

*An Exploration of the Awareness of Culture Appropriation  
in Ireland and the Significance it may have on Consumers'  
Brands perception'.*

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## ABSTRACT

Cultural appropriation has gained some major attraction and attention in the last few years and landed itself very predominantly within the depths of social media. With consumers becoming more politically correct and social media providing a platform for numerous arguments and debates, the topic has become a controversial societal issue in which this study wishes to investigate (Arya, 2021). Many brands have been caught in the crossfire of the cultural appropriation debate and have been exposed to major scrutiny by the harsh critics of the world (Gartner, 2019). Could this alleged exploitation of indigenous groups have an impact on a brand's reputation and have an impact on consumers' perception of the brand?

This dissertation aims to explore the thoughts and ideas of Irish consumers in relation to cultural appropriation and to understand the awareness of the topic in Ireland. Secondly, the researcher wishes to examine in depth if an accusation of cultural appropriation would alter a consumer's brand perception. Several authors provided a foundation for the researcher, laying down the existing knowledge in the area and providing context to the dissertation. This also highlighted the research gaps to the author and the specific areas in which are underdeveloped. The gaps in the literature regarding cultural appropriation and brand perception are tackled in this study.

A qualitative research approach was taken for the purpose of this study drawing on a small sample size of five semi structured interviews. The inductive method supported this process and allowed for an efficient data collection and analysis. The main findings from this study suggested that there is a very present awareness of the topic 'cultural appropriation' amongst the Irish consumers. In relation to brand perception, it would come down to the severity of the act committed by the brand in question. In saying this, if a religious symbol is misused or misrepresented by a brand, this would cause a consumer's brand perception to alter.

Further areas of potential research and expansion were suggested in the conclusion and recommendation chapter of this dissertation.

# Submission of Thesis and Dissertation

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## 1.0 Background to the Study

Cultural appropriation has been circulating for decades as scholars and articles have discussed its relevance in terms of anthropology and indigenous studies. According to Matthes (2016, p.343) cultural appropriation can be defined as “*misrepresentation, misuse, a theft of the stories, styles, and material heritage of people who have been historically dominated and remain socially marginalized*”. It can be further explained as the unlawful taking of a person's intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, or artifacts without that person's consent (Pozzo, 2020). In recent years, the term has been launched into the modern media and heightened by social media, generating a controversial conversation amongst brands, consumers, and critics. As the modern-day consumer has developed a growing demand for political correctness, this study wishes to explore the awareness of cultural appropriation amongst the everyday consumers. Research on cultural appropriation in relation to marketing and branding is minimal and therefore the main aim of this research is to understand the impact of cultural appropriation on the consumers brand perception (Freire, Gertner and Gertner, 2022).

## 21.1 Gaps in Literature

The greatest research gap in the literature is the awareness and understanding of cultural appropriation amongst consumers. The one study investigating some elements of this is ‘Cultural appropriation and Destination Brand’ (Freire, Gertner, & Gertner, 2022) wherein the authors evaluate consumers’ awareness of the cultural appropriation within a destination and tourism context. In relation to cultural appropriation and brand perception, the research and evidence seems virtually non-existent. There are a number of studies focusing on cultural appropriation and the fashion industry, but this study focuses on a wider perspective, understanding consumers’ broader perceptions of all brands. Another similar study discusses the utilisation of cultural elements from an ethnic group and how it may lead to a negative brand reputation. Although certain components of this study are similar, Falla (2021) keeps the study in the scope of the fashion and luxury industry and only focuses on Colombian consumers. In terms of the research question that is being explored in this study, as of now, there is no study conducting this and gaining these insights amongst Irish consumers.



## 1.2 Academic Justification

This research has the potential to educate people about an important topic and add value to the current literature that exists. By creating a conversation people may be more aware of how to respect, embrace and appreciate cultures without misrepresenting them. This is also relevant from an industry point of view, marketers' advertisers and even designers could take something from this piece of research and learn to how to embrace and recognise other cultures without offending them.

## 1.3 Research Aims

The main aim of this study is to gain some profound insights surrounding the awareness of cultural appropriation in Ireland. The author wishes to generate the thoughts, opinions, and ideas of consumers in relation to the topic of cultural appropriation while gathering their understanding of the concept. The researcher wishes to investigate where and how consumers became aware of the concept of cultural appropriation and in particular if their knowledge was heightened by social media.

Subsequently, the second purpose of the study is to understand if their opinions would have any impact on their brand perceptions and or alter their perspectives of the brands they admire. The study wishes to explore the impact of cultural appropriation on their purchasing decisions and if an event of cultural appropriation would change their opinion on the brand at stake. The author wishes to validate the research gaps with concrete evidence relating to brand perceptions and cultural appropriation and investigate the existing research that stands.

## 1.4 Research Questions

Main Research Question: 'Explore the awareness of culture appropriation in Ireland and the significance it may have on consumers' brands perception'.

The research question stemmed from the author's interest in the topic of cultural appropriation. Additionally, in the last year the researcher has found a passion for marketing and branding which therefore landed the link in the question. The interesting and controversial features in the concept drove the research. Thirteen research questions were created and developed deriving from the original research question, in order to achieve the research objectives. The research questions can be found in the appendix section of the dissertation.

## 1.5 Method and Scope

Taking into account that the research aims, and objectives of this study is to generate a conversation and gain insights through personal opinions, perspectives and perceptions, qualitative research deemed the best option. Five semi-structured interviews were conducted due to the timeframe of the study and to allow as much of an opened ended conversation as possible. The methodology section discusses the other options available and why this approach saw best fit. As discussed, due to the time constraint the sample was limited to five interviews consisting of five Irish participants. Each interview was conducted in person which allowed for body language and behaviours to be observed.

## 1.6 Overview of the Dissertation

Chapter One: Introduction

Chapter Two: Literature Review – This chapter is an extensive review of the academic literature that currently exists on cultural appropriation, linking in with elements of branding and consumer perceptions.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology – This chapter explores the research aims and objectives. This section also evaluates the chosen research methods involved, detailing the approaches for the collection and analysis of data. The philosophy of the research is also discussed in this chapter.

Chapter Four: Research Questions and Objectives – This chapter explores the research objectives.

Chapter Five: Analysis and Findings – This is a chapter articulating, discussing, and analysing the findings from the evidence of the study.

Chapter Six: Discussion – This chapter explores the themes that have derived from the interviews and discusses the insights gained from the study.

Chapter Seven: This chapter concludes the dissertation, including recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.0 Introduction

This chapter addresses the existing literature on cultural appropriation and branding, brand morals and perception while identifying any links between the concepts and highlighting the potential gaps in literature. Shock marketing and advertising may have been a popular tool in the 1980s and 1990s, but the audiences have changed and so has the political and social awareness of consumers. Within the last few years luxury fashion brands and everyday household brands have been called out for cultural appropriation while consumers redefine the scandal's connotations by debating brand communication on social media (Vänskä and Gurova, 2022). This chapter takes a deep dive into cultural appropriation to understand its significance and the importance it may hold for consumers' brand perceptions. The chapter explores various scholars' thoughts and ideas on the topic, from the history of cultural appropriation and how it has developed and integrated into modern media to the concept of converting cultural appropriation to cultural appreciation. This chapter explores the growing awareness and education of consumers and the impact that may have on their decision-making process. Lastly, the chapter discusses the industries and popular brands that have been caught in crossfire of the cultural appropriation debate.

### 2.1 Background of Cultural Appropriation

The phrase "cultural appropriation" first appeared in academic circles in the 1980s, when it was used to analyse themes such as colonialism and the interactions between dominant and minority populations. It involves members of a majority group acquiring cultural characteristics from a minority group in an exploitative, insulting, or stereotyped manner. The term appropriation has been common in the vocabulary of many fields over the last few decades, but according to Ashley and Plesch (2002) it remains theoretically unstable, despite its obvious utility in the academic debate. The term appropriation originates from the Latin verb 'appropriare', meaning, "to make one's own" (Britannica, 2022). Ashley and Plesch (2002) declares that appropriation stems from motivation to gain power over something or someone. Due to its direct link with power, the term was immediately attached to negative connotations when it was first popularized within pop culture. Robert and Shiff (2010) highlight how there are those who act and those who are acted upon in every instance of cultural appropriation, and the implications for those whose memories and cultural identities are twisted by artistic, scholarly, economic, or political appropriations can be disconcerting or

traumatic. Merry (1998) discussed how in the sphere of intellectual property, the term "cultural appropriation" refers to the mechanisms through which dominant organizations take and benefit from subordinate groups' creative, musical, and knowledge productions. Most of the early discussions surrounding cultural appropriation in the literature involve the ownership of art, museums, paintings, pottery and elements of sounds and music. Scholars also focused on both indigenous and non-indigenous cultural properties. Some authors disagree that cultural appropriation is a negative thing and that cultures need to be shared and celebrated (Freire, Gertner and Gertner, 2022).

## 2.2 Cultural Appropriation Today

Salveti Falla (2021) states that cultural appropriation has recently been at the centre of many controversies. With the topic heightened by social media, the controversy surrounding cultural appropriation leads to questions surrounding consumer decision making and brand perception. The topic is up for crucial debate due to the damaging affects it may hold for the minority culture. The growing demand for correctness leads to cultural appropriation affecting not only the minority group, but everyone else involved. If brands are using unauthorized use of cultural elements from a minority culture without expressing appreciation, respect or gratitude towards that culture, consumers are going to have a strong opinion as the number of critics is growing (Freire et al., 2022). In order to understand the impact of cultural appropriation on consumers and their brand perceptions, it is vital to fully grasp and understand the different variations of cultural appropriation and discuss and analyse the literature surrounding the theory and concepts.

### 2.2.1 Cultural Exchange

According to Mosley and Biernat (2021, p. 308) "*Cultural exchange occurs when two groups of equal power engage in the reciprocal exchange of cultural product*". Rogers (2006) discusses how cultural exchange demonstrates the reciprocated exchange of symbols between cultures who obtain power levels in which are basically identical. Cultural exchange has an important role in the literature surrounding cultural appropriation as it represents a baseline for the purpose of illustrating the inequalities involved. Cultures sharing this symmetrical power may exchange genres, rituals, technologies, religious beliefs, visual arts, and music. Often times the equality of power may not hold a high level of significance in cultural exchange nor is it an easy thing to identify, for example in relation to Japan and the US, although on many levels they do have similar levels of power, Japan's ownership of

international media companies could have some influence on the US culture. Similarly, US-owned media businesses with a significant presence in Japan may have an impact on Japanese culture (Goldstein, 2008). Various Western values, such as female beauty standards, which are reinforced by Western and transnational media channels, independent of ownership, can have unfavourable effects on Japanese society (Darling-Wolf, 2004), as evidenced by the high prevalence of certain plastic operations in Japan. This is evident in the rising rates in Japanese women altering their noses and eyes to make them appear more 'western' (Darling-Wolf, 2004),

### 2.2.2 Cultural Dominance

Berkovich and Wasserman (2019, p. 1042) define cultural dominance as “*a situation in which elements of the dominant culture are imposed on a subordinate one*”. Mosley and Biernat (2021, p. 309) refer to cultural dominance as “*when a minority culture uses elements of the dominant culture; in these cases, the dominant culture imposes its cultural elements onto the minority culture*”. Rodgers (2006) refers to cultural dominance as a situation in which characteristics of a dominating culture are imposed unidirectionally on a subordinated (marginalized, colonized) culture. According to Mosley and Biernat (2021) often times certain elements of the dominating culture are forced onto the people of the minority culture. This can be seen and recognised as cultural appropriation practices that reflect and reproduce societal inequality and systematic injustice but are less likely to be branded appropriative because the dominant group establishes society norms.

### 2.2.3 Cultural Exploitation

Cultural Exploitation is a phrase used to indicate one cultural group appropriating another's creative or artistic forms, motifs, or practices. It is a term that is commonly used to describe Western adaptations of non-Western or non-white forms, and it conjures up images of exploitation and supremacy. Figueroa (2021, p. 994) uses the term cultural exploitation to describe “*describe the use, transformation, or incorporation of a TCE into a product, name, brand, or logo for commercial purposes without the creators' consent*”. TCE's refer to “*productions consisting of characteristic elements of the traditional artistic heritage developed and maintained by a community.*” (Kuruk, N/D).

This involves large companies and corporations taking over the designs, heritages, creations and personal patterns of small communities and cultures and taking credit while trying to gain

profit. Figueroa (2021) discusses the struggles of the indigenous Guatemalan communities as they create and try and sell their traditional crafts but are being raided by commercial websites such as Amazon and Etsy who gain by exploitation. Cultural exploitation is the most frequent act of cultural appropriation and the most commonly discussed in critical or cultural studies literature. The dominant culture often takes the resources needed for consumption from the marginalized or colonized cultures and takes them back to their country without financial compensation. High-profile brands and companies believe they have the power and entitlement to take elements from small minority groups culture such as clothing, dance, mannerisms, makeup, accents, behaviours, and hairstyles and claim, market and advertise it as their own.

#### 2.2.4 Transculturation

Ortiz (1970), a Cuban anthropologist, created the term "transculturation" in 1947 to describe the phenomena of civilizations mixing and converging. *"Transculturation encompasses more than transition from one culture to another. It does not consist merely of acquiring another culture or of losing or uprooting a previous culture. Rather, it merges these concepts and additionally carries the idea of the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena"* (Ortiz, 1970). Transculturation is a phenomenon of the "contact zone," according to Pratt (2007), a noted culture critic. Contact zones, according to Pratt (2007), are *"social areas where various cultures encounter, collide, and contend with one another, often in highly asymmetrical patterns of dominance and subordination"*. Mukherjee (2019, p. 106) refers to transculturation as "a transition from one culture to another". Transculturation allows for a redevelopment and recreation of language, literacy and cultural through the clash of cultures (Arnedo-Gómez, 2008). The research indicates that scholars have predominantly focused on transculturation in the context of artistic creations such as the arts, literature, and crafts (Sundberg, 2006).

#### 2.3 Branding and Brand Morals and Values

Brands reflect the marketing strategy, segmentation and product differentiation that is implemented by the given company. The branding process involves a high level of resources and skills in order to convey to the consumer what personality the brand upholds and how they identify themselves. Branding and brand names allow consumers to develop mental association and at times, an intense emotional connection. Often, consumers base their purchasing decisions off the brands they know, remember and like. Today, consumers are

surrounded by brands and branding as they penetrate every aspect of consumers lives. Due to the high interaction with brands and their strong presence everywhere (economic, cultural, sporting, social, even religion) branding itself has come under scrutiny and developed growing criticism (Maurya and Mishra, 2012). Brands conceptualize their ‘personality’ through their set of morals, values, and beliefs as a company. By doing this, the company demonstrates a symbolic and self-expressive function that can connect and resonate with consumers on a personal level. Scholars suggest that people buy for not only what brands do but also what they mean (Maklan and Klaus, 2011). It is becoming increasingly important for consumers to shop from brands with strong values and morals (Sargeant, Hudson and West, 2008). Authenticity is also becoming increasingly important for consumers and generating more conscious consumers. Brands that lack credibility will have trouble gaining loyal consumers especially if their claims do not align with their corporate activities or products (Kolar and Zabkar, 2010). Under the watchful eye of critical consumers, concerns have arisen over ‘moral’ values when they are seen to be unauthentic or insincere. This can cause cynical associations to arise when a brand comes into question (Jeanes, 2013).

Brand perception is frequently modelled as an associative network, with memory nodes representing concepts linked to brand traits, benefits, and attitudes (Keller, 1993). These associations, according to Keller (1993), can be related to the brand's functional benefits, symbolic value, marketing-mix aspects, consumer experiences and attitudes, and usage scenarios (Dzyabura and Peres, 2021). Often it can be difficult for marketers to navigate around brand perceptions as they can be attached to personal memories and encounters. Measuring brand perceptions and brand associations can be difficult as consumers associate brands with a number of things such as objects, emotions and activities, concept, and scenarios and subsequently, create a brand perception around these individual opinions. Consumers are becoming more politically correct, and this is becoming a more dominant factor in the brands in which they wish to associate themselves with. In order to adhere to and suit the changing needs of consumers many brands have been forced to rethink their marketing strategies. Due to public opinion and political concerns, Quaker Oats readjusted their packaging and logo, Mars food announced they would they be re-evaluating and making changes to their Uncle Ben’s branding, cream of wheat cereal and Darkie toothpaste both faced racism and stereotyping allegations forcing them to change their marketing strategy (Freire et al., 2022). The rise in consumer awareness surrounding politics, stereotypes, racism, and misrepresentation of cultures is having an effect on marketers and how they

operate when advertising and selling their brand (Freire et al., 2022). The growing discussion and mindfulness surrounding cultural appropriation has had a significant impact of consumers' perception of brands and their decision-making process.

In relation to cultural appropriation, Young (2005, p. 138) describes the concept as “dealing with a moral problem”, due to its profoundly offensive nature. Young (2005) argues that if people are ‘offended’ by advertising about condoms due to its sexual nature, then productions that involve racial slurs or cultural appropriation should also be deemed offensive and morally wrong. Arya (2021) discusses how it ‘often provokes moral outrage’.

#### 2.4 Brands Misusing Culture for Financial Gain

Gertner (2019) discusses many interesting insights surrounding cultural appropriation and its involvement in the recent years. Gertner (2019, p. 873) defines cultural appropriation as “*the unsuitable, unauthorized, or objectionable use of cultural elements in a context other than that of the culture by outsiders who might lack understanding and/or respect for the culture in question*”. Recently, cultural appropriation has been scrutinized as a topic across the media questioning the morality of borrowing elements of other cultures for the use of branding, marketing, or advertising. Morality has come into question in large brands misrepresenting, misusing, and stealing elements of minority groups' heritage and culture for financial gain. The fashion industry is at the centre of the cultural appropriation argument; they have been heavily chastised in the media for misrepresenting minority cultures for financial benefit on numerous occasions (Gertner, 2019). Marketers have been forced to change elements of their branding, marketing strategies, logos and some brands have had to reassess products, brand names and advertising activities (Freire et al., 2022).

In 2018, at Milan Fashion week, Gucci models took the runway showcasing its fall collection with Sikh-style turbans (Gertner, 2019). The brand received immediate backlash due to its insensitivity and lack of awareness surrounding the religion. “*The Sikh turban is not a hot new accessory but an article of faith for practicing Sikhs*” (Gertner, 2019). The misappropriation of the religion can tarnish the brands reputation (Gertner, 2019).

Victoria Secret are an infamous brand, notoriously known for committing cultural appropriation and giving no credit where its due. The brand has been condemned on numerous occasions, designing lingerie around Native American symbols of respect and bravery. In 2016, the brand misrepresented African indigenous tribes using dark skinned models to show off animal print underwear, neck rings, cuffs, and tribal tattoos. The same



2016 show demonstrated questionable references to Chinese and Mexican cultures, and the brand was slated for “unnecessarily sexualizing a more ‘conservative’ way of dressing in Chinese culture”. Despite the backlash, companies and designers continue to use cultural features in ways that many see as appropriation. Unfortunately, at times, certain types of these acts have gone unreported and unpunished. More outspoken critics of cultural appropriation are questioning whether it should be accepted (Gertner, 2019).

Recently, there has been a rise in concern over cultural appropriation in a variety of settings, including branding, fashion, and tourism. Many people have expressed their unhappiness with outsiders using cultural aspects without understanding their actual meaning or demonstrating the necessary respect for them (Gertner, 2019).

## 2.5 Converting Cultural Appropriation to Culture Appreciation.

Jones and Childs (2021) describe cultural appropriation as “*commonly cloaked as benign and inclusive by those who are not members of the affected group*”. They discuss the negative impacts on the mis constructed culture and the harmful stigma and ignorance attached to the act and their literature, unlike other scholars, wish to convert cultural appropriation to cultural appreciation (Jones and Childs, 2021). This journal from the Culture Marketing Strategy, discusses the benefits of this, especially in the fashion industry. Embracing the culture and appreciating the layers, diversity and authenticity of a culture can only be a benefit to the brand itself and the beautiful culture that the clothes are being inspired by. The fashion industry and marketers have the power to empower and give credit to a culture instead of receiving potential customer backlash. It is not only the fashion industry who take pieces of another culture and portray as their own, but they are caught in the crossfire in the media about it time and time again. Their carelessness for the black, indigenous, and other cultures has caused the fashion industry viral condemnation, when marketers in reality, are faced with endless opportunities to do better, spreading awareness, promoting diversity, and advocating for different cultures (Jones and Childs, 2021).

Salveti Falla (2021) discusses the limitations of celebrating and collaborating with other cultures without misappropriating or misrepresenting them. Their study wishes to identify the line in which it becomes offensive or inappropriate (Salveti Falla, 2021). Many brands have found it difficult to locate the line between ‘celebrating’ a culture and being accused of cultural appropriation. As consumers’ expectations for authenticity and originality has risen over the past few years, the line remains blurry for brands. For example, Kim Kardashian was

forced to change her brand name in 2019 as 'kimono' reached the headlines as appropriative and incorrect, she took to the stage with an apology and quickly rebranded as skims. Nike also received heavy backlash in the same year for their 'Puerto Rico' modelled airforce as accusations arose, stating that the brand is 'stealing' from the traditional 'mola' design. Dior was also faced with criticism in 2019, as they associated their perfume with the native American culture, naming the perfume 'colonialism' the company claimed it was through as act of celebration. Dior were in fact celebrating, integrating, and applauding a different culture as part of their campaign and they continued to do so in 2020, however aware of the potential backlash they educated consumers on their next collaboration (Falla, 2021).

For her 2020 Resort Collection, which was inspired by Africa, Dior's creative director Maria Grazia Chiuri adopted a new strategy and included the assistance of a variety of specialists of African descent throughout the entire creative process and up until the runway, which was held on the African continent (Mairescu-Murphy, 2021). What are the limits in which brands can praise, honour, be inspired by and celebrate other cultures without receiving potentially harmful criticism and damaging comments? According to Dawnn (2021) the cultural celebration can often turn to cultural appropriation when the culture on the line is not acknowledged. Gertner (2019) argues that when outsiders have not fully educated themselves on the culture they are using or fully embrace the understanding or meaning behind the symbols, that is when culture appreciation turns into cultural appropriation. Córdova (2022) discusses how the fashion industries and designers are encouraged to be innovative, creative, and imaginative and therefore take inspiration from all around the world and different cultures in order to create designs. Nonetheless, it can be harmful to the indigenous rights and cultural heritage in which these fashion designers and borrowing from if the traditional culture is taken out of context and used in an inappropriate manner. It can be acceptable to draw inspiration from old cultures by looking for unusual or unique themes in modern clothing, but designers should take great care to pay respect to these cultures by adhering to several rules.

## Conclusion

Authors and scholars have studied and researched the topic of cultural appropriation in great detail as seen above, but this study wishes to investigate the overall awareness of the topic amongst the everyday consumer and gather their thoughts and ideas on the topic in relation to the brands they are purchasing every day. There is limited literature surrounding the consumer's perception, this study wishes to investigate this, and the awareness and

understanding of the concept. The author proposes that this dissertation explores when and if consumers believe a brand is appreciating a culture and drawing elements of inspiration from the chosen culture or if a brand is simply stealing key pieces of heritage for their own financial benefit and gain. There seems to be a research gap surrounding cultural appropriation, consumer perceptions and their decision-making process. The researcher suggests that there is capacity to further investigate the impact of knowledge and growing awareness of culture appropriation amongst consumers and gain greater insights into the morals and values that consumers uphold.

## **CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH QUESTION AND OBJECTIVES**

### **3.1 Research Question**

As discussed, this is an exploratory study investigating the awareness of the topic ‘cultural appropriation’ in Ireland. After reviewing the literature, there is a potential gap in terms of this question. The second part of the question aims to understand if consumers perceptions could be altered by a brand committing cultural appropriation.

### 3.2 Research Objective’s

As displayed in the previous chapter, there are four main research objectives for this study. The first research objective is as follows, “To explore the overall awareness/ knowledge of the concept ‘cultural appropriation’ amongst Irish women”. The first objective will be an attempt to understand how much current knowledge exists amongst Irish consumers in relation to cultural appropriation. This will demonstrate to the author, the participants personal understanding of the topic and will allow for the author to gather some of their thoughts and ideas on the concept. The second research objective is “To determine whether the Irish population view cultural appropriation as a negative or positive concept”. This is an important part of the study, as it begins the question of cultural appreciation or cultural appropriation. The third research objective is “To identify whether consumers opinions/ perceptions may be altered towards brands who have committed cultural appropriation”. This question will allow for the insights needed to conduct this study, there seems to be a gap in the existing literature in regard to this objective. Lastly, the last research aim that the author is trying to convey is “To understand consumers opinions on brands profiting from the ideas and designs of small minority cultures”. Profit and money play a huge role in the cultural appropriation debate; therefore, it is important to gain an understanding as to where the participants stand.

## CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 4.0 Introduction

The term research is often associated with academics; however, many authors have linked research to the fundamentals of everyday life (Johnston, 2014). Research is an extremely established concept in which continues to grow exponentially. The word "research methodology" is exceptionally broad and has unavoidably been used in all fields of study and inquiry. Research can be defined as a skilled technique in which a scientific process of methodical and in-depth inquiry in a field of knowledge uncovers hidden truths or develops principles envisioned by experience, theory, or observation. Additionally, research offers strategies for achieving goals and attaining objectives. Nearly all fields of knowledge, utility, and subject matter can be the topic of research. The methods, techniques, and tactics used in research differ depending on the goals, objectives, populations under study, goods to be produced, types of outcomes desired, and resources in terms of money, skilled labour, time, and equipment (Agarwal, 2015).

### 4.1 Research Aims / Objectives

The research methodology has a significant role in focusing the aims of the research and achieving the objectives at stake. The following research pursues to identify the awareness of cultural appropriation amongst Irish consumers and to investigate the impact it may or may not have their brand perceptions and opinions.

TABLE 1: RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

<b>Research Objective 1</b>	To explore the overall awareness/ knowledge of the concept 'cultural appropriation' amongst Irish women.
<b>Research Objective 2</b>	To determine whether the Irish population view cultural appropriation as a negative or positive concept.
<b>Research Objective 3</b>	To identify whether consumers opinions/ perceptions may be altered towards brands who committed cultural appropriation.
<b>Research Objective 4</b>	To understand consumers opinions on brands profiting from the ideas and designs of small minority cultures.

## 4.2 Proposed Research Methodology

A framework is an essential element to give the research structure and identify the logical steps in the research design. The Saunders Onion is a tool in which will guide the researcher to the chosen qualitative methodology and allow the author to interpret the findings and develop coherent assumptions. The research onion was proposed by Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2016), who broke down the concept to six elements or layers. The idea is that just like an onion, you peel back the layers one at a time, from outer to inner layer. As a researcher, you must not move on to the next layer, unless you have completed the current one (Melnikovas, 2018). The six layers include:

**Research philosophy:** Referring to a set of principles and beliefs that underpin the viewpoint from which the study is conducted for example positivism or critical realism.

**Approach to theory development:** Involves choosing the appropriate research. Deductive or Inductive.

**Methodological Choice:** Refers to the decision of qualitative or quantitative research.

**Strategy:** The process of how the data will be collected and analysed. For example, ethnography, action research, grounded theory, experiment, survey, case study.

**Time Horizons:** Refers to the time period allocated in which everything is completed in for the research.

**Techniques and Procedures:** Involves the data collection and analysis methods undertaken by the researcher. For example, interviews, focus groups, questionnaires.

## 4.3 Research Philosophy

### Introduction

The philosophy of science includes both conscious and unconscious presumptions and concerns about the nature of reality (ontology), how knowledge and understanding are produced (epistemology), the function of values, and their influences on the process of knowledge creation (axiology). It is important to state the research philosophy of this study and suggest the beliefs and values that influence the design of the data collection and analysis process. In essence, it includes all the decisions and preparations that researchers make when creating fresh insights in a specific area of study (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill and Bristow, 2015).

### 4.3.1 *Ontology, Epistemology and Axiology Assumptions*

In terms of philosophy, ontology discusses the nature of being, to be, and existence, including the broad concept of mathematics' existence. Ontology affects the meaning as well as the

study of methodology. The term ontology means “*the knowledge of what (what is), to be (what for), exist (what happened)*”. Given that ontology becomes a specific aspect of reality, ontology serves as the foundation for carrying out credible communication about that aspect of reality. It can be described as the collection of concepts and categories that are specific to a subject demonstrating its characteristics and interrelationships. Applying ontology as the philosophical approach to the research at hand, would add an element of certainty to the themes at stake and not allow respondent’s individual perceptions and interpretations of their own reality to prevail.

The presumptions we have regarding the type or nature of knowledge are known as epistemology, in other words, how possible it is to find out about the world and gain a better understanding. It’s the way in which we make sense of the world and embody a certain level of knowledge (Al-Saadi, 2014). Epistemology concerns itself with “objective detachment” to the knowledge presented (Aliyu, 2015) although this philosophy involves a reality perceived by individuals, this approach would be less effective for this piece of research as opinions and perceptions of consumers are the focal element of the research question at matter.

Axiology can be simply defined as the notions of right and wrong, good, and bad.

Furthermore, the name "axiology" refers to an attempt to critically evaluate a wide range of already existing and overlapping problems about what constitutes goodness, moral behaviour, worth, obligation and right conduct. The concept of axiology involves itself with the questions related to value, the consideration of what’s good and bad and the evaluation of what is right and wrong amongst humans in society. Therefore, for this particular study, this philosophical approach will be aligned with respondents’ views on what is morally right and wrong in their opinion and if it would alter their perceptions surrounding the brands they love. Cultural appropriation is a highly topical yet ethical topic and therefore the author sees this philosophical approach fit. The role of ethics and values and the values of the study participants are all highlighted by axiology. Judgements can be made surrounding the research question by recognizing the individuals’ values and what they believe to be morally acceptable in relation to branding (Biedenbach and Jacobsson, 2016).

#### *4.3.2 Positivism, Realism, Pragmatism and Interpretivism*

According to Saunders (2007) realism can be broken down into direct realism and critical realism, the research philosophy of realism is based on the notion that reality is independent of the mind. This way of thinking is predicated on the idea that information is developed through a scientific method. Realism is rejected as critical realists believe that social

structures cannot be sufficiently abstracted in research and due to critical realism being excessively value-laden in connection to qualitative research.

Along with positivism, which was rejected, as arguably the goal of positivist research is to "find" the objective reality by devising metrics that will identify the aspects of reality that the researcher is interested in. In positivist research, understanding realities is therefore essentially a modelling and measurement issue. This approach may be altered in some way to suit the study at stake but that would be risking the different realities brought to life by the respondents as individuals (Paré, 2004).

Pragmatism projects a view that reality exists in the world and may be altered by the person viewing the reality, stating that research can be subjective. This aligns with the goals of this study as all respondents' views and opinions are heavily relied on for the completion of this study and its important to recognise the differences within people's opinions. Arguably this philosophy is about finding out answers and solutions to problems and as this study is focused on a exploring ideas, opinions and perceptions this philosophy does not suit this study (Al-Ababneh, 2020).

According to interpretivism, people's experiences and perceptions shape their interpretation of reality, making truth and knowledge subjective as well as historically and culturally placed. The collection of different and varying opinions and perceptions is vital throughout this study, interpretivism recognises that various people perceive different realities, leading to numerous realities. Therefore, interpretivism better suits this study as it accepts the categories that constitute a participant's conception of reality due to their culture, norms, perception, social reality, and scenario definitions (Ryan, 2018).

#### 4.4 Research Approach

An inductive research approach can be described as working from "specific to general", whereas deductive is the opposite, focusing on the general at the start of the research process and dwindling it down to specifics. To do this, the researcher must start with a theory, derive a hypothesis from it, test those hypotheses, and then revise the theory based on the results. In contrast, induction involves making empirical observations about an interesting occurrence and developing conceptions and hypotheses based on them (Woiceshyn and Daellenbach, 2018). Deduction can be referred to as 'working from the top down', but an inductive researcher is a person who works from the bottom up, starting with participants (Soiferman, 2010).



Inductive research starts with a phenomenon of interest, an open-ended discussion as to where knowledge can be explored, an insight gained, and a perception further refined. Through exploratory research, authors are not forced to create a foundational hypothesis and a certain set of questions to be confirmed. The phenomenon or research at stake can be investigated through observation (Woiceshyn and Daellenbach, 2018).

Deductive and inductive research have varied implications for various stages of the publishing process because they play different roles in the advancement of knowledge and adhere to different logics. By contrasting the two strategies, these different implications are demonstrated. Although inductive approach has its limitations such as a need for accuracy throughout the selection and organisation process of data, deductive research is too rigid in its approach, inhibiting the creativity in this research and therefore preventing the full exploration on the brand perceptions of cultural appropriation. (Machila et al, 2018). As a result, the inductive approach is applied to this study, underpinning the research to gain greater insights surrounding the awareness of cultural appropriation and its significance on brand perceptions. Participants opinions, interpretations and perceptions are a fundamental element of this research and are aided by the axiology philosophy of this study.

Quantitative (deductive) and qualitative (inductive) analysis are normally the two basic forms of analysis employed in research. Quantitative research often involves statistical analysis to link what is already known to what might be discovered through investigation (Soiferman, 2010).

#### 4.5 Research Strategy

(House, 2018) discusses how qualitative research is designed to “understand human behaviour” through an explorative and interpretative approach and quantitative research is a way to “explain human behaviour” through analytical-nomological data access methods. The quantitative approach is a much more mathematical method, transferring the data and findings into legible statistics, this can be limiting at times as it’s not always easy to quantify a participant’s perspective. On the other hand, qualitative research explores the meanings of people lives, discussing perceptions, opinions, and expressions and through this finding are developed and underpinned.

Qualitative research is extremely valuable in relation to gaining personal opinions and consumers perceptions therefore it is used for this study. It allows the researcher to engage in conversations and dig deeper into the question of “why?” in relation to cultural appropriation.

This method will be applied to the study in the form of semi-structured interviews. This form of qualitative research gives the researcher the platform to gain an in depth understanding of the attitudes, perceptions, and decision-making process behind consumers (Rosenthal, 2016). There are a number of ways to undergo the qualitative research and various options to choose from, for example observations, interviews and focus groups. In relation to focus groups, this method was rejected due to the personal and sensitive topic at hand. Cultural appropriation deals with some sensitive and ethical subjects and therefore gathering the perceptions of a group of people is insensitive and inappropriate. The ethical issues regarding the topic may also lead to people's opinions being influenced by others. In relation to observations, due to the time frame and budget of the study, this method was rejected. Semi-structured interviews are the approach chosen to conduct this study as it allows for flexibility in the questions and answers which will permit for this exploratory study. The goal is to ask open ended questions to gain deep and meaningful insights surrounding the topic.

#### 4.6 Qualitative Data Primary Collection

Saunders et al. (2019) discuss how interviews can be categorised into three types, structured, semi-structured and unstructured. As discussed previously, due to the investigative and empirical composition of this study, semi-structured interviews will be conducted. This method is not too restrictive in relation to questions and will present the respondents with open ended questions in which they can feel as comfortable as possible to go into as much detail with. Six interviews will be carried for the duration of 30 minutes to an hour, a number of topics and themes will be explored which are all directly related to the research question. An interview guide will be provided to the interviewee with approximately 13 questions derived from the research question to help explore numerous respondents' perspectives more thoroughly and methodically in order to make the most of the interview time. They also help to keep the interview focused on the intended course of action (Jamshed, 2014).

#### 4.7 Population Sample

Robinson (2014) discusses how the use of sampling in qualitative approaches is essential and how there is a four-point approach when addressing sampling. Defining a sample universe, choosing the sample size, selecting a sample strategy and lastly the sourcing the sample. sample Universe: This element involves the criteria of the people in which you choose to interview and any certain attributes they need to obtain. In relation to life experiences. This study is to investigate the awareness of cultural appropriation and explore the affects that that

may have on women's brand perceptions. Therefore, for the purpose of the study the interviewee must be a female between the age of 18-24.

**Sample Size:** Both theoretical and practical factors affect the sample size employed for a qualitative project. The majority of studies need to make a tentative decision on sample size during the initial design stage, which is the practical reality of research. A sample size that is small enough to allow for an in-depth analysis of each case and for individual instances to have a locatable voice within the study is often sought in interview research with an idiographic purpose. . These factors lead to the recommendation of 3 to 16 participants for a single study for researchers using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, with the lower end of that range being indicated for undergraduate studies and the upper end for larger scale financed projects (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). This range of sample sizes allows for the development of cross-case generalizations while protecting the researcher from data overload and allowing participants to be given a definite identity rather than being absorbed into an anonymous component of a greater total. Therefore, for the purpose of the study and the resources allocated, six interviews will be carried out.

**Sample Strategy:** Convenience sampling is undertaken for this study in order to find participants who meet the criteria of the study. Social media is the tool used to find the people who match the criteria (Robinson, 2014).

**Sourcing the sample:** This stage of sampling requires not only practical and organizational skills, but also ethical skills and sensitivity; prior to any agreement to participate, all potential interviewees should be informed of the study's objectives, what participation entails, how anonymity is protected, and any other information that will help them reach an informed, consensual decision. The degree to which a qualitative study addresses and clarifies these four issues has ramifications for its coherence, transparency, effect, and dependability (Robinson, 2014).

#### 4.8 Analysing Qualitative Data

The five semi structured interviews took place in person aiming to have the maximum level of engagement possible. After the interviews were conducted, the researcher must gather and organise the data. This involves exporting the transcripts of the interviews, reading, and highlighting any errors throughout the conversation and implementing the analyses. After the recordings were exported to transcripts via an app, the transcripts were printed and read by author a number of times. Highlighting key points, analysing key themes, and recognising the

comparability's and contrasting scripts were all a part of the analysis procedure. For an efficient process of analysing the data, it was vital to listen carefully to all of the participants and interpret their opinions in an accurate way.

#### 4.9 Ethical Issues

The growth of research programs has led to a stronger focus on ethical issues in human subject's research. Regulations provide a strong emphasis on concerns related to research ethics, including subject safety, informed consent, privacy, and confidentiality (Zimmer, 2020). Due to the sensitivity of this topic, there are ethical concerns at stake, therefore the researcher submitted a full ethical review form to the National College of Ireland prior to the study being conducted. The interviewees were also provided with an ethical form via email outlining the purpose of the study, the purpose of their personal involvement, consent to the recording and lastly, the form stated the participants were welcome to withdraw from the process at any point. At the beginning of the face-to-face interviews, the author reiterated to the participants that they were being recorded for research purposes. All of the interviewees were over the age of 18 and were made feel as comfortable as possible throughout the course of the interview.

#### 4.10 Limitations to the Research.

Ross and Bibler Zaidi (2019) discuss how every study, without exception, has its limitations. The main limitation of this study was down to the sample size. The research consisted of five interviews; this small sample size can hinder the accuracy of the data leading to inconclusive findings due to the possibility of generalisation.

This study investigated the thoughts and opinions of consumers from an Irish perspective. The interviewees discussed how they cannot completely comment on some elements of the research questions as their culture has never been exploited, misused, or taken for financial gain. Some participants stated that they have never received any mistreatment in terms of race, discrimination or unrightful use of culture. This led to a lack of insight in some areas.

## CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

### 5.0 Introduction

This chapter is an evaluation of the five face-to-face interviews that were conducted over the course of this study. The aim of this chapter is to articulate the feelings and emotions of the participants in an accurate and organised manner while gathering important insights and findings. The author wishes to portray the data through emerging themes and direct quotations from the interviews based off the four research objectives that were stated in chapter three, research methodology.

### 5.1 Qualitative Research Findings

#### 5.1.1 Objective One: **“To explore the overall awareness/ knowledge of the concept ‘cultural appropriation’ amongst Irish women”**

##### 5.1.1.1 The awareness of cultural appropriation.

All five participants were aware of cultural appropriation. Interestingly, three participants used celebrity Kim Kardashian to describe the concept in their own words. The fourth participant mentioned Kim Kardashian shortly after, and the fifth mentioned Kylie Jenner in the beginning of her interview and Kim Kardashian at the end. Therefore, all five participants associated Kim Kardashian with their explanation and understanding of cultural appropriation in some aspect.

Participant one expressed *“The only example I have heard of it, but only in like the Kardashians is not example when Kim Kardashian and her child North, I think had the, the hair braids and the dreadlocks”*. Participant two stated that *“Taking from the black culture, like, um, especially like Kim Kardashian and all of the Kardashians really”*. In relation to cultural appropriation and an example that came to mind for participant three was *“I think the whole Kardashian family with the like black American culture and everything*. Participant four discussed their thoughts on cultural appropriation stating that *“The first person that would come to my mind would be Kim Kardashian has been a lot in the media of, um, her using culture appropriation, which would be like adopting minority groups, clothing, and, um, hair styles and things like that”* And lastly, when participant five was asked about their understanding of culture appropriation their definition was as follows *“Yeah. So, it's basically a certain ethnicity or culture adopting someone else's, um, cultures, a part of their*

*culture, like say for example, Kim Kardashian, she has been kind of widely known to, you know, be stealing, like basically looks from other cultures”*

Vaughan-Bonas (2019) discussed how Kim Kardashian exemplifies cultural appropriation after the reality star photographed herself with braids captioning it "Bo Derek" and posting it online. Kardashian West's hairstyle, which is known as Fulani braids, is unmistakably of African descent, meaning she invalidated the history of the hairstyle and the unfavourable treatment many black women receive simply for choosing this kind of self-expression. Regardless of the value they carry for black women, Fulani braids and other African hairstyles are continually disapproved of by society when worn by black women, at least until a member of the ruling class dons them and approves them for white consumption.

Phrases used across the board to describe cultural appropriation include *“stealing, adopting minority groups, taking other cultures, robbing the culture”*. Each candidate had their own way of describing the term but overall, they were similar, and they had the general understanding of the concept.

#### 5.1.1.2 The association of cultural appropriation with brands and branding.

Four of the participants could recall a moment where they heard of a brand committing cultural appropriation or they understood themselves that a brand was misusing a culture. All of the brands mentioned were fashion brands. SHEIN, Penny's, Boohoo.com, Pretty Little Thing and Dolls Kill. One of the participants understood the concept but could not link it to a brand in the act. None of the candidates mentioned any marketing campaigns or advertisements, this is interesting to note from an industry point of view.

#### 5.1.1.3 The channels of exposure to cultural appropriation

Every participant stated that they only heard about the concept 'cultural appropriation' through social media. Twitter, Instagram Facebook articles and TikTok were all mentioned, and the last channel was YouTube.

Participant four discussed how TikTok solely educated her on the issue and generated new thoughts in her mind on the idea. TikTok led her to question certain elements and clothes she was wearing and wonder if it was morally right. TikTok is deemed to be an educational platform spreading awareness around the topic. Participant four: *“Probably from the likes of TikTok and people calling out these brands, my perspective probably would've changed now. Um, after being educated about it”* Participant four: *“Yeah, like I said, if I would've not had the influence of other people on TikTok in the media, I probably wouldn't have thought*

*anything*” Participant five also granted how TikTok was her main source of education when it came to cultural appropriation. Participant five - *“Um, also like I've seen a lot of things, like, especially TikTok. TikTok was really like opened my mind to it of like people just like, like braiding their hair”*.

Participant three discussed an eye-opening video she watched on TikTok, discussing the use of Jamaicans traditional Rastafarian colours for fashion uses and brands not giving credit where its due. It made her open her mind more to what cultural appropriation is. The author had preconceived assumptions that social media would heighten and educate people about cultural appropriation but not to the extent that it is the only platform educating people about the concept and spreading awareness and knowledge. The participants agreed that if it wasn't for social media, they would have never come across the term cultural appropriation. One participant highlighted how it was not taught in school. Participant one *“Well, yeah, because that's the only reason why I know about cultural appropriation is social media. So obviously it has brought an awareness to everybody”*.

### 5.1.2 Objective Two: **“To determine whether the Irish population view cultural appropriation as a negative or positive concept”**

#### 5.1.2.1 Cultural Appreciation vs. Cultural Appropriation

When the participants were asked *“Do you believe big brands are celebrating, embracing, and appreciating minority cultures designs when they incorporate them into their products”* the answers completely varied from yes to no and an unsure answer. Participant one: *“Yeah. Like it's a compliment, isn't it?”* Participant two: *“I don't know, maybe in certain ways”*

One participant discussed how it's not appreciation unless the products are marketed and advertised as that culture, and recognition and credit of the culture is shown to the customer, *“if that's your aim, you need to like market it that way. Yeah. So, market it as a celebration of this group”*. The last two participants believe that these big brands are not appreciating minority cultures in any way, and they are just utilizing them for their own gain *“No, I don't. I think it is more just for profit”*. The overall consensus from the conversations suggested that big brands don't take from minority cultures to embrace and appreciate the culture, therefore attaching negative connotations to the concept of cultural appropriation.

#### 5.1.2.2 Mark Jacobs Image – Positive or Negative

The overall feedback and discussion of the images presented were extremely mixed. An image of Marc Jacobs models (image 1 highlighted in the appendix) generated varied opinions, participant one described it as looking “great” and “good” attaching positive links to cultural appropriation. Participant two didn’t deliberate whether image one was a negative or positive situation, she knew the image shown can be used as a “protective hairstyle” and she felt as though she couldn’t particularly comment on the image as she’s not a part of the culture that originates that hairstyle. Participant three shared similar thoughts, she stated clearly that this is cultural appropriation but wondered how people from black culture would feel about the situation, this demonstrates to the author that even though the participant feels that cultural appropriation is being committed there is no strikingly negative opinions attached to the situation or brand. Participant four stated , *“I probably wouldn't have personally thought anything from it”* before she was made aware of similar situations on TikTok involving dreadlocks.

#### 5.1.2.3 Gucci Image – Positive or Negative

The majority of the participants were slightly shocked by this image (image 2 highlighted in the appendix) and attached feelings of disappointment and confusion to the situation. The analysis found evidence that participant one changed their overall opinion on cultural appropriation when religious aspects emerged, *“I think that in that instance, I wouldn't be into that now at all”*. Participant two discussed an interesting insight that Gucci may have a strong influence on other brands, and this could cause a negative knock-on effect on smaller brands, this demonstrates to the researcher a negative suggestion attached to this act of cultural appropriation *“And then every, like, smaller brands always take from the big luxury brands as well. So that's going to start a whole spiral of all of this and there's actually so much more weight to it”* Participant four felt as though this is a fashion item being sold to people who are not a part of the Islamic religion, therefore its extreme cultural appropriation. The participant demonstrated frustration in her voice as she discussed how Gucci will gain a big profit from it. Participant five demonstrated complete anger and shock in relation to the Gucci image, deeming how inappropriate it is *“Oh my God. Like I just don't think that's appropriate at all. Like it's um, it's part of their ceremonial dress. Yeah. Like it's part of their religion. Yeah. So, like that's absolutely insane or really, really inappropriate”*. Evidently, the participant feels extreme negative implications of this kind of cultural appropriation. The author wanted to gauge how opinions may sway surrounding cultural appropriation when



religion was involved. It is clear that four out of the five participants felt much stronger about cultural appropriation when religious attributes were concerned, demonstrating more feelings of frustration towards the brand and particularly feelings of empathy towards the people of the Islamic religion. Participant two discussed an anecdote of an Islamic women who had to remove her hijab in the airport, this image triggered this emotion for her, bringing her back to that time of discrimination when she saw this image of Gucci. As discussed, only four out of the five participants attached negative connotations to the Gucci product. In contrast, participant four, felt as though the Islamic culture themselves should have high-end luxury options, just as anyone else, therefore justifying the high price for the product and stating that the brand was simply supplying “*options*”.

#### 5.1.2.4 Pretty Little Thing Image – Positive or Negative

This image (image highlighted image 3 in appendix) raised mixed opinions but was also recognised by three of the participants, demonstrating social media exposed Pretty Little Thing and Little Mix for this collaboration as this was picked up by the participants. Words used when discussing this image include “controversial”, “robbing” and “steal”, overall, the general feedback towards with the brand itself was negative, so the association with cultural appropriation did not come to the participants as a surprise. This image led the participants to a quick and easy answer, that they were not surprised or impressed with the actions of Pretty Little Thing, and they felt as though they would try and make a profit in any form possible. This suggests to the author that the association of cultural appropriation with fast fashion brands is more commonly known and watched by the consumer. Four out of the five participants stated they would not purchase this look, nor do they have any intentions of purchasing from Pretty Little Thing due to their overall poor ethical standards.

#### 5.1.3 Objective Three: **“To identify whether consumers opinions/ perceptions may be altered towards brands who committed cultural appropriation”**

##### 5.1.3.1 Brand Perceptions Shifting

The author wished to gain insight surrounding branding and cultural appropriation. It was important for the researcher to identify whether a brand committing cultural appropriation had a significant impact on the consumers brand perception. Especially if the consumer is fully aware of the acts of the company. Similarly, to the other questions, the answers varied considerably.

#### 5.1.3.2 Mocking another culture

As anticipated, participant one discussed her shopping habits would only be affected if the brand was mocking another culture. Not necessarily adapting or borrowing elements, but disrespecting a culture *“I think that, um, if it's disrespectful to the culture, so if they, they brought out, uh, you know, a fashion statement that was totally disrespectful to the culture”*, this participant elaborated and tied the religious aspect back in to her answer suggesting that if a company mocked a religious symbol or something based on the cultures beliefs, this would change her opinion on the brand.

#### 5.1.3.3 Not purchasing a brand due to cultural appropriation

Participant two discussed that cultural appropriation would most likely change her opinion, but it may depend on the severity of the situation. The participant felt as though she has gathered these opinions through her exposure of bad branding in her college course, she stated *“I just wouldn't want to support that”*. This evidence highlights that certain situations of cultural appropriation will have varying impacts on the consumers opinion.

Participant three provided an interesting insight that something like cultural appropriation can often show attributes of a ‘trend’, therefore displaying a short-term impact. The participant was conveying that due to the fast pace changing environment of social media and the ease placed on cancel culture, it would be very easy for a brand to be ‘cancelled’ for cultural appropriation, but after a few months, the situation could be forgotten *“social media moves and everything changes like, like every day something different is like being cancelled for yeah. Cultural appropriation”*. The evidence reveals a new insight that even though a consumer’s perception of a brand may alter due to cultural appropriation, it may only occur in the short term. *So, I think people's mind like memories are quite short term in that sense. Yeah. So yeah. Probably would shift my opinion of them, but maybe for the short term”*.

When discussing whether participant five would purchase from a brand knowing they have committed cultural appropriation, she discussed how her brand perception would have been tainted by the Pretty Little Thing collaboration *“Yeah, it would put me off, um, buying from, I haven't bought from Pretty Little Thing in like about two years”*. In contrast, out of the five participants, only one discussed how cultural appropriation is most likely not going to change her opinion of a brand *“at the end of the day, I just, I probably would still shop there. Yeah”*.

#### 4.1.4 Objective Four: **“To understand consumers opinions on brands profiting from the ideas and designs of small minority cultures.”**

##### 5.1.4.1 Examining big brands profiting from minority cultures

When the topic of profit arose, the participants opinions were quite alike. The researcher wished to gain an insight into the opinions of the participants regarding their morals and values when it came down to large popular brands profiting from the small minority cultures. After a general understanding was achieved that these big brands have the power to ‘steal’, ‘borrow’ or ‘take’ from minority cultures through their designs, patterns, and heritage (which the participants viewed in the examples shown), it was vital to understand if the consumers felt as if the profits should be in the hands of the brands. Four out of the five participants expressed that they felt it was unfair for these brands to gain financially from the work/ designs that are originated elsewhere. The participants declared, profits should be shared with minority cultures or appreciation and credit should be shown through the products *“but if there was some way, you know, split or yeah way they could collaborate”*. One participant discussed how companies just take advantage of the unique designs *“but they just wanna grab on anything, to make it look exotic if it's from a different culture”* *“they're making all the money like for, um, something they didn't create”*. The participants demonstrate the injustice for the unfair acts performed and discuss how something should be given to minority cultures *“if they're going to steal something from the culture, at least give something back”*. In contrast, one participant elaborated on their opinion surrounding profit stating *“People want to buy though those outfits because they look good, then Pretty Little Things brought it, brought them out. Why wouldn't you”*

##### 5.1.4.2 Giving the culture context

Participant five discussed how it may be okay for the brand to make money from the products or keep all of the earnings, if the owners are from the culture at matter and place a strong meaning and emphasis on the elements of the culture, providing the history and background *“I don't really think it's fair to be honest, unless like the brand, you know, the like main people running the brand are from that culture and said that they like, you know, or if they kind of put out more of an educational thing on behind their designs”*. This evidence demonstrates how once the elements used are presented in a way which highlights the culture, provides background, and gives context to the cultural elements, the consumers don't feel any negativity towards the brand.

## Summary of Findings

This chapter offered a number of constructive insights gathered from the interviews conducted while themes were derived from the research questions. This section provided a valuable foundation for the author and many discoveries were highlighted in which will be further analysed in the next chapter. Substantial evidence was investigated surrounding consumers, their perceptions, and opinions of cultural appropriation. The awareness and emotional association of cultural appropriation, its attachment to branding and the morality of brands profiting essentially from committing cultural appropriation was examined in this chapter and will be explored against the current literature in the subsequent chapter.

## CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

### 6.0 Introduction

This chapter breaks down the data even further analysing it into two key themes/ findings deriving from the research question, while contrasting and comparing to the existing literature. The data here was gathered from the participants interviews and as key themes emerged, interesting insights developed. This chapter discusses the impact of social media on the awareness of cultural appropriation, the discussion develops as religious aspects are explored and lastly, the author wishes to comprehend if cultural appropriation has a strong impact on consumers brand perception.

### 6.1 The awareness of cultural appropriation amongst consumers – Is it just a social media concept?

As discussed in the previous chapter, each participant expressed their own meaning and definition of cultural appropriation, providing the author with the evidence that the awareness is present amongst consumers, and they have a strong foundation of knowledge on the topic. Peters and Brooks (2022) reiterated this point, stating that the growing awareness of cultural appropriation is down to the increased knowledge surrounding the topics of racism and culture inequalities. Participant two mentioned the Black Lives Matter movement and how this refreshed her knowledge and other people around her on topical conversations such as cultural appropriation. Han (2019) discussed how models and celebrities may also have a role to play in the spread of awareness of cultural appropriation, seen on social media. This in fact aligns with the answers of the participants, as each member related back to Kim Kardashian and the Kardashian family, and all five participants discussed how they were educated about or came across the term ‘cultural appropriation’ through one main channel - social media. This leads us to question the importance of the term in the mainstream media. Is cultural appropriation just a hot topic on social media or does the term hold weight in which could strongly sway consumers branding opinions and perceptions. Arya (2021 *page 5*) expresses how the concept is “*Facilitated by social media platforms*” and stripped of its political substance, highlighting to the author that social media may have also hindered the importance of the term in some way.

The participants discussed how they would see any controversial issues surrounding fashion brands and cultural appropriation on social media through the likes of TikTok and this would steer them away from those types of brands, for example Pretty Little Thing. The participants also expressed how they were educated about misappropriation of hairstyles and certain

colour combinations, leading them to avoid these possessions. These findings support the views of Monroy (2018) as he explores the role that social media has to play on the fashion end of things, stating the social media has intensified the phenomenon of cultural appropriation and how it is used as a tool for people to hold other people accountable for their wrong doings and inappropriate behaviours.

The evidence reveals to the author that for the most part, consumers are aware of the topic of cultural appropriation, as stated five out of the five participants expressed a definition with ease. The evidence also reveals that if it wasn't for social media, not one of the participants would have been able to provide the researcher with a comprehensive answer. Social media has a fundamental role to play in the education and awareness of the topic amongst consumers and heightens every element involved with the concept. This is extremely interesting and an unexpected insight for the researcher as it means the older generation may not have any insight into the topic of cultural appropriation (the oldest participant was 53).

#### 6.2 Negative or positive association attached to the term 'cultural appropriation' in the minds of consumers

The initial evidence from the interviews suggested to the author that the term 'cultural appropriation' would deem a negative concept in the minds of consumers as each participant mentioned elements of 'stealing, inappropriate, taking from minority groups' within their description of the term. Upon further investigation, the author revealed that it was really down to the severity of the case in which would determine how offensive the term considered to be for them.

Monroy (2018) conducted an interesting study to analyse the tweets on Twitter which include the word 'cultural appropriation', the initial study showed that out of the tweets that were analysed, only 16% of them were positive and 37.2% negative and the remaining 46.8% of the tweets were neutral. This slightly aligns with the evidence received by the participants as when they were asked whether they believe brands were appreciating the cultures they take elements from, mixed reviews were exposed, and the participants displayed uncertainty in their answers.

Pozzo (2020) discusses how fashion brands have gotten it very wrong in the past by borrowing and stealing cultural elements from minority cultures etc, but in saying that, the public pay much more attention when the misuse of religious symbols comes into question. The scholar discussed how the public are extremely cautious about purchasing from ethical

brands who are willing to respect all religions and cultures in a diverse and an appropriate way, and anything short of this is merely not good enough and puts the brand in jeopardy of being scrutinized by the media affecting the brand reputation. The findings from this study tie in closely with this research as the evidence correlates to the opinions surrounding religious aspects. When religious elements were emerged into the conversation, the feelings towards cultural appropriation became much stronger and predominantly more negative towards the brand in question. As discussed in the previous chapter, the allegations surrounding Gucci committing cultural appropriation by producing and selling a hijab in the accessory section of their clothing store, raised angry opinions and shifted the consumers perceptions of that brand. This demonstrates to the author that the severity of the situation has a strong impact on whether it will shift the consumers brand perception, and religion seemed to gather the most negative comments surrounding a brands action. Therefore, although consumers understand the negativity of cultural appropriation and most of the participants did attach negative connotations to the concept, it seems as though they may be inclined to purchase a fashion or household brand that stole elements from another culture but, in regard to religious elements, symbols or traditions being appropriated and misrepresented, that's where the line is drawn, and their brand perceptions have been altered.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the aim of this study was to answer the research objectives, is there a conversation present in Ireland surrounding cultural appropriation and how aware are consumers on this topic. The researcher really wanted to gather a range of opinions, emotions, feelings, and perspectives on the topic and through the interview process this was achieved. It appears, the awareness of the topic is very much there. Consumers understand the topic and the meaning behind it. The participants, as discussed were solely educated through social media by the likes of celebrities and brands being called out and even TikTok videos stating simply, things that are appropriative and things that are not.

The second major insight in which this study aimed to achieve was associated with branding. The author wished to understand if consumers brands' perceptions would change if a brand committed or was called out for cultural appropriation. Through further discussion and analysis of the interviews and existing literature, it seems that it's really down to the severity of the incident at matter. The participants stated mixed opinions as discussed in chapter three, but one major finding that the majority agreed on involved a religious component. The

participants believed that if religious symbols are being misrepresented by a brand, this would definitely alter their opinions on this brand.



## **CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study was an examination of the awareness of the topic of cultural appropriation in Ireland and an attempt to identify if consumers' perceptions and opinions of a brand would alter if the company was criticised and condemned for committing cultural appropriation. The author wanted to gauge the honest opinions of Irish women and explore how they feel about the concept itself and its connection to branding.

The first objective was to understand how much awareness of cultural appropriation is present in Ireland. As examined in the discussion chapter, the awareness is very much present, as every participant understood the concept and could provide comprehensive examples to back up the definition.

The second objective was focused on understanding if Irish women viewed 'cultural appropriation' as a negative or positive concept, the findings of this objective were varied, as stated, at first glance, the term was described as negative and offensive term, but as the interviews progressed it seemed more about how the cultures at stake would feel. This determines that the concept is related to negative association, but it does depend on the severity of the situation. This ties into the next objective, which involved identifying whether consumers' perceptions were altered due to cultural appropriation. As mentioned previously, the evidence shows that this is truly down to the severity of the situation and the amount of respect, or lack thereof, that the brand is portraying for the culture at hand. In terms of religious aspects, it is clear to say that this would impact consumers perceptions of the brand and therefore affect their purchasing decisions, this finding was evident throughout all five interviews and is consistent with certain academic findings of Pozzo (2020).

The last research objective surrounded the topic of profit and brands misusing cultural elements for financial gain, the findings of this highlighted to the researcher that consumers would feel more comfortable about large brands taking all of the profit, if the brand named the culture, embraced the elements, and provided a background and context to their products. Recognition was deemed to be important for consumers. Other suggestions included sending earnings towards the minority culture, but the overall consensus demonstrated to the researcher that if credit, recognition, and respect is shown throughout the branding and marketing, consumers would be happier.

The main findings of this research suggest to the author that the topic has a strong social media presence, but that may be all. The overall judgements on the situation came down to respect and credit given to the cultures at stake. Although the participants felt as though it was wrong for fashion brands to take from minority cultures, they would probably still purchase from the brand unless a religious line was crossed. In an idyllic situation, brands wouldn't offend other people's backgrounds and commit cultural appropriation, but if embracing other cultures comes with respect, context and even spreads awareness about a culture, then the consumers are content.

What does this mean for brands? Even though the concept appears to live mainly on social media, the platform is a powerful place. The concept seems to be making its way into mainstream media as Vogue and CNN articles have both discussed the topic in depth, meaning that brands should always try their best to be respectful of other cultures, but not be afraid to embrace and appreciate them. As discussed, some of the participants think the world should be diverse, accepting, welcoming, and adopting of the colours, designs, and ideas from other cultures. Once the brand is knowledgeable on the culture, provides background, context and understands where the elements have come from, consumers would be more comfortable.

#### Recommendations for Further Research

This study has gained some new insights into the topic surrounding religion and branding but, there is a gap for further research to be explored. This research study could have been enhanced or further developed if the interviews were conducted with more of a diverse group of people, who's heritage is strongly misrepresented and is often misappropriated. Certain times throughout the interviews, the participants felt as though their opinions may not be as valid as the persons whose culture is being misused. Therefore, a recommendation would be to carry out this same research study with a more diverse group of people from different backgrounds, who's heritage and culture has been a victim of cultural appropriation before. This may have the potential to give this study much more depth and may gain even deeper insights.

A second recommendation is to explore the over 50's category and gather their opinions on cultural appropriation, since the oldest participant for this study was 53. If this study was conducted on an older age group the answers and discussion could have been much different,

due to the platform in which the participants were educated through (social media), this may develop new findings and generate a new conversation.

A third and final recommendation is taking this study from an industry point of view. How do the people in the marketing world, fashion industry and designers feel when they have been scrutinized for cultural appropriation? Do they believe they need to educate themselves further or do they feel as though they are embracing and appreciating the cultures? This further research has strong potential to gain new and interesting insights from a different perspective.

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# Appendix

## Research Questions

- 1) Have you ever heard of the concept cultural appropriation and if so, can you expand on your understanding of it using the examples you have come across?
- 2) Where did you hear about cultural appropriation?
- 3) Have you ever heard of brands being accused of cultural appropriation and if so what your opinion of the incident?
- 4) Have you ever noticed any type of brand borrowing elements of another culture and not stating the culture?
- 5) In 2017, Marc Jacobs sent his models down the runway in hand dyed wool dreadlocks. The majority of the models were white. The look raised concerns and a controversial conversation begun. What are your thoughts on this?
- 6) How do you feel about Gucci launching this product labelling it "Indy Full Turban"? The product was placed in the accessory section of the website of the luxury store Nordstrom and was priced at \$790.
- 7) In 2019, M&S were accused of cultural appropriation as the company launched a "sweet potato biriyani wrap". Biryani is traditional Indian dish including rice, meat, spices, and vegetables, all served in a bowl. The wrap costs £2.80, containing sweet potato, rice, buckwheat and roasted red pepper. M&S received backlash across twitter and other platforms. Do you believe this is culturally insensitive and would this alter your opinion on M&S as a brand?
- 8) Pretty Little Thing collaborated with Little Mix in 2018 to design this 'Oriental' Collection. The items from the collection highly reflect the Qipao, a traditional silk dress that originated in China in the 17th century. Do you have any thoughts or opinions on how Pretty Little Thing may profit from this?
- 9) Do you think it is fair that brands can profit from the designs and creations of small minority cultures? Please expand on your reasoning.
- 10) If a company was accused of cultural appropriation, would it shift your opinions on that brand and if so, how?

11) A lot of Zara's fashion this season had elements of Mexican culture resembling patterns and designs from indigenous groups. Do you believe big brands are celebrating, embracing, and appreciating minority cultures designs when they incorporate them into their products?

12) Do you believe social media may heighten events associated with cultural appropriation?

13) Do you feel consumers decision making processes have changed in the last few years due to consumers becoming more socially and politically aware? If so, please expand

Image 1 – Question 5



Image 2 – Question 6



Image 3 – Question 8

