

K-pop and the consumption of culture

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Should international K-pop fans support the group Blackpink after they used sacred elements of Hindu culture in a music video? Is it ok for a Kiwi K-pop fan to use Korean words and slang terms?

In an era of heightened sensitivity to critiques of cultural appropriation, international K-pop fans are questioning how they consume Korean culture—and elements of other cultures—in the form of K-pop.

The different ways fans adjust their consumption of K-pop in relation to their experiences and understanding of cultural appropriation and appreciation are explored in a recently-published paper titled "Between Cultural Appreciation and Cultural Appropriation: Self-Authorizing the Consumption of Cultural Difference."

The paper, published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, stems from a six-year research project by marketing experts Associate Professor Yuri Seo (University of Auckland), Senior Lecturer Angela Cruz (Monash University) and Professor Daiane Scaraboto (University of Melbourne).

Cruz, Scaraboto, and Seo conducted an [extensive study](#) between 2017 and 2022, collecting data from multiple sources, including in-depth interviews with non-Korean consumers of K-pop as well as from online forums, websites, [social media platforms](#) and news media.

"We found that many international K-pop fans had extended conversations about cultural appropriation in relation to what cultural differences they consume in K-pop," says Seo.

"When consumers were talking about cultural appropriation, we heard and read discussions about how K-pop artists appropriate content from other cultures, how it can be insensitive, and how the fans feel about consuming products that basically appropriate other cultures."

International K-pop fans reflected on what it meant to enjoy the diversity of cultural styles in K-pop music, choreography, and fashion concepts, such as hip-hop, R&B, and dreadlocks, originating from historically marginalized cultures.

The fans also considered how they, as non-Koreans, could express their passion for K-pop in light of a long history of racialized discourses that fetishize Asian bodies and cultures.

"There has been a shift in terms of the social discourse around how we view the consumption of other cultures and there were a lot of discussions about where to draw the line between appreciating K-pop and appropriating Korean culture," says Seo.

"We found that consumers of K-pop are becoming increasingly aware of and responsible for the consumption choices they make in relation to cultural difference."

The researchers' interviews probed extensively into what the terms 'Koreaboo' (often defined as a non-Korean person who is obsessed with Korean [culture](#)) and 'cultural appropriation' meant to participants and how these notions shaped their K-pop consumption.

"As we read threads and posts, we focused on those most relevant to understanding key issues for international consumers of K-pop. In these discussions, the term cultural appropriation was often used," say the authors.

Their analysis led them to identify four strategies international fans of Korean pop use to grant themselves permission, or self-authorize, to continue consuming [cultural differences](#) through K-pop despite internal and external tensions.

The four strategies described in the study are reforming, recontextualizing, restraining and rationalizing, and K-pop consumers come under one or several categories.

For example, when fans engage in reforming, says Seo, they typically

highlight the harms of cultural appropriation as it applies to their consumption of cultural difference and cast themselves as an activist animated by a concern for their favorite groups.

One Reddit user who falls into this category wrote on a thread:

"From a [personal experience](#), I decided for myself that I can still enjoy K-pop content AND speak up about things that they do wrong (cultural appropriation, sexism, colorism, unfair treatment of artists etc.)"

Ultimately, says Seo, the goal of consumer self-authorization is to resolve tension at the individual level rather than to radically dismantle the structural and systemic inequalities that continue to disadvantage people of color and from developing countries.

"In an era of heightened sensitivity to critiques of cultural appropriation, our work offers timely insights on how consumers manage their consumption of cultural difference."

More information: Angela Gracia B Cruz et al, Between Cultural Appreciation and Cultural Appropriation: Self-Authorizing the Consumption of Cultural Difference, *Journal of Consumer Research* (2023). [DOI: 10.1093/jcr/ucad022](https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucad022)

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