Between Cultural Appreciation and Cultural Appropriation: Self-Authorizing the Consumption of Cultural Difference

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Countervailing discourses of cultural appreciation versus cultural appropriation are fueling a tension between the ethnic consumer subject, who views the consumption of cultural difference as a valorized identity project, and the responsiblized consumer subject, who is tasked with considering the societal impacts of such consumption. Drawing on an extended qualitative investigation of international K-pop consumers, this study illustrates that this tension spurs consumers to pursue self-authorization—the reflexive reconfiguration of the self in relation to the social world—through which consumers grant themselves permission to continue consuming cultural difference. Four consumer self-authorization strategies are identified: reforming, restraining, recontextualizing, and rationalizing. Each strategy relies upon an amalgam of countervailing moral interpretations about acts of consuming difference, informing ideologies about the power relationships between cultures, and emergent subject positions that situate the consuming self in relation to others whose differences are packaged for consumption. Findings show notable conditions under which each self-authorization strategy is deployed, alongside consumers’ capacity to adjust and recombine different strategies as they navigate changing sociocultural and idiographic conditions. Overall, this study advances understanding of how consumers navigate the resurgent politics of marketized cultural diversity in an era of woke capitalism.

Keywords: cultural diversity, cultural appropriation, responsibilization, consumer reflexivity, K-pop

Based on my experience, sometimes I see something as cultural appreciation, sometimes I see something as cultural appropriation. It really depends on the exact situations that I have been in. […] As an Asian American, seeing K-pop fans in America, I see it as cultural appreciation; on the flip side, when I see Koreaboos who use Korean names just for the fun of it, I see it as cultural appropriation because my numerous esteemed colleagues at Schulich School of Business, Australian National University, ANZMAC Melbourne, and ACR Denver for helpful comments on earlier versions of this work. Finally, the authors thank the editors, associate editor, and review team for their insightful support and guidance. Supplementary materials are included in the web appendix accompanying the online version of this article.

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name has been made fun of before.” (Sam, Reddit thread, September 2020)

The consumption of cultural difference refers to the market-mediated creation of desirable contrasts to everyday life and mainstream notions of identity using another culture’s objects, symbols, styles, motifs, and subjects (Peñaloza 2001; Schroeder 2015; Young and Brunk 2009). For the past decades, a prevailing ideology of neoliberal multiculturalism suited to the demands of transnational capitalism institutionalized a desire to appreciate cultural difference as a valorized consumer identity project (Coskuner-Balli and Ertimur 2017; Thompson and Tambyah 1999; Veresiu and Giesler 2018). This prevailing discourse of cultural appreciation constitutes the ethnic consumer subject, who is hailed to “embrace differences through consumption” (Veresiu and Giesler 2018, 556). However, as Sam’s quote illustrates, a fairly recent change is emerging in popular understandings of this consumption domain. More and more, the consumer appreciation of cultural difference is being challenged by a countervailing set of ideas: the discourse of cultural appropriation that constitutes the responsibilized consumer subject.

Cultural appropriation refers to the use of elements of one culture by members of another culture, in ways that are perceived as unacknowledged or inappropriate (Young and Brunk 2009; Ziff and Rao 1997). Although scholars have long problematized complex cultural inequities that surface when other, often marginalized, cultures are transformed into palatable sources of consumable difference (hooks 2006; Peñaloza 2001; Root 1996; Skrbis and Woodward 2007; Veresiu and Giesler 2018), these critiques have only recently filtered into more pervasive public discussions and emerged as a significant concern for consumers (Finkelstein and Rios 2022; Mosley and Biernat 2021; web appendix A). In a sociocultural zeitgeist politicized through the lens of “wokeness” and “cancel culture” (Kanai and Gill 2020), consumers are hailed as responsibilized consumer subjects (Giesler and Veresiu 2014)—exhorted to take responsibility for how their actions intersect with issues of cultural diversity, equity, and inclusion (Arse, Crockett, and Scott 2022; Bajde and Rojas-Gaviria 2021; Giesler and Veresiu 2014; Gonzalez-Arcos et al. 2021). Consequently, the “Western neoliberal idyll of market-based inclusion and diversity” (Veresiu and Giesler 2018, 554) that calls the ethnic consumer subject to appreciate other cultures is being undercut by this countervailing discourse that calls the responsibilized consumer subject to engage with issues of cultural appropriation. Against this backdrop, an important question requires attention: how do consumers manage the tension between cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation when they pursue the consumption of cultural difference?

To address this question, we conducted a 6-year qualitative study of international (non-Korean) fans of Korean pop (K-pop). Through our time in the field, we observed vibrant consumer discussions of a tension between the competing discourses of cultural appreciation versus cultural appropriation. The theoretical lens of reflexivity, which holds that individuals are tasked with the adaptive construction of their own identities in relation to a systemically uncertain social world (Adams and Raisborough 2008; Akaka and Schau 2019; Thompson, Henry, and Bardhi 2018), provided a starting point for analyzing consumer discussions. This approach led us to identify consumer self-authorization, defined in our work as the reflexive reconfiguration of the self in relation to the social world through which consumers grant themselves permission to continue consuming cultural difference when confronting an identity-relevant tension between the ethnic consumer subject and the responsibilized consumer subject. We describe four consumer self-authorization strategies: reforming, restraining, recontextualizing, and rationalizing. Each strategy represents a distinct configuration of understandings of the self in relation to the social world aimed at conferring permission for oneself to continue consuming another culture’s elements.

Our theoretical account of consumer self-authorization illustrates how individuals carve diverse pathways through a tension that sits at the heart of consuming cultural difference. Inscribed in a nexus of countervailing discourses embedded in divergent ideologies of multiculturalism and hailing oppositional versions of consumer subjectivity, we find that consumers pursue diverse routes to craft permission to consume cultural difference while configuring who they are in relation to multiple others. Ultimately, however, consumer self-authorization is not aimed at radically dismantling systemic inequalities that continue to disadvantage people of color and people from the Global South. Instead, it constitutes an attempt to manage the tension between cultural appreciation and appropriation at the level of the individual consumer subject, carrying a broad range of consequences for how cultural difference is animated as a valued market resource.

THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT

The consumption of cultural difference is located at a nexus of two countervailing discourses. A cultural appreciation discourse frames the “making one’s own” of another culture’s elements (Young and Brunk 2009) as an unproblematic process of cultural diffusion and blending. By contrast, a cultural appropriation discourse frames the “taking” of elements from another culture in problematic terms (Ziff and Rao 1997)—as a harmful act of distortion, decontextualization, and domination. Each discourse comprises three interwoven elements that sustain one another: a set of ideological assumptions about the power relationships between cultures, a moral interpretation about acts of
TABLE 1

CONSUMING CULTURAL DIFFERENCE: TWO COUNTERVAILING DISCOURSES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Cultural appreciation discourse</th>
<th>Cultural appropriation discourse</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ideological assumptions about power</td>
<td>Aligned with ideology of neoliberal multicultural-</td>
<td>Aligned with ideology of critical multicultural-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relationships between cultural groups</td>
<td>ism, which occludes power relationships between cultural groups (Veresiu and Giesler 2018)</td>
<td>ism, which foregrounds asymmetrical power relationships between cultural groups (Arsel et al.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2022; Crockett 2017; Luedicke 2015; Varman and Belk 2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral interpretation about acts of</td>
<td>Foregrounds moral interpretation about consuming cultural difference as a valorized act of</td>
<td>Foregrounds moral interpretation about consuming cultural difference as a harmful act of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>consuming cultural difference</td>
<td>cultural adaptation, diffusion, learning, and blending (Askegaard et al. 2005; Beverland</td>
<td>distortion, decontextualization, and domination (Pénaloza 2001; Varman and Belk 2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>et al. 2021; Cayla and Eckhardt 2008; Thompson and Tambyah 1999)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideal consumer subject</td>
<td>Individual shaped as ethnic consumer subject,</td>
<td>Individual shaped as responsibilized consumer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>hailed to embrace diversity by consuming cultural difference (Veresiu and Giesler 2018)</td>
<td>subject (Bajde and Rojas-Gaviria 2021; Giesler and Veresiu 2014), hailed to reflect on the</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>broader societal impacts of consuming cultural difference</td>
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Consuming difference, and a vision of the ideal consumer subject (Table 1). Taken together, these countervailing discourses constitute a tension between cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation that has filtered into popular media and public debates (Mosley and Biernat 2021), offering individuals varied interpretive resources to understand acts of consuming cultural difference.

Cultural Appreciation Discourse and the Ethnic Consumer Subject

The discourse of *cultural appreciation*, rooted in the ideology of neoliberal multiculturalism, foregrounds moral interpretations of consuming cultural difference as a desirable and depoliticized consumer identity project. Prior research shows that this approach to consuming difference can manifest in multiple domains, including the consumption of foreign food (Thompson and Tambyah 1999), festivals (Veresiu and Giesler 2018), wellness techniques (Coskuner-Balli and Ertimur 2017), and popular music (Peterson and Bennett 2004). The pervasive appreciation of cultural difference in consumers’ everyday lives reflects an institutionalized consumer desire to construct authentic meanings and pursue distinctive identity projects (Pénaloza 2001; Thompson and Tambyah 1999). This desire for difference is further sustained by commodified transnational circulations of cultural objects, meanings, and practices, which result in ever-shifting recombinations of global, regional, local, and multicultural consumer cultural formations (Cayla and Eckhardt 2008; Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006; Sharifonasab, Bardhi, and Luedicke 2020). Fueling these circulations are market actors who routinely mine reference systems originating in specific groups to construct commercial myths aimed at communicating desired lifestyles and identities (Arsel and Thompson 2011; Beverland et al. 2021; Cayla and Eckhardt 2008). Furthermore, through the practices of the state, media, commercial actors, and consumers, cultural otherness is collectively reified from a site of inequality and conflict to a valorized and normalized source of consumable difference (Veresiu and Giesler 2018). In essence, the market performs a pivotal role in constituting, amplifying, and normalizing the consumption of difference across cultures (Thompson and Tambyah 1999; Veresiu and Giesler 2018).

Outside of consumer research, proponents of the cultural appreciation discourse similarly advance a normalizing view of the consumption of cultural difference by foregrounding the relationality, hybridity, and intertextuality of relationships between cultures. This perspective casts the sociohistorical circulation of objects, ideas, motifs, and styles between cultural groups as an a priori condition of all societies, viewing cultures as relational and ever-evolving phenomena. From this perspective, cultural elements offer open affordances for ongoing processes of creative and transformative reconfiguration (Cayla and Eckhardt 2008; Figueiredo, Larsen, and Bean 2021). Schneider (2003) further argues that borrowing across cultures is not only endemic but beneficial: appropriative acts can promote the recognition of another culture’s practices. Seen in this light, the use of elements from other cultures is a transformative and creative practice, expanding the horizons of those who appropriate, while extending the social life of an appropriated practice, artifact, or text by investing it with renewed significance (Schneider 2003). In essence, when situated within a lens of reciprocal exchange and cultural hybridity, the use of elements from other cultures is viewed as a depoliticized, even desirable, practice that promotes cultural adaptation, diffusion, learning, and blending.

The outcome of the cultural appreciation discourse is that it sustains the consumption of difference by
constructing individuals as ethnic consumer subjects (Veresiu and Giesler 2018). Whether indigene or immigrant, the ethnic consumer subject is hailed to welcome cultural difference via the logic of the market and express their willingness to engage with other cultures through commodified artifacts, texts, practices, and experiences (Veresiu and Giesler 2018). In distinguishing high cultural capital from low cultural capital (Holt 1998) or the cosmopolitan from the local (Figueiredo et al. 2021; Thompson and Tambyah 1999), the pursuit of difference enables the realization of a marketized version of individual subjectivity molded to the demands of intensifying multiculturalism and transnational capitalism. Against this backdrop, the ethnic consumer subject is exhorted to “negotiate his/her cultural background(s) and engage with different ethnicities predominantly through individual consumption choices made in a multicultural marketplace” (Veresiu and Giesler 2018, 554).

Cultural Appropriation Discourse and the Responsibilized Consumer Subject

The prevailing perspective advanced in the cultural appreciation discourse is being challenged by a countervailing discourse of consuming difference as cultural appropriation. The cultural appropriation discourse is scaffolded by the ideology of critical multiculturalism. Composed of heteroglossic intellectual traditions encompassing postcolonial theory, critical race theory, and critical perspectives on globalization and cosmopolitan consumption (Arsel et al. 2022; Crockett 2017; Luedicke 2015; Varman and Belk 2009), this long-standing scholarly project is broadly aimed at foregrounding, problematizing, and dismantling the systemic inequalities that disproportionately marginalize and harm people of color and cultures of the Global South. Seen through the lens of inequitable power relationships that structure the terms of cultural exchange between groups, consuming cultural difference is morally interpreted as a problematic and politically charged practice.

The literature on cultural appropriation identifies two distinct forms of cultural exchange under conditions of asymmetrical power relations: assimilation and exploitation (Rogers 2006). Assimilation is when members of a less powerful group (e.g., immigrants) use the elements of a more powerful group (e.g., indigenes). Insights about this form of cultural exchange are well established in theories of consumer acculturation. Immigrants, for example, encounter and make use of dominant cultural elements that are not “theirs,” but that nonetheless exert a powerful force in their daily lives (Askegaard, Arnould, and Kjeldgaard 2005; Luedicke 2015; Weinberger 2015). Such negotiations are delimited by asymmetrical power relationships between cultures and individuals’ positionalities with respect to these power structures (Luedicke 2015). Luedicke (2015) analyzed how immigrants’ use of indigenes’ valorized brands and cultural resources is understood through the lens of historically unequal power configurations between immigrants and indigenes. Within this relational configuration, immigrants’ assimilation of dominant cultural elements is perceived as a threat by indigenes, paradoxically sustaining discriminatory views of immigrants. By contrast, exploitation denotes the opposite configuration: when a more powerful group or individual uses the cultural elements of a less powerful group (Rogers 2006). Media critiques of appropriative commodification of elements from marginalized cultures by more powerful institutions or individuals (web appendix B) are largely consonant with this latter view of appropriation-as-exploitation.

While acknowledging that not all uses of marginalized culture elements are exploitative, the cultural appropriation discourse foregrounds the harm that can be perpetuated through appropriative acts and outlines when these harms are more likely to occur. Specifically, appropriative acts are harmful when they involve inhabiting a cultural voice or performing a cultural practice in a way that erodes a marginalized culture’s distinctive identity, infringes cultural property rights without credit or compensation, misrepresents or profoundly offends another’s culture, or fetishizes another’s culture as a commodity or a costume (Cherid 2021; Young and Brunk 2009; Ziff and Rao 1997). Seen in this light, the consumption of cultural difference is rendered in more sinister shades, as an act of misrecognition, infringement, and exploitation (Cherid 2021; Lalonde 2021; Root 1996).

The outcome of the cultural appropriation discourse is that, as it increasingly filters from academic literature into popular culture and public discussions (Finkelstein and Rios 2022; Mosley and Biernat 2021), individuals become constituted as responsibilized consumer subjects (Giesler and Veresiu 2014) with respect to the issue of cultural appropriation. Prior literature shows that consumers are increasingly held accountable for the broader societal impact of their individual practices across a range of consumption domains (Bajde and Rojas-Gaviria 2021; Giesler and Veresiu 2014; Gonzalez-Arcos et al. 2021). Although consumers carry comparatively less power than institutional actors such as the state and multinational corporations to shape market practices, responsibilization positions the consumer on par with these institutional actors. This discursive positioning of the consumer as sovereign and morally agentic, as Giesler and Veresiu (2014) explain, is part of a larger process in which responsibility and risk are shifted away from the state and institutions and toward the individual. Consumer responsibilization toward the issue of cultural appropriation, which has filtered into public consciousness via mainstream and social media (Kanai and Gill 2020), manifests a more “organic” responsibilization that differs from the institutionally
driven process described in Giesler and Veresiu’s (2014) work. The orientation toward responsibilization now permeates consumer subjectivities across so many domains that many consumers readily frame social issues raised in the media through the lens of their own consumption. Consequently, in relation to the cultural appropriation discourse, individuals are oriented toward a “moralistic mandate” (Giesler and Veresiu 2014, 842) that exhorts them to understand consuming difference in relation to its broader societal impacts and to take responsibility for the consequences of their consumption choices. This means that consumers feel compelled to care about cultural appropriation concerns, reflect on consuming difference in moralized terms, and link these moralized concerns to their own ethical responsibility.

Between the Ethnic and Responsibilized Consumer Subject: The Role of Reflexivity

Taken together, these countervailing discourses constitute a tension between cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation that offers divergent interpretative resources to frame the consumption of difference. On the one hand, consumers are encouraged to appreciate the consumption of difference as a valorized act of cultural adaptation, and on the other hand, consumers are increasingly reminded that the consumption of difference risks distorting, decontextualizing, and dominating other cultures, leading them to feel the discomfort (Eckhardt and Dobscha 2019) and challenges (Cherrier and Türe 2022) of responsibilization. Hence, we ask: how do consumers manage this tension?

The theoretical concept of reflexivity offers a useful starting point for this question. Reflexivity is broadly defined as the “awareness of the self within the social world” (Akaka and Schau 2019, 502) and encompasses “the act of an individual subject directing awareness towards itself, reflecting upon its own practices, preferences and even the process of reflection itself” (Adams and Raisborough 2008, 1168). Originating from the works of Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992), reflexivity is theorized to play a central role in the processes of self-identity construction in late-modern societies. Specifically, Giddens (1991) argues that, as the result of dynamic social changes that characterize post-traditional settings of modernity, making sense of the self relies on traditional institutional categories, such as gender and social class. Instead, the focus has shifted toward self-reliance and obligation on the self to make wise choices. This, in turn, promotes a reflexive awareness that carries potentialities to shape one’s own identity and even broader social structures. Adams (2006) terms this tenet “the extended reflexivity thesis,” emphasizing the reflexive capabilities of individuals in the context of systemic social change.

The extended reflexivity thesis has been explicitly translated in consumer research by Thompson et al. (2018) as the ideal type of existential reflexivity. Here, consumers are conceived to strategically deploy market resources to accomplish volitional identity projects from the position of agentic autonomy. In the absence of strong institutional structures that guide identity formation (Giddens 1991), or when faced with disruptions to taken-for-granted social structures (Akaka and Schau 2019; Thompson et al. 2018), individuals must draw on available sociocultural resources to create subject positions that allow them to manage salient identity tensions. Similarly, in many contexts of consuming cultural difference, there is currently no institutional consensus on how to appreciate cultural difference without appropriating or on who can grant permission to consume on behalf of a cultural group. Hence, when confronted with an identity-relevant tension between the ethnic and responsibilized consumer subject, individuals must reflexively engage with available sociocultural discourses and moral interpretations to craft manageable subject positions vis-à-vis others whose differences are consumed.

METHOD

Research Context: International K-pop Consumers

To understand how individuals navigate the consumption of cultural difference at the nexus of the ethnic and responsibilized consumer subject, we conducted a 6-year qualitative study of international (non-Korean) consumers of K-pop. K-pop is an immersive media universe, comprising a plethora of youth musical, aesthetic, fashion, dance, and performance styles embodied by groups of K-pop celebrities—referred to as idols (Cicchelli and Octobre 2021). K-pop content embodies a Korean flavor: song lyrics are mostly in Korean; almost all idols are Korean and have Korean names; narrative themes reflect popular tropes from Korean media culture; and dance choreographies privilege synchronized collective precision over individualized expression (Shin and Kim 2013). Music videos are an important component, advancing thematic concepts for each idol group’s new release that comprise an aesthetic, narrative, and performance motif. International consumers can follow their favorite idols not only through their music and music video releases but also through their ubiquitous appearances on talent and variety shows, Korean dramas, and global concert tours. Each idol group’s fandom has a distinct name (e.g., BTS Army, ATINY, Moomoo), with fan practices initiated and coordinated through official fan clubs based in Seoul. Fans orchestrate market reactions to their favorite idols’ content, for example, by organizing fan chants at K-pop concerts, generating views online through streaming marathons and reaction videos, or creating English subtitles for other international fans (Cruz, Seo, and Binay 2021).
This dense universe of celebrity-driven music, fashion, and media offerings embodies the latest iteration of Hallyu or the (South) Korean Wave—a rise in the global popularity of South Korean popular cultural products (Cicchelli and Octobre 2021). The Korean Wave began in the late 1990s with regionally focused exports of Korean dramas to China and then to other East Asian and Southeast Asian nations, followed by a more recent global diffusion of K-pop to Western markets (Cruz et al. 2021). The extensive international diffusion of K-pop is fueled by Korean cultural producers’ deliberate strategies to create a distinctly Asian, yet globally palatable, alternative to Western cultural imagery (Oh 2014). Three main Korean entertainment companies shape K-pop’s global image and centrally control the artist training process that cultivates K-pop idol groups (Shin and Kim 2013). Moreover, the Korean government actively promotes K-pop as a nationalistic platform for maintaining Korea’s position at the forefront of regional globalization from Asia (Shin and Kim 2013). As a result of these forces, K-pop has developed a loyal international following among consumers across multiple countries.

International K-pop consumers’ engagements with cultural difference in K-pop offered an appropriate empirical setting for our analysis. While we did not set out to theorize self-authorization to consume cultural difference, through our time in the field, we observed vibrant consumer reflections that evidenced a consumer-level tension between the competing discourses of cultural appreciation versus cultural appropriation. Consonant with the cultural appreciation discourse, K-pop can be interpreted as a cosmopolitan assemblage of diverse musical, aesthetic, and performance styles inspired by multiple cultures—indeed, K-pop’s culturally hybrid and syncretic form is designed to enhance its appeal to a transnational youth market (Cicchelli and Octobre 2021). Seen through the celebratory lens of global cosmopolitanism (Cayla and Eckhardt 2008), K-pop’s growing global popularity represents the latest moment in ongoing global circulations of youth culture, offering its mostly young fans a desirable departure from the everyday while connecting them to the modern and global circuits of cultural difference.

Concurrently, consonant with the cultural appropriation discourse, international K-pop fans questioned their own, and others’ right to consume Korean culture—and elements of other cultures—in the form of K-pop. We found that international K-pop fans engaged in extended conversations about cultural appropriation as it pertains to what cultural differences they consume in K-pop (i.e., the representations of cultural difference that they consumed in K-pop) and how they consume cultural difference (i.e., individual approaches to consuming cultural difference). International K-pop fans reflected on what it meant to enjoy the diversity of cultural styles in K-pop’s music, choreography, and fashion concepts (e.g., hip hop, R&B, dreadlocks) that originate from historically marginalized cultures (Garza 2021). International fans also considered how they, as non-Korean fans, could express their passion for K-pop in light of a long history of racialized discourses that fetishize Asian bodies and cultures (Oh 2014). Among international fans, the derogatory figure of the Koreaboo parodies the fetishistic consumption of K-pop and Korean culture (web appendices D and E). These consumer-level discussions cement a connection between the responsibilizing discourse of cultural appropriation and the many ways in which cultural difference becomes a desirable commodity in K-pop.

Data Collection

We conducted an extensive qualitative study, collecting data from multiple sources, including in-depth interviews, online forums and websites, social media platforms, and news media. Table 2 summarizes the dataset, detailing how each type of data contributed to our understanding of the phenomenon.

In-Depth Interviews. Interviews were conducted between 2017 and 2022 with 38 non-Korean consumers of K-pop living in a large Australian city. Opening with a grand tour question (how and when did you first develop an interest in K-pop?), the interview covered a range of topics such as what appealed to participants about K-pop, their experiences of K-pop concerts in Australia, their relationship with other consumers, the various social activities that accompanied their K-pop consumption, and how K-pop had affected other aspects of their lives. As the research evolved to focus on emergent issues of cultural dislocation, later interviews probed more extensively into what the emic terms “Koreaboo” and “cultural appropriation” meant to participants and how these notions shaped their K-pop consumption.

The researchers recruited participants through personal contacts and referrals, an ad posted on an Australian-based K-pop Facebook page, a university student subject pool, and snowball sampling. Participants comprised 28 women and 10 men, ranging in age from 19 to 25 years. The rather homogeneous demographic nature of the sample reflects the most actively engaged and visible supporters of K-pop idol groups, who tend to be young and predominantly female, as much K-pop content is targeted to appeal to this lucrative segment. Nonetheless, we employed theoretical sampling throughout and pursued opportunities to identify variations in K-pop consumption through a constant comparative method. Participants had been involved in K-pop between 1 and 13 years and engaged in K-pop consumption in various ways, from predominantly consuming K-pop among close friends to actively participating in dance cover groups and organizing online and offline community events (web appendix C).
Netnographic Observations and Media Sources. To contextualize participant interviews and triangulate their narratives within spontaneous conversations that are not directed by the researchers, we conducted several waves of netnographic immersion (Kozinets 2019) among English-speaking K-pop consumers. At the outset, we were broadly interested in understanding the globalization of K-pop. Each successive wave of netnographic investigation refined this focus further. During our immersions, we examined archival material from well-established online sources that had large numbers of active members who frequently posted consumer-to-consumer comments pertaining to K-pop. The first wave in 2016–2017 sensitized us to the K-pop phenomenon and the vast online universe of K-pop consumption, including the language, practices and rituals, and salient tensions within the international K-pop fandom. Informed by issues of cultural dislocation emerging in the online and interview data, the second wave of netnographic immersion in 2018–2019 focused on tensions in consuming cultural difference. Consequently, in the third wave of netnographic immersion from March to July 2021, while we continued occasionally observing a wide range of online sources, we narrowed our data collection focus to sources that afforded opportunities for consumers to engage in conversations that could evidence reflexivity in this domain.

To keep the online and social media data to manageable levels, we collected data from two main online sources, Reddit and Quora, both websites where people often ask questions, engage in discussion, and offer advice to one another. These sites offered us with online data that were richer than those we found on Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook. On these selected sites, we searched relevant keywords including “international,” “Koreaboo,” “cultural appropriation,” and “CA.” This search resulted in threads such as “What do you think of the culture [sic] appropriation in the K-pop world,” “I want an honest discussion about GLOBAL cultural appropriation,” and “Why is it bad to be a Koreaboo?” (web appendix D). We retained these threads and followed links shared on comments by consumers (e.g., to “Koreaboo cringe compilation” videos on YouTube).

In addition, we read news articles (e.g., web appendix B) to help illuminate the popular discourse about cultural appropriation that spans multiple consumption contexts, including K-pop. We particularly focused on those news articles that were shared by consumers in discussion boards and other online sources.

Data Analysis

We engaged in an iterative part-to-whole process of constant comparison between data collection, analysis, and development of theoretical concepts (Goulding and Saren 2010; Thompson 1997). We began by closely reading
participant interviews and online conversations among international K-pop fans to gain an understanding of the relevant issues for these consumers. Initially, our theoretical focus was on the cultural dislocations experienced by international K-pop fans. Once our theoretical focus was refined and set on the tensions between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation, we approached the interviews and the data from the last wave of netnographic immersion using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022). We started with open coding to identify provisional themes, concepts, and categories. The entire dataset was manually coded by the authors. Each author initially coded a portion of the dataset for emergent codes. In further discussions among the authors, the identified codes and code illustrations were discussed and aggregated into initial themes (e.g., accusing market actors, mimicking authentic K-pop consumption, delegitimizing K-pop). These themes were refined as we iterated between existing literature and the dataset until we developed a framework that explains how consumers navigate the countervailing discourses in consuming cultural difference.

During the process of analysis, regular researcher meetings were employed to explore divergence in perspectives and enrich the theorization. Researcher reflexivity was enhanced by the researchers’ firsthand familiarity with diverse cultural perspectives and their various levels of engagement with K-pop (e.g., one of the authors is fluent in Korean and has consumed K-pop since 2006; the others do not speak Korean and were not familiar with K-pop until starting this research project). This process of immersion and iteration led us to our present theorization of consumer self-authorization.

**SELF-AUTHORIZATION TO CONSUME CULTURAL DIFFERENCE**

Our analysis of international K-pop fans and their conversations about cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation led us to identify a set of four self-authorization strategies that consumers deploy to grant themselves permission to continue consuming cultural difference when confronting an identity-relevant tension between the ethnic consumer subject and the responsibilized consumer subject: reforming, recontextualizing, restraining, and rationalizing. When consumers engage in reforming, they problematize the harms of cultural appropriation as it applies to their consumption of cultural difference and cast themselves in the subject position of an activist custodian. When consumers engage in restraining, they limit their appreciation of cultural difference to less controversial forms and enact the subject position of a cautious appreciator. When consumers pursue self-authorization through the recontextualizing strategy, they situate their appreciation of cultural difference within its informing sociohistorical backdrop and cast themselves in the subject position of a respectful outsider. Finally, when consumers engage in rationalizing, they refute the relevance of cultural appropriation to their appreciation of cultural difference and cast themselves in the subject position of a connected cosmopolitan. As summarized in Table 3, each of these self-authorization strategies is bolstered by a distinct recombination of countervailing discourses that supports each subject position and includes a set of tactics that are either directed at what cultural difference is consumed (e.g., should international K-pop fans support K-pop group Blackpink after they used sacred elements of Hindu culture in a music video?) or how cultural difference is consumed (e.g., should international K-pop fans use Korean words and slang terms?). There are also notable conditions under which these strategies are likely to be deployed by consumers. In the following sections, we unpack each strategy, illustrating them with quotes from our dataset (web appendix E includes additional quotes for each category).

**Reforming: Consumer as Activist Custodian**

“From a personal experience, I decided for myself that I can still enjoy K-pop contents AND speak up about things that they do wrong (CA, sexism, colorism, unfair treatment of artists etc.) For me, the ugly sides do not cancel out the good things that K-pop brings. I believe speaking up and making our voices heard will make an impact, especially nowadays K-pop has evolved into a global genre and international markets can be crucial for an artist’s success. I was born and raised in Southeast Asia where racism, colorism and CA were painfully prevalent. Education for racial and cultural awareness was nonexistent. From my years of consuming South Korean and Chinese content, I think the situation is similar in those areas. With globalizing, the level of awareness has been increasing, albeit very slowly. [...] I think enjoying and appreciating someone’s art and speaking up about things they get wrong are not mutually exclusive. My ult bias member [favorite singer in favorite group] has also got heat for controversial things but has shown so much growth from constructive criticism. I still love and appreciate his art every day. But if he didn’t learn and kept on making the same mistakes, I would have stopped supporting him as well. I hope you continue to find the joy in K-pop. It is quite fun.” (KoiT, Reddit thread, December 2020)

KoiT’s excerpt captures the first self-authorization strategy of reforming. Here, consumers problematize the harms of cultural appropriation as it applies to their consumption of cultural difference and cast themselves in the subject position of cultural difference, while positioning themselves as activist custodians who are animated by a concern for the consumed “other.” In this excerpt, KoiT names and gives examples of how cultural appropriation often manifests in K-pop. Mobilizing the critical vocabulary and motifs that form the ideological subtext of the cultural appropriation discourse (e.g., “racism,” “colorism”), KoiT connects these
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CONSUMER SELF-AUTHORIZATION STRATEGIES

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manifestations to longstanding structural inequities that disproportionately harm other cultures. In doing so, KoiT’s reflection helps other international fans make sense of what cultural appropriation might mean in the context of K-pop consumption, while advancing a moral interpretation of appropriative acts as distorting, decontextualizing, and dominating historically marginalized cultures. The harms of cultural appropriation when consuming K-pop are similarly raised and problematized by interview participants and in numerous online fan conversations (web appendices D and E). Together, these debates surface two main self-authorization tactics, directed at what forms of cultural difference should not be consumed by K-pop consumers and how cultural difference should not be consumed by K-pop consumers.

Reforming What Cultural Difference Is Consumed. LouLou’s post illustrates a self-authorization tactic whereby international K-pop fans “speak up” about claims of cultural appropriation they encounter in the content that they consume: “K-pop is supposed to be fun and a break from the world. It should inspire you and make you feel happy. You should not have to deal with all the cr*p you see in the rest of the world in your fan spaces. So personally I feel it’s my job to look out for and speak up for fans who are confronted with painful imagery/problematic behavior from their idols. […] As for [CA] being an American concept that South Koreans have the right to ignore, I call b*llsh*t. Many corporations around the world have consultants to find out if their branding or logos are offensive in other cultures. SK [South Korea] is not some random backwater that can’t be expected to know what’s going on in the markets they’re selling to. And in some cases there is no plausible excuse. It doesn’t take an ethnoanthropologist or PhD in critical race theory to know the curry song is making fun of another culture. And enough idols have had controversies over Black hairstyles that you would think they’d have heard that’s a no-go zone unless you like scandals. And if you still don’t know what the hair thing is about there are plenty of online resources. […] Why not worry about your fellow fans and hold your idols accountable? We can have nice things if we just speak up and out after all.” (LouLou, Reddit comment, July 2020)
In this post, LouLou references examples of how cultural appropriation routinely manifests in the content that international fans consume in K-pop (“the curry song,” “Black hairstyles”). Through these examples, LouLou reinforces a shared understanding of how the abstract tenets of the cultural appropriation discourse translate into more concrete episodes of cultural appropriation in K-pop. LouLou frames this shared understanding within the motifs of critical multiculturalism. Briefly nodding to “ethnoanthropology” and “critical race theory,” LouLou promotes a view that being sensitive to the harms of cultural appropriation is part of a taken-for-granted curriculum for global cultural exchange (“if you still don’t know...”).

Importantly, even though cultural appropriation critiques are ostensibly about the culture of production, these critiques are framed as an identity-relevant concern for international K-pop consumers and directed at consumers who unquestioningly consume pop culture aesthetics that distort and decontextualize others’ cultural elements. By connecting concerns about what cultural difference is consumed to a concern for the other, LouLou enacts the subject position of an activist custodian, motivated to protect others from harm while consuming cultural difference. Positioning themselves as an activist custodian of the K-pop consumer experience, LouLou promotes the goal of protecting other K-pop fans from “offensive” and “painful” content. LouLou ends their reflection with a responsibilizing call to other consumers to engage in similar forms of questioning. Hence, consumers are framed as complicit in the routinization of cultural appropriation, where “holding” your idols accountable becomes part of a K-pop fan’s moral responsibility in promoting a culturally safe space for all consumers.

Other consumers, who feel directly touched by appropriative practices, inhabit the subject position of activist custodian when sharing their own emotionally charged problematizations of K-pop content that appropriates their own and others’ culture:

“I am a Desi and a Muslim, and the number of times our South Asian traditions and religions have been ridiculed is really disappointing [...] Having your culture or religion being made fun of is really upsetting and angering. Now here are a few examples: 1- When G-IDLE used a mosque as an ‘aesthetic’ while dancing; now a mosque is somewhere we Muslims go for praying and it is also known as a pure place and the house of God. Dancing in front of it for ‘aesthetic’ purposes is really disgusting. 2- When a Hindu God was disrespected in a Blackpink MV [music video]; Lord Ganesha is an important God for Hindus, and they placed them on the ground beside her which is very disrespectful and stupid, I personally want YG [producing company] to apologize for this disgusting behavior. Even though I am Muslim I have a deep respect for this religion, and really support whoever is calling out on this behavior. These are just two but I can rant on and on about how they think that our Desi culture (Desi means people from Pakistan and India and Bangladesh) is not an aesthetic for you!” (Ana, Quora post, November 2020)

Ana refers to specific episodes when K-pop groups engaged with other cultures in ways she and other fans called out as cultural appropriation. Her post, which she illustrates with multiple screenshots of music videos to evidence each of the actions perceived as appropriative, specifically covers acts commodifying cultural difference that she, being “a Desi and a Muslim,” finds personally upsetting.

Reforming can manifest as part of collective consumer action. As alluded to in Ana’s quote, a 2020 music video by female K-pop idol group Blackpink depicted a statue of the Hindu deity Ganesha on the floor. Deemed offensive to the Hindu religion and South Asian community, this use of a sacred Hindu symbol as a performance prop incited numerous calls by international K-pop fans—both South Asian and non–South Asian—to “unite against [production company] YG” and “support us in our fight to safeguard our religion and culture” under social media hashtags including #MyCultureIsNotYourAesthetic, #BlackPinkApologize, and #YGApologisetoHindus (Jeong 2020). Fans further collectively petitioned the production company for a response. Four days after the video’s initial release, the offending image was quietly edited out.

Reforming How Cultural Difference Is Consumed. A further self-authorization tactic in reforming is captured in Melissa’s post, which critiques how cultural difference is consumed—and explains how it should not be consumed—by international K-pop fans:

“Anyone who fetishizes Korean culture, [it means] to take the Korean culture and reduce it to only those tiny little things that aren’t representative of it that you think are amazing, and you love and you want to embody. So not learning the language, but you want to throw in some words here and there, because it makes you look cool. Or trying to do your makeup to make yourself look Korean. That’s what I consider Koreaboo and I consider it to be a negative thing. [...] If you were just like, ‘Korea’s, like, so perfect. Like, everything’s perfect. Koreans are perfect! I want to, like, marry a Korean guy, you know, they’re perfect! They’re much better than, like, white people.’ That sort of thing that’s going way overboard, because that’s just reducing a culture to only these positive things that you see in it. [...] I definitely do get a bit irritated if someone’s just looking at a culture so one dimensionally. I think it’s very degrading, very infantilizing.” (Melissa, interview)

In this excerpt, Melissa problematizes fetishist ways of consuming K-pop that can manifest when international K-pop fans’ expanding consumption of the K-pop media universe inflicts consumers’ self-expressions and influences
distorted attitudes toward the consumed culture. She invokes a pejorative emic term—“Koreaboo”—that caricatures a non-Korean whose interest in Korean culture is taken to an obsessive extreme through the romanticized adoption of Korean cultural habits and consumption practices, including in language, makeup, fashion, gestures, and bodily appearance. This negative stereotype is widely disseminated among international K-pop fans and reproduced in numerous YouTube and TikTok videos of “Koreaboo Cringe Compilations”—collections of short video excerpts where fans parody stereotypical Koreaboo behaviors. Originally a derogatory term imposed by non-fans, the meanings of the Koreaboo have more recently been linked to the motifs of the cultural appropriation discourse and mobilized in fan-to-fan critiques to decry appropriative consumption. As interview participant Ruby explains, the “extreme Korean copying” that characterizes the Koreaboo invites accusations of “offend[ing],” “mocking,” “stealing,” and “sexualizing” the other’s culture. Articulating the motifs of cultural appropriation as harmful distortion, decontextualization, and domination, Melissa’s quote connects stereotypical Koreaboo behaviors to fetishization and reductionism (“looking at a culture so one dimensionally”). In essence, the figure of the Koreaboo emerged as a well-known shorthand among international K-pop fans, manifesting a moralized interpretation about how not to consume cultural difference.

Similarly, Claire’s excerpt illustrates an understanding that, because K-pop is tightly territorialized as a Korean cultural product and situated within a long history of stereotypical and subordinated Asian representation, consuming K-pop in a fetishistic fashion risks perpetuating this problematic cultural dynamic:

“They [Koreaboos] would get the idea that all Korean men are these like soft, sensitive guys. And there’s a lot of history of Asian men being seen as weaker than white men, or black men, or whatever. So they perpetuate that idea without realizing that it can have harmful effects, when it’s based off of the idea of their ideal boyfriend. [...] It’s like you’re basing your idea of this entire race of people off of what you think is desirable, rather than what they actually are.” (Claire, interview)

Other consumers similarly demonstrate an earnest alignment with the vocabularies of a critical multiculturalist ideology, referring to “systemic othering,” “colonial violence,” and “exotification” when critiquing how K-pop is consumed.

In sum, via reforming, the tension between cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation is amplified as an identity-relevant issue that matters for international K-pop fans’ consumption of cultural difference. When reforming, consumers foreground the power asymmetries of consuming cultural difference, leading them to attempt to enroll others into this perspective and try to oppose cultural appropriation. It is not surprising, therefore, that this self-authorization strategy is deployed mostly by consumers who are sensitized to the harmful consequences of neocolonial market dynamics—a sensitivity that allows them to empathize with those whose differences are consumed. Such sensitivity often stems from these consumers’ prior socialization and education. For example, by drawing on her firsthand experience as an Indian member of the Desi ethnicity who has seen her sacred dance “mocked [...] as ignorant hand movements,” Maya can more readily perceive how repeated appropriative representations diminish a consumed culture (“Imagine someone bowing the way Koreans do to each other and laughing at that—would that be funny? No, right?”). This sensitization toward harm is not only limited to persons of color. While Claire is not of Asian descent, her ability to empathize with those whose differences are appropriated reflects a growing awareness of neocolonialism among younger consumers in Western industrialized nations such as the USA and Australia. This growing awareness has been driven by a changing educational curriculum that attempts to engage with difficult histories of racism and colonization (Vee: “if you’re an American, and you grew up learning about that history, you’d be like, why is/how is this a thing where Koreans think it’s cool to imitate this.”). This growing awareness is also amplified by the popular and social media coverage of cultural appropriation episodes (Ruby: “back when I was in high school, I don’t think I ever read anything about cultural appropriation [...] I didn’t know any examples, there were no proper cases.”) and the popularization of social movements aimed at resisting entrenched institutional racism (Nadia: “Black Lives Matter, for example [...] this was a big thing.”). Under these enabling conditions, we find that consumers feel empowered to inhabit the activist custodian subject position and hold other market actors accountable on the issue of cultural appropriation.

It may seem perplexing that consumers who engage in reforming are, in effect, amplifying a troubling tension in their own consumption of cultural difference. But by pursuing this strategy, their implicit goal is to safeguard themselves and others against these harmful practices while consuming cultural difference. Consumers’ subject position when reforming thus resembles an archetypical “morality play myth in which a moral protagonist is called upon to defend the sacrosanct virtues and ideals from the transgressive actions of an immoral adversary” (Luedicke, Thompson, and Giesler 2010); in essence, reforming imbibes their consumption of cultural difference with heroically redemptive qualities.

Importantly, however, international K-pop fans who engage in reforming are not responding to “outside-in” attacks, as in the case of the Hummer brand community responding to attacks from oppositional groups (Luedicke et al. 2010), gay consumers living with stigmatizing representations (Eichert and Luedicke 2022; Kates 2002), or
indie consumers responding to devaluing hipster stereotypes (Arsel and Thompson 2011). Rather, reminiscent of the consumers who mobilize change from within a consumption field (Scaraboto and Fischer 2013), the reinvigoration of tensions in the consumption of cultural difference is being amplified by active participants who are deeply invested in this consumption context. The reforming strategy reflects less a morality conflict between insiders and outsiders than an emergent “inside out” responsibilization of consumers (Bajde and Rojas-Gaviria 2021; Giesler and Veresiu 2014).

Reforming, however, falls short of the radical or sustained resistance aimed at redressing structural inequities between cultural groups. For example, we did not see international K-pop fans calling for long-term partnerships between the K-pop industry and marginalized artists or communities. Nonetheless, reforming incrementally repoliticizes others toward the interests, safety, and well-being of the consumed other. Reading through or participating in these types of discussions, consumers learn about what is considered cultural appropriation in K-pop, become sensitized to its harmful effects, and apprehend that cultural appropriation carries consequences for members of appropriated cultures and themselves as participants in the consumption of cultural difference. In dozens of responses to LouLou’s and Ana’s posts, for example, other consumers share their own impression of the episodes (e.g., “I don’t think BP [Blackpink] had anything to do with the Ganesha thing”) and engage in ambiguous, contested, and emotionally charged reflections. As such, reforming is generative of reflexivity in others, when it is visibly performed via consumers’ networked social interactions, as it is in the K-pop fandom. In short, reforming triggers further reflexive pathways to self-authorizing the consumption of cultural difference.

Restraining: Consumer as Cautious Appreciator

“I’m tired. Tired of racism, cultural appropriation, and plain disrespect as a black person. It’s almost like a cycle. I get into a group and love them with all my heart. Then I find out about all the bad things they’ve done and it leaves me heartbroken and devastated. I move on to another group and the cycle continues. Eventually, I learned to do ‘background checks’ on groups to see what they did and if it’s worth listening to their music/supporting the artist. Nowadays I feel like I don’t even have the energy to get into any more groups/soloists in K-pop and just focus on the ones I already listen to because I’m so tired of being let down. According to Very Well Mind, ‘the term cognitive dissonance is used to describe the feelings of discomfort that result when your beliefs run counter to your behaviors and/or new information that is presented to you.’ This accurately describes me (and most likely many of you) as a black K-pop fan. How can I be pro-black while supporting an anti-black industry? I feel guilty for even listening to K-pop, and honestly sometimes wish I never got into it the first place.” (Livy, Reddit post)

Livy’s quote introduces the self-authorization strategy of restraining—when consumers circumvent the tension between the ethnic and responsibilized consumer subject by limiting their appreciation of cultural difference to less controversial expressions. Unlike reforming, which is directed at shifting the understandings and practices of other actors (e.g., K-pop industry and idols, “Koreaboo” consumers) and triggering adjustments at the level of the collective, restraining is about disciplining the self. Animated by the desire to shield the self from moralized judgments about cultural appropriation while consuming cultural difference, when restraining, consumers enact a self-disciplining approach to their consumption, thereby constituting themselves as cautious appreciators.

Restraining What Cultural Difference Is Consumed. When managing the tension as it pertains to what cultural difference is consumed, consumers attempt to carefully select which K-pop idols they follow and try to divert their allegiance away from K-pop idols contaminated by cultural appropriation controversy. For example, Livy morally interprets repeated cycles of cultural appropriation in the K-pop industry in relation to their lived experience “as a black person.” Internalizing the moral imperatives of the cultural appropriation discourse, Livy responsibilizes themselves to “move on” from K-pop idol groups that engage in cultural appropriation and even performs “background checks” before deciding to support a new K-pop artist. Yet, moving on is difficult: like many other fans, Livy invests significant time, money, and emotion to follow each K-pop idol group—an investment from which it is often taxing to detach. Livy is further taxed with the emotional burden of guilt, dissonance, and regret when they fail to completely restrain their consumption. Reflecting the disproportionate impact of responsibilization on the individual consumer (Giesler and Veresiu 2014), Livy directs the moralistic mandates of the cultural appropriation discourse at themselves, ultimately bearing both the costs of disciplining their own consumption choices and the costs of failing to do so.

In a similar vein, Nadia describes her practices of “checking” and “unstanning” favorite K-pop artists in response to cultural appropriation controversies, linking these practices to the responsibilizing demands of “woke culture”:

“I would stan a group or I’d go on Twitter and before someone stans a group they’d be like, ‘Is this group problematic?’ And then you click the thread and then it’d be like this group’s done blackface, this group’s done cornrows, this group said the N word. I think with woke culture now being such a prevalent thing in the media, before someone stans a group they’re like, ‘Okay, just to double check is this group
okay to stan?” Because a lot of people don’t want to seem like they’re promoting this behavior. [...] If I’m on Twitter at the moment I’ll be looking through a friend’s account or someone else’s account and it’ll be like, ‘Don’t follow me if you’re a fan of this group, this group, this group or this group because I don’t want to be associated with even the fans of that group.’ So they think that just because you’re a fan of that group you support their behaviors. They just don’t want to be mutuals with someone who supports people that they don’t like. So let’s say if Super Junior for example did something really culturally not right, they assume that their fans then are supporting what they did after continuous, repeated behaviors, which is why they don’t want to be associated with those groups of fans. [...] One of my favorite groups—or used to be one of my favorite groups—was Oh My Girl, they were not necessarily racist but they were doing a lot of cultural appropriation. They were wearing bindis and specifically making fun of Indian culture. When I first started stanning they did do some stuff in the past and I gave them the benefit of the doubt because I was like, they’re young, we all make mistakes and they haven’t made a mistake in two years, I’m assuming they’ve grown from that. They did it again and I’m like, ‘No, I can’t.’” (Nadia, interview)

While K-pop idol group Oh My Girl “used to be” one of Nadia’s favorites, she stopped supporting them in response to repeated episodes of cultural appropriation. Nadia’s deliberate restraint carries significant identity-relevant consequences. As Nadia observes, those who continue to support controversial idols can be met with social rejection (“don’t follow me if you are a fan of this group”). Restraining thus protects the self from exclusionary social sanctions that tend to be enforced by vocal reformers in the K-pop fandom. When consumers feel vulnerable to social judgments, as in the case of international K-pop fans who closely scrutinize each other’s consumption, the subject position of the cautious appreciator allows consumers to demonstrate their commitment to—or at the very least, compliance with—the moral mandate of the cultural appropriation discourse, thereby offering a viable pathway for individuals to self-authorize what cultural difference they consume.

Restraining How Cultural Difference Is Consumed. The subject position of the cautious appreciator also helps consumers manage the tension as it pertains to how cultural difference is consumed. Here, consumers dampen the intensity of K-pop-related identity expressions, exerting careful control over how they convey their appreciation of K-pop. Jerry, for example, acknowledged that many K-pop fans risk being condemned as exhibiting the appropriative excesses of the stereotypical Koreaboo. To shield the self from these negative judgments, Jerry discussed the importance of steering clear of consumption practices that are deemed “a bit too much.” In fact, participants frequently declared the importance to “not go overboard” (Jerry), “to know where your boundaries exist” (Berlinda), and to “be cautious about whether or not you’re going too far with the obsession to the culturally insensitive point” (Claire). This shared logic of restraint was applied by participants to diverse aspects of their K-pop appreciation. For Jerry, this meant refraining from the wholesale imitation of clothing, fashion, and makeup practices that have been popularized by K-pop idols but are rendered problematic when performed by non-Korean fans:

“Oh obviously, you have a fine line between actually being a fan and it turning into. ... a fine line between being a fan and appropriating, being a bit too much, I guess there’s certain things that are just a bit strange after certain points. For example, I’m sure nobody’s going to have a problem with you dressing in, I don’t know. Korean style clothes or what not, but after you start looking a bit too... trying to emulate a Korean person’s facial features and trying to speak Korean out of nowhere... I think for international fans, as long as you’re not going overboard. [...] There’s a fine line between trying to be somebody and appreciating somebody’s culture. You don’t have to do the whole eyes and the whole hair and the whole face, you can sort of dress the way they do which is not changing your whole personality to become somebody’s culture. It’s appreciating and wearing the clothes, the styles, but not really changing the whole face and everything to be Korean. [...] It’s sort of like a music interest. It’s not like a personality interest. I like Korean K-pop, but it’s not something that I liked that much where it changed me. I think some people have—Korea just starts becoming their personality. If you’re a [Koreaboo], I guess, Korea and Korean’s things are mainly your personality. [...] But for sure, you definitely get the risk of being considered a Koreaboo, definitely.” (Jerry, interview)

Alongside visible manifestations of K-pop fan expression, the logic of “not going overboard” was also frequently applied to limiting one’s identification with K-pop. Even though Jerry is deeply invested in K-pop, because he feels vulnerable to social judgment, he restrains himself from identifying with K-pop. Reminiscent of the protective proclamations of consumer sovereignty that some indie consumers use to demythologize their practices (Arsel and Thompson 2011), Jerry minimizes the role of K-pop in his life (“it’s not a personality interest”) so that the appropriative connotations of the Koreaboo stereotype, so often conflated with devoted fan behavior, do not contaminate his identity.

The self-disciplining logic of “knowing where your boundaries exist” is also frequently applied by international K-pop fans to the consumption of cultural difference via linguistic acts. As Anna conveys:

“If one was to accept they’re not Korean, but then they like the language, culture, that is not going to be a Koreaboo. But then if some were to suddenly try and speak their so
little knowledge of Korean, and show it off to everyone, then that would be like a different story. After the term Koreaboo appeared, I think that the internet is trying to not be seen as Koreaboos nowadays. Because I remember back in the—few years ago, I would randomly see phrases of Korean, like the Romanization of Korean in their captions. But nowadays I don’t really see that at all. It’s either you’re not Korean, you don’t understand it. Or you’re not Korean, but you do understand it, so you’re trying to assist people with the translations. Not throwing random phrases in there.” (Anna, interview)

International K-pop fans often help each other decode the latest K-pop music videos by producing translated versions with English captions. In such videos, Anna observes, the Romanization of Korean is no longer a standard practice. To avoid the threat of being labeled a Koreaboo, international K-pop fans are restraining themselves from code-switching across diverse cultural vocabularies and moving away from hybridized linguistic expressions.

In sum, restraining is when consumers delimit their consumption of cultural difference to non-controversial forms. This individual-directed strategy enrolls consumers into the ongoing work of mapping and steering clear of submerged “danger zones” in the consumption of cultural difference. Restraining tends to be deployed when consumers perceive significant risk of social judgment, sanction, and conflict as a consequence of their consumption of cultural difference. This sense of heightened vulnerability can erupt as a function of the kinds of social spaces that consumers are navigating or the perceived visibility of their actions within those spaces. Spaces such as high school and online fanfairs emerged as typical examples of unsafe spaces where consumers felt exposed to social judgment (Anna: “there’s this stereotype that non-Korean fans who like K-pop are Koreaboos […] when I was in high school, the people who didn’t like K-pop would go judging those who liked K-pop.”). Consumer vulnerability to social judgment is also heightened by participants’ perceived visibility within these spaces. For example, Nadia’s status as a K-pop content creator makes her actions visible among other K-pop content creators and international fans, and therefore, more prone to social scrutiny (“they think that just because you’re a fan of that group you support their behaviors”). Under such conditions where the stakes are simply deemed too high, restraining offers a viable strategy for protecting the self. By dampening and disciplining their own consumption, individuals achieve self-authorization by performing compliance with the cultural appropriation discourse.

In some ways, restraining resembles previously documented strategies that consumers adopt in response to social conflict. This strategy is captured, for example, with Star Trek fans (Kozinets 2001) or members of the indie subculture (Arsel and Thompson 2011) who create safe zones to manage conflict. Eichert and Luedicke (2022, 10) relatedly found that some gay men enact an underground self-representation and “meticulously avoid objectifying their identity.” While these previously documented underground strategies emerged in response to stigmatizing discourses, it is intriguing that a similar strategy is being deployed by international K-pop fans to address a tension that is now arising between the ethnic and responsibilized consumer subject.

Recontextualizing: Consumer as Respectful Outsider

“All culture can be appropriated, I think. I feel like it’s just about the respect. Like if you’re just interacting with this person’s culture disrespectfully, then that’s cultural appropriation, because that’s not yours, and you’re not being respectful about it. But I feel like people are so quick to jump to conclusions nowadays. Like, you have to look at the context.” (Melissa, interview)

The third self-authorization strategy, recontextualizing, is where consumers situate their appreciation of cultural difference within its informing sociohistorical context, while constituting the subject position of a respectful outsider. In contrast to the previous strategy of restraining, which often demands a deliberate dampening of investment, recontextualizing involves a deepening of investment. This is because this strategy relies on a deeper understanding of salient cultural dynamics, which helps consumers present a more nuanced perspective on what cultural difference is consumed and how they consume it.

Recontextualizing is contingent on consumers acquiring the relevant sociohistorical knowledge and skills needed to navigate complex cultural dynamics and relate to diverse cultural viewpoints. Involving a deft ability to bridge across the countervailing frames of the cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation discourses, recontextualizing is reminiscent of the traversing strategy employed by non-celebrators of Christmas who perform a “delicate dance” between conflicting desires to connect with others through a dominant cultural ritual and the desire to express an ideologically rooted identity (Weinberger 2015, 395).

Consequently, recontextualizing commonly manifests among consumers who are prone to reflect on how one’s cultural background influences their views. In particular, we observed that reflections about one’s race, ethnicity, and cultural background are often made explicit in consumer discussions about cultural appropriation in K-pop: “I’m an Indian who lives in America. I have Indian parents who immigrated here from India”; “I’m a black person who comes from Africa. I am not American, but I’m from Europe (France to be precise). I also come from a Christian family”; “I am mixed, coming from both black and white backgrounds and I was raised in an environment with both black and white people.” Here, participants’ lived experiences of dislocation provide an important resource for
recontextualizing what cultural difference is consumed. By connecting the countervailing discourses of cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation with their individual identity resources, consumers adopt a subject position of the respectful outsider, adept at making space for diverse cultural viewpoints and connecting “both sides.”

Recontextualizing What Cultural Difference Is Consumed. In this recontextualizing tactic, consumers situate claims of cultural appropriation in the K-pop content that they consume within multiple sociohistorically situated perspectives on the politics of consuming cultural difference. Elena and Megan, for example, acknowledge the potential for some K-pop content to be viewed as culturally appropriative. However, in an important departure from consumers who engage in the first strategy of reforming, Elena and Megan resist a “black-and-white” view and are hesitant to condemn these acts outright. In these excerpts, Elena and Megan combine a sensitivity to racialized power imbalances while respecting that one moral interpretation may not carry equal currency across diverse cultural contexts:

“Keep in mind that CA [cultural appropriation] is the adoption of an element or elements of one culture or identity by members of a different culture or identity—the problems with CA therefore differ because of the context in which it happens not just the definition itself. […] Cultural appropriation functions differently in the West (US) than it does in K-pop but we react to them (us the Western fans) the same way. The reason why we often have such strong reactions to CA is that we assume that because we are in a violent environment (btw this is talking about the US) where things like CA is rooted in violent intent for our culture and wellbeing. […] It [CA] matters VERY MUCH in the political climate of the United States. The US is an ‘ethnic melting pot’ but the well-being of these ethnicities is tied to a government that harms these people because of racism. […] However, in K-pop while it’s morally wrong that’s really all it is. […] It’s not that it doesn’t MATTER because everyone is entitled to feel wronged when their culture is disrespected but it functions DIFFERENTLY. And if you wanted to know: my ethnicity is black and my nationality is Nigerian (Yoruba) and I live in the US.” (Elena, Reddit, June 2020)

“I believe since K-pop is growing more global, not everyone is on the same wavelength with cultural appropriation. Definitely there are boundaries that these K-pop idols shouldn’t cross, since now there are more international fans than before. […] That said, cultural appropriation is something that is dependent on the individual. As someone who is half Black and half Asian, I can definitely see both sides.” (Megan, Quora, June 2020)

In complexifying their interpretation and refraining from imposing a singular moral interpretation on people from other cultures, Elena and Megan soften the strong critiques of the cultural appropriation discourse, which encourages a sensitivity to the neocolonial politics of consuming cultural difference, with the tenets of the cultural appreciation discourse, which encourages a respectful engagement with diverse cultural viewpoints. These reflections by Elena and Megan thus exemplify a sophisticated recombination of multiple layers of moral interpretation to address the tension in the consumption of cultural difference.

Recontextualizing How Cultural Difference Is Consumed. Consumers can also recontextualize how cultural difference is consumed. Recognizing the critiques of decontextualizing another culture, as embodied by the fetishizing figure of the Koreaboo, consumers respectfully consume cultural difference by seeking more knowledge about the other’s culture while respecting the limits of their outsider status with respect to Korean culture. Ruby, for example, explains that cultural appreciation is demarcated from cultural appropriation based on a consumer’s earnest intention to seek knowledge about another culture: “appreciation is when someone’s actually invested in the culture […] some people actually take time to learn the language. I don’t think that’s considered Koreaboo because that’s actually being interested in the culture.” For Ruby, the additional investment of effort in learning about another culture helps consumers distinguish their practices from the superficial consumption of the Koreaboo. Other fans, like Avani, similarly aimed to extend their appreciation beyond the fantastic and spectacular representations purveyed by K-pop media culture, by recontextualizing their K-pop consumption within a deeper knowledge of the language, customs, cuisine, and history of South Korea:

“I think the first step is acknowledging that this is their culture. This is their way of life. If you try to take that on without any understanding of the ramifications of it. […] I think by listening to K-pop and trying to understand its culture is the way I try to go about it. I try to gain more understanding and knowledge in a way to prevent myself from appropriating. […] So learning about the Korean history, especially like the North and South Korea, the differences, what happened, the impact on what that had to South Korea. […] I try to put that into perspective, try to understand all of the cultural and social issues, and then attempt to not overstep the line. Because I don’t want to be viewed as someone who takes on someone else’s culture, because I still, I respect my own culture and where I come from, and I’m proud of that. Yeah it’s just that the media and the music and the messages that they have in Korean music, I also enjoy.” (Avani, interview)

Arsel and Thompson (2011) discussed how high cultural capital can become a resource for consumers to demythologize cultural meanings that devalue their extended identity investments in a consumption field. Consumers mobilize various resources, including distinctive displays (Crockett 2017; Kates 2002) and moralistic interpretations (Luedicke et al. 2010), to resist threats to their consumption-related
identities. Similarly, because of their extended identity investments in the field of K-pop, consumers like Elena, Megan, and Avani have developed a heightened knowledge of the broader politics of K-pop's globalization and sociohistorical dynamics of Korean culture. This knowledge allows them to recontextualize what difference they consume and how they consume it. Overall, recontextualizing constitutes a new subject position based on respectful—that is, more sophisticated, knowledgeable, and self-aware—consumption of cultural difference.

Rationalizing: Consumer as Connected Cosmopolitan

“We live in a very global world, it’s a little ridiculous to act like any sort of influence from different cultures is appropriation.” (online forum post)

The forum post above animates the final self-authorization strategy of rationalizing—when consumers refute the relevance of cultural appropriation discourse to what cultural difference they consume and how they consume it, thereby exempting their consumption of cultural difference from responsibilization. In contrast to the previous strategy of recontextualizing, in which consumers position themselves as respectful outsiders, when rationalizing, consumers craft a shared “we” that connects them to the cultures whose differences they consume. By emphasizing the liquidity of the boundary between the consuming self and the consumed other, consumers defend the valorized subject position of the connected cosmopolitan.

Rationalizing What Cultural Difference Is Consumed. To refute the relevance of the cultural appropriation discourse as it applies to what cultural difference they consume, international K-pop fans rationalized their consumption by framing K-pop in de-exoticized terms. If the cultural appropriation discourse assumes a clear boundary between cultural outsiders and cultural insiders, and a clear sense of what belongs to a culture and what does not (Rogers 2006), when de-exoticizing K-pop, consumers challenge these assumptions by emphasizing the liquidity of the self–other boundary as it applies to K-pop. Squarely aligned with the tenets of the cultural appreciation discourse, this strategy emphasizes a view of cultures as intermingling, shared, and cosmopolitan. For example, Nasrine understands K-pop as a form of cultural difference that is deliberately packaged to be consumed across cultures (“Korea, with the way they’ve been exporting all of this, I feel like they want their culture to be blended with the Western world, or in general, with everyone.”). Here, Nasrine frames what cultural difference she consumes in K-pop as a symptom of valorized processes of cultural diffusion, blending, and adaptation—a routinized expression of global remix culture. From this vantage point, Nasrine is rendered a connected cosmopolitan, deftly participating in the global flows of youth culture (Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006).

Similarly, Jeff contends that discussions about cultural appropriation in K-pop are “nonsensical” because the practice of consuming across cultures is to be expected in a “diverse community”:

“You know how people complain when a non-black person wears braids in their hair, like dreadlocks, I feel it’s a bit nonsensical because I don’t feel like you’re disrespecting a culture by participating in the cultural activity or cultural norms. […] I don’t get why people say only members of that race should participate in their cultural norms. If everyone wants to live in a diverse community, they should mingle a bit. It lets you, at the very least, accept the other cultures as a member of the community, I feel. […] You wouldn’t say that listening to Taylor Swift is a cultural appropriation of American norms or listening to someone like Of Monsters and Men being appropriation of Icelandic norms. So I don’t feel like it is an issue because, to me, it’s more distinct. I don’t see the relationship between cultural appropriation and K-pop fans, to be honest. I don’t see a relationship. That’s just me.” (Jeff, interview)

In this excerpt, Jeff reframes the debate as one between promoting cultural exchange versus cultural insularity. Notice how Jeff draws an equivalence between the use of Western-originated music by non-Western consumers and the use of black cultural elements in K-pop. In viewing these ways of consuming cultural difference in the same light, Jeff’s reflection elides asymmetrical conditions of production and reception that underpin different flows of global cultural exchange. By drawing on the neoliberal multicultural tenets (Veresiu and Giesler 2018) embedded in the cultural appreciation discourse, Jeff’s reflection articulates an affirmative cosmopolitan vision of global interconnection and intermingling wherein such cultural inequities are rendered irrelevant. From this depoliticizing ideological standpoint, Jeff self-authorizes the consumption of cultural difference by asserting the value of a cosmopolitan worldview.

Rationalizing How Cultural Difference Is Consumed. In addition, to release themselves from responsibilization as it pertains to how they consume cultural difference, some consumers craft a shared “we” that positions themselves as quasi-insiders with respect to the consumed culture. Here, the subject position of the connected cosmopolitan manifests via a shared regional consciousness (Cayla and Eckhardt 2008), with some international K-pop fans claiming a shared Asian identity that positions them in closer proximity to Korean culture. For example, even though Ruby is Vietnamese Australian, she claims a shared Asian identity that allows her to “pass” as an insider, in contradistinction to Caucasian K-pop fans. As Ruby shared, “generally, white people get accused of cultural appropriation more because they’re a different
race to us [...] if you can pass as Korean, then you’re fine.” Similarly, Jerry is Malaysian Chinese Australian and does not speak Korean. Yet, he invokes a shared cultural affinity and a shared history of racial discrimination that confers “a closer connection [compared] to somebody who isn’t East Asian or Asian.” Nadia, who identifies as Indonesian Australian, draws on a shared Asian regional consciousness to create a “we” that allows her to enfold Korean media into her self-identity. Nadia interprets the global rise of K-pop as a transformative identity resource against the backdrop of her own lived experiences of racial discrimination while growing up in Australia—an experience of displacement that enables Nadia to claim K-pop as “ours” (“look at the cool stuff that we have”):

“The reason it [K-pop] stuck with me I think is because it connected me to my Asian identity that I never really got to experience, because I moved [to Australia] when I was one so I lost a lot of my—I pushed a lot of my Asian culture away because I was trying to fit into Australian culture. […] It was really cool because you get to see Asian culture, and it’s so cool now seeing K-pop groups perform at Coachella, which is so insane because you wouldn’t see that normally. And BTS winning the Grammys, it’s so cool being able to see Asian creators and Asian musicians being at the forefront of Western music as well, and it exposes people. I think I really resonated or really appreciated having K-pop in that time because it showed that being Asian isn’t something to be ashamed of, look at the cool stuff that we have.” (Nadia, interview)

By connecting their diverse ethnic backgrounds and lived experiences of racial discrimination with regional forms of identification (Cayla and Eckhardt 2008), consumers like Ruby, Jerry, and Nadia seem to be broadening the boundaries of cultural insiderhood beyond the level of the nation, while at the same time reinscribing a racialized boundary that demarcates Caucasian fans as visible outsiders in the international K-pop fandom. Against the backdrop of global circuits of cultural difference, we find that consumers’ lived experiences of ethnic identity offer a reflexive resource that can be mobilized to transcend cultural difference, thereby exempting their own engagement with cultural difference from the moral mandates of the cultural appropriation discourse.

In sum, via rationalizing, consumers demonstrate creative ways to contest the boundaries of cultural difference, belonging, and ownership. Adopted by those like Nasrine, a connected cosmopolitan participant of global youth culture (Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006), or Ruby and Nadia who claim a shared regional Asian consciousness (Cayla and Eckhardt 2008), rationalizing enables consumers to address the tension between the ethnic and responsibilized consumer subject by constructing themselves as insiders of a shared transnational collective. By connecting culturally diverse consumers to an inclusive identity (Beverland et al. 2021; Cayla and Eckhardt 2008), this movement toward a shared “we” can carry transformative effects in consumers’ lives. Indeed, the rationalizing strategy, reliant upon the utopic cosmopolitan vision embedded in the cultural appreciation discourse, is consonant with K-pop’s global mainstreaming and discourses which position K-pop as a culturally syncretic blend of modern musical expressions from around the world (Cicchelli and Octobre 2021). As such, rationalizing represents the most ready-to-hand and taken-for-granted pathway for consumers who have primarily experienced cultural difference as an identity-enhancing resource from a privileged position of unfettered market access. By advancing celebratory interpretations of cultural exchange, rationalizing helps consumers defend this privileged position. While our analysis focuses on consumers who explicitly reflect on an identity-relevant tension between appreciation and appropriation, we acknowledge that there are many consumers who, like Jeff, are dismissive of the debate (“I don’t feel like it is an issue”) or do not engage with the debate at all and, as such, fall outside our sample. The urge to defend a privileged and longstanding source of distinction may similarly motivate such manifestations of the rationalizing strategy. Yet, echoing the neocolonial logic of cosmopolitan consumption (Thompson and Tambyah 1999; Veresiu and Giesler 2018), the rationalizing strategy reinscribes a depoliticized and dehistoricized view of the complex relationship between cultural groups. Ultimately, rationalizing self-authorizes the consumption of cultural difference by deflecting discussions away from the ongoing harms of cultural appropriation to historically marginalized cultures.

DISCUSSION

Prior work has theorized the tensions endemic to the marketization of cultural difference (Peñaloza 2001; Root 1996; Skrbis and Woodward 2007) and, more recently, outlined cautionary implications for the use of cultural elements by commercial actors (Kennedy and Makkar 2020; Thomas et al. 2020; Zanette et al. 2021). By contrast, our work focuses on how individuals navigate this tension as it filters to the level of the consumer subject. We use the lens of reflexivity (Akaka and Schau 2019; Thompson et al. 2018) to uncover consumers’ capacity to authorize themselves to consume cultural difference in response to the countervailing discourses of cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation. Consumer self-authorization manifests in four distinct strategies: reforming, restraining, recontextualizing, and rationalizing. Each self-authorization strategy relies upon an amalgam of countervailing moral interpretations about acts of consuming difference, informing ideologies about the power relationships between cultures, and emergent subject positions that situate the consuming self in relation to others whose differences are...
packaged for consumption. Taken together, these diverse self-authorization strategies constitute a distinct form of identity work that is emerging in the domain of consuming difference—aimed at brokering access to consume others’ cultural resources.

We further observed that the degree to which individuals are sensitized toward the discourses of cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation, in concert with their specific sociocultural contexts and idiographic circumstances, grounds which self-authorization strategies they deploy. We witnessed that individuals sensitized toward the harmful effects of neocolonial market dynamics (e.g., due to having their own cultural heritage previously subjected to the harms of cultural appropriation) were more inclined to be empathetic toward those whose differences were consumed and, therefore, to pursue self-authorization through reforming. Consumers who perceived themselves as vulnerable to social judgment (e.g., if they had a prominent public profile) often engaged in restraining to shield the self from moralized public judgments about cultural appropriation, whereas those who were prone to reflect on how one’s cultural background influences their views (e.g., due to experiencing cultural dislocation) commonly deployed recontextualizing. Finally, when consumers were invested in a cosmopolitan worldview and identified with a transnational “we” (e.g., by claiming a shared Asian identity), they tended to dismiss the issues of cultural appropriation and engage in rationalizing.

Aligned with the extended reflexivity thesis—which holds that individuals continually adjust their subject positions in response to shifting social structures (Adams 2006; Akaka and Schau 2019; Thompson et al. 2018), we also witnessed that consumers have the capacity to adjust and recombine different self-authorization strategies as they navigate changing sociocultural and individual conditions. In this vein, some of our participants described how their deployment of self-authorization strategies changed over time (e.g., Avani shifted away from restraining when she felt judged by her high school peers toward recontextualizing as she became more knowledgeable about the sociohistorical backdrop behind K-pop). Other participants detailed how they deploy multiple strategies at the same time (e.g., Nadia’s acute awareness of neocolonialism as a person of color, whose cultural heritage has been appropriated, led her to engage in reforming, while her role as a visible online figure who is exposed to social judgment led her to simultaneously engage in restraining). In essence, when pursuing self-authorization, consumers may adhere to one strategy, change strategies, or combine multiple strategies together. Overall, our account of consumer self-authorization describes diverse pathways through which consumers craft permission to consume cultural difference by configuring who they are in relation to the other. Our work on consumer self-authorization departs from prior work in three important ways.

Beyond the Depoliticization of Marketized Cultural Difference

First, prior research described how ideologies such as neoliberal multiculturalism push forward a depoliticized approach to consuming cultural difference, especially at the level of the individual consumer (Cayla and Eckhardt 2008; Thompson and Tambyah 1999; Veresiu and Giesler 2018). As highlighted by Veresiu and Giesler (2018, 565), the hegemonic ethnic consumer subject “systematically discourages other ethnic subjectivities from surfacing and materializing.” Our analysis shows that this depoliticizing effect is not as totalizing as prior literature suggests. As consumers become more responsibilized for societal issues (Giesler and Veresiu 2014), the responsibilized consumer subject is extended to the consumption of cultural difference, repoliticizing it through the cultural appropriation discourse. With two equally compelling and totalizing—yet competing—discourses and respective forms of consumer subjectivity available to them, we find that consumers reflexively pursue self-authorization to continue consuming cultural difference in a repoliticized scenario. Self-authorization is the outcome of consumers trying to address this tension, and in doing so, they manifest a struggle between the depoliticization and repoliticization of the marketization of cultural difference.

Via diverse self-authorization strategies, consumers reflexively engage a critical vocabulary that begins to resurface ethnic and racial inequalities in the marketization of cultural difference. As they engage in self-authorization, consumers articulate their own and others’ lived experiences of dislocation, reflecting on how these dislocations shape their perspectives on cultural appropriation versus cultural appreciation in K-pop. We found that international K-pop consumers referenced their own cultural backgrounds to empathize with appropriated minority groups (as in reforming), buttress changes in their own consumption (as in restraining), and situate their respectful consumption of cultural difference in multiple sociohistorical perspectives (as in recontextualizing). The outcome of these consumer self-authorization strategies is that the cultural other is reconfigured from a fetishized object of exchange toward a subject that demands consideration. Consumers reframe themselves from individuals positioned in global circuits of cultural exchange toward individuals with an identity at stake in relation to a shared moral concern. The consumption of cultural difference becomes a learning ground for engaging with cultural politics, where “scripts for thinking about race […] are being called into question” (Jenkins 2018, 19). Hence, consumer self-authorization carries the potential for consumers to be enrolled into a reflexive engagement with market-mediated cultural dislocation, informed by issues of race.

Despite these gestures in the direction of repoliticization, consumer self-authorization represents an ambivalent
marriage of convenience between the individual-as-moral-subject and individual-as-consumer that places individuals squarely between depoliticization and repoliticization. Consumers’ attempts at repoliticization are not radical or targeted at structural issues. Even though consumers engage with the vocabulary of resistance, they largely leave unquestioned the asymmetrical architecture that unevenly distributes the benefits of marketizing cultural difference. In the international K-pop fandom, while consumers who engaged the reforming strategy often called for apologies for distorted representations of minority cultures, we saw no evidence of calls to redistribute the benefits of marketizing difference, for example, by fostering equitable partnerships with Black hip hop artists who inspire much of K-pop’s musical and aesthetic styles. Seen in this light, consumer self-authorization epitomizes what Schmitt, Brakus, and Biraglia (2022, 84) describe as an ongoing “dynamic between reconcilement and activism” or what Kanai and Gill (2020, 10) refer to as “woke capitalism,” in its ambivalent attempt to reinscribe the resurgent politics of cultural diversity within the dominant logic of the market. Ultimately, the goal of consumer self-authorization is to resolve the tension at the level of the individual consumer subject, rather than to radically dismantle the structural and systemic inequalities that continue to disadvantage people of color and people from the Global South.

From Totalizing Discourses to Reflexive Subject Positions

Second, our work shifts the analytical frame from totalizing, top-down discourses to emergent and diverse subject positions that are an outcome of consumer reflexivity. Prior work on the marketization of cultural difference has analytically focused on how dominant discourses that underpin the global flows of cultural difference are sociohistorically and ideologically constituted (Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006; Thompson and Tambahy 1999; Veresiu and Giesler 2018) and, in turn, structure consumers’ experiences. Augmenting these macro-level processes, we show how consumers reflexively consider options and occupy diverse subject positions that enable them to navigate the crosswinds of two equally compelling yet competing discourses.

In shifting the analytical frame, our study contributes to recent research on the tensions surrounding the enactment of consumer responsibilization (Cherrier and Türe 2022) by accounting for the role of consumer reflexivity in processes of responsibilization. Prior work shows that consumers experience tension when they, but not others, are called to be responsible, or when there is a lack of market support for the practical enactment of responsibilization (Cherrier and Türe 2022; Eckhardt and Dobscha 2019; Gonzalez-Arcos et al. 2021). By contrast, consumer self-authorization stems from a different source of tension tied to consumer identity projects: a clash between the intention of being responsible and a competing, but equally desirable, intention to appreciate cultural difference. Our account of consumer self-authorization shows the role of consumer reflexivity in navigating this tension. When the responsibilized subject generates identity tension for them, consumers will reflexively determine the amount of responsibility they are willing to take and attribute to others the remaining share. Prior research has identified backlash (Gonzalez-Arcos et al. 2021), discomfort (Eckhardt and Dobscha 2019), and paralysis (Cherrier and Türe 2022) as ways in which consumers react to the call for adopting a responsibilized subject position. In our work, we find that just as individual consumers vary in their adoption of different self-authorization strategies, they vary in the extent to which they feel responsibilized. While some consumers (those restraining and recontextualizing) take upon themselves the task of changing their ways of consuming to avoid engaging in cultural appropriation, other consumers (those reforming) demand that others in the market assume part of the responsibility and others yet (those rationalizing) deem responsibilization unnecessary.

Moreover, our work connects to the literature on moralistic identity work (Luedicke et al. 2010) by dimensionalizing a broader array of strategies that extend beyond the antagonistic defense of an extant identity-enhancing discourse. In the reforming strategy, international K-pop fans voice the clarion calls of responsibilization and direct calls for reform at other actors in the market. Other fans, when restraining, internalized the responsibilizing discourse and directed it at disciplining their own consumption. Still other consumers attempted to recontextualize their consumption of cultural difference by connecting the divergent perspectives in the discourses of cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation. These various positions on both sides of, and in between, these countervailing discourses augment antagonistic conceptualizations of moralistic identity work that perhaps stem from an a priori framing of these forms of identity work as a dialectical conflict between competing groups—for example, subcultural consumers of indie culture versus the mainstream appropriations that led them to be labeled as hipsters (Arsel and Thompson 2011), Hummer owners versus sustainability activists (Luedicke et al. 2010), and indigenes versus immigrants (Luedicke 2015). By contrast, the diverse strategies in our theoretical account of self-authorization articulate multiple and emergent subject positions that redeem consumers’ identity work through both antagonistic and conciliatory pathways.

Importantly, consumer self-authorization strategies do not only recharge the meanings of a consumption practice by linking it with heroic discourses (Luedicke et al. 2010) or uncoupling it from culturally devaluing discourses (Arsel and Thompson 2011); they also reconfigure the
relationship between the consuming self and the others whose cultures are consumed. Rather than defending their consumption choices against direct confrontations by moral critics belonging to other groups, K-pop consumers are reflexively engaging with the two countervailing discourses and searching for a synthesis that will address the tension at the individual level, so that each of them can continue consuming K-pop.

New Complexities in Animating Cultural Difference as a Valued Market Resource

Third, our account of consumer self-authorization points toward a broad range of consequences for how cultural difference is animated as a valued market resource. Prior research shows that encounters with cultural difference carry value for consumers because they offer a source of novel, exciting, or authentic meanings, enabling consumers to enact a worldly outlook associated with social distinction and mobility (Figueiredo et al. 2021; Holt 1998). However, consumer self-authorization evidences significant adjustments in the repertoire of identity projects that can be pursued as consumers balance cultural appropriation concerns with the desire to consume cultural difference.

To illustrate one significant shift in more depth, practices of code-switching, a valued performance when considered through the perspectives of cosmopolitan ideology and cultural globalization, can be subdued when consumers engage in restraining. Code-switching, defined as the capacity to "know, command and enact [...] multiple cultural vocabularies, discourses and repertoires," is a valorized everyday performance of cosmopolitan openness (Kendall, Woodward, and Skrbis 2009, 111–112). When seen in the light of cosmopolitan ideology, code-switching constitutes the consumer as a skillful cultural bricoleur, adept at performing multiple registers of cultural difference that proliferate in the heteroglossic global economy (Askegaard et al. 2005; Figueiredo et al. 2021; Oswald 1999). Seen through the lens of the cultural appropriation discourse, however, the value of this mode of cultural consumption becomes compromised. In our context, for example, shifting out to Korean words in everyday English does not encode a mastery of cultural worlds; rather, it encodes a superficial misappropriation of another’s culture that leads some consumers to manage this identity tension by avoiding such performances altogether.

This suspicion toward code-switching raises unexpected and intriguing implications for cultural globalization. Within theories of cultural globalization, the well-established glocalization thesis holds that the globalization of cultural products offers the potential for creative recombinations of diverse cultural elements that can fuel hybridized transformations of market practices (Coskuner-Balli and Ertimur 2017). This is because consumers, as agentic and creative bricoleurs of cultural meanings (Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006), routinely repurpose, domesticate, and recombine the available symbolic and material resources in globalizing and multicultural markets to suit their own localized cultural frameworks and identity goals (Eckhardt and Mahi 2004; Sharifonnasabi et al. 2020). The glocalization thesis might lead one to expect, for example, that encounters between K-pop and its English-speaking fans would legitimize the Koreanization of everyday English among international K-pop fans. Yet, we found that, when restraining, consumers lean in the opposite direction, toward taming performances of cultural hybridity.

Further implications of each self-authorization strategy for consumers, industry, and society are broadly outlined in table 4. Taken together, self-authorization is reconfiguring the consumption of cultural difference, compelling consumers to craft novel pathways to continue their engagements with cultural difference in the face of responsibilization.

Boundary Conditions and Transferability of Insights

Other consumption contexts where cultural difference forms an important source of value—American yoga (Askegaard and Eckhardt 2012; Coskuner-Balli and Ertimur 2017), aestheticized reincarnations of Brazilian cuisine (Zanette et al. 2021), and the Westernization of the KonMari tidying method (Sudnick 2022)—already exhibit their own unfolding versions of self-authorization. Yet, it is not our intention to present self-authorization to consume cultural difference as if it were a totalizing narrative that applies to all forms of consuming cultural difference; there are several boundary conditions. First, consumers who engage in self-authorization strategies must have some knowledge of what cultural appropriation is and why it is problematic, which spurs them to reflect on what forms of cultural difference they consume and how they consume it. In the context of the K-pop fandom, such knowledge is reflexively refracted by an active collective where consumers articulate and discuss issues of cultural appropriation, thereby spurring many international K-pop fans to pursue self-authorization. Second, self-authorization to consume cultural difference is more likely to occur when such consumption is relevant to an individual’s identity. For example, many international K-pop fans construct intimate parasocial relationships with their favorite idols. Accusations of cultural appropriation can threaten these identity investments, triggering the pursuit for self-authorization to consume cultural difference. By contrast, when individuals consume appropriative fast-moving consumer goods where such identity investment may be lacking, the self-authorization to consume cultural difference in response to discourses of cultural appropriation is unlikely to be as intense.
The marketized pursuit of novel and extraordinary experiences traverses not only ethnic and racialized boundaries but also the boundaries of social class, gender, sexuality, and subculture (Arsel and Thompson 2011). As consumer responsibility toward diversity, equity, and inclusion advances (Arsel et al. 2022), consumer self-authorization could also emerge in these broader forms of consuming difference.

**CONCLUSION**

Over two decades ago, Peñaloza (2001) declared that “the consumption of another culture [is] a fundamental, contemporary market phenomenon […] arguably the single most prevalent consumption phenomenon in the world today.” In an era of heightened sensitivity to critiques of cultural appropriation, our work offers timely insights on how consumers are self-authorizing their consumption of cultural difference and, in doing so, fueling a soft repoliticization of marketized cultural difference that is shifting the implicit rules of this pervasive phenomenon. While our analysis focused on self-authorization at the level of the individual consumer subject, future research may explore the role of institutional actors in creating the resources that consumers reflexively draw upon for self-authorization and orienting consumers toward particular strategies at the expense of others. What kinds of issues are made visible, and what kinds of issues are silenced, in the quest to self-authorize the consumption of cultural difference? We hope that our work on consumer self-authorization helps provide an initial building block for advancing our collective understanding of this nascent phenomenon.

**DATA COLLECTION INFORMATION**

The first author supervised and conducted data collection via in-depth interviews (38 participants) and
netnographic immersion in Melbourne, Australia, from February 2016 to May 2022. The second and third authors systematically conducted netnographic immersion focused on cultural appropriation from March to July 2021. Data were discussed on multiple occasions by all authors using transcripts, links to online data, coding notes and tables, and shared data folders. The data are currently stored in a project folder on the first author’s Monash University Google Drive, in line with ethics approval and Monash University’s storage requirements for sensitive and restricted research data. All authors jointly analyzed these data and authored the final conceptual framework.

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