

Borrowed Without Credit: Cultural Appropriation, Collaboration, and the Question of Recognition in Fashion

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Abstract

Fashion has always moved across borders, and borrowing between cultures is not new. What has changed is the scale, speed, and commercial power with which global brands now lift silhouettes, textiles, and sacred garments from source communities, most often without naming those communities, compensating them, or asking permission. This report examines the gap between fashion's celebrated "collab culture," in which named designers and brands co-sign a garment and share both credit and profit, and the far more common pattern of uncredited cultural borrowing, in which the original makers receive neither. Using the Isabel Marant Mixe blouse dispute, the Gucci Sikh turban controversy, and the recent renaming of the South Asian dupatta as a Western "trend" scarf as case studies, this report argues that fashion's collaboration economy has built a working model for crediting culture, and simply chooses, more often than not, not to apply that model to communities without commercial or legal leverage. The report closes with a set of design-practice principles for crediting cultural sources honestly.

Introduction

Walk down any high street today and the evidence is everywhere: long scarves that South Asian women recognise as the dupatta sold under new, European sounding names, embroidery patterns lifted from indigenous Mexican textiles, and turbans styled as runway props.

Each of these items carries centuries of meaning in the culture it comes from. In many of these cases, the brand selling the item never mentions where the design originated, and the community that has worn, made, and protected that design for generations sees no credit and no share of the profit.

This is the paradox at the centre of contemporary fashion. The industry has, at the same time, built an entire commercial genre, the brand collaboration or "collab,"

around the idea that credit matters. When Louis Vuitton works with Supreme, or adidas works with the designer Grace Wales Bonner, both names appear on the label, both parties are paid, and the partnership is marketed as the point of the product. Fashion clearly knows how to credit a creative source when that source has a lawyer, a marketing team, or a recognisable brand name behind it. The question this report asks is why that same courtesy is so rarely extended to the communities, often indigenous and often from the Global South, whose textiles, silhouettes, and sacred garments are borrowed just as directly, but without a byline.

Defining the Problem: Appropriation Versus Collaboration

Fashion law scholar Susan Scafidi, founder of Fordham University's Fashion Law Institute, defines cultural appropriation as taking intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expression, or artefacts from someone else's culture without permission (Scafidi, 2005).

Scafidi is careful to note that cultural exchange itself is not the problem; exchange between cultures, she argues, can be rich and rewarding and should be encouraged (Anokhi Media, 2015). What turns exchange into appropriation is the absence of permission, credit, or compensation. In Scafidi's words, appropriation is most likely to be harmful "when the source community is a minority group that has been oppressed or exploited in other ways or when the object of appropriation is particularly sensitive, e.g. sacred objects" (Fordham Law News, 2018).

This distinction maps neatly onto the difference between "collab culture" and uncredited borrowing. A true collaboration is negotiated: both parties agree to the partnership, both are named, and both benefit financially. Uncredited borrowing skips every one of those steps. The design is lifted, restyled, and sold at a markup that the originating community will never see, and unless a journalist, a lawyer, or a viral social media post intervenes, the source is never named at all.

Case Study: The Mixe Blouse and Isabel Marant

In 2015, French designer Isabel Marant's spring/summer Étoile collection included a blouse that, according to the Mixe community of Santa María Tlahuitoltepec in Oaxaca, Mexico, reproduced the graphic elements of a blouse the community has hand-embroidered for roughly 600 years (Hendriksz, 2015). At a press conference, a representative of the community said the design "has transcended borders" and "is not a novel creation" as the designer claimed, and the mayor of Tlahuitoltepec, Erasmo Hernández González, accused Marant of "hijacking a cultural heritage for commercial benefit" (Hendriksz, 2015).

The legal story then took a stranger turn. Another French label, Antik Batik, claimed that it owned the design and took Marant to court for copying it. Marant, who had already said publicly that she did not claim to be the author of the design, argued that it came from Tlahuitoltepec and so could never have belonged to Antik Batik (FashionNetwork, 2015). In December 2015, a Paris court ruled in Marant's favour. According to Marant's lawyer, the court accepted that the design came from the village and found that Antik Batik could not claim any property rights in it (WWD, 2015).

The scope of that ruling matters. It settled a dispute between two French companies; the Mixe community was not a party to the case. The court decided who did not own the design, but it gave the community no rights, no damages, and no share of the profits. Marant's lawyer said she would meet Mexico's ambassador in France to discuss working with the villagers (WWD, 2015), yet years later the community had still received no compensation from her (Mexico News Daily, 2024).

This case illustrates a structural problem: even when it is publicly accepted that a design came from a source community, existing law is often not built to return credit or profit to a community rather than an individual or corporate owner.

The Mixe women were vindicated in public opinion, but the commercial mechanisms of fashion, built for individual designers and registered brands, had no ready way to credit or pay a centuries old artisan tradition.

Case Study: Gucci and the Sikh Turban

In February 2018, Gucci sent models down its Milan Fashion Week runway wearing turbans tied and folded in a way that closely mirrors how they are worn in the Sikh faith, styled as accessories alongside other looks (Kochhar, 2018). For the Sikh community, the turban, or dastaar, is not an accessory at all; it is one of the most sacred articles of faith in the religion, tied fold-by-fold as a daily act of devotion. Sikh activist Harjinder Singh Kukreja responded on Twitter at the time: "Your models have used Turbans as 'hats' whereas practising Sikhs tie them neatly fold-by-fold" (Al Jazeera, 2018).

When the same piece, sold as the "Indy Full Turban," appeared on Nordstrom's website for \$790 in May 2019, the backlash returned. The Sikh Coalition stated that "the turban is not just a fashion accessory to monetize, but a religious article of faith that millions of Sikhs around the world view as sacred" (Yam, 2019). Nordstrom apologised and removed the item. Gucci, however, had not responded to the criticism by 18 May 2019, when the Associated Press reported that the Sikh Coalition was still waiting for an apology from the brand (Fox News, 2019). I have not found any later public apology from Gucci to the Sikh community.

What makes this case especially instructive is that it was not Gucci's only controversy from the same creative period. The same Fall 2018 show drew criticism for headpieces that some viewers read as resembling the hijab and niqab (DNA India, 2018), and less than a year earlier, a jacket in Gucci's Cruise 2018 collection had been called a near-copy of a 1980s design by the Harlem couturier Dapper Dan (Refinery29, 2017).

That last case ended very differently. After the criticism, Gucci acknowledged Dapper Dan's influence, backed the reopening of his Harlem atelier, and produced a Gucci and Dapper Dan collection (Refinery29, 2017). As Dapper Dan himself put it, everyone had paid homage to him, "but no one ever paid him" (Essence, 2017). Once the source was a named individual with a public voice, the borrowing became a partnership. The Sikh community, which asked only for respect for an article of faith, did not receive a comparable response.

A pattern like this suggests appropriation is often not a single oversight but a recurring creative habit, one that a genuine collaboration model, with a named partner and a

negotiated agreement, would have prevented from the start.

Designer's Note: The Dupatta and the Cost of an Uncredited Trend

As a designer, I recognise the pattern above well beyond these two headline cases. To be clear about scope: head covering and scarf traditions exist in many cultures, from Eastern Europe to West Africa to the Middle East, and I am not claiming that every fashionable scarf comes from South Asia. My focus here is narrower. It is the dupatta, the long scarf worn over the head, shoulders, or chest across India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh as a garment of modesty, ceremony, and identity, and what happens when Western fashion adopts it without naming it.

Two recent, traceable examples show the mechanism. In 2024, the US fashion rental company Bipty posted a TikTok video presenting dresses worn with a scarf draped across the chest as a European look. South Asian viewers recognised the scarf at once as a dupatta; the video was deleted, and the company's founder apologised, admitting the aesthetic was not European after all (ELLE India, 2025). In 2025, Reformation was criticised for a blouse, skirt, and scarf set that many South Asians likened to a lehenga with a dupatta, sold with no reference to either garment.

The brand said the design was inspired by a 1990s John Galliano set owned by its collaborator, the model Devon Lee Carlson (CNN, 2025). In response to this wave of renaming, South Asian creators filmed themselves draping their own dupattas and mockingly calling them "Scandinavian scarves" (CNN, 2025).

In both cases, credit went to a European aesthetic, a Western designer, or an influencer, but never to the culture the look most closely resembled. This is the same mechanism visible in the Mixe blouse and Gucci turban cases, just quieter and less legally contested. There is rarely a single designer to name in a lawsuit, because the borrowing happens diffusely across dozens of brands, influencers, and trend reports rather than in one dramatic runway moment. That diffusion is, in a sense, the mechanism's protection: it is much harder to hold "trend culture" accountable than it is to hold one designer accountable.

My argument is that this makes credit more important, not less. If a brand cannot name a single collaborator to share the profit with, the least it can do is name the culture the design comes from in its marketing copy, the same way a collab drop always names both parties on the box.

From Appropriation to Collaboration: What Ethical Credit Could Look Like

Fashion already has a working model for giving credit: it is called a collaboration. When adidas partners with British Jamaican designer Grace Wales Bonner, the resulting sneaker carries both names, both design perspectives are acknowledged in the campaign, and Wales Bonner is compensated for her creative direction.

Nobody has to sue anybody for that credit to happen; it is built into the deal from the beginning.

There is now also a clear example of a brand applying that model to a South Asian craft community. In June 2025, Prada showed sandals in Milan that closely resembled Kolhapuri chappals, handmade leather sandals from Maharashtra and Karnataka, without naming their origin. After criticism from artisans and Indian business groups, Prada acknowledged the Indian inspiration, and in December 2025 it signed an agreement with two state backed leather artisan corporations, LIDCOM and LIDKAR, to produce a limited edition range made in India by Kolhapuri artisans (FashionUnited, 2025). The credit came late, and only after public pressure, but it shows that the collaboration model can work for a craft community and not only for a famous designer.

The industry could apply the same logic to cultural sourcing more broadly, and a handful of practical shifts would move the needle:

1. Name the source culture in marketing and product copy, the same way a collaborator's name appears on a co-branded product.
2. Involve artisans or cultural consultants from the source community during the design process, not after a controversy forces a response.
3. Share commercial upside, through licensing fees, royalties, or direct commissioning of artisans, rather than treating a source community's tradition as free raw material.
4. Distinguish, in design education and studio practice, between garments that hold religious or sacred meaning (like the dastaar) and garments that are primarily aesthetic. As Scafidi notes, appropriation is most likely to cause harm when the object is sacred, so the former carry a higher duty of care regardless of how "on trend" they become.

None of this requires fashion to stop drawing on global textile traditions; as Scafidi herself argues, cultural exchange is valuable and should continue.

It requires only that the industry extend to source communities the same basic courtesy it already extends to its collaborators: a name on the label and a share of the reward.

Conclusion

Fashion's collab culture proves that the industry is fully capable of crediting where a design idea came from; it does so proudly, in bold type, whenever the collaborator is a brand with legal standing. The Isabel Marant and Gucci controversies, and the quieter renaming of the dupatta as a Western trend, show what happens when the source has no legal team behind it: the same act of borrowing that would be marketed as a celebrated partnership becomes, instead, an unattributed appropriation. The Dapper Dan and Kolhapuri partnerships show that the fix is possible. The difference between the two outcomes is not the borrowing itself; cultures have always exchanged ideas, and fashion has always been a place where that exchange plays out on the body. The difference is whether credit and compensation follow the idea back to its source. As a

designer, I see this as the real measure of a collection's integrity: not whether it draws inspiration from another culture, but whether it is honest enough to say so. Until crediting a centuries-old textile tradition is treated with the same seriousness as crediting a co-branding partner, fashion will keep profiting from cultures it refuses to name, and no amount of runway spectacle will make that borrowing anything other than what it is.

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