

## **Façonnable: The Creation of Modern Youth French Fashion**

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Juliette Delahaye, 21, lives on one of the most famous fashion streets in Paris, Avenue Montaigne. When asked what French fashion *is*, the self-proclaimed fashionista responded, “The French are the best dressed in the world and are those that pay close attention to their ‘look’ even if they don’t have much money.”<sup>1</sup> Magazines like *Teen Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan* agree. Featuring regular spreads on French fashion, they outline the ‘je ne sais quoi’<sup>2</sup> and “chic Parisian touches” to inspire their American readership to mimic this great fashion.<sup>3</sup> At one time this domination of style by the French was rooted in haute couture, which was expensive, exclusive, and dependent on a small, wealthy consumer base. Over the past eighteen years, however, fashion has become accessible, disposable, and international. The ever-evolving industry inspires consumption and updating in addition to opening the door to new internal and external forces. Shifting from the haute couture styles displayed at Paris Fashion Week, fashion is now determined on the urban and suburban streets. The battle is being played out with the children of the baby boomer generation, who represent a new and emerging market where styles are constantly tested, adopted, and disposed through a process of social critique.

This paper seeks to explain why the threat to French fashion is generated within youth culture while also showing examples of its endangered status. To this end, this paper will first define the youth cohort, and then analyze French fashion across socio-political lines. Since the dichotomy between upper/middle and lower classes is fundamental in understanding French fashion it will also be discussed.

## **Youth Cohort**

The French youth cohort, ethnically and racially diverse, represents all youths between the ages of 15 to 30. Children of the baby-boomers,<sup>4</sup> the cohort was “raised in comparatively flush times by parents who believed that keeping children happy, stimulated and successful, no matter the cost, was an unassailable virtue.”<sup>5</sup> Fashion was introduced early to this group through haute couture brands like Dior and Sonia Rykiel which created stylish, high-end clothes for infants and children.<sup>6</sup> As they grew older, the youth valued cutting-edge fashion and individuality, but also craved mass acceptance. As the French Federation of Fashion (FFF) stated in a 2007 report: “teenagers demand multiple styles to promote individuality but at the same time like to remain within a general mass accepted code.”<sup>7</sup> The early introduction and recent obsession of French youth with fashion has created the fickle and quicksilver-like youth style, making the old system of fashion obsolete. As a result, the industry has fundamentally changed over the past two decades to adapt to this emerging and powerful market force.

## **Fast-Fashion**

Commercial fashion is the clearest example of the new impact of the youth. Prior to the 1990s, the majority of the French youth purchased clothing from small city retailers and factory direct stores.<sup>8</sup> In the 1990s with the lightening of trade restrictions and the creation of the European Union, outside clothes and styles poured in.<sup>9</sup> Alexis Cintrat, 20 and resident of the 16<sup>th</sup> arrondissement in Paris, summed up the impact of the import tidal wave, “We don’t have French chains of cheap clothing anymore. The few French companies that remain market themselves as luxurious and for the [rich] minority rather than the majority.”<sup>10</sup> As a result, international firms, rather than French retailers,

dominate the French clothing retail environment and have adopted the idea of fast-fashion.<sup>A</sup> Fast-fashion, geared to the youth market, revolves around a method called “Just-in-Time.” This method, however, has been controversial.

Invented by the Japanese car manufacturer Toyota, the Just-in-Time principle ensured that no materials would arrive to the factory before they were absolutely necessary and, conversely, that no item would be assembled unless already sold. Seemingly out of place in the fashion world, firms have taken the idea of “fast” even further. The process involves several steps, the first of which is evaluating demand. Rather than risk an entire season on the fickleness of young shoppers, store managers constantly observe trends and customer purchases, and report the information to company headquarters. Managers suggest new clothing, colors, and fabrics based on the feedback from customers in the store. The requests are then sent to the company’s designers, who sketch numerous designs which are peer evaluated. Final designs are sent to manufacturers in Europe, rather than Asia, where clothes can be shipped to stores more quickly. The final inventory is shipped by plane to the company’s outlets where the process repeats.<sup>11</sup> The end goal is to create affordable clothing styles from sketchpad to customer in three weeks or less. In 2005, over 11,000 styles and over 300,000 independent items were introduced in limited quantities at one fast-fashion retailer, compared with 2,000 styles at American based The Gap.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>A</sup> Agnes Rocamora, senior research fellow at the London College of Fashion, explains that elite French brands continue to exist due to the notion propagated by said brands that creativity and financial interest are “antinomic...[and] incompatible.” Rocamora, Agnes. "High fashion and pop fashion: the symbolic production of fashion in Le Monde and The Guardian." *Fashion Theory* 5 (2001): 123-42.



Fig. 1. French fashion designer house, Chloé, filed a legal complaint against British fast fashion firm Top-Shop in July 2007 for copying an original design. This is just one example of the blatant copying that occurs in the fast fashion world.

Just-in-Time industrial business process explains two critical components of fast-fashion: the “fast” and the financial aspect. However, without a third component, style, the niche industry would not be as successful as it is today. Fast-fashion firms send representatives to Paris Fashion Week and other major fashion gatherings to spy on new designs. It is well understood within the fashion world that fast-fashion retailers are copying rather than innovating. One example is shown to the left. In 2007, Chloe introduced the yellow dungaree dress seen on the left at a retail price of £185. One month later, a British based fast-fashion retailer introduced the “nearly identical” dress on the right for £35.<sup>13</sup>

The intellectual appropriation of Haute Couture for the mass market has been key to the popularity of fast-fashion chains for the French youth cohort. Twenty-one-year-old Delahaye notes, “It allows those that don’t have a lot of money to buy items that are inspired by the big designers.”<sup>14</sup> The old system of exclusivity, whereby only the rich

could afford haute couture, has been dismantled. French fashion has forever been changed by broadening access to the middle class.

### **American Influence**

The fast-fashion craze described above is targeted to the upper and middle class youth in France. Unlike Zara and H&M, American influence transcends socioeconomic patterns in French fashion, albeit in very different ways. Today, Hollywood, New York City, the Ghetto, and California are just a sample of styles that have crossed the Atlantic and have been embraced by the francophone industry in recent years.

To better understand the fashion issues posed by the United States, we must divide the French population into two distinct parts: the middle and upper class followed by the lower class population. First, Allan Narboni, 21, living in a Parisian suburb explains the influence of American fashion in France for the rich, “I bought American clothes when I came to America because it was exclusive, and it proves without telling people directly, that I went to the U.S....that I travel.”<sup>15</sup>

Favoring American clothes puts local retailers at a disadvantage and gives interpretative power on fashion to other countries and their styles. France has seen its monopoly on fashion be chipped away by recent advances in Italy and the United States. Abercrombie and Fitch (A&F) is a United States based clothing retailer that caters to the 12-30 year old segment.<sup>16</sup> Hugely successful in the United States, French tourists began purchasing A&F clothing to bring home. A mass following emerged and baggy sweatshirts and faded/ripped jeans became popular in France. In 2007, A&F opened their first store in Europe, and in six hours generated \$280,000 in sales.<sup>17</sup> American influence

is temporal but significant as brands are quickly cycled through while American styles are gaining cultural acceptance.

Second, the lower class consumes and promulgates American culture to a greater extent than their wealthier peers. A&F and other highbrow brands may impact the upper class French, but it is American ghetto ‘streetwear’ that is the rage in the Banlieue, immigrant dense suburbs in Paris. An underground fashion scene is developing.



Fig. 2. French cartoon depicting the living conditions and clothing styles of the French suburbs. The cartoon depicts current president Nicolas Sarkozy announcing in 2005 that “for those that want to work, we have jobs. For those who do not want to work, we have pressure washers” to clean up your city.

Rather than focusing on exclusivity, this alternative fashion is based on the entertainment industry in America. The style is heavily influenced by rap artists and cinematic representations of the American ‘hoods.’ As such, French Banlieue teenagers wear the baggy jersey and sweatshirt style imported from the United States. The political cartoon on the right exaggerates the Banlieue style but shows the media interpretation of these

clothes. Products from popular brands like Royal Wear and competitor, Produit de Banlieue are neither sold in the mainstream retailers like Zara and H&M, nor even department stores like Les Galeries Lafayette. Instead they can be found in small independent retailers with names like “Brooklyn,” “Dangerous,” and “L’once Sam.”<sup>18</sup>

The adoption of American names is not incidental. The lower class living in the Banlieue reject the cultural production of their host nation in favor of a country they idealize, thereby weakening the French monopoly on fashion.

### **Banlieue Impact**

Mark Tungate, author of *Fashion Brands: Branding Style from Armani to Zara* tells the story of Lacoste, a typically French sportswear company that dealt with an unwanted hip-hop and Banlieue adoption. At first, Lacoste feared “that it would lose its traditional older, wealthier French client base. Soon, though, it recognized an opportunity.”<sup>19</sup> Instead of raising prices and pulling out of certain markets as other brands had done, the company brought in a new designer, Christophe Lemaire to create a line of clothes better suited for their younger customers. As Tungate states, “The brand regained control of its identity...raising the brand’s profile among culturally savvy customers.”<sup>20</sup> Lacoste’s recent success in adopting Banlieue style has lead the industry in general to take a second look at what the outskirts of Paris has to offer. *Technikart*, a French fashion magazine proclaimed in 2002 that, “[the youth of the Banlieue] are the people who define tomorrow’s fashions.”<sup>21</sup> Just five years after this pronouncement, 2008 Paris Fashion Week was rocked by Banlieue hip-hop designs with brands like Louis Vuitton incorporating sweatshirts and the muted colors of the Parisian outskirt in their collections (See image). The battle continues to be played out at every shop and every

runway show but if Lacoste found profit in targeting this new cliental, hope remains for the rest of the industry as well.

## **Conclusions**

At one time, French fashion existed in a vacuum protected by strong import tariffs and loyal customers. With the advent of globalization and the creation of the European Union, the industry was opened to internal and external influence like never before. The youth cohort today represents an interesting opportunity to examine these shifts. Raised in a flush era where parents were determined to provide the best for their children, they became aware of fashion at a very young age. Their quest to be individualistic while still conforming to certain social norms, has changed the fashion industry and promoted the creation of fast-fashion retailers like Zara and H&M. Sadly, class differences remain strong and American fashion shows how one culture can impact a country's style in two different ways. Ultimately it was shown that fashion has evolved from an industry that prided itself in being exclusive, to one that is equalizing as in the case of Lacoste. Juliette Delahaye states, "We say that the style in France is to mix Prada and H&M, that people with a lot of money should get the best clothes but that they should still like going to H&M and Zara...It prevents injustice and inequality because in fashion you would need a lot of money."<sup>22</sup> Haute couture, invented in the 1800s, can be seen as a kind of class struggle, but in 2009, France and the internal and external influences on youth styles are changing the game once again. Now the French youth have decided to include everyone.



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- <sup>1</sup> Juliette Delahaye, telephone interview, October 15, 2008.
- <sup>2</sup> Rosamund Witcher, "That 'je ne sais quoi': How French actresses trounce everyone in the style stakes," *The Independent*, April 21, 2008.
- <sup>3</sup> Camille Bidault-Waddington, "French Connection," *Teen Vogue*, December-January, 2007.
- <sup>4</sup> James Coomarasamy, "France's new baby boom," *BBC News*, January 16, 2003.
- <sup>5</sup> Jan Hoffman, "The Frugal Teenager, Ready or Not," *The New York Times*, October 12, 2008.
- <sup>6</sup> John Taglibue, "Taking French Children's Fashion Global," *The New York Times*, December 18, 2002.
- <sup>7</sup> "Focus Jeunes," *Fédération Nationale de l'Habillement*, 1st ed. Paris, France, 2007.
- <sup>8</sup> Sophie Vienne, telephone interview, October 15, 2008.
- <sup>9</sup> "L'avenir du secteur du textile et de l'habillement dans l'Union européenne élargie," *Europa: Industrie*, October 13, 2004, <http://europa.eu/scadplus/leg/fr/lvb/n26105.htm>.
- <sup>10</sup> Alexis Cintrat, telephone interview, October 10, 2008.
- <sup>11</sup> Kasra Ferdows et al., "Zara's Secret for Fast Fashion," *Harvard Business Review* 82 (2004).
- <sup>12</sup> Zoe Wood, "Inside Story: First Families of European Fashion: In a world of faceless corporations, the clothing business is dominated by a few rival dynasties," *The Observer*, August 17, 2008: 4.
- <sup>13</sup> Rebecca Camber, "Topshop forced to destroy £35 'copycat' dress after Chloe calls in lawyers," *The Daily Mail*, July 26, 2007.
- <sup>14</sup> Juliette Delahaye, telephone interview, October 15, 2008.
- <sup>15</sup> Allan Narboni, telephone interview, October 15, 2008.
- <sup>16</sup> Abercrombie and Fitch 10-K 2007," *Abercrombie and Fitch*, (2007): 4.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>18</sup> "Points de Vente," *Produit de Banlieue*, 2008, <http://www.pagesmode.com/points-de-vente-marque-PRODUIT-DE-BANLIEUE-338.html>.
- <sup>19</sup> Mark Tungate. *Fashion Brands : Branding Style from Armani to Zara* (London: Kogan Page, Limited, 2008).
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 32.
- <sup>21</sup> "Comment Lacoste a rendu accros les ados de banlieue," *Technikart*, May 28, 2002.
- <sup>22</sup> Juliette Delahaye, telephone interview, October 15, 2008.