

How the Fashion Industry Perpetuates an Imbalanced Global North and South Power Dynamic and Its' Beginnings

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The apparel industry began to form in the mid-18th Century during the British Industrial Revolution and has the power to uplift or destroy the development of whole regions. The darker side of the industry is most evident at the beginning of the production- the harvesting and manufacturing of textiles- as well as in the production of garments. Although it seems that in a globalized society, we have progressed to seemingly become more just and fair, many practices echo those of the past to create the clothes we wear today. In other words, the fashion and textile industry perpetuates an imbalanced global north-and-south power dynamic by upholding structures that are rooted in slavery. This essay will discuss how the apparel industry came about during the British Industrial Revolution, how it systematically took advantage of workers, how it translates to the modern fast fashion model, and how the current model continues to take advantage of underpaid workers through methods such as subcontracting.

The birth of the apparel industry was brought about during the British Industrial Revolution and the new technologies that arose during that time in addition to the presence of slavery in the textile industry. The British Industrial Revolution, which occurred between the mid-18th century and the mid-19th century, brought about “New technologies such as the sewing machine, the rise of global capitalism and the development of the factory system of production” (Steele and Major) which set the foundation for the birth of the apparel industry. It filled the need for affordable and decent clothing that could be put on the shelves quickly- due to the new factory system and sewing machine. People no longer had the time to make their clothes as they were working- sometimes even making the clothing they would buy later. To make the garments affordable enough for the working class at the time, costs were cut in the production line- most notably through the use of slave labor. At the beginning of the apparel industry textiles and garments were often produced domestically. Then raw materials, such as cotton, were increasingly outsourced due to the rise in demand for the material. At the time, cotton textiles from India and surrounding regions were more expensive and very sought after so “European traders and merchants saw it as an important commodity that they [...] have a monopoly on by producing cheap imitations of the hand worked designs of the Indian cottons, using different mechanized printing processes which were developed in the 18th century in France and England.” (Mullen) Alternatively, it was cheaper to import cotton from the southern region of America “This American export became easier to manufacture in European factories and mills as newer technology developed.” (Radner Linden) then as slavery was slowly abolished they began relying more on their colonies. The “raw cotton from India and Egypt maintained the British cotton industry until after WW1.” (Mullen). India was the biggest cotton producer until “the 19th century when Manchester and its outlying towns dominated production.” (Mullen) because the new textile factories and machinery in Europe, which could then begin to weave 100% cotton in the warp and weft, and make prints, made it cheaper to produce domestically than to import them. To compete with the price of machine-made cotton fabric in a factory made of cotton that didn’t require a trip to the other side of the world, the cotton farmers and textile manufacturers in India- both before and after slavery was abolished- had to price their cotton fabric competitively first against the impossibly low price of slave labor then to maintain the exportation of their products, very possibly contributing to their disparity. This is likely what began the imbalanced global north and south power dynamic within the fashion industry to achieve lower prices and quickly make products that are desirable to customers.

Fast Fashion In A Nutshell

Fash fashion has been a phenomenon that became popular in the late 1990s, early 2000s, as players like Zara and H&M took over the fashion industry by leveraging on shorter and shorter design-manufacturing-distribution cycles. Reducing these cycles from months to a few weeks. With just-in-time logistics, flagship stores in iconic places in the largest cities in the world, these brands offered cheap, fashionable clothes and a wide variety of designs.

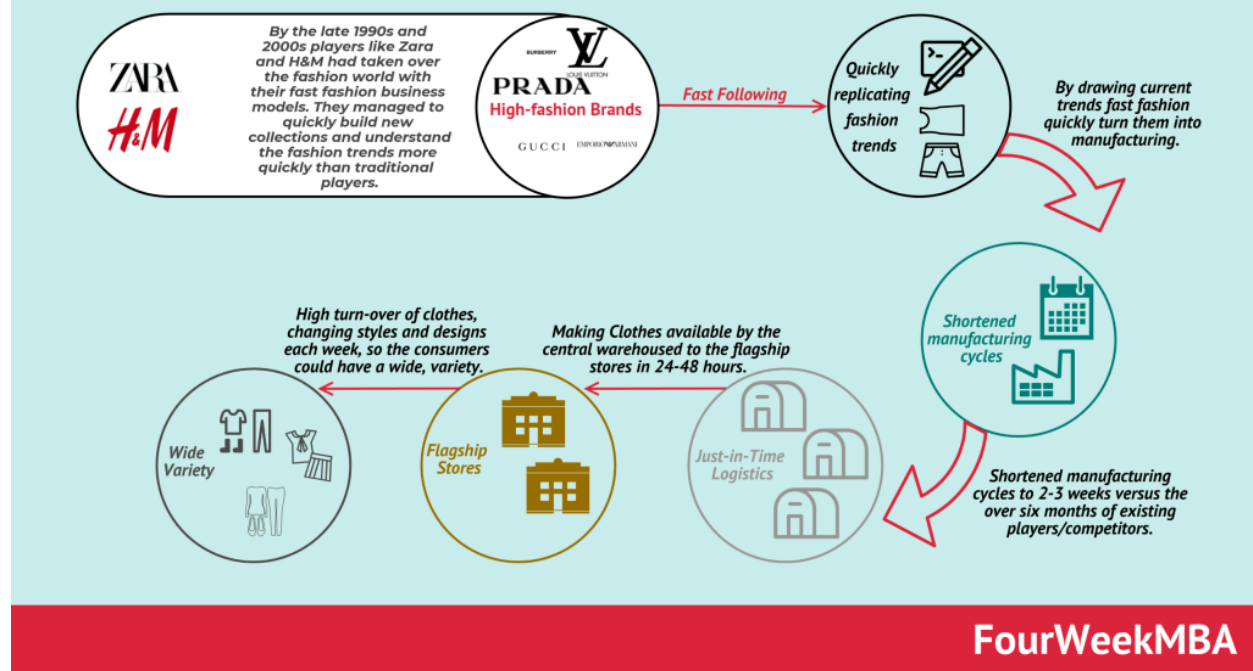


Figure 1: Fast Fashion in a Nutshell by Cuofano

Unfortunately, the global multi-billion-dollar industry that the fashion industry is today continues to rely on methods and models that echo those of its dark past perpetuating the imbalanced power dynamic that was born centuries ago. Many businesses currently follow the fast fashion model, as seen in Figure 1. The model shows that the foundation of the fast fashion model consists mainly of “just-in-time logistics”- a shortened production time to put a lesser quality imitation of what was seen on the runway onto the shelves for people to buy. In addition, it’s often made with a lesser quality material and construction. To meet the high demand for a large number of garments in such a short amount of time, and with many corners already being cut, this may be what encourages factories that are contracted directly to subcontract other factories often located in the global south, where workers’ rights and wages are less established, to maintain a high output of products. Starting at the beginning of the production line, “the 2023 Global Slavery Index report says that \$147.9 billion worth of garments and \$12.7 billion worth of textiles are at risk of being produced by forced labor are imported annually” (Unseen) to places such as Germany, the UK, the US, France, and Italy- which are all part of what is considered the global north. Such examples of forced labor include the “prison system in the southern states [which] were built around the cotton plantations and they used the prison inmates – mainly Black Americans – to pick the

cotton.” (Mullen), strongly echoing the slavery within the fashion and textile industry that was so strongly relied upon in the past to establish the apparel industry in the first place. Now, the majority of the labor in the production line occurs in lower-wage countries, often in South Asia. The laborers in South Asia have to continue to price their labor and textiles competitively so those that companies hire these factories to carry out manufacturing orders- that employ a considerable number of people in the process- and look to find business elsewhere. It’s the continuation of the competitive pricing of labor- slavery being the cheapest- that is perpetuated even more so by the monumental size of these global fast fashion companies that chase a profit by what seems to be any means possible.

However, one thing that has seemingly changed is the rise of the emphasis on fair practice in the production line adjacent to the rise of fast fashion. To be certain this doesn’t occur factories are often audited. Auditing, in this context, is used to ensure factories conduct under fair circumstances, which include, but are not limited to, no slave labor, no wage theft, a safe work environment, etc. Unfortunately, even then auditing may not be entirely reliable. The “problems with auditing include, among other issues, ‘corrupt inspectors, misleading documents (e.g. altered timesheets) and mock compliance whereby suppliers appear to be doing the right things but for audit day only” (Richards). This contributes to the evidence that the fashion and textile industry is set in their very outdated ways. It’s a continued effort to perpetuate old power dynamics put in place hundreds of years ago because they built a system that happened to work and make a profit for those at the top. It seems that because this system holds these power dynamics in place and benefits those in power enough to want to uphold this system, there is a strong resistance to changing something that could affect the amount of power these companies, and the few that profit from them, have. So, because two of the key points of the system the fashion industry operates in continue to be a fast production line, both in textile and garment manufacturing, and cheap labor, those who benefit from it see little reason for it to change, often at the expense of the laborers.

Overall, the fashion industry not only continues to perpetuate an imbalanced global north and south power dynamic but, may even put measures in place to prevent changes from happening to maintain it. The apparel industry began during the British Industrial Revolution, through the invention of the sewing machine, the changes to the loom- making 100% cotton fabric a possibility- and the introduction of the factory system making it possible. In addition to this, the use of slave labor in the American South and wage theft in the Global South is what made it profitable enough to be worth continuing. In today’s globalized world, we unfortunately see that, especially with the fast fashion model, little has changed but the enlargement of the scale at which these injustices occur. With so many efforts such as through legislation, renewed requirements of operations, and increasing pressure from the public it is truly a shame that changes within the fashion industry can be such an uphill battle. And so, it’s never been more important for the new generation of those entering the industry to change it as much as we can so that it becomes something to be proud of- where history stays history and isn’t dragged on into the present.

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