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# **Appropriation or Appreciation? Examining the Phenomenon of Cultural Appropriation in Fashion Branding**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **APPROPRIATION OR APPRECIATION: Examining the phenomenon of Cultural Appropriation in Fashion Branding**

Due to the social revolution, social issues such as racism, human justice and cultural appropriation have evolved rapidly and included in many aspects of life. Brands are taking advantage of cultural values and/ or artifacts to promote for their equities yet acknowledging the possible backfire that would damage their reputation. Most existing research regards the practice of cultural appropriation in branding as wrongful; however, researchers have not been thoroughly covering the phenomenon at a deeper level of cultural histories that may indirectly fuel to branding crises and suggesting proper resolutions to fix the problem. By adopting conceptualizations of critical theory, postcolonialism and related concepts, this study drew from the perspectives of Marcuse, Adorno & Horkheimer and investigated how cultural artifacts being used among fashion brands would result in branding crises. The results suggest that cultural appropriation does not only come from the misuse of cultural artifacts, it is also the lack of knowledge of history and origins of those artifacts, identification on who should represent those artifacts in advertising and shortage of education about this issue. Thus, the research contribute to the existing body of knowledge by explaining how cultural appropriate takes shape in branding and their contributions to branding crises.

*Key word:* Cultural Appropriation, Postcolonialism, Fashion Branding, Cultural Artifacts, Cultural Resources, African-American Culture

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# 1. DEFINING THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

## 1.1. Introduction

Using cultural artifacts has become a mainstream branding strategy since Douglas Holt promoted cultural branding in 2004. The cultural branding model explains how brands eliminate conventional thinking to develop a new mindset. Cultural artifacts being used branding address a perceptive contradiction in society. In today's world, brands are represented not only via products or services they offer; they are also embedded cultural values which are through advertisements, consumers are convinced to buy a product to forge a relationship with the brand. To an extent, brands embed cultural resources in their advertisements from which consumers associate with their values as embodied in the product. The idea of building brands at the culture buzzing around them means that brands need to use that awareness to inform how they should best position and integrate themselves into the world. In essence, they need to engage with culture more directly, become a part of it, thereby forging their relevance and connection with consumers (Street, n.d.). In a competitive and business-driven market, brands who use cultural assets in their promotion are ahead of the race because they delve into the societal and cultural connection they thrive for culture share. Nevertheless, the perceived employment of those cultural artifacts may pertain to potential risks – this phenomenon is referred to as “cultural appropriation”. Cultural appropriation is the adoption of cultural texts from one culture by members of another culture (Bicskei, 2011). In a certain context, taking an example of branding, the adoption can be controversial if brands use cultural texts of disadvantage minority culture for their promotion of equity. More specifically, the topic of cultural appropriation in fashion has received much attention in recent years, my thesis aims at inquiring the phenomenon of cultural appropriation in the fashion field, taking into account historical perspectives, in which three most popular case studies are being analyzed to understand that this phenomenon though is emergent, if tracing back to the history it is not new and has evolved over time under many forms. Hence, in this

study, I will choose fashion branding and how African-American culture is embedded in the branding process as my empirical research.

It then discusses in the analysis part the predominant features of the phenomenon in today's society, illustrating those cases that have attracted the attention of the public, describing the tension through the idea of critical theory and its extent concept of postcolonialism developed by Marcuse, Adorno, and Horkheimer to unveil the underlying causal factors that have contributed to the creation of the overall phenomenon.

## **1.2. Problem Statement**

The awareness of cultural appropriation emerged in 2016 when an entertainment writer for The Huffington Post calling 2016 was the year of celebrities apologizing for cultural appropriation (Ledbetter, 2016 as cited in Green & Kaiser, 2017). One might argue that fashion brands have employed this public consciousness to draw attention both positive and negative to themselves and the products they hope to sell. Many brands today have broken away from pure product functionality and move forward to a higher-order meaning. Taking examples of the fashion industry, recently brands do not focus just on selling but creating stories, staple statements, or even controversy to create better brand recall among consumers. Along came the huge exposure on social media, many brands have been accused as being “culturally inappropriate” or being judged of their choices whether it is socially acceptable to include cultural elements in their branding promotion. They are being perceived as exploiting a specific culture to gain profits (i.e. Marc Jacobs used multi-colored dreadlocks on white female models) (Soh, 2018). This problem seems to stem from the branding process. Though marketers understand that brands target particular market segments and that analysis of consumer demographics, media usage, and lifestyle is conducted for such targeting, it is not clear why are they still doing it when it is seemingly that they do not acknowledge historical backgrounds and meanings of those artifacts being used.



What accelerates the seriousness of cultural appropriation is the criticism of the phenomenon can be easily slipped into a reaffirmation of a unidirectional “white Western domination over and exploitation of culture at the expense of everyone else” (Pham, 2014, par. 8). The debate diminishes itself to ineffective binaries – for example, the ‘Western capitalist institution’ versus the ‘slum’, ‘high culture’ versus ‘low culture’, and these categories reflects a hierarchical correlation between the fashion industry and the cultures being appropriated (Pham, 2014, par. 18). At the fundamental level, cultural appropriation comes from imitation – people want to change their clothing styles overtime to catch up with the fashion trend change. As Simmel (1957) explains this dynamic as a problematic practice of social class demarcation, he stated that the lower classes are more vulnerable in this situation where the upper classes are constantly adopting new styles to differentiate themselves from the masses, lower classes begin to copy their style to look and feel the same. More specifically, this has transformed into a new form of oppression where upper classes or more powerful, wealthier systems create a new consumption culture making the less powerful ones more vulnerable to their own identities so they would purchase more products to fulfill the urge of being themselves.

Under the circumstance of being commodified to make people feel relate then buy more products, cultural artifacts have been misappropriated especially those artifacts come from minority cultures. In the following sections, more historical shreds of evidence will be presented to make sense of the phenomenon as well as to gain further understanding of its working mechanisms in contribution to the branding crisis.

### **1.3. Aim and Research Question**

Following these premises, through the investigation of the employment of cultural artifacts in fashion branding, the study aims to provide deeper knowledge of the historical and social aspects of cultural appropriation. More precisely, I will draw upon existing work on cultural resources analysis to gain a more thorough understanding of the working mechanism of this practice.

In order to achieve this purpose, I seek to answer the following research question:

- RQ: How does the use of cultural artifacts contribute to fashion branding?

This study aims to practically understand the working mechanism as well as the root of cultural appropriation by taking a hermeneutic approach. This thesis will answer the research question using cultural resources analysis and its aim will be accomplished through the example of cultural artifacts' visual presentation in fashion advertising. The empirical data will be collected through an Instagram account "diet\_prada" that serves as a sample example in this study. It is important to remember that this account only provides evidence that leads to the backfire towards brands, the account itself will not be analyzed.

### **1.4. Relevance of the study to the field of Strategic Communication**

The emergence of cultural appropriation was brought up in our minds and entangled with current debates about social-political movements across various media channels. While appropriation has been frequently associated with the fashion industry for as long as people have engaged in trade and communicated cross-culturally, it has become grounded in the communication revolution of mass media (Green & Kaiser, 2017). In addition to fueling fashion change, both brands and consumers have long been yearning for difference, the exotic through style-fashion-dress (Tulloch, 2010; Kaiser, 2012). These tendencies have encouraged various forms of appropriation, making this topic an on-going, yet deeply historical debate.

The analysis will shed light on the field of brand and crisis communication, at the same time contribute to the existing body of knowledge by investigating in detail how these cultural artifacts take shapes in many forms to provide different interpretations towards brand message in particular and the social debate in general. Therefore, the contribution of this study goes beyond the understanding of the right/wrong nature of the employment of cultural assets in branding. By analyzing and investigating cultural resources represented through visual texts, people and organizations, scholars and professionals, who study, plan and execute advertising campaigns will be helped in recognizing that cultural appropriation though is an interesting concept to be included, it also brings about potential risks to the brand reputation if not being used appropriately.

In conclusion, from a strategic communication perspective, this thesis will enhance this knowledge, since some aspects of cultural appropriation related to the above-mentioned fields seem to be taken lightly. As a multidisciplinary discipline, strategic communication comprises brand and crisis communication, the study of media behavior, and intercultural communication studies. Thus, a contribution to this knowledge is a contribution to strategic communication.

## **1.5. Delimitations**

The contribution of cultural artifacts in branding can either determine the success of a brand or fuel to its crisis. This study will focus on understanding how the cultural appropriation phenomenon is being interpreted when presented visually via advertisements or related visual texts. The research will not question whether it is appropriate to use these cultural artifacts of the analyzed cases, but through cultural resources analysis, it will explore how this important aspect of the experience is represented and contributing to the interpretation of the overall phenomenon that has taken place in current social-political contexts. The study proposes that cultural appropriation is a non-stop evolving phenomenon, and by using cultural resources analysis framework it is possible to unveil a clearer picture of its working mechanisms as well as effects on brands and those who perceive their perceive their messages or purchase their products.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The following literature review will present central theories and research that are relevant in order to gain a better understanding of the cultural appropriation phenomenon related to fashion branding. Within each of the presented fields, I identify the key concepts, definitions, and dilemmas concerning cultural appropriation. In a final synthesis, a key problem that has not yet been sufficiently analyzed will be extracted.

### **2.1. Understanding the Cultural Appropriation Phenomenon in Branding**

#### ***2.1.1. An Overview of Cultural Stereotypes and Appropriation in Branding***

The dynamics of culture in branding stem from Hofstede's theory of intercultural communication. He proposed an index in which each country is being measured on a binary ranking; for example, individualism and masculinity. Regarding cultural aspects, he argued culture is a fixed number and is static – it is unchangeable as same as a country's geographic position (Hofstede, 2005). Businesses employ culture as an advantage to predict consumer behavior (Weick & Quinn, 1999; Leana & Barry, 2000). Hofstede believed that measuring the value systems of each country would give us the idea that human thinking, feeling, and acting, as well as organizations' activities, can be predicted. For example, the indication of Australia's high score on the fundamental concern of individualism shows that this cultural value is highly stable; which also implies that Australian consumers are likely more individualistic. Thus, businesses can grasp this value to achieve their goals (Hofstede, 2001). On the other hand, McSweeney (2012) disagreed with this view of culture in a static paradigm – he argued that seeing culture as a fixed or persistent heritage of values means rejecting the authorship of people. The rationale behind his claim is that in the past people created a culture and passed them through generations; however, during historical revolutions, the culture has been commodified and human beings are controlled by dictatorship or more

powerful systems who predetermine values. Thus, seeing culture under a static paradigm means oppression and unchanged.

It is clear that cultural appropriation stems from imbalances of power; it is understood as silencing, exploitation, misinterpretation, or offense which makes the practice wrongful. The concept is objectified in a way that reflects and/ or aggravated inequality and marginalization which can be concluded as a form of oppression (Matthes, 2019). The reason that makes the practice wrongful is the way it interacts with the oppression of certain cultural group members; according to Ziff & Rao (1997); Hurka (1999) and Hlaki (1994), cultural appropriation acquits a common belief about members of marginalized cultural groups are being immorally objectified under the dominance of more powerful ones.

The cultural dynamism circulated brands add values to their revelation and communicative reach. In other words, the use of cultural practices is a value production mechanism (Marti, 2020). Brands are becoming more and more associated with social life, values are being determined under their power (Bouquillion, 2014). In her book *Cross-Cultural Management: with Insights from Brain Science*, Nguyen (2020) shows examples of racial issues in branding; for example, the term ‘whitewash’ refers to the assumption that white is more beautiful. Many beauty brands namely L’Oreal Paris made their African-American model’s skin and hair significantly lighter. This phenomenon is explained by Paek (2003) as ‘stereotype marketing’ – products are being promoted based on common perceptions and not necessarily fact. It manifests in many ways such as portraying black people in sport, Latin Americans outdoors, or Asians at work. Brands use stereotypes to align with consumers’ values; however, a sense of social responsibility can jeopardize brands’ positions in consumers’ mindset – those who rely on the promotion of stereotypes are believed to either reinforce cultural stereotypes or change the existing perceptions (Mai Phuong Nguyen, 2020). Mwakideu (2018) explains the cultural misappropriation in branding through the H&M crisis example – the brand released an ad with a dark-skinned boy wearing a green hooded sweatshirt said: “Coolest Monkey in the Jungle.” The campaign caused intense backlash especially among the black community, which resulted in the company

closing its stores in South Africa. Cultural appropriation and/ or misappropriation in branding crises is an act of “stealing, borrowing, and making a profit off the cultural heritage of an already at risk and underprivileged community without proper acknowledgment or compensation” (Nguyen, 2020, pg. 314). The practice has been linked to a so-called power imbalance between the more powerful groups who borrow cultural heritage from the less powerful ones – they use this heritage without honoring or solving the imbalance of their power (ibid.)

As quoted in an article written by Douppnik (2018, pg. 2), founder of Sleuth Brand Consulting firm – Shireen Jiwan said:

*“There is a fine line between cultural appropriation and appreciation. To try to maintain artificial lines between groups or protect one group’s rights over another to address or celebrate images and ideas of gender, race, ethnicity and the like is a losing battle in a day and age wherein these divisions matter less and less. The lines themselves are dissolving completely.”*

In recent years, mega brands such as H&M, Urban Outfitters, or Gucci have been caught in cultural appropriation haywire and most of the cases related to racism and bias. For example, during their Fall/ Winter 2018 collection, Gucci sparked controversy with its display of turbans resembling those worn within the Sikh community but worn by only white models. Later the Sikh Coalition accused the brand on Twitter saying it is a symbol of sacred faith and should not be used as fashion accessories. The brand did not respond to the accusation; however, in the show notes, they emphasized on self-identification that asserting it was time for young people to overcome the personal identity paradox that once was socially assigned to them. It is assumed that the show aimed to address a deeper political message about gender diversity and the corresponding rights which have long been debated (Douppnik, 2018). Therefore, Douppnik (2018) suggested three main reasons that cause brand crises: (1) the predominant role of social media has made debates over human rights, political turmoil is more open and accessible to the public; (2) because of this communication revolution, people are having various platforms to share, comment faster, so they can call out things that are bad and more people see that; (3) since these bad practices can

be spread faster and reached to larger communities, brands are required to have intensive research on the cultural practice they are promoting which is seemingly not being executed properly.

## **2.2. Synthesis and Research Gap**

As presented in this literature review, cultural appropriation practice has been misused in branding, especially in the fashion industry. Cultural appropriation stems from the historical background of oppression and imbalance in power between the more powerful systems/ nations and the oppressed ones. The concept related to postcolonialism in which people within minority groups unconsciously absorb values that were being created by powerful systems. Powerful systems commodified these groups' cultural values to gain materialistic or most of the time monetary benefits. Especially in branding, brands use cultural artifacts in their promotion of equity because they believe to gain more consumers they must become more socially conscious using values that are inherently constructed in their consumers' mindset and belief system. However, due to the social revolution and communication system development, people are being more aware of social-cultural issues. At the same time, there have been so many social movements, riots that reinforce this awareness; cultural appropriation becomes more and more vulnerable. Taking the vulnerability under branding and promotion contexts, the act of using cultural artifacts is seen as wrongful since brands do not acknowledge how the prolonged historical dilemma has such intensive impacts on a variety of issues namely racism and stereotyping. Though the phenomenon can jeopardize any race, the African-American culture is being affected the most.

The study will analyze how cultural appropriation, especially the use of Black culture artifacts, has created a negative effect on the branding process. The reasons why cultural appropriation remains a complex and unresolved issue in the practice of branding has still been inadequately researched. Moreover, most of the researches so far only relate cultural appropriation to genealogy or racism studies or in fashion branding context, the phenomenon only points out whether it is right or wrong to use cultural artifacts in advertising without considering the phenomenon at a deeper level of cultural histories that may indirectly fuel to

branding crises and mentioning suggestions or resolutions to fix the problem. Considering that there is a sort of underestimation in the cultural appropriation realm related to branding, by using a social and cultural perspective derived from my acknowledgment of theories of postcolonialism, I will explore this phenomenon investigating the cultural attributes in branding.



### **3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In the following sections, there will be an introduction to critical theory and its related theories and concepts that will be used as a framework for this research. The thesis mainly draws on the philosophical perspectives developed by Marcuse, Adorno & Horkheimer on the extent of critical theory. Therefore, the following section will introduce the critical theory, then its extensions and branches will be explained and finally, it will be presented the cultural, postcolonial framework used for the thesis.

#### **3.1. Introduction to Critical Theory**

Critical Theory (CT) applies knowledge from social science and humanities to challenge the power structure. The theory discusses that societal structures and cultural assumptions create more social problems than individual or psychological factors do. It is critical to the extent that it seeks “to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them” (Horkheimer, 1972, p. 246). Bronner (2011) argues that CT denies the identification of freedom that belongs to any institutional arrangement or an established system of thought. It asserts that thought must acknowledge the new problems and possibilities for emancipation that emerge from the historical dynamic. CT employs a normative approach which is either criticizing society from some general theory of values, norms, or through criticizing its own adopted values. It does not look for meanings of individual achievement but rather “human emancipation” in circumstances of domination or oppression. Furthermore, the theory cannot be concluded without considering empirical social research from philosophy and social science (Horkheimer, 1993). This means that any philosophical approach that has comparable purposes can be called “critical theory,” such as feminism, critical race theory, and postcolonial criticism (Bohman, 2005). Horkheimer (1993) asserts that critical theory can only be sufficient if it meets three criteria that are being explanatory, practical, and normative. In other words, “it must explain what is wrong with current social reality, identify the actors to change it, and provide both clear norms for criticism [...] for social transformation.” Also, CT reflects the cultural perspective of the society – the term “culture industry” was initiated by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer

in the 1920s; it was used to hypothesize the relationship between art and cultural production which was dictated by the emergence of new technologies and the mass production of art. The term bore a philosophical idea of how oppression functions not only through politics and economics but also through culture (Adorno, Horkheimer & Cumming, 1972). Adorno & Horkheimer explained the cultural industry as “a persuasive structure that produces cultural commodities for a mass audience while supporting dominant political and economic interests” (Ponzanesi, 2016, pg. 11). They believe that the emergence of the culture industry has commodified arts into consumable media such as films, posters, or records to gain monetary profit and entertain audiences by making them forget about their daily problems – which also means that the culture industry is another form of control and indoctrination. In this cultural framework, state and local authorities financially investing in major cultural sectors namely TV, museums, libraries, etc., in that autonomy and self-reflection are diminished and/ or controlled (Ponzanesi, 2016).

In the communication perspective, CT stresses an inherent inconstancy in efforts to achieve mutual understanding, enunciate, question, and surpass presumptions that are discerned to be untrue, dishonest, or unjust (Habermas, 1984). In other words, communication that limits to sending and receiving or simply sharing meanings is “inherently faulty, distorted, incomplete”. The theory suggests authentic communication happens within a discursive reflection process that aims at existence and/ or experiences beyond normality and physical levels – although those experiences cannot be fully achieved but “the reflective process itself is progressively emancipatory” (Craig, 2007, p. 147). Also, the communication problem under CT emerges from social material and ideological factors that deform the discursive reflection. This means that communication reflects how social injustice is preserved by ideological distortions and how communication practices can restore justice by using critical reflection and consciousness-raising to reveal those distortions thus enable political action to emancipate the participants from them.

In the next section, I will explain two perspectives that were further developed from CT and are useful for the reader to understand the concepts that will be constructed in

the analysis. The complex interconnections between individuals (which in the below sections will be referred to as consumers) in modern society will be further explained through the Consumer Culture concept which was developed by Herbert Marcuse.

### ***3.1.1. Consumer Culture***

The early concept of consumer culture stemmed from Marx's concepts of commodity, reification, fetishism, and alienation in which culture is a major factor that reproduces and legitimates advanced capitalism (Kellner, 1983). The Frankfurt School's theorists saw an emergence of consumer society as "the distinct form of contemporary capitalism" in which image and tableau are parts of processes of production and distribution in advanced capitalist society (Debord, 1977). Consumer culture is a material culture that is expedited by the market from which forges a relationship between the consumer and the goods or services (Kravets, et.al, 2017). It can also be separated from the consumption per se, which is more about the relationship between the material and the cultural rather than the implied social status or inequalities by the ownership of consumer goods. This means that consumer culture is not simply about those who consume commercial products; consumers' relationship to the culture reflects and reproduces values and forms of status. In this sense consumer culture emphasizes the relationship between structure and agency in modern society; it depicts the power of capitalism to emulate restrictions in which individuals within a consumer society live their daily lives. This aspect relates to the premise of CT that consumer culture offers people tools to express themselves but while they are doing so it constantly augments an economic system that their freedom of choice is ironically constrained (ibid.).

Marcuse's criticism of capitalism argues that it is a new form of social control. His analysis derives from Marx's ideology of Objectification, which under capitalism becomes Alienation – in this sense capitalism alienates and dehumanizes humans by inventing objects of a certain character and framing humans into functional ones. Marcuse expanded this belief by stating that in capitalist and industrialized world laborers were exploited that they started to see themselves as extensions of the objects

they were producing (Marcuse, 1964). In his book *One-Dimensional Man*, he describes people in consumer society find themselves in the commodities they own, thereby those commodities become extensions of their minds and bodies. This society has created “false needs and false consciousness” in which one-dimensional man is controlled and manipulated by a one-dimensional society that makes people need and believe they can see their values in their commodities (Kellner, 1983, pg. 74). Furthermore, he explained the characteristic aspect of the modern industry is a sellable and imposing social system as a whole. The meaning of mass consumption embeds arbitrary attitudes, habits, specific intellectual and emotional reactions which connect the consumers with the producers (e.g. brands or companies’ product consuming goods) and through the latter to the whole. On the other hand, the products inculcate and manipulate as they encourage “a false consciousness which is immune against its falsehood” (Marcuse, 1964, pg. 11-12). As these products are available to different customer segmentation, the manipulation embedded in them refrains from publicity – it becomes a way of life and if it manifests a good way of life, it resists qualitative change. Hence, the mechanism can be explained that consumers identify themselves through their commodities, their needs are anchored in a certain social order which also implies “new forms of social control.” (pg. 4). In Marcuse’s view, this one-dimensional society produces needs and consciousness that consents to the system, as a result systematically restricts the need for liberation and radical social change.

The term “the performance principle” which Marcuse used to emphasize a conception of a rationalized expansion of domination in the modern capitalist world, explains bureaucratic control over social labor recreates society on a large scale and under improving conditions. This underlying principle implies a profitable priority of the social system that claims to fulfill their labor’s needs; however, in reality, they work for a system in which they are unable to control and must serve the power if they want to live (Marcuse, 1955, pg.45).

In the next section, I will further discuss postcolonial theory and its correlations to the Culture Industry concept adopted by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer and branding strategy.

### **3.2. Introduction to Postcolonial Theory**

Postcolonial theory (PT) is a critical theory analysis of history, culture, literature, and discourse of European imperial power. The theory concerns the postcolonial identification in the aesthetic, economic, historical, and social impact of European colonial rule around the world from the 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Elam, 2019). It addresses the binary power relationship between the colonizer and the colonized people in that the definition of decolonized people comes from (1) a generational knowledge of the culture of the colonizers about the colonized ones; (2) the tyrannical application of Western cultural knowledge on enslaving non-European people as a colony of the European mother country. Elam (2019) suggests the prefix “post” of “postcolonial theory” does not imply colonialism has ended; in fact, the theory still concerns with the enduring forms of Western superiority. The study of postcolonialism emerged in the 1980s as a part of a bigger social and political movements that involve humanistic inquiry such as feminism and racism. Also, it is acutely obliged to anticolonial thought from South Asia and Africa in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. PT has constantly emphasized the fact of colonial rule in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and committed to politics and justice in the modern world. This means that the theory has adapted multiple forms: (1) it concerns with forms of political and aesthetic depiction (...); (2) it attempts in reinterpreting the underlying political and ethical discourse of colonial power – an effort to continue examining narratives from those who suffer from its effects (ibid.).

The development of postcolonial identity among decolonized people suggests degrees of social power in the colonial society; in that, they develop different postcolonial identities (i.e. culture, nationality, ethnicity, gender, and social status) based on cultural interactions (Sharp, 2008). At a fundamental level, PT explains the paradoxical coexistence of a field that is highly diversified from interdisciplinary, global to transhistorical aspects of society as well as implied a stringent agreement in terms of identity narratives. In postcolonial literary and cultural studies, the main narratives of colonial power and Western superiority are destabilized and/ or delineated; and by elaborating those narratives the theory questions the epistemological violence of othering understands as well as

challenges the cultural ramifications of colonialism and empowers marginalized groups, individuals and cultural practices of all given meanings (Koegler, 2018).

Also, as the theory is generally constituted from the means of power and domination, the power order of postcolonial ideology challenges the predicament of being, on the other hand, being seized by market forces as a new fashionable commodity. Postcolonialism is treated as objects such as cultural artifacts, products, and influences that are serving for monetary gain (Ponzanesi, 2015). This means that individuals are being used for profitable purposes which in this context are those producers, organizations, or brands. In the next section, I will look further into two aspects that will serve as empirical materials in my Methodology chapter. The history of postcolonialism derived from the culture industry adopted by Adorno and Horkheimer, as well as the mechanism of contemporary branding postcolonialism will be examined.

### ***3.2.1. Postcolonial Cultural Industry***

Unlike the cultural industry's characteristic which is only top-down or one-way domination, the postcolonial cultural element is neither homogenous nor monolithic – its engagement with the cultural industry suggests that cultural products though are hybrid, they may not be progressive or politically emancipatory (Ponzanesi, 2015). Postcolonial artifacts are commodities for international entertainment exchange amongst corporations does not mean they do not have competitive values. Ponzanesi argues that those artifacts namely art, film, music, and other forms of entertainment can be defined as postcolonial and performed both in complicity and resistance to the cultural industry. Postcolonial cultural industry focuses on "interaction and co-shaping, and not merely a top-down ideological imposition" (pg. 17) – it is a double-sided dynamics: on one hand, the phenomenon explores how the market forces' structure can be affected by the bottom-up participation (Pozanesi, 2015; Jenkins, 2006; Rheingold, 2003 & Schafer, 2011); on the other hand explains how cultural difference has become commodified (Hutnyk, 2000).

### 3.2.2. *Cultural Imperialism in Branding*

Cultural imperialism, also called cultural colonialism – the term stems from the field of postcolonial theory that addresses the impact of a more powerful capitalist culture in promoting and imposing a less powerful culture (Ad Age, 2003). Herbert Schiller (1975) defines cultural imperialism in his book *Communication and Cultural Domination* that it is a sum of processes in which pressures and shapes a society into correspondence or even promotion of values and structures of the dominating central system. This conception imposes in a common assumption of how global branding works; in capitalist societies who hold imperialist power (e.g. United State) spread a culture of consumerism – they take advantage of population growth and potential for product consumption in less developed countries without proper regard for the values of the target culture (Ad Age, 2003).

Along came social revolution cultural imperialism has moved beyond a criticism of the institutional focus of cultural production and imbalances in cultural flows which in today's world the concept evolves in a deeper cultural-ideological perspective. For example, the prolonged and inevitable effect of cultural imperialism comes from the massive exposure to imported goods especially in films, TV programs, and advertisements. Cultural theorists foresaw this inevitable effect has been built upon an idea that a set of dominant cultural ideas and values can be, as it were, penetrated the consciousness of cultural contingencies in different cultural situations (Tomlinson, 1997). The process of cultural transmission has been only focusing on the global flows of cultural goods while neglecting how people interact with, appropriate, and attached meanings to these goods. As Thompson (1995) addressed the problem is that many cultural researchers ignore the hermeneutic appropriation which is a fundamental part of how symbolic forms help to shape the culture. Tomlinson (1997) gives an example of social movements between cultural-geographical areas: it is a complex process and always involving interpretation, adaptation, and indigenization as the receiving culture brings its cultural resources to bear upon what is imported. Many empirical studies of the audience suggest that people are frequently being consumed by messages of media imports which is in ways contradictory to any intentional manipulation or implicit

ideological content (Liebies & Katz, 1993). Perhaps the unfolding reason why cultural imperialism remains a complex concept is the fast development of a globalized, Westernized mediated world where cultural diversity has been much blown up.

Regarding the aspect of globalization, cultural imperialism is also considered as a side effect of global branding where global branding is solely about saving costs and maintaining consistent customer service (Holt, Quelch & Taylor, 2004). Furthermore, global brands attempt to recreate Western-style consumer cultures among countries that are more prone to poverty and lack of knowledge about consumer goods (Ad Age, 2003). A similar phenomenon can be linked to the practice of branding of postcolonialism; Koegler (2018) uses an implication of ‘west’ and ‘rest’ to address the effect of this branding mechanism. While western corporations and/ or big business remain powerful and influential, the involvement of non-western ones can be imposed as exploited labors – this means that in a globalized world, non-western ones do not play any leading parts. However, it does not mean they are not gaining profits from business, this simply means that whether or not involved in exploitative business practice they are entitled as “twenty-first-century versions of ‘noble savages’” (Ahmad, 2008, pg. 101).



## **4. METHODOLOGY**

The following section represents a detailed description of how the study was conducted and the methods used for the analysis of the material. Hence, the chapter will include an epistemological approach, data collection, analysis structure, and methodological reflections.

### **4.1. Epistemological Approach**

Critical theory (CT) entails its epistemology aiming at reflection and emancipation. Habermas (1987) argues CT is another form of hermeneutics; the theory seeks for understanding and positivism that aims at technical control. Likewise, the epistemological approach of post-colonial theory shares fundamental traits with CT: the objects and truisms created by positivist science are questioned; science itself is considered as an instrument of domination and potential exploitation. Both theories share the same ambition to criticize Western or capitalist powerful systems in which the less powerful ones are being oppressed. In contrast to Horkheimer and Adorno who hold more pessimistic perspectives from the older generation of critical theory, Habermas approaches the oppression with rationality that liberates people by means of reason. In his version, CT takes on hermeneutics as the basis for a rational and consensus-oriented understanding. In his contribution to the so-called positivism dispute, Habermas & Fultner (2003) divides scientific knowledge into three categories: (1) a positivist tradition that seeks knowledge for functional or instrumental reasons, (2) a hermeneutical tradition that seeks knowledge in the broader perspective of gaining an understanding and (3) a critical theory tradition that sees knowledge as a vehicle for societal reflection and emancipation (see Table 1).

Table 1: Scientific Knowledge

Type of Human Interest	Kind of Knowledge	Research Methods
Technical (prediction)	Instrumental (causal explanation)	Positivistic Sciences (empirical-analytic methods)
Practical (interpretation and understanding)	Practical (understanding)	Interpretive Research (hermeneutic methods)
Emancipatory (criticism and liberation)	Emancipation (reflection)	Critical social sciences (critical theory methods)

(retrieved from Habermas & Fultner, 2003, pg.156)

Although this thesis emphasizes with struggles of formerly colonized people, the focal knowledge is understanding the phenomenon in branding rather than emancipation. Thus, the epistemological position in this thesis is hermeneutic.

To explain the hermeneutical conceptualization of understanding it is useful to discuss the multifaceted problem of epistemology as such. In continuation of The Cartesian “Cogito, ergo sum” as a solution to philosophical skepticism Kant (1787) criticizes the concept of pure reason and concludes that consciousness itself cannot serve a viable resource for understanding the objective world outside the conscious subject. The Kantian analysis of the limitations of subjective rationality thus puts forward an idea of a fundamental epistemological problem: How can the subject gain valid knowledge about the objective world? – the question has been grounded in modern criticism and analyses of CT; it is fundamental for our understanding of knowledge as such and that Kant’s transcendental idealism with its distinction between Habermas and Gadamer’s conceptualizations of CT has been one of the main influences for modern constructionism. Habermas in his theory is trying to make a non-transcendental foundation for knowledge-based on communicative action and universal pragmatics. His conceptualization of CT intends to criticize and question the tradition; while another philosopher Gadamer takes on a more ontological approach. Gadamer. In his work *Truth and Method*, Gadamer (1975) disagrees with Kantian subject-object division and thereby the epistemological problem

created by Kant. Gadamer recasts the problem of knowing from the epistemological to the ontological level: we are all subjects and objects in the world and share a common lifeworld based on language, history, tradition, etc. Through a hermeneutical dialogue with the objects of our understanding, we can gain true knowledge; Gadamer argues that the epistemological problem as created by Kant reduces truth to a matter of scientific method (Mendelson, 1979). In contrast, Gadamer finds truth in various domains of our shared lifeworld, as in art, tradition, etc. The hermeneutical position is different from various forms of social constructivism. According to Gadamer (1975), the hermeneutical enterprise is concerned with the understanding of what is, and he rejects various forms of subjectivism and relativism. This does not imply that reality becomes static, the interpreting subject is affected by the hermeneutical dialogue and change in the meeting with reality. However, the constructionist thesis that reality is constructed through its interpretation is very far from Gadamer's philosophical position (Mendelson, 1979).

In this thesis, I contribute to a field of knowledge that is dominated by instrumental theories about how companies can improve their crisis response and communication. I do this from an analytical perspective that is rooted in a critical tradition. Yet, my ambition is to provide an understanding of a phenomenon and in this respect my knowledge interest, and the epistemological foundation is hermeneutical. My thesis follows the hermeneutical tradition in my understanding of knowledge in general and more specifically with regards to the knowledge contribution of my study. I aim to reach an understanding of how the oppressed culture has become an artifact for capitalists' reputational gain. When my ambition is to provide an ontologically truthful understanding of the phenomenon, it should not be confused with the more narrow epistemological notion of truth as found in natural sciences and logical positivism where truth is defined in terms of representativeness and correctness. Rather, the hermeneutical, and therefore my notion of truth is broader and can be described as the revelation that allows things to appear. Through a hermeneutical approach, my ambition is to unconceal our phenomenon through an analysis that will make it appear clearer to the reader.

## 4.2. Research Design

Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner (1984) define case study as a detailed examination of a single example of a class of phenomena [...] the use of case study can provide hypotheses that are useful in the preliminary stages of an investigation. In a critical realist epistemology, case studies embody causal mechanisms and assume that these mechanisms exist in the real world (George & Bennett, 2005, as cited in Blatter & Haverland, 2012). The authors believe that researchers' role is to find a trace of how these mechanisms work – which is referred to as a research technique called causal-process tracing (CPT). The primary goal of the CPT approach is to unconceal causal mechanisms rather than examine causal effects (Brady & Collier, 2004). It provides an insight or piece of data that explains a context, process, or mechanism and is a process that asserts a causal inference in qualitative research (Seawright & Collier, 2004 as cited in Blatter & Haverland, 2012). Blatter & Haverland (2012) argue that within CPT, the researcher begins with an assumption that a variety of factors work together to produce an outcome of interest and this starting point will eventually uncover indispensable configurations of causal conditions or social mechanisms. It is worth mentioning that despite its focus on causality, CPT should not be confused with positivism. Because hermeneutics has a broader scope and questions the narrow understanding of causality implied in quantitative (variance) studies rather than proving whether factual factors are right or wrong.

This research will employ the use of a qualitative method in exploring the phenomenon of cultural appropriation through the use of cultural artifacts in fashion branding. These cultural artifacts are featured through visual texts (i.e. advertisements and photographs) which are posted via a fashion brand watchdog Instagram account. This will focus on understanding how meanings of those cultural artifacts can be justified and are communicated through fashion branding practice. The use of a case study will help me in creating knowledge by building explanations where my chosen case study attempt to explain the phenomenon of cultural appropriation (Yin, 1981). Also, it is useful because it provides deep insight into cultural appropriation, which also gives birth to more subjects and provides more opportunities for me to understand critical and post-colonial problems that have been accelerated overtime through branding.

#### *4.2.1. Case selection and sample*

As mentioned above, for the selection of the case to study, CPT technique will be used to understand the theory-based mechanisms that emphasize the correlation between causal factors and outcomes (Blatter & Haverland, 2012); furthermore, as referring to the aim of this research is to examine whether the practice of using cultural artifacts that are linked to post-colonialism is appropriate in branding. Blatter & Haverland emphasize the information accessibility as a single overarching principle of the CPT method; which is also a major proposition for drawing descriptive and causal inferences is crucial for the tracing process. They continue to explain in-depth sequences of the phenomenon's causes and effects as well as provide deeper insights into the introspective perceptions and motivations of key actors, the researcher must have access to many sources of information. In order to do so, I will collect two (2) case studies from an Instagram account named "diet\_prada" ([https://www.instagram.com/diet\\_prada](https://www.instagram.com/diet_prada)) – this Instagram account serves as sample example from which materials collected will represent the branding crises. The account meets the requirements for this study and sets the bar higher in the critique of the use of cultural artifacts in branding. Moreover, the account has been engaging with their followers to decode "the sometimes-cryptic fashion industry: rife with insider references, unsubtle so-called homages, and hushed-up bad behavior" (Bromwich, 2019) from which adds up the critical aspects to brands' crises. The account is an example of how individuals can contribute more meanings to the culture that once in the past could only be defined by those who were more powerful. Since the study aims to investigate the branding crises occurred by the misuse of cultural artifacts through promotional visual texts, I believe that this account represents a critical example in the context of interest.

The identification of the chosen case is based on the following criteria:

- The visual texts must provide relevant shreds of evidence related to cultural appropriation which in this thesis I will choose to analyze the cultural artifacts of African-American culture;

- Those visual texts are promotional materials (aka advertisements) of fashion brands that once being posted on this account would be likely to create reputational crises. To explain the phenomenon, the cultural artifacts (aka causal inferences) in those advertisements will be examined. I will, therefore, divide three sub-criteria based on the “visual images that provide an understanding of a culture’s ideal aesthetic beauty” (Lewis-Mhooon, 2014, pg.63 as cited in Kopano, 2014): according to Lewis-Mhooon as cited in Kopano (2014) the most obvious feature that entitles one as African-American is physical appearance; therefore, I will choose my criteria based on the author’s standpoint (1) clothing, (2) hair, and (3) facial features.

### **4.3. Data Collection**

The objective of this research is to explore how the phenomenon of cultural appropriation practice contribute to the branding crises in the fashion industry through social media platform; therefore the data collected comes from the analysis of visual texts and their specific visual features that contribute to the explanation of the phenomenon.

At the time of the study, the sample example (aka the Instagram account diet\_prada) has posted 1,128 posts including photos, videos calling out fashion brand crises, 2 cases will be selected for visual analysis, to unveil how the phenomenon takes place, or more specifically, how these posts indirectly fuel to the cultural appropriation debates in brand crisis communication.

#### *4.3.1. Process-Tracing Observation*

Unlike the usual practice of data-set observation which all the scores are given in rows and represented through all the numbers for one case; through causal process observation, the researcher will be able to gain deeper insight about context, process, and/ or mechanism of a phenomenon. This method resembles a ‘smoking gun’ that upholds rationale in qualitative research and is frequently considered as in fundamental supplement to correlation-based inference in qualitative research as well (Seawright & Collier, 2004, pg. 283 as cited in Blatter & Haverland, 2012).

The observation determines the secular sequence of the social process. As the CPT approach aims at revealing the smoking gun, the researcher needs a plurality of empirical information and/ or concrete observations to determine if the status of a causal condition is necessary or sufficient. The employment of process-tracing method is used to resolve a cluster of empirical information to (1) clarify the temporal order in which causal factors work together to produce an outcome of interest, (2) investigate whether these causal factors is either individually necessary or jointly sufficient for the outcomes and (3) identify the social mechanisms that shape the basis for mechanism-based explanations (Blatter & Haverland, 2012). In using process-tracing observation, the researcher can trace a central piece of evidence within a cluster of observations, which results in a high level of certainty for causal inference. Blatter & Haverland (2012) explain the metaphor ‘smoking gun observation’ that highlights a gun as an important piece of evidence; in that, the act of observing one case serves as an indicator for the existence of a cause in conjunction with an additional observation of another case serves as evidence for a consequential effect of the phenomenon. Also, these two observations must be connected by temporal contiguity.

In the CPT approach, the search for relevant empirical information is carried out inductively. The researcher needs to gather all kinds of information about the temporal unfolding of the causal-process that allows her to present a comprehensive storyline with a sequence of causal steps. First, the researcher searches for information that gives her a detailed picture of the whole phenomenon. Then look for a denser description of the temporal underlying motive of events during these critical times. Finally, she has to look deeper to collect relevant information about the perceptions and motivations of major factors. This process, from which the researcher will be able to extract strong evidence for a dense connection between a cause and an effect by extracting causal chains and conjunctions from detailed descriptions of critical situations. It is important that these kinds of empirical information need to be combined with theoretical reflection on the working of the causal mechanisms and/ or process dynamics to determine whether those

configurations of conditions and/ or mechanisms work individually or jointly to make the outcome possible (Blatter & Haverland, 2012).

This causal tracing observation on the chosen Instagram account was conducted exclusively in the form of photographs publicly shared and served as sample examples that lead to the consequences of the thematic phenomenon of this case study. It was the images that determined the entire analysis and results albeit the texts that accompany the pictures were considered to influence public opinions about cultural appropriation (for example, to understand and identify factors that contribute to crises in fashion branding), Furthermore, texts could be interpreted and used as a social media strategy that was not relevant for the study.

For data collection, I applied Bennett's & Elman's as cited in Blatter and Haverland's (2012) concept of process dynamics (see Table 2) to specify the roles that the different kinds of causal process observation serve to out empirical evidence on the logical basis of this process dynamic. Also, it is important to justify the period that the research aims to take into account in this empirical study; therefore, I will consider the account's posting activity and the similarities of the images' outlook of the entire profile in a relatively short timeframe of 12 months from which it was possible to extract the images. The suggested timeframe started from February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2020 until February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2020, and included 196 images. In this way, it is possible to gather the most recent photographs and, at the same time, get a clearer representative sample of the different artifacts that contribute to the whole phenomenon.



*Table 2: Process Dynamics*

Type of process dynamics	Sequences or causal chain	Example
Positive feedback loops	ER(p) → PS(p) → ER(p) → PS(p) ER(m) → PS(d) → ER(m) → PS(d)	Election rules (ER: proportional versus majoritarian) and party systems (PS: pluralistic versus dualistic)
Negative feedback loops	B → H <sub>1</sub> → B → H <sub>2</sub> → B	Westphalian state system, the attempts of different states to reach a hegemonic position (H) is countered by others and leads to a balance of power equilibrium (B)
Cyclical processes	A → a → A → a → A	Politics of abortion; mutual mobilization of proponents (A) and opponents (a) of abortion

(retrieved from Bennett & Elman, 2006, pg. 259, with some major changes and addition made by Blatter & Haverland, 2012)

After identifying the possible images for the analysis, I examine the 196 images and developed themed categories based on their characters in the selection, relevant for the study. The research aims to get a deeper understanding of the visual features that represent cultural artifacts when the creator is known for the strategical employment of calling-out brands for their misuse of cultural appropriation to trigger negative responses/ feedback from the public. For its achievement, the data was carefully scrutinized more than once to get a bigger picture of its correlation to the aim and research question. Moreover, bearing in mind that the categorization implies strong features of path dependency, which is based on mechanisms that provide negative response loops in a shorter time providing recurrent patterns if we consider more long-term consequences in the contribution to branding crises (Blatter & Haverland, 2012). After defining the categories according to the themes discovered (3), all the 196 images selected were divided into these categories.

Finally, after inspecting the photographs and related categories some more times, as the visual communication was repetitive, I reduce the number of pictures

for the thorough analysis and purposefully choose 1 photograph for each category for the analysis, considered a well representative sample.

The following delineates the list of themes encountered, related to the study, and the number of pictures included photographs that represent the multifaceted African-American aesthetics:

- Clothing that resembling blackface; no. of photographs: 1
- Hair and hairstyles that embrace cultural identity; no. of photographs: 1
- Racist accessories that resembling African-American facial features; no. of photographs: 1

#### **4.4. Analysis Structure**

In order to analyze the collected material, I apply the method of configurational analysis method further extended to hermeneutics study by the work of Yanow & Peregrine Schwartz (2013). “Legitimation, like any social process, is analytically composed of and sustained by mechanisms that ‘account for variation in how processes unfold’” (P.T. Jackson & Nexon, 2002, pg. 105 as cited in Yanow, 2013, pg. 274). Therefore, the three analytical tasks should be implemented to unfold the truths about the phenomenon are: delineate the cultural resources, specific histories of commonplaces, deployment of those cultural resources (Yanow, 2013).

The first step in delineating the cultural resources where I will refer to the historical background of the artifacts. Secondly, I will connect the cultural artifacts to situations where they have been taken place to make sense of the contribution these cultural artifacts add up to the brand crises. Lastly, I will indicate the causal factors of the crisis based on my analytical thinking. Also, I will link those key findings to the theoretical background so the readers will gain a deeper understanding of the cultural and historical dynamics that had shaped the crisis even before these case studies took place.

#### 4.4.1. *Delineate the Cultural Resources*

In Foucault's and Shotter's as cited in Yanow's (2013) standpoints, delineation requires analytical description which is different from a particular situation recode. The categories used in the delineation process derived from the situation under investigation rather than a general account of social life. This method fulfills the contextual ethnography – taking the cultural appropriation aspect into account, delineation of cultural resources means the research will be relying on historical factual theories to reveal general and coherent 'positions' or 'themes' that attempt to reflect the consequences: appreciation versus appropriation; rightful versus wrongful. Yanow (2013) emphasizes the importance of unconcealed characteristics and patterns of commonplaces, while it is not necessary to reveal whether a particular commonplace among the arguments absent or present. In conjunction with delineation, finding implications of particular interest is important. Commonplaces are juxtaposed and shared opposing sides rather than being solely comparing of which parties outweigh each other throughout the episode.

The fact that these commonplaces may be found in arguments contributed to various outcomes demonstrates that they are accessible and widely shared in a public sphere of speakers and audience that they shape part of the cultural equipment through which people make sense of a variety of situations. Commonplaces embed specific implications, though maybe vague they are cornerstones for further examination that lead towards desired outcomes of a phenomenon (Yanow, 2013).

#### 4.4.2. *Specific Histories of Commonplaces*

The second step in analyzing commonplaces is to trace back the histories of those commonplaces involved in a given case study. This investigating process should relate to studies of genealogy or racism that aim to maintain passing events in their diffusion and identify the errors, misappropriation, or accidents that gave birth to the inherent values we believe in (Foucault, 1997 as cited in Yanow, 2013). The process of analyzing rhetorical commonplaces produces

potentials for action; from a historical standpoint, these potentials should answer questions of how the phenomenon has been deployed in the past, which affinities and hostilities it has acquired in a particular context, and which patterns exist for its deployment under present circumstances (Yanow, 2013). For this case study at hand, the racial concerns the prominence and specific history of postcolonialism and its consequences that have been long deployed in the practice of branding.

This takes the analysis to the last step of deploying of cultural resources, which is about analyzing how these commonplaces form the desired outcomes that contribute a focal implication to the given situation of cultural appropriation practice.

#### *4.4.3. Deployment of Cultural Resources*

In this final step of the analysis, it is important to concatenate causal inferences. The process will allow the researcher to identify the contingencies and/ or patterns of social action that working jointly to generate outcomes (McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly, 2001 as cited in Yanow, 2013). Because these commonplaces, by definition always need further elaboration before they can be definitively linked with a particular outcome within a particular context, specification is needed to define a commonplace and its possible implications. Specification means breaking and joining, which refers to the use of a specified commonplace to obstruct the correlation between commonplaces or similar patterns that are held by an opponent and the latter referring to the use of a commonplace to help block the meaning of another one (Yanow, 2013). At this step, the research should be able to answer a question of how do these mechanisms operate to produce the desired outcome – in this study is to unveil how cultural appropriation contributes to fashion brand crises. It requires the researcher to discover the contribution and ability of the given Instagram account in drawing the public's attention about the phenomenon and referring to the cultural artifacts represented in the visual texts as a way to urge brands to learn from their mistakes.

#### **4.5. Methodological reflections and limitations**

The study is conducted on a public Instagram account, which means that the needed information is accessible to everyone and the purpose of the research. Also, it existed already and therefore cannot be influenced by the presence of the researcher or by the study conducted. However, since the content can be modified by the user, it is possible that during or after the analysis, some of the posted content might change or eliminate. This could represent a limitation in terms of accessibility of information. In any case, the methodology and the platform used are the most suitable for the study, since they give access to a form of causal tracing tailored also for a strategic purpose. Finally, it is worth mentioning that the research is confined to Western cultures. The consequence of this is that one should be careful with generalizing results beyond this culture.

## 5. ANALYSIS

In this chapter, the selected posts will be analyzed by applying Yanow's configurational analysis method (2013). The analysis will focus on identifying the cultural resources/ artifacts (what is seen and their related meanings) using the delineation, specification, and deployment of cultural resources. Therefore, it will follow the identified themes: clothing that resembling blackface, hair, and hairstyles that embrace cultural identity and racist accessories that resembling African-American facial features.

### 5.1. Clothing that resembling blackface



Figure 1: Screenshot of a photograph representing models wearing balaclava in Gucci fashion show – a piece of clothing associates to the American history of gang culture (diet\_prada, 2019)

#### 5.1.1. Delineate the Cultural Resources

In the picture, *Figure 1*, I will identify one cultural artifact that is the balaclava, covers the bottom half of the face, and has a cutout mouth with large red lips. The item was made from the inspiration of vintage ski masks, adding a mysterious feeling. This accessory was commonly known in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as Uhlan cap. The design took inspiration from the Polish Uhlan light cavalry army uniform which was formerly known as traditional Polish cap and stylized in a more formal for military use. The name balaclava originated from the Battle

of Balaclava in 1854. Referring to the town near Sevastopol in the Crimea where the British troops wore those knitted headgears to keep warm.

If we trace back the history of balaclava there was not clear evidence involved with African-American culture. However, in recent years, the Black Live Matters movement has pushed the boundaries between cultural appropriation and misappropriation towards a more societal level. The problem stems from the jihadist group dresses in balaclava for imagery war; it also associates with young black men wear balaclavas in riots. From this standpoint, we can assume wearing balaclava means promoting gang culture especially in America. Gangs emerged in the Midwest in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in Chicago and became prominent as the black population was rapidly grown in the northern American cities. During the 1910s and 1920s, the Great Migration of more than one million blacks to these cities created a large, extremely poor population. Due to this significant and rapid growth of the black population, a large number of delinquent, young black youth forming a massive ground for potential gang members. Another factor that fuels the formation of gang culture was the Chicago race riot in 1919 where gangs of white youth attacked the black community and in response black youth form gangs for self-protection. As a result, due to the historical circumstances, stereotypes are formed and targeted at young black youths as gangsters or criminals.

#### 5.1.2. *Specific Histories of Commonplaces*

There is a term called ‘black bloc’ explains why this headgear has become a nihilistic symbol of protest – it is a tactic used by protesters who wear black clothing, ski masks, sunglasses to conceal their identity. This creation of mass anonymity protects them against personal exposures including their identities and contact information on which information can be used to threaten or harass them. Paulas (2017) stated in his article about anarchistic or anti-fascism (also known as ‘Antifa’) fashion that there is more practical advice on how to dress for a riot the balaclava or face masks are essentials, which prevent some kinds of tear gas get into their eyes and may cause difficulty of breathing. However,

there is no clear indication of whether this headgear targets only at the black community. In this first case of Gucci, the controversy was sparked due to the use of a white female model wearing the balaclava. It seems contradictory for white people to wear it while tracing back at historical situations they were the ones who oppressed the black community. Thus, the headgear is not culturally appropriate and available for white people to wear it.

#### 5.1.3. *Deployment of Cultural Resources*

In this first case, the aspect of cultural appropriation does not only come from the accessory itself; it is the fashion brand chose this strategy that is: (1) promoting the product amid the emergent racial movements, (2) though may not be intentional, the product itself when being worn by white models implies racist issue. On the other hand, the outcome of this case has been reflected in one fact is that this piece of clothing was not made for white people – in history, they are those who were more powerful and oppressing or threatening young black youth.

#### 5.1.4. *Relating to Theoretical Perspective*

Regarding the basis of the cultural industry, due to the emergence of new technologies, culture has been commodified into products. Through different forms of media (i.e. TV programs, advertisements, etc.) consumers are unconsciously dictated by values that were set by big companies or brands, as a result, they start to form the belief system that to fulfill their spiritual and materialistic needs they should buy those products. The same situation goes with fashion branding, brands like Gucci rely on trending and emergent values that would make young people shop their products. In other words, they take advantage of young people's vulnerability of self-authenticity, they try to communicate to them in the way that if young people shop their products would make them feel more fashionable, quirky and unique. This raises one question is that without these fashion items that make me stand out, what am I? Many fashion brands take advantage of the insecurity psyche among young people to



promote their products. Brands usually do not make message obvious; however, their practice is low-key manipulation and dictation. Also, this is a consequence of the rapid growth of capitalism. If in the past, capitalists commodify arts into consumable media such as films, posters or records to gain monetary profit or entertain audiences by making them forget about their daily problems; in today's branding practice, brands commodify culture in which individuals are more likely ignore the social mishap that is going on in their lives, instead, they would rather fulfill their psychological need that is the possession of luxury goods to gain self-worth or to conceal a weak interior.

## 5.2. Hair and hairstyles that embrace cultural identity



Figure 2: Screenshot of a photograph representing white models wearing cornrow wigs in *Comme Des Garcons* fashion show – a typical African hairstyle (diet\_prada, 2020)

### 5.2.1. Delineate the Cultural Resources

In the picture, *Figure 2*, the identified cultural artifact is the cornrow hairstyle. The hairstyle originated in Africa and depended on the region, cornrows are being worn by all genders. Many artworks and statues of different Middle Eastern and Mediterranean civilizations suggested that cornrows emerged in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century BC and such hairstyles were commonly worn among warriors. In America, the hairstyle depicts a larger societal level of physical aesthetics: religion, kinship, social status, racial diversity, and other attributes of identity that can be expressed in hairstyle. On the other hand, this hairstyle also reflects an important historical aspect of slavery where black slaves' hair is being shaved or braided for sanitary reasons. The slaves that worked inside the plantation house were required to remain a neat and tidy appearance; thus, both men and women often wore tight braids or cornrows (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). Cornrows in America have a psychological impact of being stripped of one's culture so that the act of reenacting the hairstyle in the modern world means resistance and/ or resurgence.

### 5.2.2. *Specific Histories of Commonplaces*

Fetto (2020) explains the omnipresence of cornrows in fashion; although many brands claim using this hairstyle is an act of appreciating or embracing the black cultural heritage, they still fail to consider the social and political aspects around black hair. In the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, hairstyles served as a carrier of the message in most West African societies – it was an indispensable part of the non-verbal language system. Since the African civilizations emerged, hairstyles also indicate a person's age, religion, ethnic identity, and their ranking in their community (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). The authors also suggested that in popular culture, black people are being stereotyped as workers in the coal mine as opposed to trendsetters. They are very much engaged in their cultural manifesto: their hair, clothing, music, or food. And in response, mainstream culture often demonized black cultural artifacts by labeling them as poor, uncivilized, unhealthy, or overly sexualized. This means that once these artifacts being put out there in the world, non-black people feast on it without having understanding or appreciation or recognition of the cultural creators.

### 5.2.3. *Deployment of Cultural Resources*

In fact, in this Comme Des Garcon fashion show use not only white models to wear the hairstyles while black models keep their natural hair. The problematic strategy here is that the photograph only shows white models – the side that people want to see, especially amid current social movement, people are becoming more triggered to these sorts of practice. Also, Fetto (2020) emphasized cultural ownership as education. It does not matter if those who are not African descent wear cornrows, it is the lack of recognition of the history, understanding, and appreciative conversations towards the history of cornrows that cause crises.

#### 5.2.4. *Relating to Theoretical Perspective*

In the past, the colonizers developed different postcolonial identities such as culture, nationality, ethnicity, gender, and social status then use these assets to decolonize or brainwash the colonized ones. The development of postcolonialism has a prolonging impact until today; especially in branding, many brands implied this sort of Western superiority in their products. Brands attempt to reinterpret the underlying political, social, racial, and ethical discourse by adopting cultural artifacts from the colonized community and claiming as paying tribute or appreciating. In this case, the use of cornrows wigs on white models is inappropriate since this does not belong to the white culture. Activists believe it does not matter white or black people wearing it, it is at essence their lack of acknowledgment about otherness has caused the crises. Especially in today's social-political sphere, people are becoming more and more sensitive as well as protective of their own culture and this backfire has been presented in many anti-racism social movements namely Black Lives Matter. Another core factor that leads to crises is that most brands fail to consider public opinions before they release an advertisement, either intentionally or not they are lacking historical and cultural knowledge that has been long impact people's mindset. When juxtaposing these two problems, we conclude: the oppression of white power on the black community proves that the postcolonial impact has never been one-way, it works based on interactions and co-shaping mechanism in which brands use cultural artifacts to communicate to their target audience and the audience are those who openly expose their values so somehow this makes way for brands to take this advantage for further promotion and monetary gain.

### 5.3. Racist accessories that resembling African-American facial features



Figure 3: Screenshot of a photograph representing models accessories resembling thick lips and monkey ears which have long been linked to the history of how America views African slaves as monkeys in the jungle (diet\_prada, 2020)

#### 5.3.1. Delineate the Cultural Resources

In the picture, *Figure 3*, the identified cultural artifact is the accessories resembling Afrocentric facial features. From a psychological perspective, people are quick to pass judgments about one's race based on their facial features – this is called 'automatic racial stereotyping' (Greer, 2005, pg. 14). Many psychological types of research have pointed out that people make stereotyped judgments about others' behavior, intelligence, and skills based on their Afrocentric facial features; from which they anchor those who with these features as more athletic and aggressive. The facial cues are more complex as with race there are only two options that come in mind is that either you are white or black; however, Afrocentric features have multiple cues that create more stereotypes compared to other racial groups. In another study, when interviewing felony offenders, psychologists found another pattern was that although there was no difference in people's judgments about white or black, those with more Afrocentric facial features are usually associated with a prisoner or criminal stereotypes (ibid.). This has raised a problem in social and

racial awareness, Reis de Melo, Conti, Almeda-Pedrin, Didier, Valarelli & Filho (2017) study on the evaluation of facial attractiveness in black people has pointed out that the mouth, lips, and face are the most aesthetically unpleasant if being viewed through the frontal angle.

### 5.3.2. *Specific Histories of Commonplaces*

The racial bias about Black features originated from early research on skull and brain size, which promoted the idea that Black people were inferior to White people and in need of control (Gould, 1996 and Giddion, 1854, as cited in Eberhart, 2005). Many historians assert that the subsequent treatment of Black-American created this stereotype. Since the post-slavery era, codes and laws such as Black Codes were created by White people based on the central idea that Black people were biologically criminal – which has shaped a sentiment that aggravated by racially biased punishment towards Black people and further promoting a falsified mindset towards criminal-Black-male narrative (Russel-Brown, 1998). Feature-based stereotyping facilitates false memories of a person as a criminal. Kleider, et.al (2012) argues that when participants were shown pictures of Black men grouped by career (which is unveiled during the study) and then later tried to remember which men belonged to which type of career, the stereotypical faces were often misremembered as drug dealers, whereas the non-stereotypical faces were most misremembered as teachers or actors. This result also applies to Black women and White men who have more Afrocentric facial features. Hence, these studies have shown rising concerns about racial disparities in today's world.

### 5.3.3. *Deployment of Cultural Resources*

In this final case, the use of racist accessories in fashion branding has extended the problem to a different level of racial bias that is Black facial features can either be treated as adornments or depicting false perception about Blacks as savage or 'monkey in the jungle'. It indicates that the historical

revolution has a major impact on people's judgment about specific races, in that Blacks are being victimized in their aesthetics.

#### 5.3.4. *Relating to Theoretical Perspective*

Another dimension of postcolonialism – cultural imperialism in branding practice derived from massive exposure to imported goods, for example, what we see on TV, films, or advertisement is being culturally imposed. Cultures under this prism are assets, unique selling points that their functionalities are being chosen by a more powerful culture. Powerful cultures (in this case is Western culture) think of less powerful ones as ‘the rest’ – they treat the less powerful cultures as sellable assets the same way this case represents that the black aesthetics are being used as accessories. It is seemingly tyrannical of fashion brands to use minority cultures as accessories or adornment; this case serves as additional evidence to a confirmation that cultural colonialism has never disappeared rather it has involved overtime and taken shape in many forms that had not happened in the past. If in the past these cultural assets are being used for monetary gain, in today's practice they are being used for a promotion of superficiality, fleeting and entertaining values.

### **5.4. Summary of Cultural Resources Analysis**

The failure of branding here is the lack of acknowledgment of otherness; either being intentional or not, it seems that those cultural artifacts used in fashion branding have not been employed appropriately. In the previous sections, I pointed out that cultural appropriation was constructed as a consequence of the historical and multifaceted variations of postcolonialism. Also, after analyzing the above three case studies, I have found out different and similar patterns of which cultural resources contribute to brand crises in many forms.

In the first case, cultural appropriation was presented through a photograph of white models wearing balaclavas. The headgear was not invented by or for black people only; however, due to the social and historical effects of mass migration in America that has made balaclava a symbol of criminals. Regarding the branding

perspective, two patterns found in the first case were the timing and the use of white models. Gucci promoted the headgear amid many social movements that have been going on and also coincided with the celebration of Black History Month. When people associate looks at the balaclava in this advertisement they would instantly relate to the act of promoting gang culture, nihilism, and criminals which too many are not a righteous act. However, if looking under the historical scope of how the cultures have been commodified via media channels; we can assume an indication of a lack of self-authenticity. Brands promote products because they want to be more social, they want to own cultural share; thus, they tap into the vulnerable youth who are urging for self-identification. On the other hand, the second pattern though raises a concern of the blackfacing white model, it does not necessarily a factor that causes backfire towards the brand. It does not matter who wears it, it is the brand who is lacking acknowledgment about the history as well as current social crises that would trigger consumers' association with these goods.

The second case is more specific when brands use a typical cultural artifact belongs to black culture on another culture that once was the dominant, oppressor on the black community. Albeit its covering meaning of social terrain regarding religion, kinship, or racial diversity, cornrows also reflect a rather dark history of slavery where black people had to braid their hair for sanitary purposes. We found another pattern, in this case, is that there is a duality in the crisis shaping; brands take archetype of fashion trends young people are interested in while young people also indirectly suggest brands to this hairstyle because they want to see what is trending so they will cope with. Also, the brand itself has been lack of cultural awareness they failed to understand the specific history of the hairstyle and when using on white models it represents an underlying racist issue – since it does not inherently belong to white culture, the hairstyle when being worn by white models can be assumed as low-key domination, in which white people decide the values of the cultural artifact.

The pattern from the last case though is the same which emphasizes on the oppression of white culture on black culture; it distinguishes itself from other patterns is that the cultural assets represented in this case relate more to the study



of human perception, genealogy, and racism – how people judge others based on their facial features. Being compared to previously found patterns, facial features recognition is an intangible yet automatic mechanism of the brain; people tend to associate other races based on their facial assets, for example, those with thick lips, darker skin tone are anchored as Afrocentric. Furthermore, as human beings have become byproducts of media and false propaganda, they tend to label those with Afrocentric features as criminals. These false thoughts have turned into false practice in branding, brands are treating these cultural assets lightly without considering the potential threats to their reputation. As people have more exposure to media, they are also becoming more sensitive and aware of cultural practice; brands have failed to acknowledge public awareness towards otherness since brands may think it is alright to bring out one's cultural assets and claim as appreciation.

In short, there are three major patterns/ key findings found in these case studies suggest the use cultural appropriation practice in branding has linked to reputational crises that are (1) brands have failed to acknowledge the otherness and their lack of cultural, historical knowledge contribute to branding crises, (2) there is a lack of diversity in fashion branding where brands only use white models to promote for black cultural artifacts, and (3) by commodifying cultural assets in their promotions, brands have indirectly fueled to the inherently stereotyping crisis.

## **6. DISCUSSION**

This research examined and analyzed the branding process in which cultural appropriation essentially contributes to brand success. More specifically, a detailed analysis has been conducted to provide a deeper understanding of how cultural appropriation began in the past and has been evolving with its representation in fashion branding.

The body of literature presented at the beginning of the thesis shows that the concept of cultural appropriation is an emergent yet complex phenomenon, particularly important for the interpretation of key messages brands aim to communicate to their target audience. Although the term conveys multifaceted meanings depending on different circumstances and the used artifacts, study today has not linked the phenomenon with historical findings and they seem to be normative by claiming it is a wrongful practice. Also, most studies did not consider the hermeneutic approach, which is highly relevant to unconceal the underlying truth about the phenomenon rather than label the practice right or wrong. By this, in their empirical applications, these theories are limited to classifying the phenomenon as either right or wrong. Also, most of the research has too little historical indications towards cultural appropriation, they only scratch off the surface and fail to acknowledge the prolonging effect the phenomenon has taken placed through meditation branding. When conceptualizing cultural appropriation under historical and cultural revolution timespan, it was possible to identify how cultural assets are being commodified and used through which channels and the ways they represent as well.

In the literature review, studies are based on the practicality of cultural appropriation in fashion branding, but it also faces controversy and backfires of being used in different commercial settings. The analysis demonstrated three key findings that brands are (1) lack of education of social and cultural awareness, (2) lack of diversity in model castings, (3) they do not aware that they are indirectly feeding to the development of racial stereotyping. What also emerged from the analysis is that despite the use of cultural artifacts for commercial purposes are most of the time unintentionally or against the brands' initial goodwill, how people perceive the phenomenon also plays a key role in creating brand crises. Additionally, with the non-stop development of social media in brand

communication, brands are being put in more vulnerable positions of being judged and decided whether their practice is appropriate.

As shown in the literature review, cultural appropriation derives from imbalances of power; it is understood as silencing, exploitation, misinterpretation, or offense which makes the practice wrongful. The concept is objectified in a way that reflects and/ or aggravated inequality and marginalization which can be concluded as a form of oppression (Matthes, 2019). From a normative perspective, many authors like Nguyen (2020) argues that cultural appropriation is straight out wrongful; however, the analysis showed more multidimensional prospects of the phenomenon. The phenomenon is a duality mechanism between the give-take exchange of cultural assets – brands take those values, artifacts people believe it not just to gain monetary benefits but also fuels individuals’ needs for self-identification. The visual presentation of those artifacts are of course open to some degree of interpretation and the audience can deliberately decide whether they want to believe it. Yet, the presentation is very clear and direct, including pieces of clothing being worn by the people from the dominant culture while it supposedly belongs to the oppressed one. This has created a lurking racist issue in advertising where stereotypes take place and being spread throughout the media.

Since it was not the ambition of the study to practically test whether it is a righteous or wrongful act of using cultural artifacts in branding, in order to take distances from the predominantly static thinking about cultural appropriation, the thesis adopted the approaches developed by Yanow (2013) to gain deeper cultural, historical and social understandings about the phenomenon in that the truth is more important than the mere black and white nature of the problem. Encouraged by these perspectives, the analysis demonstrated that cultural appropriation can take place in many forms and be interpreted differently based on its visual presentation (i.e. facial features stereotyping, traditional aesthetics in clothing and hairstyles, etc.). It emerged that what is important to understand cultural appropriation does not rely on what represents on the advertising, but the knowledge of history and relevant theories that help map out the problem formed a proper understanding of the phenomenon as a whole.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

The presented analysis and research demonstrate how the cultural appropriation phenomenon affects the process of branding through the presentation of cultural artifacts in the brands' promotional materials. Therefore, the research contributes to the existing body of research by explaining in detail how relevant historical pieces of evidence help unveil the phenomenon. Considering that there is a lack of thorough understanding of the multifaceted historical perspectives in the conceptualization of the issue, as showed in the literature section, which regards the issue as complex and sensitive to any races encountered, by using hermeneutics approach I was able to explore this phenomenon investigating the processes of construction of truthfulness. Through the understanding is critical theory and postcolonialism, that focuses on the relationship between the colonial powerful systems and their oppression to the colonized ones, it was possible to interpret cultural appropriation more thoroughly based on evidence and events that had happened in the history of humankind. Following the analysis and the previous discussion, it is possible to answer the research question, demonstrating in practice the thesis' contribution to the body of knowledge.

The answer to the question of how cultural artifacts contribute to the branding crises relates to the fact that the practice has to be investigated through two-way approaches and linked back to history. Indeed, cultural appropriation relies mostly on its visual presentations that together formed a consistent pattern that resonates with the phenomenon itself. Additionally, since this thesis regards the notion of cultural appropriation as historical and social dynamism, the phenomenon can thus be created by both parties who are brands and those who perceive and consume their messages and products as well. By employing; for example, the piece of clothing, the cultural interpretation can take shaped in different ways. Culture is indeed a multifaceted concept and it has never been accurately defined; however, through only one piece of clothing people can blow up the crisis by only sharing their interpretation. On the other hand, brands also lack acknowledgment of the otherness and in the education of social and cultural awareness. Though this thesis does not aim to point out whether the brand is doing good deeds or not, through the analysis, it became more clear that brands are most of the time wrong in the action of deploying

cultural artifacts. At the same time, it is worth mentioning that at other times brands are also being misunderstood in their practice. For example, the second case has proved the essence that the use of cornrows here is to make those models look like Egyptian prince enhancing their self-confidence; too many still think it is inappropriate to use artifacts from the oppressed culture on a dominant one.

In conclusion, the analysis and its results shed light on the field of brand and crisis communication and helped to unveil and explore the working mechanism of cultural appropriation in fashion branding and through its visual presentation in promotional materials. Investigating the relationship between the phenomenon itself and branding will contribute to the work of people and organizations, scholars and professionals, who study, plan and execute advertising campaigns in recognizing cultural appropriation can put potential risks to their brands' overall success.

## **7.1. Suggestions for Further Research**

As stated in the previous sections, the focus of this thesis was to gain a deeper understanding of how cultural appropriation fuels to branding crisis in the fashion industry. Since the thesis focuses heavily on the historical and cultural niche, it would be interesting to apply the same methods used and to extend and/ or compare the field of study to different types of industries, contexts, or fields of study. It is also important to note that the research is confined to Western cultures. Therefore, to complement, contrast, or to gain a broader understanding of the phenomenon, it is suggested to include in the analysis sources deriving from other society models and cultures. This thesis can be used as a cornerstone to further develop a model that assimilates and/ or compares different cultural practices in branding to distinct historical, cultural, and social backgrounds and contexts.

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