols who become K-Pop artists on the Korean public's perception of Thai people (Butsaban, 2019); secondly, the impact of the popularity of the Korean culture on online social networks in Thailand (Chansanam et al., 2021); thirdly, the consumption of K-pop by Thai fans (Siriyausak & Hyunjoon, 2007); and finally, Thai K-pop fan activism (Andini & Akhni, 2021). Arguably, Thai people have limited contact with or knowledge about Black people (Goździak, 2023). This could result in gaps in their understanding regarding what cultural appropriation of Black culture entails, especially in terms of historical exploitation and marginalization. Thus, with limited understanding regarding the cultural appropriation of Black culture, some Thai K-pop fans might interpret the combination of Black cultural elements in K-pop as a source of artistic inspiration, rather than as cultural appropriation. Therefore, their perceptions surrounding this issue are worth exploring.

Cultural Appropriation and its Disagreements

Rogers (2006, p. 474) considered cultural appropriation as consisting of "the use of a culture's symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another culture". Cultural appropriation can apply to situations in which power is either symmetrical or asymmetrical (Rogers, 2006). Cultural appropriation in the form of symmetrical power includes the equal exchange of symbols, artifacts, and rituals between cultures, as well as the flow of music. By contrast,

cultural appropriation in terms of a power imbalance (i.e., asymmetrical power) occurs when those from a dominant/colonising culture take aspects belonging to marginalized/colonized cultures without consent, to use for the benefit of the dominant culture. This power imbalance represents cultural exploitation as the dominant culture treats elements of marginalized/colonized cultures “as a resource to be mined or consumption” (Rogers, 2006, p.486) without giving credit or providing financial compensation. It involves the use of indigenous folk music by Western musicians and companies, or of native American culture to produce commercial objects (Rogers, 2006). This type of exploitation involves the act of stealing or appropriation (Cruz et al., 2024). Cultural exploitation is harmful when it includes the violation of the cultural property rights of marginalized/colonized cultures by those from a dominant/colonising culture, and misrepresents or deeply disrespects marginalized/colonized cultures (Cruz et al., 2024). However, some scholars have argued against the use of music from another culture in K-pop as being cultural appropriation, due to its incorporation of a variety of genres (e.g., rap, hip-hop and R&B), leading to the creation of a new and unique form of hybrid music (Anderson, 2020; Cho, 2022). This current study was therefore undertaken in response to the limited number of previous research studies focussing on cultural appropriation in K-pop, and particularly the attitudes of fans, addressing the issue by exploring the views of Thai K-pop fans.

Methodology

Participants

The participants in this study were all volunteers, consisting of nineteen Thai K-pop fans, aged between eighteen and forty-five, who had been fans for various lengths of time, and who had a variety of occupations (Table 1). Using purposive sampling, the researcher recruited the participants following their consideration of the research questions (Schwandt, 2015), using online K-pop Fan pages on Facebook, i.e., ALL K-POP [Thailand] and EXO Thailand. The participants all followed the largest K-pop Facebook fan pages in Thailand with over three hundred thousand fans exchanging information on K-pop artists, including new music videos and tours. These online groups can be seen as highly active, with a large number of posts and replies generated daily. Moreover, the recruitment of participants was supplemented with a ‘snowballing’ technique or

participant referral technique (Berndt, 2020), so long as the participants satisfied the criteria for participation.

Data Collection

The ethical requirements of this study were approved by the Ethics Committee of the university in Thailand at which this study was undertaken. Firstly, the researcher sent a request to recruit participants to the administrators of the Facebook pages, asking them to pass on information concerning their members. Secondly, those wishing to take part in the study were then able to contact the researcher by means of the researcher’s Facebook messenger or Line application, depending on their preference. Thirdly, the researcher sent the participant information sheet to each participant prior to the online interviews, which were conducted through the researcher’s Facebook messenger and Line Call. Finally, one-on-one interviews with a semi-structured format were conducted. The researcher collected the data using online interviews, to save travel costs, as well as the ability to schedule interviews at the convenience of

Table 1 Demographic profiles of the participants

Participants	Age	Gender	Occupation	Duration of becoming a K-pop fan (years)
P1	24	Female	Company employee	3
P2	22	Female	Pre-service teacher	10
P3	38	Female	Freelance K-pop writer	19
P4	30	Female	Company employee	14
P5	25	Female	Dental student	12
P6	45	Female	Lecturer	10
P7	41	Female	Freelance K-pop writer	16
P8	31	Female	Company employee	15
P9	37	Female	Company employee	8
P10	18	Male	High school student	4
P11	22	Female	University student	12
P12	26	Female	Company employee	13
P13	25	Female	Company employee	12
P14	18	Female	High school student	10
P15	30	Female	Company employee	17
P16	18	Male	High school student	6
P17	37	Female	Company employee	3
P18	27	Female	Company employee	8
P19	36	Female	Company employee	15

Note: n = 19

the participants (Oliffe et al., 2021), due to the majority working night shifts. Prior to commencing the interviews, the researcher conducted an online pilot interview with a participant sharing similar characteristics to the participants taking part in the main study. The pilot interview was carried out to ensure clarity and generate a more focused set of questions (Malmqvist et al., 2019). Once the interview questions had been adjusted, the researcher commenced the main study with warm-up questions intended to put the participants at ease and gain general information concerning their experience of becoming K-pop fans. These were then followed by content questions to determine whether the participants had: firstly, noted any cultural-related elements in K-pop music; secondly, believed that K-pop artists undertook cultural appropriation of foreign cultures and the reasons for such a conclusion; fourthly, observed any negative consequences to K-pop fans of the use of cultural appropriation or positive outcomes of incorporating foreign cultures; and finally, considered any solution to the potential issue of K-pop artists' cultural appropriation. Each individual interview lasted between approximately forty and seventy-five minutes. In addition, the interviews were held in the Thai language, to assist the participants to articulate their thoughts without experiencing any anxiety relating to their fluency in English, e.g., grammatical errors, or limited vocabulary.

Data Analysis

For this study, the researcher employed Express Scribe and Foot Pedal Controls to produce the verbatim transcriptions of the interview data, followed by an analysis using NVivo 12 software. In addition, before undertaking the data analysis, the researcher returned the analysis to the participants for the purposes of validation (McGrath et al., 2019). Furthermore, the researcher employed thematic analysis, described by Terry et al. (2017, p.18) as “a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data”. This study employed Thematic Analysis as its main analytical method due to its flexibility in determining themes. The researcher therefore followed the six phases of the analysis: firstly, reading the entire transcripts several times to become familiar with the data; secondly, identifying and labelling important features in the data; thirdly, grouping together similar themes; fourthly, reviewing themes; fifthly, defining and naming themes; and finally, producing the report (Terry et al., 2017). The themes and quotations were then determined by means of Krueger and Casey's (2015) guidelines as follows:

firstly, extensiveness (i.e., a theme repeatedly mentioned by different participants); secondly, frequency (i.e., a frequent subject of discussion by participants); thirdly, specificity of quotations (i.e., specific and detailed quotations); and finally, intensity (i.e., themes expressing participants' emotions, enthusiasm, or passion (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The themes and subthemes were identified following a focused reading of the transcripts, with the aim of addressing the research questions.

Results

This study identified the following themes highlighting the participants' attitudes to the debate concerning K-pop artists' potential appropriation of foreign cultures. These include their perception of foreign cultures in K-pop music and their views about using these foreign cultures, as well as whether they believed this to be culturally appropriate. The themes are clarified with direct quotations from the participants, being coded P1–P19.

Blending of Foreign Cultures and K-pop

The participants explained that K-pop is a type of music derived from a mixture of foreign cultures; i.e., Black culture in the form of Black music (hip-hop or rap music), the use of Black hairstyles (cornrows and dreadlocks) and the inclusion of Black fashion (a Durag and oversized t-shirts) in K-pop. Black culture appears in music videos such as “Ringa Linga” by Taeyang (Kim, 2020) and “Money” by Lisa Blackpink (Hsiung, 2023). In addition to the blend of Black culture, participants raised the issue of the use of Indian culture in K-pop, e.g., including a Hindu god, Ganesha statue in How You Like That by Lisa of Blackpink (Begum, 2020) and the song entitled “Fire” in the live performance of a girl group (G)I-DLE (Khaitan, 2021). This integration of foreign cultures into K-pop has led to debates over whether K-pop is culturally appropriate or appreciative of its origin sources. More importantly, there are concerns over cultural appropriation in K-pop, with critics mentioning cultural hybridity, and its unique musical form that combines foreign cultures, particularly Black culture.

Black Culture

Eighteen out of the nineteen participants reported that they found that Black culture frequently appears in K-pop music videos in the form of an imitation of American hip-

hop or rap music. This blend of Black music and K-pop was confirmed by P7.

"I think K-pop has borrowed Black culture ... Like Exo [a Korean boy band] borrow the culture of Black people ... K-pop music borrows rap [music]." (P7)

P8 pointed out that K-pop artists tend to use rap music due to *"being fond of Black music"*, thus suggesting that this tends to stem from a sincere appreciation of Black music rather than being appropriation, particularly in the sense of demonstrating a lack of respect for a different culture (Anderson, 2020). Additionally, some interviewees noted the use of Black hairstyles, with P2 elaborating that *"cornrows were worn by Lisa of Blackpink [a South Korean girl group] in the music video titled 'Money'."* Noticeably, Lisa's hairstyle was not cornrows but box braids, a widely recognized Black hairstyle, as depicted in Figure 1.

Further, participants added that K-pop artists have attempted to resemble American hip hop artists through the wearing of Black hairstyles (e.g., cornrows and dreadlocks), along with a Durag (a piece of cloth worn on the head with long ends tied in the back) (Merriam-Webster, 2023), as well as oversized t-shirts. This, therefore, suggests that Black culture influences K-pop both in relation to music genre and fashion. For example, Taeyang, a member of the K-pop group 'Bigbang', wore a Black hairstyle in a music video (D). in a music video, as illustrated in Figure 2

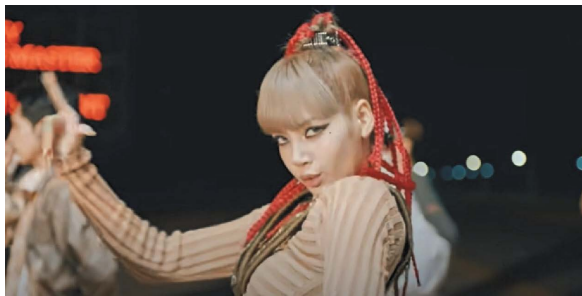


Figure 1 In the music video Money, Lisa is shown wearing box braids

From BLACKPINK. (2021, September 23). *LISA - 'MONEY' EXCLUSIVE PERFORMANCE VIDEO* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dNCWe_6HAM8

Indian Culture

The participants also pointed out K-pop's use of Indian culture. For example, P16 explained that *"there is a controversy about using Ganesha statue [a Hindu god] near Lisa's [a girl group Blackpink] feet in her music video titled How You Like That and some K-pop*



Figure 2 Taeyang wearing a Black hairstyle in the music video 'Ringa Linga'

From BIGBANG. (2013, November 9). *TAEYANG - RINGA LINGA (링가 링가) M/V* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UJfZ69MSlvY>

artists wore dupatta in their music videos." A Ganesha statue represents a Hindu god, believed to protect humans against obstacles and bring good luck and achievement (Allard, 2020). Such practices provoke controversy among Indian K-pop fans when it comes to the issue of cultural appropriation, particularly as, to denote respect, this statue of a Hindu god is never placed on the floor. Moreover, P16 and P17 also noted that Jennie, a member of the girl group Blackpink, and dancers in a K-pop group, whose group name was not mentioned by P17, wore bindis in their music videos (i.e., a small red dot applied on their foreheads between the eyebrows) (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023c), as well as a dupatta (i.e., a long headscarf worn by South Asian women) (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023d), without referencing any cultural affiliation. This practice has been criticized by Indians as showing a lack of understanding of the cultural significance of Indian attire and its associated rituals (Sanghvi, 2020). Figure 3 illustrates Jennie wearing a bindi in a music video, and Figure 4 depicts Sandara Park, a member of the K-pop group 2NE1, wearing a bindi and Indian attire in her music video.

However, some have also argued that Indian clothes and bindis have recently been used for a number of purposes (i.e., to wear at parties, or as a beauty accessory or cultural fashion statement) without any strict adherence to the requirements of Hinduism (Jha, 2018; Sharma, 2018). It has also been argued that the inclusion of Indian clothing reflects an embracing of Indian culture, which is in line with cultural hybridity in terms of K-pop's mingling of multiple cultures while processing



Figure 3 The music video ‘DDU-DU DDU-DU’ depicts Jennie, a member of Blackpink, wearing a bindi on her forehead.

From BLACKPINK. (2018, June 15). *BLACKPINK - ‘뚜두뚜두 (DDU-DU DDU-DU)’ M/V* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHNzOH8sJs>

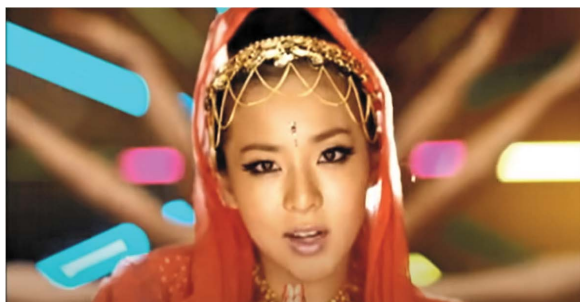


Figure 4 Sandara Park is shown in traditional South Asian attire, along with a bindi.

From YG ENTERTAINMENT. (2009, August 18). *2NE1 - FIRE(Space Ver.) M/V* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISEoXdhb4W4>

them into forming its own style. As noted previously, there has been a significant degree of discussion in the literature concerning cultural hybridity in K-pop as a result of a combination of Black musical forms (e.g., Anderson, 2020; Cho, 2022; Yoon, 2018), while at the same time paying little attention to other cultures. Thus, this result contributes to the existing discussion by demonstrating that cultural hybridity in K-pop does not only focus on Black culture, but extends to a variety of cultures, including that of India. This study therefore adds substance to the limited literature examining the issue of cultural appropriation in K-pop beyond that of Black culture.

Cultural Appropriation in K-pop

The participants opined that K-pop engages in cultural appropriation for several reasons. First, K-pop

fails to acknowledge its use of Black culture, and so can be regarded as stealing from another culture for financial benefit, neglecting the cultural and historical significance of Black hairstyles. Second, the participants explained that some K-pop artists are not adequately well-informed about appropriate ways in which to engage with and respond to foreign cultures, which causes misunderstandings and offense to those from other cultures. These aspects are demonstrated in the music video entitled *How You Like That* by Lisa of Blackpink (Khaitan, 2021), the single *T.O.P.* of Shinhwa, a boy band group and Zico from the boy band Block B and the song entitled “I’m Still Fly” (Chatman, 2020).

Absence of crediting indigenous communities

Two participants made several observations concerning the fact that some K-pop artists have failed to acknowledge their use of African culture in their music videos. P14 noted:

“A music label let their artists use African hair braiding or dreadlocks in their music videos without giving any credit to the origins of this borrowed culture. The music label also does not take action to show any awareness of the feelings of people from that culture.” (P14)

This correlates with Myung’s (2021) view that a lack of information about the cultural origins of Black hairstyles used by K-pop artists can be regarded as resulting in cultural appropriation. This is due to a misrepresentation of the original cultural meaning, which Myung (2021) considered should be reserved for Black people only, but now tends to be used without their permission (Myung, 2021). Arguably, P14’s account raises ethical questions about cultural appropriation, as Black hairstyles are being adopted without acknowledgement and used for financial benefit (Lalonde, 2021). Additionally, the use of these hairstyles in K-pop for fashion purposes, or as aesthetic concepts in artists’ imagery, misrepresents their origins and meaning, sidelining their historical significance, which is a form of cultural appropriation (Myung, 2021). Moreover, P14 also considered that K-pop’s use of hip-hop without crediting its origins in Black culture can also be regarded as cultural appropriation, stating that:

“The way that K-pop artists incorporate hip-hop dance into their music lacks any acknowledgement of the cultural origin of Black people. This is because hip-hop dance belongs to Black people and using it [hip-hop dance] in K-pop simply follows a trend.” (P14)

This suggests that these dance forms and techniques need to be properly acknowledged by K-pop artists and labels as belonging to Black people.

Inappropriate behavior towards other cultures

Seven of the participants noted that it was inappropriate to place the Hindu deity Lord Ganesha on the floor, as seen in a K-pop music video, with P16 explaining:

“Placing the god [Ganesha statue] near Lisa’s shoes on the floor [in the music video] should have been scrutinized more ... before it was released... The music label knows that this song is going to be popular, and people around the world will watch it. So, people who worship it [Ganesha statue] criticize this and some interpret it as disrespecting their religion.” (P16)

However, the Ganesha statue shown on the floor in the music video was later edited out after YG Entertainment, a South Korean multinational entertainment agency managing the girl group Blackpink, received criticism from fans (Lee, 2020). P16’s account implies a significant impact of this alleged disrespect for the Deity Ganesha and Hindu culture, as such actions can spread misconceptions relating to the convention of the appropriate approach toward this religious statue for a large number of non-Hindu K-pop fans. The extract from P16 suggests that such an act is culturally appropriate when an individual outside the culture uses a religious artifact without understanding and respect for the origin culture and any spiritual significance. This is regarded as harmful, since the act can profoundly offend those from other cultures (Cruz et al., 2024). Additionally, two participants raised the issue of using the N-word (i.e., a racial slur used against Black people) by some K-pop artists in their songs. However, it can be argued that the N-word is actually pronounced /niga/ and /nega/ for the Korean second person pronoun, and /nega/ for the first-person pronoun, and these have simply been misheard as the N-word by English language speakers (Lo, 2021). This suggests that Korean words that sound similar to the N-word in English can create confusion, or be misinterpreted, by English-speaking people. Finally, P15 raised the issue of Mamamoo, a K-pop girl group, who dressed up in blackface in one of their music videos. This implies that, unlike Americans, Koreans tend to be unaware of the implications of blackface, particularly in relation to the history of African American slavery and the use of offensive racial slurs (Cho, 2022; Myung, 2021). Arguably, acting blackface is regarded as a racist performance (Han, 2015) since Blackface is linked to Black people’s painful history of racism, when doing so was employed in exaggerated and offensive minstrel shows in the US to ridicule and dehumanize them. Thus, this provokes memories of a painful history and implies a disregard for the associated trauma (Han,

2015). Therefore, Blackface is cultural appropriation, as it ignores the significance of Black people’s history, reinforces harmful stereotypes and exploits them for entertainment, profit or artistic use.

Insufficient knowledge of foreign cultures

Three participants criticized K-pop artists for employing Black culture in their music without acknowledging the history of racism. P13 highlighted that:

“... Black hairstyles have a [long] history. In the past, a braided hairstyle helped African slaves escape. So, wearing cornrows is not just fashion, as it’s used in K-pop.” (P13)

P13’s view is supported by Craig’s (2020) statement that cornrows were historically used by African slaves to create maps to enable them to escape, so having a greater significance than simply styling. This indicates that K-pop artists using these styles can be regarded as practicing cultural appropriation, due to taking aspects of colonized cultures without consent (Rogers, 2006). Similarly, P14 pointed out that cultural appropriation can stem from insufficient knowledge of the history of Black hairstyles, as *“the African braided hairstyle has a long historical link with slavery, particularly as African slaves hid rice in their [braided] hair.”* P14 stressed the importance of having background knowledge of Black hairstyles and criticized the use of such styles by K-pop artists in their music videos simply as a fashion statement. This account is relevant to Craig (2020) and Rose’s (2021) proposition that the wearing of braids is closely linked with Black history, i.e., slaves’ practice of hiding rice and seeds in their hair to ensure they had enough to eat, and/or would have food when they escaped. This indicates that this aspect could be regarded as cultural appropriation, particularly when K-pop artists wear their hair in braids for the sake of its appearance, so profiting from marginalized groups. For P15, using Black hairstyles in K-pop without acknowledging their historical significance can cause Black people’s emotional pain when P15 said: *“When they [K-pop artists] use it [Black hairstyles] as fashion without knowledge of Black people’s history of slavery, this act causes immense painful feeling. They [Black people] may think that K-pop steals the hairstyles for entertainment, and these causes offend.”* Interestingly, P15 emphasizes the importance of lack of empathy for Black people in regard to the painful experiences of slavery, racism, and marginalization. This is also considered cultural appropriation when K-pop adopts Black hairstyles and treats them as a trend or fashion without considering their cultural and historical

significance. Furthermore, P15's account highlights the notion of exploitation in terms of power imbalances in cultural exchange, as K-pop artists wear Black hairstyles to enhance their appearance to be seen as trendy and unique, distinguishing them from their competition in the entertainment world. This implies that it does not necessarily mean exploitation is occurring between races, but rather that the powerful K-pop music industry as a dominant industry is profiting from a marginalized group without offering recompense.

Arguments Against Cultural Appropriation

Some participants have argued that K-pop does not engage in cultural appropriation for several reasons. First, it is a product of foreign music composers and producers; and so it is unavoidable that foreign music and associated cultures will influence K-pop. Second, participants raise doubts about the ownership of Black culture, as there is no clear legal procedure when asking permission to use Black culture in K-pop or identifying an exact person from whom to seek consent, due to there being a large group of Black people. Third, the participants voiced their opinion that blending American Black music in K-pop brings about a new and unique musical form that can be described as cultural hybridity and that American Black music is considered the dominant culture (Ahn, 2023). This suggests K-pop does not take advantage of or culturally appropriate a less powerful culture. Lastly, the majority of participants illustrated that K-pop may promote Black culture and that some Black people are not offended by the incorporation of their culture into K-pop.

Collaboration with foreign music personnel

Some participants noted that they felt K-pop artists do not culturally appropriate foreign cultures, since their labels tend to hire foreign music composers, producers, and choreographers, particularly from Sweden and the US. Moreover, some K-pop entertainment companies employ foreign choreographers to create new forms of choreography in their music videos. This can demonstrate that K-pop artists are unlikely to culturally appropriate Western musical forms, due to this close collaboration with Western music.

No cultural ownership

Some participants argued that they felt there are no fixed rules concerning the ownership of Black culture, as it also borrows cultural aspects from other ethnic groups. P15 stated: “*there should be an organization to enable people to ask for permission to use Black hairstyles*”

and believed that “*it is difficult to give Black people credit for using their hairstyles [as we don't know how to ask]*.” P15's statement reflects the broader question of the ownership of culture, since it is not possible to operationalize a consent procedure, particularly when it comes to large groups (Siems, 2019). P1 commented that “*if Asian people cannot have a Black hairstyle, there should be a law against them wearing Black hairstyles.*” P1 can be seen to support P15's view that if black culture is owned by a particular group of people, there needs to be a law stating that permission is required for others to use aspects of their culture. However, no such practice can occur, as no single group can claim ownership of Black culture. This therefore demonstrates the right of K-pop artists and labels to incorporate Black culture into their musical performances. However, these accounts do not comply with the historical context of cultural appropriation in terms of the power imbalance between a dominant/colonising culture and a marginalized/colonized culture. This is because wearing Black hairstyles in K-pop fails to acknowledge their origin or cultural significance without giving credit or showing respect and lacks awareness of the African history of exploitation and the discourse that arose due to slavery (Chatman, 2020; de Luna, 2020).

Offering newness through mixture of different musical styles and cultures

Most of the participants in this study emphasized that incorporating foreign cultures into K-pop, and particularly hip hop, resulted in innovation and the subsequent music being unique and distinct from that of other countries. Furthermore, they did not consider that such practices could be seen as cultural appropriation, due to the combination of hip-hop with K-pop music, leading to a new type of music. This can be seen as due to further aspects discussed by the participants, in particular labels' cooperation with foreign composers (i.e., African American music composers), enabling K-pop to adapt other genres of music to become an aspect of its own style, eventually generating a new type of music. The incorporation of American Black music into K-pop thus emphasizes the concept of cultural hybridity (Anderson, 2020; Yoon, 2018). It is significant that this approach is seen as separate from cultural appropriation, as African American is perceived as a globally popular dominant form of American popular culture, rather than as a minority culture (Ahn, 2023). This, therefore, negates the view of K-pop as practising cultural appropriation by taking advantage of less powerful indigenous groups for its own benefit.

Promoting different cultures

More than half of the participants in this study discussed the benefits of using foreign cultures in K-pop, including promoting awareness of the wearing of a dupatta as an aspect of Indian culture. Similarly, they felt that the use of Black hairstyles tended to encourage K-pop fans to take an interest and become more likely to wear styles similar to that of their favorite K-pop artists. Consequently, as stated by P2, this has the potential to promote interest in Black hairstyles. Furthermore, P10 argued that some Black people may not feel offended by this practice, and many are happy to teach non-Blacks how to braid cornrows on YouTube. P3 stated that this could be because “*they [Black people] can overcome their painful memories behind their hairstyles and do not feel offended.*” This shows that incorporating these foreign cultures into K-pop can help promote global awareness of various cultures (Sharma, 2018).

Discussion

The study’s findings answered the research questions as follows: For the first question, Thai K-pop fans noticed that K-pop incorporates elements of foreign cultures, i.e., Black culture (Black hairstyles and Black fashion) and Indian culture (a Ganesha statue, and the inclusion of Indian rituals and clothing, i.e., bindis, a dupatta). In answer to the second question, the participants expressed two viewpoints on cultural appropriation. Those who think that K-pop engages in cultural appropriation because K-pop artists draw from Black culture without permission (equivalent to stealing another culture) for their financial profit, neglecting the cultural, spiritual and historical significance of other cultures and disrespecting the other culture. This can potentially offend individuals from those cultures, i.e., lack of awareness of the historical pain associated with Black hairstyles, placing a statue of the Hindu deity Ganesha on the floor in a music video. Interestingly, the findings from this study demonstrate a misunderstanding of K-pop artists’ racial use of the N-word. This indicates the issue of mishearing or misunderstanding not only among Thai fans, but also international K-pop fans, due to their insufficient understanding of Korean (Lo, 2021). Ironically, instead of stating that their lyrics do not refer to Black people, a Korean record label chose to edit out these controversial words in some K-pop songs (Kelly, 2018). This can be seen as potentially aggravating the situation and causing some K-pop fans to assume the artists actually use the N-word, even when this was not the case.

The participants who questioned cultural appropriation in K-pop opined that K-pop is influenced by the contributions of foreign composers and producers, and that this is unavoidable as Black culture is combined with K-pop. Second, it is challenging to obtain permission to use Black culture in K-pop as there is no specific organization or association to grant such approval. Third, combining foreign cultures with K-pop leads to cultural hybridity and the creation of a new form of music, resulting in K-pop’s unique musical style (Anderson, 2020). Concurrently, cultural hybridity in K-pop includes not only Black culture, but also others, i.e., Indian cultural attire is worn. In this regard, cultural hybridity reflects that culture is evolving and prompts creativity (Cruz et al., 2024) as K-pop is driven by combining Korean and Black music elements to form a unique musical form, creating a hybrid sound that appeals to global audiences (Anderson, 2020). Finally, K-pop helps to promote foreign cultures among its international fanbase, and it is unlikely that Black people would feel offended when their cultures appear in K-pop. The findings imply that using foreign cultures in K-pop can be interpreted as racism as with the use of blackface. Furthermore, cultural appropriation in K-pop reflects a power imbalance, not necessarily between whites and blacks, but between a dominant music industry and marginalized cultures who are offered nothing in return.

Views regarding cultural appropriation in K-pop reflect the importance of educating individuals within the music industry about cultural appropriation, particularly regarding religious beliefs, to avoid *being* culturally *disrespectful* or making potentially hurtful mistakes. A possible way for K-pop music labels to avoid a backlash from their fans is to employ cultural advisors who can share their knowledge of other cultures when music videos are being made (Lalonde, 2021). This would help avoid culturally offensive acts, which, even when unintentional, can be observed by viewers worldwide and upset individuals from the culture in question. Additionally, the findings have implications for teachers or university lecturers wishing to broaden students’ knowledge of cultural appropriation, particularly the need to give proper recognition and respect to other cultures.

This study acknowledges a number of limitations, including that it did not include Thai K-pop fans under the age of eighteen, in order to explore their views of the issue of cultural appropriation of K-pop artists in their music videos. This author therefore recommends that this could be an age group considered in future studies. In addition, it also recommends that future studies examine

the attitudes of international K-pop fans from other countries, and in particular those who are Black or Indian, with regard to the incorporation into K-pop of hip-hop, rap music and Black hairstyles, as well as Indian cultural symbols and dress.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has explored the attitudes of Thai K-pop fans towards the debate surrounding the issue of potential cultural appropriation on the part of K-pop artists. In doing so, it has extended the knowledge in the literature, in particular through a discussion of those aspects that can be potentially viewed as cultural appropriation. This study argues that the attitude of Thai K-pop fans towards the incorporation of foreign cultures into K-pop suggests that, once a culture is open to being exchanged and mixed, it offers the possibility of a new musical form. This enables it to become universal property, so challenging the notion that K-pop artists tend to culturally appropriate foreign cultures. However, it is vital that the incorporation of foreign cultures into K-pop be subject to a consideration of appropriate cultural practices to prevent controversy, in particular a lack of sensitivity towards the religious and racial values of other cultures. This study has the potential to benefit both Thai and international K-pop fans, as well as those who watch K-pop music videos, by raising awareness of the issue of cultural appropriation in terms of appropriate behaviour towards other cultures, in particular insufficient knowledge of such cultures.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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