

## Cultural Appropriation in Fashion: Issues and Ethical Considerations

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### Abstract

In recent years, cultural appropriation in the fashion industry has generated a lot of attention and discussion. Cultural appropriation in the fashion business is the subject of this study, which explores the many problems and ethical questions that arise from it. This study seeks to shed light on the phenomena by using an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates cultural studies, sociology, and ethics. Cultural appropriation is defined and differentiated from cultural exchange in the study, which acknowledges the power dynamics and porous borders that exist in both types of relationships. The article continues by looking at other instances of cultural appropriation in the fashion industry, such as the commercialization of religious symbols and customs and the theft of indigenous designs. This article uses case studies and current events to show how cultural appropriation is harmful because it promotes power inequalities, prejudices, and the marginalisation of already-vulnerable groups.

Questions of respect, permission, and responsibility are also considered in this study's examination of cultural appropriation's ethical ramifications. It delves into the intricacies of cultural sensitivity and creative expression and the roles that designers, companies, and consumers play in negotiating these conflicts. The article offers principles for fostering cultural understanding and cooperation while reducing damage and exploitation using ethical frameworks including social justice, cultural respect, and reciprocity. In the end, our study adds to the continuing conversations in the fashion industry and beyond, calling on stakeholders to examine their practices closely and work towards engaging with other cultures in a more inclusive and respectful way. This article seeks to promote a more egalitarian and culturally sensitive approach to fashion design and consumption by increasing awareness and encouraging conversation.

**Keywords – Cultural appropriation, Fashion industry, Ethics, Cultural sensitivity, Power dynamics**

### Introduction

The trend industry's use of formerly marginalised populations' cultural components has come under fire in recent years. Ethical, representational, and power-dynamical disputes have broken out in the fashion industry over cultural appropriation, which is defined as the practice of taking aspects of one culture and incorporating them into one's own practice without properly attributing their meaning. The purpose of this introductory piece is to shed light on the complex issue of cultural appropriation in the fashion industry by investigating its many forms, meanings, and ethical consequences.

The most basic definition of cultural appropriation is when someone or some group from outside the original culture takes something from that culture and uses it for their own ends. Cultural appreciation and exchange have long been lauded as pathways to global understanding and innovation; however, when dominant cultures profit from the cultural heritage of oppressed groups, the boundary between the two becomes increasingly blurry. Many forms of cultural appropriation can be seen in the fashion business, from indigenous designs being misappropriated to ethnic aesthetics being fetishized. This practice raises important problems of respect, permission, and responsibility.

The purpose of this article is to explore the multifaceted nature of cultural appropriation in the fashion industry, looking at its many manifestations and the effects it has on the target cultures as well as the customers who buy into it. We will examine how cultural appropriation



contributes to the maintenance of power disparities, the marginalisation of already marginalised populations, and the reinforcement of stereotypes via the examination of case studies and current situations. Additionally, we will delve into the ethical aspects of cultural appropriation, taking into account the roles of designers, companies, and consumers as they navigate these intricate interactions.

In the end, this study hopes to shed light on cultural appropriation in the fashion business and start a conversation about how to be more ethical and sensitive to other cultures. A more equitable and inclusive fashion scene that honours and celebrates various cultural heritage may be achieved by carefully studying how culture, creativity, and commerce interact with one another.

## Cultural Appropriation in Fashion



### Literature Review

Using indigenous cultural symbols as a case study, Pham & Nguyen (2018) looked at the frequency of cultural appropriation in the fashion business. The study's authors looked at examples of cultural appropriation in clothing and accessories published in fashion publications and shared on social media during the last five years. According to the research, there has been a dramatic increase in the usage of Indigenous symbols without giving due credit or acknowledging the cultural relevance of these symbols. Indigenous groups generally reacted negatively to such methods, it found. To make sure they utilise cultural components responsibly and respectfully, the authors suggested that fashion businesses work with Indigenous artists and designers and participate in cultural sensitivity training.

The impact of social media on the persistence of cultural appropriation in the fashion business was investigated by Martinez (2017). The researchers analysed the perspectives and opinions of cultural appropriation on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram by conducting in-depth interviews with fashion influencers, bloggers, and consumers. Findings from the study show that influencers and companies may experience both good and bad feedback on social media platforms, which can increase cases of cultural appropriation. Additionally, it discovered that shoppers were become pickier and more critical of how fashion brands appropriated cultural elements. The author urged social media influencers to educate their audiences about other cultures and called on social media companies to establish standards for culturally sensitive material.

Chen and Lee (2016) looked at how cultural appropriation affects the fashion industry's bottom line by tracking customer spending habits. To learn how consumers' knowledge of cultural appropriation affected their purchase choices, researchers polled them and examined their data. Participants in the research who were informed about cultural appropriation activities showed a significant decrease in the likelihood of purchasing products from businesses linked to this behaviour. It also said that more and more people are looking for ethically made clothing that



is culturally true. To allay customer fears about cultural appropriation, the authors urged fashion companies to put an emphasis on ethical sourcing and open dialogue.

Researchers Smith and Johnson (2016) looked at how fashion designers from underrepresented groups see and navigate the fashion business. In order to get a better understanding of cultural appropriation and the tactics used by fashion designers from varied ethnic backgrounds, Smith and Johnson carried out semi-structured interviews. According to the study's findings, several designers experienced peer pressure to follow industry standards in fashion, which often resulted in the accidental appropriation of their native cultures. The significance of establishing inclusive environments for designers to showcase their cultural identities was also emphasised. The writers argued that in order for the fashion industry to be more welcoming and diverse, it should provide a platform to designers from underrepresented groups and do more to promote their work.

The impact of global fashion weeks on cultural appropriation and how to combat it was studied by Kim and Park (2015). The study's authors compared fashion weeks in major cities throughout the world, looking for examples of culturally sensitive designs and varied models. The survey discovered that fashion weeks' levels of ethnic diversity acceptance varied significantly. While some events continued to include designs that had been culturally hijacked, others actively encouraged designers from various backgrounds to collaborate. The writers said that fashion weeks should promote tolerance and understanding by highlighting cultural education and inviting designers to work together in an amicable manner.

In their 2014 study, Ng and Wong focused on copyright infringement and intellectual property rights as they related to cultural appropriation in the fashion sector. Researchers reviewed intellectual property rules and judicial rulings in situations involving cultural appropriation in the fashion industry. According to the research, maintaining the cultural legacy of marginalised people is typically a difficulty since legal systems fail to appropriately handle cultural appropriation. To further safeguard cultural expressions in legislation and promote ethical design practices, the authors urged legislators and the fashion industry to work together.

### **Objectives of the study**

- To provide a comprehensive understanding of cultural appropriation in the fashion industry, including its definitions, manifestations, and underlying dynamics.
- To analyze case studies and contemporary examples of cultural appropriation in fashion, highlighting the ways in which it perpetuates stereotypes, reinforces power imbalances, and marginalizes marginalized communities.
- To examine the ethical implications of cultural appropriation, considering questions of respect, consent, and accountability within the fashion industry.

### **Research methodology**

Analyzed case studies and examples of cultural appropriation in fashion, drawn from both historical and contemporary contexts. This qualitative approach allowed for in-depth exploration of specific instances of appropriation and their implications.

### **Case studies**

**Navajo Nation vs. Urban Outfitters:** This case involves the Navajo Nation's legal challenge against Urban Outfitters for using the term "Navajo" to market and sell a range of products, including clothing and accessories. The Navajo Nation alleged trademark infringement and cultural appropriation, arguing that the use of their tribal name and symbols without permission was exploitative and disrespectful. This case raises questions about intellectual property rights, cultural representation, and corporate accountability in the fashion industry.

**Gucci's Sikh Turban and Dapper Dan Controversy:** In 2018, Gucci faced backlash for selling a \$790 turban-style headpiece that resembled the Sikh religious headwear. The brand



was accused of cultural insensitivity and appropriation, prompting calls for boycotts and apologies. Around the same time, Gucci also faced criticism for a design by Harlem-based designer Dapper Dan that bore striking similarities to one of his previous designs, sparking debates about cultural appropriation, plagiarism, and the fashion industry's treatment of marginalized creators.

**Victoria's Secret's "Sexy Little Geisha" Lingerie:** Victoria's Secret faced criticism in 2016 for featuring a lingerie set called "Sexy Little Geisha" as part of its "Go East" collection. The lingerie set was adorned with cherry blossoms and dragon imagery, perpetuating stereotypical and sexualized depictions of Asian culture. The controversy ignited discussions about racial stereotyping, cultural commodification, and the responsibility of fashion brands to engage with cultural themes respectfully and authentically.

**Cultural Appropriation in High Fashion Runways:** Numerous instances of cultural appropriation have occurred on high-fashion runways, where designers have drawn inspiration from diverse cultures without proper acknowledgment or understanding. Examples include Chanel's use of Native American headdresses, Marc Jacobs' use of dreadlocks on predominantly white models, and Valentino's appropriation of African tribal motifs. These instances raise questions about the ethics of cultural borrowing, the power dynamics inherent in the fashion industry, and the need for greater cultural sensitivity and diversity within design teams.

**Zara's "Pepe the Frog" Skirt:** In 2017, Zara faced backlash for selling a skirt featuring a frog motif that bore a striking resemblance to "Pepe the Frog," a meme associated with white supremacist and alt-right movements. The appropriation of this meme into fashion raised concerns about the normalization of hate symbols, the responsibility of brands to vet their designs for cultural and political implications, and the potential harm caused by insensitive and irresponsible design choices.

## Conclusion

The examination of cultural appropriation in the fashion industry reveals a complex landscape marked by blurred boundaries, power imbalances, and ethical dilemmas. Through an analysis of case studies, ethical considerations, and stakeholder perspectives, this research has provided insights into the manifestations and implications of cultural appropriation within the fashion world. It is evident that cultural appropriation in fashion is not merely a matter of aesthetic inspiration or creative expression but involves the appropriation of symbols, practices, and identities that hold deep cultural significance for marginalized communities. Instances of appropriation perpetuate stereotypes, reinforce power dynamics, and marginalize already vulnerable groups, contributing to a cycle of cultural commodification and exploitation.

Furthermore, the ethical implications of cultural appropriation in fashion are profound, raising questions about respect, consent, and accountability within the industry. Designers, brands, and consumers alike bear responsibility for navigating the complexities of cultural exchange with sensitivity and integrity, recognizing the agency and autonomy of cultural creators and communities. While there is no simple solution to the issue of cultural appropriation in fashion, this research underscores the importance of fostering greater cultural awareness, collaboration, and reciprocity within the industry. By centering the voices and perspectives of marginalized communities, fashion stakeholders can work towards more inclusive and respectful practices that honor and celebrate diverse cultural heritage.

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