

Black Women, K-pop, and Global Fandom: A Critical Intersectional Review

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Abstract

This study systematically reviews and investigates the relationship between African American and K-pop fandom, examining how hybridity, cultural appropriation, racial capitalism, and identity work shape their participation in a globalised cultural form. A thematic literature review was conducted, drawing on 62 peer-reviewed literature sources published between 2000 and 2024. Databases searched included Web of Science, Scopus, ProQuest, and Google Scholar. Keywords included K-pop, Black women, fandom, intersectionality, cultural appropriation, racial capitalism, and hybridity. Inclusion criteria prioritised works addressing race, gender, and fandom politics in relation to Korean popular culture. The analysis identifies five interlinked contradictions shaping Black women's positionality in K-pop fandom: (1) the simultaneous familiarity and distance produced by K-pop's Black cultural foundations, (2) the celebration of Black aesthetics alongside their erasure within industry structures, (3) the provision of gendered affective alternatives tempered by persistent stereotypes, (4) the coexistence of inclusive branding and anti-Black exclusion in fandom spaces, and (5) the tension between identity re-creation, activism, and the policing of critique. This review addresses a critical gap in fandom studies by centring Black women's perspectives, revealing how their cultural affinity for K-pop coexists with racialised marginalisation, and developing a transferable framework for analysing contradictions in other transnational popular cultures.

Keywords: Black women, K-pop, Fandom, Intersectionality, Cultural appropriation, Racial capitalism, Hybridity, Transnational popular culture

Introduction

Over the past twenty years, Korean popular music—better known as K-pop—has grown from a local entertainment scene into one of the most influential cultural exports in the world. Its reach has been fuelled by slick production, eye-catching visuals, and marketing strategies that deliberately appeal to audiences across national and cultural boundaries (Howard, 2022, p. 14; Jung, 2013, p. 112). However, the story of K-pop's global rise is not only one of innovation and success. At its core, much of the genre's sound, style, and choreography draws heavily on African American musical traditions—especially hip hop, R&B, funk, and the dance cultures that surround them (Lie, 2014; George, 2004). Within South Korea's music industry, these influences have been reshaped and repackaged a “hybrid” cultural form (Bhabha, 1994). Hybridity here

is double-edged: it can create meaningful points of connection across cultures, but it can also blur or even erase the histories that gave rise to these forms in the first place. Within K-pop, African American-derived musical and visual styles are often detached from their original socio-political contexts, repackaged to fit the idol industry's highly managed aesthetic, and marketed to a global audience. This process raises critical questions about cultural appropriation, racial capitalism (Robinson, 1983), and the ethics of transnational popular culture.

Black women fans experience a distinctive and often paradoxical relationship to Korean hybrid cultural form. On one hand, many Black women identify a sense of sonic familiarity in K-pop music, as well as an emotional connection to its romantic narratives, which

often contrast with the hypersexualised and stereotyped portrayals of Black women in Western media (Lee, 2018, p. 102; Jung, 2011, p. 45). On the other hand, these fans frequently encounter anti-Blackness within fandom spaces, including harassment, silencing, and the selective recognition of racial issues (Shin, 2021, p. 77; Williams, 2020, p. 46).

Existing study on K-culture has tended to focus on its global marketing strategies, online fan communities, and the role of digital platforms in fostering fandom culture (Jenkins, 2006; Oh, 2017). These studies often treat “international fans” as a homogenous category, overlooking the ways that race, gender, and geopolitical context shape different fan experiences. Black women’s voice and their engagement with K-culture and the fandoms remain largely unknown. This research addresses that gap by examining how Black women fans of K-culture navigate the tensions between cultural affinity and racialised exclusion, and how they use fandom as a site for identity re-creation. Specifically, this study investigates how K-culture fans engage in beauty labour (Craig, 2006; Macon, 2019), language learning (Shin, 2021; Duff, 2011), and activist practices—such as hashtag campaigns and community education—to assert belonging and reshape the terms of their participation.

Purpose of this review

This article systematically reviews and synthesises existing studies on the relationship between Black women and K-pop fandom, examining how their participation is shaped by cultural affinity, racialised exclusion, and practices of identity-making. It draws on theoretical frameworks from cultural studies, critical race theory, and intersectionality to offer a critical synthesis of the literature.

Methods

Search strategy

A systematic literature search was conducted across Web of Science, Scopus, ProQuest, and Google Scholar from database inception to 15 July 2024. The search included peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and relevant grey literature in English. Keywords and Boolean operators were used in various combinations, including: (“K-pop” OR “Korean popular music” OR “K-culture”) AND (“Black

women” OR “African American women” OR “Black fans”) AND (“fandom” OR “popular culture” OR “cultural appropriation” OR “intersectionality” OR “racial capitalism” OR “hybridity”).

Reference lists of all retrieved works were manually screened to identify additional sources. Grey literature sources—such as conference proceedings, fan organisation reports, and open-access online publications—were also examined to ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant perspectives.

Study selection

This review considered empirical studies, theoretical essays, critical commentaries, and book chapters that addressed the participation, representation, or experiences of Black women within K-pop fandom or broader K-culture contexts.

Two levels of inclusion were used: 1) Core studies: Empirical or conceptual works that directly analyzed the experiences of Black women in K-pop fandoms and met the inclusion criteria below; 2) Contextual sources: Broader works consulted for theoretical framing, background, or comparative insights, even if Black women were not the primary focus.

Inclusion criteria for core studies were as follows:

1. Studies that explicitly addressed race and gender in the context of K-pop fandom or K-culture.
2. Works that analysed Black women’s experiences either as a primary focus or as a significant sub-group.
3. Sources employing cultural studies, critical race theory, intersectionality, or related theoretical frameworks.
4. Both qualitative (e.g., ethnographies, interviews, discourse analyses) and quantitative studies (e.g., surveys, content analyses).

Contextual and Grey literature was included to provide a broader landscape of fandom discourse, theory development, and related social phenomena, though not all were part of the final thematic synthesis.

Exclusion criteria

Studies were excluded if they:

1. Focused exclusively on domestic South Korean audiences without discussing race or gender.

2. Treated “international fans” as a monolithic group without disaggregating by race or gender.
3. Mentioned Black fans only in passing without substantive analysis.
4. Were non-English works without available English abstracts.

Screening process

All titles and abstracts were screened by the first reviewer, with full texts retrieved for potentially relevant sources. A second reviewer was consulted in cases of uncertainty, with disagreements resolved through discussion. The final selection comprised 62 works, covering academic scholarship, critical essays, and grey literature outputs.

Analytical approach

A thematic synthesis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was undertaken using an intersectional feminist lens (Crenshaw, 1991). Sources were coded for recurring concepts, debates, and contradictions. Codes were then refined into a set of overarching categories that captured how Black women’s engagement with K-pop has been theorised across the literature. This process enabled the integration of diverse forms of evidence while highlighting patterns, tensions, and underexplored areas

Result

A total of 124 records were identified through database searches (Web of Science, Scopus, ProQuest, Google Scholar) and a further 14 records were located through grey literature sources (conference proceedings, online fan organisation reports). An additional 5 studies were identified through manual searching of reference lists.

After removing 22 duplicates, the titles and abstracts of the remaining 121 records were screened for relevance. Initial title and abstract screening excluded studies that lacked direct reference to Black women or racialized fan experiences in the context of K-pop. This left 32 full-text works reviewed in detail. Of these, 21 were excluded for one or more of the following reasons:

1. Did not analyse race or gender in fan reception.
2. Treated “international fans” as a homogeneous category without disaggregation.
3. Mentioned Black fans only in passing without substantive analysis.

4. Focused solely on domestic South Korean audiences.

The final synthesis included 11 sources that directly examined Black women’s experiences in K-pop fandom or addressed them as a significant sub-group within a broader analysis. These included:

- 5 qualitative empirical studies (e.g., interviews, ethnographies, online discourse analyses)
- 2 survey-based quantitative studies
- 4 conceptual/theoretical works that explicitly addressed Black women in K-pop fandom using critical race, intersectional, or cultural studies approaches

In addition, 51 contextual sources, including broader theoretical works, literature reviews, and grey literature, were reviewed to inform the background, framing, and discussion sections. These were not part of the final synthesis but supported the development of theoretical and analytical perspectives.

The simultaneous familiarity and distance produced by K-pop’s Black cultural foundations

K-pop’s emergence as a distinctive musical and visual form cannot be understood without recognising its deep entanglement with African American cultural production. As Howard (2022, p. 14) notes, “Black American popular music has been central to the sonic and performative aesthetics of K-pop since its inception.” From the early 1990s, Korean pop acts such as Seo Taiji and Boys integrated rap verses, breakdancing, and baggy streetwear directly modelled on African American youth culture, a shift that Jung (2013, p. 112) identifies as “pivotal in shaping the soundscape of 1990s Korean pop.” This was not a superficial stylistic borrowing; it marked the institutionalisation of Black musical and dance vocabularies into the idol training system, ensuring that subsequent generations of K-pop performers would embody these forms as part of their everyday performance repertoire (Jung, 2013, p. 115).

The musical borrowing was deliberate and openly acknowledged by industry figures. The CEO of BigHit Entertainment has stated unequivocally, “Black music is the base. Even when doing many genres like house, urban, and PBR&B; there’s no changing the fact that it is Black music” (cited in Dahir, 2022). This admission resonates with Lie’s (2014) argument that K-pop’s

rhythmic and melodic structures are fundamentally indebted to African American popular music, creating what George (2004) calls an “aural bridge” between K-pop and Black audiences. Early K-pop producers and choreographers sought out African American collaborators, embedding not just sound but also movement vocabularies—locking, popping, krumping—into the visual grammar of the genre (Macon, 2019, p. 88).

Yet, as Bhabha (1994) stated, hybridity is always a site of negotiation, not mere fusion. The K-pop industry has frequently stripped Black music of their original socio-political contexts, reconfiguring them as global commodities (Condry, 2006). Hooks (1992, p. 25) critiques this process as a commodification that “takes the goods without the spirit,” detaching Black expressive forms from their histories of struggle and resistance. In K-pop, hip hop is often recast not as a vehicle for political critique but as a signifier of cosmopolitan coolness, available for consumption by global audiences regardless of their familiarity with its origins (Howard, 2022, p. 18).

The visual dimension of culture borrowing is equally significant. K-pop music videos and stage performances frequently employ fashion elements associated with African American culture—oversized streetwear, cornrows, durags—often without contextual acknowledgement (Macon, 2019, p. 97). These aesthetic borrowings are part of what Hall (1997) describes as the “circuit of culture,” where representation, identity, production, and consumption are mutually constitutive. As Howard (2022, p. 18) observes, the emotional appeal of Black music within K-pop is amplified through its decontextualization, allowing it to circulate globally as a floating signifier of “cool”—one that evokes affective recognition without acknowledging the cultural struggles from which it originates. In this circuit, Blackness becomes a style that can be put on and taken off, divorced from the lived realities of Black people.

This historical entanglement between K-pop and African American cultural forms generates a powerful sense of sonic and stylistic recognition for many Black women fans. Yet, the erasure of the political contexts that shaped these forms simultaneously produces a distance by rendering Blackness as an aesthetic to be consumed rather than a lived identity to be acknowledged. This contradiction lies at the heart of

Black women’s fandom: A space of both cultural intimacy and structural marginalisation.

The celebration of Black aesthetics alongside their erasure within industry structures

Cultural appropriation is neither a new nor a peripheral phenomenon in K-pop; rather, it is a recurring pattern embedded in the industry’s production logics. Howard (2022, p. 25) characterises this repetition as a “normalised” feature of K-pop, where appropriative acts are treated less as ethical breaches than as low-risk marketing strategies. The structural nature of this repetition suggests that appropriation is not merely the product of individual ignorance but the outcome of institutional priorities within the Korean music industry.

A key feature of this normalisation is the absence of substantive repercussions for idols or agencies involved in appropriation. Macon (2019, p. 97) notes that unlike scandals involving drugs or dating—both of which can significantly harm an idol’s career—instances of cultural appropriation rarely jeopardise professional standing. This asymmetry underscores the industry’s assessment that the costs of offending Black fans are outweighed by the benefits of maintaining a global image of stylistic versatility. Rogers (2006) argues that such selective accountability is a hallmark of commodification, whereby cultural forms are stripped of their origins and repackaged for mass consumption.

Hooks (1992) provides a critical lens for understanding this process, emphasising that commodification “takes the goods without the spirit,” removing the political and historical significance of marginalised cultures while profiting from their aesthetic appeal. In the K-pop context, this has included the repeated use of Black hairstyles, linguistic mimicry of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and choreographic styles rooted in Black social dance traditions—often without credit or compensation to their originators (Macon, 2019, p. 88). These acts are not isolated missteps but part of a structural pattern in which Black cultural labour is rendered invisible. For Black women fans, this erasure is deeply personal: the same aesthetic elements that draw them into K-pop—familiar sounds, styles, and movements—are rooted in their own cultural histories, yet are consistently devalued or misrepresented by the industry. This creates an affective dissonance, where admiration for the genre coexists

with the pain of seeing one's culture appropriated without acknowledgment or reciprocity.

That invisibility extends to the role of Black creative professionals in shaping K-pop's aesthetic. Williams (2020, P. 48) highlights how Black choreographers, producers, and stylists have been essential in developing the genre's sound and look, yet they are frequently undercredited and underpaid. Gill (2011) situates this within a broader pattern of exploitation in the global culture industries, where racialised labour is both foundational and systematically devalued. This mirrors Robinson's (1983) concept of racial capitalism, in which the production of value depends on the differentiation and subordination of racialised groups.

The undervaluation of Black creative labour is reinforced by the industry's global marketing strategies. Agencies often deploy Black cultural forms as signifiers of cosmopolitanism, modernity, and youthfulness, targeting international audiences who recognise and respond to these codes. Yet, as Shin (2021, p. 82) observes, controversies over appropriation are typically managed as public relations issues rather than prompts for structural change. Apologies, when they occur, are framed in ways that minimise the harm and re-centre the idol's intentions rather than the impact on marginalised communities. This approach allows agencies to maintain control over the narrative while avoiding commitments to long-term reform.

The instrumentalisation of culture in this way exemplifies what Robinson (1983) describes as the entanglement of cultural production with capitalist imperatives. In the case of K-pop, the industry's global expansion is predicated on its ability to adapt and incorporate diverse cultural forms, yet this flexibility is not matched by an ethical framework for cultural exchange. Instead, as hooks (1992) warns, the process often involves the "eating of the Other," consuming cultural difference as a form of exoticism that enhances the dominant group's image while leaving underlying power relations intact.

The persistence of appropriation also speaks to the limitations of hybridity as a critical concept. While Bhabha's (1994) notion of the "Third Space" emphasises the potential for hybrid cultural forms to subvert dominant narratives, the K-pop industry demonstrates how hybridity can be harnessed to

reinforce existing hierarchies. The blending of Black and Korean cultural elements may create new aesthetic possibilities, but without structural accountability, such hybridity risks becoming a tool for the depoliticisation of Black cultural forms.

Moreover, the industry's selective engagement with cultural criticism reflects a market calculus in which certain audiences are deemed more important than others. As Ahmed (2012) notes, institutional responsiveness is often shaped by the perceived value of the complainant; when Black fans' market share is undervalued or their voices are marginalised in global discourse, their grievances are less likely to prompt change. This selective recognition reinforces the affective economies described in Section 3, in which some communities are consistently kept at the periphery of care.

Ultimately, the structural dynamics of cultural appropriation in K-pop cannot be disentangled from the global systems of racial capitalism that shape cultural industries more broadly. The industry's ability to absorb and profit from Black cultural forms while marginalizing Black creative labour and fan voices is not an anomaly but a core feature of its operation. For Black women fans, this presents an ongoing contradiction: Their emotional and cultural investment in K-pop is continually challenged by its structural complicity in the very systems that erase them. Addressing this imbalance would require more than public apologies or diversity initiatives; it would necessitate a fundamental restructuring of how cultural value is recognised and redistributed within the global K-pop economy. The question, then, is how Black women fans navigate this terrain—how they reconcile their affective investments in K-pop with an awareness of its structural complicity in appropriation.

The provision of gendered affective alternatives tempered by persistent stereotypes

While K-pop's reliance on Black cultural forms has been widely acknowledged, far less attention has been given to how these forms are received, reinterpreted, and emotionally inhabited by Black women fans. As Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality reminds us, Black women's relationships to cultural products cannot be fully understood by looking at race or gender in isolation;

their experiences are shaped by the intertwined forces of racialised and gendered oppression. Within the K-pop context, this means that musical and visual elements rooted in African American culture intersect with representational practices that differ markedly from the dominant portrayals of Black women in Western popular media.

K-pop's male idols often exemplify what Jung (2011, p. 45) describes as "soft masculinity": a performative style that blends conventionally masculine traits—such as physical strength and charisma—with qualities culturally coded as feminine, including emotional expressiveness, aesthetic self-care, and attentiveness to relationships. This presentation stands in marked contrast to the hypermasculinity associated with certain strands of African American hip hop performance, as well as to the hypersexualised portrayals of both Black men and women in much of mainstream Western media (Collins, 2000). For many Black women fans, the soft masculinity of K-pop idols offers an imaginative space where masculinity is redefined—not through dominance or aggression, but through care, vulnerability, and relational sensitivity (Lee, 2018, p. 102).

Music and performance also function as sites of emotional projection and self-identification. Anderson (2021, p. 54) notes that "for many Black women, K-pop's incorporation of R&B vocal stylings and hip hop beats provides an immediate sense of sonic familiarity." George (2004) characterises this as an "aural bridge," enabling Black audiences to feel a connection even in the absence of shared language. In Bhabha's (1994) terms, this constitutes a "Third Space" where cultural forms are neither wholly original nor wholly borrowed, but re-signified through the act of reception. Black women's navigation of this space involves negotiating their own positionality as both cultural insiders to the musical idioms and outsiders to the Korean national context.

The alignment between K-pop's visual aesthetics and Black women's own practices of self-presentation further deepens this affective connection. Macon (2019, p. 92) describes Korean beauty labour as encompassing disciplined skincare routines, coordinated styling, and strict body management. For some Black women fans, adopting elements of K-beauty—whether makeup styles, skincare techniques, or fashion trends—becomes

a way of engaging in what Hall (1990) terms the "production" of identity: Crafting a self-image that is simultaneously culturally hybrid and personally affirming.

Importantly, the consumption of K-pop by Black women fans is not a passive act of reception but a socially embedded practice. Participation in fan communities—both online and offline—provides opportunities for collective identification and mutual support. Williams (2020, p. 40) highlights how Black women fans often engage in content creation, such as subtitling videos or producing fan art, as a way of deepening their connection to the culture and asserting their expertise within fandom spaces. Jenkins (1992) interprets such practices as forms of participatory culture that blur the line between producer and consumer, granting fans a measure of agency in shaping the meanings of the texts they love. This layered engagement underscores the paradox at the heart of Black women's fandom: the very elements that foster belonging—musical recognition, alternative masculinities, beauty practices, and creative participation—can also become sites of alienation when racial hierarchies within fandom and industry spaces are left unchallenged.

Yet, these affective and creative engagements exist in tension with the racialised dynamics of K-pop fandoms. As Ahmed (2012) suggests in her concept of "affective economies," emotions circulate within communities in ways that bind some bodies closer while pushing others to the margins. The same intimacy that Black women fans cultivate through their engagement with K-pop can be disrupted by experiences of exclusion or hostility from other fans, particularly when issues of cultural appropriation or anti-Blackness are raised. These tensions underscore the necessity of examining not only the pleasures of fandom but also its contradictions.

In this way, Black women's affective connections to K-pop are not just emotionally rich but structurally fraught. While they are drawn in by the sonic familiarity of African American musical idioms, the alternative masculinities offered by Korean idols, and the aesthetic resonances with Black beauty cultures, these connections remain precarious—always subject to disruption by the racialised politics of global fandom. This illustrates how the hybrid nature of K-pop's appeal

is both expansive and exclusionary, enabling identification while reinforcing the very hierarchies that marginalise the fans it attracts most deeply.

The coexistence of inclusive branding and anti-Black exclusion in fandom spaces

In fandom spaces, Black women are frequently positioned as outsiders to the “imagined community” of fans, despite their deep cultural investment and, in many cases, longer engagement with the genre than their non-Black peers. This outsider status is maintained through both micro-level interactions—such as being ignored in fan discussions—and macro-level discourses that question their authenticity as fans. This disconnect between cultural investment and social belonging exemplifies the paradox faced by Black women fans: while they may find emotional and aesthetic resonance in K-pop, their full participation in fan spaces is often undermined by racialised dynamics of exclusion and mistrust.

Shin (2021, p. 76) suggested that the consistent silencing of Black fans’ concerns could be seen as anti-Blackness. For example, grievances raised by non-Black marginalised groups—such as the misuse of Indigenous or South Asian cultural symbols—are often addressed swiftly by agencies and idols, sometimes resulting in public apologies or corrective action (Williams, 2020, p. 46). By contrast, similar complaints by Black fans about anti-Black appropriation or the use of racial slurs frequently go unanswered, revealing what Ahmed would call a differential economy of care. This selective acknowledgement of racial harm aligns with Ahmed’s (2012) theorisation of “affective economies,” wherein some bodies are drawn closer into the communal embrace while others are pushed to the margins through the circulation of affect. The silencing can take the form of gaslighting, derailing conversations about appropriation, or framing Black fans as “overreacting” when raising legitimate grievances. Black women fans who persist in speaking out often face targeted harassment. Howard (2022, p. 21) documents instances where Black women criticising idols for culturally appropriative behaviour were subjected to doxxing, mass-reporting on social media platforms, and coordinated campaigns to ostracise them from online communities. These practices not only attempt to discredit the individual but also serve as cautionary

examples to others, reinforcing a climate in which voicing dissent carries social risk.

The dissonance between K-pop’s heavy reliance on Black culture and the hostility directed toward Black fans remains an unresolved contradiction within global fandom spaces (Trier-Bieniek., 2015). One explanation lies in the commodification of Blackness, which complicates the moral authority of these fandoms to address anti-Blackness internally. As hooks (1992) reminds us, when dominant groups consume the cultural production of marginalised communities, they often fetishise certain elements while rejecting the people who created them. In K-pop, this dynamic plays out in the enthusiastic celebration of Black cultural forms—dance styles, musical genres, fashion—alongside the sidelining or silencing of Black fans who challenge the terms of that consumption. This pattern reinforces what Macon (2019, p. 97) describes as the “disposability” of Black fans within the global pop economy, where their cultural contributions are valued only when stripped of political context and repackaged for mass appeal. A second explanation can be found in what Ahmed (2012) terms the “politics of happiness,” in which dissenting voices are framed as threats to the shared joy of fandom. By refusing to “just enjoy the music” and insisting on sustained conversations about race, Black women fans disrupt the affective consensus that helps maintain fan cohesion. In doing so, they expose the racialised fault lines that global K-pop communities often prefer to gloss over.

This dynamic underscores the need to approach K-pop fandom not simply as a site of cultural consumption but as a contested arena where global racial hierarchies are reproduced and challenged. While online platforms have enabled unprecedented levels of fan participation, they have also created environments where harassment can be scaled and coordinated, often with little recourse for the targeted individuals. The uneven enforcement of community guidelines on platforms such as Twitter and YouTube exacerbates these vulnerabilities, leaving Black women disproportionately exposed to harm.

In sum, the experiences of anti-Blackness and exclusion in K-pop fandoms expose the limitations of the genre’s inclusive branding. Black women fans may contribute significantly to the global circulation of K-pop—through cultural labour, emotional investment, and community engagement—yet they are often denied

recognition and safety within those same fan spaces. This contradiction is not incidental but foundational, rooted in broader systems of racial capitalism and gendered exclusion that structure the global flow of cultural forms. It reinforces the central tension: the simultaneous sense of belonging and alienation that defines Black women's engagement with K-pop.

The tension between identity re-creation, activism, and the policing of critique

Despite the structural appropriation and anti-Blackness described in earlier sections, Black women fans of K-pop are not merely passive recipients of cultural products; they actively shape, contest, and reimagine their place within this transnational fandom. Their engagement can be understood through Hall's (1990) conception of identity as a process of becoming—a dynamic, ongoing negotiation of meanings within a shifting cultural landscape. This process is especially pronounced in the “Third Space” described by Bhabha (1994), where cultural forms are hybridised and re-signified through interaction, creating both opportunities for solidarity and sites of contestation. Yet this agency emerges within a contradictory terrain: Black women fans are deeply emotionally and culturally invested in K-pop, even as their critiques and creative labour are often marginalised or actively resisted by both industry and fandom. Their strategies of engagement therefore reflect not only a desire for inclusion but a reworking of the very structures that exclude them.

Black women fans employ a range of participatory practices that transform their role from consumer to cultural agent. Williams (2020, p. 53) documents how these fans organise hashtag campaigns, create subtitled content, and produce original fan art or essays to educate peers on issues of cultural appropriation and anti-Blackness. Such practices align with Jenkins (2006) concept of participatory culture, in which fans blur the boundaries between production and consumption, exercising creative and political agency. These acts not only increase the visibility of Black voices in fandom but also contest dominant narratives about who belongs in K-pop's imagined global community.

A central dimension of this agency is articulated through intersectional activism. As Crenshaw (1991) theorises, intersectionality reveals how overlapping

systems of oppression—racial, gendered, cultural—shape distinct experiences and strategies of resistance. For Black women in K-pop fandom, activism often involves highlighting the intersections of race and gender in the industry's representation of both its artists and its audiences. Howard (2022, p. 29) notes that these fans' critiques frequently expose how racialised and gendered stereotypes persist in the genre's visual and lyrical content, even when marketed to international audiences.

Language learning serves as another key site of identity work. Shin (2021, p. 85) observes that for many Black women fans, acquiring Korean language skills functions as more than a tool for comprehension; it becomes a symbolic claim to belonging within the transnational fan community. By learning Korean, fans can bypass the mediation of translation communities, engage directly with primary cultural texts, and participate in conversations that might otherwise be inaccessible. Duff (2011) describes this as a form of “linguistic investment,” in which language acquisition is tied to identity formation and social participation.

Engagement with Korean beauty culture also becomes a way for Black women fans to reconfigure their self-presentation. As discussed in Section 2, parallels between Korean beauty labour (Macon, 2019) and African American beauty practices (Craig, 2006) create a shared aesthetic discourse that can be appropriated and adapted to individual contexts. By selectively integrating K-beauty techniques into their routines, Black women fans perform a hybridised form of beauty labour that resists both Western beauty standards and the erasure of Black femininity in Korean media.

Resistance in this context does not necessarily take the form of rejection. Hooks (1992, p. 32) reminds us that reclaiming cultural space can be an act of love as well as critique—demanding a more equitable cultural exchange rather than abandoning the cultural form altogether. For many Black women fans, the goal is not to sever ties with K-pop but to reshape its transnational community into one that acknowledges and values their contributions. This aligns with Ahmed's (2012) notion of “complaint as diversity work,” where raising concerns is itself a form of labour aimed at transforming the institutions—or in this case, the fan cultures—in which one participates.

Community-building initiatives further illustrate this transformative potential. Online networks of Black K-pop fans, often facilitated through platforms such as Twitter, Discord, or YouTube, provide spaces for resource sharing, critical discussion, and mutual support. These networks act as counterpublics (Fraser, 1990), where marginalised voices can articulate alternative narratives of fandom that challenge the dominant, often exclusionary, discourse. Within these counterpublics, fans exchange knowledge about the historical and political contexts of Black cultural forms, enabling a more informed and critical engagement with K-pop.

Such practices are not without risk. As discussed in Section 3, outspoken fans may face harassment or exclusion from mainstream fandom spaces. Yet, the very act of persisting in these practices under hostile conditions underscores their significance as forms of resistance. By maintaining visibility and continuing to articulate critiques, Black women fans disrupt the affective consensus that prioritises uncritical enjoyment over accountability.

In sum, Black women's engagement with K-pop exemplifies a mode of fandom that is both affectively invested and critically engaged. Through creative production, linguistic investment, beauty practice adaptation, and community-building, these fans construct hybrid identities that reflect their cultural affiliations while resisting marginalisation. Their activism operates at the intersection of personal identity work and collective transformation, challenging both the industry's structural inequities and the fandom's internal hierarchies. This dual commitment—to pleasure and to justice—complicates simplistic narratives of either assimilation or rejection. Instead, it illustrates the paradox at the heart of Black women's fandom: even as they are excluded from full recognition, they help shape K-pop's global story through practices of love, critique, and transformation. In this sense, their contributions are not peripheral, but central to understanding how transnational popular culture is lived, contested, and reimagined from below.

Discussion

This review highlights that Black women's engagements with K-pop are shaped by a set of persistent contradictions—familiarity and distance,

recognition and erasure, empowerment and constraint, participation and policing, and belonging and exclusion. These contradictions are not incidental but structurally produced by the global logics of racial capitalism, cultural appropriation, and patriarchal neoliberalism. Together, they position Black women as both foundational and peripheral to K-pop's transnational appeal.

At the culture level, K-pop's deep reliance on African American music generate a strong sense of sonic recognition and affective intimacy. Black women fans hear their own histories in the sonic textures of hip hop, R&B, and funk that structure K-pop's global sound. Yet this recognition is consistently undermined by the industry's refusal to acknowledge or credit these origins. What emerges is a contradiction wherein Black cultural forms are central to the genre's global brand, while Black fans remain marginal. This phenomenon highlights how hybridity operates as both bridge and barrier, capable of enabling identification while obscuring the histories of struggle that make that identification possible.

Gender further complicates this dynamic. Black women turn to K-pop's "soft masculinity" and alternative beauty practices as affective resources, offering reprieve from Western media's racialised hypersexualisation. These pleasures, however, remain embedded within a global system that recycles Orientalist and sexist tropes. What appears as empowerment is frequently aestheticised constraint—a phenomenon McRobbie (2009) identifies as patriarchal neoliberalism, where agency is celebrated at the surface while structural subordination remains intact. In this context, empowerment becomes a surface-level choice, while underlying structures of gendered and racial subordination remain intact. Thus, even K-pop's most liberating gestures are embedded within broader systems of constraint.

Fandom spaces, often imagined as sites of inclusion, reproduce these structural exclusions. Black women may belong when they celebrate, but risk exclusion when they critique. Their interventions, particularly around cultural appropriation and anti-Blackness, are frequently dismissed, pathologised, or punished. As Ahmed (2012) calls the politics of happiness: dissent is framed as disruption to communal joy, rather than as a necessary intervention. The

conditionality of belonging within K-pop fandoms reveals how affective solidarity is rationed: extended to those who uphold the dominant narrative, withdrawn from those who challenge it.

At the systemic level, these contradictions map directly onto what Robinson (1983) theorised as racial capitalism. Black cultural—both from artists and fans—drives K-pop's global visibility yet remains structurally undervalued. Cultural appropriation is not an occasional controversy but a core mechanism of value extraction within the K-pop industry. The repeated use of Black styles without recognition or compensation, alongside the sidelining of Black fan voices, reveals how K-pop's success is predicated on the disavowal of the very people it draws from.

Despite these exclusions, Black women fans are not passive consumers. Their acts of identity re-creation—through organizing activist campaigns, creating educational content, and creative community spaces—demonstrate a politics of resistance grounded in intersectional experience. By occupying what hooks (1992) describes as “the margin as a site of radical possibility,” they reconfigure the terms of participation in transnational fandoms, even as their labour is vulnerable to re-absorption into the industry's circuits of commodification.

While this review primarily focuses on the experiences of African American women, the structural contradictions it identifies—around cultural appropriation, racial capitalism, and affective exclusion—also resonate across the broader African diaspora. However, the geopolitical positioning of Black women outside the U. S. , such as in the UK, the Caribbean, or various African nations, may shape distinct fandom dynamics (Wright, 2022; Yoon, 2022; Olutola, 2024). For instance, the racial formations in postcolonial Britain or the cultural politics of Blackness in South Africa or Jamaica influence how K-pop is consumed, interpreted, and critiqued (Sobande, 2020). Future research should explore how these regional contexts mediate the relationship between Black women fans and K-pop, in order to fully realise the transnational scope of this inquiry.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that Black women's relationship with K-pop is best understood not as one of simple affinity or rejection but as an ongoing negotiation within structures of global inequality. Their

fandom illuminates how affective investments in popular culture are entangled with racialised exclusions, and how pleasure and critique can coexist within the same cultural practice. Importantly, centering their experiences provides a framework for understanding other transnational fan cultures, where communities forged through shared media texts are simultaneously shaped by histories of race, gender, and power.

Conclusion

This review has shown that Black women's engagement with K-pop is shaped by a series of structural contradictions—between affective intimacy and cultural exclusion, empowerment and constraint, and participation and policing. These tensions are not incidental but emerge from the intersecting forces of racial capitalism, cultural appropriation, and patriarchal neoliberalism that structure global cultural production.

This review's primary contribution is its integration of affect theory, intersectionality, and cultural political economy to conceptualise Black women's fandom as a site of both pleasure and resistance. By focusing on Black women's experiences, this analysis reorients K-pop scholarship away from celebratory globalisation narratives and toward the racialised, gendered conditions that underpin transnational popular culture.

Looking ahead, future research should explore how regional and diasporic specificities—such as those in the UK, Caribbean, or African countries—shape K-pop fandom among Black women. Comparative work could illuminate how different racial formations and postcolonial histories mediate the contradictions of recognition and erasure. Additionally, deeper engagement with industry perspectives could further clarify the mechanisms of appropriation and gatekeeping, and the potential for ethical frameworks in global cultural exchange.

More broadly, this study highlights the need for media and cultural scholarship to center those whose labour, critique, and creativity sustain transnational cultural forms yet are often excluded from their imagined communities. Understanding the political and emotional stakes of Black women's fandom is not only essential for K-pop studies, but for any inquiry into how race, gender, and power shape the flows of global culture.

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