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Celebrities dressed like a goddess: Admiration, cultural appropriation and disrespect

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**Celebrities dressed like a goddess: Admiration, cultural appropriation and disrespect**  
**Flavia Piancazzo - University of Bologna**

**ABSTRACT**

In September 2020, the Italian edition of Vanity Fair magazine published a series of interviews with Italian women in important professional positions. Each woman interviewed was compared with a female figure that had a paramount role in history or in popular culture. Chiara Ferragni, entrepreneur and influencer who had established herself in the international fashion scene, was depicted as the Madonna with child, painted by Giovan Battista Salvi, also known as Sassoferrato, upsetting readers and social network/internet users. This will be the starting point of our analysis of other cases. At times the media portray or adorn the celebrity as a deity, or as a cult figure, thus mystifying or desecrating the sacred meaning of deities and history; there are dozens of examples of famous people who were portrayed or have made appearances dressed as divinities. The article will aim to offer a comparative analysis by attempting to systematically explain the variants of the social phenomena found in the parallelisms between appropriation and spectacularization of religious clothing

**KEYWORDS** fashion studies social media celebrity culture religious clothing popular culture qualitative analysis

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## INTRODUCTION

In the book *Consuming Religion*, Kathryn Lofton, professor of religious studies, American studies, history and divinity at Yale University, analyses the process of consumption in popular culture, describing it as the need to fill a gap that consumption itself generates, and popular culture as the terrain where peoples participate in, support or criticize something together (Lofton 2017: 1–4), thus questioning the role of religion in this new consumerist frame being fuelled by popular culture.

Nowadays, the sacred images are misrepresented and cannibalized (Partridge and Moberg 2017: 145) by the cultural industry in order to create moments of fleeting attention while ensuring a strong impact. However, aesthetic solutions of this sort could lead to moral problems, insofar as the appropriation of a style, the appropriation of religious beliefs, leads to a distorted picture of the culture of its members, as Young and Brunk explain in *The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation* (2012: 9).

It has to be said that wearing holy dresses could often be a *modus operandi* that takes us back to the Renaissance concepts of the human being, clothing and the new social dimension. Some scholars (Marchetti et al. 2004: 10) explain that the spectacularization of clothing becomes the acquisition of a theatrical perception of the self within a perception of life as a theatre. However, the use of these clothes, when decontextualized, is an example of de-corporation in which elements of a dominant culture are subtracted to satisfy one's own interests (Mora 2005). For example, the singer Madonna uses religious iconography to express a certain sexual independence and stages a parody of the original meaning for the pleasure of 'exhibiting, scandalizing, resisting' (Mora 2005: 237).

In this work, the images of some celebrities who have been deified and dressed as Madonnas or Hindu goddesses will be analysed. Pictures generated discussions, movements and sometimes contempt, thus securing their fame with fans and anti-fans, and once again putting the concept of ethics in crisis. It seems also necessary to highlight how much the rise of celebrity culture is linked to developments in media systems within the capitalist system of commodity exchange (Drake and Miah 2010: 49).

Thus, in this work I will analyse two case studies. In September 2020, the Italian edition of *Vanity Fair* magazine has published a series of interviews with Italian women. One of them, Chiara Ferragni, was depicted as the Madonna with child, painted by Giovan Battista Salvi, also known as Sassoferrato. The article in the Italian fashion magazine generated a huge online reaction.

While, five years before the issue of *Vanity Fair Italia*, Carine Roitfeld and Jean-Paul Goude had turned today's icons into legends of history for the September 2015 issue of *Harper's Bazaar UK*. On that occasion, the singer Willow Smith asked to be portrayed as the Goddess Kali, meticulously copying her appearance, while wearing the clothes and jewels designed by Riccardo Tisci for Givenchy. This case was intended both as a commercial operation and a form of devotion or admiration with multiple meanings.

When it comes to religious beliefs, cultural industries have to face the general public and consider their impact on society. The present article, indeed, will provide a critical analysis of the consumption of religion in popular culture, specifically highlighting how cultural industries appropriate and misrepresent sacred images and beliefs for commercial gain and providing insights into the intersection of religion, popular culture and consumerism.

## CELEBRITY IMAGE THROUGH MEDIA, DEVOTION AND APPROPRIATION

The creative process surrounding the representation of celebrities (emphasised in this work) is heavily permeated in the needs of the commercial-artistic apparatus. As a result, the strong implications they can have in society are of strong interest for a sociological analysis. The activity of the media is therefore significant not so much as an artistic-communicative element but, above all, as a social trace for both the message they intend presenting, which is sometimes extended into the provocative realm, and the perception of those who are 'consuming' the image of the celebrity. Celebrity creation accelerates with

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image production and circulation growth (Marcus 2015: 1–5). Indeed, the internet era makes it easy to shape and disseminate the discourse around celebrities, and now fans enthusiastically do the work of replicating and circulating the celebrity discourse, which in the past was carried out by journalists and media in general (Marcus 2015).

The problem in tracing a complete analysis of the public figures' celebrification, here, stems from the multifaceted reading of celebrities in contemporary social theory: it implies the split between a private self and a public self; a distinction between celebrity, renown and notoriety; the need of questioning who is attributing celebrity status; and the impact on public consciousness, often determined by media (Rojek 2001: 11). Although academia does not intend celebrity culture as a proper religion (under any circumstances), some scholars have found similarities between both experiences. Celebrity culture and consequentially fandom, although largely associated with modern capitalistic cultures (Duffets 2013: 5), contain elements and social rules that can be easily found in religious practices (Booth and Wood 2022: 157). Morin had already projected his research on the mass culture phenomenon, that is, culture produced and disseminated according to the logic of mass industrial manufacturing. He notes how synthetic products, placed alongside religious cultures, produce values that often degenerate into dogmas (Anselmo 2006: 35). According to Morin, the star system is a combination between the religion of immorality and the religion of love. It produces stars like gods, whose divine substance is the love that humans feel for them, producing psycho-affective processes that intersect with economic and historical-social processes (Anselmo 2006: 33). Indeed, the spiritual experience provided by the media for fans presents features that can show analogies with the experience of believers, provided by religious communities and groups (Turner 2004: 6). Celebrities' qualities are often emphasized for the audience. Expressions such as 'icon' create a sense of importance in describing a celebrity, having a similar meaning in celebrity culture and religion (Edwards 2010: 148).

For instance, in this article we will see how Vanity Fair described Chiara Ferragni as a cult Christian figure with the quotation 'Madre, Figlio e Spirito social' ('Mother, Son and of the Social Spirit' (Marchetti 2020) and with comparable similitudes on other occasions. Even the curators of social communication at the Uffizi Gallery have thus described the celebrity as follows: 'Nowadays, Chiara Ferragni, born in Cremona, embodies a role model for millions of followers – a sort of contemporary divinity in the era of social media' (@uffizigalleries 2020). However, despite the exaggerated media storytelling and the admiring feelings from fans, the correlations between celebrities and fans, and between God and believer, remain diverse since media create para-social relations (Horton and Wohl 1956: 215–29) totally different from the other 'relation'. Indeed, the emotions generated by the former are ephemeral, mostly generated ad hoc by the media; they turn out to be momentary, purely focused on 'showing' rather than 'experiencing' (Rončáková 2021: 37).

On the one hand, the operation of elevation to divinity status by fashion magazines shows a poor ability to determine the cultural depth of what they represent when turning celebrities into deities, probably because of the ambivalence of fashion itself (Flugel in Davis 2013: 82). This gives rise to results that can often be traced back to the category of bad taste, disrespect and, finally, cultural appropriation. In *Cultural Appropriation in Fashion and Entertainment*, it is clearly stated that '[f]or culture to be appropriated, it first needs to go through a process of commodification' (Kawamura and de Jong 2022: 108), quoting the sociologist and economist Karl Marx and the process of commodifying things in the capitalistic mode of production that he theorized (Marx [1876] 2014: 59–76). On the other hand, fashion magazines multiply the potential of the visual in all its forms, since they are both commodities and cultural products (Moeran 2016: 28), typical of the cultural industries' production.

In addition, when publishing on social media the same photos destined for magazines, the possibility of interacting with the user (which does not necessarily refer to the figure of the fan) very often leads to a major misperception of those representative practices.

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Where there are audiences, there are politics. Probably celebrities cannot drive political changes directly, but they – along with the public – occupy increasingly important positions in sharing information geared towards (positively or negatively) impacting sociological and political transformations (Marcus 2015: 1–5). Indeed, in the internet era, fan commentary far outweighs the material that celebrities and their handlers produce (Marcus 2015). The use of social media, on the one hand, reinforced the representation of racial Otherness in mass production that started in the 1980s to the open enjoyment of racial differences (de Jong 2022); on the other hand, cultural industries commodify ethnic minorities' cultural aesthetics through media representation (de Jong 2022).

Theorizing and analysing forms of cultural insensitiveness, including cultural appropriation, requires an in-depth consideration of its multiple aspects, in any field (Kawamura 2022: 150). The fact that it occurs in many different systems, with a cultural globalization-related exchange, makes the definition of 'cultural appropriation' quite an effort. Moreover, when the issue encounters other intricate investigation areas such as fashion studies and celebrity studies, it seems necessary to consider each case study within all the fields of social sciences through its various perspectives (Kawamura 2022). Yet, the analysis setting has many common grounds in all these fields. Kawamura places the cultural appropriation debate within the theoretical framework of globalization delineating three dimensions: economic, political and cultural. Similarly, Alice Payne proposes a theoretical model to conceptualize any fashion system by synthesizing multiple perspectives on three factors: fashion as culture, fashion as change and fashion as an industry (2021: 13–38). Still, Lee Barron highlights how the celebrity system is embedded within social meanings and politics, industry and economy (2014: 1–10).

## **ACCOUNTING RELIGIOUS REPRESENTATION AMONG CELEBRITIES**

**Research design** To develop the present analysis, the author has decided to select two case studies of celebrities represented as sacred images that were published both in a fashion magazine and on social media.

Therefore, the research process required two qualitative analysis tools, according to a mixed approach: content analysis and image content analysis, yet necessarily integrated with virtual ethnography (Gobo and Molle 2016: 57).

Preliminary data were produced through content analysis and image content analysis conducted between October 2020 and February 2021. In November 2022, while writing the present contribution, a fact-checking process was carried out supported by virtual ethnography (Hine 2000), identifying Instagram as one of the preferred platforms (Dewan 2021: 662).

The main research questions have been defined:

1. How does the consumption of religion in popular culture develop?
2. How do cultural industries appropriate and misrepresent sacred images and beliefs for commercial gain?
3. How do users interact and react within the contents provided by cultural industries?

### ***Methodology***

The research process is structured into two preliminary stages: in the first instance, the forms of representation of the selected celebrities are identified; the next step is dedicated to the analysis of the dissemination of images produced by celebrities to make it possible to comment on the concept of celebrity and appropriation/spectacularization with the support of the theories of reference. However, the mere observation of the representations carried out by fashion magazines of the sampled celebrities has not returned sufficiently noticeable results for the purposes of this article. Therefore, it was deemed necessary to deepen the analysis with the feedback from users (appreciation vs. accusations of appropriation, or blasphemy).

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Thus, a multimodal framework for analysing the context was designed:

- In-depth analysis of contents, both written and visual
- (Along with the) Analysis of the context
- Points of view of the audience (Instagram users).

The activity was carried out online: the publications of the same image intended for the fashion magazine on social networks were analysed. Moreover, the field expanded to other websites and areas insofar as they seemed relevant during the fieldwork. Indeed, for each case study, the author provided the results of the analysis of the pictures and texts that supported: the picture published on the magazines and that published on Instagram by the subject (the celebrity or the creator). Moreover, the context of each case study was provided collecting existent data and information on the magazines and on the celebrities selected. For the second step, with the support of the ethnographic method, it was possible to identify and analyse the users' reactions to the pictures – object of analysis. The point of view of the audience was carried out on the selected platform, Instagram. I narrowed the field of investigation by selecting the first 50 comments, just to set a general frame. Consequently, I exclusively selected comments containing text, thus excluding comments containing only emoticons, comments containing vulgar and offensive text towards the subject and comments aimed at the general public. These comments were added to a chart and evaluated as positive or negative at first; then they were divided into four different categories: comments that assumed disrespect; comments that assumed blasphemy or cultural appropriation, according to the keywords 'blasphemy' and 'cultural appropriation'; comments of support; and comments of admiration regarding the picture or the subject, evaluating the tone according to the context, as will be demonstrated in the next lines.

The methodology applied in this research is to be understood as adequate for analysis circumscribed to a few case studies, and as such, it has its limitations. First of all, it is not extensive, nor is it to be understood as a sample representing all the cases in which a celebrity had worn a goddess-like attire. Rather, this contribution is to be seen as a reflection on how media expression can be understood as cultural appropriation or not and how online communities react.

#### **ADMIRATION, CULTURAL APPROPRIATION AND BLASPHEMY: SOCIAL NETWORKS' LAST JUDGEMENT**

In September 2020, the Italian edition of Vanity Fair magazine published a series of interviews dedicated to Italian women who have an important role in their fields of work, associating each woman interviewed with an important female figure in history. In the issue, the designer Miuccia Prada is represented as the secret agent protagonist of *Alphaville*, the movie by Jean-Luc Godard; the Italian host, producer and author Maria De Filippi as Queen Mary I of England, painted by Antonis Mor; the image of Luciana Lamorgese, Italian public service executive, prefect and politician and then minister of the interior, is compared to Joan of Arc, painted by John Everett Millais, and so on for other female profiles known to the Italian public.

Chiara Ferragni, an entrepreneur and influencer who has established herself in the international fashion scene, is the Madonna with child, painted by Giovan Battista Salvi, also known as Sassoferrato.

This is a particular choice of the editorial director Simone Marchetti, together with the artist Francesco Vezzoli, on which we will focus our reflection and which will be the starting point for analysing other cases in which the celebrity is represented or adorned as a divinity or cult figure.

'Madre, Figlio e Spirito Social' ('Mother, Son and Social Spirit'). This is the title of the interview conducted by the director of Vanity Fair Italia with Chiara Ferragni. A play on words that highlights the power of the image created by Francesco Vezzoli, whose artistic research is a continuous reworking of the ephemeral, of contemporary media society, in an almost provocative key, always quoting the history of art and Italian

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culture. A play on words and images that goes beyond the title of the interview and continues with other references to religion and Catholicism. In effect, in the pages of the interview with Chiara Ferragni, one can read:

1. C'è chi la odia e chi la ama fino alla venerazione
2. È il presente e il futuro che non riusciamo ancora a capire del tutto
3. Mamma Digital
4. Regina dei Blogger

In the statement 'there are those who hate her and those who love her to the point of veneration', the concept of idolized character is highlighted (1); it emphasizes that Chiara Ferragni's present, future and success, although certain, are in any case shrouded in a veil of mystery for her followers, the same mystery that Christians accept, moved by their own beliefs. Because 'she is the present and the future that we still cannot fully understand' (2). Then she is called 'Mamma Digital', since she is a parent and a pioneer of her own profession. She is depicted in Vanity Fair Italia as one who was for the Catholics both the mother of Jesus of Nazareth and the mother of the Catholic Church (3). Therefore, Chiara Ferragni – perhaps quoting Pope Francis when he said that Mary was the greatest influencer in history (@pontifex 2019) – has become for Francesco Vezzoli the Queen of Bloggers, like Mary, Queen of Heaven (4) (Ranck 2006: 130).

The intention of the artist and the director of the Italian periodical was to create a gallery made of strong images, a tribute to the determination of Italian women. The key was a particular artistic choice, but the provocation cannot always be so direct. A few days before Vanity Fair's release on newsstands, a body of associations for the defence of the environment and users' and consumers' rights accused the blogger of blasphemy.<sup>1</sup> A few hours after the accusation, the media and the Italian press published dozens of articles, transforming the artistic choice we have just described into a media case. However, in other instances, the media usually take a position, either defending or accusing those purporting a certain religion; in this case, the media provide only a limited explanation of the episode.<sup>2</sup>

Chiara Ferragni, however, is not the first celebrity to have literally personified Mary of Nazareth, and probably the public is somehow used to seeing holy pictures altered and borrowed for art purposes or for commercial advertisement. The history of photography is full of such examples: for instance, Lady Clementina Hawarden, the pioneer of nineteenth-century photography, produced a series of images whose subjects were Magdalenes, Madonnas and Queens (Spinelli 2018). Even Monica Bellucci, an internationally renowned Italian actress and model, was also represented as and played the Blessed Mother in a picture by Ali Mahdavi made for the 21st edition of 'Les Sapins des Créateurs' charity auction.<sup>3</sup> These images provide us with two reflections: both in the case of Clementina Hawarden's photography and in Vezzoli's work, the Virgin is a mere character to be interpreted like a queen or a historical figure. The second reflection pays particular attention to the work of photography from the Victorian Age, whose intent, in this case, was to not only reproduce the subject but also recreate the painting in its entirety, as, indeed, in the case of the Madonna con Bambino by Vezzoli.

However, if it is true that Chiara Ferragni interprets Mary of Nazareth as if it were a role, it is also true that the choice is not solely evocative or provocative. The author compares the peculiarities of the religious figure to those of the public persona, praising Chiara Ferragni and glorifying her life and work path, appealing to the artistic provocative choice of distortion and reproduction of the paintings of the great artists of the past. In this game of reproductions, Vezzoli did not choose to dress Chiara Ferragni as a Madonna. His artistic intuition was to use a choice already made by the public, the same audience that had already raised celebrity to divinity.

As is often the case when the art of our times plays with religious iconography, the artistic operation published in Vanity Fair created conflicting opinions. For this reason, it seemed necessary to investigate user reactions. The user comments on Instagram were analysed as follows: the picture shared by Chiara Ferragni on 23 September 2020 was commented on 5623 times. Surprisingly, half of the comments were

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positive and the other half negative. Thus, even if one of Francesco Vezzoli's purposes could have been a provocation, part of the same audience that had elevated celebrity to divinity before felt offended later. Indeed, a third of the comments evaluated as negative in this work contain accusations of blasphemy. Moreover, almost one-third of the sample considered the picture disrespectful towards Christians. By contrast, half of the positive comments were evaluated as positive: among the positive ones, half of the users showed feelings of support, while the other half showed clear admiration towards the influencer (Figure 1). The latter can be considered borderline. In fact, even a superficial analysis can easily refer to a morbid admiration in which the user – clearly a fan – considers the public figure an idol.<sup>4</sup>

Once again we are observing an artistic choice that becomes a media event, approved by some and considered offensive by others since the balance between provocation and damage is subjective. As Ylenia Caputo (2020) explains, the relationship of presumed intimacy that is established between celebrities and the public takes on such a depth as to trigger emotional responses comparable to those of social and family relationships, despite the fact that the bond is not immediate but rather mediated by the means of communication.

It is legitimate for the public to judge, just as it is appropriate for the public to decide whether to elevate a public figure to the status of celebrity or not. Let us now consider other cases in which an artist mentioned a religion literally by putting themselves in God's shoes.

In 2015 Harper's Bazaar UK proposed a sequence of images similar to the ones proposed five years later by Vanity Fair. In fact, the media market (and social media) seems to be increasingly oriented towards women, as well as young people, and focused on female power as a key sales item (Caputo 2022: 85–101).

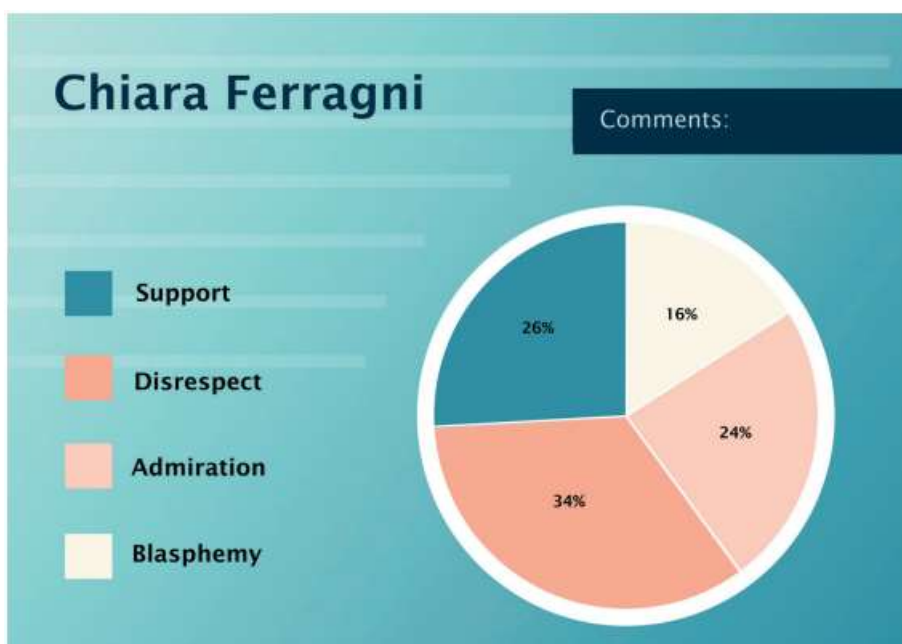


Figure 1: Analysis of the comments about Chiara Ferragni represented as the Madonna con Bambino

For that occasion, Carine Roitfeld and Jean-Paul Goude transformed today's icons into legends of history for the September 2015 issue of Harper's Bazaar. Thus, model and actor Rosie Huntington-Whiteley puts herself in the shoes of journalist Diana Vreeland; actor Jessica Chastain becomes Joan of Arc; host, producer and writer Oprah Winfrey is Glinda from The Wizard of Oz; the singer Mariah Carey is portrayed as Queen Marie Antoinette; actor Dakota Johnson, the goddess of Greek mythology, Aphrodite; and so on, ending with the singer Willow Smith who for the occasion becomes the Goddess Kali.

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The singer requested to be depicted as the Goddess Kali, meticulously copying her appearance, but wearing the clothes and jewels designed by Riccardo Tisci for Givenchy. It should be noted, however, that the celebrity has always shared her knowledge of the Hindu religion, expressing her appreciation.

For example, in an Instagram post on 18 October 2020, Willow Smith published a photograph taken by Alan Silfen. In this shot, she appears with Jaggi Vasudev, also known as Sadhguru, a mystic and yogi awarded by the Indian government in 2017 for his contribution to spirituality.<sup>5</sup> In the description accompanying the photograph, we can read:

Rare sighting of helping me through my existential crisis// INFINITE GRATITUDE for this moment with this spectacular human being// photocred: @alansilfenwil. (@willowsmith 2020)

Therefore, the artist is aware of the meaning of the goddess she wanted to personify. She knows its symbolic and religious value, and, in fact, it is the celebrity itself who attributes a spiritual meaning to it. Although Willow Smith's interest in and appreciation for Hinduism is known to many users, and not just fans, some people felt that her posing as Goddess Kali was not respectful. For this evaluation, I had to analyse the comments regarding the picture shared by Riccardo Tisci in order to determine the reaction of the general public. Indeed, at the moment of the analysis, the picture produced for the fashion magazine was not present in the Instagram official profile of Willow Smith. The fashion designer, however, published a picture produced during the shoot – the focus of our analysis – on 20 May 2015. As many as 5623 users liked the picture, a lower number when compared to the photo published by Chiara Ferragni. Furthermore, only 107 comments – compared to the more than 5000 comments received by Chiara Ferragni – do not permit a completely similar analysis. However, in both cases, the same type of comments was analysed. As a result, 27 out of 107 comments were suited for the analysis, but they were assumed to already represent user reactions. Just over a fourth of the comments were rated as positive. Instead, almost three-quarters refer to negative comments. Among the positive comments, only 8 out of 27 contain words of support, and the remaining ones refer to comments of pure admiration for the public figure. Among the many negative comments, almost a half complained of disrespect towards Hinduism. In addition, if among the comments addressed to Chiara Ferragni, one could find an accusation of blasphemy; in the case of the image that portrays Willow Smith, there are very often comments on cultural appropriation (Figure 2).<sup>6</sup> Indeed, blasphemy in Italy is considered an offence, but it must be noted that there is no single definition of the word. As a matter of fact, according to the Committee on Culture, Science and Education, blasphemy can be defined as the offence of insulting or showing a lack of reverence towards anything considered sacred (European Commission for Democracy through Law 2010: 19). In effect, it must be noted that the geographical area in which the image of Chiara Ferragni was published (Vanity Fair Italia) and her nationality already convey the accusations of blasphemy and not of cultural appropriation. Instead, the image of Riccardo Tisci, published in an American fashion magazine, leads to accusations of cultural appropriation precisely because he and Willow Smith do not belong to the 'true' religion quoted in the photoshoot. Indeed, cultural appropriation occurs even when the person doing the appropriation did not intend the act as appreciation, because the element is not being created by the original culture (Davis 2018: 59). Moreover, in 2021, a TikToker shared the photoshoot Willow Smith did in 2015. The video shared on this social network, viewed over a thousand times since being posted, assumes that Smith's actions are wrong and disrespectful.<sup>7</sup> This makes us understand how cultural appropriation can permeate media platforms and last over the years. Although the celebrity carried out dozens of actions in order to explain her proximity to the religion, users and society continued to feel offended by that singular picture. We must consider, however, that in the first case the choice to compare the influencer to a religious icon was made by the author of the image. Whereas the second one was a choice of the subject being photographed.

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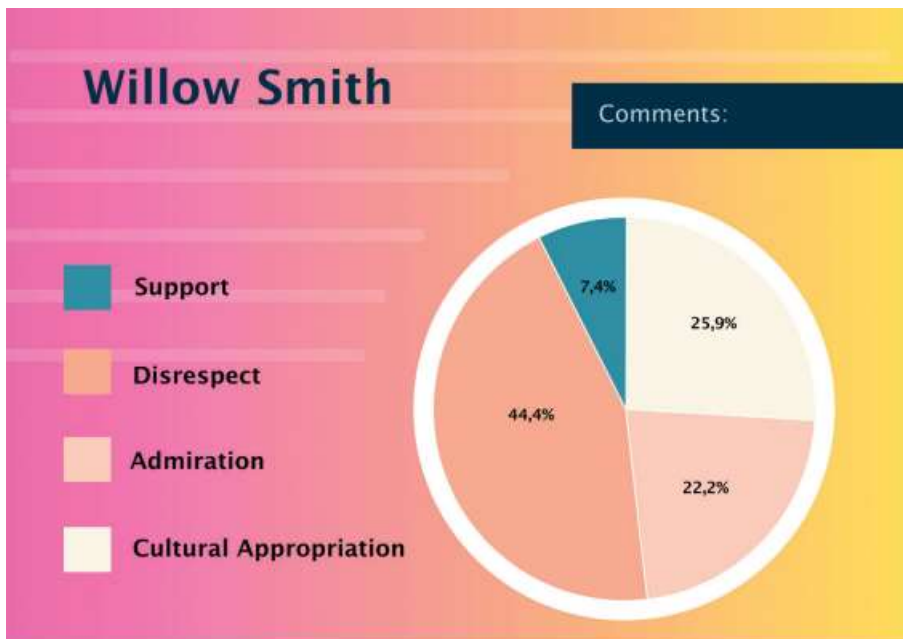


Figure 2: Analysis of the comments about Willow Smith dressed as the Goddess Kali.

In this regard, it is necessary to consider the question of the dress – a replica of the dress worn by a sacred figure – as a form of devotion. This practice was widespread – and still is – in many cultures. For example, in Italy, up to the second half of the last century, in many Christian families devoted to the Saints of the Liturgical Calendar, children were usually dressed in clothes that resembled those of the Saints. In Figure 3, in fact, we see a child dressed in clothes similar to those worn by Saint Anthony of Padua in classical iconography. In this case, the family who professed Christian religion had prayed to the Saint, hoping that the child would recover following a domestic accident. Dressing in sacred garb was used to honour and thank a Saint or the Madonna or simply used during sacred processions, a custom inherited from the ancient Romans (Campanale 2019: 73). The costume, intended as a replica of the sacred habit, is for the believers a form of devotion or admiration that takes on multiple meanings depending on the context in which it is worn.

The case is different in which the ‘sacred’ dress is not an act of devotion but takes on the meaning of a mere stage costume.

If we consider other examples, we can easily support the previous statements. In October 2008, on the occasion of the Halloween party organized by the model Heidi Klum every year from 1999 to 2019, the host decided to dress up by assuming the guise of the Goddess Kali (Barnett 2008). These celebrations are notoriously known as a time when the problems revolving around the theme of cultural appropriation emerge. Indeed, even if we are used to seeing pictures of children dressing up for Halloween with innocence, these costumes are often mere stereotypes, caricatures that have translated into racism or cultural appropriation, at times misrepresenting other people. In this regard, in 2011 Ohio University launched a campaign called ‘My Culture Is Not a Costume’ in order to raise people’s awareness (Karpova and Marchetti 2020: 155).

On another occasion, even the singer CardiB took the garb of a Hindu deity, Goddess Durgā (Bucar 2022: 20). She was depicted in a red dress, bare shoulders and holding in her hands a shoe from her collection for a famous brand, but the image was post-produced adding eight additional arms, like the Hindu goddess. Once again, the world of creative industries took inspiration from religion, as it happened for the pictures commented before, but what is controversial here is the contraposition of the meaning of the goddess with the picture. Indeed, if the picture of Chiara Ferragni as Madonna con Bambino was gentle, although

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provocative, like the other pictures referring to Christianity, these pictures are less respectful, often referring to the sexual sphere.

When the picture of CardiB was published, the public accused her of disrespect, above all, and the Hindu community highlighted some points that were in conflict with religion, given the fact that promoting a pair of shoes using Hinduism as a context is controversial since footwear and feet had a deep cultural meaning in India (Kawamura 2016: 32).

So, after a series of accusations of disrespect and cultural appropriation, the singer apologized for her picture and for the lack of knowledge about Hinduism that led her to make this mistake.

In fact, in *The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation*, it is stated:

Knowledge of a culture's belief and practices will be similarly crucial when assessing other acts of cultural appropriation. [...] There is the possibility that the cultural appropriation of artistic content (songs, stories, motifs, styles, and so forth) could lead to aesthetic failure. This aesthetic failure could, in turn, lead to moral problems. The appropriation of a style could, for example, lead to a distorted picture of the culture or its members. [...] Other sorts of appropriation, including appropriation of religious belief, give rise to similar concerns about undermining cultures. (Young and Brunk 2012: 9)

The point is that the issues of celebrities, crisis and success earn media coverage more than other ethical issues, although highlighting once again the problem of ethnocentrism.



*Figure 3: Child with Saint Anthony of Padua's clothes, San Mauro Forte (MT) Italy, June 1966. Private album, Piancazzo family (property of the author).*

## CONCLUSION

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The debates over the roles of celebrities and cultural values are not new, as during the 1970s, Horkheimer and Adorno studied the relationship between mass products (Hancock and Garner 2014: 237) and society, and other scholars have even studied the problem of scandals affecting the figure of the celebrity. In the analysis of the pictures mentioned above, we saw images of celebrities dressed like goddesses, sometimes imitating the purity of the Virgin Mary – albeit arousing controversy among people and even supporters – and sometimes imitating some Hindu deities, for which they were accused of disrespect. The scandal related to these events is quite short-lived, as it often happens when a celebrity or brand is accused of cultural appropriation, racism or disrespect for something, and now the steps of these events seem to follow a precise path: the picture is created, then published via social media (it is increasingly rare that these pictures are shared through magazines, a factor that denotes greater attention to possible ethical implications); users – considered in any case as a component of society – begin to write their comments on different platforms, thus taking positions for, or against, celebrities who at that moment represent an image almost always created in the context of the cultural industry and, therefore, in a capitalist context. After a few days, the celebrity implicated in the mini-scandal will release a statement, which almost always provides an apology to the communities that have felt offended by the image, justifying themselves in one of the following ways:

- A. referring to the very meaning of art, for which it is possible to use all means to arouse emotions, positive or non-positive, if the inspiration is Christianity;
- B. apologizing for the lack of in-depth knowledge of the culture that has been quoted, if the inspiration is a religion that is different from the first. Sometimes deleting the picture that is accused of disrespect, or deciding to not share it (as Willow Smith did).

This is generally the way in which issues related to the representation of religions through celebs or brands develop today. When society comments on these images, it questions the morality of the celebrity, highlighting a real crisis of today's ethics and a lack of sensitivity towards personal and cultural beliefs. However, what emerges from the analysis of the activities of the two celebrities in this study is once again the problem of Eurocentrism. As we have seen, the way of treating a sacred image and presenting it in an artistic key differs according to the religion the religious image refers to. Dropping the image into the oblivion of the Web and replacing it with other images to recapture the attention of social media users is not the solution. The solution would always be to pay attention to the meaning of what we are inspired by, even before publishing an image.

But, if what happens is always the opposite of a simple solution, what we have to ask ourselves is whether the compromise for a moment of extreme notoriety is, in fact, coming to terms with one's own ethics.

## **APPENDIX**

Minorities/ethnic minorities: Bear in mind that 'ethnic minorities' is a term that can include minorities with a broader meaning (i.e. religious, linguistic, cultural, ethnic, national, territorial and non-territorial minorities).

Influencer and celebrity: In the present work, the word 'influencer' is addressed only to Chiara Ferragni to identify her profession and her role on social media, and it is not linked to Willow Smith. However, in this work, the two subjects are both considered celebrities.

Blasphemy and appropriation: Please note that here blasphemy and cultural appropriation are not considered synonymous concepts under any circumstances.

During the first phase of the research, it was expected to have results where users would accuse of disrespect and possibly cultural appropriation. However, as can be seen from this article, many users accused celebrities of blasphemy.

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Furthermore, this work aspires to highlight a much broader issue: the way in which religions are used by celebrity and the need to create awareness. Therefore, speaking of blasphemy in the sphere of cultural industries in this article and considering that it is a broader argument – just think that in certain countries it is a crime punishable by death penalty (Lacerenza 2021) – would not be exhaustive.

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6. The author maintains the collection of Instagram comments used for the analysis in this work in a personal archive.

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