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# What you can learn from Zara's cultural appropriation faux pas

Zara is just the latest major fashion brand accused of stealing an Indigenous group's traditional designs. By Heather McIlvaine

Spanish fast-fashion giant Zara made headlines for all the wrong reasons last month when Mexico's Ministry of Culture accused it of using embroidery patterns distinctive to the Mixteca community of Oaxaca in its garments without credit or benefit to the Indigenous community.

While the international retailer denied "intentionally" borrowing from or being influenced by the group's designs, according to *Reuters*, the story reignited a debate over the prevalence of cultural appropriation in the fashion industry.

The Mexican government has been at the forefront of this issue in recent years, sending letters to major brands that it believes are profiting from the designs of Indigenous Mexican communities without acknowledging or compensating the people who developed them.

"Unfortunately, these kinds of actions are not new, and the subsequent call outs are reoccurring," Samantha Tams, a former buyer at Saks Fifth Avenue Mexico and co-founder of the Latin American Fashion Summit, told *Inside Retail*.

In addition to Zara, Mexico's Ministry of Culture accused Anthropologie and Patowl of using designs developed by the Mixe and Zapoteco communities, respectively, without benefit. And last year, it accused French label Isabel Marant — and US brand Carolina Herrera the year before — of similar behaviour.

"While it's a tough discussion to have, it is important and fair to do so," Tams said.

"Sadly, there is a very big grey area on what's legal and what's not because there are no regulations or intellectual property rights on these artisanal techniques."

## What is cultural appropriation?

Part of the difficulty of discussing cultural appropriation is that there's an ongoing debate about its definition.

"It has often been represented as either being something that is cultural appropriation or is not. And if it is cultural appropriation, then it's very bad. If it isn't, then it's good. I think it's just a much more complex process than that," Dr Alexandra Sherlock, a lecturer in design at RMIT, told *Inside Retail*.

While some argue that traditional designs don't belong to anyone culture or person, others say there's a power imbalance between different cultures, which makes it inherently exploitative when a dominant culture or corporation adopts the aesthetic of a minority culture for its own gain or enjoyment without credit.

Some common examples of this include non-Native Americans wearing feather headdresses in the style of the Plains people, non-Latinx people wearing hoop earrings or winged eyeliner and non-African or non-Black people wearing Fulani braids. The fact that the history and meaning behind these designs are often lost is a big part of the problem.

"People have been exchanging ideas, trading thoughts, designs and technologies for millennia. Where it becomes cultural appropriation is where you get these major companies taking and not giving back," Dr Emily Brayshaw, an honorary research fellow at UTS, told *Inside Retail*.

## Why it's harmful

For some people, it can be hard to understand how borrowing, or being influenced by, a traditional design or aesthetic can be harmful, especially if they believe they're practising cultural appreciation rather than appropriation. But often, there's an economic impact to their actions.

"For most Indigenous communities, that [design] is their primary source of income. So instead of buying a huipil from a community in Oaxaca and providing them with opportunities such as education, jobs sales go to major corporations," Tams said.

"It also impacts cultural heritage; these techniques are passed on from generation to generation, and with them they carry meaning, and they tell stories. Younger generations in these Indigenous

It's important businesses understand the difference between cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation.





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communities are more economically driven nowadays and leave their cultural craftsmanship aside in search of other opportunities, making it a vicious cycle.”

When global brands swoop in and copy designs without understanding their meaning, it can be emotionally painful for the communities.

“It’s particularly problematic when what’s being appropriated is tied to a ritual,” Brayshaw said, noting that the North American Plains people’s headdresses are traditionally worn only by male leaders who have earned a position of respect.

“You have to earn the right to wear those headdresses. It’s not just something from a dress-up shop.”

**How to avoid cultural appropriation**

For all the controversy around cultural appropriation, the solution is straightforward. Tams, Brayshaw and Sherlock all agree that respectful and mutually beneficial collaboration with Indigenous communities is the answer.

“In an ideal world, brands should collaborate with Indigenous communities. For example, they can do capsule collections where they co-design and co-create products,” Tams said.

Compensation is a key part of this, according to Brayshaw.

“It’s about giving back to the communities, making sure that they’re benefiting. This is intellectual property that they’ve developed over millennia,” she said.

Brayshaw pointed to the Brazilian fashion brand Osklen, which paid the Asháninka community that lives in the Brazilian and Peruvian rainforest in exchange for permission to incorporate their traditional tattoos and designs in its Spring 2016 collection. The community used the funds to build a school, among other projects.

“Really effective collaboration with Indigenous communities and minority communities will often result in a far more sophisticated design,” Brayshaw added.

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**Brands should collaborate with Indigenous communities.**

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Of course, this requires brands to give their design teams the time and resources to work with Indigenous communities based in distant locations, which most fast-fashion brands do not allow.

“They do not afford their designers the time or the creative freedom to properly research and engage with the cultures that they’re taking inspiration from,” Sherlock said. “Until that happens, you’re not going to get meaningful conversations going between dominant brands and minority cultures.”

In the absence of that, brands should acknowledge the source of their designs at the very least.

“Major companies should acknowledge where their inspiration comes from to pay tribute to Indigenous communities’ designs,” Tams said.

Ultimately, Sherlock believes this will appeal to today’s consumers.

“I think, often, these brands are missing a trick because there is an increasing desire for transparency and authenticity in relation to the products that people are buying,” she said.

“The story of that culture would be more attractive to the consumer than just ignoring it.” IRW



Cultural appropriation ignores intellectual property and disrespects artforms that have been a part of cultures for generations.