

Fast Fashion

Fast fashion is a contemporary term used by [fashion retailers](#) to express that designs move from [catwalk](#) quickly in order to capture current [fashion trends](#).^[1] Fast fashion clothing collections are based on the most recent fashion trends presented at [Fashion Week](#) in both the spring and the autumn of every year.^[2] Emphasis is on optimizing certain aspects of the [supply chain](#) in order for these trends to be designed and manufactured quickly and inexpensively to allow the [mainstream consumer](#) to buy current clothing styles at a lower price. This philosophy of quick manufacturing at an affordable price is used in large retailers such as [H&M](#), [Zara](#), [Peacocks](#), and [Topshop](#). It particularly came to the fore during the vogue for "[boho chic](#)" in the mid-2000s.^[3]

This has developed from a product-driven concept based on a manufacturing model referred to as "[quick response](#)" developed in the U.S. in the 1980s ^[4] and moved to a market-based model of "fast fashion" in the late 1990s and first part of the 21st century. Zara has been at the forefront of this fashion retail revolution and their brand has almost become synonymous with the term, but there were other retailers who worked with the concept before the label was applied, such as [Benetton](#).^{[5][6]} Fast fashion has also become associated with disposable fashion because it has delivered designer product to a mass market at relatively low prices.^[7] The [slow fashion](#) movement has arisen in opposition to fast fashion, blaming it for [pollution](#) (both in the production of clothes and in the decay of synthetic fabrics), shoddy workmanship, and emphasizing very brief trends over classic style.^[8] Fast fashion has also come under criticism for contributing to poor [working conditions](#) in [developing countries](#).^[9]

Over the past decade, sustainability and ethical conduct have begun to matter in fashion; companies have realized that affordable and trend-sensitive fashion, while typically highly profitable, also raises ethical issues. How do today's young consumers, so conscious of green values, balance their continual need for ever-newer fashion with their presumed commitment to environmental sustainability?

Sustainability is often paired with corporate social responsibility, informed purchasing decisions, and an emerging green orientation at some companies. "Sustainability" has many definitions, with the three most common being an activity that can be continued indefinitely without causing harm; doing unto others as you would have them do unto you; and meeting a current generation's needs without compromising those of future generations.

Fast fashion—low-cost clothing collections based on current, high-cost luxury fashion trends—is, by its very nature, a fast-response system that encourages disposability. A formerly standard turnaround time from catwalk to consumer of six months is now compressed to a matter of mere weeks by such companies as H&M and Zara, with heightened profits to match. Fast fashion companies thrive on fast cycles: rapid prototyping, small batches combined with large variety, more efficient transportation and delivery, and merchandise that is presented "floor ready" on hangers with price tags already attached. To keep customers coming back, high street retailers routinely source new trends in the field, and purchase on a weekly basis to introduce new items and replenish stock. Moreover, lower manufacturing and labor costs mean lower costs overall, which result in lower prices, which, in turn, equal higher volume. Even companies such as Zara, which once manufactured all their goods in Europe, resulting in better quality control, now outsource at least 13

percent of their manufacturing to China and Turkey. Shipping time from China to Europe may take three weeks, but it only takes five days from Turkey. Admittedly, fast fashion companies do employ stables of in-house designers: more eye-catching designs lead to trendier, must-have fashions, which lure consumers into paying full price now rather than deferring gratification until the year-end sales arrive.

The technology industry similarly produces a constant stream of ever-improved, ever more alluring, products—with limited functional life design and options for repair, design aesthetics that eventually lead to reduced satisfaction, design for transient fashion, and design for functional enhancement that requires adding new product features. Fashion, more than any other industry in the world, embraces obsolescence as a primary goal. Young consumers' desire for fast fashion is coupled with significant disposable income (or, alternatively, the availability of credit). Fast fashion exploits this segment, offering of-the-moment design and the immediate gratification of continually evolving temporary identities. "Craft" denotes highly skilled labor, using simple tools to make unique items, one item at a time, and accessible to only a select clientele. Hermes' affluent customers, for example, might wait for several years to acquire a particular bag. With fast fashion, new styles swiftly supersede the old, defining and sustaining constantly emerging desires and notions of self.

Our overarching finding is that consumers from both Hong Kong and Canada, while concerned about the environmental and social impact of their non-fashion purchasing decisions, did not apply such principles to their consumption of fashion. They talked in general terms of saving the environment, were committed to recycling, and expressed dedication to organic food. In the strict fashion context, ethical fashion refers to "the positive impact of a designer, a consumer choice, a method of production as experienced by workers, consumers, animals, society, and the environment" (Thomas 2008: 525). Yet, these very same consumers routinely availed themselves of trend-led fashionable clothing that was cheap: i.e. low cost to them, but high cost in environmental and societal terms. They also exhibited relatively little guilt about fast fashion's disposability, seeing little discrepancy between their attitudes toward sustainability and their fashion choices.

Often participants combined several themes in their descriptions. Speed was described as part of the fast fashion industry mode. Updated looks, greater variety, and limited editions, along with the speed of their availability, make this industry very attractive to many consumers—initially a younger crowd, but now attracting older segments as well. Some participants even talked of speed that resembled that of the fast food industry, although they recognize the problems associated with creating goods for mass cultural consumption (Stillman 2003). Roxanne, a Canadian student, echoed the views of the Topshop brand director mentioned earlier: "I want to see new things and styles that can help me create and recreate my wardrobe and who I am. But I don't want to look like someone else—so the limited edition satisfies this need to be unique. When I see it on the catwalks or in magazines, I want it immediately." Roxanne's desire is characteristic of how purchases are made in stores like Zara. As one participant, Rita, a Canadian student, mentioned, "If you do not buy the item that you like right away, you will not be able to get it later." The supply side of fast fashion ensures scarcity, which in turn drives demand. Lynn, another participant from Hong Kong, referenced fast food, noting: Since the speed with which...the display and collection [changes] is fast, it [fast fashion] is similar to the fast food store. In Hong

Kong, most of us go to fast food restaurants at least once a week—the same is true of fast fashion. We like new things and we don't have to wait too long before we own these items. Linda, a Hong Kong student, noted: "Fast fashion (like Flash Gordon) is moving at the speed of light, speeding up deliveries, and reinventing... [itself] and...[its] designs as quickly as possible." Clearly, time is of the essence. As Dave, a thirty-five-year-old Canadian merchandiser, pointed out, "Patience used to be a virtue. But nobody likes to be kept waiting. Once consumers have seen the latest fashion shows, they want to own the high-fashion item ASAP." The possibilities of endlessly defining the self are envisaged. Wendy, a Hong Kong student, said: "Just recently I purchased a cocktail dress for my friend's wedding party. I saw a similar dress at Marc Jacobs—a velvet beaded dress—but I bought this one at Zara for a fraction of the price. It may not be premium quality, but it is a trendy piece and very affordable!" The choice of that item was more than satisfactory, so why spend more? Since the dress was available at Zara, it suggested style. Nora, a Canadian shop floor assistant, commented: "The trendy items allow me to update my wardrobe more regularly than before. If the style is going to be dead in a year, why should I buy a piece that will last longer? In a nutshell, it is affordable pricing and acceptable quality." Lara, a Canadian student, noted: "It is cheap chic—it is a trend worth buying into. I visit Zara and H&M twice a month and if I see something, I buy it." The fact that all our participants were students or recent, employed graduates, and that all were under thirty-five years of age, inevitably skewed the responses. However, it is this demographic that is conscious of the catwalks, slavishly follows trends, and is perennially in pursuit of specific pieces that are both unique and stylish. They are also pragmatic. Why spend money on something that will last, at most, several seasons? Instead, acquire a number of items that are cheaper and offer a wide variety

Affordable prices mean that consumers are buying more clothes more frequently. But it also means they're truly disposable. You may keep an item after ten washes, but the item may lose its lustre by then, or it may have gone out of fashion.