

# CULTURAL APPROPRIATION



## TOPIC BRIEF

As we move towards an interconnected world, the mixing and melting of cultures is inevitable. From new sushi burger fusion restaurants popping up in major cities to high-end designers causally featuring sacred Native American iconography as runway accessories, globalization begs the question: to what extent is it cultural appropriation? Often controversy arises when there is a power dynamic reflected in the systematic oppression of a dominant group of people towards the marginalized group. This is the difference between assimilation and misappropriation. Cultural assimilation is when a minority group comes to resemble a prevailing group by assuming its values, behaviors, and beliefs. For example, immigrants feel compelled to adopt Westernized styles of dress or names that are easier to pronounce in order to be accepted or fit in to their new country. Cultural appropriation is dominating cultures adopting “aesthetic” or “fashionable” styles of minority cultures. These elements may include food, clothing, artifacts, a manner of speaking, hairstyles, accessories, but often fail to represent its original intentions, context, or history. The dominating culture is sometimes praised for popularizing or even inventing the “trend” that minority cultures were once persecuted or discrimination against for. For example, yoga was once a banned practice that followed the hierarchy created by the British empire. Now, it is a popular and commercialized trend that barely resembles its original spiritual and religious roots. To many yogis and South Asians, the significance of yoga seems minimized and aestheticized. Some believe that no group “owns” a hairstyle or type of clothing and that everyone has the right to experiment and try new things, especially if the original intentions weren’t hateful or racist. Others argue that misappropriation feels not only offensive, privileged and humiliating but also perpetuates the exaggerated caricature of ethnic stereotypes. The debate rages on.

## QUESTIONS

To what extent can one group of people copy the look of another culture? Do these adoptions perpetuate stereotypes? Can they? In the case of yoga, do people need to educate themselves on its religious, spiritual and historical context? If so, to what extent are they “qualified” enough to participate in yoga? If not, who is responsible for educating the mass about yoga’s context? How can we as consumers explore new styles while remaining respectful? How can businesses spread these trends and modify advertising to respect and give credit to the original creators?

## ACTIVITY

Look at cultural appropriation in the news and around you. Discuss with your group: what is “ok” and what is not? Here are some examples for you to get started: Miley Cyrus’s VMAs performance that popularized the trend of twerking, based on the traditional West African dance movements, to develop what she called a “ratchet” persona. Festival-goers wearing feathered headdresses, a symbol of the highest and bravest honor that is worn with dignity and respect in many Native American cultures. Kylie Jenner and other non-African Americans wearing dreads or boxbraids, while African American women are discriminated against for being unprofessional due to their natural hair. A non-ethnic girl wearing a qipao dress to her prom without a look into its cultural significance, while Asian girls feel “too ethnic” wearing a qipao dress. Non-ethnic Gucci models wearing turbans on runways while Sikhs abandon their turbans due to the rise of Islamophobia. Searches on Yelp hoping to find an authentic, ethnic Mexican restaurant without the “sketchy, ethnic neighborhood.”