Overdressed

Overdressed

The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion

ELIZABETH L. CLINE

PORTFOLIO / PENGUIN

vamped by the logo-eschewing German fashion designer Tomas Maier. In the years since, celebrities from Kim Kardashian to Sarah Jessica Parker to *Harry Potter* starlet Emma Watson have graced red carpets in gorgeous, understated Bottega Veneta gowns. Even I, a woman who won't pay more than $30 for a dress, have heard of Bottega Veneta. They have a retail location on Manhattan's Fifth Avenue, but I had never been inside.

The dress I had in my hands was eggplant purple, with a pleated skirt and frayed football-pad shoulders, and priced at $7,000. I loved it. When a very gracious saleswoman encouraged me to try it on, I smiled and said reflexively, "I don't want to be tempted." The line rang comically hollow. I didn't even have the credit limit to buy this garment. The saleswoman persisted, "This dress is almost one-of-a-kind. It's not mass-manufactured clothing, you know. I don't like mass-manufactured clothing." And there it was. I could either flee to the H&M just down the street and buy a poorly made knockoff, or I could take out a second mortgage and buy the "real thing." For a moment, I was convinced that nothing could exist outside of the current paradigm, which pits prestige and the allure of a designer name against clothing priced just as outrageously on the cheap end of the spectrum.

4

Fast Fashion

Opened by James Cash Penney in 1913, JCPenney started off as a dry-goods store that sold, among other things, blue jeans, fabric, and sewing needles. But it quickly set itself apart from its department store brethren. It was a chain store to its core, setting up posts in numerous rural towns and small cities. As the Penney's Web site boasts, at one time more than two thousand of its stores blanketed the country. Sam Walton, the founder of the world's largest and most ruthlessly cheap retailer, Walmart, worked at the Des Moines, Iowa, JCPenney in the 1940s.

JCPenney survived the consolidation and markdown wars of the past several decades, but by the new millennium was in deep decline, so much that a business journalist named Bill Hare wrote a book called *Celebration of Fools: An Inside Look at the Rise and Fall of JCPenney.* A few years ago, JCPenney's former CEO, Myron Ullman, determined that his company's woes were caused by his customers—they weren't shopping enough. Department store shoppers were still on the old seasonal habit of buying. "If you only deliver four times a year, there's only a reason to come to the store four times a year," lamented Ullman to the *Wall Street Journal.*[1] The natural pace of clothing consumption in the United States was suddenly being viewed as retail suicide. There was only one thing that could save Penney's: fast fashion. Ullman con-

cluded, "Fast fashion for the young, modern woman is our highest-potential business opportunity."

In 2010 JCPenney rolled out a collaboration with the Spanish fast-fashion giant Mango. Although it only has a modest fourteen retail locations in the United States, Mango is one of the largest and most popular retailers in Europe and operates two thousand stores in 103 countries. Mango's line for JCPenney, called MNG by Mango, is replenished every two weeks. Ullman no longer had to lose sleep that his customers aren't shopping enough. They now have twenty-six reasons a year to come into his stores.

Fast fashion is a radical method of retailing that has broken away from seasonal selling and puts out new inventory constantly throughout the year. Fast-fashion merchandise is typically priced much lower than its competitors'. The fast-fashion concept was pioneered by Spain's Zara, which delivers new lines twice a week to its stores. H&M and Forever 21 both get daily shipments of new styles. The London-based Topshop, which has a U.S. location in Manhattan, introduces an astonishing four hundred new styles a week on its Web site. Charlotte Russe and bebe, both U.S.-based, are also constantly updating their stock. On its face, it makes little sense that selling so much attractive fashion for so little could be profitable. But in fact, it seems to be the only surefire way to make it in today's retail scene: Fast-fashion retailers have almost twice the average profit margin of their more traditional competitors.[2]

There may not be one of these stores I mention on every city block in America *yet,* but the fast-fashion model has been adopted to varying degrees by retailers of all stripes. A 2006 *Newsweek* article on the growing pressures of fast fashion on U.S. stores noted that Walmart, which has struggled to win over fashionable consumers, had already shortened their delivery times down to weeks for fashionable items and that even chains like Chico's, which caters to the over-forty set,

now deliver new inventory every day.[3] There are few fashion companies who aren't currently trying hard to figure out how they can get new clothes into stores faster and to sell them for less than ever before.

Fashion is by its nature a perilous business. The threat is always there of a style bombing or not selling as well as predicted and markdowns and clearances stealing away profits. In 1987 merchants were notoriously burdened with huge leftover inventories after forecasters predicated the miniskirt was making a comeback. It did not.[4] As the industry consolidated, order sizes became huge, and shareholders demanded to see quarterly growth, the financial risk of fashion became great enough to make any CEO wince.

Once production was outsourced, supply chains became very long and unwieldy with fabric sourcing, dyeing, embellishment, and sewing all potentially happening in different countries.[5] Lead times were a half a year; collections had to be dreamed up a full year ahead of time. Clothing companies began to invest deeply in trend research and professional forecasting, all in an attempt to accurately predict what we'd all want to be wearing far down the road. Naturally fashion companies got it wrong all the time. Long lead times and huge orders doomed clothing companies to overbuying and to the incessant sales that consumers have come to expect in recent decades. The president of Nicole Miller told the *New York Times* back in 1991, "The cost of that kind of inefficient guesswork is what has led to this phony price structure with guaranteed markdowns that we have now."[6]

Amancio Ortega, the founder of the first fast-fashion store, Zara, started his career as a garment manufacturer and was almost driven to bankruptcy after a single wholesaler canceled a big order.[7] He would not be burned again. The first Zara store was opened to sell the orphaned order. And then Ortego got to work taking the risk out of selling clothes.

Zara can design, produce, and deliver a new garment and put it on display in any of its worldwide locations in two weeks. It produces relatively small batches of each design and always has something fresh on sale. Because its customers return more often to the store to see what's new, a majority of clothes sold at Zara are bought at full price. An in-depth 2004 *Harvard Business Review* article on Zara revealed how the retailer performs its magic: Its supply chain depends on a constant exchange of computerized information and phone calls between retail locations, factories, and Zara's headquarters in La Caruña, Spain. Zara's retail employees carry customized handheld computers to feed information about what's selling, customer reactions, and buzz around new styles. They'll make last-minute calls to their factories, where more than 50 percent of their fabric is waiting undyed so they can change the color midseason if need be.[8] Zara leverages all this information for one main purpose—to keep it from producing a style or a color, or even from using a zipper instead of a button-fly, when it's not going to sell.

Fast fashion is certainly an industry innovation and not possible in the globalized fashion industry without technological progress. But this is not the first time the industry has had quick, flexible supply chains. When production and textile resources were entirely in the United States, brands such as Jonathan Logan were very fast to market. Logan once owned an integrated factory in Spartanburg, South Carolina, that spun wool, made fabric, and sewed dresses all under one roof. "Raw wool in one door and finished dresses out the other," Logan president David Schwartz boasted to *Time* in 1963. The company also owned its own planes, so it could quickly airlift goods to stores.

Zara owns some of its factories, realizing what manufacturers knew a half century ago: Supply-chain control is crucial in a very finicky industry. H&M, which has its largest number of stores in Europe, likewise relies more on Turkey and other eastern European nations for quick-turn production. And Forever 21 keeps orders in Los Angeles factories for its most fashion-sensitive products. Though not as quick as Zara, Forever 21 can get styles from design to rack in six weeks, and H&M in close to eight.[9]

Fast fashion's true secret to success does not lie in advanced technology or close-by factories—it's in selling an unprecedented amount of clothing. As the *Harvard Business Review* cautions, Zara's success may only be applicable in industries "where product life cycles are very short." Fast fashion can only give us low prices if consumers continue to buy new clothes as soon as they're on the floor. Because fast-fashion goods move so quickly, stores are able to offer their best price first. At Zara unsold items account for less than 10 percent of stock, compared with the industry average of 17 to 20 percent.[10]

Fast-fashion consumers, not surprisingly, shop more than other consumers. *A lot more.* Just anecdotally, in my own life, I was shopping almost continuously at H&M—on my lunch break, on my way to the subway, during an errands trip to the city; I was buying clothes all the time almost subconsciously, like a cow grazes on grass. Zara's customers shop the store seventeen times a year on average. Just as the production cycle has broken away from the seasons, seasonal shopping patterns have given way to continuous consumption. And fast fashion is driving these changes.

When people shop at Costco, the discount wholesaler, they often irrationally overconsume, such as buying a six-month's supply of breakfast cereal. This is called the Costco effect. Fast-fashion stores deploy their own strategies to get us to buy more clothes, even when we already have a closetful of them or own very similar styles. They rarely restock even their most popular items, in an attempt to lure consumers back into the store for "fresh" products. I recently con-

vinced myself that I had to have a black faux fleece–lined hoodie that I spotted at Forever 21 because it *seemed* so rare. There was not another one in sight. In reality a black sweatshirt is not an innovative product, and I already owned four.

Somehow, the low price paired with a treasure hunt to find the only one in the store made me feel like I had to have this exact one. Consumer psychology expert C. W. Park says most of us learn after a few bellyaches eating the same cereal morning, noon, and night to not to buy food in such excess. There are no such built-in physiological or psychological limits to how much clothing we will buy. There is no Costco effect for fashion, especially if it's cheap. "In the case of clothing you can somehow use it or wear it," says Park. Of course, much of it we don't use or wear, but the promise of utility is enough to justify a purchase.

According to the *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, order sizes for fast-fashion companies can sometimes be as small as five hundred.[11] Zara produces their styles in very limited numbers initially and then scales them up or down based on popularity. Forever 21 consistently orders smaller. A Forever 21 designer I'll call Amanda (she asked me to change her name) told me, "The largest order Forever 21 will place is five thousand for accessories." This is not to suggest that fast fashion is a more responsible retailing model that produces thoughtfully curated batches of unique garments. Amanda explained that Forever 21 might buy five hundred slightly different variations of a single trend—a bucket-style handbag, for example—and order several thousand of each. The retailer oversaturates the market with numerous spins on the same look.

H&M, Topshop, Mango, and other fashion chains operate slightly differently from Forever 21, often ordering big, sometimes close to the order sizes of a Gap, Nike, or Walmart. But they spread these numbers more or less evenly out over all their retail chains around the world,

making the quantity at each store limited. H&M's PR person would not give me exact numbers of how much it produces of each style, citing "competitive reasons,"[12] but a Gap designer who has been in the same factories used by H&M says the chain can order as much as fifty thousand or two hundred thousand of a given style. This is less than a Gap denim order but tremendous nonetheless. "The fast-fashion chains definitely win on units," the Gap designer told me, meaning their total annual output exceeds that of almost all of their competitors.

According to the *Independent*, H&M produced 500 million pieces of clothing a year in 2004.[13] A decade and many hundreds of store openings later, it's safe to assume their numbers are *much* higher. London's *Times* reports that Zara processes one million garments *a day* from its Spanish headquarters.[14] As of 2009, Forever 21 was buying more than 100 million pieces of clothing a year, with a single location in Tokyo packed with fifty thousand to sixty thousand pieces at any given moment.[15] Fast-fashion stores have dramatically accelerated an already bloated and overheated clothing production system.

Fast fashion is known not only for its constant offerings of the latest fads but for being shockingly cheap. Forever 21 can sell cute pumps for $15 and H&M can peddle a knit miniskirt for $5. These stores make gobs of money in spite of their low prices, in part because their consumers shop more and buy their clothes for full price. But their true secret is, once again, high volume. They earn their profits the same way that any mammoth discount chain store does: by taking a small sliver of profit on a large amount of goods. According to H&M, one of the reasons they can provide such low prices is because its two thousand stores "provide high volumes."[16] Forever 21 sells its products at double the cost of production plus a couple of dollars, says Amanda. It's a standard retail markup, but one that creates astounding revenues when added up over at least 100 million pieces of clothing. Fast fash-

ion's profitability resides in the same place as its appeal—in selling a relentless and unsustainable ocean of new clothes *week after week after week*. Or as Amanda puts it, "Forever 21's biggest secret is units all the time. They sell *so much freaking product*."

Shopping for new clothes used to be far more leisurely. If I spotted a cute fleece-lined sweatshirt in a store, I would have been able to go home and think on it. If I came back a few weeks later, the sweatshirt would likely still be there. Usually I'd just realize I didn't really need or even want the sweatshirt at all. Most fashion labels historically produced two main collections: spring/summer and autumn/winter. A department store had four major selling seasons. A mass-market retailer such as Gap updated their color scheme throughout the year, but focused on seasonal output. To an increasing degree, "the look" on display in clothing stores is rapidly changing. What's in stores this week is no longer what will be there the next. What's in style now is very different from what will be in style next year. This is all the result of fast fashion, which demands a constant stream of product to turn a profit.

In early 2010 I was sitting with friends at a pub near Manhattan's Union Square debating the biggest fashion trends of the past three decades. For the '80s, it was easy—"Hammer" pants, neon, power dressing, poofy party dresses, and so on. For the '90s, it was grunge, floral prints, combat boots, and midriffs. We went back and forth for an hour trying to come up with the defining trend of the 2000s—skinny jeans, knee-high boots, oversize sunglasses were all suggested—before deciding that the biggest style trend of that decade was trends themselves—too many to count, changing ever-faster, challenging us to keep up.

The fashion industry relies on change. It always has. What is so astonishing today is the breakneck pace of change, which has shifted from seasonal and focused to constant and schizophrenic. FIT Museum Director Valerie Steele agrees that fashion is speeding up. "Trends now change more dramatically in terms of silhouettes and hemline," says Steele, "whereas in the past trends changed more in terms of details like sleeves and decorations. But fashion even today doesn't really make radical changes."

At first Steele's statements seemed like a contradiction, but then I began to make my own sense of them. We're rotating through entire paradigms of fashion now within a few seasons (boho, androgynous, hippie-chic, sailor-inspired), while we're also seeing fashion within a single season change in almost capricious ways. In Lee Councell's magnanimous blazer collection, she not only has myriad colors and prints (beige, black, light gray, dark gray, army green, pinstripe), she also has a hybrid blazer that is crossed with a corset and laced up the back and a blazer that is crossed with an army jacket and covered in cargo pockets.

Before fashion met Hollywood and the Internet, Steele says that information about new looks was tightly controlled by fashion magazines and their editors, who would dictate a few winners and a fairly singular vision of where fashion was headed. That's no longer the case. "You can no longer have someone like Dior launching a New Look," Steele explains, referring to French designer Christian Dior's revolutionary 1947 collection that singularly inspired the hyperfeminine wasp-waisted tops and ballerina-like skirts of the following decade.

The Internet age and the dissemination of information through blogs, social networking sites, and tabloids is pushing fashion forward at great speeds. It's also exposing us to many more ideas simultaneously. "The empire of fashion has broken down into a bunch of warring style

tribes," says Steele. Today, any runway designer or trendsetting celebrity, stylist, or fashion blogger can influence the fashion winds through our 24/7 media world.

But without fast-fashion stores, without a tangible product affordable to so many people, trends would not be established and spread across the country and now the world so quickly. In order to have something new for us to buy, Forever 21, H&M, and Zara must always be on the hunt for some fresh concept, whether it comes from the streets, the media, or the runways, and to somehow differentiate all that product. It's a tall order and a highly contentious one.

Forever 21 was founded in 1984 by South Korean–born power couple Do Won "Don" and Jin Sook Chang, who now run it with the help of their twentysomething daughters Esther and Linda. The headquarters is located in shabby downtown L.A., a stone's throw from the minimum-wage factories that still stitch some of the retailers' duds. The offices are not the most relaxed environs. Employees clock in with a fingerprint ID system, Amanda says. They're required to wear an ID badge. A bell rings to notify them of their two ten-minute breaks, one at 10 a.m. and one at 3 p.m. There are security cameras to make sure that everyone is at their desk when they're supposed to be.

Amanda described working for Forever 21 this way: "It's very much set up like a sweatshop. When we take our lunch break, which we're supposed to take 4 hours and 45 minutes after we start, it's in a cafeteria where they serve us stuff worse than jail food." Amanda was hired to design original products for the company, but she says Forever 21 is so much faster at getting a "cheap, close knockoff" into stores that it made her designs "unnecessary." Likewise, her department head's sketches for new designs were tossed on top of a shelf and

left there to languish for eight months. That's because Forever 21 is largely structured to pounce on trends and get them into stores before anyone else, and the fastest way to do this is to buy existing designs or to copy them from other places.

Forever 21 is notorious for ripping off fashion designers. To date, the company has been sued more than fifty times for copyright violations. Yet they have never been found liable for copyright infringement.[17] U.S. copyright law does not protect fashion design, only fabric prints and jewelry, and Susan Scafidi, a Fordham University law professor and founder of the Fashion Law Institute, says U.S. copyright law has always been firm on this point. "The copyright office has always said very consistently that clothing is just functional and therefore can't be copyrighted," Scafidi explains. To anyone who's ever worn a four-inch stiletto or craved a sweatshirt simply because the fleece lining is cute, that fashion is primarily utilitarian is laughable. In Europe, as well as in India, Singapore, and with certain limitations in Canada, fashion design *is* largely covered by copyright rules, although Scafidi says they are loosely enforced. France, perhaps not surprisingly, has had copyright protection on their fashions for a century.

The reason America lags behind other nations on fashion copyright law is, in Scafidi's view, because historically it was a manufacturing hub rather than a design center. Europe had the designers; the United States had the factories that mass-manufactured the European designs. Garment makers benefit from relaxed copyright laws because it means they can either skip hiring designers or simply hire sketch artists to copy the latest looks. "They can just go out and choose what's hot—it used to be what's hot from Paris, now it's what's hot from anywhere—and make the copy," says Scafidi. Now that you're more likely to find a fashion designer than a garment worker in the United States, Scafidi believes that this has shifted the balance of power

toward designers, many of whom are demanding that we reexamine our laws.

A clothing brand such as Gap arguably has its own "look" that is updated and only slightly impacted by prevailing trends. But fast fashion doesn't have *a* look. It feeds off existing fads and new trends, no matter where they're coming from. The degree to which fast-fashion retailers directly copy depends on the company in question. Fast-fashion stores from Charlotte Russe to Zara all carry such core basics as denim, sweaters, or outerwear that can be planned in advance and updated with a handful of the season's established trends—such as leopard print, bondage, or lace, as it was in the fall of 2011.

H&M claims to work much like runway designers, scouting fashion schools, street styles, blogs, and rock shows, and looking at art and literature, with the goal of creating something fresh without moving too far from the fashion zeitgeist. They also have the advantage of a gargantuan design team, which has ballooned in recent years to 140 people.[18] A company like J.Crew might have two dozen designers on their women's team by comparison; a high-end designer might work with a handful of assistants at most.

Zara has 250 in-house designers.[19] Zara is well-known for producing close approximations of entire runway shows, as it did with French luxury label Céline's spring 2011 collection. Strikingly similar leather shorts and skirts and extra-wide-legged pants, all in a muted color palette of camels, coffee, and beige, landed in Zara stores in March 2011, at the same time the originals were released. Zara commonly sells very similar takes on designers' signature pieces, such as Prada's striped sombrero from its spring 2011 collection. Zara's version was black and white instead of neon colored. The chain has been both criticized for its lack of originality and lauded for bringing designer fashion to the masses, yet because the store rarely engages in exact

copies, Zara was not sued for copyright infringement even once between 2003 and 2008.[20]

Forever 21 works very differently from the European fast-fashion giants. As late as 2007, they had no in-house design team.[21] Most of this chain's clothing is ordered from vendors, essentially manufacturers and agents who either have their own factories or design teams who peddle new styles. Mrs. Chang is Forever 21's head buyer and she approves every single style found in the company's stores, which is as many as four hundred new items a day according to the UK's *Observer.* The company often blames the copycat designs on their vendors,[22] but often the vendors are copying based on Forever 21's request. "[Mrs. Chang] will go shopping all over the world, circle things in magazines, buy samples, and take pictures," Amanda says, and then hands over her research to her buying team to find a vendor who can produce a replica. And unless the copy is of a fabric print or jewelry, the company is within its legal rights. Scafidi told Jezebel.com in July 2011 that the only way a company like Forever 21 would allow itself to be sued again and again is because they have a "business strategy" of copying and settling if they get "caught." She comments in the article that paying designers a settlement is "probably cheaper" than licensing the design in the first place.[23]

In the late '80s, H&M worked the same way as Forever 21, buying existing collections from Southeast Asian agents and then "putting them together in the store like pieces of a mismatched puzzle."[24] It has since changed their strategy, possibly because European copyright law made it more legally problematic. Scafidi told me that because they operate under a much stricter legal environment, the designers at the European fast-fashion chains including H&M, Zara, and Mango, are instructed to produce a spin on designer styles as opposed to doing direct copies.

Of course, Forever 21 doesn't *just* sell carbon copies of high-end looks. Runway designers produce small collections of thirty to forty pieces per season, insufficient material for the bottomless pit of new styles needed in the 24/7 fast-fashion world. The reason why fast-fashion stores seem so presciently on trend is not *always* because they're lurking in the water, waiting to copy. It's sometimes for the same peculiar reasons that runway designers will all suddenly be using loud geometric prints or leather at the same time.

Celebrity designer Tom Ford explained fashion coincidences at a 2005 conference at the University of Southern California called "Ready to Share: Fashion and the Ownership of Creativity." "The clues to where we are going to be next year are here now," he said. "And to all good sleuths and people with a certain amount of intuition, they will tend to find the same thing. In order for a design to be successful, it has to be appealing to the mass population."[25] Fast-fashion design teams and buyers can be master sleuths at spotting trends as well as the high end. And fast-fashion retailers, with their quick-turnaround production systems and virtual lack of testing or quality standards, do have the advantage of waiting to finalize a collection after they've seen the catwalk or are certain of which trends are taking off.

Copying fashion was once a more inexact science, but it's always been a widespread practice, especially in America. The wholesale garment trade in the United States copied Parisian couture for much of its early history, with Christian Dior's hobble skirt on sale at Macy's before his clients received their originals.[26] According to Scafidi, before World War II a hired gun might sneak into a French fashion show, sneak back out, quickly make some sketches, and use a telegraph to transmit their sketches to a manufacturer. "Or they might intercept a dress at the docks and snap a photograph," she says. Parisian designers

also sold licensed copies of their dresses to department stores from which to make exact replicas, but illegal copying was rampant.

What's different today is partly the sophistication of the copies. The Internet, while driving the heightened profile that fashion designers now enjoy, is giving their competitors the tools to better rip them off. "Today, people can look at the pictures online from a fashion show, which are posted almost instantaneously, and copy them directly in a factory in Asia," says Scafidi. "And the photographs are so good. You have photographs in 360 degrees. You have photographs in high-definition on which you can zoom in and see what kind of buttons they used." The result is uncannily similar copies, down to distinctive trim and embellishments. The only case against Forever 21 that even made it to trial was in 2008, and it was because the retailer was selling copies of California-based label Trovata's shirts so exact that both the original and Forever 21's version featured a string of buttons in descending size, each one a different color, including yellow, green, red, and cream. Forever 21 eventually settled out of court with Trovata, which the retailer has done in all of the prior cases against it.[27]

Many of us who shop at fast-fashion stores end up in copies without even knowing it. It was only months after buying a boxy cream-colored top with patch pockets from H&M that I saw an almost identical one by American designer Adam Lippes in Bergdorf Goodman. And perhaps Lippes himself had copied the design from someone else. It's been a largely accepted part of the fashion industry for more than a century now. At a tribute to Ralph Lauren at Lincoln Center in October 2011, the famed American designer admitted to Oprah during an onstage interview that he owes his career to "forty-five years of copying."

The U.S. Congress is currently considering fashion-design protection under a bill called the Design Piracy Prohibition Act. Since its

introduction in 2007, the bill has been whittled down to grant designers a three-year protection from copies that are "substantially identical" to their own. Close and very near approximations, which would encompass most designs, will still be legal under the bill. American designers such as Council of Fashion Designers of America president Diane von Furstenberg as well as Nicole Miller and Zac Posen are the ones leading the charge behind the act, but the design community is split on the issue. At the USC conference, Tom Ford said that nothing makes him happier than seeing copies of his designs, as the high-end consumer and knockoff consumer are not the same. During the panel at the conference which featured Tom Ford as well as author and *New York Times* style critic Guy Trebay, a moderator asked the pair how fashion would be different if there were copyright laws like the ones that protect books and movies. "There'd be no fashion," Trebay said definitively. "It's true," Ford agreed. Strong statements indeed.

The mass copying of a style is what creates a trend, and trends sell clothes today. This is why many in the industry furiously protect their right to ripping each other off. Two law professors, Kal Raustiala and Chris Sprigman, have argued against the design piracy act on the grounds that the American apparel industry "may actually benefit" from copying, as it speeds up the creation and exhaustion of trends. As they put it in their paper to Congress, "The fashion industry's entire business cycle is driven forward by consumer demand for the new, and the entire process is fueled by copying."[28]

Its easy to view copies and near copies as justified and even fair in the face of high markups and steep designer fees. Writer Christine Muhlke recounted in the *New York Times* her adventure to track down Zara's rip-offs of the Céline collection. The original silk tuxedo shirt would have set her back $990. At Zara she could have it for 90 percent less. But what happens when the copycats in question are

huge, billion-dollar companies that are gaining market share by the day? Forever 21 and Zara aren't small Seventh Avenue manufacturers aping Parisian couturiers. And they aren't just mimicking high-end designers few can afford. They're corporations that are able to undercut virtually *all of their competitors,* whether it's a high-end luxury label, an independent designer, or anything in between.

In July 2011, Forever 21's most recent copyright victim was a small, domestically produced label called Feral Childe, whose hand-drawn "Teepee" print showed up on a Forever 21 garment. The designer's tops typically retail for between $150 and $300. Consumers have little incentive to buy Feral Childe when they can buy the same item for a tenth of the price at Forever 21. Scafidi agrees that it's the more affordable designers and the middle market that suffers from copying. "There's a sense from the customer who might otherwise save up for something nicer, *why bother?*" says Scafidi. "Why bother when you can get an approximation of the same look quickly and very cheaply?"

Unlike the world of technology, where rapid innovation produces improvements, innovation in fashion just produces arbitrary stylistic changes. Fashion doesn't improve, it *just changes.* For some followers of fashion as well as designers themselves, this pace of change is not a welcome one. The pace has become maddening. Because of the lack of limitations on copying, paired with increasing sophistication and speed to market of copies, we're living under a tyranny of trends.

Fashion is moving faster and faster, and the pressure to produce the next "new" look has gotten so intense that designers are not only looking into each other's sketchbooks. They are increasingly looking backward and pillaging the past. This became especially apparent to me when fashion of the 1990s came back into style in 2010, right down to the tiny floral-print dresses, loose-fitting midriffs, high-waisted shorts, and combat boots. And girls were buying it up as if we weren't

just looking back and snickering a few years ago at how the cast of *Friends* dressed.

It's very common for fashion designers and buyers to prowl vintage outposts looking for inspiration, and Brooklyn-based vintage dealer Sara Bereket says her stall at the popular outdoor market Brooklyn Flea is a frequent victim. "We know they copy the runway, but nobody talks about how they bluntly copy everything vintage," she says of not only fast-fashion companies but high-end designers as well. One customer bought a '70s cashmere sweater by Calvin Klein from Bereket's stall and then admitted she was shipping it to China the next day to be replicated. Bereket said exasperatedly, "That's the world we live in now."

In her Brooklyn apartment, Bereket was standing in a mountain of finds from a day of digging through used-clothing bins at textile recyclers. She showed me a green silk dress in her closet from the 1980s. A friend of hers owns a shirt from H&M with an identical print. Scafidi told me that vintage is in the public domain and can be freely copied. Bereket then picked through the pile on her floor and held up numerous '90s floral dresses and tops as well as jumpsuits from the 1980s, all hot sellers in regular retailers at the moment. "What styles did we have from the 2000s era? Low pants?" Bereket wonders. "Other than that, it was all copied from the past."

Bereket didn't use to be such a cynic about the fashion industry. Her aunt is a fashion designer, and growing up in Amsterdam, Bereket used to travel to Italy a few times a year to shop in high-end boutiques. "I've always loved coming up with creative, fun things to wear," she told me. When she first moved to the United States five years ago, she was turned off by cheap fashion. "I was disgusted," she says. "We buy a top at Forever 21, wear it three times, and throw it away." But she quickly got sucked into the same habits, shopping al-

most exclusively at the retailer. It wasn't until Bereket became a secondhand clothing buyer, and started to see styles copied stitch-for-stitch in the stores she shopped in, that she decided to stop buying new clothes altogether for several years. She says, "I felt like I'll buy something new if you make something different."

It's easy for a cheapskate like me to criticize fashion designers as unoriginal or profiteering, especially when you consider the fact that many luxury goods doubled in price between 1998 and 2008. To the outsider, the fashion designer's life is glamorous. But the field is overcrowded and competitive. The celebrity focus on fashion and such reality shows as *Project Runway* have spiked enrollment in fashion schools, which means the competition is getting tougher by the day. Designers who are just starting out are up against enormous odds. Starting a line takes a huge financial commitment that can push a person into debt—I know a designer who is $50,000 in debt from her first fashion line. Without producing a lot of clothes, adding very high markups, or somehow finding fame and investors quickly, it's difficult for a new designer to make any profit or even to walk away without totally losing their hat.

Stores such as Forever 21, H&M, and Target have unbeatable economies of scale that no one but another huge corporate player can compete with. When H&M actually lowered their prices in August 2010, in the midst of rising costs in China, they explained their cost-cutting capacities to Vogue.com this way: "We have over 2,000 stores in 37 countries. This provides high volume and there is no middleman. We have our own team of over 100 in-house designers and we do all our own production."[29] Not surprisingly, no independent designer (not to mention most other retailers, brands, or manufacturers) has these resources at her disposal.

Most independent designers also sell their clothes through a de-

partment store or boutique—which means after the standard retail markup, consumers are paying a much higher price for something than they'd find at a store that sells its own brand, such as H&M. Of the American designers who produce in New York, Theory sells a number of dresses for under $350, as do Alice + Olivia, Tucker by Gaby Basora, Nanette Lepore, and many others. It's actually not easy to keep prices at this level when producing in small quantities and selling through a limited number of retail outlets. Eviana Hartman, a former *Vogue* fashion writer and the mastermind behind the Bodkin label, says that selling through brick-and-mortar stores is very difficult for up-and-coming designers. "The inevitable retail markup means your wholesale price is expected to be low, much lower than would really be ideal," says Hartman, whose contemporary designs include asymmetrical dresses and jumpsuits made from environmentally sustainable fabrics that mostly retail for under $300. Hartman says designers like her are turning to online sales and trunk shows to help pad margins.

The ubiquity of cheap, attractive fashion means that designer clothes must also be more showstopping to gain consumer loyalty and to keep people from only shopping at places like Forever 21. This further drives up the cost of designer clothes says Hartman. "It's difficult to be more than a niche player when the majority of consumers are acclimated to dresses costing $20," she explains. "When starting out, in order to distinguish your work, you have to make pieces with a 'wow' factor, and those are never going to be cheap."

How does a designer compete, for example, with a $10.50 Black Fab Skinny Jean from Forever 21? Apparently the answer is to produce jeans in such an over-the-top manner that they can fetch prices well above $300 a pair. The Phantom jean by high-end denim company True Religion, for example, typically retails for $375. Premium jeans

are often made from fabric produced at a North Carolina textile plant where a shuttle loom from the 1950s creates quirky irregularities that give the jeans extra character. The denim features special washes, stitches, and distressing methods.[30] Necessary and discernible to most consumers? No. But sometimes an absurdly extravagant product is the only way a company or designer can stand out from low-cost, corporate fashion.

The intense pressure of today's apparel industry seems to be affecting even those at the very top of the fashion pyramid. *New York Times* style writer Suzy Menkes noted in a March 2011 article, "The pressure from fast fashion and from the instant Internet age to create new things constantly" is wearing down fashion's famous names. Menkes says these pressures are partially to blame for Calvin Klein's stint in rehab, Alexander McQueen's 2009 suicide, and the downfall of John Galliano, who was fired from his post as the creative director of Christian Dior the month of her article's release for engaging in a drunken anti-Semitic rant.[31]

In 1904 German sociologist Georg Simmel wrote a landmark article, "Fashion," for *The American Journal of Sociology*. In it, he laid out a very clear view on how price and the pace of fashion are tied: "The more an article becomes subject to rapid changes of fashion, the greater the demand for *cheap* products of its kind." How right he was. Today, it's very difficult to convince the average consumer to buy clothing at a reasonable price, and fast fashion gets around this conundrum by selling a treadmill of fresh trends for cheap. But in their race to sell new products, they speed up the pace of fashion, which in turn makes the average consumer even cheaper. Why pay good money for clothes that aren't going to be in style next season? It's a vicious feedback loop.

This takes me back to Councell and the $59.95 blazer left hanging on the rack. Blazers, like everything else, are no longer a classic piece of clothing. They are a trend, doomed to become dated. I would be surprised if they aren't "out" by the time you read this. Today's styles have a very short shelf life, and it behooves consumers to pay as little as possible for them. Councell told me that because she prefers to shop for trendy garments, she sees no point in spending a lot of money on fashion. "I like really trendy stuff that's in this spring, and next spring will probably be out," she said. "That's why I won't invest a lot of money in one thing." With so many competing trends in existence at any given moment, some consumers prefer to shop cheap so they can cash in on them all. Councell's friend Sidia, twenty-two, is one of them. "I don't want to pay so much to buy one shirt because the style is going to change," she told me, "So, I like to spend on cheaper clothing since I buy *a lot*."

The pace of fashion is also making quality and craftsmanship obsolete. A 2006 report on fast fashion by researchers at the UK's Manchester Metropolitan University found that fast-fashion companies are indeed eliminating product development and quality control. The researchers interviewed one fast-fashion designer anonymously, who admitted: "We sometimes have huge quality issues with garments that have maybe skipped a test or fit session to get into the shops quicker as the lead times we have been given are very tight."[32] There is evidence that some overseas factories prefer working with fast-fashion retailers precisely because they send things into production with little testing or fitting. According to *New York* magazine, H&M rarely cancels or returns orders. Factories sometimes charge such retailers only half their usual fees, in part because they are such low-maintenance customers.[33]

Yet many fast-fashion stores use their quality as a selling point. H&M's tagline, for example, is "Fashion and quality at the best price."

In the spring of 2011, H&M launched their Conscious Collection, a line of clothing made from recycled plastic and organic cotton. The collection was up on their Web site and made a big splash in the media for about a week. Two weeks later the Web site was promoting summer shorts and knits. I e-mailed H&M's PR person and told them that in my humble opinion, sustainable design and the high-volume production associated with fast fashion seemed to be opposing design approaches. *How do you reconcile the two?* I wanted to know.

I received this fascinating exercise in doublespeak in response: "We do not see ourselves as a fast-fashion company, we make modern designs of good quality. We do not believe that low prices can be equated with a throwaway society, because price and the life span of a garment are not related to each other . . . H&M offers fashion and quality at the best price—good quality means longevity, and we take responsibility that our products will be manufactured in an environmentally, socially and economically sustainable way."

No one expects to take an H&M shirt to the grave. At prices that often circle around $20, we know the product is not *good quality*. Instead, the quality is *good enough*. According to C. W. Park, we accept a substandard product partly because we're so amazed by how well-made cheap fashion is for the price. "Obviously, [the consumer's] expectation of quality may not be that high. But for the price, the product has a very reasonable quality," Park says. This is how quality is defined and why it has been eroded in the cheap-fashion era. Despite what H&M's PR rep would have us believe, low price also signals to consumers that a product is disposable. Low price and fast trends have made clothing throwaway items, allowing us to set aside such serious questions as *How long will this last?* or even *Will I like it when I get it home?* Park agrees, "You may try it and if you don't like it, you can still throw it away because you bought it for such a low price."

My father remembers the terror of spilling something on his $5 Gant button-up as a kid in the 1960s, when the minimum wage was less than two dollars an hour. Stains were grounds for punishment. But the quality was impeccable, he recalls, and he wore the shirt totally out. He bought a three-piece suit for his high school prom in 1965 and wore the vest until the mid-1980s, and it never looked dated. Quality is ultimately relative, and we have less use for it than ever before. Sean Cormier, the FIT marketing professor and quality-control expert, says in the industry quality is simply defined by customer satisfaction. If we do not return a garment to the store, it has met the quality standard.

In my experience, if I pay less than $30 for a garment, I'm not likely to bother returning it if I'm less than satisfied. I'm probably not going to take good care of it either. I'll wear it once and put it in the back of my closet. Stores like H&M are able to say they are "good quality" because in the era of fast fashion, their product will serve us well enough through a handful of wears—until the seams split open, a stubborn stain sets in, or the style changes and we grow of sick it. It is quality measured in number of washes.

5

The Afterlife of Cheap Clothes

It was early morning at the Quincy Street Salvation Army, an easy-to-miss location tucked away on a Brooklyn side street. The only donations that had come in so far were books, an entire truckful from one single apartment. Charitable clothing donations usually roll in with fits and starts, with the changing of the seasons and at the end of the year, when people are looking for tax write-offs. It was on a weekday morning in the middle of the fall, the off hours for clothing donations. But I didn't have to witness someone pulling up in her car and shoveling bags full of clothes from the trunk. I'd been that person innumerable times, lugging overloaded trash bags pierced by the heels of cheap pumps, sleeves and pant legs hanging out, to a local charity. I never knew what happens after I drive away and leave my old clothing orphaned on the Salvation Army's doorstep.

I shopped religiously at charity thrift stores like Salvation Army and Goodwill in high school and college, roving through the racks looking for baggy corduroys and weird T-shirts silk-screened with the logos of recreational sports teams and local auto-body shops. Shopping at thrift stores allowed me to dress uniquely and cheaply, but I abandoned them in lockstep with the declining price of fashion and with the improvement in the design and variety of cheap clothes.