



The Role of Haute Couture in Today's Fashion Industry

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Keywords: Haute couture, trick-across, fashion, interview

Introduction. Haute couture, which originated in late 19th-century Paris, represents the pinnacle of fashion design. The term “haute couture” translates to “high dressmaking” in English and has traditionally been seen as the most influential force in the fashion industry. For centuries, runway shows have been a source of inspiration for everyday retailers, featuring trending colors, silhouettes, patterns and more. In recent times, fashion has adapted to better fit a more digitally connected world, and the nature of trends has shifted with the influence of social media. As a result, the impact of haute couture on fashion has been called into question. In addition, there has been a push for more sustainable and season-neutral fashion, leading many to wonder if haute couture, as it has been known for centuries, is becoming irrelevant.

Literature Review and Statement of Purpose. The first haute couture house was established in Paris by British designer Charles Frederick Worth in 1858. In 1868, the Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode (FHCM) was founded to promote and preserve the culture of high fashion. The FHCM endorses designers who exhibit the quality of craftsmanship required to show their pieces on the official Haute Couture Fashion Week schedule (Aspelund, 2009). Today, there are approximately 100 members of the FHCM, including well-known couture giants such as Chanel, Dior, Ateliers Versace, and Alexander McQueen (Ward, 2018).

Haute couture serves different forms and roles in the fashion industry, from creating custom-made garments for private clients to showcasing designers' work in runway shows at Haute Couture Fashion Week. Today, there are only around 200 clients for haute couture across the world, compared to an estimated 20,000 during the mid-20th century (Split, 2017). While the relevance of haute couture in the ever-changing fashion industry is being debated, it still holds significant impacts on culture, society, and the industry. This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of modern haute couture and its contributions to the mass-market fashion industry through the perspectives of professionals, educators, and students in the field. Specifically, this research investigates haute couture's primary influences in today's mass-market fashion industry and examine whether it will continue to be relevant in the future.

Methodology. This study utilized in-depth, semi-structured interviews to collect primary data. A purposive sampling approach was employed to select 10 participants for the interview process, including 6 fashion industry professionals, 3 fashion design professors, and 1 master student majoring in haute couture. Participants were selected based on their experience in design and/or merchandising in the fashion industry, with a focus on their knowledge of both historical and modern haute couture. All participants have at least five years of experience in the fashion

industry, with seven out of ten participants having 10 years of experience or more. The interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom or Google Meet and lasted approximately 30 minutes each. Participants were asked a set of eight questions designed to elicit their perspectives on the topic of haute couture. The questions included, for example, “How does haute couture influence today’s fashion industry?”, “What is the perception of haute couture by the general public today?”, and “How do you respond to the critics of haute couture who do not believe it’s necessary in the present and future fashion industry?”

Results and Discussion.

Laboratory of Fashion The most commonly occurring theme throughout the interview process is the belief that haute couture remains a leader in fashion design innovation, technology, and craftsmanship. Participants highlighted haute couture’s role as a space for boundless experimentation and unrestricted creativity. According to participant D, “Haute couture shows almost serve more as a gallery than anything. Couture shows test the waters for upcoming trends by seeing which looks gain popularity and interest.” Without the restraints of commerciality, haute couture represents the ultimate form of creative expression within the fashion industry, providing a platform for designers to explore new ideas and push the boundaries of fashion design.

Trickle Across Effect The fashion industry has observed a “trickle-across”, where a particular fashion trend spreads horizontally across several socioeconomic classes at the same time (Majima, 2008). The effect can be accredited to the influence of street fashion and rapid social media circulation. During the interviews, many participants noted that trends are becoming increasingly synchronous between haute couture runway and streetwear worn by social media influencers and celebrities. As cited by participant B, “The fashion industry is seeing a bigger trickle-across effect, and even a lot more trickle-up from streetwear to high fashion than in previous years. Street fashion influences such as denim, lingerie and other design elements are being seen on haute couture runways.” While haute couture is no longer the sole trendsetter of trickle-down fashions, it remains crucial in creating new twists on popular lower-class trends and inspiring other brands and designers to produce similar mass-market pieces.

Preservation of Art The majority of interview participants emphasized the significance of preserving the craftsmanship and artistry that is inherent in haute couture. The intricate techniques employed by haute couture artisans are unique to each individual couture house, and handcrafting each garment requires significant care and expertise to learn and execute accurately, with the knowledge being transmitted from generation to generation. Participant A stated “Haute couture exemplifies technological feats of craftsmanship and continues to do what has never been done before in fashion. There’s an overall appreciation for things that are made by hand, with such skill and artistry. Haute couture has always displayed top of the line ability.” The techniques utilized by haute couture houses are a crucial aspect of the tradition and symbolism of haute couture, which represents the birth of fashion, when clothing was first created with artistry,

rather than merely serving a functional purpose. In this sense, the runway shows serve as a moving museum, showcasing the talent and skill of designers.

Conclusion. Overall, the insights gained from this research suggest that despite debates surrounding the role of haute couture in the changing fashion industry, it remains a significant and influential force in shaping the direction of the fashion industry. The information gathered from the interviews can serve as a valuable resource for fashion designers, educators, and industry professionals seeking to understand the impact of haute couture on contemporary fashion trends and future developments. As the fashion industry continues to evolve, it will be interesting to see how haute couture will continue to inspire and influence the fashion industry.

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