Linear Comprehension of Cultural Appropriation in the Business World

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This article critically explores cultural appropriation (CA) within the global fashion industry. Drawing on a critical literature review methodology, the study synthesizes interdisciplinary perspectives from cultural studies and intellectual property law to examine how cultural elements, particularly those belonging to historically marginalized communities, are extracted, repurposed, and monetized by dominant businesses. The analysis engages key theoretical frameworks, including postcolonial theory, critical race theory, and the concept of "ethnopreneurship", arguing that CA in fashion is often a continuation of colonial logics under the guise of innovation. Through detailed discussion of typologies of CA, historical context, and power imbalances, the article highlights how designers and brands frequently disregard cultural origins and profit without consent from or compensation for the communities whose cultures they draw on.

Keywords: *cultural commodification, cultural appropriation, intellectual property, fashion industry*

1. Introduction

Cultural appropriation (CA hereafter) can be seen as a product or a process. It refers to cultural elements taken out of their original context and reinterpreted or used in a different cultural setting, mainly as a niche market segment or as a profit-generating tool within an entrepreneurial setting. In this context, a niche market refers to a small, targeted group of consumers attracted to products that incorporate distinctive cultural elements perceived as authentic or innovative. Innovation enables businesses to reinterpret or redesign these cultural symbols to differentiate themselves from mainstream markets; however, when such innovation prioritizes novelty and profit over cultural understanding, attribution, or community participation, it can lead to CA. In this way, niche markets often become spaces where cultural heritage is transformed into a commercial and

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innovative asset, sometimes at the expense of the originating community. This phenomenon can present itself in diverse manifestations, including the integration of cultural symbols in attire, artistic expression or promotional activities (Marketing), and the assimilation of cultural components in commercial goods or media content (Lin, 2020).

This article aims to investigate how CA in the fashion industry intersects with power, profit, and ethics, and to determine who gets to define the boundary between respectful cultural exchange and exploitation. It adopts a linear analytical perspective to examine how cultural appropriation operates within fashion businesses, tracing its progression from cultural extraction to commodification, market value creation, and ethical contestation.

1.1. Methodology

This article employs a critical literature review methodology to examine the concept of CA within the global fashion industry. Drawing on interdisciplinary sources and legal scholarship, the review identifies key debates, definitions, and tensions surrounding the appropriation of cultural elements. The analysis is structured thematically, focusing on power dynamics, commodification, public perception, and regulatory gaps.

2. Conceptual Framework

Noticeably, entrepreneurship is a reflection of innovation and creativity, which is closely linked to this scope. In my examination of the concept of CA, I have incorporated various interconnected terms such as entrepreneurship, business, and the fashion industry to broaden my analysis, treating them as components of the same domain. A more striking term that leads to this connection is "ethnopreneurship", which John and Jean Comaroff (2009, in DiFruscia 2010) have coined as a term to describe claims to ownership based on naturalised ethnic identity. Simply put, entrepreneurship is the activity of setting up a business and taking on financial risks in the expectation of profit to fulfill a niche market through innovation (Ratten 2023). Within the fashion industry, CA is frequently framed as a form of innovation and creativity, with designers sourcing inspiration from cultural traditions. When designers repeatedly draw on similar external cultural sources, these borrowed elements begin to reshape the creative environment in which they work. In this way, CA indirectly stimulated creativity and innovation, because exposure to and use of diverse cultural forms can generate new combinations,

variations, and design directions within the design process. This, in turn, influences how new designs are imagined, planned, and developed by expanding the pool of references and prompting designers to reconsider familiar solutions (Eckert and Stacey 2000; Omwami et al. 2020).

Furthermore, the fashion industry can be a typical example of a place where CA occurs through adopting or adapting cultural elements merely for commercial goals. The commodification of cultural elements is, in many ways, a direct manifestation of capitalist logic. Hogans and McAndrews (2022) frame this as a kind of symbolic violence, where acts of appropriation are not only exploitative but also reinforce systemic inequities. These authors emphasize the lack of academic attention to how CA plays out in fashion, particularly in terms of the failure to credit source communities and the lack of legal and social protection for their creative outputs.

3. Historical and Power Dimensions of CA

To fully understand CA, it is essential to examine its historical roots. Dillard (2000) emphasizes the responsibility of researching marginalized communities that have endured oppression, as their histories serve as valuable resources. This is particularly relevant when analyzing ethnic attire that holds sacred meaning throughout history. The power dynamic displayed is rooted in historical events. What follows is a brief survey of the different views and theories put forward in the literature that will shed some light on the connection between historical roots and today's fashion industry.

The Cultural Studies theory, debuting in the 20th century, connects fashion development to power dynamics and social structures. This framework helps clarify CA within the fashion industry, where trends often reflect cultural inequalities (Chumo 2023). CA has been critiqued as an extension of colonial practices and extractivist economies, with indigenous concepts like "cultural belongings" proposed as alternatives (Derksen 2020). Adding to this, "postcolonial fetishism" (Hall 1997, 266) describes the use of cultural objects while obscuring or erasing their origins, a dynamic often seen in CA cases in North America. Colonial histories continue to shape modern fashion trends, and postcolonial theory helps explain how colonial legacies influence CA.

A key aspect of CA is the erasure of Indigenous ownership. Nash (2016) asserts that Indigenous people are the true owners of cultural objects and stories; their narratives stem from original creation, not colonial reinterpretation. This ties into the concept of "Terra nullius", where colonizers claimed the land as "empty"

and freely took what they found, disregarding Indigenous sovereignty (Wheeler 2005). Similarly, "settler-colonial logic" revolves around the elimination of the Indigenous presence so settlers can inherit and exploit land and resources. Unlike migrants, settlers establish political dominance in foreign regions, hence, a further confirmation of the power imbalance. While the adoption of cultural elements in fashion can reinforce power imbalances, it may also disrupt colonial cycles, depending on how it is implemented.

"Critical Race Theory" further examines how CA perpetuates racial inequalities and stereotypes. It provides an angle to analyze the racial dimensions of CA in fashion, highlighting how different groups are affected unequally (Chumo 2023). Since CA appears in many domains, this theory can be examined through various critical approaches, such as the dominance of the "white lens," discussed by Hogans and McAndrews (2022), which equates whiteness with authority and rightness. CA is critiqued as a display of power, often serving to give white people more power and allowing them to pick whatever they want (Anyangwe 2018).

4. Different connotations and attributes

Scholars argue whether CA is inherently harmful. While some see it as a natural, even necessary, part of cultural exchange, others emphasize that its impact depends on context and intent (Nash, 2016). There is an ongoing debate over what qualifies as harmful CA, and many argue that its proximity to political discourse complicates the issue. Conventionally, CA occurs when the appropriator does not ask permission. The question is: who gives the permission? I agree with Lenard and Balint (2019) that the permission granted by the leader of the community does not necessarily make it a righteous act, as the cultural element should be important to each individual. On the other hand, it is not realistic to ask permission from every single member of the community, which makes this even more complicated. In contrast, when designers appropriate elements from their own cultural background, they often feel entitled to ownership of the item, perceiving no need to seek permission to use it, even on a global scale. This entitlement, however, differs from cases where fashion companies take symbols from cultures with which they have no direct affiliation. Such acts are often viewed as "cherry-picking" from other cultures without an understanding of their deeper meanings, leading to exploitative outcomes and inhibiting the growth of the original art form (Adongo 2021).

CA represents cultural injustice, according to authors like Young (2006), who talked about structural injustice and how it led to CA. Young defines structural injustice as a condition where the threat of domination leads the dominant culture

to gain from multiple opportunities. The power dynamic in structural injustice leads to oppression, and oppression leads to appropriation. However, according to Büyükokutan (2011), CA is sometimes a reciprocal exchange; if the community being appropriated from truly opposes the act, they must actively deny access to their culture. In many real-life examples, however, the original communities are already under the social radar of the appropriators and often rely on them for valuable resources, complicating the question of who to blame. On a more analytical level, scholars like Nelson (1996) describe CA as a subjective, motivation-driven phenomenon. Although it may be perception-based, its consequences can be deeply hurtful and anxiety-inducing. Young and Brunk (2012) differentiate between benign and harmful appropriation, noting that, while some forms of CA are respectful and do not offend the source culture, others can violate cultural identity or property rights. This distinction suggests that CA, while often criticised, also has a neutral aspect rather than solely a negative one, depending on how it is executed.

The commodification of culture creates political and multicultural tensions. We have seen heated debates on social media platforms like Twitter, where CA cases spark intense backlash. Examples include non-Black individuals wearing cornrows, non-Indian yoga instructors, an American girl wearing a traditional Chinese dress to the prom, Lady Gaga wearing a burqa in a provocative video, and the use of Ka Mate Haka in marketing (Lenard and Balint 2019). These instances raise questions: Is the term CA now overused? Are people reacting to historical injustices, or has the debate evolved into becoming the police of personal expression?

Furedi (2016) warns that CA accusations can become tools of social control, limiting freedom and self-expression, trying to control people's tastes and benchmark what they eat, dress, and sing. Supporters of CA justify it as a realistic method for development and intercultural integration, though critics argue that it allows dominant cultures to "borrow" from minorities without accountability. The fine line between appropriation and appreciation – Cultural appreciation is defined as respectfully paying tribute and giving credit to original cultures, contrasting it with appropriation (Jones and Childs 2021) – often hinges on how the original creators are acknowledged, and acknowledging them can be viewed as an act of homage (Adongo 2021).

Despite these nuances, CA continues to carry a largely negative connotation in contemporary discourse. Authors like Rogers (2006), for example, have even categorized it as cultural exploitation. However, Rogers also notes that communities being appropriated from are not always passive victims; they often display resilience and resistance. In the fullness of time, while cultural interactions

have historically brought great benefits, citing those benefits alone is insufficient to counter concerns about CA's exploitative nature (Lenard and Balint 2019). Yet the question remains: what qualifies as CA, who decides that, and what makes an act respectful or harmful? As the discourse evolves, it becomes clear that CA is a complex, contested, and a deeply contextual phenomenon shaped by history, politics, economics, and people's perceptions.

5. Cultural Appropriation in the Fashion Industry

The practice of design inspiration drawn from external cultures, when commercialised by Western fashion brands, directly intersects with capitalist motives and entrepreneurship within the fashion industry. This often manifests as the commodification of cultural elements to achieve the desired profit, which is a core element of entrepreneurial activity. This commercial focus can lead to fashion designers and brands becoming brand-builders, where their goal is to capitalize on the borrowed cultural asset, often obscuring the actual originators of the design. This pursuit of capital accumulation, frequently seen in cases where traditional designs are copied and sold for significantly higher prices by Western enterprises, contributes to classism. Therefore, the creative appropriation of cultural symbols is frequently an exercise in profit-driven entrepreneurship that neglects the economic position of the source communities (Hogans and McAndrews 2022, Pietilä 2022)

Following the previous section, consumer reactions are mainly shaped by their awareness of neocolonial market dynamics and by the empathy they have developed toward different cultures through socialization or formal education. The recent integration of ideologies like neocolonialism into the educational curricula and the influence of "woke culture" have both contributed to this reposition (Cruz et al. 2023). Consumers are now more inclined to question whether a product or brand respects cultural boundaries or merely exploits them for profit. On the other hand, consuming items from different cultures is considered cultural appreciation based on the ideology of neoliberal multiculturalism that encourages cultural integration and disregards the CA aspect of cultural exchanges. This clash between Cultural appropriation and appreciation reveals a huge identity issue (Cruz et al. 2023). Cultural appreciation happens when someone takes the time to research the history and meaning behind a cultural item or practice. It is about understanding where it comes from and what it means to the people of that culture. Green and Kaiser (2020) state that this process leads to an informed or "educated decision" about whether it is appropriate or possibly offensive to use that cultural element.

So, instead of just taking something, the person actually respects it and tries to use it responsibly.

According to Cruz et al. (2023), consumer responses to CA can be grouped into four main strategies. The first is reforming, where individuals outside the appropriated culture take an activist stance, defending the culture through awareness campaigns, especially on social media. The second strategy is retaining, in which consumers deliberately distance themselves from controversial products, exercising caution in their consumption choices and avoiding cultural judgment due to fear of misstepping. The third strategy is recontextualization, where consumers invest in research and contextual understanding before making claims about CA. These are typically seen as having more objective stances. Lastly, rationalization involves consumers excusing themselves from responsibility, often viewing CA as a minor issue or not relevant to them.

6. The Legal and Ethical Landscape

The legal dimension of CA reveals a troubling continuity between historical dispossession and modern-day exploitation, particularly in the case of Native American communities. The ongoing deprivation of their cultural resources is not only rooted in history but also perpetuated by a legal system that fails to specifically address CA, giving rise to what has been termed "Indian appropriation" (Riley and Carpenter 2016). The majority of legal cases that happened because of CA fell under copyright laws, with distinctions made based on the specific circumstances and context of the legal case.

Certain elements of a culture may not be adequately protected by copyright laws. Generally, these laws require a clear form of expression and not abstract creativity. The specific criteria for copyright protection laws differ from one nation to another and may require the transformation to a tangible form to be copyrightable (Siems 2019).

A frequently cited case in CA literature is that of the Maasai tribe. According to the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), over a thousand companies have utilized Maasai iconography in their marketing and branding. Luxury brands such as Louis Vuitton, Calvin Klein, Diane von Furstenberg, and Ralph Lauren have even used variations of the tribe's name as trademarks. The resulting "Maasai brand" is estimated to be worth more than ten million dollars annually, yet paradoxically, 80% of the Maasai people live in poverty. While this case is well-documented and repeatedly discussed in academic papers, it still lacks definitive legal classification as an act of injustice or violence (Adongo 2021).

Historically, intellectual property (IP) frameworks excluded traditional knowledge, leaving Indigenous cultural expressions largely unprotected. However, there have been growing international and national efforts to recognize and safeguard Indigenous rights. One such milestone is the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), which affirms the right of Indigenous communities to control their cultural heritage. National legislation, such as Kenya's Protection of Traditional Knowledge and Cultural Expressions Act, further demonstrates this shift. The Maasai Intellectual Property Initiative (MIPI), for example, aims to establish a licensing system that ensures the Maasai people receive compensation when businesses profit from their cultural property (Hogans and McAndrews 2022).

7. Conclusion

This article set out to offer a linear comprehension of CA in the business world, particularly in fashion. The analysis shows that CA in fashion often follows a recurring sequence: cultural elements are taken from marginalized communities, reframed as sources of innovation or style, commodified within entrepreneurial systems, and transformed into economic and symbolic value that largely benefits dominant actors. Public criticism may emerge, but it rarely disrupts the commercial structures that enable this process.

By tracing this sequence through historical, cultural, and legal perspectives, the article demonstrates that cultural appropriation is not an isolated creative choice but a structured outcome of capitalist and colonial power relations. Innovation plays a central role in this process by legitimizing cultural borrowing while obscuring questions of ownership, consent, and compensation. Addressing CA, therefore, requires more than symbolic acknowledgement or aesthetic sensitivity; it calls for structural engagement with the indigenous communities, clearer standards of accountability, and legal and economic frameworks that recognize collective cultural ownership. By offering a clearer analytical comprehension of cultural appropriation in the business world, this article contributes to ongoing debates on how fashion can move toward more responsible and equitable forms of cultural exchange.

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