

Is Cultural Appropriation Braided into Fashion Coverage? An Examination of American Magazines

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Abstract

Cultural appropriation, the use of culturally laden images by people with no association with that culture, occurs across the fashion industry. Such appropriation can be practiced without an understanding or appreciation of the originating culture, thereby cheapening the underlying heritage. This study explored the incidence of and attitudes toward cultural appropriation of cornrows as depicted in three U.S. fashion magazines (Cosmopolitan, Vogue, and Essence) from 2013-2018. The author used a qualitative content analysis, structured by framing theory, to explore how each publication uniquely addressed the cultural appropriation of this hairstyle over time. This study identified a shift in the depiction of cornrows across the magazines in 2016 toward a more socially conscious perspective. This shift differed in each publication. Cosmopolitan developed an explicitly verbalized stance against the cultural appropriation of cornrows, Vogue shifted its visual depiction of this hairstyle, and Essence most often depicted cornrows within cultural and historical contexts.

I. Introduction

Instances of cultural appropriation, the use of culturally laden iconic images by people who have no association with that culture, have drawn increased attention in recent years. Cultural appropriation can be a form of denigration, especially of a minority or foreign culture. The complexity of this issue is heightened in an increasingly pluralistic society in which many people might want to explore and appreciate aspects of cultures to which they do not belong. Therefore, the motives for appropriation might range from a well-meaning intercultural exploration, to a negative expression of xenophobia. Over time, there has been a shift in American society away from cultural appropriation by white culture. Occurrences of appropriation have become more noted, and their elimination urged.

While cultural appropriation is a powerful societal phenomenon, many suggest that it casts a particularly dark shadow on the fashion industry, which prides itself on emphasizing innovation and prestige. Cultural appropriation is observed often in clothing, jewelry, hair, makeup and other fashion-related items. Thus, the fashion industry is important to examine as it frequently borrows elements from the past and other cultures.

In particular, this study examined the portrayal of cornrows in high-profile fashion publications, including an exploration of the culturally rich and potentially sacred features of this hairstyle, and how

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appropriation of the cornrows style may cheapen its history and meaning.

Fashion magazines are ideal to analyze, as these publications transmit fresh and important industry trends and values to its readers. Specifically, this study explores whether there is a change in the portrayal of cornrows, a culturally laden hairstyle, among three prominent fashion publications – *Cosmopolitan*, *Vogue*, and *Essence* – from 2013-2018. Using framing theory, the research identifies a substantive shift in content in some publications, reflecting the public's increased attention on appropriation of trends, dances and songs that originated in other cultures.

II. Literature Review

In previous scholarship, there are connections between how magazines frame cultural appropriation and how its readers perceive the appropriation. Research has examined the cultural appropriation of black hair, the role fashion magazines play in society, and the effect of framing on an audience's attitude. These scholars lay the foundation for studying how a magazine's perspective concerning the cultural appropriation of cornrows may influence readers.

Interestingly, very few scholarly articles explicitly define the term "cultural appropriation." Rogers (2006) defines cultural appropriation as "the use of a culture's symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals or technologies by members of another culture" (p. 474). On the other hand, Alexander (2001) writes that "appropriation occurs when someone else speaks for, defines, describes, represents, uses or recruits the images, stories, experience and dreams of others for their own" (p. 185).

Rogers suggests that cultural appropriation is inevitable when different cultures interact either physically or virtually. One can appropriate history, ways of knowledge, or modes of expression from other cultures (Rogers, 2006). Rogers describes categories that name the conditions under which acts of appropriation occur, such as cultural exploitation, or appropriative acts that reinforce the dominant culture. These instances often carry the connotation of stealing or exploiting the culture of a minority group.

There often are serious negative consequences that arise when a dominant culture marginalizes members of a minority culture through appropriation. At worst, this type of negative intercultural interaction can involve taking from another culture things that are not one's own, such as intellectual property or historical artifacts. Lancefield, Ziff, and Rao (1998) identify key concerns about acts of cultural appropriation by dominant cultures, including a loss of nuanced understanding of other cultures, and the removal of context from cultural objects or practices. Isabella Alexander adds to this by explaining how items that have been appropriated from another culture are often wrongfully exploited for financial gain. Creating cheap duplicates devalue the original item by stripping it of its significance. Whatever is being appropriated is more than just a tool, decoration, or trend; it is often interwoven into the religion, land, and overall social structure (Alexander, 2001).

Other scholars study appropriation in specific cultural contexts. For example, White (2017) examined the appropriation of the war bonnet in popular culture and whether it would ever be correct for anyone to wear this traditional Native American headgear other than members of the culture from which it originated. White's article demonstrates the extent to which this specific appropriation occurred, examined the criticism received by brands that engaged in this appropriation, and explored the backlash received by "cultural appropriation critics" who were concerned with excessive censorship. This exploration into the range of public attitudes over the wearing of a piece of Native American culture demonstrates the current societal divide between those who categorically disapprove of cultural appropriation and those who are more permissive of the practice.

A specific example of a unique cultural feature are cornrows. The traditional hairstyle of many sub-Saharan African cultures, cornrows are distinguished by hair braided close to the scalp. They have a rich history and represent much more than just a hairstyle. The story begins in parts of Africa where hairstyles were often elaborate works of art, exhibiting styles like braids and designs shaved into the scalp. The social, aesthetic, and spiritual significance of this decoration has been intrinsic to the sense of self among the originating cultures for thousands of years (Byrd & Tharps, 2014). Because of this, hair has never been a purely cosmetic attribute for many West African people. The specific style of hair in each African culture signified characteristics, like a person's marital status, age, religion and prominence within the community.

Because of the spiritual aspects associated with hair, people took great care of it. Byrd and Tharps note that in many African cultures, neglected or messy hair implied a deep disturbance, such as one being

bereaved, depressed or habitually dirty. For this reason, there was a significant and often overlooked importance in the treatment of African hair in America. Newly arrived African slaves were often subjected to having their hair shaved, a mindless act that disregards African culture. To slaves, and likely to many of the slave owners, this act represented the elimination of autonomy. In many African cultures, a shaved head was equivalent to taking away one's identity (Byrd & Tharps, 2014).

Among Africans now living in the Americas, hair tended to carry less of its original meaning in a land dominated by fair skin and straight hair; instead, hairstyles often mirrored the desires to conform to the prevailing power dynamics, even after emancipation. Conforming seemed necessary for survival, as jobs and education were often contingent on the texture of hair and skin tone (Byrd & Tharps, 2014). Even as recently as the 1970s and 1980s, American culture often racially characterized people of color according to how they styled their hair. In 1977, a soldier was nearly court-martialed simply for sporting cornrows. Until the late 1980s, some major corporations, perceived "natural" hair and braids by blacks as undesirable and grounds for dismissal (Babou, 2009).

The conversation began to shift in the 1990s when natural hair, and hair braiding in particular, started to gain recognition in mainstream circles. Braiders were seen as artists and lauded for their creations. Newspapers ran photo spreads of braids, and cornrows received positive media attention. This positive portrayal allowed African American women to present themselves in a way that most represented themselves and their culture (Babou, 2009). Although there was a less intense need to conform to society and sacrifice ancestral identity, another issue began to arise - that of cultural appropriation. With the rise in the popularity in braiding, other cultures began to consider this as a highly desirable beauty trend. In doing this, however, many people disregarded the history of African hair and braiding. The lack of understanding and respect for the culture and history of cornrows resulted in inappropriate cultural appropriation, rather than behavior derived from respect for others.

Fashion magazines popularized African-style hair braiding as a cultural trend, and women's fashion magazines have a longstanding history in defining where society is at that time (MacGowan, 2014). These are publications written almost exclusively for women and by women, combining elements of health, beauty, fashion, relationships and work. For more than three centuries, women's magazines have provided their readers with a public forum in which their voices could be heard (MacGowan, 2014). Despite the common stereotype that these magazines primarily focus on women's issues, American women's fashion magazines helped to modify the role of women in an American society.

Fashion magazines simultaneously represent and influence the current society by portraying aspects of beauty among a diverse group of women. In this way, they are powerful influencers of culture. Bramlett-Solomon (2002) studied this phenomenon, documenting the representation of black women in fashion magazine ads throughout the 1990s. She determined that there was a stark contrast between the number of black and white women featured. However, the ads that depicted black women increasingly challenged mainstream perceptions of beauty. Even as Babou (2009) described the 1990s as a time that popularized black hair traditions, he found that there was still a dominance of images that strongly favored European beauty standards. This demonstrates both the lack of representation of black women in magazines and the dismissal of more African cultural traditions. Babou found some movement toward redefining acceptable beauty standards in ways that emphasized ethnic images, although this was not the predominantly depicted fashion paradigm.

Scholars have identified changes in cultural trends using various theoretical constructs, including framing theory. Frames affect the attitudes and behaviors of an audience according to how a topic is presented. Media focus attention on certain issues, consciously choosing a certain angle on a topic (Goffman, 1974). The way the topic is presented, the angle chosen, creates a frame for that information. Framing theory expands on agenda setting research, as it includes the media telling the audience what aspects of an issue to focus upon. Framing works by making new beliefs available about an issue, making certain available beliefs accessible, or making beliefs applicable in people's evaluations (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Frames do not have to be true and sometimes can play on the predispositions of the public, building the frame around misrepresentation and fabrication. Journalists have the ability to pick and choose aspects of a topic and the ability to write a story from a chosen perspective, including one that aligns with the magazine and societal values (Chong & Druckman, 2007).

This study, through framing theory, will examine how fashion magazines have changed the way they address and display black hair. While black hair and its appropriation has been studied, there is little

insight into how conversations about cornrows have altered over time, especially in recent years. Fashion magazines that have the platform to discuss hair are the ideal content to analyze, as these publications transmit fresh and important trends and values to their readers. Cultural appropriation, cornrows and fashion magazines have all been studied, but not as a collective concept: How fashion magazines frame the cultural appropriation of cornrows.

III. Methods

This study examined three fashion magazines: *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan* and *Essence*. Each of these magazines was chosen for the specific context it provides.

Vogue is the most esteemed fashion publication internationally, and is considered by many readers to be a personal fashion Bible. Its prominence has led people to use *Vogue* as a voice to represent the heart of the fashion industry. Outside of fashion, this magazine has acknowledged current political and cultural issues by featuring women in burqas and endorsing Hillary Clinton in the 2016 Presidential election (McLarney, 2009). Knowing *Vogue*'s stance will be powerful to demonstrate the perspective of fashion's leading industry experts.

Cosmopolitan is the highest selling women's fashion magazine in the U.S. It grew to this level because of shock value, an approach that challenged conventional societal norms. While the level of shock was originally due to more risqué content, *Cosmopolitan* is now known for its progressive stance on societal issues, especially women's rights. Delving into the conversation of America's most popular fashion magazine will be vital to this study.

Essence is different, being the only magazine selected that targets a specific racial demographic, African American women. Although similar in format, layout and content to the other women's fashion magazines, *Essence* is a magazine both by and for African American women. This publication focuses African American women's issues, an important one being cultural appropriation. This is a distinct and important perspective, because the magazine speaks to its demographic as a community being appropriated.

Articles from the online database of each magazine were sampled between 2013-2018. A consistent subset of months (March, May, August and November) for each year were chosen. The months were selected to represent each fashion season and to limit the sample to an appropriate size. The online version of women's fashion magazines are regularly updated, usually daily, which provides more content by volume than the monthly editions. The specific example of traditional African hairstyles, that of cornrows, was chosen because this term would likely be used in a similar manner in all three fashion magazines. This specific term was also a subject of widespread discussion during this time period, making it likely this hairstyle would be covered as a topic of artistic expression.

The identified articles were then examined through a qualitative content analysis based on a study by Clarke (2010). Once all of the articles were collected, each was individually analyzed for the nature of the reference—whether cornrows was the main topic of the article or if it was simply included as a reference. For the 11 articles in which cornrows were the main focus, the study also determined the prominent themes that emerged. Additionally, if an image paired with the reference was not of a person of color, it was noted if there was any mention of cultural appropriation and if there was an implied negative or positive connotation. For the purpose of this study, it was considered to be culturally appropriating if the person was not clearly of African descent.

IV. Findings & Discussion

Across all three magazines, cornrows were referenced in a total of 81 instances between 2013-2018. However, there was a large disparity when comparing the number of articles found in each magazine. *Cosmopolitan* only had a total of seven mentions, which was far lower than the 28 mentions in *Vogue* and 48 mentions in *Essence*. The frequency of articles was not the only difference among the magazines. Each publication differed in how often the topic of cultural appropriation appeared in conjunction with cornrows, and how each magazine's coverage of the cultural appropriation of cornrows shifted over time.

Topical Emphasis on Cornrows

Out of the 81 articles that referenced cornrows, only 11 featured cornrows as the main topic. There was a clear imbalance in the number of these articles from each magazine: *Cosmopolitan* had two, *Vogue* had zero, and *Essence* had the remaining nine. Similar content frames were evident across all of the magazine articles.

The majority of these articles over the five-year period focused on cornrows in the context of celebrity. The purpose of these articles seemed to be to portray the prevalence of the hairstyle and its place in society. By employing the frame of celebrity across a variety of contexts, these articles demonstrated how commonplace cornrows were becoming and the increasing acceptance from society. The articles' wording fostered a sense of inspiration and belonging for *Essence* readers. *Cosmopolitan* also had an article that highlighted celebrities and cornrows, but the focus was on a celebrity appropriating the style (Rose, 2015). The article was brief, describing the celebrity's actions—posting a picture with cornrows on social media—and documenting the commentary of others expressing their distaste. In contrast to *Essence*, the celebrity was not acting as a source of inspiration or education for the reader. Instead, *Cosmopolitan's* inclusion of a celebrity appropriating cornrows was an effort to remain relevant by covering a culturally controversial moment.

The articles that did not concentrate on celebrities examined cornrows through societal frames. These articles were more profound, often commenting on society's lack of acceptance. In contrast to the celebrity-focused articles, these articles identified social issues and explained the history of this hairstyle's controversial nature. Each article paired either the author's personal journey or a newsworthy event to illustrate this theme. Regardless of the publication, these articles in *Cosmopolitan* and *Essence* had two purposes: to inspire and educate.

An article in *Cosmopolitan* that followed the author's journey of hair acceptance exemplified these trends. The author wrote that she had felt forced to embrace the more societally acceptable straight hair for the majority of her life, disregarding her African roots. Her outlook changed once she began learning about how deeply cornrows ties are rooted in African history. Here she referenced research about the chronicled prejudice that surrounded black hair, like black women being fired from jobs for embracing their natural texture (Allen, 2017). Some articles in *Essence* were also presented in a societal context. Rather than the focus being on a personal hair journey though, these articles emphasized newsworthy events that touched on cornrows. These events often pertained to influencers commenting on the cultural appropriation of cornrows. One of *Essence's* articles included an influencer challenging the trendy nature of cornrows among celebrities and socialites. Her frustration arose because "braids are not new. Black women have been wearing braids for a long time... cornrows became new and fresh and fun, because it was on someone else other than a black woman" (Perkins, 2016).

These societally-focused articles that featured cornrows as the main topic were mostly written by women of color. As a part of the population whose hair is being appropriated, these women spoke based on their personal experiences and inspired others to push past the prejudice and embrace their background. The writers noted the strides that had been made in this country, but also that there was still a pressing need for societal acceptance of cornrows.

The 70 articles that did not place their primary focus on cornrows simply included the hairstyle as a fleeting mention (*Vogue*: 28; *Essence*: 37; *Cosmopolitan*: 5). Often this was in a list of other braided styles, or as a brief example for inspiration. The single-word reference was most common in *Vogue* articles (28 single-mention instances), which is notable because *Vogue* had no articles dedicated to cornrows as the main discussion point. The role of cornrows in *Vogue's* articles, as well as *Cosmopolitan* (5) and *Essence's* (37) brief references, was often noted as a trend worn by celebrities or fashion designers.

Difference in Depiction of Cultural Appropriation

When analyzing articles where cornrows were the primary focus, there were a few similarities between the magazines. For example, *Cosmopolitan* and *Essence* only portrayed cornrows in a negative light when they were being appropriated. In each instance when cornrows were worn by a non-person of color, the articles dismissed the person wearing them and suggested a poor understanding of the cultural and social implications.

However, there were also differences between each publication's reference to cultural appropriation. This discrepancy was most evident when directly comparing two articles that covered the same topic, but

was written for different magazines. One example was the coverage by both *Vogue* and *Essence* concerning Solange Knowles's "Saturday Night Live" performance in 2016. Both of the articles in *Essence* and *Vogue* referenced cornrows, but the amount devoted to the hairstyle's place in society differed between the magazines. *Vogue*'s article was more of an overarching discussion of Knowles's performance. Praising her beauty and ingenuity, the article said that she stunned in "a netted crystal dress and a sparkling headpiece reminiscent of a dreamcatcher placed atop her finely woven cornrows" (Schulte-Hillen, 2016). It was clear by the end of the article that the purpose was not to praise her cornrows, but to use Solange's sparkly outfit to identify glitter as the new holiday trend.

Vogue's coverage of cornrows in the Solange Knowles performance stands in stark contrast to that in *Essence*. Although the *Essence* article opened similarly to *Vogue*'s, it moved quickly past the fashion analysis and focused in on Solange's hair. "It was beautifully plaited with cornrows and topped off with a show-stopping headpiece by artist Shani Crowe that resembled a dazzling halo, which took more than 40 hours of braiding and beading" (Wilson, 2016). The article continued by further discussing the partnership between artists, as both had a history of celebrating and supporting braid designs on black women. The article began to touch on the implications of a celebrity supporting an artist that engages with the history of African hair. Although neither the performance nor the celebrity written about in this article directly related to an instance of cultural appropriation, *Essence* took the time to depict its connection in this article.

Although *Cosmopolitan* did not dedicate an article to this particular performance, its approach to the discussion of cultural appropriation in other articles had similarities to how *Essence* addressed cornrows. *Cosmopolitan* often strongly referenced this fashion style as cultural appropriation. This portrayal of cornrows was evident no matter the context of the article, from a journalist's personal hair journey in accepting her natural hair, to exposing institutional racism in public school dress codes. Although this sometimes seemed to be a method of maintaining relevancy, especially in its coverage of celebrities donning cornrows, it still demonstrated *Cosmopolitan*'s awareness of appropriation and its disapproval for it.

Shift In Coverage of Cultural Appropriation

When considering the evolution of each publication from 2013-2018, the development of coverage in each magazine varied. *Cosmopolitan* remained rather consistent in the number of articles written about cornrows throughout the years, while *Vogue* and *Essence* each increased coverage. For example, *Vogue* had zero mentions of cornrows in 2013, but had eight in 2018. Similarly, *Essence* had one article in 2013, but 15 in 2018.

While the number of articles written about cornrows in *Essence* increased, the nature of the articles' content did not change. Throughout the period studied, cornrows were heralded with rich history and recognized as a part of *Essence* readers' daily lives. Its first article emphasized the cultural appropriation of cornrows that one woman has observed throughout her life, and the most recent article listed celebrity examples to inspire new cornrow styles. During each year, there were a variety of approaches used in articles that touched on the cultural appropriation of cornrows. The mere mention of cornrows in an *Essence* article would lead to the discussion of appropriation.

In 2016, though, there was a significant increase in the number of articles written about the cultural appropriation of cornrows. This increase could have been due to other changes in society. However, when comparing this shift in 2016 to the other magazines, it is plausible that the increase in these articles could be due to the editors and writers at *Essence* wanting to conjure a change in society. *Essence* maintained a consistent frame that constructed a negative portrayal of cornrows in the context of cultural appropriation. Because the shift was not in how the magazine discussed cornrows (meaning the frame was consistent), the shift occurred in *how often* this topic was discussed. Thus, it was clearly a priority to shift this frame into the forefront of its readers' minds.

Essence is a magazine that predominantly targets African American women. To evoke a sense of importance, *Essence* increased the number of articles written on the cultural appropriation of cornrows. It is clear the magazine wanted its readers – and by extension society as a whole – to put greater focus on appropriation. In addition, the increase in coverage by both *Cosmopolitan* and *Vogue* in 2016 suggest *Essence* may have had an influence on the coverage of other magazines with different demographics. The role of intermedia influence on framing is beyond the scope of this study, but interesting to consider.

The shift that was observed in *Cosmopolitan* in 2016 was a change in both authorship and content. All

of the articles prior to 2016 were related to celebrity controversy. Although there was discussion of celebrities appropriating cornrows, it was minimal and did not detail the issue in its fullest extent by drawing from history and culture. Instead of defining the deeper issues underlying appropriation, the articles appeared to be more interested in celebrity news. Once the shift occurred in 2016, the articles transitioned to more in-depth discussions, covering deeper topics concerning appropriation and social change.

The noticeable difference in *Cosmopolitan* content may be due to the change in the race of its writers. While the authors of the articles in 2015 were white, those writing in 2016 were women of color. As an example, one article in particular was written by a black woman who spoke of her personal experience with cornrows, as well as the institutional racism evident in situations where hair is used to stop people with natural hair from following dress codes (Allen, 2017). This shift underscores the importance of someone of color writing about the topic; someone who had experience with this prejudice. The increase in articles may have demonstrated that *Cosmopolitan* realized that other magazines, like *Essence*, were deepening its coverage of cultural appropriation. The writers and editors realized that this issue should be treated as more than just a catchy headline, but a deep and serious topic.

In *Vogue*, the language and content of the articles remained primarily the same from 2013-2018. *Vogue*'s purpose and main message was to cover culture and fashion with an idealized and mostly glorifying tone. Throughout its articles during this time, cornrows were regarded with beauty and style. The difference, though, was that *Vogue* never addressed appropriation when covering non-people of color wearing cornrows. There was never a negative comment about cornrows, which were often lumped in with the other examples of braids. There was never a comment about the history of cornrows or their origin.

Despite this, there was still a shift that was unnoticeable if just looking at the articles' copy. The major shift that occurred in 2016 issues of *Vogue* was the visual representation of race and cornrows. In 2015, the celebrities or models that were portrayed donning cornrows were mainly white. Whether at a fashion show, on red carpets, or on social media, it did not matter. Whoever was wearing cornrows was featured the same—as a new trend for everyone to enjoy. However, in 2016 the representation changed, as *Vogue* stopped depicting people with cornrows if he or she was not a person of color. This visual shift is notable, because aside from the image, there was no change in content emphasis. Throughout the years, there was never a mention of cultural appropriation at all, not in a positive or negative manner. No matter the year or the race of the person, *Vogue* regarded people wearing cornrows exactly the same in the articles' framing. Given the demonstrated overall change in coverage from *Essence* and *Cosmopolitan* however, *Vogue*'s 2016 racial shift in photographs depicting cornrows suggest that the magazine was well aware of the changing cultural ground.

V. Conclusion

This study sought to explore the cultural appropriation of cornrows within the context of three U.S. fashion magazines and how the coverage developed between 2013-2018. The study determined that the development differed for each publication. The two publications that often featured cornrows as a main article topic, *Cosmopolitan* and *Essence*, had a clearer evolution of content during the period examined.

While *Cosmopolitan* remained steady in the number of articles on the cultural appropriation of cornrows, a shift in authorship coincided with a change in content. The articles initially placed a greater focus on celebrity controversy concerning cornrows, but later evolved to focus on the larger implications of appropriation. This shift in content was paired with a shift in authorship, as the later articles were written almost exclusively by women of color. *Essence* had the largest increase in the number of articles written on the topic over time. The difference in content was less evident in *Vogue*'s analysis, because none of its articles featured cornrows or their appropriation as the main discussion of an article. *Vogue*, however, changed its visual representation of race, showing people of color with cornrows. The visual treatment of those shown with cornrows changed, but *Vogue*'s discussion of those wearing them did not.

The convergence of an increase in *Essence* conversations with the shifts in portrayals of cornrows in *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan* suggest that *Essence* could be driving the media and societal conversation concerning cornrows to a more robust and culturally conscious place. However, it must be noted that this study was limited in scope. These three magazines are not necessarily representative of the fashion industry as a whole, and this study could only make conclusions based only on these magazines' specific content.

In addition, the content was limited to four specific months. Thus, it did not capture mentions of cultural appropriation or cornrows during other months. Another limitation of this study is that only trends, and not motives of editors and writers, can be assessed. Future research could examine other U.S. or global fashion magazines, as well as include a larger sample during each year.

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