

USE2209: Globalising Asian-Pacific Identities

A/P Barbara Ryan

Visual Project

Visual: EXP Edition K-pop Band

(https://www.nautiljon.com/images/people/01/71/exp_edition_87617.jpg)

For my Visual Project, I have decided to work on the above visual image. This image depicts the first non-Korean K-pop band named EXP Edition. Three of its members are Caucasian and one is of German-Japanese descent. In the following examination of this visual, I will discuss my first impression, some notable features of the visual and the band's background, followed by my reflection revolving around whether the band members' mimicry of Korean phenotypes is analogous to Blackface and a form of cultural appropriation.

My first impression of this visual was that it depicted a Western boy band, judging from its Caucasian-looking members. However, on closer inspection, it reminded me of a genre of pop music, K-pop, which seemed unrelated to Western-ness. Despite the band members' largely Caucasian facial phenotypes, everything else is typical of male K-pop stars: permed and carefully styled medium-length brown hair, trimmed eyebrows, and wearing shiny red lipstick. Moreover, a notable feature was what appeared to me as artificially whitened skin from a heavy makeup. Aside from facial features, their apparel and body gestures all seemed to be in imitation of Korean boy bands.

An intriguing feature of this visual is the fact that the band members significantly lighten their skin tone by using cosmetic products. Justifiably, applying makeup is a common practice among celebrities of all ethnicities as a means to beautify their facial image, such as concealing acne marks. However, through comparison with images of other Caucasian bands in similar age groups such as One Direction, the facial skin tone of EXP Edition members is considerably lighter than their non-K-pop counterparts. Given that EXP Edition is branded as a K-pop band, this practice appears understandable. Fair complexion is one of K-pop artistes' defining features. Images of other K-pop bands, such as the ultra-popular boy band BTS, boast members having flawless and snowy white faces. Thus, we can reasonably infer that using skin-whitening products is a ubiquitous practice among K-pop artistes.

While it is generally common for some East Asians to whiten their skin, it seems unconventional for Caucasian males to do so. Many have attributed skin-whitening in East Asia to people's desire to look "Eurasian", as fair complexion is an important identifying phenotype of Caucasian ethnicities. Before jumping to the above conclusion, it is helpful to note that white skin has long been sought after in East Asia. Since antiquity, Chinese women used lead powder (铅华, literally *lead beauty*) to whiten their faces in order to boost their attractiveness. Also, fair skin was associated with higher social status, indicating that a person did not belong to the peasant classes who toiled away under the scorching sun (Johansson, 1998). Similarly, in the Goryeo Dynasty (918-1392) in Korea, the skin complexion of a noble man was almost always expressed as being like pale jade (Jeon, 1987). Therefore, rather than treating East Asians' attempt to whiten faces as an act of imitating Caucasians, it may be more reasonable to consider that EXP Edition members' act of skin-whitening is a mimicry of a characteristic East Asian practice. Hence, together with other Korean-looking facial features

of the band members such as permed hair and shiny lips, they are clearly attempting to replicate male Korean phenotypes. Despite not having the same historical context, this act may be analogous to Blackface, which similarly involves attempts to imitate appearances of ethnic Africans.

Upon closer examination of the visual, I noticed another subtle feature. The way that the band members slightly tilt their heads to display their sharply-defined jawlines, their tender facial expressions and body gestures, coupled with their heavy makeup, emanate a soft masculinity characteristic of East Asian males. This soft masculinity manifests in gentle, tender charisma as opposed to hard masculinity commonly associated with aggressive, manly “tough guys”. This characteristic has a historical root; it is a transcultural amalgamation of Korea’s traditional *seonbi* (선비)¹ masculinity, Chinese Confucian *wén* (文, or *literate*) masculinity, and Japanese *bishōnen* (美少年, or *pretty boy*) masculinity (Jung, 2010). Again, EXP Edition members’ act of accentuating the East Asian, in particular South Korean, soft masculinity appears to be yet another attempt at mimicking Korean phenotypes.

After reading news about EXP Edition, I have realised that the creation of this band is not merely a commercial act of breaking into the K-pop market, but it all started out as a thesis project of a master’s student, Bora Kim, who was pursuing Master of Fine Arts at Columbia University². She wanted to experiment with the ideas of whether K-pop must be done by Koreans and what were the limits of K-pop. So, she started conducting auditions to select

¹ *Seonbi* were virtuous scholars during the Goryeo and Joseon periods of Korea who served the public without a government position, choosing to pass up positions of wealth and power to lead lives of study and integrity.

² Source: BBC article: K-pop's EXP Edition: The world’s most controversial 'Korean' band.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-46381997>

suitable members without Korean heritage in New York. After the selection process and the quitting of two other members, EXP Edition comprised four members when it first debuted in Seoul in summer, 2017. They are Croatian Sime Kosta, Portuguese-American Frankie DaPonte from Rhode Island, half Japanese-German Koki Tomlinson from Texas, and New Yorker Hunter Kohl. They appear to be genuinely passionate about Korean pop culture and even moved to Korea to further develop their K-pop career, leaving their families and friends in the US. The creation of this band is a bold attempt to challenge fixity, and explore whether K-pop is merely a genre of music or is inextricably linked to ethnic identities.

Nevertheless, Kim does not deny her team's desire to make the band a commercial success as a real K-pop group. Therefore, we should note that the manners in which EXP Edition members are presented and beautified in this visual are carefully crafted business strategies to pander to the preferences of main demographic groups consuming K-pop. By following the conventional style of K-pop artistes, manifested in whitened faces and soft-masculine looks, EXP Edition may be able to boost its following, since its intended audience is the gigantic K-pop fandom who consume similar-looking cultural products.

Since the start, public opinion has been unfavourable towards the Caucasian K-pop band, with some accusing it of cultural appropriation. Most opponents argue that non-Koreans should not be allowed to take on the title "K-pop" as K-pop belongs solely to Koreans. K-pop has provided a safe space for Koreans to develop their talent and pursue their dreams in the performing career. EXP Edition's crash into the Korean market not only disrespects K-pop, but is also unfair to the many years of hard work that authentic Koreans have put into training on the road to grow into K-pop stars.

Nevertheless, critics overlook the fact that K-pop itself has borrowed heavily elements from American pop culture, as seen from the generous infusion of English lyrics, rap, and hip hop dance moves. In fact, K-pop, too, has often been accused of cultural appropriation. Donna Lee Kwon, a professor in ethnomusicology at the University of Kentucky, says, “appropriating from various sources, including African-American dance-oriented R&B and hip-hop, was integral to K-pop.”³ A notable incident of K-pop cultural appropriation was EXO’s Kai, who styled his hair in cornrows and dressed as a rapper on his debut⁴. This act may constitute blackface, as it is a mimesis of ethnic Africans’ stereotypical appearances. It also appropriated African-American hip hop culture and solidified the fixed view associating African Americans with hip hop rappers.

While those accusing EXP Edition of cultural appropriation may found their criticisms on the band “stealing” elements of Korean culture and deliberately imitating Koreans’ physical appearances, they may fail to consider the backdrop of rapid globalisation. As cultural flows have become increasingly flexible in our modern world, exchanges of cultural elements are no longer one-directional. The fine difference between cultural appreciation and appropriation resides in whether there is a conscientious effort to understand, acknowledge, as well as respect each cultural element being used. Also, with increased ease of international migration, identities become more fluid. The traditional way of fixing one’s identity based on one’s origin seems restrictive. In this case, can we consider EXP Edition members Korean or

³ Source: How K-pop gets away with cultural appropriation – of R&B, hip hop and bubblegum pop <https://www.scmp.com/culture/music/article/2168815/k-pop-ultimate-cultural-appropriation-or-south-korea-improving>

⁴ Image of Kai with cornrows: <https://pbs.twimg.com/media/DwLsn0tWsAEcdn5.jpg>

“becoming” Korean if they put in effort to learn its language and culture while developing their career in Korea?

Smedley’s (1998) *“Race” and the Construction of Human Identity* provides us with valuable insights on the relationship between K-pop and race. Although this journal focuses on the Black-White racial division in the US, some of its points are relevant to this case. Smedley argues that racial identity is a restrictive social construct based on biophysical traits. It renders cultural identity hereditary, permanent and unalterable. Analogously, the categorisation of Caucasians and Asians imposes an arbitrary fixity that impedes EXP Edition members’ adoption of Korean culture. The members’ biological heritage seems to dictate that they cannot belong to a culture they were not born into. This racial determinism assigns fixed expectations to each ethnic group and prevents one’s attempt to become “multicultural”, despite a rapidly globalising world.

In conclusion, EXP Edition members’ imitation of Korean appearances, especially in their whiteface and soft-masculine looks, seems to have granted them membership in the K-pop industry while generating discourse on whether this act is analogous to blackface or constitutes cultural appropriation. This view may arise from the fixed categorisation of racial identities that precludes the adoption of another cultural, which is increasingly common in our globalising world.

(1498 words)

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