



Developments of Cultural Appropriation in Fashion: An In-Progress Research

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Abstract. The research examines global fashion, with a special focus on cultural appropriation and inspiration in the contemporary fashion industry. The issue of cultural appropriation is quite new in the scenario of cultural studies. In its early stage, the project will consider new perspectives on the analysis of fashion production with a multidisciplinary approach. By collecting and studying material from international frameworks, the research aims to understand how the concept of appropriation develops. By outlining an approach for a conscious production process, even cooperating with other international realities, the present work might be of help in decentralizing the market.

Keywords: Cultural Appropriation · Fashion System · Eurocentrism · Digital Archive · Qualitative Research

1 Introduction

Cultural appropriation is a complex issue that relates with other concepts such as colonialism, cultural exchange, authenticity, and transculturation [8]. This phenomenon occurs in every sector of real-life situations and in many sectors of academic interest [8].

In fashion, the debate about its global dimension is not new [9] but the current debate about cultural sustainability has seen an increased awareness of the issue. “The appropriation of symbols, styles and terminology by the fashion industry is strictly related to colonial practices still active to date” [10, p. 98], which have become a component of the legacy of a fashion system that needs to be reframed from industry to academia [10]. Over the last decade, the academic world related to Fashion Studies started to re-conceptualize the socio-historical frame built around this field. Despite the scholars’ interest in fashion as a new phenomenon, compared to other fields which belong to the so-called soft sciences, the concepts that revolve around this research area bring with them the sign of the transformation in our society as an ever-changing system.

The present paper stems from the on-going PhD research process carried out by the author. Once briefly addressing cultural appropriation in the fashion system, the contribution would offer some research notes, based on a part of the on-going research study, in the context of the intangible cultural heritage dimension of fashion.

2 Introducing Cultural Appropriation in Fashion

Cultural appropriation has a multiple dimension of analysis: from the historical, legal, ethical, and the ethnographic point of view [19] and from a normative side, since it is from the concept of cultural heritage that cultural appropriation originates [19].

Cultural appropriation is a complex subject prompting a political and ethical debate, starting from producers and consumers of fashion that have expressed a fascination with the *other* and with what was called *exotic* for a long [7]. What Europeans call ethnic is the result of complex vicissitudes that have created strong boundaries and stereotypes in the definition of modern and traditional clothing.

Indeed, until the last century, fashion was considered a *European fact* that was implicitly the measure of progress and well-being [17]. In addition, the discourse on fashion has been dominated for centuries by a Eurocentric perspective which excluded the clothes of non-Western peoples from the concept of fashion [20] and allowed cultural appropriation.

According with Oxford Reference, cultural appropriation is, therefore, “a term used to describe the taking over of creative or artistic forms, themes, or practices by one cultural group from another [...] and carries connotations of exploitation and dominance” (www.oxfordreference.com: “cultural appropriation”) [3], and for a culture to be appropriated, “it first needs to go through a process of commodification” [8, p. 108]. Nowadays, the fact that cultural appropriation is encountered in many different systems makes its definition quite an effort. Thus, theorizing and analyzing cultural appropriation requires an in-depth consideration of its multiple aspects in any field [8].

Moreover, there are few works on cultural appropriation in fashion, with a prevalence of theory studies, and the majority of the empirical research that includes data mostly refers to content analyses of media narratives [14]. This can be related to the fact that fashion is a field where the line between appropriation and appreciation can blur [4]. According to Ayres, in the creativity process it is hard to clarify the line between appropriation and inspiration, defining cultural appropriation as a term that can have “different degrees of borrowing, ranging from inspiration to theft” [1, p. 152].

The use of items and symbols from other cultures might be viewed as an appreciation of cultural diversity. Yet, their use is often considered problematic, as in cases of religious or cultural symbols of other ethnic groups used for commercial reasons, misrepresenting the true meaning they have, or when reducing the representations of a culture to a mere stereotype [18]. According to Minh-Ha T. Pham, the framework of cultural appropriation/cultural appreciation produces an array of sociocultural, and economic advantages for dominant groups. The fashion system can borrow with impunity by appealing to inspiration, homage, and cultural appreciation [16] and traditionally preferring to place fashion in the dream worlds [15]. Even in the context of sustainable fashion companies, where the focus is on environmental issues, the cultural aspects are significantly less represented. This current lack of broader understanding of fashion-as-culture constrains us to the predominant, economic growth-led fashion system [11], where non-Western cultures are underrepresented and little-talked-about. When it comes to minorities or religious beliefs, cultural industries must face people and consider their impact on society, since fashion houses still can push their global acceptance, even if culturally embedded trends start at street level [2]. Nevertheless, the fashion industry continues to cross the

boundaries of the culture: designers are accused of racism, cultural appropriation, and other kinds of lack of concern for others' feelings towards powerless and vulnerable groups [23]. Moreover, events of this sort, which often occur in the media sphere, might give birth to crises, like Dolce & Gabbana's chopstick-gate, the Gucci's sweater accused of racism and the H&M's 'coolest monkey' jumper, which are just some examples in which fashion companies, called to deal with exogenous crises also from in a digital setting, need to mitigate the loss of credibility and address criticism [13].

3 Notes from an On-Going Research

The author collected and cross-checked factual information to understand how cultural appropriation and appreciation developed during a period of time in the established structure of global fashion.

To do so, the author conducted a detailed analysis mapping the global fashion industry with a data-driven approach in order to evaluate the general landscape of cultural appropriation in the fashion industry and its impact. The analysis was performed from December 1st 2020 to December 1st 2021, and collected all the fashion shows published on Vogue Runway [24] from 2010 up to 2020 of brands which had at least ten fashion shows (comprising Ready-to-wear and High-Fashion) in that decade, in order to restrict the sample.

Through a systemic analysis and reworking of the classification system of dress proposed in *The Visible Self* [5] a table was created (see Table 1) for entering data according to a mixed approach: the Content Analysis and Image Content Analysis of the produced images, yet necessarily integrated with virtual ethnography [6].

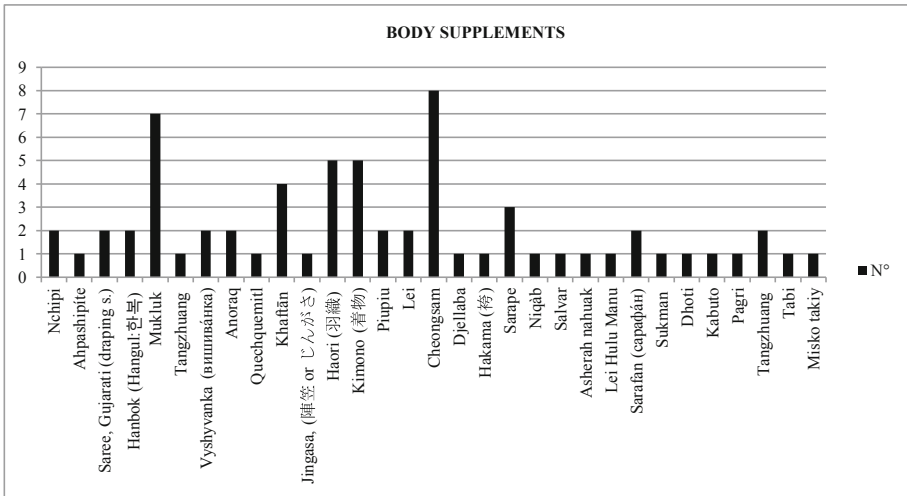
Starting from a period ranging from 2010, in which attention on cultural appropriation grew [21] to 2020, a list of 106 fashion brands was created. Thus, 2,281 fashion shows were analyzed, drawing from the Vogue archive. The analysed items were clothes, accessories, and prints seen in the photographs portraying every model, and how they were used. The data collection took place along with the construction of a glossary, which is still underway.

Assuming that Vogue Runway is a platform structured for commercial purposes and for the promotion of fashion, it was deemed necessary to adopt exclusion criteria to establish which features were suitable for the analysis. To investigate the main contents related to cultural appropriation, the following research protocol was designed. The observation of the 106 sample fashion shows was facilitated by two classification areas, identified at the beginning of the research: a commercial one and one limited to the classification of the dress system according to which every detail can be traced back to a society or a culture, with its socio-cultural meaning (ceremony, protection, ornament, ritual, etc.). Furthermore, each of them can be read as the act of fashioning the body: 1) Temporary Body Modification; 2) Body Supplements; and 3) Features.

The methodology applied in the research is to be understood as adequate for the final intent, but it has its limitations. This part of the presented research is not extensive, nor can be understood as exhaustive for addressing cultural appropriation issues. This leaves room for future analysis and observations on fashion production at a less creative level, like in fast fashion, whose margin of error is much higher.

For example, of the examined fashion brands, one-fifth of them have not presented elements of cultural appropriation or inspiration, while other fashion houses have been counted up to seven times in five collections. Another interesting datum is related to the classification system. According to the analysis, body supplements belonging to a different (designer’s) culture are the most featured: cloth enclosures that can be wrapped, pre-shaped, or combined, considered attachments to the body (draped, clipped...). On these assumptions, for example, four main appropriated contents relating to the types of body supplements have been identified: *Mukluk*, *Kimono*, *Cheongasm*, and *Haori* (see Table 2).

Table 2. Body supplements.



This speaks volumes about the very persistent problems of the contemporary fashion industry, appropriating *other* cultures. Indeed, the critical positions that question the dichotomy of western fashion/*ethnic* garments seem still significant, with an overlap creating schematic and stereotyped shapes/results. According to these findings, there is an East-West perspective-referring to Orientalism - and a North-South perspective which refers to colonial and postcolonial events [20]. However, the present analysis can trace a growing convergence even in the appropriation of Eastern European cultures. Indeed, the fashion system, along with its conceptualization and theorization, has been communicated with a modernity/colonialist framework, as one of the creations of a system of power and a capitalist industry that was developed in the West [22].

4 Conclusions

The overall picture emerging at the end of the present work suggests some reflections. In the era of globalization, “reflecting the multi-cultural harmony and designing for acculturation is becoming a new challenge” [25, p. 228]. Accusations of cultural appropriation seem to be increasing despite society’s growing interest in preserving diversity and enhancing multicultural perspectives. Indeed, although the phenomenon of cultural appropriation is not a recent phenomenon, the reaction and replies to these controversies have been favored by the use of social networks and online media [19].

With the Dolce & Gabbana’s “DG Loves China” campaign and the Gucci’s “blackface-sweater” [12], companies have shown poor cultural awareness. Furthermore, from the industry’s side, since fashion can take inspiration and examples from many cultures in its design process, it seems necessary that firms establish protocols to manage or prevent accusations of cultural appropriation or other insensitiveness that could affect the company [19].

In conclusion, there is an urgent need for fashion deconstruction, given the instances of Western industries being called out for racist or stereotypical imagery. Contributing to a greater awareness towards little-talked-about topics such as cultural appropriation could be a move towards deconstructing the axes of fashion dynamics productions in all their complexity. As the author has observed, the lack of authenticity still finds its place within the Western-centered dimension. As a result, the current social involvement does not imply an integrated approach to cultural sustainability. Hopefully, the commitments of the cultural agents and the flourishing of deconstruction and decolonization theories in fashion studies can have an impact on the hegemony of Eurocentric and Western fashion.

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