

It's Just Fashion

On November 7, 2012, Karlie Kloss strutted down the walkway during Victoria Secret's annual fashion show wearing leopard print underwear and a Native American headdress. After the show, there was a huge backlash against Victoria's Secret for allowing a non-Native American model to don a Native American cultural identifier as an accessory. The company subsequently issued an apology.¹

The wearing of Native American headdress has become popular; they are worn as part of Halloween costumes, and have become casual accessories referred to as the "Hipster Headdress."² The adoption of some specific elements of a culture to which one does not belong is known as 'cultural appropriation'. Some people argue that cultural appropriation is morally problematic, while others have argued that it is a sign of cultural progress.³

Those who criticized Kloss contend that casually wearing items like headdresses, which have important cultural significance to a certain group, is extremely disrespectful. They compare it to someone wearing a Purple Heart that was not earned in battle. Opponents also argue that the casual wearing of these items promotes stereotyping, and decreases the social value of such symbols.

Kloss's supporters claim that she wore the headdress for the sake of fashion. After all, Native American headdresses are beautiful and ornate, and wearing them in a fashion show – especially a show as prominent as the Victoria's Secret fashion show - can be perceived as a celebration of the beauty of Native American culture. Furthermore, it could be argued that if cultural artifacts aren't shared, we will have no access to cultures other than our own which means that we cannot learn from each other and expand our horizons.

Study Questions:

1. Is it acceptable for clothing companies to appropriate cultural identifiers in their fashion shows?
2. To what extent is it acceptable to wear accessories from another culture? For fashion or costume?
3. Are there certain cultural identifiers that are more acceptable to appropriate than others? And if so, what underlies the reasons for the acceptability of cultural appropriation?

¹<http://www.usatoday.com/story/life/people/2012/11/12/victorias-secret-apologizes-for-use-of-headdress/1701413/>

²<http://nativeappropriations.com/2010/04/but-why-cant-i-wear-a-hipster-headdress.html>

³<http://www.reference.com/browse/cultural+appropriation?s=t>