



The Evolution of Fast Fashion Business: Key Drivers and Historical Perspectives

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This paper explores the historical trajectory of fast fashion and its underlying drivers using Whetten's framework. By bridging existing theories across disciplines, we aim to provide multi-level insights into the industry's evolution and propose actionable directions for future inquiry. To provide a robust analytical structure, we employ David Whetten's framework for theory building. This framework, emphasizing the crucial elements of "what," "how," "why," "who," "when," and "where," will serve as a lens through which we examine the multifaceted nature of fast fashion's development. By systematically addressing these fundamental questions, we aim to move beyond descriptive accounts and offer a more theoretically grounded understanding of the industry's dynamics.

Keywords: fast fashion, business, industry evolution

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1. Introduction

Fast fashion, defined as the rapid design, production, and consumption of affordable trendy clothing, has revolutionized the global apparel industry. This paper seeks to answer critical questions about the industry's emergence and key drivers, leveraging Whetten's criteria (Whetten, 1989) to explore innovative links and integrate theoretical constructs. By addressing historical milestones, technological innovations, and cultural dynamics, the paper contributes to understanding how fast fashion has evolved and its implications today. Our analysis will bridge existing theoretical perspectives from diverse disciplines, including business strategy, supply chain management, consumer behavior, sociology, and environmental studies. This interdisciplinary approach is crucial for capturing the complex interplay of factors that have shaped fast fashion. For instance, we will consider how advancements in manufacturing technologies ("how") intersected with changing consumer preferences for affordable and trend-driven clothing ("why" and "who") within specific historical periods ("when" and "where") to create the fast fashion ecosystem ("what").

By leveraging Whetten's framework and synthesizing insights from various fields, this paper seeks to provide multi-level insights into the evolution of fast fashion. This includes examining macro-level trends such as globalization and technological innovation, meso-level factors like supply chain optimization and competitive dynamics, and micro-level influences such as consumer psychology and brand strategies. This layered analysis will offer a richer and more nuanced understanding of the industry's historical trajectory and its underlying mechanisms.

Ultimately, this paper aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by providing a theoretically informed and historically grounded perspective on the evolution of fast fashion. Based on our analysis, we will propose actionable directions for future inquiry. These directions may include exploring the long-term sustainability implications of the fast fashion model, investigating the evolving role of digital technologies, examining the impact of increasing consumer awareness and activism, and analyzing the potential for alternative business models within the fashion industry.

By highlighting these avenues for future research, we hope to stimulate further scholarly engagement with this dynamic and increasingly significant sector.

2. Literature Review

What Do We Know?

The roots of fast fashion can be traced back to industrialization and the advent of ready-to-wear clothing. Early developments, such as the rise of textile manufacturing, formed the foundation for today's business model (Antonakis et al., 2014). Historical analyses also highlight globalization as a catalyst for scaling production and reducing costs.

Where Have We Come From?

Key milestones include:

- The globalization of supply chains during the late 20th
- The introduction of automation and digital design tools in production
- The cultural shift toward trend-driven consumption (Cropanzano, 2009).

Conceptual Framework

What's New?

This paper introduces an integrated framework combining technological, economic, and socio-cultural drivers to explain the evolution of fast fashion. Unlike traditional models, our framework connects marketing theories (e.g., diffusion of innovation) with supply chain management concepts (Whetten, 1989).

Drivers of Evolution

Technological Innovations:- Automation and digital design have enabled rapid prototyping and production efficiency (Van de Ven, 1989).

Consumer Behavior Shifts:- Changing attitudes toward affordability and instant gratification have fostered demand for fast fashion (Fulmer, 2012).

Supply Chain Globalization:- Offshoring and just-in-time inventory practices have reduced costs and accelerated production cycles (Weick, 1989).

Challenges:- Environmental concerns highlight tensions between rapid production and ethical practices (Short, 2009).

So What?

Understanding the evolution of fast fashion helps businesses adapt to emerging trends like AI-driven design and blockchain-enabled supply chain transparency (Sutton & Staw, 1995).

Why Now?

Growing awareness of sustainability issues makes this analysis particularly relevant today (Antonakis et al., 2014).

3. Propositions for Future Research

Why So?

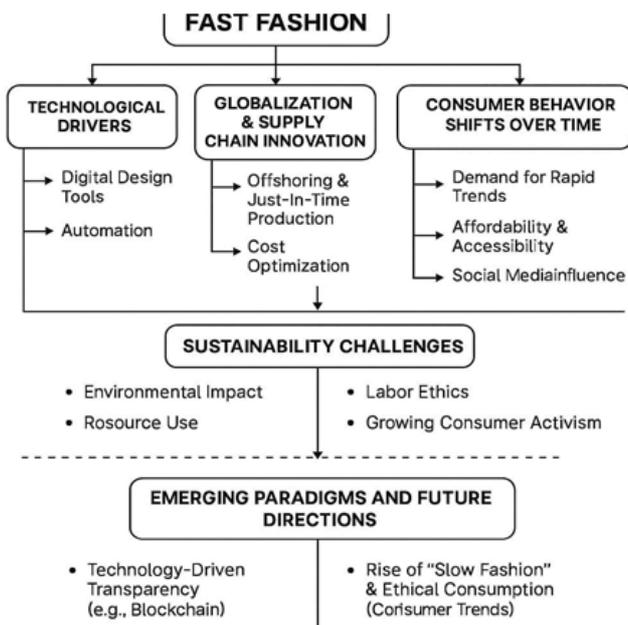
Proposition 1: Advancements in AI technology will reshape consumer expectations for personalization in fast fashion.

Proposition 2: Sustainability concerns may lead to hybrid business models integrating "slow fashion" principles.

Who Cares?

Businesses, policymakers, and environmental advocates will benefit from understanding fast fashion's trajectory to navigate future challenges effectively (Cropanzano, 2009).

4. Conceptual framework



1. Historical Evolution of Fast Fashion

Fast fashion isn't a sudden phenomenon; it's the result of a gradual transformation in the apparel industry. Historically, fashion followed a seasonal cycle with designers presenting collections well in advance, and retailers stocking them for a significant period. Clothing was often more expensive and considered a longer-term investment. The evolution towards fast fashion involved a shortening of these cycles, with trends being rapidly translated from runways to mass-market retailers, often within weeks. This shift was driven by the desire to cater to consumers' ever-changing tastes and their appetite for newness. The core idea is to make trendy clothing affordable and readily available, leading to more frequent purchases and shorter lifespans of garments.

2. Key Drivers Branching Out

Technological Drivers:

- **Digital Design Tools:** Computer-aided design (CAD) software and 3D modeling have revolutionized the design process. Designers can quickly sketch, visualize, and modify designs digitally, significantly reducing the time needed for prototyping and sampling. This speed allows retailers to react faster to emerging trends and get new styles into production more quickly. Furthermore, digital communication facilitates seamless collaboration between design teams and manufacturers across the globe.
- **Automation:** The introduction of automated cutting machines, sewing robots, and other advanced manufacturing technologies has increased the speed and efficiency of garment production. Automation reduces the reliance on manual labor for certain tasks, leading to higher output rates and potentially lower production costs per unit, especially for large-scale production.
- **E-commerce:** The rise of online shopping platforms has fundamentally changed how consumers discover and purchase fashion. E-commerce allows retailers to reach a global audience, track trends in real-time through online behavior, and quickly introduce new items without the limitations of physical store layouts. The convenience and accessibility of online shopping have fueled impulsive buying and the demand for constant new arrivals.

Globalization & Supply Chain Innovation:

■ **Offshoring & Just-In-Time Production:**

Moving manufacturing processes to countries with lower labor costs (offshoring) significantly reduced production expenses. Coupled with "just-in-time" (JIT) inventory management, where goods are produced only when needed, retailers minimized warehousing costs and the risk of unsold inventory. This lean approach requires highly efficient global supply chains capable of rapid production and delivery.

- **Cost Optimization:** Fast fashion thrives on offering low prices. This necessitates continuous efforts to optimize costs at every stage of the supply. This includes sourcing cheaper raw materials, negotiating lower manufacturing costs, streamlining logistics, and minimizing waste in production. While beneficial for affordability, this relentless focus on cost can sometimes come at the expense of environmental sustainability and fair labor practices.

Consumer Behavior:

Demand for Rapid Trends: Modern consumers, heavily influenced by media, celebrities, and social media, have an insatiable appetite for the latest trends. They want to wear what's fashionable *now*, and this demand drives the fast fashion industry to constantly churn out new styles to meet these fleeting desires. The pressure to stay on-trend fuels frequent purchases.

Affordability & Accessibility: Fast fashion democratized fashion by making trendy clothing accessible to a wider range of consumers through lower prices. This affordability encourages more frequent purchases, as consumers are less hesitant to buy items they might only wear a few times. The sheer availability of fast fashion through numerous retail outlets and online platforms further fuels

Social Media Influence: Social media platforms act as powerful catalysts for trend dissemination and consumption. Influencers and viral trends on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube create immediate demand for specific "outfit of the day" culture and the pressure to showcase new looks online contribute significantly to the fast fashion cycle.

3. Sustainability Challenges (Cross-Cutting Driver):

- **Environmental Impact:** The rapid production and consumption cycle of fast fashion has severe environmental consequences. Huge amounts of textile waste end up in landfills. The production of synthetic fibers like polyester relies heavily on fossil dyeing and finishing processes consume vast quantities of water and often involve harmful chemicals that pollute waterways. The transportation of goods across the globe also contributes to carbon emissions.
- **Labor Ethics:** The pressure to produce quickly and cheaply often leads to unethical labor practices in garment factories, primarily in developing countries. This can include low wages, long working hours, unsafe working conditions, and the exploitation of workers, including women and children. The lack of transparency in complex global supply chains makes it difficult to ensure fair treatment of workers.
- **Resource Use:** Fast fashion demands vast amounts of natural resources. Cotton production, for example, requires significant water and land, and often involves the use of pesticides. The increasing demand for raw materials puts a strain on the planet's resources and can lead to environmental degradation.
- **Growing Consumer Activism:** Increasing awareness of the environmental and social costs of fast fashion is leading to a rise in consumer activism. Consumers are becoming more conscious of the impact of their purchasing decisions and are demanding greater transparency¹ and sustainability from brands. This growing awareness is putting pressure on the industry to change its practices.

4. Emerging Paradigms and Future Directions

Technology-Driven Transparency (Blockchain):

Technologies like blockchain offer the potential to create more transparent and traceable supply chains. By recording information about the origin of materials, manufacturing processes, and labor conditions on a secure and immutable ledger, consumers can gain greater confidence in the ethical and sustainable claims of brands. This transparency can empower consumers to make more informed choices.

Rise of "Slow Fashion" & Ethical Consumption (Consumer Trends):

"Slow fashion" is a counter-movement that emphasizes buying fewer, better quality items that are made to last. It focuses on fair labor practices, sustainable materials, and timeless designs over fleeting trends. Ethical consumption involves consumers actively seeking out brands that align with their values regarding environmental and social responsibility. This shift in consumer mindset is gaining momentum.

Circular Economy in Fashion Industry (Recycling, Upcycling):

The circular economy aims to minimize waste and maximize the lifespan of products. In the fashion industry, this involves initiatives like designing clothes for durability and recyclability, promoting clothing repair and reuse, developing innovative textile recycling technologies, and upcycling discarded materials into new garments. This approach seeks to break the linear "take-make-dispose" model of fast fashion.

5. Limitations

- **Simplified Representation:** The flowchart provides a high-level overview and may not capture the full complexity and nuances of the fast fashion ecosystem and its evolution. Many interconnected factors and sub-trends are likely not explicitly
- **Lack of Quantitative Data:** The flowchart is qualitative in nature and does not include specific data or metrics to quantify the impact of the drivers or the scale of the
- **Geographical Focus:** The flowchart does not specify a particular geographical focus, and the dynamics of fast fashion may vary significantly across different regions and
- **Time Sensitivity:** The fashion industry is constantly While the flowchart captures key historical trends and emerging directions, future developments and unforeseen disruptions could alter the landscape.
- **Limited Scope of Solutions:** The "Emerging Paradigms" section provides a general overview of potential solutions, but a more in-depth analysis would be needed to evaluate the feasibility, scalability, and potential impact of specific interventions.

- **Potential for Bias:** The selection and categorization of drivers and challenges may reflect a particular perspective on the evolution of fast fashion.

6. Future Recommendations

- **Foster Greater Transparency and Traceability:** Implement and scale technologies like blockchain to provide consumers with clear and verifiable information about the entire lifecycle of their garments, from raw material sourcing to manufacturing and disposal. This will empower informed purchasing decisions and hold brands
- **Invest in and Promote Circular Economy Models:** Encourage and incentivize the adoption of circular design principles, textile recycling innovations, and upcycling initiatives. This requires collaboration across the industry, from designers to waste management systems.
- **Support and Scale Sustainable Material Innovation:** Increase investment in the research, development, and commercialization of sustainable and alternative materials with lower environmental footprints, such as organic cotton, recycled fibers, and bio-based textiles.
- **Educate and Empower Consumers:** Promote consumer awareness campaigns that highlight the environmental and social impacts of fast fashion and encourage mindful consumption habits, such as buying less, choosing quality over quantity, and extending the lifespan of clothing.
- **Implement Stronger Regulations and Policies:** Governments and regulatory bodies should establish and enforce stricter environmental and labor standards for the fashion industry, including extended producer responsibility (EPR) schemes and mandatory due diligence for supply chains.
- **Encourage Collaboration and Partnerships:** Foster collaboration among brands, manufacturers, NGOs, researchers, and policymakers to collectively address the complex challenges of fast fashion and drive systemic change.

- **Incentivize Ethical and Sustainable Practices:** Implement tax incentives or other financial mechanisms to reward brands that adopt ethical labor practices, invest in sustainable materials, and implement circular economy initiatives.
- **Promote the Growth of the "Slow Fashion" Movement:** Support independent designers and businesses that prioritize quality, durability, ethical production, and transparent supply chains.

7. Conclusion

The historical evolution of fast fashion, driven by technological advancements, globalization, and shifting consumer behavior, has created a system characterized by rapid production, low costs, and a constant demand for new trends. While offering affordability and accessibility, this model has generated significant sustainability challenges, including environmental degradation, unethical labor practices, and excessive resource consumption. However, growing consumer awareness and emerging paradigms like technology-driven transparency, the rise of slow fashion, and the principles of a circular economy offer promising pathways towards a more sustainable and ethical future for the fashion industry. Addressing the negative impacts of fast fashion requires a multi-faceted approach involving industry-wide.

The historical trajectory of fast fashion, fueled by a potent combination of technological advancements like digital design and automation, the efficiencies of globalized supply chains leveraging offshoring and just-in-time production, and a surge in consumer demand for rapid trends driven by affordability and social media influence, has fundamentally reshaped the apparel industry. This evolution has led to an unprecedented increase in clothing production and consumption. For instance, global apparel production more than doubled between 2000 and 2014, reaching over 100 billion garments annually. This surge has come at a significant environmental cost. The fashion industry is estimated to be responsible for around 8-10% of global carbon emissions, surpassing the emissions of the entire aviation and maritime sectors combined. Furthermore, textile production is a major consumer of water, with approximately 2,700 liters of water needed to produce just one cotton t-shirt.

The rapid turnover of trends and the emphasis on low prices have also exacerbated the problem of textile waste. Globally, an estimated 92 million tonnes of textile waste are generated annually, with a significant portion ending up in landfills or being incinerated, leading to further environmental pollution. The linear "take-make-dispose" model of fast fashion stands in stark contrast to the principles of sustainability.

Beyond the environmental impact, the pursuit of low costs often raises serious ethical concerns regarding labor practices in garment factories. Reports from organizations like the International Labour Organization (ILO) highlight persistent issues such as low wages, excessive working hours, and unsafe working conditions in many garment-producing countries. The pressure on manufacturers to meet tight deadlines and low prices demanded by fast fashion retailers can contribute to the exploitation of workers.

However, a growing awareness of these detrimental impacts is catalyzing a shift. The rise of "slow fashion," with its emphasis on quality and durability, is gaining traction among consumers. The secondhand market is also experiencing significant growth, projected to be twice the size of fast fashion by 2030. Furthermore, technological innovations like blockchain are being explored to enhance supply chain transparency, allowing consumers to trace the origins and production of their clothes. Initiatives focused on textile recycling are also advancing, although significant technological breakthroughs are still needed to effectively close the loop.

Ultimately, addressing the challenges of fast fashion requires a fundamental transformation of the industry. This includes a move towards more circular business models, greater corporate responsibility, supportive government policies, and a conscious shift in consumer behavior towards valuing longevity, sustainability, and ethical production. The future of fashion hinges on decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation and ensuring fair treatment for all stakeholders in the value chain.

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This sample conceptual paper reflects Whetten's framework and incorporates in-text citations. Let me know if you'd like more detail on any section!

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