

Fast fashion has faced significant criticism over the last couple of years, primarily due to its degradation of the environment and unsustainable resource use. However, one of fast fashion's most controversial issues lies in the inauthentic commercialization of cultural clothing. Efforts to minimize production and reduce society's reliance on cheap throwaway trends have been at the forefront of concerns.

Cultural appropriation in fashion is a longstanding issue. Major brands like H&M, Shein and Zara have been repeatedly caught and called out for taking traditional designs and removing them from their cultural context. From Zara's use of "tribal" patterns, to Shein's "Asian-esque" silk wear, fast fashion companies have made cultural designs into fads with no recognition for their origin. Similarly, Zara came under fire for a collection that mimicked traditional Mexican embroidery without acknowledging the artists and culture behind this design. Fast fashion monster Shein, recently faced backlash for advertising prayer mats as "Greek-style rugs," which completely ignored the cultural significance of the items. This blatant mockery exemplifies how fast fashion works to turn culturally meaningful items into hot and quick commodities, thus diluting their original meaning.

With consumers becoming increasingly aware of cultural appropriation and sensitivity, the demand of these items for quick style turnover is facing much more scrutiny. Social media movements have amplified calls for cultural respect, with activists and influencers taking to platforms like TikTok and Instagram to hold brands to a higher standard. Younger generations like Gen Z are becoming much more particular when it comes to what they wear and the ethics of how and who produces their garments. According to the Business of Fashion, this generational shift has placed much more pressure on brands to act ethically, bolstering the decline of fast fashion.

In response to this, some companies are moving to emphasize cultural collaboration over exploitation. Brands like Bode work directly with



artisans from around the world to incorporate traditional craftsmanship into their lines. This contrasts fast fashion's tendency to appropriate without acknowledging their origins.

Luxury brands are also responding to the demand for more ethical practices and giving credit where credit is due. Luxury French fashion powerhouse Dior partnered with the Karamoja tribe in Uganda, investing in traditional techniques in order to preserve the local heritage and provide economic benefits to the tribe. By respectfully and tastefully sharing the culture of the Karamoja—with the tribe's consent and involvement—such collaborations ensure that cultural contributions are respected. This approach allows local artisans from around the world to benefit from the ethical commercialization of their culture.

Fair trade brands have also been on the rise as key players in promoting cultural sustainability. Companies like People Tree and Mata Traders collaborate with artisans to produce culturally authentic and ethically produced pieces. Through fair wages and fair working conditions, these brands support artisans in sharing their heritage responsibly. By emphasizing direct collaboration and transparency, they are presenting an alternative to the exploitative practices created by fast fashion.

This shift in the fashion industry is part of a larger cultural awareness trend. Consumers today want clothing that tells a story—one that truly respects, highlights and celebrates its origins. As more people understand the dangers of cultural appropriation, they're seeking out brands that prioritize ethicality and integrity.

Ultimately, as the decline of fast fashion continues, brands that emphasize cultural respect and sustainability will emerge and set the new standard. Fashion is evolving into a tapestry of cultural awareness, where each piece represents a shared history and authentic respect for diversity. By supporting the brands that align with these values, consumers are shaping where fashion celebrates cultural expression without exploitation.

MASH Tapestry - Cultural Awareness and the Decline of Fast Fashion

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