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Abstract

Harsh critics have relentlessly exposed myriad instances of misuse, exploitation, and misrepresentation of values, customs, rituals, and religious objects, for example, by different actors, such as designers and artists, and in myriad contexts, such as in art, entertainment, and tourism. Instead of being perceived as the appreciation or preservation of cultures, as claimed, they have been condemned as cultural appropriation. Occasionally, they are deemed offensive by members of the culture of origin. In the context of destination image, tourism, and hospitality, the matter can be even more problematic as many places are economically dependent on tourism and hospitality services. A growing number of critics believe place brands in general and tourist destinations in particular have exploited indigenous groups for the commercial purpose of entertaining visitors. This article represents a pioneer effort to build awareness among place marketing scholars and practitioners, particularly in the context of tourism, of the importance, implications, and risks of cultural appropriation to the future of destination image, reputation, attractiveness, and sustainability and advances suggestions for future research.

KEYWORDS

cultural appropriation, destination image, hospitality, place branding, tourism

1 | BACKGROUND

Cultural appropriation is 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. This topic has been increasingly discussed in social networks, as well as covered by leading media vehicles. The cultural appropriation debate has multiple facets, including its ethical, legal, and political implications (Young & Brunk, 2009). Some contend that “[I]n human experience, borrowing and cultural mixture are widespread. This is evident in language, religion, agriculture, folklore, food, and other cultural elements” (Arewa, 2017, April 1, p. 26). Nevertheless, a growing number of detractors are questioning the “morality” of the “misrepresentation, misuse, and theft of the stories, styles, and material heritage of people who have been historically dominated and remain socially marginalized” (Matthes, 2016, p. 343).

The boundaries between cultural borrowing and cultural appropriation can be subtle and subjective, and the correctness of the utilization of cultural elements out of context by culture outsiders has been increasingly debated in myriad settings. In the arts, for example, cultural appropriation is not unusual and can take the form of subject, content, and object appropriation (Young, 2005).

The use of elements associated with a cultural group by outsiders has been increasingly questioned. In 2016, for example, pop star Justin Bieber was harshly criticized and accused of appropriating black culture because of his public appearances with dreadlocks. According to a fan, “People are annoyed cause when black people wear this style they are stereotyped as druggies and are ‘unkempt’” (Oppenheim, 2016). In addition, in 2016, a video with an African American San Francisco State University employee confronting a white student with dreadlocks and accusing him of cultural appropriation went viral (Sivera, 2016). The video has been viewed by many millions of people.

After a presentation of Shaka, a female Polynesian dance group, The Association of Native Americans at Yale censured the performers for “sexualizing and homogenizing Native [American] people, misrepresenting and erasing histories and political realities, and attempting to depoliticize inherently political culture and communities under colonial subjugation” (O'Daly, 2017).

The fashion industry has been at the center of the “cultural appropriation” debate. Some salient examples of public criticism of that industry are as follows:

- In 2015, the Mexican community of Santa Maria Tlahuitoltepec held a press conference to accuse a French designer of cultural appropriation. They stated, “Isabel Marant is committing a plagiarism because the Etoile spring-summer 2015 collection contains the graphical elements specific to the Tlahuitoltepec blouse, a design which has transcended borders, and is not a novel creation as is affirmed by the designer” (Larsson, 2015). The press conference was widely covered by leading media, including newspapers, fashion magazines, blogs, and social networks.
- In the New York Fashion Week Spring–Summer 2018, during a performance in an after-party, rapper Nicki Minaj criticized the fashion industry and designers “for benefitting from black culture without valuing or including the communities where it originated.” She asserted, “Designers get really big and really rich off of our culture, and then you don't see a *motherf-ker* that look anything like us in the front row half the time” (Lang, 2017).
- During a recent Milan Fashion Week, Gucci dressed the brand's models presenting its fall 2018 collection with Sikh-style turbans, drawing intense criticism and media attention. Reactions included: “For Sikhs, turban is not a fashion accessory but an integral part of our religion. Presenting it like that is profane” and “The Sikh turban is not a hot new accessory but an article of faith for practicing Sikhs. Your models have used turbans as ‘hats’ whereas practicing Sikhs tie them neatly fold by fold. Using Sikh/Turbans is worse than selling fake Gucci products” (Rana, 2018).
- Year after year, during the brand's annual shows, Victoria's Secret has used ethnic elements from various cultures to adorn top models who present the brand's lingerie collections on the runway. In 2012 and 2017, eliciting harsh condemnation, models wore feathered headdresses, a Native Americans' symbol of respect and bravery. In 2016, dark-skinned models in animal-print underwear displayed tribal tattoos, neck rings, and cuffs, typical of African indigenous tribes (Victoria's Secret is being accused, 2017). In that same show in 2016, there were questionable references to Mexican and Chinese cultures: critics claimed “the designs unnecessarily sexualized a more ‘conservative’ way of dressing in Chinese culture” (Anderson, 2017).
- In 2018, Adidas and the pop artist Pharrell Williams launched “Hu Holi,” a colorful line of apparel and shoes inspired by the Hindu celebration known as the “festival of colors.” Raja Zed, president of the Universal Society of Hinduism, accused both Adidas and Mr Williams of the “trivialization of traditions-concepts-symbols-beliefs of Hinduism” and demanded an apology. He stated:

“Pharrell Williams and Adidas should have done some homework before taking Hinduism concepts frivolously and using these to make a fashion statement and sell shoes for mercantile greed, some of which contain leather.” He added, “[The] inappropriate usage of Hinduism concepts or symbols or imagery for commercial or other agenda was not okay as it might be painful to many devotees” (Young, 2018).

Mounting criticism has not stopped brands and designers from using cultural elements in ways perceived by many as appropriation. However, recently, these acts rarely go unnoticed and are excused. Louder voices are speaking out against cultural appropriation and questioning whether it should be tolerated. A critical arena where “cultural appropriation” has been pervasive but universally disregarded is “destination image” and tourism.

2 | CULTURAL APPROPRIATION AND TOURISM DESTINATIONS

Some authors contend that cultural appropriation is “morally problematic” as it may involve “misrepresentation, misuse, and theft of the stories, styles, and material heritage of people who have been historically dominated and remain socially marginalized” (Matthes, 2016, p. 343). Despite the topic's importance and sensitivity, it has been largely ignored by place-branding scholars and practitioners in general and in particular by those involved with destination marketing, tourism, and hospitality.

Investigations on the impact of “cultural appropriation” on place-related decisions are rare. One exception is a study suggesting that “the adoption of another country's culture enhances general attitudes towards the country, its companies, and its products, and, hence, purchase intentions by a product made by the country” (Suh, Hur, & Davies, 2016). Study participants were foreign nationals living in Korea who had been exposed to Hallyu, Korean drama, movies, and music. The authors' assumption that familiarity with and adaptation to a culture might be a measure of “cultural appropriation”, however, is inconsistent with the concept's definition. Furthermore, the generalizability of their conclusion that “cultural appropriation” has a positive impact on country-of-origin effect is questionable as they acknowledge in their discussion of the limitations of the study. Therefore, one might question both the internal and external validity of the authors' use of the concept of “cultural appropriation.”

While the tourism and the hospitality industry are key for the survival and prosperity of countless places around the world, an increasing number of people are starting to criticize their impact on local cultures and people. Here, we discuss two cases of successful tourism destinations, Hawaii and Mexico. They are among the most visited destinations in the world. Furthermore, the “cultural appropriation” of Hawaiian and Mexican cultural elements has triggered a great deal of polemic and passionate reactions, as illustrated and discussed ahead.

2.1 | Cultural appropriation of Polynesian and Hawaiian cultures

The commoditization of Polynesian cultures in general and of Hawaii in particular constitutes a vivid example of strong reactions to tourism as guilty of “cultural appropriation.” The economic impact of tourism for Hawaii is settled. In 2017, nearly 9.39 million visitors spent approximately US\$17 billion while visiting the Hawaiian Islands. That year, tourism was responsible for nearly 204,000 jobs in Hawaii (Murar, 2018). Despite the importance on the islands' culture in the marketing of brand Hawaii, a 2010 survey conducted by the Hawaii Tourism Authority found that 60% of Native Hawaiians did not believe tourism had a role in preserving the islands' language and culture (Grandinetti, 2017). Native Hawaiian Amy Sanderson stated, “I guess the biggest insult is that there's no understanding or respect of Hawaiian or local Hawaii culture when people throw luaus or Hawaiian-themed events on the mainland.... [W]hile I don't expect everyone to know everything, especially [about] a state that is almost 5000 miles away, I wish there'd be some respect” (Howley, 2015). Indeed, Tiki bars, torch-lighting ceremonies, and fire knife dances are not Hawaiian (McAvoy, 2012). “Hawaiians have never worn coconut bras, grass skirts and wouldn't give plastic leis a second glance. Yet for some reason—this is what people associate Hawai'i with,” stated Kayomi Kayoshi. She contends, “Dressing up as a Hawaiian is very insulting. Being Hawaiian isn't a costume for me” (Kayoshi, 2015).

2.2 | Global appropriation of Mexican culture

Mexico's culture has gone global. These days, anyone can find Mexican music, tequila, tacos, and margaritas in all corners of the world. Mexico is also one of the most popular tourist destinations, particularly amongst North Americans. The position is well-deserved as the country has a lot to offer to visitors, including paradisiacal beaches, a unique cuisine, extraordinary archaeological sites associated with the Mesoamerican Pre-Colombian Aztec civilization, and a wealth of cultural traditions. In 2017, 39.3 million foreigners visited the country, setting a new record. Tourism is Mexico's third largest source of income, surpassed only by the auto industry and foreign remittances (Mexico's tourism, 2018).

Mexico is extremely proud of its heritage and is glad to teach visitors about its culture. However, there is a growing concern about how elements of Mexican culture have been appropriated by outsiders without the proper understanding and respect. Take, for example, the sombrero. The broad-rimmed wide hat meant to create shade (*sombra*) for horse riders and farmworkers is one of Mexico's national symbols. Many Mexicans feel affronted when foreigners wear it, particularly during national festivities, such as Mexico's Independence Day—which, by the way, is not Cinco de Mayo, the day the Mexican army defeated the French army in the Battle of Puebla in 1862. One person stated, “It can be offensive to some when people from other cultures try to own it [the sombrero], especially without at least trying to understand what it means to the people of that culture” (Dupere, 2017).

Another Mexican tradition frequently appropriated by outsiders is “Dia de Los Muertos.” The origin of the celebration of the deceased loved ones goes back to the Aztecs circa 1800 BCE. The holiday takes place on 1 and 2 November, when the graves of dead ancestors are cleaned, and family members build altars with flowers and “ofrendas,” such as the deceased's favorite foods, drinks, objects, and music. Dia de Los Muertos is definitely not the Mexican Halloween. It has a strong religious and spiritual significance for Mexicans. Locals believe “the souls that visit [the] altars do not actually eat or drink what is on the altar. ... Instead they absorb the aroma and energy of the food, which nourishes their spirits. After the holiday is over, the foods and drinks on the altars are distributed among family and friends, but the foods and drinks are now tasteless and devoid of nutritional value, because their essence is gone” (Moreno, 2016). With regard to attitudes and behaviors of outsiders in relation to the holiday, author and activist Aya de Leon writes:

Dear white people, ...You arrived at the Dia De Los Muertos ceremony shipwrecked, a refugee from a culture that suppresses grief, hides death, banishes it, celebrates it only in the most morbid ways—horror movies, violent television—death is dehumanized, without loving connection, without ceremony. You arrived at El Dia De Los Muertos like a Pilgrim, starving, unequal to survival in the land of grief, and the indigenous ceremonies fed you and took you in and revived you and made a place for you at the table. And what have you done? Like the Pilgrims, you have begun to take over, to gentrify and colonize this holiday for yourselves (De Leon, 2014).

3 | CONCLUSIONS

The unauthorized use of music, dance, artefacts, language, symbols, cuisine, art, fashion knowledge, medicine, sacred objects, or any other cultural element or expression can be considered cultural appropriation, particularly damaging long-exploited and oppressed minority groups, contends law professor Susan Scafidi (Nittle, 2018). Recently, we have witnessed mounting concern about cultural appropriation in various settings such as branding, fashion, and tourism. Numerous people have been quick to share their displeasure about group outsiders making use of cultural elements without understanding their true meaning or displaying the expected respect for them.

In reaction to increasing scrutiny, many sensitive consumers have expressed concerns with regard to the correctness of the use of certain cultural elements. For example, one can find on the Internet people who want to know whether wearing a sari in an Indian wedding or attending a party in a Japanese kimono or Chinese qipao is acceptable or offensive to members of the associated cultures (Hosie, 2018; Koehler, 2017; Marshall, 2017, April 12; O'Dwyer, 2015, August 4). Furthermore, there is a passionate discussion about the issue of cultural appreciation versus appropriation and when one crosses the line

that separates them (Hosie, 2018). The answer is not simple or straightforward.

In the context of place branding, destination image, tourism, and hospitality, the matter can be even more problematic as many places are economically dependent on tourism and hospitality services. A growing number of critics believe place brands in general and tourist destinations in particular have exploited indigenous groups for commercial purposes and usurped indigenous peoples' rituals to create tourist attractions. Many questions require further discussion. For example, is it appropriate to entertain visitors with representations of ceremonies and religions, like Macumba, Voodoo, and Hoodoo, to tourists visiting countries with African-influenced cultures, such as Brazil, Puerto Rico, Cuba, or Haiti? Should visitors to Turkey be taken to visit a shop for a theatrical demonstration of weaving with the purpose of selling overpriced mass-produced copies of Turkish traditional rugs, made by low-paid workers? Is it appreciation or exploitation when tourists are brought to a tea ceremony in China on the way to the Great Wall to sell them teas at sometimes exorbitant prices, way above the market value, produced by low-wage workers? How do Native Canadians feel about tourists displaying in their homes as decorations mass-produced "indigenous" ceremonial objects, inspired by authentic dreamcatchers, without understanding their meaning and showing respect for the culture? Are tourists aware the souvenirs they take home from their trips, for example, an Australian boomerang, are fake? According to estimates, 85% of aboriginal arts and crafts sold in Australia to tourists as indigenous art is fake and imported (Carter, 2017) and does not benefit aborigines.

This article constitutes a pioneering attempt to build awareness among place-marketing scholars and practitioners about the increasing importance of understanding the issue of cultural appropriation. It is critical for place-marketing scholars and practitioners to understand how the next generation of tourists, such as millennials, feels about the matter. Moreover, place marketers must listen to leaders of communities involved, engage members of the groups, and assure that they approve of and benefit from the dissemination and commercialization of their cultural elements.

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