

IS FAST FASHION SLOWING DOWN?

Data on sales for the month of December 2008 have confirmed that the downward spiralling trend in consumption of fashion articles is continuing. Performance for the last month of the year is even worse than the trend observed thus far (a reminder: sales for the first eleven months of the year showed a 2.7 % drop in value compared to the same period in 2007). Department stores have also suffered a 5 % downturn in business in value, while specialty chain stores' sales have plunged around 7 %. For the year 2008 as a whole, consumption of textile-apparel articles has therefore dropped around 3 % in value in comparison to 2007.

There has not been a downturn comparable in severity since that of 1994-1995, which was, nonetheless, somewhat less far-reaching. Just as in 1994, sales volumes have gone down in a context in which prices are also dropping slightly, although consumers usually tend to take advantage of lower prices to shop more, not less.

The drop in textile-apparel consumption is essentially a result of the budgetary restrictions

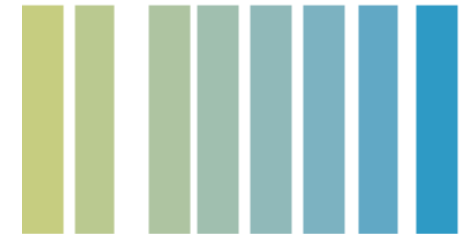
households have imposed on themselves in these times of hardship and should not be interpreted as a rejection of fashion as such. The issue here concerns consumption in a time of crisis rather than a crisis in consumption. Nevertheless, times of crisis are instrumental in helping create new consumption behaviours which may endure well after economic recovery.

People's appetite for fashion seems undiminished, to judge by the teeming crowds during the first days of the big sales, though it is true that for the long term, only time will tell. Consumers who are careful not to spend any more than necessary mostly see this as a heaven-sent occasion for a bargain. The idea of "the right price" seems to be moving back to the forefront, which is not necessarily at odds with a certain up-market trend.

In 2008, consumers bought less clothing. Their choices were dictated by more stringent consumption criteria within a deteriorating economic climate. The fact remains that, while tomorrow consumers may continue to buy less, they may reorient their purchases towards

higher-quality products that cost more but last longer.

While it may still be premature to posit that "fast fashion" will soon be dethroned by "slow fashion", the coexistence of two rhythms will no doubt become more widespread. Indeed, like the dynamic taking place in the food industry, many fashion consumers may once again begin consuming in a less compulsive, more meaningful way. Consumers today are increasingly sensitive to environmental issues, just as they value products manufactured with respect for fair trade practices and fairer pay for producers. The Mediterranean Basin countries, which have benefited from the rising power of fast fashion in recent years because of their geographical proximity, remain equally well-situated to respond to these new expectations, as long as they show a willingness to commit themselves to a policy of openness that will guarantee their customers total traceability. Geographical proximity will thus become an asset that ensures that clothing manufactured in North Africa has not travelled half-way across the planet before ending up in our closets.



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