



A Qualitative Exploration into Consumers' Perceptions and Experiences with Cultural Appropriation

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Cultural appropriation is defined as “the taking—from a culture that is not one’s own—of intellectual property, cultural expressions or artifacts, history and ways of knowledge.” (Ziff & Rao, 1997, p.1). There is increasing evidence that a culture’s aspects are “borrowed” by outsiders that cause profound offense to insiders (Rogers, 2006; Young, 2005). There are few studies on how people perceive or experience cultural appropriation. Students, as consumers and future professionals, have the power to change social, cultural, economic, or political conditions in various industries, at all levels including design, manufacturing, and marketing. Higher education should impart skills and values to students for social progress and knowledge advancement. Thus, the purpose of this descriptive qualitative research was to understand students’ perceptions and experience with cultural appropriation and discuss how they can be better informed through education.

Method

A total of 116 business students in the Midwest participated in an online discussion forum and answered a list of questions. Instead of providing definitions of cultural appropriation, students were encouraged to research and discuss what they think cultural appropriation means and share their experiences and solutions with peers. The discussion topics included (1) their own definitions of cultural appropriation and how they differ from cultural appreciation, (2) examples of cultural appropriation in their daily lives, (3) ways to avoid appropriating a culture or community and educate themselves toward better understanding and practice, and (4) possible advice for marketers or designers to avoid cultural appropriation. These questions were formulated to achieve the learning objectives of Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy for Learning (Krathwohl & Anderson, 2009), including (1) recognizing the concept of cultural appropriation, (2) understanding and translating it into their own words, (3) applying what they have learned into their daily lives, (4) analyzing real-world practices, and (5) evaluating and (6) creating new perspectives and ideas.

To further clarify findings and to reflect on their learning activity, we conducted a follow-up interview with 14 participants in the online discussion forum. The interview questions included (1) their previous experience thinking about or discussing this issue, (2) their reactions toward

real-world examples discussed in the online forum, (3) what they learned from this learning activity, and (4) whether they think they had enough learning opportunities about this issue from the school and what other training or learning activities they would recommend.

Findings

Recognizing and understanding: Respondents defined cultural appropriation as follows: (1) done by outsiders, (2) for their personal interest, (3) in an inappropriate or disrespectful way, (4) without knowing the background of the culture, and (5) without permission or acknowledgment. A lack of credit or appreciation of the original culture is the main issue of cultural appropriation (Rogers, 2006). Respondents also pointed out that, as opposed to cultural appreciation, which embraces the history behind a specific ritual or belief and cherishes it respectively, cultural appropriation takes artifacts or cultural property without permission to exploit it in ways that are disapproved.

Applying and analyzing: Respondents shared various examples of cultural appropriation they experienced in their daily lives. Examples included sports teams (e.g., Washington Redskins) using Native American tribal names or images as mascots, fashion brands (e.g., Gucci, Marc Jacobs) showcasing white models wearing Sikh turbans or faux dreadlocks, computer games (e.g., Far Cry 3, Overwatch) inspired by Maori and Samoan cultures, and white artists in historically African American music genres (e.g., Hip-Hop, Reggae, R&B). Respondents also identified several instances of cultural appropriation from celebrity cases (e.g., Kim Kardashians' cornrows, Katy Perry's geisha costume, Rhianna's chola makeup, Zac Efron's dreadlocks) to ordinary people wearing Navajo headdresses or henna tattoos at music festivals or Native American Halloween costumes. This could be harmful, as they misrepresent or create racial stereotypes of already marginalized or colonized cultures (Rogers, 2006).

Evaluating and creating: To avoid appropriating or misrepresenting a culture or community, respondents indicated that education is the most important. Respondents suggested that marketers or designers should research the history of a culture before deciding to use its elements. Respondents also recommended that working with diverse groups at school or at work would be helpful in understanding and experiencing different cultures. Testing a design or advertisement with people of diverse backgrounds before releasing it to the public was also recommended.

In the following interview, respondents, while reflecting on their learning experience, discussed the importance of education for them to be more mindful about cultural appropriation. Many of them pointed out the lack of learning opportunities on this issue at school. Some respondents indicated that international business courses, study abroad programs, or student clubs with diverse students helped them learn about different cultures, but most of them had not

had a chance to think about cultural appropriation before this class, which influenced their previous perceptions. For example, they did not know wearing a “fun” fashion item at a festival could be offensive to a certain group of people; they had never thought that they could be involved in appropriating a culture by using the item or following a style or trend. A respondent pointed out that one may find it difficult to notice cultural appropriation when it does not directly affect oneself. Through this discussion, they learned they should be more careful whenever they encounter such cases. One respondent said that she will voice her opinion more about this issue when she sees examples in front of her. Most respondents asked for more learning opportunities such as guest speaker series, culture week, or more courses focusing on learning diversity and culture.

This discussion was effective in increasing students’ awareness of cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation is partly due to the lack of understanding around the line discerning right from wrong (PBSEducation, 2019); thus, it would be necessary to educate students about cultural appropriation and its harmful effects by providing resources and learning opportunities.

References

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