

Reframing Fast Fashion: A Paradigm Shift for the Two Dirtiest Words in Our Fashion Vocabulary & the Introduction of Flow Fashion

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ABSTRACT

Fast Fashion has fundamentally changed how we create, manufacture, and buy clothing. It is also destroying the planet. Garments produced by fast fashion chain stores often incorporate non-biodegradable synthetic fibers, and unethical manufacturing practices in low-wage factories are commonplace. The relentless pace of fashion trends results in garments being discarded after an average of just seven wears, contributing to massive textile waste, much of which ends up in landfills or is exported to developing countries for them to deal with the mess. The trend cycle, inspired by endless influencers on TikTok and our desire to want new and trendy items has made fashion so quick, many call it Instant Fashion now. It's also a huge business. According to Statista, the worldwide fast fashion business hit \$136 Billion US Dollars in 2024 and continues to climb. Some of the wealthiest people on the planet own and operate these fast fashion brands, amassing bank accounts bigger than oil tycoons. Consumerism is exacerbating the problem, making it now more than ever a way of life, with people sharing their shopping hauls on social media sites more so than ever before.

But fast fashion does not have to be this way... if you take the words at their core, the idea is to create clothing quickly (or rather, fast, even *instant* in today's lexicon as noted above). What if instead of these words having a negative connotation, we spun it differently and gave them a positive spin. Imagine a paradigm shift where we only produce clothing that customers truly desire, tailored to their specifications and delivered promptly. Technology has been created where we can produce bespoke clothing on demand, in a short amount of time, shipped directly to the customer with little or no waste or unsold products. People get what they want, when they want it, it fits them well and they keep it for a long time. We also can approach the idea of consumerism from a more conscious perspective, retraining the customer to value what they buy and keep it for as long as possible because it fits well, feels good and lasts.

Keywords: fast fashion, slow fashion, sustainability, technology

INTRODUCTION

What if that is the *new* fast fashion? Let's call it Flow Fashion. This approach minimizes excess inventory that typically leads to clearance sales and landfill dumping. It also reduces the volume of clothing languishing unworn in closets—a common sight due to impulse purchases or misaligned trends. It also greatly reduced store returns which in the United States alone are estimated to be more than \$38 billion dollars annually (Zheng, 2023).

This transformative vision of reimagining fast fashion was inspired by Jennifer Mankins, a forward-thinking fashion boutique owner of Bird (which formally had shops in New York City and Los Angeles). On a field trip several years ago to her Williamsburg Brooklyn shop (the first LEED certified store in NYC) with my students, she spoke about the line CP Shades, a clothing brand popular in the 80s and still around today. She explained that when buying for her stores from this company, they would cut and sew only what was needed for the order. It is produced locally (in Sausalito, California) and sent out approximately three weeks later, a testament to sustainable fast fashion done right. Brands like Reformation further exemplify this model by producing only what is pre-ordered by partners like Nordstrom, aligning production closely with demand. Again, this idea of fast fashion reframed is a new way of thinking about two of the dirtiest words in our fashion vocabulary.

Fast fashion, long criticized for its detrimental impact on the environment and exploitative labor practices, is being redefined by innovative brands that blend the speed and efficiency of the model with the values of slow fashion. This paper explores how educators can leverage these industry shifts to foster future-forward thinking, community engagement, and technological literacy among our fashion students. By examining brands like Reformation, CP Shades, Ministry of Supply, and KOTN this paper outlines actionable strategies for integrating sustainability, technology, and ethical practices into pedagogy. The goal is to inspire a paradigm shift that transforms the negative connotations of fast fashion into a model of responsive, responsible fashion design and production. This new way of thinking can help more brands understand how they can operate sustainably and successfully, changing the narrative for success in the fashion business.

Fast fashion has fundamentally altered the global fashion landscape, enabling rapid production cycles and trend responsiveness. However, the environmental and social costs of this model have sparked widespread criticism. Synthetic fibers pollute ecosystems, unethical labor conditions persist, and overproduction fuels staggering levels of waste. According to the Center for Biological Diversity, fast fashion is responsible for 10% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions. And current tax loopholes like the USA's De Minimis Exemption help fast fashion brands (again, really instant fashion at this point) like Temu and Shein send packages directly from China to customers (this loophole passed under the Obama Administration allows for any

packages coming into the States with a value of under \$800 to be allowed in without paying duty or taxes opening the door to massive amounts of small packages to flood the market sent directly to consumers). If you received any Holiday presents in plain white poly bags sent directly from China, through one of these big (and new) brands, or perhaps even from TikTok Shop directly, you are part of this very real and growing concern that fast fashion is getting more powerful than ever. Amazon just recently launched their own version of this new business model that values cheap and trendy over anything else. Amazon Haul is their attempt to compete as they were losing to those brands on price (for what it's worth, the consumer seems more driven by price than by expediency as many of these items are imported directly from China and can take weeks to arrive).

Despite these challenges, the principles underlying fast fashion—speed, adaptability, and accessibility—hold untapped potential for positive transformation. By reframing fast fashion through the lens of slow fashion values, the industry can leverage these strengths to create sustainable, ethical, and community-driven systems. Four case studies of brands currently working with these fast fashion principles at the core of their businesses but through the slow fashion lens will be explained and explored as a way of reframing the dirtiest words in the industry, perhaps we can even rename this Flow Fashion (Fast and Slow Fashion combined together in this new context) where the best of both world's concepts work together to foster a new way of business operations.

For fashion educators, this paradigm shift presents an opportunity to prepare students to lead in a reimagined industry. This paper explores how brands have successfully merged fast and slow fashion principles and provides a framework for incorporating these insights into education. By focusing on forming futures, fostering community, and integrating technology, fashion pedagogy can help shape a more equitable and sustainable industry.

The Problem with Fast Fashion

Traditional fast fashion operates on a model of mass production, rapid trend cycles, and disposability. Key issues include environmental degradation on a mass scale, whether we see it directly in our backyards or export our problems overseas, we are ruining the planet by producing too many clothing options. The industry also uses a massive consumption of water (we all know by now that it takes 2700 liters of water to make a t-shirt, the same amount of water someone can live off of for three years), energy, and synthetic materials which all contribute to pollution and climate change. Another issue is labor exploitation, as we have been experiencing garment workers working in low-wage factories often facing unsafe conditions and inadequate pay for decades now (some of the world's earliest sweatshops in the world were in New York's Lower East Side in the early 1900's where factory workers were even locked inside a factory while it caught on fire in the famously tragic Triangle Shirtwaist Factory

Fire). And then of course there is overproduction and waste. Over 85% of all textiles end up in landfills annually, with clothing discarded after an average of just seven wears. Plus, we have the major issue of consumerism, social media-driven consumer culture prioritizes quantity over quality, perpetuating a cycle of overconsumption where you can't be seen wearing the same thing twice. Despite these challenges, innovative brands are proving that fast production cycles can coexist with sustainability and ethics when reimagined through slow fashion values.

Sadly, it's unrealistic to think that fast fashion is waning in popularity. In fact, it seems more in demand than ever with social media and influencers pushing brands to release new styles every week. As one example. Shein drops up to 10,000 new items on its site daily (Selyukh, 2023), and the consumers are there for all the releases and products. As it prepared for an IPO a few years ago, Shein was seemingly valued at more than H&M and Zara combined (Duncan, 2022).

A note about Slow Fashion

Slow Fashion is everything fast fashion is not. It's about connection to the farmer where raw materials are sourced. It's about connection to the designer who creates the garments. Slow fashion is a movement and philosophy that advocates for a more mindful and sustainable approach to clothing production and consumption. It emerged as a counterpoint to fast fashion, which prioritizes mass production, low prices, and rapid turnover of trends, often at the expense of ethical labor practices, environmental sustainability, and product quality. Slow fashion is about quality over quantity, sustainability, environmentally conscious materials, timeless design, local and small batch production, and conscious consumption. A favorite store in Los Angeles' Echo Park region embodies the ideals of this so much. Matrushka's founder Laura Howe created a few simple silhouettes, incorporates deadstock fabric (so intrinsically there are limits to the number of pieces produced) and even whips you up a handmade bag on her sewing machine while ringing up your purchases. Her business, which recently got an online makeover with more information on the Matrushka silhouette that can be customized to your body, has been a part of the Los Angeles community for over a decade inspiring other designers to utilize the same principles.

As mentioned above though, there are certain limitations to the business model. In an age where growth and expansion are our cultural barometer of success, the slow fashion model cannot always be scaled to "corporate America's" ideals. For slow fashion pioneers this is often the point, but in reframing the industry to this mix of slow/fast= FLOW FASHION, there are a lot of best practices to apply to both models.

Case Studies: Brands Reframing Fast Fashion

1. Reformation: Trend Responsiveness with Sustainability

Reformation exemplifies how speed and sustainability can coexist. The brand

produces limited runs of garments and frequently restocks only the best-selling pieces. By using eco-friendly materials like Tencel, recycled cotton and deadstock fabrics (which according to Reformation's site makes up 5% of their raw materials), Reformation minimizes waste and environmental impact. They call themselves a green fast fashion brand and are very open about their admiration of brands such as Zara and their effective fast fashion model (Thomas, 2019). Yael Aflalo, Reformation's founder, started the brand in 2009 after seeing the harm the fashion industry was having on the planet. She later opened their own factory in 2013, which is virtually unheard of in the fashion industry. It should be noted that Aflalo stepped down as CEO from Reformation in 2020 amid outcry from employees over racism issues at the company and recently launched a new fashion line called Drama School (Sherman, 2024).

Educational Takeaway: Students can analyze Reformation's pre-order and small-batch models to understand how data-driven production can reduce overstock and meet consumer demand sustainably.

2. CP Shades: Localized, Made-to-Order Production

CP Shades operates on a made-to-order system, producing garments only after orders are placed. For the past forty years they've produced their garments with local manufacturing in Sausalito, California. Through this model the brand reduces lead times and supports community-driven production with made in the USA production for quick response time for domestic orders. There is so much to love and admire about this timeless brand. Their California offices and factory are run on 100% renewable energy (Much like Reformation, having their own factory, key to their operations). They also eliminated plastic bags from their manufacturing process, choosing instead to use reusable linen bags for easy and responsible transport. Their sustainable fabrics are also dyed by hand to maximize color value and quality. Much like Eileen Fisher's model they also actively utilize the ideals behind capsule dressing, continuing to layer in pieces that work with the prior years collection in a seamless way, eliminating the need to buy a whole new looks each season. (Relish, 2024).

Educational Takeaway: Educators can use CP Shades to teach the importance of localized supply chains and their role in reducing carbon footprints and fostering local economies.

3. Ministry of Supply

This brand uses 3D knitting technology to create custom-fit clothing on-demand. Their production is streamlined, and waste is minimal because garments are made only as needed. Ministry of Supply was started by MIT students in 2012 and continues to innovate and iterate. They recently partnered with MIT's Self-Assembly Lab to collaboratively design a 4D knit dress that according to MIT utilizes "Heat-activated yarns, computerized knitting, and robotic activation around each garment generates

the sculpted fit” (Iacobo, 2024). Making clothes that fit using state-of-the-art technology, are functional and built to order has made this company one to watch.

Fast-Fashion Principle Applied: Fast turnaround times and the ability to react quickly to customer needs. Slow-Fashion Twist: Sustainable materials and a focus on durability. Their 3D printed knits use only the materials needed for the garment.

4. Kotn

Kotn combines direct-to-consumer efficiency with ethical sourcing. It was founded in 2015 in Canada and as we learn from a recent Forbes article, one of the founders (Helali) says "our goal has always been to create beautiful products while honoring the people and places that make them," (Snelling 2024). Their products are made using sustainable Egyptian cotton and produced in the Nile Delta. They invest in farming communities to improve livelihoods. They are known to have a transparent supply chain and are slowly expanding to brick and mortar in Los Angeles and New York City. With ten stores in North America and plans to expand to Europe, this brand has a loyal following for their quality products and ethical supply chain and sustainable practices.

Fast-Fashion Principle Applied: Direct-to-consumer business model and efficient operations. Slow-Fashion Twist: Transparent supply chain and a commitment to community development.

Flow Fashion: The Best of Both Worlds

With these case studies in mind, and an open mind to a new way of thinking, let's discuss this new concept of Flow Fashion. Flow Fashion represents a fusion of fast and slow fashion principles, leveraging speed and adaptability while adhering to sustainability and ethics. This model fosters a new business approach where responsiveness meets responsibility, creating a harmonious balance that redefines the future of fashion. In the popular term “the flow state” mind and body are aligned with one another in a harmonious way, affirming things are working properly. This same idea can be applied to this new concept of Flow Fashion, where the best principles of both slow and fast fashion work together to create a business model that is both environmentally and economically sustainable.

Pedagogical Strategies for Reframing Fast Fashion

As we are educators teaching the next generation of change makers, we need to rethink how we present these topics to our students. We are teaching Generation Z, who on the whole say they are more environmentally conscious than any cohort before them. Yet they talk out of both sides of their mouth, as they also keep shopping at fast fashion brands (sadly the TikTok trend of wearing Brandy Melville clothes while watching the *Brandy Hellville & The Cult of Fast Fashion* documentary was real and real frightening).

As educators there are steps we can do above and beyond the traditional case studies methodology as outlined prior. First, we can practice teaching Futures Thinking. Futures thinking empowers students to envision long-term industry transformations. Educators can guide students to use scenario planning to explore sustainable production models, design speculative collections that integrate on-demand manufacturing and circular systems and analyze how emerging technologies like AI and blockchain can enhance transparency and efficiency.

We can continue to build Community in the Classroom as well. Community-driven fashion prioritizes collaboration and social impact. Pedagogical approaches include collaborative projects with local artisans or ethical brands, workshops on community-oriented design, such as inclusive sizing and cultural preservation and encouraging peer-to-peer learning through group critiques and co-creation.

We can also integrate more technology into the curriculum. Technological literacy is critical for future fashion leaders. Suggested activities for adopting more technology into the classroom include introducing students to 3D scanning, CAD software, and virtual sampling tools. Students can also research e-commerce platforms that facilitate pre-ordering or made-to-order systems and use blockchain simulations to teach supply chain transparency. We recently introduced Harvard Business School's Circular Economy Simulation: Fashion Forward, which gives students the opportunity to start their own fashion business and explore four different initiatives each year and how they affect profitability as well as greenhouse gas emissions and other environmental elements.

The Role of Technology in Reframing Fast Fashion

Emerging technologies are key to transforming fast fashion into a sustainable model. Examples include 3D Printing which enables on-demand production with minimal waste. AI and Data Analytics which predicts consumer demand, reducing overproduction. Blockchain which ensures transparency and accountability in supply chains and Virtual Reality which allows consumers to "try on" garments digitally, reducing returns and waste. By integrating these technologies into education, students gain the skills needed to drive innovation in the industry. The Kit is a new fashion brand digitally printing all their goods on demand with all operations under one roof in the Dominican Republic minimizing transportation costs, time and energy all in two weeks. Examples like this are vital to help students think beyond the traditional business models we often discuss.

CONCLUSION

Reframing fast fashion requires a shift in mindset, one that embraces the speed and efficiency of the model while embedding the values of slow fashion. By studying brands like Reformation and CP Shades, educators can inspire students to lead this

transformation into Flow Fashion, where the key components of fast fashion's business success meet with the thoughtful approach of slow fashion. Through futures thinking, community-driven approaches, and technological integration, fashion education can empower the next generation to redefine fast fashion as a force for good.

As industry evolves, fashion educators play a crucial role in shaping the future. By equipping students with the tools, knowledge, and ethical foundation to innovate responsibly, we can transform the "two dirtiest words in fashion" into a beacon of possibility for a sustainable and equitable future. Not only do we have the responsibility to open our students' eyes to more thoughtful ways of operating fashion businesses, but we can also learn from other businesses' successes for future sustainable growth, one where stakeholder consideration is valued over shareholder greed valuing the triple bottom line (people, planet, profit/prosperity) for all members in the supply chain.

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