

THE KIMONO COVER UP

MARIA DELIFOTI-NIKODEM

Mediterranean College Greece, Greece

delifotinikodem@gmail.com

Orcid: 0009-0001-2519-3975

Copyright: © Author(s). This is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Firenze University Press and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.
Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.
Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest

DOI: 10.36253/fh-3962

Abstract

Fashion does not merely reflect history; it actively rewrites it through the language of style, desire, and consumption. In contemporary fashion copywriting, garments are not only described but transformed into desirable narratives that attach style, lifestyle, and value to consumption. This article explores how the kimono, historically embedded in systems of cultural practice and social meaning, is reconfigured within luxury e-commerce language as a fashionable “cover-up.” Through close reading, the analysis demonstrates how terms such as “kimono-inspired,” “certified,” and “enhances” detach the kimono from its original cultural context and reposition it within systems of leisure, lifestyle, and aesthetic consumption. The article argues that fashion language operates not simply descriptively, but semiotically, producing meaning through connotation and transforming cultural specificity into marketable value. In this process, the ambiguity between inspiration and appropriation becomes structurally embedded within fashion discourse itself.

Keywords: *Fashion copywriting; Kimono; Cultural appropriation; Semiotics; Luxury e-commerce.*

“Based in Cali, Colombia, Johanna Ortiz is committed to the local community and works to preserve craftsmanship and encourage creativity. Handmade from certified linen, this 'Boa Whisper' cover-up is cut with flared sleeves and printed with a zebra-print motif. The wide sash belt enhances its kimono-inspired shape.”

(- Product description from net-a-porter platform.¹)

1 https://www.net-a-porter.com/en-gr/shop/product/johanna-ortiz/clothing/coverups/boa-whisper-belted-zebra-print-linen-cover-up/46376663162965802?utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=GOO%3ANAP%3AEU%3AGR%3A-OO%3AENG%3ASEAU%3APMX%3AMAN%3AMXO%3A-NEW%3AWN%3AHIGH-CLUSTERS%3ALV0%3ALV1%3ALV2%3AXXX%3A0%3AHIGH-CLUSTERS%3A&utm_id=23642032934&utm_term=3074457345630280270&vtp00=GOO-GLE&vtp01=SEAU&vtp02=&vtp03=&vtp04=x&vtp05=c&vtp06=&vtp07=pla&gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=23642039909&gbraid=0AAAAADRhZnv8j_EcgqfFWwxeLJJSXot9D&gclid=CjwKCAjwntHPBhAaEiwA_Xp6RoN8hzwAFBUJNx1lxypw-Bom_tjhF-oVoN99cqLpMzkIjQhi_bz3DBoCu0EQAvD_BwE

Cali, Colombia, is introduced as more than a location. It functions as a guarantee: of community, craftsmanship and ethical grounding. The garment goes beyond being simply described to being justified, since its “certification” presents it not as fashion, but as virtue.

“Certified”, here, functions less as a material guarantee than as a moral one, allowing the garment to appear ethically secured before it is aesthetically consumed; “enhances” suggests a completion of the garment’s form as it is translated into a fashion language; and naming the garment ‘Boa-Whisper’ combines an exotic reference with softness and intimacy that create an atmosphere. The description moves from geography, through design details, to another geography, culminating in the originless “kimono-inspired shape,” where the kimono appears without context. As Jenny Hall notes in *Japan Beyond the Kimono*, the kimono historically functioned not merely as clothing, but as a garment embedded in systems of etiquette, social identity, and cultural practice. None of these associations remain necessary within the product description (Hall, 2020, p.123-135). Here, the kimono is no longer referenced as a cultural object, but as a form, an outline, a visual trace enhanced by a sash. Such vocabulary usage allows for alignment with the Barthesian idea, where “fashion appears essentially [...] as a system of signifiers [...]” (Barthes, 1990, p.280). As such, the kimono is not described but rather evoked, and in that evocation it is transformed. The description transforms the kimono from a culturally situated garment into a consumable fashion sign.

The phrase “kimono-inspired” is a cautious one. It acknowledges the difference while subtly neutralising it. By invoking “inspired” the cultural heritage of the kimono is flattened, suggesting distance and detachment that produce an atmosphere of appreciation rather than appropriation. As its cultural context recedes, the garment ceases to belong to a specific place, and becomes instead a stylistic resource available to be “re-imagined”, “re-defined” and “re-invented”. Inspiration does not preserve the kimono, it displaces it. The garment is no longer encountered as a cultural object, but as a form that can be mobilized and recombined. Thus, it is through the depoliticisation of vocabulary, whereby the kimono is reframed as

a fashionable garment. The transformation matters commercially because garments positioned as fashion circulate more easily than garments tied to specific cultural traditions.

Words do not merely describe the garment; they make it wearable within a different system of meaning. In this context, language must be understood not merely as a descriptive tool, but as a site of responsibility, mediating how cultural difference is translated and circulated. The description masterfully assembles multiple cultural references without friction.

It moves seamlessly, stylized in editorial voice, from one vestimentary feature to another, producing a surface that appears coherent, even natural. “Colombia” anchors the garment with ethical locality; the “zebra-print motif” introduces an exoticised elsewhere; the “kimono-inspired shape” provides a recognizable form.

Different cultural elements that coexist without tension. Fashion copywriting achieves, indeed, the interchangeability and coexistence of signs within a single object through their detachment from their original contexts.

Since the garment does not belong to any one place, but circulates between them, it now consists of a single aesthetic composition held together not by origin, but by readability.

Fashion as a system of signification elucidates how garments acquire meaning through language, transforming material features into culturally legible signs, as are aesthetics.

This circulation of the garment finds its destination in the “cover-up”. The kimono is no longer a garment to be worn within its cultural context. The clothing category of the “cover-up” situates it within a different scene: the beach, the resort, the space of leisure in general.

In this scenery, the kimono is nothing but a layer to be put on and taken off. It is now an accessory that accompanies a particular mode of dressing rather than defining it. In this context, the kimono-as-resortwear, or bohemian chic must-have, operates as a culturally re-coded signifier within the semiotic system of western leisure. What matters is not where it comes from, but how it can be worn.

Rather than expressing its original cultural context, it becomes a marker of belonging to a particular lifestyle. Through this process, fashion language does more than describe the garment—it situates it. It determines where it belongs, how it should be

worn, and what it should signify. The kimono is thus not simply transformed into resortwear or boho-chic; it is made to fit a set of expectations that govern what counts as fashionable, desirable, and appropriate. Through repeated linguistic formulations, it stabilises norms and expectations, effectively producing a system of implicit “do’s and don’ts” that govern how fashion is understood and consumed. What emerges is a form of meaning that appears stable and self-evident. Cultural difference is not erased, but reorganised into a form that can circulate without resistance. The garment becomes both legible and consumable and, thus, the kimono no longer belongs to a culture, but to a setting. This transformation overwrites the conditions under which the kimono once existed. Its history, its cultural specificity, its modes of use are no longer required. It is not a matter of misinterpretation, but of simplification that enables them to disappear while maintaining the garment’s intelligibility. The kimono is reduced in order to circulate as a westernised cover-up with new meaning: one that is immediate, aesthetic and consumable. By this means, cultural appropriation takes the form of the commodification of traditional clothing (He, 2025, p.228). When the kimono is no longer “just a dress,” it becomes a story that is easy to sell, and one that fulfills the conditions of what Barthes would identify as myth (Barthes, 1991); a form that empties history from objects while making their meanings appear natural. Appropriation, here, not an accident, nor an external intrusion. It emerges from the very process that makes the garment intelligible within fashion. In this sense, appropriation is not the opposite of meaning, but one of the conditions under which meaning is made to circulate smoothly, making up a strong, coherent, marketable story. In other words, the kimono is given meaning that can be consumed. Appropriation is not inevitable, but intelligible. The kimono is not distorted after all. What has changed is the system of its intelligibility, that is, the conditions under which it can be understood. Re-framed as a “cover-up” it appears as naturally belonging in this context. The ambiguity between inspiration and appropriation is not accidental. The new framing of the kimono gives it a form that no longer resists consumption.

In fashion copywriting, it is connotation that generates meaning beyond mere description, and it is here that desire is produced. Connotation attaches culturally loaded meanings that render the garment desirable. Fashion language does not simply inform; it situates the garment within a world of associations that give it value. This raises a crucial question: how do words move from connotation to meaning—and further still, to value? In the case of the kimono cover-up the garment is not worn so much as circulated. What is preserved is its recognisability; what is lost is its specificity. The cover-up does not conceal the body, but the process through which meaning is detached, aestheticised, and made available for consumption. This does not necessarily compose a call for the elimination of cultural influence or cross-pollination (Climer & Almond, 2023), but rather an awareness of how such exchanges are mediated. The distinction between appreciation and appropriation is enacted linguistically: through the terms, metaphors, and narrative frames that render cultural difference both intelligible and marketable. In this sense, the future of fashion copywriting lies not in abandoning myth, but in consciously attending to how myths are made, whose meanings they catalyze, and at what cultural cost.

REFERENCES

- Barthes, R. (1990). *The Fashion System*. University of California Press.
- Barthes, R. (1991). *Mythologies*. The Noonday Press.
- Climer, G., & Almond, K. (2023). Pattern-Cutting without cultural appropriation. *Fashion Education: The Systemic Revolution*, 148–181.
- Hall J. (2020). *Japan Beyond the Kimono: Innovation and Tradition in the Kyoto Textile Industry*, Bloomsbury Publishing.
- He, Y. (2025). Exploring the role and impact of cultural appropriation in the fashion industry. *Transactions on Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, 14, 227–232. <https://doi.org/10.62051/1cmqdh17>