Historical Power Dynamics Reflecting on Today's Cultural Appropriation: The Arab Culture in Global Fashion

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Abstract: This paper explores how fashion brands use cultural heritage and history in their marketing strategies, often repackaging them for profit without acknowledging the communities they stem from. It explains Cultural Appropriation (CA) and focuses on the role of power dynamics in shaping consumer backlash to it. Using a qualitative approach, I examine case studies of brands criticised for appropriating indigenous cultures, analysing how they justify their actions versus how consumers respond, especially through online visuals and text. Findings show that consumer reactions vary, depending on the historical relationship between cultures, highlighting the need to define and call out appropriation in its different guises. The study argues that businesses must consider historical context when representing the cultures they draw on. Overall, this research adds to the ongoing discussions on power and responsibility in cultural representation in today's commercialised world.

Keywords: Cultural appropriation, Cultural identity, Historical factors, Fashion industry, Cultural heritage.

1. Introduction

Today, brands are defined by both their products and the cultural values promoted by their marketing strategies, shaping consumer behaviour. Some cultural organisations succeed by presenting historical artistic products as exotic in foreign markets, reinforcing cultural diversity as a global competitive advantage (Arango & María, 2016; Mohiuddin et al., 2009). Social media fuels this trend as companies exploit scandals for attention, risking reputational damage. Brands like Carolina Herrera and Gucci have faced Cultural Appropriation (CA) accusations, forcing brands to address such

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controversies with care and transparency (Gargoles & Ambas, 2023).

CA is a rising controversy in modern business. Scafidi (2005, in Bucar 2022, 9) defines it as "taking intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, or artefacts from someone else's culture without permission." In business, turning a profit from CA is central to its definition. Many borrowings can be labelled CA, but this does not mean they are morally objectionable or perceived equally (Bucar 2022). Any product, tangible or intangible, may be seen as CA, even outside the realm of business, depending on the power dynamics or historical ties between cultures. This makes CA a highly sensitive and complex notion (Yagiz, 2010; Lancefield et al., 1998).

This paper applies an interpretive approach to the exploration of various facets of CA and CA-related situations. It addresses the question: To what extent is Cultural Appropriation a universally applicable concept? This requires attempting some answers to investigative questions, such as how does consumer perception vary by case? To what extent do power dynamics and historical background affect consumer behaviour? In what follows, I shall be using the term "preponderant" for the appropriating culture due to its greater influence on society and the market, and "subaltern" for the appropriated culture.

2. CA: Scope, Definition, and Relevance

The concept of culture is rather complex, involving more than behaviour, items, and symbols. Culture manifests itself in diverse forms, including art, science, spiritual systems, and daily life practices. The term is often used to describe specific historical periods, societies, or areas of human activity (Makhmudova, 2022). It encompasses symbolic and expressive dimensions of social life, including language, ideas, values, identity, and meanings attributed to material objects (Williams, 2013). This view shows how beliefs, behaviour, and products construct society. UNESCO adds emotional and intellectual elements, defining culture as a web of art, literature, lifestyle, values, traditions, and beliefs (The 2009 UNESCO Framework for Cultural Statistics (FCS), 2009). Culture shapes identity and preserves human history, but is frail due to global interaction and technology, risking value loss (Birukou et al. 2013).

Appropriation involves borrowing a cultural item and claiming ownership, changing its meaning and use from the original (Schneider 2003). CA can be classified into four frameworks. The first is exploitation, involving commodification and financial gain, where

businesses turn cultural elements into profit without crediting the source, converting culture into exchangeable value stripped of meaning (Heath 1992). The second is transculturation, a mix of cultural elements from various sources, with appropriation at its core (Pratt 2008). The third is exchange, where CA occurs between equal powers and can be seen as reciprocal (Büyükokutan 2011). The last framework is dominance. Appropriation occurs when a dominant power imposes its power dynamic on an oppressed group or as a site of resistance of the latter to challenge this dynamic (Said, 1978). Legal scholars view CA through the lens of intellectual property, regarding it as cultural theft and focusing on unauthorised use and protection. Sociologists and anthropologists study borrowing across cultures, offering not only negative but also neutral definitions (Ashley & Plesch 2002; Rogers 2006). Exploring different frameworks reveals Cultural Appropriation's potential and its varying impact across business and ethnic cultures.

3. Literature review

Because current debates on CA are rooted in history, it is important to first provide historical context. Wachs and Weber (2023) trace the origins of CA to art theft during wars and colonialism, when rulers and collectors seized cultural objects from colonised regions as trophies of conquest. Similarly, Jenss and Hofmann (2019) document how German-speaking elites in the nineteenth century collected oriental jewellery, Arabic coins, textiles, maps, and costume books, revealing early forms of appropriation shaped by colonial fascination with the "exotic". These studies show that CA is deeply rooted in historical practices of cultural expropriation.

Historical and literary scholars have traced early academic discussions of CA to the 1920s. Ledbetter (2016, in Green and Kaiser, 2017), highlights how Harlem Renaissance intellectuals criticised popular depictions of African Americans, laying the groundwork for later critiques of cultural misrepresentation. Nearly a century later, in 2016, public debate on CA re-emerged when several celebrities issued public apologies for appropriation, marking a shift toward mainstream awareness.

From a postcolonial perspective, Cuthbert (1998) emphasises the legacy of colonialism, where colonisers acted as appropriators and indigenous peoples as dispossessed subjects. Yet he also recognises that appropriation may occur in reverse, as colonised groups sometimes adopt elements from dominant cultures as strategies of

survival or adaptation.

Focusing on economic and social processes, Watson (2006) identifies importation as an important dimension of CA, linking it to cultural imperialism and to the passive acceptance of global influences by less resistant societies. Similarly, Kjeldgaard and Askegaard (2006) describe acculturation as a process through which minority cultures assimilate into dominant ones, illustrating how cultural influence often mirrors global power hierarchies.

Analysing CA through the lens of power dynamics, Heath (1992) defines it as a situation in which a dominant culture appropriates from a subaltern (as the author puts it, "subordinate") one without acknowledgement or respect, resulting in the commodification and misrepresentation of the subaltern culture. Derderian (2017) supports this interpretation, noting that such acts reproduce Western superiority and marginalise the cultural contributions of others. Some scholars have explored the reverse dynamic of cultural appropriation, where less powerful cultures adopt elements of dominant ones as strategies of adaptation or negotiation. This process has been described as acculturation or assimilation within global consumer contexts (Kjeldgaard & Askegaard, 2006; Watson, 2006). Sobh et al. (2012) extend this to fashion, showing how individuals combine Western and traditional elements to express pride and continuity within modern contexts. Adding a further perspective, Thimm (2021) examines cases of appropriation where equally less powerful cultures borrow from each other, using cultural exchange to challenge stereotypes or for commercial purposes.

The question of authenticity and representation has also attracted critical attention. Said (1978), through his theory of Orientalism, demonstrates how Western discourse constructed the East as inferior and exotic in order to legitimise dominance. Heath (1992) and Carini and Salice (2023) show how such practices distort or erase authenticity, turning cultural symbols into marketable commodities. Howes (1996, 2002) situates this within global consumer culture, arguing that cross-cultural exchange simultaneously generates creativity and inequality. Sobh et al. (2012) further note that participation in global fashion can reinforce hierarchies and perceptions of superiority over "foreign" cultures.

From the standpoint of cultural innovation, Rogers (2006) and Lancefield et al. (1998) view appropriation as existing on a spectrum between appreciation and exploitation, depending on context and intent. Worsley (2011), cited in David (2020), provides a concrete example of this through Assyrian heritage organisations reclaiming

objects such as the keffiyeh or shemagh, an Arab headdress rooted in Sumerian history, illustrating local agency in redefining cultural ownership. Said (1978) reiterates that reclaiming interpretive and representational authority from Western dominance remains essential to preserving authenticity and resisting cultural dilution.

In terms of methodology, Alsultany and Shohat (201 3) and Sobh et al. (2012) observe, in general terms, that research on CA predominantly employs qualitative approaches, including ethnography, interviews, and case studies. Specifically, David (2020) and Heath (1992) conduct comparative analyses of Western and non-Western interactions, while Said (1978) and Young (2001) provide key theoretical foundations through postcolonial and cultural studies frameworks. Together, these studies emphasise that CA cannot be understood without considering historical and structural power relations. Nevertheless, gaps persist in the literature. Research continues to focus mainly on Western contexts, with relatively little attention to non-Western settings such as the Arab world. Moreover, the intersections of gender, long-term cultural impact, and reciprocal exchange remain underexplored. Carini and Salice (2023) insist that understanding CA requires a sustained analysis of the power dynamics underlying cultural interaction. Following this approach, recent scholarship increasingly distinguishes between creative freedom, often framed as appreciation, and exploitative practices that disregard reciprocity and context.

Collectively, these studies reveal that CA is neither a fixed nor a one-directional process : it must be understood as a dynamic system of cultural negotiation shaped by history, power, and evolving standards of representation.

4. Methodology

As far as the research design is concerned, I employed a qualitative approach, presenting visuals of Cultural Appropriation and examining real-life fashion industry cases. Data collection, discussed earlier, involved poring through scholarly articles, books, industry reports, and case studies on fashion intersections, as well as finding examples of CA. I also collected case studies, which I subsequently organised into three categories.

The first is the Cultural Appropriation of non-Western cultures by Western Fashion Brands. The second is Fashion Brands' Appropriation of Subaltern Culture. Third, Cultural Appropriation between two subaltern cultures. The data analysis method used is thematic analysis,

identifying common patterns. I used a systematic approach to categorise visual elements in the imagery, focusing on symbols, motifs, colours, and design elements related to specific cultures. I used a semiotic analysis in order to evaluate these symbols. Additionally, I conducted a comparative analysis to examine instances of Cultural Appropriation across brands, identifying similarities and differences in their use of cultural elements. I also evaluated the effectiveness and sensitivity of each brand's approach and analysed how the representation of cultural elements has evolved over time.

5. Findings

5.1 Case Studies

A. Western Brands Appropriating from the Arab Culture

Case A1: In 2018, Dior created 15 new pieces for their haute couture show in Dubai, incorporating local elements. This case represents how global brands attempt to connect with local markets by adopting local aesthetics, but sometimes they risk appropriating cultural elements without sufficient consideration. While the show claimed to honour local values, it could be perceived as an instance of CA, due to its ambiguous respect for cultural significance. Regardless of intent, it clashes with CA's definition. To align with the eclectic fashion style of the UAE, Dior chose a circus theme with vibrant colours, maintaining the global aspect of its identity. As a result, Dubai became a significant hub for modest fashion. Is it possible that such appropriation in high-profile fashion shows is acceptable because it boosts tourism in the city and actually promotes the local cultural identity? In this case, there is a fine line between Appreciation and appropriation. Clearly, there is a huge financial gain for Dior. However, can the benefit be mutual? Do we no longer consider this case as cultural appropriation (CA), or do we still call it CA but without assigning a negative connotation to it, since it fits the definition? Further cases should be collected and analysed in detail in the future.

Case A2: In 2014-2015, Karl Lagerfeld's Chanel Cruise collection incorporated cultural elements like Aladdin-style slippers, harem trousers, and tweed patterns resembling the Keffiyeh scarf to blend Middle Eastern symbols within a Western framework. Chanel aimed to connect with local consumers, assuming relatability, while appealing to both Western (preponderant) and Middle Eastern (subaltern) markets. However, as Chanel is a Western brand, it remains the appropriator in this case, using these elements to increase

profitability by focusing on modest fashion.

Case A3: The Swedish brand H&M released children's socks featuring a doodle design that closely resembled the word "Allah" (God). This word is unique in Arabic, as it is written differently due to its sacredness. The company used the calligraphy without understanding its meaning or the cultural and religious sensitivity. Though unintentional, the resemblance led to backlash, forcing H&M to withdraw the product. This case shows the need for Western companies to thoroughly research cultural symbols in order to avoid disrespect.

Case A4: Gigi Hadid faced backlash for her Vogue Arabia cover, with critics claiming she disrespected Palestinian culture. She defended the shoot, stating that, given her Palestinian roots, the cover was meant to honour her heritage. Her response could explain the sensitive distinction between cultural appropriation and cultural representation. The stand she embraces is that she has pure intentions in representing her familial cultural ties respectfully. This begs the question: Could intention be the crucial standard of CA evaluation? If so, how to measure intention effectively? Is it measurable in the first place?...

Case A5: The Italian brand Dolce & Gabbana used Arab cultural items in their collection of 2016, and because of that, faced a huge backlash. The presence of Arabic script and calligraphic elements in their designs was considered a misuse. The brand employed cultural symbols disconnected from the proper context. This was seen as stripped of its original significance and value. Arab inspiration appeared in Gucci's designs for dresses, scarves, and bags. Critics argue that turning cultural values into fashion trends exploits these elements for profit without compensation or proper acknowledgement. Whether or not the criticism is valid, the consequences are significant, as key stakeholders (consumers) may change their behaviour in response. Similarly, Dolce & Gabbana's use of Arab motifs simplifies and stereotypes the source culture, diluting its meaning in the pursuit of profit. This harms Arab designers, who gain little recognition or benefit, while global brands profit without giving back. The cover features Dolce & Gabbana's collection, including the Abaya, a traditional garment worn by Muslim Arab women, highlighting the thin line between appreciation and appropriation. The "Yay or nay" caption suggests a choice to approve or reject the image, as the Abaya carries deep cultural and religious meaning.

B. Arab designers appropriating from Western culture.
Case B1: Faissal El-Malak is a Palestinian designer who uses

traditional textiles from Yemen, Tunisia, and Egypt in his modern, Western-like clothing. He works within a Western context and collaborates with traditional Arab designers, translating cultural artefacts into modernised designs. This is seen as a respectful form of innovation rather than appropriation, possibly due to the lack of power and influence in the appropriator culture compared to the one being appropriated from. Designers like Utruj, Zareena, and Mashael Alrajhi also transform Arab traditions into Western-style designs. Utruj and Emirati designer Zareena have reinvented women's dress wear to suit Western tastes, likely because Western styles appeal more to UAE consumers. These Arab designers appropriate from Western culture while preserving traditional Arab elements to maintain modesty accepted by their society. This reflects the social and economic influence of Western culture. Meanwhile, Saudi designer Mashael Alrajhi appropriates Western techniques, not designs, to access a broader, cross-cultural market beyond the local one.

C. The less preponderant cultures appropriating from the Arab culture.

Case C1: Elie Saab is a Lebanese designer known for his haute couture creations that are influenced by many cultures. In his Fall/Winter 2015 collection, Elie Saab combined Indian embroidery techniques with his signature design and Arabian features. The detailed beadwork, mirror work, and thread embroidery from Indian traditional fashion used by Saab did not put him in a position to receive backlash, unlike in other cases. The collection was well received, and the appropriation may be viewed as a privilege, as these cultural elements were included in and elevated by Saab's success and fame.

Case C2: Zuhair Murad's Spring/Summer 2018 Collection
Zuhair Murad's Spring/Summer 2018 collection, "Indian Summer," was inspired by Native American culture, featuring feathers, traditional patterns, and teepee-like decorations. Critics called the use of "Indian" inaccurate and the designs disrespectful for commercialising sacred symbols like feathers, which represent freedom, wisdom, and honour. Murad defended the collection as a creative challenge and a tribute to Native American art. However, critics like Native scholar and activist Adrienne Keene argued that using sacred cultural symbols for profit risks misrepresentation, strips them of meaning, and can offend communities by reducing traditions to stereotypes.

Case C3: A different category
In September 2024, Morocco's Ministry of Youth, Culture, and Communication warned Adidas about CA, accusing it of using

Moroccan "Zellij" patterns on Algeria's football warm-up shirt. While Adidas claimed inspiration from Tlemcen's Moorish palace, Morocco argued the designs are historical and uniquely Moroccan and accused Adidas of misattribution and economic exploitation. The ministry demanded withdrawal, compensation for craftsmen, and raised broader concerns over the role of fashion in cultural appropriation and the need for legal protection of heritage. Moreover, Morocco filed a complaint against Algeria over the appropriation of the "Ntaa El Fassi" caftan, opposing its inclusion in Algeria's UNESCO dossier. Though not directly tied to profit, this case highlights the need to protect cultural heritage from misappropriation, especially amid geopolitical tensions. UNESCO plays a key role in mediating such disputes and preserving traditions across borders, even within shared ethnic groups.

D. Other less preponderant cultures appropriating from the Arab culture

Case D1: Manish Malhotra, an Indian designer, drew from many cultures in his 2018 Haute Couture collection "Zween," which featured Middle Eastern motifs and aesthetics. Critics pointed out his superficial use of these symbols without real cultural respect. While some admired his creativity, others felt that using important cultural elements without a deep understanding was disrespectful. With many DESI immigrants in the Gulf, the collection could also spark political and social controversy.

6. Analysis and Discussion

The foremost reason for criticising CA usually arises when a preponderant culture or, as described by Cranes (2018), a privileged and often white culture appropriates elements from, as described, marginalised culture and thereby profits from them. The Arabic world, however, has an interesting dynamic. In this part, I will employ some theoretical frameworks discussed in the literature review. Chanel's 2022 collection typifies the concept of importation by incorporating Middle Eastern modesty traditions, cultural symbols, and elements of regional textile heritage that were used to evoke a vague sense of "local authenticity in Western luxury fashion. As for Gigi Hadid's case, it could typify the challenges of importing cultural symbols into global fashion. These mixed reactions reflect the complexity of cultural affiliation, especially when a figure has a hybrid identity. Here, the historical façade is more layered; it is not just about appropriation, but also about claims to belonging and representation in a globalised

context. I use the term "historical façade" in reference to a surface-level engagement with history that enhances brand image without deeper cultural accountability. The trend of tailoring fashion collections to regional preferences (for example, DIOR and Dolce & Gabbana) is predicated on the premise on the fact that entering a market and gaining money is more important than preserving the cultural value of the fashion items. These cases illustrate the influence of Western brands on cultural representation and integration. These brands can shape the perception of Arab motifs in the fashion world and highlight the power dynamics within this industry, making Western culture more preponderant. Chanel's incorporation of traditional Bedouin headdresses and latticework patterns in its designs raises questions. Is it genuine engagement with Middle Eastern culture? A mere fashion statement, or a blatant attempt to make more money? Regardless of the intention, the risk of superficial representation and commodification persists. In the fashion industry, the interchange between cultural appropriation and authentic representation underscores a pivotal theme. The industry shows the profound impact that fashion can have on cultural records. I would advocate an approach that values authenticity over mere commodification. El-Malak and Malhotra successfully navigate the balance between honouring cultural heritage and Fashion innovation. It is a kind of alternative to the commodification frequently observed in shows like Chanel's Cruise Collection (2014-2015). On another note, the H&M controversy highlights the dangers of misinterpreting cultural significance, regardless of the intention, that mistakes (honest or dishonest) would lead to backlash and could lead to boycotts, as consumer backlash is closely tied to historical wounds. Dolce & Gabbana, known for prior racist scandals, faced accusations of insincere inclusion when launching abayas aimed at Muslim consumers. These reactions show how the power imbalance between global brands and local cultures shapes public perception: the more marginalised the culture, the more sensitive the reaction when its history is commodified. Certain Local Cultures could change due to the influence of the Western brand that did not receive an impactful backlash or was just embraced by the local culture. Not only gradually change the local adaptation of local elements, but it also changes the global perceptions of such elements. For example, Chanel's incorporation of Arab elements, such as keffiyeh scarves, impacted the popularity of these scarves and the market value of these symbols, which raises concern about fashion authenticity and commodification.

7. Conclusion

This paper explores the nuanced concept of cultural appropriation (CA) in the Arab world, as manifest in the fashion industry. Specifically, it examines stakeholder reactions, questioning whether CA is universally applicable. It focuses on power dynamics shaped by historical and political contexts, which influence how cultural elements are perceived and commercialised. CA in this context reflects both adaptability and complexity. Consumer understanding in the Arab world remains unclear, despite the rise of traditional elements in modern Western fashion. While this reflects cultural awareness and global engagement, it also poses risks of misrepresentation if not handled with respect. The study confirms CA as a global issue, but with distinct dynamics in the Arab world. Addressing it requires an inclusive approach that considers all stakeholders' perspectives.

8. Limitations and Implications

The first limitation is the reliance on secondary sources, which risks bias; direct consumer input would have added more depth to the study. Second, the paper did not focus on a specific stakeholder, limiting the range of perspectives. Third, CA is a complex, fluid concept with no clear definition or metrics, making it difficult to study objectively.
The first implication is an academic contribution to developing standards to assess CA, with the Arab world offering insights into power dynamics. The second implication is that business research on CA can guide branding strategies and help build contingency plans. Lastly, it calls for clearer policies in fashion, better-trained mediators, and CA education for designers and marketers.

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