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# M'mmm, Branding: Marketing, Music, and Merchandise

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### The Future of the Fashion Industry

Since the forming of the first cultures and societies, appearance and apparel have taken a large part in the way people interact. The way in which people clothe and groom themselves communicates a lot about them. Throughout history, certain styles were symbols of status and prestige, worn to flaunt one's social standing, and in the present day it is no different. Clothing plays a huge part in cultures worldwide, which is why the fashion industry—one often dismissed for its seemingly shallow, material nature—is one that can be expected to remain around for as long as human society exists. Today, the fashion industry is massive and booming, employing over 115 million people worldwide, and is valued at over 3 trillion dollars (fashionunited.com). Here in the United States, consumers spend millions a year on apparel and accessories, and New York City is considered by many to be the fashion capitol of the world. However, large and lucrative as it may be, the industry is not without its issues. Currently, the traditional cycles of fashion are being overthrown by “fast fashion” retailers. Labor is being outsourced, leading to shrinking domestic employment in apparel manufacturing (US Bureau of Labor Statistics). The industry's negative impact on the environment is becoming ever more apparent, and questions are being raised as to the sustainability of current production methods. Seeing as how the market

for fashion won't be going away any time soon, it's clear that this is an industry in need of some reform.

Traditionally, high-end fashion has been dictated by a handful of renowned designers, predominantly the creative directors of French fashion houses. Anticipating and forecasting trends, these designers create original looks and pieces released in themed collections twice a year. Every year it is these collections which define what's stylish and 'in'. It is expected for these styles and silhouettes to trickle down to average consumers via lower-priced retailers, just as it is expected for styles that originate on the street to trickle up and make appearances on the runway. Up until recently, this has been the system in place, but in the past decade or so there has been a huge disruption to this cycle, manifested in "fast fashion" retailers which aim to design, produce and put to market exactly what consumers already want quickly enough to make a huge profit before the trend dies, using a combination of lean and agile supply chain strategies (Bruce and Daly). These companies, such as Zara, H&M, and Mango, seek not to produce original designs, but to replicate the high-end looks already in demand. By their nature, fashion houses work slowly, often with months at a time between the runway debut of a collection and its appearance in stores. This gap is more than enough time for companies like Zara to rip off the designs and meet demand for the product. This severely hurts the profits of the designers.

Julie Zerbo, editor-in-chief 'The Fashion Law', a blog covering the legalities of fashion, advocates against the fast fashion companies. Given the choice, she says "customers will be tempted towards the lower-cost items, especially if it is a trendy piece that they just want to wear for a season or two" (qtd. in [businessoffashion.com](http://businessoffashion.com)). Additionally, the existence of fast fashion companies effectively nullifies the business of some would-be high end consumers. "If [a] luxury customer has seen [a] design in Primark or H&M, then they're less likely to pay all that money"

since the original designer piece has lost its exclusivity (Elaine Maguire O'Connor qtd. in [businessoffashion.com](http://businessoffashion.com)). Fast fashion isn't only an issue for high-end, well known designers, either. These companies have also been known to rip off young lesser-known designers on the rise. Just recently, graphic artist and clothing designer Tuesday Bassen filed a suit against Zara for their reproduction of her pin and patch designs without her knowledge or consent. In their response, Zara didn't explicitly deny the use of her art, but dismissed her claim on the grounds that most of their customers would not attribute the design to her, since they don't know of her. Since aspects of design such as prints and artwork are so easily replicated or imitated, many high-end designers have begun focusing on aspects that can't be cheaply or quickly reproduced, like high-quality handmade fabrics and intricate detailing. This may potentially work for fashion giants, but isn't an approach that will help small-time graphic designers. Given their sheer size as the largest clothing retailer in the world, Zara is a huge force to be reckoned with, and this makes their trespasses and rip-offs a significant threat to the industry as it stands today.

Another growing issue for the Apparel industry is the outsourcing of labor. At one point, the United States was a significant manufacturing power, but the last couple of decades have seen a huge shift of apparel manufacturing jobs to other nations. For the purpose of meeting short-term market demands and fluctuations, many smaller companies still produce their products within the country, but for large houses and brands that put out large collections every season, outsourcing labor provides a huge cost benefit (Sameer and Arbi). Unfortunately, this has a decidedly negative effect on the American economy, leaving many Americans without jobs. According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 1990 the United States employed over 900,000 workers in apparel manufacturing. In the twenty years following, that number shrunk to well under 200,000, and continues to fall today (US Bureau of Labor Statistics).

Troubling as the situation may be, the effects of outsourcing are arguably worse overseas. Usually, manufacturing jobs are outsourced to countries with little legislation regarding the rights of workers, or very poorly enforced laws which allow factory owners to take advantage of their employees. Heavily populated countries like China and India have provide a huge workforce that allows employers to pay workers' salaries well under the living wage, and have them work long hours with no overtime compensation (waronwant.com). A significant unemployment rate results in no job security, meaning that factory workers have no grounds to bargain for better working conditions or wages. If this practice continues without significant actions being taken, it could be potentially disastrous both at home and abroad.

Increasingly in recent news, climate change is becoming more and more of a concern, especially in the case of manufacturing consumer goods. While many industries are brought up as having a negative effect on the environment, the apparel industry is ultimately rated as being one of the worst (wwf.org). Cotton farming uses a huge amount of resources, with 20,000 liters of water being used to produce a single kilogram of cotton, which is roughly he amount it takes to make a T-shirt and a pair of jeans (wwf.org). Seeing as how cotton accounts for almost half the material to make clothing and textiles, it goes without saying that the water usage adds up. Alternatively, polyester or other synthetic fibers may be used, but their production is linked with manufacturing pollution. Regardless of material, manufacturing and dyeing of fabrics often uses many chemicals that are irresponsibly handled and potentially harmful should they be improperly disposed of, which the case far more often than it should be. Environmental regulations in America often give the illusion that malpractices are being reformed and efforts are being made to slow down the damage to the environment, but many American businesses see these regulations as nothing more than another incentive to ship their manufacturing jobs overseas.

Countries such as China, to which apparel manufacturing is largely outsourced, have little to no environmental regulation—just one more factor that drives down the price of manufacturing overseas, in this case at the cost of the environment’s well-being. Overseas production also requires the use of huge amounts of fossil fuels to ship products across the ocean, which certainly doesn’t help matters. Ultimately, both lawmakers and the producers of apparel need to make a choice to be more responsible in terms of sustainability.

To acknowledge these problems, serious though they may be, is not to condemn the industry. In most if not all cases, there are steps that can be taken to slow and eventually reverse the wrongdoings that result from the apparel design and manufacturing industry. Sustainable cotton farming and programs to reuse and recycle fabric would make a huge difference, and already are in some instances as a few companies, including retail giant H&M, pick up such practices. Design patents, legal action, and new design techniques are helping high end designers and smalltime artists alike combat fast fashion companies, and while they may be forced to adapt they shouldn’t be going anywhere anytime soon. Many companies are taking the initiative to keep manufacturing jobs within the states, and the resulting positive response of many consumers is incentive for other American designers and brands to do the same. The government can help hugely by introducing stronger design protection with more efficiently issued patents, by enforcing labor laws and providing incentives to companies for employing Americans, and by introducing and enforcing stronger environmental protection legislation to keep the industry in check. Despite its flaws, the fashion industry isn’t going anywhere. The fact is, people will always need things to wear, and there will always have to be people to design and create those garments. The job market for fashion designers in the United States is growing steadily, and upcoming generations will see new designers rise to the top to steer the reigns of the industry

(US Bureau of Labor Statistics). It will be the duty of these young designers to shape it into what it ought to be, and ultimately they will.

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