

The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation in Art and Entertainment

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Introduction

Cultural appropriation in art and entertainment is a highly debated ethical issue that raises questions about respect, representation, and power dynamics. It occurs when elements of one culture, often a marginalized or historically oppressed group, are adopted by individuals from a dominant culture without proper understanding, acknowledgment, or respect. While cultural exchange has historically contributed to artistic innovation and creativity, the modern entertainment industry frequently blurs the line between appreciation and exploitation. From fashion and music to film and literature, cultural appropriation can reinforce stereotypes, erase the voices of marginalized communities, and commodify sacred or traditional practices. This discussion explores the ethical implications of cultural appropriation in art and entertainment, examining both the harm it causes and the debate surrounding artistic freedom and cross-cultural influence [1].

Description

Cultural appropriation in entertainment often manifests in ways that trivialize or misrepresent cultural traditions. Musicians, filmmakers, and fashion designers frequently incorporate elements of non-Western cultures without understanding their historical or spiritual significance. For example, pop stars wearing traditional Indigenous headdresses or fashion brands profiting from sacred African or Asian symbols without crediting their origins can be seen as exploitative. Similarly, Hollywood has a long history of casting white actors in roles meant for people of color, reinforcing systemic exclusion in the industry. Critics argue that these practices perpetuate cultural erasure and benefit dominant groups while leaving the original communities without recognition or economic gain. Cultural appropriation in art and entertainment is a complex and often controversial issue that raises questions about respect, power dynamics, and ethical responsibility. While cultural exchange has historically played a significant role in the evolution of art, fashion, music, and film, the way certain cultures are borrowed from particularly by dominant or historically privileged groups has led to widespread criticism. Cultural appropriation occurs when elements of a marginalized or oppressed culture are adopted, often without permission, understanding, or proper acknowledgment, for commercial gain or personal expression. This can lead to harmful stereotypes, erasure of cultural identity, and economic exploitation of the very communities from which these cultural elements originate [2].

However, defenders of cultural borrowing argue that artistic expression should not be limited by rigid cultural boundaries. Many great works of art, music, and literature have emerged from cultural fusion, and imposing strict rules on artistic influence could stifle creativity. They suggest that the key difference between appreciation and appropriation lies in intent, context, and engagement with the originating culture. When artists collaborate with and credit the communities they draw inspiration from, cultural exchange can be enriching and mutually beneficial. In the visual arts, cultural appropriation has

been a long-standing issue, as artists have often drawn inspiration from non-Western cultures without fully understanding their significance. Throughout history, many Western artists have incorporated African, Asian, or Indigenous motifs into their work while ignoring the cultural and spiritual meanings attached to them. For example, Pablo Picasso's fascination with African masks influenced his development of Cubism, but the African artists who originally created these designs were largely unrecognized in the art world. Similarly, Indigenous symbols and designs have frequently been used in paintings, sculptures, and tattoos without acknowledgment of their sacred or ceremonial significance [3].

One of the most contentious aspects of cultural appropriation in art is the question of who benefits from such cultural borrowing. Western artists and designers who appropriate elements of non-Western cultures often receive praise for their "innovation" or "exotic" aesthetic choices, while the original creators of these cultural expressions remain overlooked and undercompensated. This raises concerns about power imbalances, as the dominant culture profits from the traditions of marginalized communities without giving them proper credit or opportunities. Ethical solutions to cultural appropriation include advocating for representation, fair compensation, and deeper cultural understanding. The entertainment industry can play a role in promoting inclusivity by hiring artists from diverse backgrounds, consulting cultural experts, and ensuring that cultural elements are used with authenticity and respect. Social media and activism have increased public awareness of cultural appropriation, pushing companies and artists to be more accountable for their choices. The fashion industry has been widely criticized for its appropriation of traditional clothing, patterns, and symbols from different cultures. Designers frequently draw inspiration from Indigenous, African, Indian, and Asian cultures, often without consulting or compensating the communities they borrow from. This has led to major controversies, with brands facing backlash for using sacred or culturally significant garments as mere fashion statements [4].

One well-known example is the use of Native American headdresses as accessories at music festivals and fashion shows. In Indigenous cultures, headdresses carry deep spiritual and ceremonial meanings and are reserved for respected community leaders. When these items are worn by models or festival-goers without understanding their cultural significance, they are reduced to mere costume pieces, stripping them of their original meaning. Similarly, major fashion brands have come under fire for appropriating textiles and designs from traditional artisans without giving them credit or compensation. High-end fashion houses have, at times, mass-produced garments that imitate handmade Indigenous or African designs, selling them at exorbitant prices while the original artisans remain in poverty. This form of cultural appropriation not only disrespects the traditions of these communities but also economically exploits them, as they do not receive any financial benefit from their cultural expressions being commodified. Music and dance have long been spaces where cultural appropriation is both widespread and highly debated. Many genres of popular music, such as rock, jazz, hip-hop, and reggae, have roots in Black and Indigenous communities but have often been co-opted by mainstream (predominantly white) artists who reap the financial rewards. This pattern has repeated itself throughout history, with Black musicians creating innovative musical styles, only to see them popularized and often diluted by white performers who gain more commercial success [5].

Conclusion

The ethics of cultural appropriation in art and entertainment involve complex questions of power, representation, and creative freedom. While cross-cultural influences are inevitable and often enriching, the exploitation of marginalized cultures for profit or aesthetic appeal can reinforce historical injustices.

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Respectful cultural exchange requires acknowledgment, collaboration, and an effort to amplify the voices of the communities being represented. Ticktack and other social media platforms have amplified this issue, as viral dances often gain mainstream attention through influencers who may not acknowledge or compensate the original choreographers. This was evident when Ticktack influencers popularized dances created by Black artists without giving them due credit, leading to widespread criticism and demands for greater recognition of Black creators in the entertainment industry. As conversations about cultural appropriation continue to evolve, the entertainment industry and artists must navigate these issues with greater sensitivity and responsibility to ensure that artistic expression remains inclusive and ethical.

Acknowledgment

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Conflict of Interest

None.

References

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