

Korean Pop Dance: What Belongs to Who?

Can K-Pop dance really be labeled as its own genre of movement? Here, we examine issues of movement transmission and representation amidst the rising popularity of Korean Pop entertainment across the world

by Alice Myung

You might wonder, how problems in the Korean pop world are relevant to current dancers and creatives who have been navigating their way through the pandemic and their own artistic futures. What prompted me to look into it might have been the increased media attention that K-Pop dance received in the media throughout COVID-19 pandemic, and the fact that I couldn't easily find choreographic details in the video descriptions. I started asking myself who choreographed these specific dances and searched on Google for the names of the original choreographers that were being plagiarized without recognition. Dance covers and performance sets might be copied without ill-intention, but as I became more attuned to social justice movements like Black Lives Matter, I wanted to ask whether or not the popularized dance of my ethnic background has contributed to inflicting harm on other communities of color.

Korean Pop entertainment has become increasingly popular on the internet and across social media platforms within recent years. During the pandemic, the rise in streaming technology and accessibility led to even more people learning K-Pop choreography and more K-Pop influences in dance, music, and fashion. Performances by famous Korean Pop groups, such as Blackpink and BTS, have gained new audiences and success. This has prompted fans to create dance covers, which essentially consist of replicating the choreography to a specific song and uploading it online for others to watch. As cover dance trends have become admired and publicized across media platforms, certain dance studios and other YouTube content creators have started to learn the choreographed numbers performed by different K-Pop entertainment artists, sharing them online to teach audiences on the internet. The result? K-Pop is considered by many to be a unique and individual genre, one that blends music, dance, rapping, and fashion. There are, however, considerations that need to be made when analyzing the globalization of Korean Pop entertainment.

Choreographic Plagiarism within Movement Transmission

It is common to see Korean music industries invite well-recognized dancers from around the globe to choreograph for certain performance groups, who then perform their work on tours and in music videos. These invited choreographers have included Paris Goebel, Aliya Janell, and Keone Madrid, all artists who actively participate in Hip-hop culture and practice its several dance forms. Cover dances and tutorials that replicate their work for K-pop groups are subject to

copyright laws. These laws deny YouTube content creators the ability to monetize their videos and make profit off of content that is not original. But many of these videos are still available for online viewing, embedded with advertisements, even if they are flagged for copyright violation. These cover tutorials are still publicly accessible for promotional and publicity purposes of these K-Pop entertainment groups, but the original choreographers that have ownership over the choreography are often not credited or given any formal recognition for their contributions.

Furthermore, dance studios like STEEZY studios, On One Studios, and other online programs have begun to create a specific course category for these dance covers, labeling them K-Pop dance classes. These programs require registration and class fees to partake in, and such companies have been making profit by teaching students borrowed choreography online. This brings up the issue of choreographic plagiarism, sending out a public message to audiences and viewers that it is acceptable to replicate other artists' movement and use it for capitalistic and self-serving gain. Winning public attention and fame for plagiarized work is a huge disservice to the original choreographers that are brought in to teach these K-Pop groups their dances, and this is something that needs to be addressed.

Criticisms against K-Pop: Cultural Appropriation, Ownership, and Disrespect

Another layer to the issue of dance ownership and misrepresentation can be seen in the nature of the Korean-Pop entertainment industry as an entity, aside from dance covers and studio programs. K-Pop dance is a blend of African Diaspora dance forms such as Hip-hop and Jazz, choreographed to Korean pop music, but those influences are not properly acknowledged. Instead, K-Pop is celebrated nationally as their own Korean Pop culture. Looking at K-Pop dance, it's easy to see it relies on Africanist influences, including the presence of polyrhythms, breaking, whacking, jazz, all of which are dance forms and techniques that have previously been established outside of Korean pop culture and belong to other marginalized groups of people of color. "This process of cultural appropriation of African American hip-hop... has come about through multiple selective strategies of adoption and adaptation with respect to the associated cultural, musical, and linguistic components of the genre" (Hae-Kyung 2013).

Korean pop entertainment industries may be under-educated and uninformed about the cultural origins of the dance forms that influence their movement, but this lack of awareness generates extensive harm on racially subjugated groups that have to experience the erasure and disintegration of culturally important and even sacred movement expressions. When these influences of dance go unrecognized and unaccredited, and K-Pop dance and music culture is claimed proudly as original, this brings to surface an issue of not just cultural appropriation and proper ownership, but rather an ethical issue of cultural disrespect and misrepresentation of intellectual work, origins, and meaning.

These problems in Korean Pop culture do not solely stem from failing to give credit where credit is due, nor can these issues be mended easily by relabeling the title of K-Pop dance. Rather, the main problem is that K-Pop dance perpetuates a myth of reflecting something unique in Korean pop culture and perpetuates ideals that are completely skewed from the cultures that influence it. If K-Pop dance is not an individual genre of dance that can be claimed, and if it fails to credit true attribution and ownership of the borrowed material, why does it not—at the very least—respect and promote the authenticity of the cultural dance forms that influence it?

Examining the K-Pop Industry

The Korean pop group industry has become a very rigid, factory-based system with its own rules for how they operate, cast, train, and do publicity. There is very little individuality in how the artists are presented; the focus is the collective image of the group and how they are painted in contrast to other competing and popular K-Pop groups. From the moment that these individuals are cast and created into a new performance group, every facet of their lives become predetermined—how they eat, dress, and portray themselves publicly. There is a very specific image that these industries work to sell to their audiences, and the actual members have little autonomy over how they will be presented and promoted. The stereotypes and beauty standards that are perpetuated and upheld by the Korean pop culture often cater to Eurocentric beauty standards, from dyed hair, to colored contacts, and a pale complexion of the skin.

At the same time, it is noticeable that these groups cherry-pick Black influences aside from just dance moves; they take hip-hop fashion and customize it in a way that appropriates dreads, chains, grills, and other forms of Black cultural expression and turn them into costumes for their performance sets. In a specific music video released by the Korean artist G-Dragon, the movement, gestures, and costuming that are borrowed from different elements of hip-hop, allow him “to [hypersexually] remasculinize his persona,” while he also includes female Black dancers wearing leotards in the background whose faces are not individually revealed (Chuyun, 2016). “The[se] dancers are dehumanized to some extent... [and] the appropriation of hip-hop, thus, provides a space where female bodies are sexually objectified, while [the artist G-Dragon] can be more masculinized, which potentially serves to maintain the patriarchal status quo” (Chuyun, 2016). With Korean pop entertainment, the portrayal of such dance forms, fashion choices, and other borrowed influences have bred room for misrepresentation, even as other cultural meanings and origins have become lost in translation as this continually expansive industry has become globalized.

The Movement and Culture of Hip Hop

The culture of Hip Hop has promoted the idea of community collaboration, invitation, and unrestricted individuality, whereas K-Pop culture has emphasized the image of perfectionism and

uniformity. Hip hop culture was originally created by Black and Latinx communities as a liberation for self-expression and freedom from injustices throughout times of racial and cultural oppression. “Hip-Hop and rap are global but emerged as a quintessentially African American cultural form and diasporic expression, especially in the contexts of subcultural, underground resistance against the dominant hegemony” (Gilroy 1993; Lipsitz 1994; Rose 1994; Potter 1995, as cited in Hae-Kyung 2013). In an American past with a history of racial oppression, discrimination, and marginalization, Hip-hop dance and culture was a path of revolution and subversion that was created by people of color, for communities of color. Today, it is celebrated and participated in by many individuals and groups around the world. With care and intentionality, this can be done respectfully, paying tribute and homage to what this culture and movement meant to people and how it can be practiced by other cultures with proper consideration of its roots. However, Korean pop artists and entertainment industries have supported ideals that contradict the essence of Hip-hop culture, while simultaneously, appropriating Black influences without understanding the magnitude of their actions, failing to properly recognize and credit dance movement that originates from African Diaspora dance forms, and instead coining K-Pop dance entirely as its own genre of movement, music, and artistic expression.

Concluding Thoughts

The problems of the K-Pop industry may not seem problematic to global audiences who enjoy its popularity, but they are essential to recognize. This is not about limiting the potential fun that audiences find in K-Pop dance and music. Rather, this is about bringing awareness to the way a lack of acknowledgement and attribution can feed into silencing and erasing something culturally important to other groups of people. This is about respect, and understanding where credit is needed, whether that be to the contributing choreographers that craft these dances behind the scenes, or towards the cultures that have been misrepresented by the Korean pop industry as a whole. I believe that we as artists, and often participants of other cultural forms and expressions, can do a much better job at educating ourselves and others about the history and heritage of the dance forms that we partake in, at honoring those that deserve recognition for their contributions, and embodying movement in a way that respectfully illustrates how different cultures intended them to be.



Trained in a number of art forms, ranging from modern, ballet, tap, Korean folk dance, and hip hop, Alice Myung is a performer and choreographer who recently graduated from the University of California, Irvine class of 2021 with a Bachelor of Arts in Dance, as well as a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and Social Behavior. Currently based in Irvine, California, Myung has been appointed as Coordinator for the competitive hip-hop dance team Kaba Modern, founded in 1992 by Arnel Calvario as an extension of the Filipinx heritage and cultural club, Kababayan.

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