

## How Can I *Appreciate* Culture through K-pop without *Appropriating* It?

Suppose a white American K-pop fan romanticizes all things Korean. Certainly, K-pop itself, the latest wave of South Korea's celebrity-driven youth music, dance, fashion, and media exports, liberally seasons its "Korean" offerings to please the global palate. And it blatantly repackages hip-hop, R&B and other products of marginalized African American society. Are any of these cultural remixes an issue?

New research\*\* says: "Nowadays, yes!" Wokeness has recast much cultural appreciation as appropriation by, or for the benefit of, more powerful cultures. The consumers of K-pop and other exotic products are increasingly saddled with the onus of justifying what, and how, they consume.

Between 2017 and 2022, the researchers interviewed 38 non-Korean consumers of K-pop, aged 17 to 25, in a large Australian city. They also followed fan discussions on Reddit and Quora. All aficionados were working out their consumer identities; seeking a defensible self-definition.

The researchers detected four unspoken strategies for defining and justifying one's continued consumption of K-pop. They labelled these strategies reforming, restraining, recontextualizing and rationalizing. To navigate the vagaries of appreciation-appropriation debates, fans sometimes switched or combined strategies.

First, reformers set themselves up as activist custodians. Facing outwards, they patrol others' consumption for any harmful appropriations of, or by, K-pop. For instance, the campaign #MyCultureIsNotYourAesthetic demanded that the production company behind girl group Blackpink apologize for a music video that disrespectfully depicted a statue of a Hindu deity on the ground.

Second, restrainers turn inwards and vet their own consumption. Defining themselves as cautious appreciators, they steer well clear of appropriation controversies. One young woman regularly checked the groups she was endorsing on social media. If, say, she found out they had used blackface, she would no longer "stan" them (a mashup of "stalker" and "fan" meaning to idolize).

Whereas restrainers pull back, the third group, recontextualizers, dive deeper. They are wary of becoming

obsessive, fetishizing "Koreaboos" or just plain cultural magpies. So, they educate themselves about the wider context around the shiny objects of Korean culture that magpies would blithely pilfer. By assiduously studying, for instance, Korea's language, customs, cuisine, or history, recontextualizers position themselves as curious, conscientious, respectful outsiders.

Last, rationalizers style themselves as connected cosmopolitans, part of a shared transnational "We". They say appropriation is not an issue. Anyone living in the global village should expect cultural products to be remixed, especially such a curated commercial confection as K-pop.

Until capitalism tried to "go woke", the rationalizing strategy dominated. Unchallenged, neoliberalism glossed over power differences or viewed everything as appreciation. Consumption was a matter for market forces, not politics. Yet, the researchers point out, putting the onus of justification on consumers keeps it off the real powers that be: institutions and producers. And even reformist consumers are not, for instance, demanding that a share of profits go to the cultures exploited. The ethical aim being pursued is defensible ongoing consumption, not structural equity.

\*\* The full study results are available in an article authored by Angela Gracia B. Cruz, Yuri Seo and Daiane Scaraboto: "Between Cultural Appreciation and Cultural Appropriation: Self-Authorizing the Consumption of Cultural Difference". *Journal of Consumer Research* 50(5) (2024) 962—984. Open access <https://academic.oup.com/jcr/article/50/5/962/7100345>

