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Pyramide

Challenging the Power Structure in Fashion
PYRAMIDE: THE CHANGING POWER STRUCTURE OF FASHION

by

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Like many things, fashion is ever evolving. This can most clearly be seen in the changes from season to season of what trends are in and out and which designers are cool or not. But while some things change quickly in the fashion industry, other facets take longer to evolve. Some of the mainstay aspects of modern fashion have existed for hundreds of years, still dictating who has power and who does not. In recent years, there have been major shifts in how fashion is sold and marketed, meaning that many of these old ways are also evolving. Things, like haute couture and major fashion magazines that used to be the dominant rulers no longer are. A new crop of workers is coming into fashion, making their mark on the industry in transformative ways, like new, inventive, business savvy bloggers and rule breaking designers in ways not possible before, but the same subjects that are changing fashion are also reinforcing the old traditions.

Historically, France has been the capital and most influential country of fashion. Fashion was linked to the monarchy, where the king and queen would have the finest of garments constructed specifically for them by their loyal dressmakers. France was not always the center of fashion, but with the reign of Louis XIV, it became the epitome of style. Jean-Baptiste Colbert, the financial advisor for Louis XIV said that “fashions were to France what the mines of Peru were to Spain” (Chrisman-Campbell), and like gold for the economy France brought fashion to the forefront of technology and economic successes. Decades later, in 1770, Marie-Jeanne Bertin, or Rose Bertin as she was more commonly known, worked for Marie Antoinette, becoming the Minister of Fashion (Chateau de Versailles), and created the trends of the time period until the death of Marie Antoinette in 1793. Bertin was a famous milliner and designer, a concept that had never occurred prior because the clothing was always more important than the maker. Bertin helped to create the tradition of haute couture, a uniquely French institution. Haute
Couture is premier in clothing production. While for centuries, all clothing was handmade, haute couture was superior because of its technicality and luxuriousness at a price point and exclusivity that only the elite and aristocracy could afford. Today, haute couture, French for “high dressmaking,” has an incredibly strict standard maintained and approved by the Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture which requires a thousand hours of work on embellishments and finishes “including sewing the buttons, button-holes, pleats, zippers and embroideries by hand” (Bernard). The clothing is then shown to the clients, and if a piece is bought, it will be expertly fitted to the client. During the reigns of Louis XIV and Louis XVI, haute couture was created as the clothing that the monarchy would wear, making it the influencer in every single trend to occur after since it was the most luxurious.

For centuries after, and even today, haute couture is still seen as the best because it is so demanding to create. It helped establish a hierarchy of what was deemed fashionable. With the growing popularity of ready-to-wear in the nineteenth century, clothing was becoming more accessible, but haute couture was still the most sought after that few could actually afford. On the other hand, ready-to-wear, a less technical form, brought the trends popular in haute couture to a wider audience: “the ready-to-wear industry began to imitate the styles and designs of the elite made-to-order tailors and couturiers, producing what Perrot calls ‘false luxury’” (Wollen 135). Ready-to-wear is machine made making it easy to mass-produce and create multiple sizes in; it is made for a general market and sold in stores (Apparel Search). Ready-to-wear was, and still is, below haute couture because it is more accessible and easier to make. This change in clothing accessibility also changed who was important: “within this new system, wealth rather than rank as such became important, but also the ability to deploy wealth, through fashion, as a form of symbolic capital, one that attracted both attention and envy, as well as respect” (Wollen 133).
Wealth and class became the defining object of who could afford luxuries and the newest of trends instead of the aristocracy, so more people could buy into the high priced garments, allowing for fashion to be more accessible to a larger group of people.

With the shift of power to ready-to-wear for the growing middle class, another major change occurred a century later to who was creating the most in-demand clothing. By the mid-twentieth century, France was still at the top of the fashion production hierarchy, dictating the best trends, after all it was the only place that haute couture was produced. Yet ready-to-wear was growing in popularity for designers, even for haute couture houses because it was starting to be seen as a lucrative venture; although not as dignified or respected as haute couture. The true change in popularity came when the Americans invaded French fashion with a showcase of their best works at Versailles- what was in many ways the birthplace of haute couture. During a night of fundraising for Versailles, five French haute couture houses and five American designers showed their collections. The French were showcasing what they had been getting right for centuries with grand presentations and decorative settings rivaling the clothing being presented. The result did not feel modern: “the entire French half of the evening was built around the glories of the past… not even Nureyev dancing a pas de deux could have made the atmosphere any less than funereal” (Givhan 205). While no one could argue that the clothing was not fantastic, the show for it was too much and too old-fashioned. It lacked an excitement. The Americans on the other hand, were the stars of the night. While the clothing was not as technically advanced, it was relevant to the 1970s, and the show was much simpler, much more exciting, with models dancing in the clothing as they walked on stage, bringing life to what was meant to be lived in. That night, ready-to-wear changed; American clothing was seen as cooler and more modern than what the best fashion houses of France were creating. The underdogs
were finally accepted as important figures in the fashion world. And with this night and the years to come after it, there was a shift to what still exists today: a much heavier reliance on ready-to-wear over haute couture. The audience for haute couture was dwindling, while the audience for ready-to-wear was growing. While haute couture was still important and seen as the best, ready-to-wear had garnered a lot of respect and was seen as where trends were being made.

In the past few years, there have been more shifts in the hierarchy of fashion. Ready-to-wear is increasingly becoming more important while haute couture is almost non-existent, at least compared to when it was at its height: “fashion houses receive very little profit from Haute Couture; in fact, they often lose money. Colossal expenses and a tiny clientele (there are only an estimated 2,000 female customers globally) perhaps explain why, in the past 60 years, the number of couture houses has decreased dramatically” (Core). While ready-to-wear is more important than haute couture, fast fashion has become incredibly important to the overall success of the fashion industry and is affecting the former two sectors. Fast fashion includes billions of dollars in revenue for stores like Zara, H&M, and Forever 21, which sell low-cost clothing that is made and shipped to stores rapidly. When talking about Zara in the 1990s, The New York Times reported, “It would only take 15 days for a garment to go from a designer's brain to being sold on the racks” (Idacavage). These stores change stock weekly and have become powerhouses at the forefront of the fashion industry. In many ways, fast fashion as a whole has completely changed the way the industry works; it has sped up how fashion is consumed, challenging the once standard rule of showing collections six months prior to when the merchandise begins to be sold in stores. Because fast fashion’s output is so rapid and they rely on ready-to-wear designers, the stores do not have as many markdowns because customers are always buying the new and when the new is sold out, it will be replaced with something else that will be newer, influencing the
same costumers to return. This allows for strong gross margins and soaring profits not possible for most other stores or ready to wear designers (Forbes). While fast fashion is not influential in the creative process, they are, however, influential in what will become stylish and its accessibility and affordability allow almost everyone to be able to wear these trends, making them leaders in the fashion industry.

Fast fashion is a large platform for making money and getting an audience, so much so that many fashion designers have working with the stores to create collections, including ready-to-wear French designer, Isabel Marant known for its causal cool French girl designs. In 2013, Isabel Marant collaborated with H&M to create a collection of womenswear, menswear, children’s, and accessories. Overall, it was a huge success: clothing sold out in days and men and women were lined up at storefronts during the early hours of the morning. The actual clothing is unique, because it’s priced higher than the average item at an H&M, but still cheaper than something that would usually be sold at Isabel Marant. The price point creates a happy medium, as does a convenient location where most customers would already be shopping. The clothing seems like a steal, and so happy customers can buy into the illusion that they are living a luxury designer lifestyle because of the name on the label, while the designer is still able to keep the label itself exclusive since this collaboration is not the main line collection. Conventionally, accessories like sunglasses and cosmetics like perfume are the most popular items for luxury designers, so the possibility for people to buy more than just that is exciting and also an opportunity to invest more into the brands. Designers working with fast fashion companies create opportunity that would have been possible prior.

Designers and media work together: designers need the press in order to sell their clothing, and the media would not exist if the designers did not make something to talk about.
Both influence the clothing that is being made: “brands that are aspirational, authentic or have the most point of difference are now the ones with the edge.” Designers now have big social profiles, their runway shows are devoured on all social media platforms, and in some ways, it’s less about clothing and more about the total look.” (Baird-Murray). And so the clothing is not just the celebrated factor. The designer has to be present, the show has to be exciting, and the right people have to be interested. But additionally, social media also has to be a part of the process, the people behind this are often times celebrities, but also bloggers who are now creating their own type of celebrity status and media. These new celebrities have been gaining clout and respect in the fashion industry, upheaving other established aspects of fashion.

Fashion media has changed over the years. In the nineteenth century, magazines like Vogue advertised the latest trends in haute couture that women around the world would follow. Similar to clothing designers, there was a top-down hierarchy of media, where traditional magazines like Vogue would have a much more sweeping influence than smaller magazines. While haute couture created the clothing, magazines made them important: “it is the language of the magazine which gives the clothing created by haute couture the structure of a signifier and the power to signify; before being taken up by the fashion magazine, haute couture clothing is much closer to a working model than to a semantic unit” (Barthes 79). In recent years, with the advent of blogs and their increasing popularity, other voices have come into the sphere of influence when it comes to trends and also credibility.

Many of the most popular bloggers would likely not be as successful as they are in traditional platforms because of their backgrounds, which still limits who can participate. For example, as Asians have increasingly had more buying power in fashion; Asian Americans alone spend almost twice as much as the total market annually (Motivate). Asian Americans have
economic power, so it makes sense for the fashion world to start catering to them. Asian bloggers have been able to gain influence and millions of followers, giving them incredibly strong voices in mainstream fashion. These men and women’s audiences are not exclusively Asian, but a powerful Asian audience has undoubtedly helped them gain traction. Bloggers like Susie Lau and Bryan Boy were some of the first bloggers to create names for themselves. Seeing these men and women represented in media has also helped the representation of minorities in other channels, as Chriselle Lim, another successful Korean American blogger has pointed out: “When I started, it was so rare to see an Asian face on a campaign or even on the runway. I think that social media, and just digital media in general, has really given a voice to minorities” (Sherman). Blogging has enabled a wider group of people to gain representation in fashion and not only in the media, but throughout all aspects of the industry.

The representation of multi-cultural backgrounds for men and women in fashion is not new. While it has never been an equal representation, many have been able to take part in fashion when they otherwise would not have been able to. During the Versailles show of 1973, ten of the thirty-six American models who partook in it were African American, more than can be said, unfortunately today. And Stephen Burrows, one of the designers presenting was African American as well. Their presence at the show was not just for show or as a gimmick (Givhan 138). While it was economical, and in the case of Burrows political, they were included not just for the sake of being included. In many ways, these women and man are similar to bloggers who are also starting to obtain a voice. Fashion is no longer limited to just the monarchy or the rich, it is for a larger group of people that is no longer directly based on class or race.
Additionally, blogging is completely unique from traditional magazines because it can be far more interactive for its readership. Most blog writers are also a brand. In many cases, these men and women come from backgrounds that are not as formal as someone who has years of experience and clout at a traditional magazine. This makes blogs feel more authentic: “their connection to their readers was much more direct, personal, immediate—and effective in starting conversions.” (Goodman). The reader can become a critic as well as the blogger because of the forum format and the accessibility of the conversation and each person’s knowledge. Blogging has democratized media, by creating a world where anyone can partake, by creating an accessible platform (Wired).

While fashion and blogger is becoming more democratic, it is still far from being representational of everyone all of the time. While there are a fair amount of Asian men and women with a strong presence in the blogosphere, it still overwhelming ruled by white women. The most successful blogger, Chiara Ferragni, is Italian. Originally a student studying law, Ferragni turned her hobby of fashion and blogging into a career. She has seven million followers on Instagram and because of her success as a blogger, started her own shoe collection that brought in 10 million dollars last year (Indvik). While her background might not be similar to the backgrounds of many who work in fashion, she resembles any other fashion editor for a major magazine: her taste in clothing is similar, but on a more basic level, she is also tall, thin, and blonde. Numerous other bloggers are similar to Ferragni, with similar tastes in clothing as well, so while in many aspects fashion blogging is democratizing, it is also stagnating.

Through my Senior Project, Pyramide, I aim to illustrate that these new crop of workers coming into fashion are making their mark on the industry in transformative ways. I have done this by creating a digital magazine that comments on the two changes currently occurring in
fashion. I wanted to focus on the designers and bloggers who were changing what the fashion landscape looks like, because they were shaking up a configuration that had been in place for centuries. Research shows that this change has not been only in the past one hundred years, but it is still, undoubtedly, having a major influence on fashion right now. In the digital magazine, I wrote four articles on the subject, two for each sub-topic, examining these new trends. One of the important aspects of this project was directly commenting on the near obsolescence of fashion magazines, as blogs have increasingly gained followers and power. While the basic structure would stay true to a magazine-a cover, inside, back cover, different articles, etc., I wanted the actual content to be a blog format. The layout would look like a blog with interactive links and causally toned articles. While these elements ran throughout the magazine, I also incorporated a traditional magazine layout, so, for two of the less serious articles, I played with how the text and images interacted.

For the articles, I wrote one on fashion designers collaborating with lower end fashion brands, one about shopping such a collection, another on blogging bringing democratic values to the fashion world, and lastly an article on how to start a blog. My intention with the how-to articles: shopping a collection and starting a blog, is to include interactivity, that is, the reader can directly take part in what is occurring right now no matter their past experience in fashion. They are an extension, commenting on ideas presented in the main articles. The two main articles provide overviews of the state of fashion. Because the articles were supposed to be influenced by blogging, I decided to take a very casual approach in how I wrote them. I wanted it to be very friendly, harking back to my thesis that blogging itself is a very approachable medium for anyone critiquing this subject.
To go along with the text I wrote, I decided that I wanted to use found images that furthered what I wrote about in the articles. For example, I spoke about Vetement’s designs in their recent runway show, so I felt it was essential to add images from the show, showing how the designer integrated the brands into the clothing. But I realized that since these images would be found images that anyone could use, my project would end up looking very generic and take away from my original points, so I decided to customize them with backgrounds that still went along with the theme. With the same example of Vetements, I added high heeled shows, trying to make the subtle comment that the clothing seen isn’t necessarily what one might initially think of as high fashion, but as I previously stated does not fully encompass what high fashion has been becoming. In other cases, I used Illustrator to transform images I found into drawings. While most of my images are found, I did decide that for the cover, it would be a picture of myself. Blogs are in many ways extensions of the person who creates them; that person becomes the spokesperson and the brand of their work, so I felt that with my face on the cover it would be referencing back to the self-ownership of blogging and its importance in creating a voice.

One of the hardest parts of this project was finding a theme that would mutually reflect a magazine and a blog. While the layout and content should reflect a blog, they still have to look like a magazine in order to make the point that medium is becoming less and less important. Because of this, I’ve had to do a lot of visual research on which to base my own digital magazine. I’ve also realized that the magazine will end up looking more like a blog than I had originally intended, but this will reflect what is occurring in the fashion media landscape.

I had not initially planned to write about fast fashion separate from ready-to-wear. Though through working on this project, I realized the extent to which fast fashion is becoming a crucial and defining aspect of the industry, influence fashion houses and their own work output.
As a whole, fast fashion has become a major source of revenue for the industry as a whole. Almost everyone wears some, including celebrities and others who can afford more luxurious clothing. Fast fashion is changing the way that customers are shopping: buying more and not keeping clothing pieces for as long. So, reflecting on the amount of influence it has, I decided to write on fast fashion in the main articles beyond its relation to the two ready-to-wear designer houses I am focusing on: Isabel Marant and Vetements. While focusing on ready-to-wear’s change and democratization, it would be foolish not to mention the importance of fast fashion and the brands the ready-to-wear companies are working with, when talking about the democratization of the actual clothing.

While researching, I also realized that while so much has historically and is currently changing, many of the same aspects that existed prior are still very similar to what it was like before. For example, one of the topics that I focus on is diversity, mainly in the blogging world, and while there are many new voices who have become influencers, they would most likely not have had this chance prior, simply because of the color of their skin. The majority of the fashion world still looks like it did prior. Even some of the blogging worlds’ biggest success stories are of white women. For me, it was important to address the fact that while fashion is democratizing, it is still far from equal.

Through the production process, I learned more about InDesign. While I had previous experience with Photoshop, this semester was the first time I had used Illustrator and InDesign because I was taking a class separate to my Senior Project. While this class helped me learn the basics, my project was where I was really able to put what I had learned to the test. I learned how to do things in InDesign that I had not known were possible before, like putting an interactive slideshow into the document. It could at times be frustrating because I am by no means an expert
in these applications, but it also made it more exciting when I finally was able to get even small things look the way I was imagining.

The hierarchy of fashion is changing in some ways while many others are staying the same. Through my project, I hope to show these changing dynamics of the fashion world, and how it is also, in many ways, staying the same. New people are gaining a voice in fashion, a number that could not exist prior to the recent occurrences of blogging and the emergence of the importance of fast fashion, making fashion more accessible on both a consumption and critical level. No longer do just a few fashion houses have a say in what will be popular each season like they did even just fifty years ago. With the growing importance of ready-to-wear, blogging, and now fast fashion and their abilities to become more advanced, fashion is changing. From what I’ve learned through this project I hope to carry it into my own personal projects. While I do not have any intentions of continuing Pyramide after this semester, I will undoubtedly carry both of what I learned in my research and the production of this project into my own blog that documents my personal style, like many of the fashion bloggers I was originally inspired by for this project.
Works Cited


