

RE:RE:RE: SUPERMODERN FASHION AND FASHION DESIGN IN THE 21st CENTURY

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The current fashion retail environment is one where large quantities of clothing are produced at a very quick pace, these items are worn for a short time and then discarded. This phenomenon can be described as fast-fashion and it is the most prevalent form of fashion retail today (Kennedy, 2022). This type of fashion manufacturing generates huge quantities of waste. The average American produces 35 kgs of textile waste per year (*What's Wrong With The Fashion Industry*, n.d.), and of all the new clothing that gets brought each year, 85 per cent ends up in landfills or incinerated (*The Fashion Industry's Problem With Waste*, n.d.). Looking at the way in which the fashion system operates, the larger structural and systemic issues in fashion become clearer. The issue in fashion today is not that it is unsustainable, but rather that it is 'supermodern.' It is the 'supermodernity' of fashion that leads to unsustainability. Using the fast-fashion giant SHEIN, I will illustrate how fashion has become supermodern and how this supermodernity drives the design, consumption, and conceptualising of fashion.

SHEIN is one of the top apparel retailers worldwide, outperforming even the H&M group (Kennedy, 2022). Based in Guangzhou China, with key operational centres in Singapore and Los Angeles, SHEIN uses a network of third-party businesses, that generally manage things like the production and distribution of products (Ma, 2022). SHEIN has achieved a ruthlessly streamlined production process, cutting 30 per cent of its worst-performing suppliers, and adhering to strict production timelines (Ma, 2022). Shien's business model manages to produce up to 10,000 new units per day (Williams, 2022). Much of SHEIN's business practices, if not outright unethical, (both from a human and environmental perspective) are at least uncomfortable for those observing the fashion system. This approach is geared toward a singular goal—profit at any cost. This type of business model is uniquely modern, only the invention of mass communications networks, the increased speed of international transport, and increased access to global labour pools make this business possible (Crewe, 2017).

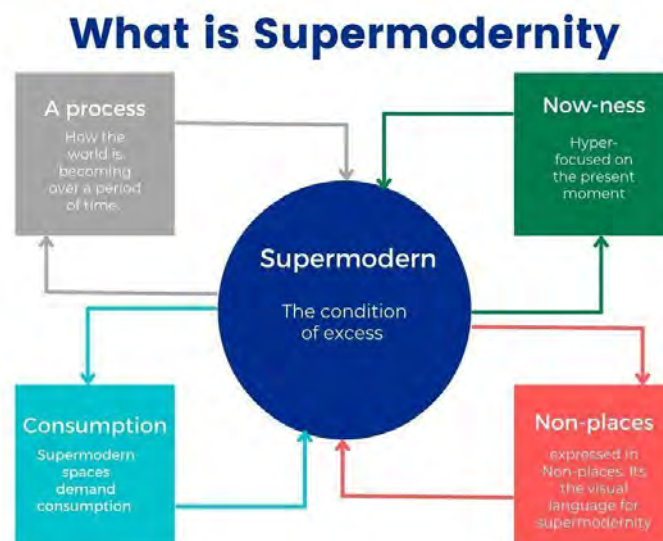
The three elements that make the SHEIN business possible—fast transport, mass communication, and global labour—make up part of what is supermodernity. Supermodernity is a term created by the anthropologist Marc Augé in 1995 to describe the conditions of excess that govern modern life (Augé, 2008). This is expressed in three ways:

1. An excess of time – which is the hyper-focus on the present moment. In an ever-increasing news cycle where the events of yesterday are already old news, and where communication is faster than ever, time seems to shrink around us (Augé, 2008).
2. An excess of space – which is the shrinking of the special divide, due in part to better, faster, and more affordable mass transit options. It is not only the feeling of being able to view any place in the world whenever you would like via satellite but also the

growing megacities that leave individuals feeling like there is less space for them (Augé, 2008).

3. An excess of individuality – which is also referred to as ego, is the hyper-focus on the individual. Defining a person, not by their connection to place, or family, but rather by taking each individual separately and isolated from any environment, identifying them with a passport, or credit card number (Augé, 2008).

Supermodernity is a process that has taken place over time, starting in modernity. Critical to a complete understanding of supermodernity is its exclusive focus exclusively on the present. Supermodernity disregards the past and only invokes it for the purpose of spectacle, however, supermodernity also disregards the future. Any elements that may seem futuristic are better described as futurism, rather than an actual attempt at describing the future. Lastly, supermodernity demands consumption. In order to participate in supermodernity, you must consume.



In the fashion context, this excess of time is expressed in the compressed timelines from design to production. The extreme production timelines are definitely evident within SHEIN, who can deliver a new product to customers in as little as 17 days (Ma, 2022). Their incredibly flexible supply chain allows them to produce new designs in as little as nine days and an extra eight days for shipping, which means transit takes up nearly half of the total time (Ma, 2022). The large scale of retailers is what is needed to make speed possible (Sekules, 2020). Fashion today is big multinational conglomerates that sell the same designs globally (Crewe, 2017). Even more than that they sell these designs online, which means they are accessible to anybody anywhere at any time. Speed of production and the scale of the business allows clothing to be both easily accessible and cheap, which generates demand.

The more challenging aspect of today's fashion is the sense that new ideas or designs saturate the market almost as soon as they arrive. Li Edelkoort in her 2015 manifesto describes the design problems in fashion as:

... Googling designers rely on found vintage detailing and are capable of haphazardly blending all periods amongst themselves, creating amusing hybrids in the process. Setting the creation of clothes-free for the future without the constraints of knowledge. (Edelkoort, 2015, p. 3).

This type of period-free design, which references no particular history, is the essence of supermodernity. The problem exceeds Edelkoort's fears, according to an Atlantic article, as the conglomeration of brands in the 1990s created bigger businesses more reliant on computers and the internet (Mull, 2022). This reliance is not merely using digital fashion specific tools like Adobe, Clo, or Gerber, it is using data aggregation and analysis to create clothing (Mull, 2022). A design practice that creates a pastiche of ideas conglomerated together with no real meaning, designed specifically for novelty and superficial appeal.

SHEIN's approach to this is perhaps the succinct example of this pastiche approach to design can be seen in the SHEIN business model. SHEIN will often directly copy images that are performing well online, not only from high-end designers, but from sites like Etsy and Depop (Ma, 2022). This means the design process is completely reliant on duplicating found images and creating only a few units of a new item at a time (Ma, 2022). This practice is what allows them to speed up the design process, but it also divorces clothing from any sort of history and prioritises novelty. Because of this constant need for novelty, the trend cycle becomes shorter and shorter. This generates more waste, as the period in which clothing is current shrinks, so clothing is discarded quicker.

The excess of space in contemporary fashion is the shrinking and tightening of supply chains. The size of the modern fashion business is possible only because of a global world order which allows the global west to exploit the global south and to hide this practice with vague geographic signifiers, such as labels 'designed in Italy', 'made in India' and so on (Crewe, 2017). Big fashion businesses are dependent upon both the cheap labour available in the global south and the ability to hide their practices by having the business be incorporated in Italy for example (a country historically renowned for its textiles and fashions) to elevate the brand to the consumer (Crewe, 2017). Often garments are made by importing fabric from one country, manufacturing in a second before shipping to distribution centres, and finally, most online retailers ship globally. Brands use diverse geographic locations in their supply chain to hide the realities of how their brands operate (Crewe, 2017). More than that, there is a sharp disparity between different actors in the fashion supply chain. Globally it is a system where wealth is extracted from the global south and concentrated in the global west (Crewe, 2017). Even more than that wealth is concentrated at the top: even in the West retail workers are often exploited and underpaid. However, this is nothing compared to the sweatshop conditions in the nations which produce the world's clothes, such as Tunisia, Bangladesh, China, and Thailand among others (Craik, 2019). Supermodernity is in its most literal sense the idea that spatial barriers are overcome by both the speed of communication networks and also transportation (Augé, 2008). The ability to create a network that is geographically diverse, and to produce and ship products to consumers in such a short amount of time is supermodernity. SHEIN as described earlier has finely tuned this global supply chain, and this supply chain is what makes it possible to sell as much clothing as they do.

In contemporary fashion practice, duplicating designs means all clothing looks the same, there is a similarity in dress that creates no real relations but only demographic-driven targeting. In supermodernity there is "... [neither] singular identity nor relations; only solitude and similitude" (Augé, 2008, p. 103). This reduces the individual down to demographic targets and removes the tropes of dress from communities (these are groups like punks, hippies, and so on). Contemporary fashion reinforces the idea that it is possible to separate the object from the system which produced it, and that we can aspire to the design values of objectification and egocentricity (Fletcher, 2008). We focus on the momentary novelty of a specific item rather than the larger system within which it sits. The constantly changing trends feed insecurity and create great pressure to constantly reform identity (Fletcher, 2008) whilst simultaneously providing a lack of distinctive choices for consumers. This pressure to consume identity makes identity creation a task, rather than a fact, and places pressure on consumers to purchase a fashionable body (Palese, 2013). This type of identity-making links identity to the ability to purchase goods, thereby reducing it down to a set of demographic factors. As indicated earlier one of the ways SHEIN contributes to this is in the actual design of the clothing, however, they also use other modern communication tools to target individual consumers.

In order to create clothing that feels ubiquitous as soon as it arrives, SHEIN uses a combination of various online marketing tools. These tools flood users' feeds with endless content about SHEIN making the brand seem much bigger than it is. For example, SHEIN often gifts influencers large quantities of clothes to unbox for their following online (Vauhini, n.d.). This has two effects; one, it convinces the audience watching that SHEIN is a desirable brand to own, and two, if the influencer owns the clothes they may often be seen wearing, ensuring the cycle continues. SHEIN also uses targeted ads, particularly targeting women between 12 and 22 years old so their feeds are flooded with content (Ma, 2022). SHEIN also only sells their clothing online, which means the brand as a whole lacks a sense of physical space.

Contemporary fashion has become a capitalist machine, it cares only about making the most amount of money possible and has few ethical concerns. What has in the past made fashion great is its ability to comment on, influence, and change people's ideas about society. Now its primary objective is to get people to keep on consuming. In her book *Geographies of Fashion*, Louise Crewe proposes that what has occurred is that big fashion retailers have priced medium to small-scale retailers out of the market, which homogenised the offerings on the market and removes the unique selling points of smaller brands, who perhaps catch a narrower segment of customers (Crewe, 2017). What is certain is that fashion has become increasingly supermodern, and this explains the condition of contemporary fashion. It should be noted however that SHEIN's unethical practices though supermodern are not excusable. They are choosing to exploit as many people as possible for the singular goal of profit. They are leaders in a business model that others choose to follow, they could choose to slow down, and make less. They could choose to sacrifice some profit for the good of the many people who contribute to the system which makes them wealthy but they do not.

Supermodernity defaults to practices that are unsustainable. Particularly the need for newness and speed leads to a production process that defaults to the most unsustainable method of operating. In her 2015 manifesto, Edelkoort examines the issues in the fashion system and, she provides a path forward in her 2022 opinion piece in 'Business of Fashion' where she states "Our goal is to have less and better design and overhaul the current diktat of more and

mediocre. No sentient being should suffer, and people should benefit from another, more equitable society” (Edelkoort, 2015). This idea works well as a mantra for all designers, less and better is the way forward. Perhaps a large part of that will be an examination of ourselves and our own design practices, for me in particular it has been a challenge to realise that sometimes the correct thing to do is to not make something. I imagine that all designers could benefit from an analysis of their own practices around making and examine how much of it has been influenced by supermodern thinking.

ITEM	SUPERMODERN RELATIONSHIP	SYSTEM PART	DEFINITION
Multinational Supply Chain	Space	Supply chain	Engages with various companies and suppliers, in at least 1 other country. Selling to customers worldwide would also be multinational.
Prioritizes Speed- Economically Driven	Space	Supply chain	Emphasizes how fast it is to get from concept to product.
Wants to produce as much as possible	Space	Supply chain	There are no run limits or production cap of any kind. They want to sell as much product as they can convince people to buy.
Prioritizes seasonal novelty	Individuality	Design	Wants to make as much 'New' stuff as possible. Doesn't build on ideas from the previous season.
Rapid design process	Individuality	Design	How many new styles does a brand produce in a small time frame?
High Design output	Individuality	Design	A brand doesn't create in compressed timeframes but produces huge collections when they do put something out.
Engages in social media	Time	Media	A brand has a social media page, which they use to reach out to customers.
Sells mainly online	Time	Media	The brand is based online and has no brick and mortar storefronts.
Gets reported on, or is in popular media	Time, Individuality	Media	Brands gets talked about in media, like magazines, websites, or other more traditional media.
The brand gives cultural recognition.	Time, Individuality	Media	This can be thought of as hype fashion brands (like Supreme). Wearing these brands makes people 'Cool'

ITEM	SHEIN
Multinational Supply Chain	Relies on third-party suppliers also based in Guangzhou China, but ships to more than 150 countries. (Williams, 2022)
Prioritizes Speed-Economically Driven	SHEIN is dependent on a very flexible supply chain, which allows them to produce very small batches (50-100 items). Just 6% of this inventory remains for longer than 90 days. It takes nine days or less to get a product manufactured and another 8 days for shipping means a product can be on a customer's door in 17 days (Matsakis et al., 2021; Williams, 2022)
Wants to produce as much as possible	SHEIN produces 10,000 new products a day and the idea that SHEIN can produce as many styles as possible is key to their sales strategy. (Ma, 2022; Williams, 2022)
Prioritizes seasonal novelty	The business model is dependent on having new items constantly. (Ma, 2022; Matsakis et al., 2021)
Rapid design process	The design process is completely reliant on duplicating found images and creating only a few items at a time (Ma, 2022). This indicates that the design process is very quick
High Design output	Though it isn't clear exactly how many new garments styles get produced we do know that the company is capable of producing thousands of items simultaneously and it added between 2,000 and 10,000 individual styles to its app between July and December 2021. It is also clear that the design process encourages the creation of as many new styles as possible. (Ma, 2022)
Engages in social media	SHEIN topped the top 50 app downloads on both Android and iOS in May of 2022 (Matsakis et al., 2021). A key part of its business strategy is to send large quantities of clothing to influencers to show off to their followers (Monroe, 2021).
Sells mainly online	Shein doesn't have any brick-and-mortar stores, their clothes can only be purchased online (Deeley, 2021)
Gets reported on, or is in popular media	Shein only gets reported on to say they are unsustainable. However, they use targeted advertising to make their brand seem big to young consumers (Matsakis et al., 2021)
The brand gives cultural recognition.	No, SHEIN isn't a hype fashion brand. There is no cultural recognition in wearing SHEIN.

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