

Cultural Appropriation and Cancel Culture: A Global Survey

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Abstract

A cultural practice that might be once unique to a particular set of people can go global. In a globalizing world, cultural diffusion has become a widespread phenomenon. This global dispersal has led to clash of cultures, giving rise to defenders - people who want to defend their culture from outsiders they view as threats i.e. outsiders with no plans to give credit to origins of the borrowed culture. This leads us to the concept of 'appropriation', which, literally, means to take something and adapt it for use in another context. This sets the background for the emergence of the concept of 'cultural appropriation'. While cultural appropriation may be novel in theory, it is not so in praxis. It can be seen in the things that constitute our day to day life. This is unlike the shallowness of the definition that most people, especially active social media users, use. Recently, it is mostly used in accusation, and is perceived as malicious intent, even in cases where none is intended. The misinterpretation of cultural appropriation is being used as an outlet for online jungle justice, 'cancel culture'. A situation where people take law into their hands and backlash individual or group that say or perform actions that are deemed unacceptable. This paper scrutinizes the misuse of cultural appropriation as a concept and how it causes more cases of cancel culture. This study finds that cancel culture is heightened with the increased misuse of the concept cultural appropriation online and tries to proffer solution to this rising phenomena.

Key words: global, culture, appropriation

Introduction

Various scholars have discussed the concepts of cultural appropriation and cancel culture, but as different topics. Cultural appropriation has been discussed as hypersensitivity, traced to capitalism as its root, even invalidated by some scholars under claims of globalization. Some even discussed how it is a good thing and people cannot thrive without it, because it has acted as the leverage upon which civilization grew. Alanna (2019) discusses the root of appropriation as failure to give credit (profit) to the black creator, whereas the white appropriator gets it all, the money, the fame and credits. She talks about the inevitability of appropriation and that cultures will interact 'by choice or by force', and acts of appropriation are mostly not deliberate. Since the beginning of time, appropriation has been present and acted as key to growth of civilization. Her work acts as a compass of clarity to fully understand the concept of cultural appropriation and how there is more than meets the eye. On the other hand, cancel culture keeps thriving according to Dershowitz (2020) due to moral clarity. This is a concept that is built on the theory that 'America is systematically racist, and a white-supremacist project', so there is no other side of the narrative. This idea makes it clear that there is only one way to see things and anyone who disagrees is racist, morally inferior and politically incorrect. Today, this theory has shifted and now it includes all races, with racial minority pointing against the majority. His work explains how 'an American problem' has shifted to a wider scope, and now is spreading at a global pace. Advocates are rising irrespective of the country, to defend their 'truth', thus feeding

extremists. Kovalik (2021) explained how people fail to acknowledge that we are all flawed, and despite it, still deserve love. There is no need to destroy all they have built in a moment, because of allegations, which even when cleared, they are unable to rise from. The importance he placed on free speech and expression is not overstated and should be closely examined. Ridding people of these rights is one of the consequences of cancel culture, although its advocates do not consider it.

The research paper will essentially talk about increase of cancelling people online linked with defense of the wrong concept of cultural appropriation, which is embroiled in cultural discrimination. This is an exaggerated form that acts as an anger outlet and takes away the rights of the recipient. People tend to see cultural appropriation in every situation and retaliate with cancelling the person with the problematic behavior. This behavior has gone too far and left netizens (internet users) threading carefully, in order to avoid being cancelled, leaving them with restricted freedom to practice their rights of free speech, expression, and pursuit of beauty.

Cultural Appropriation

To properly look at this growing social phenomenon, it is only right that we have an understanding of the concepts, starting with culture. According to Oxford Dictionary, culture can be defined as the ideas, customs and social behavior of a particular people or society. It is a particular way of life, an expression of a particular way of life (Storey, 2018). This is an identifying factor of a group of people, for example the Igbo culture. This is the way of life that is used to identify the Igbo people from Eastern Nigeria, in Africa. Culture covers anything from religion, food, language, clothing and accessories, down to behavior, how we greet elders, our perception of right or wrong, among others. Now to cultural appropriation. Appropriation is not a new word. It means to take something and find use for it in another context. This word, appropriation, has mostly been used to describe the use of money. That is, taking something from somewhere to find use for it elsewhere. So with this prior understanding of culture and appropriation, putting the two words together, cultural appropriation, simply put, would mean the adoption of customs, ideas and other elements of one cultural group by another. Cultural appropriation is found everywhere; in food, dressing, writing, artworks, etc. It is important to know that these acts of appropriation are usually not intentional. It most often becomes a touchy topic when the culture appropriated is that of indigenous people or racial minority. Cultural appropriation is considered harmful when: there is a violation of property right (theft), and attack on the viability or identity of cultures or their members. Profit made off the culture in question, especially when none of the profit is remitted to the insider (member of the culture) creator, is a reason for profound offense. Even without profit in the question, an attack on the members of the culture, or the culture itself, that is in form of mockery or wrong representation, is considered an attack on one's identity and is also a reason for offense.

Misconception of Cultural Appropriation

Any teen and young adult conversant with the internet will find that this is not a new term. As these words are found on most pages, on websites, in the comment sections, and elsewhere. Cultural appropriation has become so common a word on the internet, that its meaning today has become twisted and vague. It has shifted from its original

meaning of bracketing racial minority exploitation to defining anything people do that is not culturally associated with them. The twisted definition of cultural appropriation that most people use, has created an outlet for cultural racism and discrimination. This outlet is embodied in cancel culture. Though cultural appropriation is not the only cause, it is becoming a fast rising reason for ‘cancelling’ people online. It is a reason of concern because people who hide under the umbrella of cultural appropriation, most times, do not fully understand the concept. They just criticize anyone that does anything that is seen as not locally associated with them, and they forget this is inevitable because of globalization. It is important to bring to the fore, that civilization and globalization we have today is a product of cultural appropriation. This concept may sometimes be bracketed as cultural exchange, cultural assimilation or cultural diffusion. But in all it simply means that culture is fluid. Culture moves, and this movement is the reason we have the alphabets, mathematics, the calendar, and so many things as we know them today. Cultures change and this change allows us to embrace each other as one humanity. Cancel culture advocates do not see or consider this aspect, due to the fact that a good percentage of them are ignorant of the concept of cultural appropriation and are just on the bandwagon train. Globalization has moved cultures around on a global scale. Cultural diffusion is seen in our everyday life. This could be something as simple as craving Chinese food accepted in your country when you’ve never been to China and so have no idea of the techniques and ingredients used, hanging up an African dream catcher without knowing it, just because you thought it looked pretty, learning French and imitating the accent with no plans to travel to France, etc. These are examples of cultural appropriation that are overlooked. Appreciation is not considered an option and blind backlash is given to an innocent or a victim of exaggeration. It has become the norm of cancel police to consider any use of anything from another culture problematic. Cancelling people because others are too, pointing fingers and making victims of people appreciating other cultures is in a sense a threat to globalization. Because all these accusations will eventually limit cultural spread and create a stagnant society, where different cultures and races are enclosed in their own bracket.

Who is Considered Appropriating?

After looking at misconceptions of cultural appropriation, it is normal for questions like who exactly is appropriating, to arise. This section will be looked at from two points; who the internet think is appropriating and who is really appropriating.

Who the internet think is appropriating?

The internet, made up of misguided people, are quick to point fingers, call out and cancel any person involving themselves in any other culture outside their cultural bracket. They are quick to pick offence about the subject, and project their feelings as being hurt. It is important to note that ‘it is common for people to frame their objections to cultural appropriation in terms of offense.’ (Young & Brunk , 2012. p. 5). This is usually the case, as no profound harm or offence is caused but cancel police pick up the case and portray it in terms of offense, as if they are looking for a reason to be offended. They then advocate that others should be offended too, with their preaching. In the end people act offended so they are not left out and cancel the victim without full understanding.

Who is really appropriating?

This paper aims to correct the misuse of the word cultural appropriation, which does not invalidate the fact that indeed cultural appropriation in its rightful sense does exist. It is important to understand when exactly an outsider (a non-member of a culture) is appropriating, and when the outsider is appreciating. What constitutes cultural appropriation is mostly profit made either in cash or kind, which is acknowledgement. To be sure someone is appropriating there are certain important questions to be asked. Is this person making a profit of this culture? Is this person making a caricature or a stereotypical image of this culture? Is this person claiming to be an expert on the culture and making false claims? These are important questions to be asked before pointing out a person as an appropriator and cancelling the person. Outsiders having the wrong representation of the culture. The representation of, against its misrepresentation (Brunk & Young, 2012, p. 100), because it is general knowledge that outsiders do not have the knowhow to decide if what have been appropriated is authentic. When an outsider is engaged in portraying a caricature image of another's culture, this is a reason for profound offense, because it is a direct attack on a person's identity, when an outsider sheds light on a culture in a bad and stereotypical manner. People who engage in these activities, making a profit of or mocking a culture, are the true appropriators whose activities are embedded in a place of exploitation.

Cancel Culture

Cancel culture refers to the mass backlash to individuals that take actions deemed unfit by the public (Ethantofyu, 2021), usually on social media. Cancel culture is a fairly new term, though recently scholars have been tracing its use in past times. The tide of cancelling people is becoming terrifying on social media, as anyone can be cancelled even by the slightest allegation. Even in cases where cancelled persons are able to prove innocent, if given the chance (which is rarely), the consequences of being cancelled stay with them for a long time. They are left handicapped and unable to defend themselves. In this era of cancel culture, public opinion is becoming more important than the truth. Accusation is considered conviction. An example of this can be seen during a discussion once held with a friend who made a statement that goes thus; 'people start to think and talk'. This statement explains how speculations are made on accusations without any verification. Such speculations spread and in turn feed cancel culture. It will not be denied that the advocates of cancel culture are well meaning, it is just clear they lack understanding, and this lack causes extremism. In this era where public opinion has an elevated place, especially via social media as Dershowitz says 'the truth can't even find its shoes'. It has become hard to sort the right from the bundle of wrongs. Although cancel culture has been linked with other concepts such as political correctness, moral clarity, and others (Dershowitz, 2020), understanding how it is related to cultural appropriation is also crucial. This generation of highly culturally sensitive people have made this relation prominent. Cases of cancelling have been on the rise because of cultural appropriation, where in most cases, the reason pointed out as cultural appropriation is usually very trivial, and not even cultural appropriation in its rightful sense. Cancel culture is an enemy to free speech as its advocates 'want what they want and they want it now' (Dershowitz 2020). To get to their goal they will ignore due process and leave the recipient with no say, because public opinion is on their side. Leaving such unfortunate person with no rights

whatsoever to express themselves. These cancel culture advocates are very vocal about free speech and use it as the basis of their claims to cancel people, while forgetting they are stripping people of the same rights of free speech, when they give them no room for explanation because they are blinded by their “truths”. A simple accusation is enough to get a person cancelled. The advocates of cancel culture are impatient, so there is seldom need for veracity, because they believe accusation is conviction. This statement by Alarilla (2021), ‘If you think about it, cancel culture is really an American thing that’s being spread like a virus all over the world via social media’, is not wrong. Starting out as a problem of the United States because of the diverse nature of the country, the internet has acted as medium and spread it to the rest of the world. This spread is causing problems to these cancelled people, especially the innocent of the lot.

Consequences of Cancel Culture

Discrimination and ostracism is on the rise because of cancel culture which is closely linked with cultural appropriation. Thus, it is quickly becoming another form of cyberbullying. An example of cancel culture can be seen in the case of Shay Mitchell, the 34 year old *Pretty Little Liars*’s actress, who was called out for cultural appropriation after she posted on Tiktok (a social media platform) the outfits for her photo shoot that had her sporting braids. The comment section of the video was filled with hateful comments, where people told her to remove it and other hurtful words were hauled her way. People failed to see that she was appreciating the look and she looked great, all they saw was she is Canadian and braids is not Canadian, so she should not be wearing braids. She was called out and not allowed to express herself. Another example can be seen when Korean singer, Lisa, wore braids for her song ‘Money’. She had to tender an apology, an apology for expressing herself. Even the black community online came forward to express that they did not find it offensive (Alarilla, 2021), but of course were shut up with claims that they do not speak for everybody. Other cases abound on the internet. These barrage of hate comments, and sometimes threats, are cases of cyber bullying that those cancelled face. Online jungle justice is carried out against them. Discrimination is also one among the consequences cancelled persons face. They are barred from attending events, boycotted when their works are released, lose fan following, and face many other acts of discrimination. Cancelled people lose their rights to due process, especially the innocent. They are not given the space to prove innocent after these accusations are rendered. People out of fear of being cancelled hide and refrain from saying and doing anything that might cause them to be cancelled. Racism is another effect cancelling is having, especially in its relation with cultural appropriation. Racist persons from minority cultures can use this as an outlet for their racist moves. Lastly, cancel culture due to cultural appropriation is narrowing the boundaries of individuality because of fear/threat of backlash.

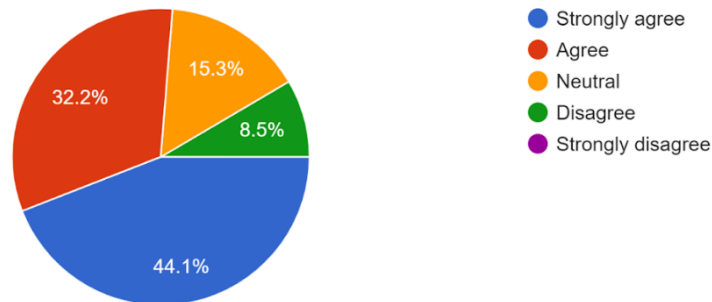
Statistics

A total of sixty people from different parts of the world responded to the online survey. Respondents were ten to fourteen at 3.3, fifteen to nineteen at 31.7%, twenty to twenty-four at 50%, twenty-five to twenty-nine at 13.3%, and thirty and above at 1.7%. The respondents are active social media users. 33.3% of the respondent population did not

know about cultural appropriation, and 45% did not know about cancel culture, prior to the survey.

Cancel culture can be toxic.

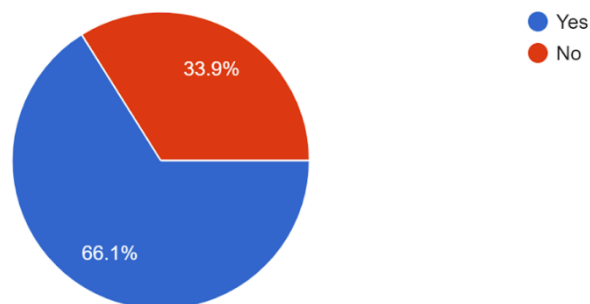
59 responses



Out of 60 respondents, 59 responded to the question of if cancel culture can be toxic. 26 persons representing 44.1% of those that responded strongly agreed that this is the case with cancel culture, and 19 persons at 32.2% agreed. This number goes to show that the good cancel culture advocates claim to do is just counterproductive and in reality creates more problems than it solves. Cancel culture in actuality is mostly toxic, because its advocates tell people the reason why they should cancel someone and not give them room to judge for themselves if that act of cancelling is wholly necessary.

Do you think cancel culture is a form of bullying?

56 responses



Going forward, the numbers for the question if cancel culture is a form of cyberbullying had 37 persons affirming to this. Cancel culture has become an outlet for people to victimize others, victims. Cancelling is already cyberbullying in a sense, but once it is paired with cultural appropriation, it skyrockets. Cancelled persons are not allowed the opportunity to clear up the situation and are just shut out.

Other Findings

6.8% opined that cultural appropriation affected their culture and made them upset. 28.8% opined that it affected their culture, but it was not considered a big deal. 23.7% opined that it did not affect their culture, but understood the concept, thus are upset by it. 40.7% opined that it did not affect their culture, and they do not think it is a big deal.

26.7% have a personal experience regarding cultural appropriation, 73.3% do not.

31.9% have cancelled someone, 68.3% have not. 22% of the number that have, made this choice influenced by social media.

12.3% lied about cancelling someone, and kept following the online persona of the cancelled person.

16.1% strongly agreed that cancel culture is beneficial for checking people's behavior, 19.6% agreed, 33.9% were neutral, 21.4% disagreed, and 8.9% strongly disagreed.

5.3% strongly agreed that cancel culture brings about beneficial effects, 21.1% agreed, 43.9% were neutral, 14% disagreed, and 15.8% strongly disagreed.

The most picked reason for cancel culture was cultural appropriation, with bandwagon activity as a close second.

Conclusion

This paper is another addition to what other scholars, critics, and activists of free speech and cultural diffusion in globalization have started. Their work aimed to make people understand that cultural spread is inevitable, and should not just be considered cultural appropriation, because since the onset it has been the foundation of civilization. This is why there is a need to point out and cure this cancer called cancel culture. The number of innocent victims of cancel culture is on the rise, because of the misused concept of cultural appropriation. As a problem most prominent on the internet, which is a hub that connects the whole world, it is important that people be aware of the consequences. It is breeding an age of silence online where people only respond to bandwagon activity and shy away from voicing and expressing their individuality due to fear of being cancelled, a situation that brings whatever hard work of cancelled individual in the past to come crashing down and become invalid. The cankerworm of misused concept of cultural appropriation and the increase in cancel culture advocates will only leave room for the passing on to the oncoming generation of social media users wrong internet etiquette. It is time for us to rise and speak against the extremism of cancel culture. Some people are oblivious to the consequences of their actions and just follow the tide of bandwagonism. Powerful public opinion has seen the trend of cancel culture becoming more than a phase and showing potentials for continuity. This makes it important that this problem be explored and solutions proffered. If not, what would be left is an intolerant society caused by cancelling.

Recommendations

Enlightenment talks have not shown much of a difference; instead, other countries outside the United States have joined the spread of cancel culture as they nitpick, in

the bid to find a cultural appropriator. This method has proved unfruitful because most people are so fixated on the past, they forget the current generation is innocent of the allegations thrown their way. But little result should not stop us from speaking on people's excesses. We should rise to challenge these advocates of cancel culture, who wield their free speech as a weapon against others. A little can go a long way, so this paper acts as one of many wakeup calls that wishes to draw people's attention to the vice of our generation. The exposure is important to make people understand the difference between cultural appropriation and appreciation. That cultural diffusion as the foundation of civilization should not be casually considered cultural appropriation. Using cancelling as a weapon wielded against even the innocent is simply wrong, therefore it should be called out. This is why this paper is joining the many voices of this generation, in our fight to cut down these excesses.

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