

# K-pop and Cultural Appropriation: Influences from the West and Within South Korean Society

Celine Hong<sup>1</sup>, Harrison Cho<sup>2#</sup> and Diana Kinney<sup>1#</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Academy of the Holy Angels

<sup>2</sup>Master Klass Academy

#Advisor

## ABSTRACT

Korean pop music, or K-Pop, has become an international sensation and a multi-billion industry in just the past 20 years. K-Pop groups such as BTS, Blackpink, and EXO have become household names and carry huge influence on the international youth audience. New cultural products within the K-Pop industry consequently have to cater to fans across all socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. However, there are increasing accusations against Korean artists of cultural appropriation or taking the possession and performing elements of a subordinate culture without proper accreditation. Many artists imitate and attempt to profit from marginalized communities, who are criticized and ostracized for performing their own culture. In the West, cultural appropriation manifested from the colonization by the West (and particularly the US) of African American, Native American, and Hispanic cultures. The clear power imbalance between the colonizing and colonized countries defines the parameters of cultural appropriation. However, cultural appropriation in South Korea is more difficult to ascertain due to the country's complex position within the international community. South Korean companies and the government need to be more conscious and have a united front against cultural appropriation to create media that respects the culture of those all over the world.

## **Introduction**

Media coverage of South Korea was limited to its geopolitics with North Korea and its rapidly advancing technology—until about a decade ago. Since then, the country has made its mark on the international stage in music and fashion in the form of Korean pop music (“K-Pop”). Nearly nonexistent until 2008, the K-Pop industry has skyrocketed to a multi-billion-dollar industry. K-Pop groups such as BTS, Blackpink, and EXO are sprawled across the advertisement of luxury goods such as Prada, Chanel, and Gucci. There are many economic and cultural reasons for the meteoric rise of K-Pop in the past few decades, namely the influence of American culture and substantial funding from the South Korean government. However, as K-Pop reaches a global status, there are problematic controversies that plague the industry.

Many artists across the industry have been accused of copying cultural elements from previously marginalized communities and profiting from their cultures without any acknowledgement of those communities. “Cultural appropriation” traditionally refers to the Western appropriation of non-Western or non-white forms of art (Oxford Reference). In South Korea, where K-Pop has become a successful international export, entertainment companies have constantly worked to create art that can appeal to the whole world. In that process, wittingly or not, K-Pop artists have continued the legacy of the Western World. Here, I attempt to first define the parameters of cultural appropriation and present it in the American context. Then, I trace the trend of cultural appropriation across Korean media as well as the Korean pop music industry.

## Cultural Appropriation in the West

Ever since the Age of Empires and the colonization of the world by the West starting from the 15th century, there has been the inevitable clashing and meshing of cultures throughout the world (Chen et al, 2020). There were several ways in which different cultures interacted, and the distinct cultures were mostly defined by the power imbalances that existed amongst the colonized and the colonizers. Through imperialism and colonization, European countries were able to conquer or influence much of South America, Africa, and Asia. In the East, the numerous kingdoms of China and the imperial force of the Japanese defined much of the international relations (Rogers, 2006; Chen et al., 2020). Most of the past few centuries have been defined by cultural dominance, whereby the dominant power has imposed its values and cultural norms onto a subordinate or receiving culture (Rogers, 2020). Colonized countries have adopted the official language and government system of their colonizers. Furthermore, these countries have established a one-way flow of media and cultural content from more developed and wealthier countries such as the US. This is predictably due to the lack of a cultural industry in colonized countries and their economic dependence on the “colonizers” (Straubhaar, 1991).

As society progressed and the distinct lines between cultures blurred, there were much more sinister implications within these cultural relationships between the dominant and subordinate subcultures. In particular, cultural appropriation or exploitation has recently become a hot topic within popular culture and academia. Cultural appropriation is defined by “the appropriation of elements of a subordinated culture by a dominant culture without substantive reciprocity, permission, and/or compensation” (Rogers, 2006). Emerging naturally within the framework of cultural dominance, cultural appropriation is understandably confused with members of a culture appreciating and enjoying the customs of a minority culture. This latter exchange is dubbed “cultural exchange,” when cultures of “equal levels of power” reciprocally exchange elements of their culture (Rogers, 2006). To understand the distinctions between the two, it is important to understand the first instances of cultural appropriation.

The first blatant forms of cultural appropriation started in the early 19th century, with entertainment in the form of minstrel shows that often portrayed African American stereotypes. White actors would don black makeup and caricature the sound and manner of enslaved African Americans, depicting them as lazy, uneducated, and beastlike, much to the applause and laughter of the white audience. By the 1840’s, minstrel shows created a sub industry of entertainment entirely built upon mocking African Americans. During this time, characters such as Sambo (“the happy slave”), Mammy, Aunt Jemimah, and Jim Crow emerged that encapsulated several harmful and pernicious stereotypes (National Museum of African American History, 2017). Unfortunately, the effects of the media on negative stereotypes continue to this day. Media portrayals of African Americans are often pejorative: African American women are loud and obnoxious, deemed the Jezebel, or a woman who criticizes and emasculates other men, and men are thought to be more criminal and violent (West, 1995). These depictions are an extreme but revealing view of cultural domination and appropriation.

Though these outright racist and prejudiced portrayals of different races have abated in today’s socially conscious world, there is now a more nuanced form of cultural appropriation that has been called to attention. Many artists may have an appreciation for all forms of culture and art and wish to appreciate it with respect while sharing their appreciation for that culture. However, many artists fail to acknowledge and realize the efforts of non-White or non-Western artists who have been ostracized for performing their own culture within a dominant one. For years, prominent figures in these industries have been accused of stealing styles, music, and art from minority groups and “Westernizing” them as pop culture. Clothes or items of minority culture are worn and used inappropriately for the artist’s creative vision.

The most prominent instances of cultural appropriation are through the prominence of Hip-Hop culture amongst white audiences. As an industry that encompasses culture that has been exclusively created and curated by the African American community, the cultural institution of Hip-Hop provided a means of popular entertainment to white Americans; research confirms that nearly 70% of consumers were white (Xie et al, 2007). Naturally, there were many white Hip-Hop artists that developed in the US and Europe (Androutsopoulos & Scholz, 2003). These artists

have currently come under more scrutiny and called out for their appropriating behavior (Mendez, 2019). In the case of Australian rapper, Iggy Azalea, linguistic analysis of her speech and songs suggested that she was affecting an African American English speech pattern to appear non-White (Eberhardt & Freeman, 2015).

Though appropriation of African American culture is the most common, there are other subordinate cultures that are appropriated by the white audience. The major fashion brand Victoria's Secret has featured Indigenous-inspired clothing in their shows multiple times, for example in their 2017 "Nomadic Adventure"-themed fashion show (White, 2021; Park, 2019). Superstar Madonna has constantly been accused of stealing from Black, Indian, and Latin cultures to benefit her music career (Nittle, 2020). There is much discussion today about the validity of claims of cultural appropriation. Though these incidents have to be carefully scrutinized to determine whether the artist has truly taken advantage of another culture, the systemic issue of appropriation is a real phenomenon. With an understanding of cultural appropriation in the context of dominant and subordinate, South Korea has a unique place within the global narrative. To understand the influence and the eventual dominance of Korean pop culture, the history needs to be closely examined.

## History of Korean culture and K-pop

Within the context of world history, South Korea has historically had a turbulent past under colonization from Japan, China, and the Soviet Union over the past two centuries. After the Korean War ended in 1953, the country lay in a heap of rubble. Widespread poverty and post-war conditions made exportable cultural products nearly impossible. In fact, South Koreans were heavily influenced by cultural imports such as movies, TV shows, and music from the US, China, and Japan. The US has a particularly significant role in shaping Korean postwar society (Park, 2009). Although there was significant oppression and suppression of foreign media, Koreans regularly consumed American media. Western folk songs like "Danny Boy" and Christmas jingles became popular in Korea and are still widely referred to in Korean media (Narayanan, A, 2020). Although anti-American sentiment still existed in the homogenous country, Koreans still viewed Americans with a stereotypically positive light. Most of the educated and wealthy class of Korea often studied in American or foreign universities and embodied Western ideals. Through close relations with South Korea, the US was able to impose American hegemony and successfully integrate American culture in Korean society (Yi, 2002).

As the economy in South Korea grew, so did its cultural industry. Until the 1970's, Korea was considered one of the poorest countries in Asia and had an infant cultural industry. Compounded by the financial crises of the 80's and 90's, South Korea had been subject to the uncertainty of the world market (Park, 2009). As a relatively small country on the world stage, there was a limited role that South Korea played in the world economy. The South Korean government started its strategy of funding and developing Korea's cultural industry to revive the South Korean economy. In the 1990's, the Korean government in the 90's invested a significant amount of money into entertainment companies to create cultural products that could be sold to the rest of the world. These efforts were ultimately successful and started a "Korean Wave" throughout Asia, also known as Hallyu; the entertainment infrastructure was able to cultivate very young and promising artists (Kim, 2017). At first, Korean dramas and movies became popular amongst the entire Asian continent.

The first successful K-Pop group is considered to be Seo Teoji and the Boys, whose influence is obviously inspired by the American hip-hop scene; they are credited with changing the South Korean music industry by pioneering the use of rap in K-Pop. According to an April 1996 Billboard report, the band's first four albums each sold over 1.6 million copies, making them some of the best-selling albums in South Korea (Varcoe, 1996). Soon after, boy bands such as H.O.T, Sechs Kies, and G.O.D. dominated the Korean airwaves, launching the K-Pop era. Since then, South Korea has become an important player in the international entertainment market.

## The Cultural “Position” of South Korea

Within this framework, South Korea is placed at an interesting crossroads. South Korea’s history is defined by the influence of both Western and Eastern superpowers. The rapid economic growth of South Korea has put the country at the current forefront of global economics and the country is able to produce a high quality and quantity of cultural products. However, it is clear from an examination of Korean pop culture that South Korea is heavily influenced by Western culture and borrows much of the stereotypes that are associated.

Unsurprisingly, Korea is not immune to instances of cultural appropriation before the rise of K-Pop. Korean entertainment has a long history of racial insensitivity; there are instances of blatant stereotyping and cultural appropriation in Korean entertainment. Comedians throughout the past forty years have painted their faces black and lips exaggerated, imitating the offensive portrayals of African Americans of the minstrel show era. The most famous comedy shows, like Gag Concert, often featured skits in which comedians wore blackface and afro wigs to portray black people. Other instances of blackface were seen in shows such as MBC’s “Quiz that Changes the World” and “Saturday Night Live Korea” (DazedDigital, 2020). Though there are those who do recognize the offensive nature of the skit, there are many more who believe that these portrayals are simply harmless representations for entertainment purposes. Furthermore, in these same shows, only white actors or entertainers are viewed as more sophisticated and educated than even Koreans themselves. In addition, black individuals are portrayed as less sophisticated and (Han, 2014).

Claims of cultural appropriation may be seen as inaccurate as South Korea is not a dominant culture. Wouldn’t South Korean artists use of other cultural elements simply be a matter of cultural exchange? Asking this question would be to ignore the overwhelming effect of Western media in South Korea. As Korean pop culture imitates and gains inspiration from Western culture, we can also see a transfer of the same prejudices and stereotypes towards subordinate cultures, especially for people of color. Throughout the 80’s and 90’s these portrayals had no opposition due to the exclusively domestic audience (Han, 2014). Though these representations are getting better



**Figure 1.** The first official K-Pop group, Seo Taiji and the Boys.

## Present day K-pop

Currently, the criticisms against cultural appropriation have done little to stop the Korean Wave of becoming successful. K-Pop takes its influence from all over the world, as the K-pop audience is becoming more diverse. However, this also means that idols and entertainment companies are often aware of the instances of cultural appropriation but fail to enact any systemic measures to alleviate these problems. From analyzing the three biggest entertainment companies in South Korea (YG, SM, and JYP), it is notable that many of the most popular idol groups are part of these three

companies. While many fans have “called out” these companies for their exploitative behavior, many companies and artists simply release an apology before another incident strikes. YG Entertainment has especially shown little remorse. Some of their major groups, including BIGBANG and BLACKPINK, have several records of appropriating Black and Indian cultures. When fans have reached out to the idols and companies, informing them of their mistakes, they have been largely unresponsive and shown little intent of improving from their flaws (Narayanan, A, 2020). It is also important to note that South Korea’s pop artists are often under the control of the companies themselves. Though many artists do have artistic freedom, most K-pop bands often make the most generic and appealing music for the widest audience. Therefore, the entertainment companies have direct influence over what is released and published through the K-pop group. Although these companies have all the capital and manpower to discuss these issues, incidents of cultural appropriation are still prevalent without any corrective measures. Below, I have charted the most notable instances of cultural appropriation throughout K-Pop’s history.

**Figure 2.** Representative instances of Cultural Appropriation from the most popular K-pop groups from 2003 to 2020.

Date / Year	Group	Incident of Appropriation/Insensitivity	Action of Idol/Company
2003	Bubble Sisters	Wore blackface for debut cover art and promotional images	
2013	G-Dragon of BIGBANG	Wore afro wig and comb in “MichiGO” music video	
2017	MAMAMOO	Performed “Uptown Funk” in Blackface at concert	An official statement of apology released
2010	Yuri of Girls Generation	Did racist impression of black people on KBS show	
2018	Wendy of Red Velvet	Imitated “Black” mannerisms	
2012	T-ara	Imitated Native Americans in “yayaya” music video, choreography, and lyrics	
2020	Chungha	“Appropriation” of Indian culture	
2020	Hwasa of MAMAMOO	Dressed in traditional Nigerian clothing on MBC show	Producers denied accusations, claimed it was a “Korean sauna outfit”
2020	Hongjoong of ATEEZ	Wore cornrows in promotional image for comeback single	Company issued statement apologizing within 24 hours
2020	BLACKPINK	Statue of Lord Ganesha placed on floor in “How You Like That” MV, defiled religion of Hindu fans	Edited image out of video, but no apology

2019	Soyeon of (G)I-DLE	Stated that she wanted to use Latin music to show off the “aggressive side” of the group for their music video “Senorita”	
2020	XRO	Uses stereotypical Native American calling sounds and lyrics in debut song “Welcome to My Jungle”	
2018	Jihyo of TWICE	Dressed as a stereotypical Native American for Halloween	
2018	MOMOLAND	Showed diverse cultures through outfits, but some (Egyptian and Mexican depictions) were stereotypical and racist	
2009	Sandara Park of 2NE1	Appropriated Indian culture by using stereotypical outfit and poses	
2020	Sunmi	Danced to famous Punjabi track “Tunak Tunak”, actions that mocked Indian dance and culture	Quick to acknowledge mistakes, apologized, and promised to do better

Although instances of cultural appropriation and mockery are countless, these are some of the worst and most blatant examples of racism and appropriation reported. T-ara’s track “yayaya” of 2012, which featured stereotypical Native American outfits, and used “Native American” ideas and gestures for the choreography, was clearly a mocking imitation of Native American culture. MAMAMOO’s “Uptown Funk” performance also sparked outrage throughout the K-Pop community, when, in a concert in front of thousands of fans, MAMAMOO performed their version of Bruno Mars’ “Uptown Funk,” dressing up in blackface to imitate the star’s appearance. Such cases of insensitivity are what contribute to an endless cycle of ignorance and dismissal of cultural appropriation (DazedDigital, 2020).

## Conclusion

As the platform and influence of K-Pop continue to grow and develop globally, artists are obliged to be aware of the diversity inherent in their equally growing number of international supporters. Rather than turn a blind eye, the companies and artists alike must be knowledgeable about the nuanced instances of cultural appropriation. First, Korean companies need to facilitate discussions and be open to receiving feedback from their fans. As the fandom of K-pop is internationally diverse, fans will furnish valuable sources of information. These forums may be overseen by official fan clubs or “fan cafes” that are operated independently or through the companies themselves (Miley, 2020). Furthermore, companies need to take their fans’ wishes to heart and hold internal company meetings to find ways to navigate global cultures while retaining creativity. These meetings may be similar to diversity sessions and meetings currently facilitated at various corporations to educate workers about racial prejudice. Entertainment companies should also conduct substantive research before producing products that embody cultural appreciation. K-pop is no longer limited to the Korean peninsula, and companies risk alienating their fans entirely if they continue to ignore the issue.

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