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# **The Influence of the Fashion Industry: Cultural Appropriation for Mexican Cultural Textile Design**

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**The Influence of the Fashion Industry: Cultural Appropriation for  
Mexican Cultural Textile Design**

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### **Abstract**

Cultural appropriation in the United States is an issue that individuals do not accept leading cultures to be viewed as humorous and not dignified of respect. In particular, the fashion industry has previously had problems with the address of cultural appropriation in design elements and similarities in clothing appearance in designers and clothing companies. Designers are not supplying adequate references to contributors or evidence of the clothing design being different than a cultural clothing item. The inappropriate use of cultural elements results in culture being represented inappropriately by others and for worldviews to be modified into narrow categories regarding the characteristics of a particular culture, therefore, fostering biases and stereotypes. Despite the ongoing prevalence of cultural appropriation within the realm of fashion design, I want to understand why certain cultural groups like Mexicans are targeted by fashion designers and clothing companies. To understand the continuing process of cultural appropriation, I conducted a literature review on different cases of clothing companies accused of Mexican cultural appropriation by the media. The literature review highlights the importance of being aware of other cultural values, elements, and traditional clothing to avoid cultural appropriation. In the need to be influenced by other cultures in clothing design elements proper justification and accreditation must be given to demonstrate respect to other cultures. Regulating cultural appreciation and acceptance of other cultures will increase unity and decrease the problems associated with cultural appropriation among fashion designers and clothing companies.

*Keywords:* cultural appropriation, Mexican culture, fashion industry, culture, culture appreciation

## **The Influence of the Fashion Industry: Cultural Appropriation for Mexican Cultural Textile Design**

Culture defined by psychologist Edgar Schein, a pattern of basic assumptions held by group members developed over time, including beliefs, feelings, knowledge, and cognition (2004). Appropriation the “act of taking something for one’s own use, typically without the owner’s permission” (Oxford dictionary). Cultural appropriation furthermore is the adoption of a minority group's cultural identity markers by a superior group without acknowledgement (Dictionary). Cultural appropriation being the use of another cultural symbolic elements without acknowledgment makes the inspiration of clothing design elements to become challenging because designers need to refrain from using cultural elements that might offend individuals.

Cultural appropriation in fashion often involves designers using clothing design elements in which the design is associated with a culture other than from where it originates without the appreciation for the influence and or inspiration of the culture in the making of the clothing by the designer. Design elements used in clothing are often correlated to specific cultures for example, in Mexican culture utilizing an eagle standing on a cactus can be associated with the country’s flag. Additionally, specific shape designs incorporated in clothing can resemble a traditional symbol or clothing element used in another country. Cultural appropriation also involves the model wearing the clothing which in some cases ~~is~~ to be inappropriate if the model displaying the clothing is not representative of the culture the clothing is influenced by. Often clothing appropriation concerns one culture using another culture's elements in which the clothing used is inappropriately displayed, designed, or described setting biases and negative connotations towards another culture.

In Mexican culture some clothing design elements ascribed to the cultural representation of the land such as embroidery, huipil, hand designed textiles, and a sombrero. Aside from clothing designs, other cultural elements include pottery, bright colors, native languages, and monumental. If anything of cultural significance is used without appreciation, then the elements used have no significance to others.

When people fail to respect and appreciate the cultural elements in a significant way it becomes a threat and an insult to the culture. Once cultural elements are used out of context then it deteriorates the value others give and for the respective culture to be diminished and disrespected by others. Keeping each culture's elements is fundamental for each culture to keep its traditions and unique elements that tourists look forward to viewing and learning about.

To avoid cultural appropriation in the fashion industry, designers need to be knowledgeable of various cultures and elements pertaining to each culture such as symbols, design, characters, religion, clothing style, and language. Understanding distinct cultural values will enable designers to avoid being fined, questioned, and to get involved in problematic issues regarding the inappropriate use of clothing towards a culture, ethnicity, or race. Cultural appropriation, being harmful towards individuals in a specific culture, must be limited to allow each culture to restore and provide adequate display of the clothing belonging to each culture representing their people, beliefs, perspectives, and values.

### **Literature Review**

Many fashion designers along with clothing companies have been accused of inappropriate cultural appropriation in the display and crafting elements of the clothing that resemble a culture's traditional clothing. In understanding how different companies have used Mexican cultural textile in inappropriate ways, led me to gather scholarly documents to further

understand how cultural appropriation affects individuals and the way designers respond to the arguments.

In the British Vogue by Scarlett Conlon, the magazine covers the case of fashion designer Isabel Marant found to plagiarize her clothing style to an indigenous group in Oaxaca, Mexico (2015). The similar resemblance in the blouse led the case to be taken to court to be determined if Marant plagiarized or if her work was an inspiration by her visit to Mexico. The resemblance in clothing indicates the need to be aware of clothing design to be unique instead of inspired because it can lead to miscommunication and misinterpretation. Further in the case, women from the indigenous group narrate on their behalf the sentiments and reaction towards finding Isabel Marant plagiarizing the clothing design to their traditional clothing. In the narration given by the female, it includes a narration of the movement they started with the hashtag “#miblusadetlahui” on Twitter to evoke unity among the indigenous group (Conlon, 2015). Through the indigenous womens’ unity, the group hoped to receive the right of ownership for the clothing design to preserve and make exclusive the design only to the state of Oaxaca (Larsson, 2015).

Based on the occurrences of the case with Scarlett Conlon, Henna Choudhary (2019) narrates in the document how social media is one of the largest areas of predators for critiquing designer, influencer, and cultural events for cultural appropriation. Choudhary describes how to avoid being victimized of cultural appropriation it is best to resemble elements from our own culture while supporting and demonstrating appreciation for other cultures art, clothing, and cultural elements. The justification of cultural appropriation being reduced, and appreciation being considered indicates the need for awareness of cultures from others. Having prior knowledge of typical clothing used in cultures is crucial to avoid plagiarism of cultural clothing designated to be created by individuals within the culture.

Similarly, the clothing brand Carolina Herrera was accused by the Mexican prime minister of the 2020 collection being designed with cultural elements pretraining to a city in Mexico by including serape colors, embroidered flowers, and bird designs (Friedman, 2019). In the response by Carolina Herrera's designer, the text analyzed the importance of each culture claiming material that belongs to them instead of mixture being involved by designers adding multiple cultures elements in a clothing piece. The analysis of the text demands the importance of designers being aware of what they are creating to make sure that they are not being racist towards other cultures.

The constant impacts of cultural appropriation in fashion recommends the need for designers to understand how one clothing piece viewed in different perspectives can change the meaning behind symbolic elements. As the author Liu and Kwon (2019) focused the text on James Young's definition of appropriation implies how clothing analysis the analysis of colors, patterns, cloths, and shapes in the creation of a new clothing design are contemplated in determining appropriation. An example of clothing analysis described by the text illustrates how the design, colors, and Aztec, Inca, and Mexican folk history of a Mexican poncho can lead to different misinterpretation and misuse by other cultures (Liu & Kwon, 2019) . The cultural appropriation of a Pancho being a historical element to Mexicans shows how stereotypes can be created towards the culture. In addition, Vezina (2019) discussed in her paper the importance of cultural appropriation designers need to consider because of the cultural, economic, and social harm caused by the replication of an original design. With cultural appropriation numerous factors are affected in which the culture designs inspired are damaged since they do not know what action to take to claim textile belonging to them. The useful incorporation of various cases for cultural appropriation engages readers to understand the importance of separating inspiration



from plagiarism. Faith Adongo emphasized cultural appropriation as the use or borrowing of cultural elements from minority groups without proper credit given/causing issues to arise on what distinguishes cultural appropriation from borrowing (2020). The distinction between cultural appropriation and homage demonstrates how the use of cultural artistic elements must be carefully used by designers to avoid their company becoming, like many others, accused of unoriginal designs.

Some difficulties encountered with cultures being unable to claim cultural elements to avoid cultural appropriation by other companies is the need to have copyright laws to protect cultural design and having no designated member in a culture as the owner since most of the elements are passed from generation to generation (Lee, 2020). Copyright laws need to be considered for minority cultural groups to further avoid designers taking advantage of power to steal designs. The obligation for more states to protect its cultural elements is needed to keep the elements protected and from violation of others.

In defining cultural appropriation some writers considered cultural appropriation in the fashion industry as design, name, and communication of tangible or intangible elements being used (Sadaba, LaFata, and Torres, 2020). By considering different aspects related to cultural appropriation in fashion the authors describe the constant argument of cultural appropriation through media in fashion. With an excessive explanation of cultural appropriation in fashion, the readers understand problems arising in different aspects of fashion that develop into legal problems. For example, the writer Hannah Marriott described the company *Zara* to be accused of plagiarism for incorporating distinguished elements pretraining to a Mixtec group in Mexico. The author described the anger of the Mexican ministry towards the company for not giving proper credit for the inspiration in the clothing (2021).

In the articles analyzed all designers seem to not supply enough credit for the inspiration Mexican culture gives them when designing new clothing. The designers mention to not be aware of being culturally inappropriate designs in which most of the time designers meant no harm. In cultural appropriation, it indicates the need for fashion designers to be aware of the places they receive inspiration while providing appropriate credit to other cultures or designers. As multiple companies have been targeted for plagiarism the need for designers to take courses on the importance of cultural appropriation is needed to avoid designers getting fined by other cultures and decrease media threats. The consequences for cultural appropriation towards a clothing company can have various consequences affecting the company's image as well as the culture for not receiving respect from others, for their cultural elements to be mixed, and to decrease the originality.

### **Discussion**

Often, many cultures establish cultural elements based on historical significance or resemblance to an important event, part of the individual culture and identity. The sentimental value of the items in a culture often is only used for special occasions in which the culture respects and pays homage to them. As cultures respect their own cultural items, the respect of cultural elements should also be respected by others even more since the items are of great significance. As the article the Expression of Characteristic of Mexican Poncho Costume Appropriated In Modern Fashion- Focus on James Young's Cultural Appropriating Technique- by Lui Shuai and Mi Jeon Kwon (2019) describes:

The poncho is also closely linked to Mexican culture in the form of the Sarape with pre-Hispanic and Iberian motifs. This colorful cloth is widely considered an iconic

symbol of Mexico. The poncho has been a favorite article of clothing for hundreds of years in Mexico, pre-dating the Spanish invasion of the early nineteenth century.

One clothing piece such as the poncho having a historical significance to Mexican culture is a motive for other cultures to respect and appreciate the poncho. Fashion designers need to consider that some clothing pieces like the poncho are more than pieces to cover oneself that need to consider if designers find inspiration in clothing pieces. When designers are inspired or want to incorporate similar attributes pertaining to a culture's clothing, designers ought to think about the existing significance, cultural development, and viewpoint of individuals in designers using the clothing element.

Designers considering various perspectives on the use of cultural elements can aid the clothing designer and company to avoid being accused of plagiarism when the designer's original intent was to create a clothing piece from cultural inspiration. Understanding the distinguishment between plagiarism and inspiration designs will help solve the problem between fashion designers and cultural appropriation. As the paper *Curbing Cultural Appropriation in the Fashion Industry* by Brigette Vezina defines plagiarism leads to “This practice makes up the “piracy paradox,” whereby rampant copying is considered the fuel for further cycles of creativity and for renewed consumer demand... the day that a culture’s TCEs are no longer associated with that culture might be the day that that culture has ceased to exist (2019)”. The problems associated with copied clothing designs leading to cultural elements becoming diminished and no longer existing implies the importance of designers not using cultural elements as part of the clothing textile. Along with the use of design elements, as the author Henna Choudhary defines “The fine line between cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation is drawn between the oversimplification, fetishization and assertion of cultural dominance over a minority people in

contrast to the reverence of a culture's history in which inspiration is drawn from traditional wear through contemporary clothing designs (2019)." The distinction made between fashion elements considered culturally appropriate and appreciated is crucial for designers to understand. Despite sometimes clothing designers getting inspired by cultural elements from other cultures they may visit, the designers need to be cautious in the way inspiration leads their creativity of creating a clothing piece to resemble cultural appreciation instead of cultural appropriation.

With the encounter of the designer for the brand Carolina Herrera being accused of Mexican design theft in the 2020 Resort Collection it led the Mexican minister to be involved due to inadequate credit and identical brodering technique. As one article by New York Times written by Vanessa Freidman (2019) narrates:

But the collection also included floral and bird embroidery on strapless gowns, perforated leather coats and baby-doll cocktail dresses that Ms. Frausto cited as belonging to the community of Tenango de Doria in Hidalgo, as well as a striped knit shirtdress that she saw as too closely resembling a serape from Saltillo. (see Appendix A)

Despite the designer not being aware of the problems that would arise with his selection of clothing style and elements incorporated in the collection, the cultural appropriation caused the brand to almost send the case to court. With a supplementary article communicating "is important to stress that in no way the fashion house collaborated along the design, production or communications process with any individual from any of the communities they got their inspiration from" (Sadaba, LeFata, and Torres, 2020). The designer not having set appropriate credits to the community that inspired the design caused the clothing designer to set boundaries between the items they get inspired by and what elements would be considered plagiarism. Setting differences within the fashion industry of designs that are considered plagiarism versus

inspired should be set to avoid further problems with countries trying to claim their cultural elements from other designers in a different country.

Similarly, the clothing designer Isabel Marant was accused of plagiarism for the textile used in one of her blouses for incorporating the same design and colors as the traditional clothing for indigenous Mixe groups in Oaxaca (see Appendix B). The article written by Scarlett Colon for the British Vogue addresses “Isabel Marant, however, insists that its founder and designer has been open about the origin and inspiration for the design and is hoping to credit the Mixe community herself (2015).” The designer, trying to avoid further complication with the cultural appropriation, describes how to remediate the problem of using other cultures' designs, Isabel tries to provide credit to the community for the creation of the blouse. Not finding other solutions than her shirt being plagiarized, the designer decided to not claim credit for the blouse creation and instead focus on the inspiration the cultural group provided. As a response, the indigenous women in Oaxaca according to the article *Inspiration or plagiarism? Mexicans seek reparations for French designer's look-alike blouse by Naomi Larsson (2015)*, comment “the Mixe community are looking to Marant for recognition of their design. They have issued an official declaration calling for the French designer Marant to recognize the imitation of the traditional pattern, and invite her to meet the artisans to “appreciate how the blouse is shared in the everyday.” The Mixe community needing to keep the cultural elements such as the blouse part of the culture and identity to preserve the original elements is justifiable to Isabel being accused of plagiarism. Like the circumstance that occurred with the Mixe group in Oaxaca there are many other vulnerable cultures in which the fashion industry is plagiarizing ideas while disguising the elements as part of inspiration.

Not only are the textile and design elements incorporated in the clothing causing

accusations of cultural appropriation but also the way companies display the clothing. In displaying clothing elements, cultural appropriation can be caused by the model wearing the clothing not representing the culture leading to stereotypes and disrespect for the people in the culture. The way designers present their clothing causes problems because despite being inspired and influenced to resemble similar attributes designers and companies do not provide credits to the culture. As the article Mexico accesses Zara and Anthropologie of cultural Appropriation by Hannah Marriott mentions “Frausto issued a statement last autumn saying that Mexico would no longer tolerate the cultural appropriation of local designs without due credit, according to fashion trade title WWD (2021)”. The need for cultures to receive proper credit when other designers have made inspired outfits as described by the culture ministry of Mexico to enforce laws and the way they file designers for cultural appropriation.

### **Conclusion**

Cultural appropriation within the fashion industry needs to be enforced in which fashion designers from other countries are prohibited in manufacturing the same clothing. Greater awareness on the problems plagiarism in clothing affects cultures need to be studied. As mentioned, the differentiation between cultural appropriation and inspiration in clothing must set guidelines on the types of cultural elements that can be inspired. Cultural appropriation within Mexican culture must be instead appreciated and inspired but not replicated. Within the Mexican culture inspired clothing designs, the designers must be aware of the historical significance the elements have in the community and the reaction the design can cause others.

Cultures needing to keep their culture's elements originality must find ways in which the elements are protected from other individuals using them without permission. Understanding how using cultural elements in clothing can give other meanings is important to consider because

for people wanting to learn more about a clothing piece can be misinformed on the significance and the resemblance. Despite self-expression through clothing being important for designers, the designers and project managers must review where the items are inspired from and set comparisons on the resemblance to other material that exist. Clothing companies avoiding other allegations of plagiarism from cultural appropriation will benefit the company and the culture for each having their original clothing designers distinguishing them from one another.

In solving the problem of cultural appropriation within fashion, the writer Faith Adongo suggests mediation would be needed in which minority group rights and fashion brand use of elements would need to be addressed. Additionally, the writer Amber Lee suggested “any legal reform that strives to enhance protection for cultural products must balance the competing interests of safeguarding a source community’s cultural identity with the need to preserve the free flow of ideas in support of cultural exchange (2020).” Needing to protect minority groups' cultural elements from designers creating mixtures and diminishing the significance yields for legal regulations to be established to protect historical elements. Along with protecting the elements, Mexican crafters of the clothing need to be given rights to protect their work and new guidelines be placed on foreign designs. The guidelines for designers from other countries should establish how many elements from other cultures they can use, copyright, and need to provide appropriate reference to other cultures for the inspiration they provide in creating the clothing.

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**Appendix A***Carolina Herrera Mexican clothing design*

*Note:* The clothing design is being addressed as cultural appropriation towards Mexican culture for the clothing design and colors used. The design elements of the dress on the left resemble similar colors of a sarape while the other two dresses of this collection are similar to the traditional clothing.

**Appendix B**

*Isabel Marant accused of plagiarism for shirt resembling Mexican indigenous groups.*



*Note:* The image on the left is the traditional clothing worn by the indigenous group in Mexico while the image on the right is the blouse created by Isabel Marant.