Research Paper:
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Fast Fashion

Throughout the fashion business, the fast fashion industry has been a major disruption to leading brands, shaping the apparel retail landscape over the past few decades. Investopedia describes fast fashion as, "the term used to describe clothing designs that move quickly from the catwalk to stores to take advantage of trends." The term fast fashion refers to inexpensive designs that copy luxury brands to stay on top of style demands. The trend-driven fashion mimics luxury at a lower price. In other words, fast fashion allows consumers to express themselves in a more cost-effective way. The rise of fast fashion is exemplified through the effects and struggles on Couture Houses.

The concept was first engineered by European companies like Zara, H&M, and Forever21 in the early 2000s. These retailers employed traditional fashion practices by introducing new collections multiple times per month, rather than the modern four seasons per year. This quick inventory is achieved by compressing design-to-production cycles dramatically through low-cost labor and replicating luxury designer trends. The concept of fast fashion quickly grew and enticed consumers who shop for trendy and affordable designs online. The allure of online fast fashion's convenience, price, and aesthetics lead consumers to want the lifestyle that comes with the luxury-like clothing in a more cost-effective way. While fast fashion is popular among consumers for its affordability, quick turnaround time, and look, it decreases sales in couture houses, emphasizing the good and bad sides of the new practice.

Fast Fashion has both positive and negative effects on original couture houses. Fast fashion brands can design products and have them on the shelves in just weeks. The main

reason fast fashion is popular is because consumers can get a designer-looking product at "an affordable price" (Hayes, 2024). Looking online and finding a better price tends to consume the buyer. Statistics show that most every site has seen that the majority of its consumers opt the cheapest option. People choose affordability as they don't understand that with lower prices, comes lower quality. Ecology explains that people "desire the same latest fashions, but are not willing to pay the major price tag because they do not hold quality in the same high regard" (Edology 2015) This illustrates how much consumers tend to favor brands that offer efficiency and affordability over high-quality, yet more costly brands. Some consumers opt for a more simple article of clothing, with less features on it, as that is what's right for them. The focus on value is a very important part of consumers choices. Whether prices play a part in the quality of clothing or not, most consumers view cheaper options at the same value as the pricier items, though this isn't usually accurate. As more and more consumers opt for fast fashion, it will continue to rise above even the most historically successful and significant leading luxury brands. Lastly, decision-making can be made simply by the influence of friends and family. A friend buying a cheaper version can compel consumers to choose the more affordable option. An influencer online who is seen wearing a dupe (duplicate), will influence consumers to choose the dupe versus the higher-quality original design. These consumer reasonings are all contributing to the rise of fast fashion houses. Overall, the combination of the price with consumer needs and value determines people's selection.

Zara is an example of a major fast fashion house that launches over 20,000 designs per year and completes a product cycle from design to store in just 2-3 weeks. H&M, once a small European retailer, now has over 5,000 stores globally and aims to increase sales. People begin

to create an "appetite for up-to-the-minute styles" as these brands are not only cheaper but come up with material rapidly, intriguing buyers (Hayes, 2024). Several trends have accelerated fast fashion's rapid expansion, such as the globalization of manufacturing supply chains, e-commerce, social media marketing, and celebrity culture. The success of fast fashion forced traditional apparel chains to respond by competing with costs, all while dramatically increasing the speed of fashion cycles.

The fast fashion business shows little indication of slowing down. However, there are concerns about overconsumption and sustainability within the industry. Many fashion brands are responding with eco-friendly lines and circular production concepts, yet it remains to be seen if fast fashion will attempt to reform its environmental and societal impacts. The backlash of fast fashion's nonexistent sustainability practices has grown due to its detriment on the environment. Fast fashion's labor practices are often criticized, especially its child labor and poor working conditions. This creates negative publicity for the brand due to the exploitation of workers and little regard for the environment. Quality issues and overproduction are another important downfall of the fast fashion industry. Cheaply made items can leave consumers dissatisfied with the quality. Overproduction often happens when trends rapidly change, leaving out of style clothing to go unpurchased. Fast fashion faces challenges from all angles that could jeopardize low-cost items. Until fast fashion brands adapt to the standards of labor and sustainability many luxury brands hold themselves to, consumers will have to accept their unconventional practices in order for them to succeed in the fashion world.

Trend-driven, affordable designs can make fashion more inclusive to all economic classes. Brands often use the popularity of trends to quickly create affordable lines whose

designs can expand to consumers with varying incomes to participate in stylish fashion. Trend-driven designs also allow consumers to refresh their wardrobes more frequently. Fast fashion fosters greater chances of repurchasing and customer loyalty. In life, many consumers believe that physical appearance is the key to social and financial success. Fast fashion houses help consumers gain their desired look while also gaining their loyalty. Vogue explains that fashion "shows us *the now.* Through the lens of a collection," which can determine consumers' obsessions, dreams, and perspectives on the world (Singer, 2022). Fast fashion is a very important concept in the world we live in today, as it reflects where consumers priorities lie. The idea of status chasing fuels consumers obsessions with limited trends that usually only luxury brands produce. Fast fashion is a real time circulation of ideas and obsessions that defines a cultural moment with its speed and affordability that materializes the now.

Through the industry, there is an increasing pressure on traditional couture houses, leading to competition amongst consumers. The talk of fast fashion houses pushes couture houses to create items faster and rethink the costs. McKinsey further explains a "database of over 500 private and public companies allows us to analyze and compare the performance of individual companies against their peers" (Amed, 2019). This website decreases exclusivity by comparing each other by categories and creating intense pressure to do nothing wrong in the old fashion couture houses. The goal of this website is to provide a comprehensive fact-base on the fashion industry that allows stakeholders to understand identity improvement opportunities and the background thoughts of making strategic decisions. "Digital innovation, rising globalization, and changes in consumer spending habits have catapulted the fashion industry into the midst of seismic shifts. Trends in e-commerce and social media have

transformed how consumers discover and purchase fashion" (Keenan, 2024). Keeping up with growing pressure, couture houses adapt by expanding ready-to-wear collections, having more frequent seasonal collections, and sustainability initiatives. The fashion industry's "goal is to quickly produce cost-efficient articles of clothing in response to (or anticipation of) fast-shifting consumer demands" (Hayes, 2024). Due to the threat of fast fashion brands producing lower-cost items, couture houses are forced to quickly create and produce competitive clothing lines. Normally, they utilize time to cultivate high-quality products, yet, in this instance, they feel as though they need to launch items rapidly to compete with fast fashion. Normally, designers have a 9–12-month planning period however it "simply will not cut it against brands such as Zara or H&M that can churn out off-the-runway looks in mere weeks (Levey,). Retail dive explains the quick changes couture houses had to implement to entice customers into choosing them over cheaper options. The quality of items is the biggest difference between couture and fast fashion. This is a big factor in why "Shoppers are increasingly considering the ecological impact of buying new items and its knock-on effect on fashion's substantial contribution to the climate crisis." (BOF Studio, 2023). As a result, brands and retailers gradually came into the resale arena, a more environmentally conscious option.

With the uprising of social media, shops that struggled in person created online websites to increase sales. Post quarantine, many consumers would rather order online than in stores as it is more convenient and efficient. Utilizing social media, "secondhand and vintage shops can target new audiences and build a following" (DeAcetis 2021). These brands can gain attention by us, utilizing partnerships with influencers, employing their large platform to reach

bigger audiences. Many newer brands collaborate to increase purchases and set off their items quickly. To keep people intrigued, brands often create limited edition items to keep the buyer's loyalty and attention, however many brands copy these ideas and sell them for cheaper. H&M is an example of a brand that uses "capsule collections" regularly (2017). A capsule collection is when designers take designs and condense them into a version that focuses on construction and delivering the key look. In this case, couture houses must create detailed and intricate designs to prevent fast fashion houses from duplicating them. Fast fashion's small budget makes this easier for the couture houses. This is integral in defining the differences between couture and fast fashion. In the fashion industry, historical houses must keep their audiences on board with their designs. "Historic preservation and heritage conservation are two mainstream concepts related to the sustainability and renewal of historic houses"(Zhou, 2022). They aim to enhance sustainability and withhold their old appearances to preserve their aesthetic and prestige. The idea of heritage conservation focuses on the safekeeping of their sacred creations while integrating them with modern items. Maintaining their values is very important when trying to preserve their original ideas. This can also ensure their continuation and integration into the modern world. The sustainable renewal allows for historical couture houses to carefully restore and adapt over time. Although this might take longer, it is very much needed to survive the rise of fast fashion.

Among the chaos of fast fashion, reevaluating brand identity and offerings as well as maintaining quality and prestige serves to help keep up with mass production. Although having new collections is exciting, exclusivity and offering customized couture designs is a long-lasting, more personal experience. The New York Times explains that "having a closet

full of vintage couture is an opportunity for sartorial independence in an era of fashion lemmings" (Owens, 1997). The New York times quote shows the bigger experience and story you gain from couture houses. Vintage items also offer customers limited, if not rare, items, whereas new collections are mass-produced and not diverse. Many promising young designers believe in a shared approach to traditional craftsmanship. Fashion is supposed to be in relation to art, yet fast fashion is the opposite. To return to the past, young designers utilize a "slower form of production" to embody the importance of traditional couture houses, which utilize prestige detail (Banks-Walker, 2023).

In an industry rich with tradition, the fast fashion phenomenon has put immense pressure on couture houses and luxury brands to keep up with ever-changing trends. Many couture houses have been forced to compromise creative visions and accelerate their design and production cycle. This can be stressful for the designer and could end badly if not taken well.

After this loss of detail due to fast fashion, many brands branch out into more accessible price lines. Many designers believe there will be a decline in the artistry and quality of true couture over time. The loss of individuality and creativity of these brands is a loss of their historical identity. Brands like Zara and H&M gain the loyalty of former couture house customers due to the loss of individuality among brands. Fast fashion dominating couture reflects larger shifts in consumer values and the democratization of fashion. Artists want to bring back quality and creativity, yet they often fail due to the high success rate of fast fashion. It's difficult to keep up with traditions when a large part of global consumers are finding an alternative. This new quick creation of products causes consumers to often forget how much

quality takes part in a good garment and the expense of it. The problem with Couture houses is their high expenses, though high expenses equal high quality. If the cost of a garment is valued much higher than a fast fashion duplicate, there's not much Couture houses can do to compete.

Emerging designers often can't afford to be locked in a legal battle with a retail giant. "If a designer can't afford to fight a company like Zara or H&M, it will no doubt be difficult for them to break into the market" (Brucculieri, 2018). Some original houses cannot afford to go against big companies like Zara and H&M. Couture brands struggle to compete with low prices and quick production cycles of fast fashion retailers. Couture houses create exclusive high-quality garments that skilled artisans painstakingly procure.. Their designs focus on precision fine fabrics and detailed embellishments, which are more expensive than fast fashion items. Rushed manufacturing methods replicate catwalk trends and deliver new stock to stores every few weeks. The lengthy design and production process for couture pieces makes it impossible for luxury brands to profit. The limited supply and high overheads of couture also lead to extremely high prices, thus making it incredibly difficult to go against big houses. Due to modern couture and fast fashion houses luxury brands struggle to keep up former traditions and eventually lose attraction to pricier pieces. Remake world states "While some luxury clothing may indeed be produced in ateliers in France or Italy, for example, by seamstresses who do earn a living wage, much of it is also produced alongside fast fashion in the south, in the same factories and under the same working conditions. Moreover, many luxury brands also still rely on oil-based synthetic materials to make their products." (Caldecott, 2022). This critiques the common perception that luxury-to-couture fashion is inherently more ethical than fast fashion. Some luxury items are produced in higher-end ateliers with better labor practices.

Many luxury productions take place and are located alongside fast fashion factories. High end brands rely on heavily synthetic materials rather than natural materials. Luxury and fast fashion share many of the same unsustainable production practices. If consumers truly believe one is more sustainable than the other, it may be a misconception. Simply paying a higher price or buying a prestigious brand name does not guarantee more ethical production.

The rise in Fast fashion affects Couture houses in many ways. Quicker production is shown as a weakness in Couture houses as the average production time is 9 months, while fast fashion's is as low as 3 weeks. Quality over quantity is another important factor that goes into original houses, which is hard to find nowadays. Consumers with the need for instant gratification cannot wait months for a piece, so they side with brands that create it faster. The influence of outside opinions has a big role in making a purchase. Influencers, family, and friends can sway consumers' opinions. Inclusivity is very important to consumers. Fast fashion houses offer a wider variety of pieces that look just like couture for a smaller price. Many consumers care about creating a certain image of themselves, and being unable to afford expensive items can lower their self-esteem. The feeling of being an outsider can lead to impulse purchases to feel as though they are elite. This later on leads to unnecessary purchases. The influence of social media can shape how the community publicizes their purchases. There is an assumption that every fast fashion brand has bad working conditions and does not consider the environmental damages, however, that is not always the case. Consumers choose what they believe is right, whether it is having their desired looks or helping people and the environment. The appeal of fast fashion raises the question of whether original Couture houses are relevant now that fast fashion exists. While most believe Couture houses

are no longer relevant due to fast fashion houses affordability, others still believe Couture is the

original, and therefore, will timelessly be relevant. Ultimately, there is no right or wrong; it is

the consumer's preference, based on their needs and wants. Though both houses have their

issues, their wide range of respective strengths allow for a more inclusive fashion scene that

gives the customer the liberty to choose.

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