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**Kolhapuri Chappals as ‘flat leather sandals’ by Prada**  
*Insight into the Issue of Cultural Appropriation in the Contemporary Fashion Field*

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## **Abstract**

The issue of cultural appropriation is a prevalent matter in fashion, as well as a matter of cultural preservation. The Spring Summer 2025 collection by Prada showcased several pairs of ‘flat leather sandals’ very closely resembling traditional Indian footwear, Kolhapuri chappals. The following paper addresses this issue through a sociological lens, applying decolonial understandings of power relations to the field of fashion as well as the phenomenon of cultural appropriation as a part of it. The methodology applied in the empirical analysis is a critical discourse analysis, which looks into four articles selected from prominent fashion media institutions in both the Western and Indian context. The aim of the study is to explore the power relations observable in the global fashion scene through the tracing of the Italian fashion house and the incident revolving around the Kolhapuri chappals. The thesis also takes great care in providing a synthetic understanding of the fashion discourse which this case is heavily reliant on, as well as its relation to modernity.

**Keywords:** Fashion, Cultural Appropriation, Decoloniality, Orientalism, CDA

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*Image 1. Prada SS26 in Milan (image from [prada.com](https://www.prada.com))*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Cultural appropriation is as prevalent in fashion as any basic t-shirt you find in a clothing store rack. When using the Instagram search engine for posts related to cultural appropriation (#culturalappropriation), it shows over 1,800,000 results. The top posts often concern the appropriation of South Asian or Asian cultures in general, with many citing its use in the fashion industry. While Prada's use of Kolhapuri Chappals is one example, it remains to be one of many. With the trend of the "cool girl from India" and many others, South Asia, and specifically India, is becoming an increasingly recurring theme. The instance of the fashion rental brand Bipty referring to Dupattas as a 'Scandinavian shawl' caused outrage on TikTok and Instagram alike. In another case, Adidas was accused by the Mexican authorities of using the design of traditional Huarache sandals, where its credit for inspiration was later clarified, but was not initially given to the Oaxacan community. While cases of accused or admitted cultural appropriation are a

widely discussed topic now with the increased attention from online audiences, the issue of cultural influences from the East in the Western fashion scene is nothing new. Paul Poiret, successful French couturier in the 19th century, known for liberating women from tight corsets by producing loosefitting dresses, has taken inspiration from the Japanese Kimono— an example of dress, seen from the Western sartorial culture as an unchanging traditional garment. A similar vision was applied in the creations of Madeleine Vionnet at around the same time, who was also inspired by the looseness of the Kimono. Nonetheless more straight in the silhouette compared to the European dresses of the time, it is a blatant reduction of the garment and style, and its symbolic value to refer to it as loose and liberating, as Kimonos are characterised by a tight restricting piece wrapped around the waist and torso called the Obi. Such loss of meaning, as will be discussed in further detail in the following text, is one of the threatening features of the phenomenon of cultural appropriation.

Many contemporary academic articles written about fashion begin with critical comments on the fashion industry. As much as the contemporary issues of the fashion industry and its unsustainable nature is valid, this thesis focuses on the historical progression of what we can refer to as the phenomenon of fashion around the world to bring to light the recurring issue of problematic cultural reference and engagement. Despite the speed of fashion or the interpretations by people in the West, the fashioning and adornment of the body is a common trait found in every civilisation. It is a mark of every human civilisation and community to seek more meaning in what could have been merely a piece of cloth. And yet fashion systems that exist outside of the Western fashion world have been disregarded as being static and artistic, as it is seen to fail to meet the stoic style of Western fashion. This thesis attempts to draw a clear line between the general practices of fashion to those of the Western fashion system, and challenges the views that undermine the Othering fashion systems. Showing that in the larger picture of interdependent fashion systems, it is a necessity that other fashioning systems and <sup>1</sup>clothing fashion is to be recognised and met with equal respect and appreciation.

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<sup>1</sup> A term used by Kawamura to refer to garments/ clothes involved in the concept of fashion. The distinction is made due to the idea that not all garments produced materially are laden with the values of fashion, which are the symbolic relevance and legitimation of the fashion garments as novel by the involved institutions. (Kawamura, 2023a, p.5, Arnoldy, 2022, p.9, Craik 2003)

In providing insight into the contemporary fashion scene and of its accomplice cultural appropriation, this thesis looks at the case of the Italian fashion house Prada in the SS 2026 collection, showcased during Milan Fashion Week in June, 2025. Where the brand introduced what they called ‘flat leather sandals’ without mentioning their very obvious Indian heritage. The case of Kolhapuri Chappals on the Prada runway is dissected from the produced texts revolving around the incident. By applying a critical discourse theory as well as a decolonial lens to the subject, the thesis is guided by the following research questions.

Q1: To what extent can the legitimisation of fashion values in Western fashion institutions be attributed to colonial legacy?

Q2: How was the recent case of Prada’s cultural appropriation of Kolhapuri chappuris portrayed by the media? And how does this situate the issues of cultural appropriation in the current discourse of fashion?

## 1.2 Disposition of Paper

The following section presents the literature review and the theoretical framework applied throughout the thesis. Where the theory and discourse revolving around fashion and cultural appropriation are explored. In the third section, a literature review and theoretical framework is given on related studies. It also discusses the debate of post-postmodern fashion studies and the locating of fashion systems, to provide a contemporary review of academic fashion discourse. The fourth section gives background information on Prada as a brand and historical explanations regarding the Kolhapuri sandals. This section provides the necessary information for readers to understand the standpoints of the actors and cultural products involved in the analysis that follows. The subsequent analysis section delves deeper into the application of critical discourse theory as a tool to analyse the chosen data in the research and leads to the final discussion, where the textual analysis is situated within the socio-cultural context and aligned with the theoretical and discourse framework provided beforehand. To summarise the findings of the paper, a brief conclusion is provided, offering insights into the delimitations of the research conducted here, as well as a nod to possible future research.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study of fashion has been a subject of contemplation by several scholars, yet its overall value within academia has been less pronounced. Many authors who have paved the way for fashion discourse have stated the underperceived reality of fashion within academia, as fashion in itself as a phenomenon (further explored in the paragraph) has contradicting tendencies and ever-changing characteristics which are threatening to the rational world of science. Therefore more often than not fashion is believed to be a rather superficial act of dress and adornment, embodying some form of magic unexplainable through rationality (Kawamura, 2023a, Lipovetsky, 1944, Simmel, 1957, Blumer, 1968). The combined literature review and theoretical framework go over literature ranging from the early modern times to the present period, mapping out the trajectory of fashion discourse which mostly revolves around the theories attempted to explain the phenomenon. The literature review and theoretical framework are combined to form a coherent narrative of the prevalent contemporary literature which is built on the grounds of previous theories and discourse which are further revised. Following the trajectory of the fashion discourse, section 2.5 goes over the applied definitions of fashion within the thesis. The final section is specifically on the matter of cultural appropriation as a subfield within the broader fashion field.

### 2.1 Fashion in a Classical Sense

This section reviews the theoretical constructs developed by each influential sociologist, Simmel, Veblen, and Bourdieu. These collections of literature serve as a starting point for the conceptualisation of exclusively Western fashion, and remain influential for the general understanding of fashion today.

Georg Simmel's article on fashion was first published in 1904 in English and is one of the earliest records and attempts to theorise fashion (Simmel, 1904). Simmel notes a sense of duality between socialism and individualism that is observable in this play of fashion. The desire and need to imitate one another who is recognisable to be from a similar class while aiming to distinguish from those that differ or exist in a lower strata (Simmel, 1957). Similarly Veblen's theory on conspicuous consumption concerned much of the upper class in the European region, distinguished from the mass of the working class (Veblen, 1899). In comparison to Simmel

(1957), Veblen (1899) focused more on the material aspect of fashion and consumption goods in general. The more exclusive and greater the pecuniary value of a content in one's ownership was the more respected and assumed their wealth and status. According to Veblen's theory apparel was an obvious evidence of the status of the wearer at the initial glance, as signifiers of taste and decency of the wearer (Veblen, 1899).

Observation of the coming and going of styles by Simmel follows what in the fashion field is referred to as the trickle-down theory. Where the dress and manners of the upper class are imitated by those of the lower class, but once almost caught up with, the more affluent society will drop the style in judgement of it being obsolete and unbearable (Simmel, 1957) Veblen also recognised and commented on the change that is obvious and valuable in fashion. He states that the principle of conspicuous consumption is not enough to explain the ever changing styles of apparel in fashion. He later goes on to explain the change of fashion as "added or altered detail(s) that) strives to avoid condemnation by showing some ostensible purpose" (Veblen, 1899, p. 81). And the style with those details is abandoned making way for a new and fascinating detail to take over.

Bourdieu is another very influential sociologist in the discourse of fashion, coming slightly after Simmel and Veblen. He is well known for his work on the concepts taste, habitus, and class and how the three come together as markers of distinction among societies. Bourdieu has also written exclusively on fashion, specifically <sup>2</sup>haute couture as a form of high culture. Despite his interest and discussions on the topic of fashion he disregards it as being one of the 'unworthy' subjects to study (Bourdieu, 2020 [1974], p.88).

Habitus as Bourdieu devised is defined as the "relationship between /.../ the capacity to produce classifiable practices and works, and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate those practices and products", with the latter half defining what he refers to as *taste* (Bourdieu, 2010, p.166). Both habitus and taste are constructed throughout one's livelihood, often heavily affected by their

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<sup>2</sup> Haute Couture relies on the entirely bespoke creation of unique pieces in workshops located in France, according to precise criteria, which distinguishes it from luxury ready-to-wear, characterized by mass production. (Ministère de la Culture, 2025 "*FICHE D'INVENTAIRE DU PATRIMOINE CULTUREL IMMATÉRIEL EN FRANCE LA HAUTE COUTURE*")

social class and, hence, their respective upbringing. This brings to the fore the observable distinctions in consumption habits, lifestyle differences, and choices as signifiers of class difference (Bourdieu, 2010, Rocamora, 2002). Bourdieu's theorisation of taste is significant in fashion, as the construction of the values of what is fashionable and what is not does to some extent rely on the individual or collective's perseverance of subjects and how they appreciate such subjects. Consequently, in "Haute Couture and Haute Culture", Bourdieu borrows the terms transubstantiation and consecration from Roman Catholic doctrine to explain the symbolic value laid onto certain garments by the couturier (designer) (Cambridge Dictionary 2026). He intends to demonstrate the change of social nature that occurs in fashion objects while their material nature remains the same (Bourdieu, 2020 [1974]). He later goes on to refer to such shifts of societal value in material objects as "collective misrecognition" (Bourdieu 2020 [1974], p.96).

The commonality in the early- to late-modern sociologists' attempts at theorising fashion is that they conceptualise fashion primarily through hierarchy, distinction, and elite social signalling within the Western sphere. This brings to the limitation that these observations and operationalisation were done in the context of Western culture. It also signifies the birth of Western modernity and, hence, a more fluid societal structure, where the upper class was visible, but so was the possibility for those of the lower class to catch up to them in terms of fashion and, more generally, in social mobility. Therefore, while the elements of imitation or distinction are relevant to some extent in today's society, they fail to capture the full scope of fashion's social and cultural dynamics in the 21st century due to their limitations (Wilson 1985).

## 2.2 Fashion in the Present

The era of society we live in today may be referred to as post-postmodernity, in contrast to the early- to late-modern era of the classical theorists. The term post-post modernity was coined by Morgado (2014) as one of many terms that aim to represent the times of our awareness of climate change, shifting geopolitical boundaries, the polarisation of minorities, and the widespread influence of the internet (Morgado, 2014, p.11). The current state of modernity is frivolous in nature and has ever-stronger ties to consumerism as an element that "heavily affects individuals' socio-cultural identities" and as a practice of issue resolution (Bocock, 1995, p.94 cited in Rocamora, 2002, p.3, Reilly, 2021).

Amongst the scholars of fashion in recent years, there has been an increased attention to the study of fashion as fashion-ology, as Kawamura (2023a) puts it, or fashion studies. The contemporary<sup>3</sup> fashion studies academia treats fashion as a concept and phenomenon constitutive of various institutions (Kawamura, 2023a, p.2). While the development of discourse in fashion studies does have roots in classic theories of fashion, as elements such as imitation and expressions of self regarding social stances are still relevant, it focuses on more diverse interrelations of society and fashion as a tool for visual communication.

Hence, the concept of fashion has clearly expanded to include more actors within the field. Bourdieu has defined a certain space where players (individual or institutions) compete or have objective relations for the same stakes (Bourdieu, 2020 [1974]). Whilst, for example, in Bourdieu's use of the term transubstantiation, the actor within the field of fashion who transubstantiates the essential values attached to a garment or any other clothing fashion is the designer. Whereas, in understanding fashion as a phenomenon constitutive of various institutions, the players who attribute such values to clothing are plural and not restricted to the couturier/designer (Kawamura, 2023a). And whilst the term consecration explains the more prolonged, connected process of transubstantiation, Bourdieu refers to it as an *unconscious* collusion of the actors involved in the production. Blumer (1968), after observing the industry in Paris, argued that the choices made by buyers (whom we see here as a sort of player in the fashion field) were independently yet collectively similar in their tastes. Through his observations, he notes that buyers' tastes are shaped by constant stimulation and attention to the most minor details of women's dress (Blumer 1968). Therefore, arguing that rather than an unconscious collision of the actors involved, it is a meticulous social activity where those partaking in it come to form a collective, almost shared understanding of every minor detail of change within the larger observable phenomenon. Such extant findings and observations from previous scholars are important to keep in mind throughout this thesis, as they relate to the delimitation of the research, which studies fashion through analysis of observable empirical

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<sup>3</sup> The term contemporary is used interchangeably as the encompassing term modernity which includes the period of modernity, postmodernity, and post-posmodernity as part of a connected timeline with varying characteristics.

products. A more ethnographic approach to fashion will provide a different level of analysis of its immaterial aspects.

### *2.3 Fashion Here not There*

While the sorting of the actors and institutions constitutive of the fashion field, and the understanding of a much more diverse social motive to challenge a vertical social relation, have advanced, there remains a debate about the phenomenon's origins or its attachment to a certain geographical location.

In modern Western scholarship on fashion, the early age of fashion is often seen as a reflection of Western civilised society and a symbol of the wealth and status that came with it. The distinction between the various populations under comparison positioned European societies as upholding modernity and a civil cultural scene, with the upper class of those societies as the most superior and most appropriate to participate in this social and cultural phenomenon. Hence, differentiating between styles of dress, as ‘costumes’ to be found in the Other cultures and ‘fashion’ to be found in the West. This is inferable from the literature of Simmel and Veblen, where Simmel clearly states that “fashion does not exist in tribal and classless societies” (Simmel, 1957, p.1). With Veblen noting similarly that civilisations outside of Europe, such as the Oriental nations and the Romans, have developed a more static and “artistic” style of dress in comparison to the Western and “modern civilised apparel” (Veblen, 1899, p.80). This paradigm of fashion solidified in the late modern period, with the emergence of the modern Western fashion industry, equipped with the tools of capitalism and access to the global market (Wilson 1985). Hence, the characteristics of Western fashion became the commonly accepted conception of the generalising term “fashion”. As seen in several subsequent postmodern scholars' contributions to fashion discourse, such as Lipovetsky (1994), the fashion phenomenon is arguably understood as a product of Western modernity.

In contrast to these Eurocentric views on the fashion phenomenon, there are scholars who argue for the universality of applying the term and concept of fashion to systems of dress and adornment outside European society, such as Craik (2003) and Cannon (1998). Such scholars see the defining elements of fashion as a process of style change (Cannon, 1998). Previous reviews

on literature have shown that there has been a generalisation of the style of dress outside of the West to embrace a static nature. Craik states that, “the amount of changing fashions is less pronounced in cultures with less emphasis on economic change, changes do occur” (Craik, 2003, p.19). Arnoldy (2023), who discusses fashion within the philosophical field, dissecting the phenomenon through a dual lens of decolonial feminist framework, also remarks that the general concept of fashion is not restricted to the consumerist culture and that its relation between fashion and consumerism is constructed. Cannon (1998) argues that the common definition of fashion associated with a society with “clearly-defined class structure” is “unnecessarily restrictive” (Cannon, 1998, p.2). So is the element of planned obsolescence, which feeds from and to the value of newness and nowness, is also a concept closely and solely related to capitalism. While these elements, when referenced to the specificity of the Western fashion system, make for a reasonable explanation, it is not prominent in other systems of dress and adornment. The ongoing debate therefore, questions whether the elements that are particular to the Western fashion system should be the universal definition of fashion, hence restricting the phenomenon to the Western sphere.

#### **2.4 Decolonial Fashion and Fashion Orientalism**

As shown in the sections above, the common conception and the dominant narrative of fashion are often of the Western fashioning system. The fashion industry, which many are familiar with operating under the principles of capitalism, also has its roots in the development of Western modernity. Decolonial scholar Walter D. Mignolo argues that Western modernity was built on coloniality (Mignolo, 2011). “Coloniality names the underlying logic of the unfolding of Western civilisation from the Renaissance to today...coloniality, in other words, is constitutive of modernity – there is no modernity without coloniality” (Mignolo, 2011, p.3-4). It can therefore be deduced that the Western fashion system also has roots in coloniality. In the sense of industrial system (capitalism) as well as in terms of aesthetic hierarchy (Arnoldy 2023).

Decoloniality as applied in Arnoldy’s case “focuses on racial and geographical power relations...[involving] a critique of Western modernity” (Arnoldy, 2023, p.10). Coloniality, which is already a decolonial concept according to Mignolo, emerged as a response to globalisation and global linear thinking (Mignolo, 2011). Global linear thinking or “colonial

logic promotes thinking in generalisations, value hierarchies, and dichotomies” (Arnoldy, 2023, 8). It promotes a prejudiced power relation in various fields ranging from knowledge to the economy, which is referred to as the colonial matrix of power, and puts Western modernity and civilisations as the superior group (Mignolo, 2023, Arnoldy, 2023). Such ways of thinking were already evident in fashion discourse, and hence the necessity of bringing a decolonial framework to bear on the fashion system in a critical light and of finding more accurate terms to define each aspect of fashion. As Mignolo puts it, the decolonial ways of thinking are an “analytical effort to understand in order to overcome, the logic of coloniality underneath the rhetoric of modernity” (Mignolo, 2023, p.10).

Fashion as a concept (like many others) remains to be explored in the domain of Eurocentrism. According to Quijano (2000), the father of the concept of coloniality of power, Eurocentrism is the essential idea of European hegemony in the epistemological domain (Quijano, 2000). One of the core elements of Eurocentrism is the dualist, binary view of knowledge, with examples such as West-East, rational-irrational, and traditional-modern (Quijano, 2000, p.542). Similarly, looking back at the theoretical developments of ‘fashion’ (which is actually Western fashion), the binary logic is also prominent in its concepts and phenomena. Including the West-Rest divide, the association of fashion with femininity (and hence the placement of masculinity), Occident - Orient, and the assumption that ‘fashion’ and non-fashion describe the civilised and the primitive. This binary logic of Eurocentrism has also affected the aesthetic domain, which Quijano (2000) and Mignolo (2011) refer to as the aesthetic hierarchy. The aesthetic hierarchy “manages the senses and shapes sensibilities by establishing norms of the beautiful and the sublime, of what art is and what it is not, what shall be included and what shall be excluded, what shall be awarded and what shall be ignored” (Mignolo, 2011, p.19). The idea is similarly explored by Bourdieu in terms of habitus (Bourdieu, 2020 [1974]). The relation of exoticism found in non-European cultures to be associated with extreme novelty as stated by Simmel also stems in this aesthetic hierarchy, where the validity of aesthetic even from outside Western culture is determined through the lenses of the Western fashion’s element of novelty (Simmel, 1957).

Amongst the binary logic in Eurocentric epistemology is the idea of the Occident and the Orient, which itself roots in British hegemony (Quijano, 2000). Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said coined the term Orientalism to explain the hierarchical stance that positions Western culture as superior to Other cultures (Said, 1987). He argues that Orientalism is a political doctrine imposed on the Orient because of its perceived differences, which were further recast as weaknesses relative to Western standards (Said, 1987). This dominant framework of power is still observable today. Enforced and reinforcing colonial relations and Eurocentric conceptualisations of the globe, such as Orientalism, where the culture of the Other remains to be observed, represented, and discussed. Such inequality is also observable in the fashion discourse, in its outstanding prominence of the generalisation of sartorial cultures outside of the West, as well as the restrictive definition with great association with Western modernity. Which is the instance where “non-Western fashion becomes the residual subject in the fashion narrative” (Arnoldy, 2022, p.25).

### 2.5 Re-Defining Fashion

In this thesis, the term fashion industry is differentiated from the concept and phenomenon of fashion. With the phenomenon of fashion encompassing the concept of fashion and the fashion industry. The latter term refers specifically, within the fashion phenomenon, to the material aspects, such as value chains, media-publicised communication, and market laws that influence the industry. The fashion concept refers to the immaterial essence, such as the <sup>4</sup>fashion capital, the cycle of trends, and ephemerality.

The fashion phenomenon may be defined as a system that consists of value-producing institutions that validate styles, with its immaterial essence translated into the material form of dress and adornment that communicates an individual's or a collective's shared values. The core element of fashion is any form of change in style (Cannon, 1998, Craik, 1994). The motivations for change may range from individual choices to collectively induced actions, as may the velocity. The fashion phenomenon may be further broken down into the fashion industry and concept, which respectively refer to the material and immaterial aspects of fashion, yet both are

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<sup>4</sup> “The specific capital at play in the field of high fashion” (Rocamora, 2002, p.3) In this case it is not restricted to the field of high fashion, it applies to the field of fashion in general.

interdependent (Kawamura, 2023a). Additionally, in discussing the material objects involved in fashion, it must be clarified that this refers not only to clothing but also to accessories, footwear, jewellery, and so on that adorn the wearer (Kawamura, 2023b).

In concluding the section of fashion discourse and the process of application of decolonial lens to the matter, a definition of the Western fashion system in particular is provided, to differentiate from the general phenomenon of fashion. As this thesis claims from a decolonial understanding of the phenomena, to restrict the application of the term fashion to the Western sphere by unnecessary limitation of the definition means to remain in the linear Eurocentric epistemologic domain.

The definitive definition of the Western fashioning system can be read as follows:

Fashion deriving from the aristocratic and subsequent capitalist society is characterised by the common denominators of fashion in general, of change, and value-producing institutions which validate styles, with its immaterial essence being translated to the material form of dress and adornment which communicates an individual's or collective's shared values. Yet the distinctive character of Western fashion lies in its ties to the capitalist system of planned obsolescence, novelty, and its revered relevance to the emergence of modernity. An era of fluidity and increased production and consumption, with elements of fashion being observable in the larger society as a guiding principle for continued change and consumption as an issue-resolving activity.

## 2.6 Cultural Appropriation

The motivation for imitation, as argued by Simmel (1957), is observable in fashion today; it becomes an issue when people in the dominant culture adopt styles of adornment from minority cultures. Lenard et al. (2020), in discussing cultural appropriation and other forms of problematic cultural engagement conceptually, place cultural appropriation as a form of cultural engagement alongside two others: cultural offence and cultural misrepresentation. The three are often used interchangeably and have differing meanings and consequences. Cultural offence occurs when an action is taken to hurt, insult or attack a cultural practice. Negatively influencing those who belong to the respective culture (Lenard et al., 2020). This can be seen in fashion in instances

such as the “black face”, where white models or performers paint their faces black, in mockery of darker-skinned people. An exemplary case of such is the 2019 Gucci show, where the Italian fashion house presented a black turtleneck sweater with a large cutout red lip around the mouth, worn by a Caucasian model. This caused obvious backlash from the internet community (Kawamura, 2023a, p.68). Cultural misrepresentation occurs when cultural practices or beliefs are represented inaccurately, with the most common form of misrepresentation resulting in stereotyping and generalisation of a certain population (Lenard et al., 2020). Such instances are also visible in film, for example, where Asian people are depicted as being intellectual, or a certain representation of queer characters.

Amongst discussions of cultural appropriation, James O. Young has further broken down the phenomenon into three categories: subject appropriation, object appropriation, and content appropriation (Young, 2008). Cultural appropriation in fashion is most often associated with the third: content appropriation. Young defines such instances as when “an artist has made significant reuse of an idea first expressed in the work of an artist from another culture” (Young, 2008, p.22). Forms of cultural content may be symbols, existing practices, or a way of self-representation through dress or physical display (Lenard et al., 2020). The issue with such a form of appropriation of cultural content lies in the fact that reproduction and dissemination of the product are carried out in a harmful way, where due credit is not given, or when the appropriator uses the content to assert ownership. When cultural elements are incorporated into fashion products, they risk being reduced to symbolic meanings and values that are more suitable to the dominant culture or the market (Al-Oraini, 2026). It is a fine line between appropriation and appreciation, and yet, when not conducted carefully, cultural appropriation becomes a threatening act that erases or oversimplifies the originating cultural values (Carrizosa 2024, Scafidi 2005). It then becomes a form of cultural dominance, converting fashion products into a tool to assert “power over” a certain oppressed population while reinforcing existing power relations (Arnoldy, 2023, p.12). Lenard et al. (2020) also introduce the presence of power dynamics as an amplifier for instances of cultural appropriation. Where the taking of cultural elements in a preexisting power imbalance worsens the scenario (Lenard et al., 2020, p.13). The second amplifier is the presence of profit, which is often the case when cultural appropriation occurs in fashion. Where the appropriators, who are commonly also those with more power,

profit from the use of cultural elements in their production, while the original communities credible for the designs are at a loss or gain nothing from the cultural exchange (Lenard et al., 2020, p.13).

Summarising the above, the term cultural appropriation, as applied in this study, is defined as the incorporation of cultural elements into fashion production with the intent to capitalise on the product, without formal authorisation or acknowledgement of its originating culture.

The literature on cultural appropriation covers topics ranging from property law and product design to psychological insights on how appropriation is perceived (Scafidi, 2005, Brown & Vacca, 2022, Park & Chun, 2023). It is stated in the existing literature that, despite the similarities between cultural products and intellectual property, there is little to no law or policy that strictly prohibits the copying of cultural content into other forms of production, primarily for commodification purposes. And intangible cultural products and indigenous materials remain legally invisible (Scafidi, 2005). As Brown and Vacca note in their study, the acknowledgement of culture as a fourth and independent pillar for sustainable development came in 2010 (Brown & Vacca, 2022, p.591). Scafidi (2005) states that the lack of an orderly prohibition for intangible cultural products/content may be due to the fact that, unlike intellectual property, it is more challenging to trace the record of invention, as it often stems from a community.

There are existing acknowledgements of the broader power framework of colonial legacy relating to the phenomenon of cultural appropriation noted in the extant literature (Siddiqi & Dietze, 2026, Lenard et al., 2020). And yet, amongst the many lenses of dissecting the topic of problematic cultural engagement, there is a lack of exploration into the extent of such power inequalities and Eurocentric frameworks that influence cultural appropriation, specifically in the field of fashion. This thesis responds by exploring the relationship between coloniality and cultural appropriation through the products of fashion institutions.

### 3. BACKGROUND

#### 4.1 Prada: The Italian Fashion House

The Prada brand, known today, took to the global stage with the introduction of nylon bags, produced under the reign of Miuccia Prada, granddaughter of the founding brothers of the family sake label “Fratelli Prada” (Graves, 2012). The brand began as a leather goods company, known for quality and style, but under Miuccia Prada, the label expanded from leather goods and bags to a wider range of fashion-related products. The brand showcased its first show for the F/W 1988 (Prada Group, 2026).

Currently, the Prada label is part of the Prada Group alongside brands such as Miu Miu and Versace. The brand's identity, according to the brand website, is described as transcending products and trends through reinterpreting and challenging existing conceptions and shared aesthetics (Prada Group, 2026). Whether as part of their mission to celebrate acts of reinterpreting the past or the traditional, or to cover up their alleged cultural appropriation, it cannot be said that the involvement of Kolhapuris has now been made into a project within the ‘Prada made in’ concept. Beginning in 2010 with projects such as ‘Prada Milano Made in Scotland’ for the woven tartan kilts and ‘Prada Made in Peru’ for the alpaca wool knits (Tokatli, 2014). In 2026, it is ‘Prada Made in India’ (Prada Group, 2026).

Tokatli (2014) refers to this redefining of Prada’s geographical attachment from Italy to specific local production as a misleading emphasis on the dislocating of the production of products as the label began dispersing the process of production outside of Italy for the sake of reducing production costs. In doing so, Prada has redefined the concept of ‘place’ to something more relational. This collection of projects has been dissected in the respective paper as a strategy for the brand to maintain its prestige and production in the globalising world, with reference to the symbolic geographical importance of the fashion industry.

The Italian creative economy, in which Prada, an Italian fashion label, is situated, dates back to the Renaissance. Mignolo argues that the flourishing of the arts in Italy from the 14th to the 15th century was also due to the nation's economic well-being (Mignolo, 2011). Italy, as a nation and

its consequent products of style, have been amongst the aesthetic hierarchies validated alongside the language and literature hierarchy as part of the Eurocentric realm (Mignolo, 2011).

As well as the *Made in Italy* label, which Prada, among many Italian brands, has benefited from, insofar as the production remained mostly in Italy (which now has changed), as it is constructed through a complex and multilayered history of Italy and the validation of Italian style throughout Europe over a long period of time (Paulicelli, 2014). Hence, in the wider picture, it is indisputable that Prada, as a brand, is liberated from aesthetic hierarchies.

In conclusion, applying the definition of cultural appropriation to the brand deconstructed through the decolonial lens, Prada, as an influential fashion house based in Italy, both physically and conceptually, can be seen as a member of a more dominant society and culture. Thus, the incorporation of Kolhapuri Chappals into their production, whether as part of their special projects, raises questions and calls for a critical discussion of how such actions affect the wider community of fashion consumers and the broader fashion narrative. Especially when, despite the outcome as a collaborative project, the process of disclosure of the information of inspiration and credit towards Indian culture was delayed.

#### 4.2 Kolhapuri Chappals

Kolhapuri chappals are traditional footwear originating in the regions of Kolhapur. Majority of the production today is carried out in the states within Kolhapur such as Maharashtra and Karnataka (Dabade & Naik, 2026, Salve et al., 2017). The chappals trace its roots back to the 12th century, when footwear was produced to suit the needs of those in the working class and the social elites (Dabade & Naik, 2026). The manufacturing of the chappals remains in the informal sector, with artisans to this day handcrafting most of its productions through traditional and conventional craftsmanship (Salve et al., 2017). While the major markets remain within the nation, Kolhapuris have gained global recognition with countries such as China, Japan, France and Australia being the top importers of the traditional Indian footwear. The footwear received a GI (Geographical Indication) tag in 2019, which recognises the traditional crafts with association with the region of origin. The GI tag protected the craft from cheaper replicas of the tradition, which have been threatening the community of Kolhapuri artisans (Dabade & Naik, 2026).

The following image provided below (left), shows the traditional Kolhapuri chappal. The selected image is taken from the Korakari brand website, which is a brand founded in India, with the efforts to collaborate with artisans from the Kolhapuri region to provide high quality chappals whilst the artisans gain recognition as well as a form of livelihood (Korakari, 2026).

The image to the right shows the Kolhapuri chappal inspired sandals produced by Prada. The display of images here provide the visual comparison of the more original product of Kolhapuri chappals to the Pradian Kolhapuri chappals. The Prada sandals, produced are commercialised as a Kolhapuri ‘inspired’ product. The seemingly obvious similarity between the two sandals raises the question of the line drawn between plagiarism and inspiration.



*Image 2. (Left) Traditional tan Kolhapuri Chappals (Image from [Korakari website](#) )*

*Image 2. (Right) Prada Kolhapuri Chappals (‘leather sandals’) (image from [Prada website](#) )*

#### **4. METHODOLOGY**

The analysis will be carried out on the visual images themselves, taken directly from the Prada website and shown in this document, as well as on media articles published regarding the incident. The analysis of the media articles is conducted using CDA, which will provide additional information as data which will help construct the argument of how cultural appropriation is perceived in society today. The use of media articles is a valid method and choice of data, as my argument stands by the concept of fashion as being constructive of various

institutions as proposed and discussed in contemporary fashion discourse (Kawamura, 2023a). The media is one of the crucial actors that disseminates relevant fashion values to a wider audience.

#### 4.1 The Corpus

The selection of the corpus is through purposive sampling, focusing on media that specialise in fashion. Media institutions are one of the various institutions constitutive of the fashion field. While the depiction of cultural appropriation in general media also functions as a value legitimating institution, selection of fashion media aligns with the scope of the thesis which aims to remain in the field of fashion.

The research will consist of four fashion media articles that are openly accessible online. The corpus can be categorised into two categories, first is the Western based media and the second is India based media. The two Western media selected are WWD (Women's Wear Daily) based in New York, and the BoF (Business of Fashion) based in London, New York, Paris, Milan, and Los Angeles. The Indian based media selected are Elle India based in Mumbai, New Delhi), and The Voice of Fashion based in Mumbai. While the primary focus does not lie in comparing the two categorical media, it will be incorporated into the analysis as an element to provide insight into potentially differing discursive practices.

#### 4.2 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

The selected texts are analysed using critical discourse analysis (CDA), solidly theorised by scholars such as Fairclough, Van Dijk and Wodak. This analytical framework allows for a thorough reading of the text while acknowledging the interconnectedness of discourse in social reality as a field of operation for social practices. As Fairclough and Van Dijk argue, ideology and social practices are neither interchangeable with nor reducible to discourse, and vice versa. As Fairclough puts it, “semiosis and other elements of social practices are a dialectical relationship – semiosis internalises and is internalised by other elements without the different elements being reducible to each other” (Fairclough, 2001, p.5). And yet discourses and semiotics are a medium of reproduction of ideologies and social practices of various fields. (Fairclough, 2001, Van Dijk, 1998) Discourse is ultimately embedded in the larger sociocultural

context at various levels (Fairclough, 1995). This paper's analysis adopts the type of CDA introduced in Fairclough's paper, Critical Discourse Analysis (2001), which is "characterised by a realist dialectical-relational theory" within discourse, to theorise and discuss the research subject within the context of other sociological theories and lenses (Fairclough, 2001, p.20), which in this case is of cultural appropriation and matters of power within the fashion field.

Fairclough proposes a three-dimensional approach to CDA: looking simultaneously at (1) the text as language, (2) discourse practice, and (3) sociocultural practice. Each level of analytical focus provides thorough insight into the meaning literally conveyed by the corpus, as well as into its broader standing in the given context (Fairclough, 1995). As Fairclough states further, "the method of discourse analysis includes linguistic *description* of the language text, *interpretation* of the relationship between the (productive and interpretive) discursive processes and the text, and the *explanation* of the relationship between the discursive processes and the social processes" (Fairclough, 1995, p.97).

Such an approach is suitable for examining the case study of Prada's cultural appropriation incident, as the case can be understood as a contemporary issue, more often taken up than previously, due to increased awareness and a surge in multiculturalism. A CDA approach to the empirical data (the media articles) allows for the analysis of the texts alongside the context in which the texts are produced. This is part of the theoretical approach within CDA, in which discourse is understood as a form of social practice. And semiotics and discourse are understood as elements of social reality that can subtly reinforce existing power relations, just as language and knowledge systems constructed through it can create an epistemic hierarchy. This therefore implies that the text representing the discourse of each field is understood alongside the wider context. By doing so, it provides an effective combination of "'micro' forms of analysis (discourse analysis is one) and more 'macro' forms of analysis". This is, according to Fairclough (1992), is a valuable form of analysis in investigating change, and change is a prominent characteristic of contemporary society.

### 4.3 Limitations of the Research

There are several limitations to this research beginning with the material chosen as the corpus for the empirical analysis as well as the literature viewed prior to carrying out the research. The article chosen, and the extant literature covered are all written in English, or have been translated to English. Which is a crucial factor to note upon as mentioned in the CDA section and the decolonial framework that within discourse, language does affect the power relations within discourse. Hence engaging in the fashion discourse through the limited scope of the English language provides information and concepts only explored in that language, which most of the time is based in the Eurocentric sphere, no matter how critical insights are incorporated.

Secondly there is the sociological scope within the fashion discourse that is pursued as the main grounding framework. As covered in the literature review, the phenomenon of fashion as well as the phenomenon of cultural appropriation may be and has been dissected through various dimensions, including philosophical, psychological, economical, political and so on. But as the thesis remains in the sociological domain, it naturally fails to address all of the mentioned relations and factors involved. Which may be seen as a hindrance but also through the limited focus of the paper and through acknowledging the area of focus it shall provide useful knowledge when combined with other researches with differing focal points.

Thirdly, as demonstrated throughout the study thus far, the thesis focuses specifically on a single case of cultural appropriation: Prada's reinterpretation of the Indian Kolhapuri chappals. Thus the findings of the research remains to be a singular example of how the power relations and cultural appropriation occurs in fashion, and does not conclude with a generalisation of the proposition of the research. Yet, the delimitation of the scope allows one to look at a single very relevant case of appropriation in a timely manner, which has not been the case for many other instances of cultural appropriation.

### 4.4 Methodological Procedures

*Fig. 1 CDA in Three Layers*

|                                 |                                                                                               |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Box1 (Text language)            | Topicalisation, Lexicalisation, Intertextuality, Modality                                     |
| Box 2 (Discursive practices)    | Style of communication, production of text                                                    |
| Box 3 (Sociocultural practices) | Preexisting sociocultural structures related or observable, power hierarchies, hegemony, etc. |

The CDA process in this paper is twofold. The first is the textual analysis (Box 1), which is conducted by dissecting the corpus using tools introduced by Fairclough (1992) and Van Dijk(1998, 2006): topicalisation, lexicalisation, intertextuality, and modality.

The second part of the analysis considers what I refer to as Boxes 2 and 3: the discursive and sociocultural aspects of the selected corpus. The following are discussed by bringing in the textual analysis done in the initial process and the positioning of the producers and institutions of text, as well as the form of discursive nature. Further discussion is provided through collaborative efforts to apply the decolonial lens to bring the text into context and place it within its resonant sociocultural context.

## 5. ANALYSIS

### 5.1 Textual Analysis

The initial part of this section shows the findings of the textual analysis of each text. The findings here are shown in a summative text for each of the articles; more detailed annotation samples to be found in the appendix. As part of the texts the images included in the published online articles are also analysed.

The following tools of analysis are applied to carry out the inquiry:

Topicalisation... The foregrounding of the discursive orientation (Van Dijk, 1998)

Lexicalisation... Words chosen deliberately to express the subject (Van Dijk, 2006)

Intertextuality... Other related discourse or perspectives that are included or excluded (Fairclough, 1995)

Transitivity... Which social actors are given the roles of subject (agent/participant) or object (affected/patient) (Machyn & Myr, 2023)

**Text1:**

**Prada Releases Sandals Inspired by Kolhapuri Chappals, Launches Artisan Training Program in India**

Fully funded by Prada, the program will run over three years, involving a total of 180 artisans over the period.

Publisher: WWD

Published date: April 27, 2026

The article's topicalisation reflects its broader discursive orientation. Prada is positioned as the central subject throughout the text, and the article structures events not chronologically but presents actions that cast the brand in a favourable light. This is evident in the subtitle, "fully funded by Prada," which depicts the brand as a benefactor. Although this is factually accurate, the early placement of this statement and the less attention paid to the earlier commotion between Prada and the public outrage encourage a reading of Prada as generous and socially responsible. The opening paragraph similarly prioritises Prada's collaboration with Indian artisans, foregrounding themes of partnership and cultural appreciation rather than the earlier accusations of cultural appropriation that initiated the controversy. The release of the sandal collection and its retail price of 750 euros are mentioned; these details receive minimal elaboration and are subordinated to extensive discussion of Prada's collaborations with craftspeople from Maharashtra and Karnataka.

The backlash over the sandals' resemblance to Kolhapuri chappals is introduced only one-third of the way into the article, delaying the introduction of the initial incident. Furthermore, a substantial portion of the article—approximately 300 words within a 760-word text—is devoted to Prada's artisan training initiative. This disproportionate allocation of textual space functions discursively to focus the narrative on the brand's responsible actions and its seemingly devoted attention to craftsmanship and cultural preservation. While the initial controversial actions of Prada are sidelined. Quotes from the director and managing director of the institutions involved in Prada's training initiative are included in the article. While it seems to be an attempt to include

a different narrator's view on the subject, it is characterised by a surprisingly positive tone on the entire occurrence, with terms such as “cross-cultural design” and “bridging traditional craftsmanship with global excellence” ““the initiative will empower artisans” appearing in the quotes. Another notable part of the quote as follows “the legacy of handcrafted and handmade traditions into the commercial arena, representing the true essence of sustainable and heritage fashion”, draws a line, albeit subtly to the commercially produced fashion to the handcrafted products of fashion.

The article’s final sentence is devoted to the financial gain and growth of the Prada group. Following the mention of the “Made in...” project of Prada, which is described as a celebration of artisanal excellence globally.

Throughout the article, images are incorporated to effectively convey the narrative. The images are all excerpts from the Prada website. (See figures 2a-f). With clean, sterile working images of artisans, as well as the pictures of the Pradian Kolhapuri chappals (indicated through the Prada symbol engraved onto the sandals). The images enhance the credibility of Prada and its collaboration with local artisans through visual communication, and reinforce the article's narrative of the incident through the subject of Prada.

## **Text 2:**

### **Prada Eyes ‘Made in India’ Collaboration After Sandal Scandal**

Publisher: BoF (Business of Fashion)

Published date: July 17, 2025

This article by BoF explicitly states the chronological order of events in the title: the collaboration the brand eyed *after* the scandal. The opening paragraph of this article retraces the steps of the incident, supplemented by an opening image (and the only image in the text) of the ‘leather flat sandals’ initially introduced in Prada's Spring Summer collection. (See figure 3). Although the opening sentence refers to the brand's collaborative initiative, it clarifies that the brand's actions came after it faced backlash for the lack of acknowledgement in the sandals' initial presentation and their relation to the Kolhapuri chappals. The choice of words here states

that Prada was ‘forced’ to acknowledge the original design, through the round of critiques received by Indian artisans. This depicts the power relations between the brand and the artisans, as the artisans had significant say in the incident. But as stated later in the article, it was not solely the artisans' efforts but a collective recognition and demand for credit for the unacknowledged Indian heritage on the Italian brand's runway.

Midway through the article, it is noted that the incident caused the Kolhapuri chappals to gain substantial attention and demand due to their involvement in the controversy, which the article describes “as a way to promote the heritage craft”. This article was published before the initial text (and therefore does not include the actual initiatives founded by Prada) mentioned the meeting with the Maharashtra Chamber of Commerce. The result of a planned collaboration between the artisans of India and Prada is a new project within the “Made in...” collections.

The tone throughout the text remains neutral, and while narratives of both Prada and commerce are incorporated, the incident is viewed in its individual context, with little to no intertextuality observable. The last section comments on Prada's audience within the Indian population, which is said to be limited to a select few in the extreme upper class, with no retail stores in the country. This implies that despite the shared narrative, Prada remains the subject within the text.

### **Text 3:**

#### **Prada, Kolhapuris, And A Debate That Refuses To Settle**

As the brand acknowledges India after months of backlash and explores artisan collaborations, the debate continues over whether calling it 'inspiration' does justice to a design that already exists in full form.

Publisher: Elle India

Published date: May 6, 2026

The title here suggests that this incident of cultural appropriation by Prada is unresolved, even with the introduction of the collaboration and the acknowledgement of its Indian heritage. Further emphasised through statements such as “that absence set the tone for everything that

followed”, referring to the lack of acknowledgement. It also explicitly states the delay in acknowledgement by emphasising the time it took for the brand to present official ties with India. Also, throughout the article, the word "inspiration" is in quotes to denote the author's critical stance toward its application to the situation. This is later explained by the fact that the sandals in the Prada collection resemble the design of the already existing Kolhapuris. Suggesting whether the term inspiration is the correct term to describe a situation when the inspired product shows little creativity and maintains its traditional form, which may have been more suitable to be depicted as a close replica of the original product.

The opening paragraph is notable for its use of the inclusive ‘we’, indicating that the article stands with the people of India and with any that have inherent knowledge of the original sandals, the Kolhapuri chappals. The article also refers to the sandals presented in the Prada show as “flat leather sandals”, which is the original term applied by the brand. Indicating even before it is explicitly stated, that the use of the traditional design came without any acknowledgement of the connection to India.

In the following paragraphs, the history of Kolhapuri Chappals is revised, as such dimensions of the narrative “often gets flattened in conversations like this”. A crucial and critical statement referring not only to the case with Prada but to general instances of cultural appropriation. It depicts the broader context in which the Kolhapuri chappals originate and brings into the narrative the value of the cultural product not just as aesthetic footwear, but as something imbued with history and symbolic significance. Further grounding this by mentioning the Geographical Indication tag given to the cultural product, the text emphasises that the responsibility for brands to credit is not a matter of option.

While the acknowledgement and intent of collaboration are depicted as progress and a positive turn of events, they are still written critically as delayed and enforced through external pressure. The author of the text makes a personal statement in this matter, stating that “I find that shift important, yet incomplete.” This shows personal involvement as well as the author's clear standing within the appropriator and appropriated divide. The discursive narrative in the latter part of the article is focused on the placement of Kolhapuri chappals as well as other forms of

traditional craft that are presented in contemporary fashion scenes, which the author refers to as “that system”. Relating to the symbolic value of such products and their reduction or possible misinterpretation, as well as the change that occurs in the perception of value of these objects. The tone of the articles ends critically, even with the acknowledgement, which the author describes as “a response triggered by backlash.”

Despite the critical stance on the incident through semiotic expressions, the images incorporated counterintuitiveness, as they focus on the Pradian Kolhapuri chappals. (See figures 4a-4d). Furthermore, the text includes a link to a Prada Instagram post where the sandals are introduced as Kolhapuri chappal-inspired products. The images add to the text a more linear discursive nature, leaning toward the actions and visual representations of Prada.

#### **Text 4:**

##### **Who Loses in Prada’s #Kolhapurigate?**

*A world away from Milan Fashion Week and social media chatter, the artisans and communities whose lives are tied to the traditional craft of Kolhapuri footwear were already on a losing streak*

Publisher: The Voice of Fashion

Published date: June 26, 2025

The topicalisation of the article immediately suggests the orientation of the text, with the use of the term “Kolhapurigate”. The term can be understood as slang created by combining Kolhapuri and gate, with gate understood as a shortened form of gatekeeping. Which, according to the Urban Dictionary, is “When someone takes it upon themselves to decide who does or does not have access or rights to a community or identity.” Hence, in this context, suggesting the gatekeeping of the Kolhapuri chappals. The subtitle reinforces this stance by further explaining the loss experienced by traditional artisans and communities when such cultural crafts are taken from their specific contexts and brought onto the global stage under inappropriate circumstances.

The initial paragraph opens with an introduction to the founder of the brand Sole Sisters, who was around long before Prada and produced various interpretations of the Kolhapuri slippers. Her quotes positively note the remarks she received following the incident involving Prada and simultaneously imply the extent of its effect on local communities. Early in the media article, the instance of appropriation is depicted in a neutral tone, with a clear statement that the acknowledgement was lacking in the brand communication. This article has the most intertextual narrative with insights of several other Kolhapuri-related businesses, involving people taken into account to speak for the incident.

It is pointed out in the text that the Prada sandals are almost identical to the original Kolhapuri chappals, despite the known locations of leather products of the brand being in Italy. Following this statement, the article goes on to argue that the taking of cultural products from traditional communities and into the line of international brand production puts the values of such cultural products at risk. The article highlights the works of craftsmen and their importance within their community, as despite the attention Prada may have brought onto the Kolhapuris momentarily, the hardships that are their reality in maintaining the craft remain to be a larger problem.

A notable expression in the article, such as “a world away” and “Prada is far, far away”, suggests a different variation of the system in which the international Italian brand and the local artisans provide their products to. Suggesting that, despite the widespread internet and the brief interaction between the two worlds, the two worlds remain far apart.

Text 4 is the single text in which images of Kolhapuris from outside the context of Prada are incorporated. It strengthens the article's critical and interdiscursive nature by providing images of traditional artisans and other forms of Kolhapuri-inspired products produced in the local context. While the images focus on the Kolhapuri chappals and the artisans involved in their production, they include backgrounds that, albeit subtly, provide an unfiltered picture of the production of original Kolhapuri chappals. (See figures 5a-g).

## 5.2 Comparison of Text and Discursive Practice

At a discursive level, all the articles compile the information with journalistic objectivity, with text 2 deviating slightly from this pattern by adopting a more personal and critical stance on the subject. Texts 1 and 2, published by Western-based fashion media, inform of the incident mostly through the narrative of Prada as described in the text analysis section, where the Italian fashion brand is given more often the role of the subject while the craft of Kolhapuri chappals as well as the artisans involved are represented primarily as affected participants. In texts 3 and 4, which are published by Indian-based fashion media (despite the fact that Elle is a localised branch of the French global magazine), the culture of India is depicted as the subject that has been subjected to an unjust form of cultural engagement. The interdiscursivity of the latter two texts, built with the context of Kolhapuri chappals and the broader discourse on cultural appropriation and cultural heritage conservation, expands more in terms of discursive plurality. Hence, Kolhapuri chappals as representative of traditional craft and heritage, are the main subject of action, and Prada is among the many international brands that engage in the inappropriate use of marginalised cultural content.

The four texts covering the same incident follow a journalistic stance of information provision, yet their discursive orientation and interdiscursivity suggest incremental differences in narrative performance. Bringing in aspects of the naturalisation of power of the involved social actors and the legitimisation of values of the cultural products involved. This will be further elaborated in the section below discussing the socio-cultural placement of the text.

## 5.3 Socio-cultural Practice

The analysis at the textual and discursive levels highlights several elements of the corpus that need to be taken into consideration in the wider context, such as the varying levels of intertextuality and the depicted relationship between Prada, as a well-established fashion house, and the crafts of Kolhapuri chappals.

### **Fashion here and there**

The articles do not explicitly exhibit a polarising stance on the situational placing of Prada or the Kolhapuris chappals. The term fashion is not applied in a way that deliberately places the

traditional craftsmanship outside the context of fashion. Yet distinctions are drawn between handcrafted fashion products and commercial fashions, as extracted in the TA (Text Analysis) of text 1. The distinction made between the fashion product of Prada and the original Kolhapuri chappals as cultural heritage, or artisanal footwear, despite not explicitly downplaying its values it also does not acknowledge the system of fashion that is present in India. It is exactly in this lack of recognition of fashion systems other than the Western fashion system that calls for the need for decolonial practices, as it would allow for a fairer disposition of the fashion field.

The acknowledgement present now is that the handcrafted fashions, such as the Kolhapuri chappals, represent sustainable and heritage fashion, placing Prada and the likes of the international brands as the opposite, unsustainable. By connecting heritage and sustainability, it allows the assumption that the sustainability mentioned here encompasses not only the environmental aspect but also the social pillar, a valuable noting. It brings to light that despite the neutral narrative of the journalistic convention, the issue of this case of problematic cultural engagement by Prada is not about the surface acknowledgement of the source of ‘inspiration’, but that there are underlying issues of sustaining culture. And while there are hinting points to this acknowledgement in the latter two texts, it is underplayed in the collective corpus, where the term cultural appropriation is only brought up once in the fourth and final empirical data.

### **Naturalisation and intertextuality**

The lack of an explicit statement that the incident revolves around Prada’s deliberate act of cultural appropriation, exhibits naturalisation of power imbalance as well as the phenomenon of cultural appropriation. This is also inferrable from the degree of variance in the articles’ interdiscursivity. As already mentioned in prior sections of the analysis, the first two texts belong more squarely within Western fashion media institutions, with Prada as their main subject. Prada’s actions as a beneficiary are highlighted in comparison to the act that they were initially condemned for. Limiting the discourse to Prada’s actions, the texts obscure the narrative, emphasising the incident’s reconfigured positioning as a more formal association between the brand and traditional craftsmanship. As text 1 does by opening the article with the grand announcement of the collaboration between Prada and the artisans of India, whilst delaying the account of the incident of cultural appropriation. This is also referred to as merely the “backlash

online” the brand received, downplaying the validity of the issue that was actually on the table. This is in contrast to the latter two texts, where the historical and hence the symbolic value of the Kolhapuri chappals is elaborated upon. Therefore, despite the lack of a direct reference, the articles address the broader issue of cultural appropriation and other problematic forms of cultural engagement, including cultural misrepresentation (Lenard et al., 2020). As the third text explains, the Kolhapuris come from a complex background which involved the labour of the leather-working castes who have suffered in the Indian social hierarchy. The approach of the latter two articles that argue that the issue remains unresolved despite the well-acknowledged actions of the Prada brand to initiate collaboration is extended to the matter of change that occurs in the perception of the cultural products on a different stage. This, as noted earlier in this thesis, is one of the crucial issues of problematic cultural engagement, the reduction or shift of the initial cultural and symbolic values that are embedded in cultural content (Carrizosa, 2024, Scafidi, 2005). While the article does not go so far as to claim its effect in threatening the cultural validity of the Kolhapuri chappals, it is well noted in text 4 that the artisanal community around them are vulnerable, with little connection to the fashion stage which brands such as Prada function at, as well as few opportunities to innovate the craft.

### **Validation by Prada**

Returning to the depiction of Kolhapuri chappals and Prada, there is also a significant noting on the effect it has had on Kolhapuri chappals and the artisans of the community. The attention it has received but also overjoyed reactions from the community mixed with the rage of not having been giving due credit. While this is not delved into amongst the articles, this shows the effect Prada has had in validating the craft. While as stated in text 4, it is not about seeking validation, the actions of Prada and fellow fashion houses, whether conscious or unconscious, have the effect of validating certain styles and culture as significant social actors with greater fashion capital. As also mentioned in text 3, the placing of traditional cultural products in luxury context changes perception. In Bourdieu’s words, the process of transubstantiation occurs where the Kolhapuri chappals sold under the name of Prada, despite its material aspect not forgoing any substantial change transforms economically and symbolically into something of superior value (Bourdieu, 2020 [1974]). As mentioned in texts it was also taken as an opportunity for people to tap “into nationalist pride”. It raises questions of what sort of pride this may be given the

context? A sense of pride for the Kolhapuri chappals to be recognised outside of the nation, which is also noted to have already been accomplished, then is it the recognition it received from the validating player in the dominating fashion system? Following this, text 3 notes on “a different kind of desireability”, the kind which is constructed and laden with due to the validation that comes from the Kolhapuri chappals being placed in the luxury fashion context. In other words it is referring to the legitimation from a fashion brand with the fashion capital to do exactly what has been done by Prada, introducing an already existing form of design by replacing it with Kolhapuri ‘inspired flat leather sandals’. Such use of cultural content is problematic as it comes from the intent of producers of Western fashion to look outward to find a captivating source of novelty. Which is no different to an outdated view proposed by Simmel on how exotic cultural products originating outside of Europe is perceived as characteristic of extreme novelty, which is further addressed only as an aesthetic detail that emphasises the exclusiveness of the wearers of the style (Simmel, 1957). There is no evidence that proves otherwise that the actions by Prada were an action motivated through this lens of Orientalism (Said, 1978).

### **Visual communication of power**

The majority of the images in the articles show the Pradian Kolhapuri chappals, whether on the runway or in promotional images for the Made in India collaboration, with text 4 being the exception. The images in text 4 show artisans and Kolhapuri chappals outside the context of Prada. Where several shots such as images shown in figures 5a,e, and g, include an uncurated background, adding to the text a less performative picture of the Kolhapuri chappal production. While the images presented by Prada all depict the ‘leather sandals’ and artisans at work against monotone backgrounds. This emphasises the contrast suggested in the text between Prada as modern fashion and Kolhapuri chappals as traditional (othering) fashion. And the act of Prada taking this traditional fashion into modern fashion by placing it in a clean modern image, shows the symbolic transformation of the Kolhapuri chappals into something stripped of their context. This is not merely a depiction or appreciation of someone else's craft, it is a show of ‘power over’ through the act of immaterial extractivism (Arnoldy, 2022).

## 6. DISCUSSION

This section aims to answer the research questions stated in the beginning of the research, through the synthesis of theoretical and empirical findings.

The extensive literature review and combined theoretical framing of the thesis have gone through the historical and epistemic construction of the fashion discourse. The dominance of the Western fashion system and the definition of the term fashion limited to the Western fashion system strongly suggests that the legitimisation of values within the wider fashion systems are also dominated in the colonial matrix of power (Cannon 1998, Mignolo 2023, Quijano 2000). The empirical analysis, which shows the understatedness of cultural appropriation within the products of fashion media institutions further validate that the colonial legacy, and the tendency of extraction of resources whether material or immaterial from marginalised societies are still present despite the acknowledgement of the cultural origin. The text gives evidence of addressing the issue as a commonly occurring matter worth while acknowledging but lacks explicit condemnation of the issue. This stance in itself shows the forgiving attitude toward the issue of cultural appropriation not by the appropriated by the appropriators. This presents the power of the appropriators to control the situation through the maneuvering of contextualising the action in the name of collaboration, hence denying the agency of the artisans who are the producers of fashion in the Indian fashion system. The power held by the appropriators, the dominant actor within the wider fashion system, is supported by the larger colonial matrix of power where the Western fashion system is the dominant and influential counterpart to any other systems of fashion. The reframing of the controversy of cultural appropriation into a collaborative project narrated as the main subject in text 1 and 2 is the process of legitimisation that occurs in the field of fashion through the media institutions. Whether the framing of the issue through the corpus validated the act of Prada, the fact remains that the act of cultural appropriation did occur in the case of Prada and Kolhapuri chappals. As the acknowledgement of credit came after the accusations of cultural appropriation from the public, further problematising the issue. Bringing in the amplifiers defined by Lenard et al. (2020), the pre-existing power imbalances and the capital gain from the application of the cultural design, this case is present of both. As acknowledged in the corpus, as well as through the lens of decolonial fashion, Prada represents a dominant player within the field, and the artisans and craft of Kolhapuri chappals as

the minority. Following this the Italian fashion house proceeded with the production of the sandals, resulting in their profitable gain. The collection moving into production regardless of the backlash reinforces the power imbalance where the Western fashion system is allowed the extraction of material and immaterial content, through unauthorized means.

In answering the second research question, the empirical analysis provides findings of two contrasting portrayals of the event. One where the controversy is solved by the recontextualising of the incident through a collaboration ‘provided’ by Prada. While the other remains to observe the controversy as ongoing not as an individual case but as part of a collective issue of cultural representation in the Western luxury fashion scene. With the two Western situated articles providing a more or less singular discursive structure focusing on the Italian brand and its actions following the incident with little acknowledgement or discussion on the initial controversy of the inappropriate act. The creation of active discourse on the issue to understate the issue of cultural appropriation affects the possible change in social practices, which in this case is the restructuring of the fashion system to be deconstructed from a Eurocentric domain (Fairclough, 2001). The act of appropriation and Othering of various systems of fashion do not become naturalised as observable in the text. The following two articles published in the local context in India shows inexplicitly through discursive narrative, intertextuality and occasional personal insight, critical attention toward the issue that prevails. Providing discourse on not singularly the case of Kolhapuri chappals and Prada but also the wider context of problematic cultural engagement.

Despite the existence of mild critical discourse on the topic it is also evident that the transubstantiation or the change of perceptance of value of the Kolhapuri chappals in general points out the limited influence media have in the legitimization of fashion products. The influence and power of legitimation that Prada and other global Western fashion players embody are already embedded in the collective misrecognition in and out of the semiotic aspect of fashion. This was depicted within the articles as reactions from the local people of India who have felt the accreditation that they believe was well deserved for the Kolhapuri chappals, but this came in the form of appropriation of the product, which have garnered attention for the time being but does not promise any consistency. This is a reflection of the condition of modernity where the

awareness of cultural marginalisation is present but its frivolous nature attempts to resolve it through consumerism. Thus, decolonial practices which actively aim to overcome the underlying rhetoric of modernity are called for in fashion to further deconstruct the current power imbalance, which albeit well camouflaged, continues to reinforce the colonial structure that has structured the global fashion system. Where the Western fashion remains to be a legitimizing actor of other fashion systems and fashion products. The alteration of collective misrecognition is a form of social change which requires social practices as well as active social discourse surrounding the subject.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

This thesis has explored the case of Prada and Kolhapuri chappals through the controversy of the Spring Summer 2025 collection, providing insight into the issue of cultural appropriation and the Eurocentric nature of the fashion discourse. While as a case study, it does not provide general observations of the phenomenon of fashion or cultural appropriation, it depicts a crucial matter that is in need of further research and active efforts to reposition and overcome the prevalent power imbalance as a product of colonial legacy. The instance of Prada appropriating from the Indian, specifically from the Kolhapur community, may be addressed as a definitive case of cultural appropriation. Despite the open dialogue of the controversy present, the actions of the brand resulted in acceptance from the dominating Western fashion system, while the debate on the matter continues in the wider fashion context. The thesis strongly argues that the process of alteration of collective misrecognition, which presently recognises the Western fashion system as a dominant legitimate power, requires an active practice of decolonial thinking. To apply and discuss the matter of decoloniality in other aspects of fashion, as such done by Mignolo (2013), would be the next step to further elaborate on the findings of this research.

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## APPENDIX

### Articles Used in the Critical Discourse Analysis

#### **Text 1:**

Salibian, S. (2026) Prada Releases Sandals Inspired by Kolhapuri Chappals, Launches Artisan Training Program in India, *Women's Wear Daily*, April,  
<https://wwd.com/footwear-news/shoe-industry-news/prada-sandals-kolhapuri-chappals-india-artisan-training-program-1238929987/> [Last accessed 26 May 2026]

#### **Text 2:**

Pandya, D., Anzolin, E., Vijayaraghavan, A. (2025) Prada Eyes 'Made in India' Collaboration After Sandal Scandal, *Business of Fashion*, July,  
<https://www.businessoffashion.com/news/luxury/prada-sandal-scandal-india-collaboration-kolhapur/> [Last accessed 26 May 2026]

#### **Text 3:**

Inamdar, A. (2026) Prada, Kolhapuris, And A Debate That Refuses To Settle, *Elle India*, May,  
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#### **Text 4:**

Dey, S. (2025) Who Loses in Prada's #Kolhapurigate?, *The Voice Of Fashion*, June,  
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Images from the Articles Used in the Critical Discourse Analysis

Figure 3a. Image Text 1



Figure 3b. Image Text 1



Figure 3c. Image Text 1



Figure 3d. Image Text 1



Figure 3e. Image Text 1



Figure 3f. Image Text1



Figure 4. Image Text 2



Figure 5a. Image Text 3



Figure 5b. Image Text 3



Figure 5c. Image Text 3



Figure 5d. Image Text 3



Figure 6a. Image Text 4



Figure 6b. Image Text 4



Figure 6c. Image Text 4



Figure 6d. Image Text 4



Figure 6e. Image Text 4



Figure 6f. Image Text 4



Figure 6g. Image Text 4

