
Is K-pop Guilty Of Cultural Appropriation?

Introduction

Korean music or K-pop has become a global phenomenon recently in the music industry. It is important to determine the cause of success in K-pop that enables a small culture to be recognized by other cultures on a global scale. This is because of the globalisation strategy that is utilised predominantly in Korean music. One of the strategies is the use of cultural hybridisation or the process of creating a new cultural form as a result of mixing existing cultural forms, evokes an issue of Cultural Appropriation in the media. The Cambridge dictionary defines cultural appropriation as “the act of taking or using things from a culture that is not your own, especially without showing that you understand or respect this culture.” The issue of cultural appropriation is an important ethical issue that must be discussed as there is a fine line between appropriation and appreciation of cultures. K-pop inevitably faces the issue of Cultural appropriation as they use elements of other cultures in their music. The question is whether or not K-pop use of hybridization in creating a new form of culture linked different cultures together or disrespecting other cultures due to their appropriation strategies.

Literature Review

The cause of success in Korean pop music majorly comes from the globalisation strategy that it utilises. Oh (2013) disagreed with scholars theory that states the globalisation of K-pop only comes from cultural hybridity, which means that Asian cultures (Japanese, China, India) are becoming more predominant and may prevail over Western cultures as a whole. It was natural that K-pop is successful because the music originates from Japan and China. (Oh, 2013) Oh argued that this theory is not true as the globalisation of K-pop involves a much more complex process. K-pop mixes elements of other cultures, modifying it to suit their own identity, then redistributing it to the global market. (Oh, 2013) The success of K-pop also involves a mixture of creativity and export management strategies by the leading music industry. Thus, Oh concluded that K-pop is an attempt to connect popular East Asian and Western music in the formerly disconnected music industry, more than to modify Japanese music or dominate western music. (Oh, 2013)

Similarly, Jin & Ryoo (2014) also discusses about cultural hybridity but more deeply into the hybridisation process and specifically about the appropriation of English mixing into Korean lyrics. It also talks about the history of K-pop that has diversified itself from trot and ballad to a more western style since the 1990s. The article explained that this hybridity occurred because of socio-cultural environments that led to the appropriation of English lyrics and a mix of different music genres. Korean music was largely influenced by western power that has been happening since the start of modernisation. It is important to note that Korean music may lose its local identities if they continued to take in products of western culture without exchanging their own local identity. This article suggests that the future of K-pop might be a potential force for “creating new local identity formation through creating much richer and more diverse attributes of K-Pop” by preserving their identity in the hybridisation process. (Jin, D. Y. & Ryoo, W, 2014)

When discussing about hybridisation of K-pop, it is vital to also look at cultural appropriation that

has recently become an issue in the media. Hurt (2018) raises the question of how K-pop gets away with cultural appropriation. The article refers to Elvis and Vanilla Ice in facing similar claims of appropriation without proper attributions. Hurt stated that not only Kpop artist but many artists have managed to get away with borrowing from other cultural element. For example, BTS "I Need You" were inspired by other Korean acts such as GOD or Jinusean, as well as New Kids on The Block, who themselves were created in the image of The JACKson five. (Hurt,M. 2018) The article explained that it is challenging for K-pop to not appropriate to other cultures. Hurt states that K-pop have no negative intentions as they haven't claimed that they invented rap or are better than the originators.

In comparison, Chitrakorn (2019) disagrees with this notion and leaned towards a more negative connotation of Kpop appropriation especially in the Hip hop genre. Chitrakorn (2019) talked about how Koreans "has been a country where racism is common." Koreans feel that they are paying respect to the hip-hop culture but others see this behaviour as inappropriate. "People love to dance and sing but when it comes to our struggle they don't want nothing to do about it". (Chitrakorn,K.2019) The article concluded with a statement that Koreans need a wider education and cultural awareness about the issue of racism and cultural appropriation more than as a means to "coolness".

However Tucci (2016) agreed to both arguments for and against Kpop cultural appropriation. The article states that Korean pop culture is a reflection of American Pop culture, they share similar features and genres but still maintained their cultural identity. This argument agreed with Hurt (2018) stating that it is natural for K-pop to borrow from it. They also agreed to Chitrakorn (2019) that K-pop use of cultural appropriation to convey a certain themes or concepts are not always the right thing to do as it perpetuates stereotypes and racism. Tucci (2016) concluded that cultural appropriation is a complex ethical issue and suggests Koreans should maintain a balance between creativity and appropriation by being more educated and be more aware of this issue. It is important to research differing opinions to effectively answer the research question.

Results

The first two sources is an academic journal that emphasizes Korean pop culture and its history in modernisation. The first article highlights K-pop complex process of globalisation. (Oh, 2013) This article provided evidence of how K-pop success not only appropriates to other cultural elements but serves as a medium that connects East Asian culture with Western culture. (Oh, 2013) They connected these cultures together through their music that is exported through social media. The second source similarly discusses the issue of cultural hybridity but in more detail. The article agreed with Oh (2013) as it highlights the concern of K-pop relying heavily on Western elements that it may lose its local identities. (Jin & Ryoo 2014) It is important to note that the first source argued from the K-pop producers point of view, while the second source argued from the audience point of view. These two arguments may not answer the research question about cultural appropriation directly but it explained why K-pop industry appropriates other cultures, which is to lift their socio-economic status.

To answer the research question directly, it is important to look at popular sources that gives both negative and positive aspects towards the issue of cultural appropriation. The first source highlights the positive aspects by providing examples of other musical artists such as Elvis and

Vanilla Ice who appropriates to other cultures. This shows that it is normal for music industries to appropriate to other cultures, and K-pop can get away with it. There are some elements of biased in this article as they argued that K-pop have no negative intentions to culturally appropriate. However, Chitrakorn (2019) completely disagreed with this notion and give evidence that racism is common in Korean society, which is why they need to be more educated about cultural appropriation. The two sources has both valid arguments and evidence for their opinions which is understandable. On the other hand, Tucci (2016) remained unbiased and tried to balance out whether or not K-pop cultural appropriation has a negative impact towards other cultures. The article states that there should be a balance between appropriation. Kpop could use other cultural elements but they also need to be more educated about this issue by paying respect and giving credit to the owners. From the research that I gathered I agreed with this articles opinion as I understand that K-pop culturally appropriates due to the process of globalisation and hybridisation which is inevitable. However, I also agreed with Chitrakorn (2019) that Koreans are still ignorance towards the issue of cultural appropriation and still need to be more educated.

Conclusion

By researching this topic I discovered that K-pop culturally appropriates because of its hybridisation process in blending different cultures together to form a new cultural identity. This strategy allowed them to be successful on a global scale. However they utilises this method and relied heavily on other cultural elements which other people may see this as cultural appropriation. I suggest that not only K-pop should be educated but other people criticising the industry to be more understanding of each others culture by not blaming one another. Thus, cultural appropriation is an ethical issue that is hard to determine whether or not K-pop is truly guilty, especially when they appropriate to enhance global connections.