

Exploring the Role and Impact of Cultural Appropriation in the Fashion Industry

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Abstract. Cultural appropriation is a general phenomenon in the fashion industry today, in which international brands appropriate cultural elements from marginalized groups without permission or compensation. This causes continuous public discussion and criticism of the fashion industry. This article uses typical examples such as Gucci's "blackface" sweater, Dior's "Sauvage" perfume advertisement, and Isabel Marant's use of Mexican Huipil embroidery as a starting point to analyze the phenomenon of cultural appropriation in brand fashion design. The article uses qualitative analysis and theoretical integration to examine the impact of cultural appropriation in the fashion industry on marginalized groups (ethnic minorities, indigenous communities, and religious groups). The results indicate that cultural appropriation often derives from unequal power structures between social groups and the lack of legal protection for traditional cultural expressions. This is leading to cultural devaluation, economic exploitation, and emotional harm toward marginalized groups. The article claims that brand companies should not use "borrowing inspiration" as an excuse for cultural appropriation. Instead, companies should shift toward collaborative and co-creation models with marginalized groups, and international organizations should enhance consumer awareness of cultural appropriation issues while addressing legal loopholes related to cultural copyright ownership, thereby protecting marginalized groups' cultural autonomy.

Keywords: Cultural Appropriation, Fashion Industry, Inspiration, Marginal Group.

1. Introduction

In recent years, fashion designers have frequently used cultural references and inspiration to mask their cultural appropriation, particularly in globalization and the rapid growth of the social media era, where the cross-geographical flow and fusion of cultural elements have become increasingly frequent. This phenomenon has illustrated controversy and criticism regarding the use of cultural symbols in the fashion industry. For example, cases like Gucci's "blackface" sweater have not only caused public criticism and cultural authenticity but also revealed the design industry's systemic neglect of non-Western cultures and minority groups.

This essay can promote cultural equity, protect the cultural autonomy of marginalized groups, and encourage sustainable cultural exchange and development. Cultural appropriation is not merely an issue within the fashion industry but a manifestation of social power structures and global capital. This research can promote ethical awareness and institutional norms within the fashion industry.

This article primarily explores cultural appropriation in fashion design through symbolic borrowing, the commercialization of traditional attire, and the misuse of religious symbols, analyzing the identity devaluation, economic exploitation, and cultural harm inflicted upon marginalized groups. At the same time, the study will discuss the distinction between cultural appropriation, inspiration borrowing, and artistic re-creation. This article uses literature analysis to search for and read relevant theoretical literature, case studies, and international treaties. The advantage of this method is that it can comprehensively organize the theoretical background and actual cases, which is conducive to analyzing the causes and effects of cultural appropriation from multiple perspectives and facilitating in-depth research.

The findings of the study highlight the multifaceted impacts of cultural appropriation in the fashion industry on marginalized groups. It clarifies the boundaries between cultural appropriation and inspiration borrowing, and proposes the establishment of mechanisms for cultural respect and cooperation. This paper will systematically discuss the topic from three dimensions: qualitative and theoretical analysis, case analysis, and policy recommendations to achieve this objective.

The findings of this study indicate that cultural appropriation in the fashion industry reflects the constant process of exploitation and commodification of marginal cultures by mainstream cultures in the context of globalization. Whether it is Dolce & Gabbana's demeaning portrayal of Chinese imagery or Victoria's Secret and Isabel Marant's commercialization of indigenous clothing symbols, these cases highlight the widespread lack of cultural sensitivity and disregard for cultural context in the fashion industry. The study concludes that cultural appropriation constitutes symbolic violence and structural oppression. It manifests in three aspects: cultural devaluation, economic exploitation, and emotional harm, not only weakening the voice of marginalized cultural communities but also deepening the global structural inequalities in culture.

2. Specific Examples of Cultural Appropriation in Fashion Design

Cultural appropriation is a common phenomenon in the fashion industry. It involves the direct borrowing or reinterpretation of cultural symbols, patterns, and clothing elements. In the context of globalization, many brands draw inspiration from cross-cultural influences to design clothing and products. However, this "inspiration" often lacks respect or understanding for the original or appropriated culture, ultimately resulting in a one-sided exploitation of marginalized groups or ethnic minorities by the mainstream. Teresa Sádaba et al. argue that cultural appropriation can generally be divided into two types [1]. They point out that the first type of cultural appropriation is surface appropriation, which involves "borrowing" visual features or superficial elements of a culture, such as patterns while ignoring or obscuring the deep historical and religious meanings these elements carry in their original cultural context. For example, Gucci released a black high-neck sweater in 2019 featuring an exaggerated red lip design at the collar, paired with the overall black sweater design, which was widely perceived as mimicking "Blackface" makeup. This costume has historically been used to exaggerate and discriminate against Black people when white actors portray Black characters, sparking widespread public criticism for its insult to Black culture [2]. Moreover, Blackface exemplifies the brand's racial insensitivity in cultural appropriation. Gucci failed to consider the historical pain points of the Black community during its promotion, revealing the brand's indifference to racial issues. Another representative case is Dolce & Gabbana's 2018 advertisement, which depicted an Asian woman awkwardly trying to eat pizza and pasta with chopsticks, portraying Asian women as "clumsy" and "ignorant." Chinese women criticized this stereotypical representation. Moreover, chopsticks are a historically significant utensil in Chinese culture. However, the advertisement forced them into a context with Italian food, implying the superiority of Western culture and evoking associations of cultural degradation. This caused many to consider the advertisement as discriminatory and diminishing toward Chinese culture, as well as simplistic of Eastern culture. The advertising incident caused consumer anger and resulted in a boycott of the brand in the Chinese market. This incident also highlights the lack of cultural sensitivity and background knowledge that fashion brands often overlook when using symbols from other cultures [3].

The second type is called deep appropriation. It involves using visual elements and redefining and transforming cultural symbols or traditions without authorization, consultation, or collaboration with the original cultural group, and without economic or other forms of compensation, and then commercializing them [1]. The commercial and commodification of traditional clothing elements is another form of cultural appropriation. In 2012, the Victoria's Secret show required models to wear Native American feather headdresses as sexy accessories. However, these warbonnets, traditionally worn by Native American tribal leaders or warriors, are ritual symbols of honor and sacred meaning, reserved exclusively for specific tribal members on special occasions. Using them as fashion accessories severely disregards their cultural significance. It has been widely condemned by

Indigenous organizations and critics as a desecration and commodification of sacred culture [4]. Another example is designer Isabel Marant being accused of plagiarizing the traditional embroidery designs of the Tlahuitoltepec community in Mexico. These patterns typically carry ethnic identity, history, and local knowledge but were directly replicated and used in high-end clothing without the community's consent. Although Marant claimed it was a cultural homage, the local community responded angrily, arguing that it violated their cultural intellectual property rights and that the community had not received any economic benefits; but under legal and public pressure, Marant was forced to issue a public apology [5]. Regarding the misuse of religious and ritual elements, Australian swimwear brand Lisa Blue released a bikini featuring an image of the Hindu goddess Lakshmi. This design led to widespread protests in India, as Lakshmi is a symbol of wealth and purity in Hinduism, and her image on swimwear was considered highly disrespectful. This misuse of religious imagery crosses the emotional boundaries of faith communities and reflects a lack of basic respect and understanding in global cultural dissemination by fashion brands [4]. These instances of cultural appropriation demonstrate disregard, devaluation, and emotional harm toward the original cultural groups. Such behavior is an extension of colonialism.

3. The Impact of Cultural Appropriation

Cultural appropriation is not merely an aesthetic or creative issue but also a manifestation of power structures and social inequality. The impact of cultural appropriation on specific cultures and marginal groups, such as minority race groups, displays itself on three levels: cultural degradation, economic exploitation, and emotional harm.

Firstly, cultural degradation refers to removing cultural symbols with sacred or identity-defining significance from their original context and using them solely as fashion symbols, simplifying, trivializing, or even stigmatizing the culture. For example, Victoria's Secret's use of Native American headdresses was criticized for objectifying Indigenous culture as a sexy symbol. This simplistic treatment strips the culture of its complexity and reinforces the structural inequality where marginalized cultures are defined by mainstream consumer society [6]. Moreover, when fashion brands design products or clothing without considering or ignoring the meaning and history of other cultural backgrounds, this constitutes a lack of respect for culture and reinforces the marginalization and cultural oppression of specific groups. Cultural appropriation is "offensive" not because of its aesthetic value but because of its disregard for the specific cultural context and meaning it represents [2]. Cultural appropriation also reflects the passive position of marginalized groups within social structures. Cultural appropriation is a typical form of symbolic violence manifested in the passive reproduction of culture and the deprivation of its semantic meaning [6]. Therefore, cultural appropriation is a form of neglect and marginalization of the owners of cultural symbols. Cultural appropriation is not merely a matter of borrowing fashion inspiration; it also reflects the power imbalance between the mainstream and minorities, the continuation of colonialism, and racial oppression [7].

Secondly, cultural appropriation is an issue of economic exploitation or oppression. Brands and fashion companies transform cultural symbol elements into profitable fashion items. Many appropriated cultural elements originate from economically disadvantaged communities, often lacking the capacity or legal resources to protect their cultural outputs. Multiple international brands have used the "Tibeb" pattern from traditional Ethiopian attire in their designs, yet local weavers have not received any licensing fees or collaboration opportunities [8]. Furthermore, according to their research, behavior impacts local artisans' economic livelihood and exacerbates cultural subordination, reflecting the exploitative commodification logic within a capitalist framework. Brands replicate cultural symbols and use them extensively in production, leading to the commodification of these symbols. However, such actions often occur without the consent of the cultural symbol holders and any economic compensation. This results in the original communities losing control over their cultural symbols and failing to receive economic or other compensation. Even without intending to

insult cultural symbols, unauthorized use may still constitute cultural appropriation and economic exploitation [2].

Moreover, when the clothing of minority groups gains popularity in the fashion or clothing market, the mainstream group engages in cultural appropriation to achieve market and capital exploitation. For example, after discovering the immense market potential of black brands like FUBU, white-dominated brands such as Tommy Hilfiger, Adidas, and Polo Ralph Lauren began replicating urban aesthetics and encroaching on their market share [9]. Therefore, cultural appropriation prevents cultural symbol owners from defending their cultural ownership rights and receiving appropriate compensation, leading to economic exploitation and social structural issues, as well as widening the gap between mainstream and minority groups. This economic and cultural ownership exploitation also reflects the continuation of colonial logic.

Lastly, there is emotional and psychological harm. When religious totems and symbols, such as the goddess Lakshmi, are used in commercial products, they not only hurt the feelings of believers but also convey a message of cultural disrespect. Such behavior reinforces the structural violence of mainstream consumer culture, arbitrarily manipulating cultural expressions and sparking moral anger and resistance among the original cultural communities [4]. Distorting or misrepresenting a culture also constitutes a distortion of the culture itself, eroding cultural heritage. Brands that ignore certain groups and misuse or misrepresent their cultural elements also lead these groups to feel anger and a lack of respect. Religious symbols such as Hindu goddesses, Sikh turbans, and Jewish prayer garments, when used in non-religious contexts, often trigger emotional detachment and anger among faith communities. For example, Gucci sold Sikh turbans as fashion accessories, even without malicious intent, which was perceived as an offense to the group's self-identity and religious dignity [4]. Such neglect and misuse of cultural symbols erode their meaning and historical context, leading to a decline in authenticity and commodification. Ultimately, this results in emotional and psychological harm to the original cultural groups.

4. Distinguishing Between Cultural Appropriation and Inspiration

In today's increasingly frequent global cultural exchanges, distinguishing between "borrowing inspiration" and "cultural appropriation" has become a key issue in design practice. From a theoretical perspective, Ko and Yim (2020) argue that cultural appropriation often occurs when mainstream cultures decontextualize and strip symbols from marginal cultures without permission and consent from the original or source groups [5]. It typically involves unequal power dynamics. On the other hand, cultural appropriation involves using cultural symbols for homage and innovation. It can potentially return to the original culture and is merely a form of cultural exchange.

Two-way exchange is the core distinction between appropriation and borrowing. Accurate cultural exchange should reflect equality and respect between the interacting parties, involving dialogue, authorization, collaboration, and sharing. Kristian Hogans and Laura McAndrews (2023) propose that cultures can share inspiration but must acknowledge each other's agency, jointly share profits, mutually respect and understand the original culture's history, religion, and meaning, and use cultural symbols only with explicit permission [9]. Therefore, inspiration borrowing and cultural homage should occur with mutual consent, respect for the original culture's historical, religious, and cultural significance, and shared benefits. Cultural appropriation, however, refers to the unauthorized use of another's cultural elements without compensation, undermining the local community's voice and distorting the meaning of cultural symbols.

However, current intellectual property laws still have significant limitations in protecting traditional knowledge and collective cultural assets. For example, the "Huipil" pattern, as a product of community collective wisdom, does not have a clearly defined individual author, making it difficult to obtain protection through the copyright system [8]. Informed consent and economic compensation are important criteria for determining whether an action respects culture. Second, whether designers have reinterpreted and innovated the cultural symbols they borrow is also a key distinction between

"homage" and "plagiarism" [10]. If the design merely replicates the surface without cultural integration or emotional connection, it is challenging to avoid accusations of appropriation. The ethical boundaries of cultural appropriation are not determined solely by subjective motives. However, they should also consider structural power dynamics, institutional safeguards, and the transparency and collaborative nature of the creative process.

While some international laws and provisions aim to protect cultures from being appropriated by brands and other groups and include folk cultures under copyright protection, countries like Morocco and Ghana have incorporated folk culture and oral traditions into copyright law protection. In collaboration with WIPO and UNESCO, they have issued the *"1982 Model Law on the Protection of Expressions of Folk Literature and Art,"* the *"Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage,"* and the *"United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples"* to protect indigenous and folk art [2]. While existing systems reflect a recognition of the importance of cultural rights and protection, they are limited in terms of practicality, scope, and enforcement. Therefore, people cannot rely solely on the law to curb cultural appropriation, as the law is inherently flawed. Instead, people should protect and respect other cultures through self-regulation. For example, businesses and industries such as fashion and art could establish a management theory similar to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) to ensure cultural respect [2].

Additionally, brands can make their design processes transparent to detect any instances of cultural appropriation. Most consumers know the differences between counterfeit cultural accessories and authentic ones but still choose to purchase counterfeits due to price and availability [8]. Therefore, the public must enhance consumers' awareness of cultural appropriation in clothing and accessories. International organizations such as UNESCO can educate consumers on distinguishing between cultural appropriation and homage, thereby increasing awareness of cultural respect and resisting cultural appropriation and ambiguous brands to protect the rights and interests of cultural symbol holders.

5. Conclusion

This study also provides important considerations for future research in this field, primarily influencing two directions. Firstly, it defines the relationship between cultural appropriation, power asymmetry, and economic commodification. Also, it promotes the importance of informed consent, cultural reciprocity, and co-creation mechanisms in fashion and design ethics.

Future research on cultural appropriation should focus more on new forms of cultural appropriation emerging in the digital fashion and social media era or on platforms like TikTok and analyze how to protect marginalized cultural groups' rights and cultural authenticity within the global digital economic system. Additionally, future actions should focus on improving traditional intellectual property protection laws and policies and developing new cross-cultural design models based on community participation, cultural authorization, and mutually beneficial cooperation. Concurrently, consumer education should be strengthened to enhance public awareness of cultural respect and fairness.

People can achieve genuine cultural respect and global cultural and ecological balance. The fashion industry, legal systems, and the public must collaborate to transform cultural appropriation into cultural respect through structural, ethical, and institutional reforms.

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