Chloe Mayfield

Communication Capstone

Dr. Bob Bednar

February 1, 2024

Are Balenciaga's Sweatpants Culture Appropriation or Appreciation?

In 2021, Balenciaga, a Spanish fashion franchise introduced a distinct pair of gray sweatpants with boxer briefs attached to the top of the waistband. The design is meant to showcase a more "authentic" piece of clothing. Balenciaga planned a certain narrative, but the way it was received by the media was different. Discussions about whether this unusual piece reflected cultural appropriation or admiration were triggered by it. Debates were sparked by the design, with one of the most common questions being, "Why does it seem like they are appropriating from young Black men?" This query brought attention to the controversy surrounding Balenciaga's latest design and started more general discussions on the fashion industry's need to consider cultural nuances while creating new pieces. This research object helps to contextualize how fashion and cultural appropriation or appreciation are closely related. For example, the boxer sweatpants design demonstrates how designers are remaking clothing items that Black people have previously used. Not a single well-known fashion designer is a person of color. This seems to allow one to believe they are building a new narrative of high-end Black style while also allowing for a specific but targeted view of how non-Black people are copying Black culture designs to produce and profit from. My research will focus on identifying the differences between cultural appropriation and appreciation, fashion, Black culture, Black

designers, and a closer examination of the Balenciaga boxer sweatpants. This will enable me to put my research object into context and explain why and how this assertion is crucial for a person working in communications to demonstrate and provide a clearer understanding to everyone that, even though this has happened repeatedly, it needs to stop.

The "idea of cultural appropriation is multifaceted and frequently controversial, referring to the act of individuals from one culture adopting or borrowing components of another, especially when the dominant culture appropriates parts of a minority or marginalized culture" (Young 1). This phenomenon is widespread in several domains, such as music, art, fashion, language, and rituals. "History has repeated itself with the advent of hip hop music, and white society continues to erase the cultural significance of the art form as it is thrusted further into mainstream culture. While hip hop is often understood to be a music and dance style, hip hop has influenced fashion, language, and attitude", While inspiration and cultural interchange have always been important parts of human history, problems occur when these components are removed from their native cultural context without due respect or understanding (Balanda 7). A primary apprehension regarding cultural appropriation is the power dynamic that permeates these interactions. The commodification or aesthetic use of aspects of a minority culture by the dominant culture can reinforce inequities, promote prejudices, and lessen the value of the behaviors that have been appropriated. Complex cultural traditions are frequently reduced to mere fashion trends as a result, losing their historical and social context and losing their original significance. Because it enables the dominant culture to choose to highlight elements that seem fashionable or exotic while ignoring the struggles and history of the appropriated culture, cultural appropriation plays a role in the erasing of the identity of the oppressed group. This may result in

damaging misconceptions, misrepresentations, and a lack of respect for the diverse cultural fabric these elements are taken from.

Though Culture Appropriation highlights the importance of taking from one culture negatively, which benefits the individual who is not from that culture, Culture Appreciation focuses on the opposite. The positive recognition, comprehension, and appreciation of the numerous traditions, cultures, and practices that comprise different communities worldwide is known as cultural appreciation. Cultural appreciation emphasizes an authentic and respectful engagement with various cultural manifestations, in contrast to cultural appropriation, which is the stealing of components from a culture without knowledge or respect, "Appropriation may seem harmless to a dominant culture, but it is not. Appropriating oppressed peoples' cultures maintains mistreatment of certain groups of minorities in the US and carries on a colonialism mindset"(Jernigan 4). It entails taking an open-minded stance to recognize the contributions that every culture makes to the global fabric of human experience while also learning from, honoring, and celebrating the distinctiveness of each one. Understanding other cultures is essential to fostering inclusivity and enlarging one's horizons. A more tolerant and polite society can result from appreciating and honoring the contributions of all civilizations. It is crucial to approach the appreciation of different cultures tactfully, steering clear of preconceptions and acknowledging the agency and autonomy of each culture. In the end, appreciating different cultures promotes a global society that celebrates diversity and strives for a more accepting and connected world.

Understanding Cultural Appropriation or Appreciation is highly important as it sets the tone to understand why Fashion plays such a large role in this debate of whether or not something is being appreciated or mocked. Style pays respect to customs, ideologies, and past events by allowing people to express their cultural identities via fashion. To inspire designers and

produce works that honor the diversity of cultural history, fashion designers must respectfully acknowledge and incorporate various cultural influences. This process is known as cultural appreciation. This procedure makes the globe a more interconnected place by fostering inclusivity and cross-cultural understanding. When designers practice cultural appreciation, they typically work with artists and communities to learn about the meaning behind the materials they use. On the other hand, cultural appropriation in fashion occurs when designers appropriate aspects of a culture without due respect or understanding, which frequently results in the commercialization of traditional attire, hairstyles, or holy symbols. Whether or if these components are incorporated into fashion with tact, teamwork, and a sincere respect for the original culture makes all the difference. Cultural appropriation can result in the erasure of the cultural identity from which these aspects are acquired, the perpetuation of negative stereotypes, and cultural distortion. "Cultural Appreciation" gives too much weight to the designer's feelings—their good feelings, good intentions, or "appreciation" for another culture—and no weight at all to other feelings. Feelings that fall outside the cultural appreciation framework are rejected as hypersensitivity reactions or "hater" feelings unfairly directed toward the well-intentioned or at least not ill-intentioned designer. Conversely, "cultural appropriation" too quickly reduces the problem to one of utility. The definition provided in the Fashion Institute of Technology's 2017 Summer Institute program schedule is one of countless examples of the common understanding of the term: "Cultural appropriation is the use of elements of a culture by nonnatives of that culture"(Pham 68).

Individuals tend to see a larger increase in this debate of Cultural Appropriation or Appreciation in Fashion because companies such as Prada, Balenciaga, Louis Vuitton, etc. need to seemingly cater to cultural ideals to showcase a stance of we see you. All though the fashion

industry has seen many scandals including claims of cultural appropriation against designers. Examples include wearing traditional clothing, headdresses, or sacred symbols from Indigenous peoples without giving due credit or cooperation to the original community. Discussions concerning privilege, power relationships, and designers' obligations to be culturally sensitive are frequently included in the debate over cultural appropriation. Finding a balance between appreciating cultural influences, accepting diversity, and refraining from exploiting or misrepresenting underprivileged communities is the main difficulty.

To elaborate more clearly on how this ideal of Cultural Appropriation or Cultural Appreciation is heavily prevalent today in fashion, Balenciaga released "Trompe-L'Oeil Sweatpants", known as a pair of sagging gray sweatpants with boxer briefs attached at the waistband. Launched in 2021, this fashion item was made to be a comfortable pair of pants on Balenciaga's end. This product was designed by Demna, a white Georgian fashion designer, who was appointed creative director in 2019. Balenciaga has made clothing for the top 20% of wealthy individuals who can afford their $1000 plus price tag. That demographic is typically "75% white individuals, 10% Asian individuals, 10% Latino individuals, and the remaining 5% or less Black individuals" (Chumo 27). They cater to the top demographic of primarily white individuals by offering them advanced structural pieces, straddling the edge of fashion, and forecasting the future. Spanish couturier Cristóbal Balenciaga created the well-known luxury fashion label Balenciaga in 1919. With its avant-garde designs and creative approaches to style, the brand has carved out a special place for itself in the fashion industry. The brand has come to represent pushing the envelope and questioning accepted wisdom throughout time. But Balenciaga hasn't been immune to controversy. One prominent example is the brand's tendency to transform commonplace, ordinary objects into haute couture pieces, frequently with

outrageous price tags. This strategy has spurred discussions on the thin line that separates creativity from consumerism. Critics claim that the brand occasionally crosses the line into absurdity by commodifying commonplace items at the expense of usefulness and accessibility. Balenciaga's daring and frequently contentious designs are a reflection of a wider discussion in the fashion industry over the relationship between art, commerce, and how luxury is defined in modern society.

Balenciaga has made a name for itself truly, in good and bad. More recently since the launch of "Trompe-L'Oeil Sweatpants" in 2021, there has been a question of whether this fashion house is truly what it was before. With a major increase in platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, they have been able to push out faster marketing and content of upcoming designs and runways. It allows for individuals who are not close friends or celebrities of the brand to feel included in seeing the new fashion of Balenciaga. When the "Trompe-L'Oeil Sweatpants" were launched they were not shown on a social media platform until after the runway show in the Fall/Winter of 2021. When news broke of this design it caused heavy criticism of the brand and the designer of culture appropriating. This established the conversation of whether or not fashion houses such as Balenciaga can get away with cultural appropriation, specifically profiting off of the Black American community. "There have literally been laws that make it illegal to have sagging pants yet fashion designers are profiting off of the same thing Black people were criminalized for. Despicable" written by a Black influencer Devan M. Vilfard and "just a reminder that there has been legislation to criminalize Black people for sagging" followed up by a Twitter stan account named @Blackgirldating, elaborate on how the launch of the Trompe-L'Oeil sweatpants are not a new design but a style that was made and created by Black individuals that Balenciaga is now attempting to profit off of (Li, Hypebeast).

This incident exposes Balenciaga's shortcomings. Highlighted by i24NEWS English in Chicago, Evita Duffy and a Black woman in fashion addresses the sweatpants created by Balenciaga and how the media specifically African American men and women are talking about the disgust and appropriation of what this fashion house has done. Four primary critical perspectives that have been raised about the brand are Cultural Appropriation vs. Appreciation, Brand Identity and Evolution, Representation and Diversity, and Consumer Identity. They have crossed lines by being overly audacious, reckless, and appropriative. Balenciaga has faced criticism over claims that some of its designs are culturally appropriate. Cultural critics address the proper use of cultural elements in apparel and explore the lines separating appropriation from admiration while facing criticism for issues with diversity and representation. Through the media, the brand's capacity to represent a range of identities, body types, and cultures is scrutinized, and it is made clear when they have broken boundaries.

Though Balenciaga has showcased a flaw in fashion, they are not the first and only one who has done this. In a sense, it is the saying, "The second person gets caught". Black culture has been one of the primary cultures that have been appropriated by non-Black designers who are attempting to profit and put their own identity on Black culture. Long-standing and complicated, the appropriation of Black culture by the fashion industry has sparked crucial conversations about cultural sensitivity, respect, and the power structures in the world of style. The growth of fashion is inherently influenced by cultural exchange and inspiration, but issues arise when deeply ingrained Black cultural aspects are removed from their historical context, turned into commodities, and presented without the appropriate recognition or comprehension. Adopting traditional African and African-American hairstyles—"like braids, cornrows, or dreadlocks—without appreciating their cultural value is one of several prevalent kinds of

appropriation. Baggy and sagging clothing is typically linked with African-American men and women, who use this style to stand out and reveal aspects of their identity, gang affiliation, and economic position" (Brown 10). These looks, which have strong roots in Black identity and history, are occasionally appropriated by mainstream fashion without giving due credit, which frequently results in the erasure of the cultural background, by non-Black designers.

"The history of Black fashion not only includes the ensembles that have shaped Black culture for centuries but the lives and experiences of the designers who persevered against all odds from slavery to ongoing racial inequalities"(Brown 5). This brings into play how Black designers have a sense of ownership over Black culture within fashion. The fashion industry's Black designers make a substantial contribution to Black culture's positive depiction and empowerment. When designs are stolen from them and the community "in doing so, and without crediting the creators of the clothes nor paying them to use the designs, their appropriation of elements of Black culture simultaneously infringed on intellectual property rights of Black designers" (Cherid 360). Their distinct viewpoints, life experiences, and artistic interpretations frequently subvert ideals of beauty and inject a welcome genuineness into the world of fashion. To create a more inclusive narrative that represents the multiplicity of Black identities, Black designers actively seek to demolish prejudices. Black designers display the diversity of Black culture and add to a larger discussion on the importance of cultural representation in the fashion industry by fusing aspects inspired by their cultural history. Furthermore, these designers frequently act as role models for the upcoming generation of Black creatives, shattering stereotypes and providing opportunities. Beyond the catwalk, their impact reshapes the business to better reflect the multidimensional beauty inherent in Black culture and influences society's perspectives.

To ensure that designers appreciate and showcase cultural variety without contributing to the propagation of damaging stereotypes or the exploitation of vulnerable people, it is imperative that they strike a balance between admiration and appropriation because, "Black culture allows for white people to enter into a world of unique customs that they can pick and choose from at their own discretion to benefit them however they want. Black culture is more than just hairstyles and hip-hop for Black people. It comes with your very existence being challenged daily and constantly places you in danger" (Lockhart 24). Designers must approach their work with a profound grasp of the cultural relevance of the sources of inspiration as well as a dedication to developing mutual respect and understanding in this dynamic relationship between fashion and culture. There needs to be a clear understanding that what Balenciaga has done is cultural appropriation. Yes, many fashion designers pay homage to Black culture through appreciation but what has been demonstrated and the reaction from the media reaffirms that appropriation is a pivotal aspect within fashion. Fashion may effectively prevent cultural appropriation by cultivating an industry-wide culture of mutual respect, cooperation, and consciousness.

First and foremost, education is essential; stakeholders and designers alike should place a high priority on becoming knowledgeable about the cultural significance of the components they use in their designs. Mitigating appropriation can also be accomplished by aggressively soliciting advice from Black designers with varied backgrounds and experiences to promote diversity and inclusion within the fashion industry. Working together with Black communities and craftspeople from the original culture is essential to ensuring authentic depiction and creating job possibilities. Furthermore, it can be beneficial to set rules and moral principles for the sector that deter the commercialization of traditional clothing or holy icons. In the end, fashion may prevent appropriation by fostering an atmosphere that is more thoughtful and culturally aware, where

originality is valued without sacrificing the deference due to the sources and significance of the cultural aspects being used, "As far as the fashion industry is concerned, such interventions need to incorporate the following: foster public and professional environments that support Black designers and provide them with resources and opportunities to exert agency as they (re)claim and showcase their cultural heritage" (Vézina 36). It needs to be encouraged that non-Black designers are turning to Black designers for guidance and opinions on whether what they want to produce is appreciating Black culture or appropriating it for cash benefit. Black culture is just as important as fashion, but Black culture is not a profit that can be made to fit the needs of non-Black individuals.

Works Cited:

Balanda, Marisa E. "Bodies without the Burden: White Appropriation and Exploitation of Black Appearance and Culture" (2020). Student Publications. 857. https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/857

Balenciaga. "Trompe l'œil Pants - Balenciaga." *Trompe Il Pants*, 2021, www.balenciaga.com/en-us/trompe-l-%C5%93il-pants-blue-675336TLV864011.html.

Brown, Sian Viktoreya. "FASHION THAT PREVAILS: A STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY BLACK DESIGNERS." Cornell University, Cornell University Theses and Dissertations, 2020, pp. 1–68.

Cherid, Maha Ikram. "Ain't Got Enough Money to Pay Me Respect": Blackfishing, Cultural Appropriation, and the Commodification of Blackness". Cultural Studies, Critical Methodologies 2021, Vol. 21(5) 359–364 © 2021 SAGE Publications.

Chumo, Lewis. "Cultural Appropriation in the Fashion Industry: A Critical Examination of Trends and Implications". 2023. International Journal of Arts, Recreation and Sports. 1. 62-73. 10.47941/ijars.1519.

i24NEWS EN. "Designer Pants Spart Outrage, Debate over Cultural Appropriation: Designer Pants Spark Outrage amid Allegations of Appropriating African-American Culture -- but Is It Racist, or 'Cultural Appreciation'? Chicago Thinker...: By I24news English." *Facebook*, 14 Sept. 2021, www.facebook.com/i24NEWSEN/videos/designer-pants-spart-outrage-debate-over-cultural-appropriation/371738134443651/.

Lockhart, Amirah. "A Stolen Culture: The Harmful Effects of Cultural Appropriation" (2021). Honors Theses. 1804. https://egrove.olemiss.edu/hon_thesis/1804

Li, Nicolaus. "Balenciaga Attracts Criticism for $1,190 USD 'Sagging' Sweatpants." *Hypebeast*, Hypebeast, 9 Sept. 2021, hypebeast.com/2021/9/people-arent-happy-about-balenciagas-sweatpants-with-exposed-boxer-detail.

Pham, Minh-Ha T. "Racial Plagiarism and Fashion." *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2017, pp. 67–80. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.14321/qed.4.3.0067. Accessed 23 Jan. 2024.

Vézina, Brigitte. "Curbing Cultural Appropriation in the Fashion Industry". CIGI Masthead. CIGI Papers No. 213 — April 2019.

Young, James O. "Profound Offense and Cultural Appropriation." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 63, no. 2, 2005, pp. 135–46. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3700467. Accessed 1 Feb. 2024.