



## Selling Music, Wearing Culture: Fashion Merchandising, Popular Music and Symbolic Consumption

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**ABSTRACT:** This article examines the intersection of music, fashion and cultural appropriation through the lens of music-based fashion merchandising and consumer behaviour. Using an exploratory mixed-methods design—combining qualitative interviews with artists and professionals and a survey of 333 consumers—the study investigates how merchandising has shifted from a symbol of authenticity and community to an aesthetic commodity embedded in the logic of fast fashion. Quantitative findings suggest that while more than 75% of respondents consider merchandising important, 38% reported purchasing it without knowing the artist, primarily for design-related reasons. Qualitative insights further indicate a symbolic tension: emerging artists view merchandising as a visibility strategy, whereas established artists perceive it as a marker of identity and community. The analysis highlights ongoing disputes around authenticity, the role of social media in shaping consumer practices, and the implications for fashion brands engaging with music culture. Overall, the study contributes to debates on cultural appropriation, authenticity, and consumer behaviour, while pointing to future research on sustainability, digital micro-trends, and intergenerational differences. The analysis offers implications for fashion brands and marketers engaging with music culture in the context of fast fashion and cultural appropriation throughout the RPM range with a camless engine.

**KEYWORDS:** Cultural appropriation; fashion merchandising; fast fashion; authenticity; consumer behaviour; fan culture.

### I. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the fashion industry has intensified its relationship with popular music, moving beyond mere aesthetic inspiration toward the

systematic appropriation of icons, narratives, and styles associated with specific subcultures such as punk, rock, metal, and hip hop. This process—especially evident in fast fashion—often entails the decontextualization of identity-laden symbols from their original communities of fans and artists, raising critical questions about authenticity, representation, commercial ethics, and cultural sustainability.

This article critically examines how the mass-market commodification of musical aesthetics affects two distinct publics:

- general consumers of fast-fashion, and
- committed fans of the appropriated bands and genres.

Drawing on a systematic literature review and a mixed-method design—semi-structured interviews with professionals and artists alongside a survey of 333 consumers—the study analyses how cultural appropriation in musical merchandising impacts:

- perceptions of authenticity and belonging,
- the determinants of purchase, and
- the symbolic re-significations that emerge when musical signs circulate as fashion.

The study pursues a dual aim: first, to identify the tensions between identity value and aesthetic consumption in the marketing of musical merchandise; and second, to explain how these tensions shape consumer practices and brand strategies. It contributes to academic debates by offering:

- a. empirical evidence on how the meanings of merchandise are reconfigured when circulating outside their communities of origin;
- b. a typology of consumer responses (committed fans vs. aesthetic consumers); and,
- c. implications for marketing and brand management, particularly for collaborations between fashion and music.



The article is structured as follows: Section 2 develops the theoretical framework; Section 3 presents the methodology; Section 4 reports the qualitative and quantitative results; Section 5

discusses the findings in light of the literature; and Section 6 outlines conclusions, limitations, and avenues for future research.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1. Cultural Appropriation and Fashion.

The concept of cultural appropriation refers to the adoption, use, or exploitation of cultural elements—symbols, practices, art, aesthetics, or meanings—belonging to one cultural or subcultural group by another group with greater economic, social, or symbolic power, without recognition, consent, or compensation [1], [2], [3]. In the literature, this process is linked to dynamics of decontextualization and commodification, whereby cultural elements lose their original meaning when transferred to a broader market [4].

In the field of fashion, Hebdige [5] described how the industry absorbs signs from youth subcultures, stripping them of their oppositional charge and re-signifying them as commodities. Today, this dynamic is amplified by the fast fashion model, which accelerates the capture, reproduction, and mass commercialization of subcultural aesthetics—from punk and hip hop to grunge or trap—often detaching them from their original social and political context [6], [7], [8]. This practice not only dilutes cultural meaning but also transforms identity into an ephemeral consumer product, feeding a form of “empty commodification” [9], [10], [11], where aesthetics are severed from their history and presented as trends disconnected from their communities of origin. Cultural appropriation thus becomes a systematic resource for generating high-turnover micro-trends [12].

Concepts such as performative authenticity [13] and the fetishization of the symbol [14] are key to understanding this tension between identity and consumption: while original communities value coherence and meaning, the fashion industry—especially fast fashion—privileges speed, replicability, and immediate commercial appeal.

Applied to the musical domain, cultural appropriation is manifested in the use of iconography, styles, or symbols from subcultures (punk, metal, rap) by brands that commercialize them on a massive scale, disregarding their identity significance or the communities that originated them. This symbolic emptying generates tensions between authentic fans, who perceive a loss of legitimacy, and fashion consumers, who primarily value the aesthetic appeal of the product.

### 2. Musical Merchandising: From Identity Symbol to Fast Fashion Product.

The relationship between music and fashion has been widely documented as a process of mutual symbolic influence. Since the 1960s, musical subcultures such as rock, punk, and hip hop have projected styles that became markers of youth identity beyond the strictly sonic realm [15], [16].

Concert T-shirts, patches, and hoodies functioned as cultural signifiers, expressing belonging, shared values, intense emotions, and a sense of rebellion [17]. These objects were performative: they not only carried symbols but also acted as active tools of self-definition and communication within fan communities, even serving as visible rituals of identification. In this context, musical merchandising consolidated itself as a key resource to materialize the cultural identity of fans. Initially conceived as a promotional complement, it has since evolved into a multibillion-dollar global market, where the purchase of products not only supports the artist economically but also operates as a sign of belonging [18].

Over time, this phenomenon became permeated by the logic of global commodification, as musical merchandising shifted from being a tool of cultural identification to a massified and decontextualized fashion product [19].

The emergence of fast fashion systematized this process, transforming historically loaded symbols into globally accessible garments stripped of their original cultural and social significance. As Santos and Avery [20] note, “by mass-producing ‘punk’ clothing, companies fail to capture the true spirit of punk, which relied on handmade clothing to subvert commercial norms.” This produces a discontinuity between the original meaning and its contemporary use: music drives trends and builds identity, while the fashion industry subordinates these cultural expressions to dynamics of consumption. This cycle of resistance and neutralization [5] converts subcultural signs into commodities. In this context, fashion no longer functions as an autonomous medium of cultural expression, but rather as a consumption device that reconfigures identities through market logic.

As Ramirez [19] warns, “cultural appropriation in apparel design does not merely



imply an aesthetic transaction, but a symbolic operation that erases the history and conflict from which those signs originated.” This displacement generates tensions between identity-based authenticity, defended by fans, and mass commercialization, which seeks to capitalize on musical aesthetics in wider markets [21].

## 2. Divergent Impact Consumers.

Although musical merchandising has achieved notable commercial success by becoming integrated into the fast fashion industry, the transformation of these products raises a series of cultural and social tensions that remain insufficiently understood.

On the one hand, traditional fans may perceive a loss of culture, identity, and belonging due to the dilution and trivialization of the symbols and styles that once represented specific communities, movements, and ideals [13]. Such decontextualization can generate feelings of detachment or even rejection toward derivative merchandise, as the fast fashion model privileges speed and novelty over respect for and preservation of the original meaning. While fast fashion arguably democratizes access to style, it may also foster excessive consumerism and the erosion of cultural value, promoting a “throwaway culture” [22] that negatively impacts the perception of clothing as a carrier of identity.

On the other hand, the fast fashion consumer, often detached from the cultural roots of the merchandise, may disregard its original meaning and interpret the garment primarily as a matter of aesthetics or trend [6], [7]. Nevertheless, in some cases, exposure to this iconography can act as a gateway to fandom, generating a process of symbolic conversion [23].

The tension between the loss of meaning for fans and the superficial consumption or re-signification by new users raises critical questions about how fast fashion reconfigures the relationships between musical culture, identity, and market dynamics. This demonstrates that merchandise is not a passive object, but rather a field of symbolic dispute in which values of legitimacy, resistance, and market interests are constantly negotiated [24], [16].

In this context, there is a clear need for empirical analysis that explores how these divergent impacts are experienced both by original fans and by fast fashion consumers. Understanding these dynamics is essential for assessing the social, cultural, and economic consequences, as well as the brand positioning strategies of companies involved in

incorporating musical merchandising into the fast fashion model.

What perceptions do traditional fans hold about the commercialization of their symbols? How do new consumers engage with these aesthetic elements? Does this process entail cultural re-appropriation or a symbolic rupture? These are the guiding questions that this research seeks to address.

## III. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design [25], combining qualitative and quantitative approaches with the aim of triangulating perspectives and enriching the understanding of the phenomenon.

a. Qualitative Phase: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten professionals from the music and merchandising sectors, as well as four artists (two established and two emerging). The selection criteria were:

- direct experience with processes of merchandising production or commercialization, and
- active participation in music scenes with a strong identity dimension.

The interviews (30–60 minutes) were recorded, transcribed, and analysed using inductive thematic analysis, following the guidelines of Braun and Clarke [26].

b. Quantitative Phase: In the second phase, data were collected through an online survey using a non-probability sampling strategy, yielding a total of 333 valid responses. While the sample was not probabilistic, its size is consistent with methodological recommendations for exploratory studies in social sciences and consumer research, where samples above 300 are generally considered adequate to identify meaningful patterns [27]. Moreover, the target population— young and urban consumers—aligns with the main demographic segment of fast-fashion markets, thereby reinforcing the contextual relevance of the data.

To strengthen validity, the questionnaire included Likert scales and closed items adapted from previous studies on authenticity, fandom, and consumption practices [28], [21]. Responses were screened to remove incomplete or inconsistent data, ensuring analytical reliability. Although the non-probability design restricts generalizability,



the survey's exploratory scope, combined with the qualitative evidence from interviews, provides robust triangulation [25]. Thus, while not statistically representative of the entire population, the sample is adequate for identifying relevant consumer trends within the target group most engaged with fast fashion.

This methodological strategy therefore balances depth and breadth, capturing both the symbolic and consumerist dimensions of musical merchandising, and provides a more comprehensive perspective on the tensions between symbolic authenticity and aesthetic commercialization.

## IV. RESULTS

### 1. Qualitative Phase Results

The interviewees agreed that merchandising has evolved from a rudimentary promotional product (1980s–1990s) to a cultural and fashion symbol. They emphasized its value for loyalty in genres such as rock and hardcore, while perceiving more ephemeral consumption among younger audiences. Limited editions were highlighted as mechanisms for exclusivity, but concerns were raised about cultural appropriation.

**Table 1. Key qualitative insights from professionals and artists.**

Theme	Main source	Empirical insight	Interpretation
Identity and community	Established artists	Merchandising is framed as a marker of belonging, loyalty and authenticity.	It should be managed as a strategic identity resource, not only as revenue.
Visibility and branding	Emerging artists	Merchandising is used to increase recognition, social media presence and audience reach.	Merchandise may operate as a discovery and positioning tool.
Fast-fashion acceleration	Industry professionals	Micro-trends accelerate the circulation and imitation of music-based symbols.	The risk of decontextualisation increases when symbols are detached from their musical origins.
Exclusivity and limited editions	Artists/professionals	Limited editions are perceived as mechanisms of scarcity and symbolic value.	Exclusivity can reinforce authenticity when linked to artist-led narratives.
Appropriation concerns	Professionals/fans	Concerns emerge when brands use music symbols without explanation, respect or recognition.	Legitimate collaborations require contextualisation, co-creation and cultural acknowledgement.

*Source: Own elaboration.*

Established artists understood musical merchandising as a symbol of identity and community, aimed at reinforcing ties with their most loyal fans. In contrast, emerging artists viewed it as a visibility strategy, a way to reach new audiences and strengthen their presence on social media.

Industry professionals noted that musical merchandising has evolved from being a secondary product to a strategic component of the music economy, accelerated by fast fashion and the logic of micro-trends. This evolution supports the hypothesis that merchandising has become a strategic branding tool, consistent with studies on Generation Z that have documented impulsive purchase rates of nearly 47% [29].

These qualitative insights confirm the tension between authenticity and commercialization, while also revealing opportunities for hybridization between fashion and music.

### 2. Quantitative Phase Results

The survey of 333 participants provided empirical evidence regarding perceptions and consumption practices of musical merchandising. In terms of age distribution, 51.3% were young adults between 18–44 years, while 47.4% were 45 years or older. Representation of the under-18 group was limited (1.2%), making reliable analysis for this segment difficult. The majority identified as female (60.1%), followed by male (39%), with 0.9% preferring not to specify.

The most frequently selected music preference was “I listen to everything” (32.4%), followed by pop (28.9%), and genres such as rock/punk/metal/hardcore (13.4%). Greater diversity was observed in the preferences of younger respondents compared to older ones, among whom pop predominated. Streaming platforms were the primary medium for listening to music (61.3%),



although the oldest group ( $\geq 45$  years) showed a preference for radio (40.5%).

**Table 2. Respondent profile and music consumption patterns.**

Variable	Result	Comment
Valid responses	333	Online non-probability sample
Age: 18-44 years	51.3%	Young and adult consumers
Age: 45 years or older	47.4%	Relevant older cohort for intergenerational comparison
Age: under 18	1.2%	Limited analytical reliability
Female respondents	60.1%	Majority of the sample
Male respondents	39.0%	Second largest group
Prefer not to specify	0.9%	Minority response
Most selected music preference	32.4%	'I listen to everything'
Pop preference	28.9%	Second most frequent preference
Rock/punk/metal/hardcore preference	13.4%	Relevant for subcultural merchandising
Streaming as main listening medium	61.3%	Primary medium across the sample
Radio among respondents aged 45+	40.5%	Most visible age-related listening difference

Source: Own elaboration.

Approximately 75% considered musical merchandising important or very important, confirming its cultural and commercial relevance and reinforcing findings such as those of The Harris Poll (2021), which indicated that Gen Z perceives merchandising as a brand influence. T-shirts and hoodies were the most purchased items (28.2%).

A total of 64% identified rock, punk, and related genres as producing the best merchandising, valuing their symbolism of rebellion and authenticity, even though pop was the most popular genre overall. Meanwhile, 60.9% believed that musical symbols can change their meaning over time, and 69% felt that musical merchandising is sometimes just a fashion trend.

**Table 3. Main descriptive findings on music-based fashion merchandising.**

Indicator	Value	Interpretation
Merchandising considered important/very important	>75%	Confirms cultural and commercial relevance
Purchase without knowing the artist	38.1%	Indicates aesthetic-driven consumption
Aesthetics/design as motivation among those buyers	87.4%	Design dominates over cultural knowledge
Rock/punk-related genres perceived as best merchandising	64.0%	Associated with rebellion and authenticity
Musical symbols can change meaning over time	60.9%	Supports re-signification thesis
Merchandising sometimes perceived as just a fashion trend	69.0%	Supports symbolic deactivation argument
Design as purchase factor	32.2%	Main purchase driver
Price as purchase factor	26.6%	Second driver
Quality as purchase factor	21.9%	Third driver
Exclusivity as purchase factor	5.6%	Limited influence in total sample
Fan opinions as purchase factor	0.5%	Very low influence
Emotional/symbolic connection	13.2%	Lower than tangible motivations
Bothered by non-fans wearing band T-shirts	51.3%	Among respondents familiar with artists
Social media influence	41.9%	Supports the role of digital micro-trends

Source: Own elaboration.

Notably, 38.1% admitted to purchasing merchandise without previously knowing the music,

motivated mainly by aesthetics/design (87.4%). This phenomenon was more common among younger age



groups, supporting the hypothesis of “aesthetic ignorance”: consuming musical symbolism as visual style, stripped of musical or identity content.

The most influential purchasing factors were design (32.2%), price (26.6%), and quality (21.9%), whereas exclusivity (5.6%) and opinions of fans (0.5%) carried little weight. Only 13.2% cited emotional connection with the artist or symbolic/ideological value as purchase motivations. These results reinforce the diagnosis of a symbolic deactivation of merchandising, reduced to a visual fashion with little emotional connection. Tangible factors (design, price, quality) outweighed symbolic ones (exclusivity, emotional connection).

Conversely, among the 32.9% of respondents who were familiar with the artists, motivations were linked to identity, support, or belonging. Of these, 51.3% agreed with the statement: “Does it bother you when people wear band T-shirts of artists they do not know?” The perception of “aesthetic appropriation” was recurrent in open comments, which criticized the trivialization of cultural symbols by brands that “neither explain nor respect” the musical references.

The analysis revealed a clear generational divide: consumers over 30 valued merchandising as a symbol of belonging or musical activism, while younger respondents (16–24 years) regarded it as just another aesthetic trend, easily interchangeable. The younger segment purchased merchandising primarily as fashion and ephemeral aesthetics, whereas older participants valued its cultural meaning and authentic connection with the artist. These patterns were reflected in the acceptance of garments by both fans and non-fans, as well as in the willingness to socialize through merchandising.

These findings indicate that merchandising has increasingly been perceived as fashion, transcending its original role as an identity marker.

## V. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest and expand upon existing claims in the academic literature concerning the relationship between fashion, music, and cultural appropriation.

First, the perception of merchandising as important for three out of four respondents supports the idea that these objects function not merely as accessories, but as symbols of collective identity [30], [28]. However, the fact that 38% of participants reported purchasing merchandise without listening to the artist indicates a shift toward aesthetic consumption, resonating with Hebdige’s [5]

description of subcultural “recycling” by the fashion industry.

Second, the emphasis on design, price, and quality as the most valued purchasing factors shows that consumers tend to prioritize tangible dimensions over symbolic meanings. This finding partly contrasts with earlier studies that highlighted exclusivity and authenticity as central drivers of merchandising consumption [21]. A key tension therefore emerges: while committed fans still perceive merchandise as a marker of legitimacy, general consumers approach it primarily as a fashion accessory.

Third, the significant influence of social media (41.9%) aligns with recent research on the role of digital platforms in disseminating micro-trends and accelerating fast-fashion dynamics [12]. This suggests that the circulation of merchandise is no longer confined to concerts or official outlets but rather amplified through online platforms that reinforce its status as a trend-driven product.

Finally, insights from interviews with artists and professionals reinforce the notion of merchandising as a field of symbolic dispute [24]. Emerging artists view it as a strategy for visibility, whereas established artists consider it a symbol of community. This divergence illustrates that authenticity is constructed and negotiated differently, depending on an actor’s position within the musical field [13].

**Implications.** For fashion brands, these findings highlight potential risks of symbolic trivialization and possible rejection by authentic fans, while also pointing to opportunities for co-creation with artists seeking to strengthen legitimacy. For artists, the challenge is to manage merchandise not merely as a source of revenue, but as a strategic identity tool.

For fashion and lifestyle brands, the findings underline the importance of understanding when music-based collaborations are perceived as authentic extensions of fan culture and when they are seen as opportunistic appropriations. Brands that co-create merchandise with artists and acknowledge the cultural roots of the symbols they use are more likely to avoid backlash from core fans while still attracting aesthetic-driven consumers.

**Cautionary note.** Given the exploratory and non-probabilistic nature of the quantitative sample, the results should be interpreted as indicative tendencies rather than generalizable claims. Nonetheless, the combination of qualitative and quantitative evidence provides a robust basis for



understanding emerging dynamics in the intersection of music, fashion, and cultural appropriation.

## VI. CONCLUSIONS

This study suggests that musical merchandising is perceived by consumers not only as a fashion product but also as a symbol of cultural identity. More than 75% of respondents attributed importance to it, highlighting its value as a resource for connecting artists and audiences. At the same time, the finding that 38% reported purchasing merchandise without knowing the artist indicates a shift toward aesthetic consumption, consistent with Hebdige's [5] description and the broader literature on cultural appropriation.

The qualitative results further indicate that merchandising constitutes a field of symbolic dispute: while emerging artists employ it as a strategy of visibility, established artists perceive it as a marker of authenticity and community. Thus, merchandise is positioned at the intersection of identity and market, balancing between fandom loyalty and banalization.

This research provides three main contributions:

- empirical evidence on how the meanings of merchandise are reconfigured at the intersection of music and fashion;
- differentiation between the perceptions of committed fans and general consumers; and
- implications for brand management in a context of increasing cultural appropriation.

**Limitations.** Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, although the survey sample was sizeable, it focused mainly on young and urban consumers, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Second, the limited number of interviews reduced the diversity of artistic and professional perspectives. Finally, the cross-sectional design did not allow for observing the evolution of the phenomenon over time or across cultural contexts.

**Future Research Directions.** Building on these limitations, several avenues of inquiry are suggested:

- Longitudinal studies to analyse how perceptions of authenticity and fashion evolve over time.
- Cross-cultural and intergenerational comparisons, assessing differences across music genres, local scenes, and age groups.
- Analyses of the role of social media and micro-trends in the diffusion of musical merchandising and its integration into fast-fashion logics.

- Exploration of the relationship between musical merchandising and sustainability, given the growing importance of responsible consumption.
- Further investigation into the tension between authenticity and commercialization, focusing on how fans reinterpret and re-signify merchandise in response to its banalization.

**Closing Statement.** In conclusion, this study provides exploratory evidence that musical merchandising has shifted from a symbol of identity to a fashion commodity, reflecting broader tensions between culture and market dynamics. By combining qualitative and quantitative insights, it shows how authenticity, community, and aesthetic consumption coexist in contested ways, shaped by both fans and general consumers. These findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than generalizable, but they remain essential for advancing academic debates on cultural appropriation and consumer behaviour, as well as for guiding fashion brands and artists seeking to balance cultural meaning with commercial success.

**Ethical Considerations.** The study involved human participants who took part in semi-structured interviews and an online survey about their perceptions and consumption of music-related fashion merchandise. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and respondents were assured of anonymity and the confidential treatment of their answers. No personally identifiable information was collected, and data were analysed in aggregate form. The research protocol complied with the ethical guidelines of University of A Coruña (Spain) and the principles of responsible research in the social sciences.

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