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Breaking the Cycle: How Slow Fashion Can Inspire Sustainable Collection Development

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Title: Breaking the cycle: How slow fashion can inspire sustainable collection development

Abstract

What do academic librarians and fashion designers have in common? As designers produce a good—clothing—and librarians provide a service, it may seem like the two share no similarities. However, in recent years, both professions have been asked to do more with less. Designers are tasked with churning out clothing collections at a record rate while academic librarians have had to maintain and in some cases increase their level of service in the face of steadily decreasing budgets. One response to this relentless cycle in the fashion world is the development of slow fashion, a designer-oriented process that prioritizes producing fewer collections of clothing using materials that have less of an environmental impact. For libraries to respond to increasing demands, slow collection development is proposed and applied to building fashion resource collections in academic libraries.

Introduction

The fashion world and the field of librarianship may not seem to have much common ground, yet both are experiencing production exhaustion. Relentless fashion cycles see high-end designers creating several different collections (Pre-Autumn, Autumn, Resort, and Spring, with some designers producing both ready-to-wear and haute couture collections for Fall and Spring) and producing multiple fashion shows per year all while representing the brand publicly. In academic libraries, librarians teach classes, develop research guides, design tutorials and manage collections as part of the production of information, as well as represent the library to the students, staff and faculty of the university in the midst of slashed budgets. As a result, both fields have seen an exodus. An entire blog devoted to librarian burnout¹ and major fashion houses have been upended by the departure and dismissal of top talent including Raf Simons' from Dior, Alber Elbaz from Lanvin and Hedi Slimane from Saint Laurent. Given librarians' low profile, it is easy to determine that some have left the field. It is more difficult to determine if

designers have chosen to leave the fashion world. None of the three designers above have stated their future plans. Non-compete clauses likely impeded these designers from taking noteworthy positions, but Simons² and Elbaz³ have been highly critical of the punishing pace these historic houses are expected to keep. How can these two tired fields change course and find more sustainable paths?

Slow fashion and the creation of slow collection development, particularly as librarians wish to build new collections with limited budgets, are potential frameworks. While slow fashion—a process that encourages producing fewer collections per year, by people paid a living wage, using sustainable materials (eco-friendly fabrics, deadstock material, etc.)—cannot completely upend rapid consumption cycles, creating a mindful process around design and purchasing habits has implications for a number of practices, including collection development in academic libraries. In the same way slow fashion practitioners are more transparent about the creation process, librarians should be equally transparent about the role collection development plays in the production of information, from advocating for a new collection to purchasing and processing the items. As slow fashion practitioners and the fashion industry critique the demanding production cycle, librarians can draw attention to how certain budgeting models make it difficult to build new collections, particularly interdisciplinary ones. Additionally, librarians can communicate the nature of building collections slowly and thoughtfully to faculty members and other users, in the same way that slow fashion practitioners work to inform consumers about the higher cost of a garment due to its sustainable creation.

This article applies a slow collection development framework to building fashion collections in academic libraries, which continue to gain traction due to recently developed programs devoted to the academic study of fashion, like Parsons School of Design's Master of Arts in Fashion Studies and the Graduate Center at City University of New York's Master of Arts in Liberal Studies with a Fashion Studies track. Tying the designer- and process-oriented nature of slow fashion to the production of information that librarians participate in gives birth to a new collection development framework that encourages transparency and allows for highly-used items. By further defining slow fashion as a conceptual process and then reviewing library collection development trends, the two concepts connect to make the case for developing fashion

collections during times of flat or decreasing allocations by following the ethos established by slow fashion practitioners.

What is slow fashion?

Moving towards a definition

Before exploring its impact on collection development, a working definition of slow fashion is crucial. Slow fashion is a relatively new concept elucidated by Kate Fletcher in 2007. Fletcher states that ‘The concept of slow fashion borrows heavily from the Slow Food Movement...slow food links pleasure and food with awareness and responsibility.’⁴ Sanjukta Pookulangara and Arlesa Shephard go further and posit that slow fashion ‘is based on sustainability within the fashion industry and design incorporating high quality, small lines, regional productions, and fair labour conditions,’ further clarifying that ‘the purpose of slow fashion is not to literally slow down the textile and apparel supply chain, but place more holistic emphasis on creating a more sustainable process, which includes design planning, production sourcing, and consumer education.’⁵ Popular understanding of slow fashion is varied at best, with a quick Google search returning an article on “the best slow fashion brands” from Huffington Post which includes primarily brands that focus on eco-friendly fabrics rather than slower production rates⁶ and another website for the Brooklyn-based clothing brand Study which utilizes ‘slower production schedules, fair wages, lower carbon footprints, and (ideally) zero waste.’⁷ A single, agreed-upon definition of slow fashion may be elusive, but why the need for slow fashion in the first place? As scholars stated, pleasure, awareness, and responsibility are all currently missing from fashion production and consumption today. What is present is an alarming increase in textile waste, which grew from 30% to 70% over five years.⁸ This is due to willingness on the part of the consumer to both accept the poor quality of “fast fashion” pieces from retailers like Zara and H&M and part with those pieces quickly. While it only takes a cursory understanding of economics to rationalize how the U.S. recession of 2008 contributed to consumers’ excitement over inexpensive clothing, some scholars theorize the inverse: ‘due to the economic crisis worldwide, disposable incomes are on the wane and some consumers are becoming disenchanted with mindless consumption and its’ impact on society.’⁹

Concerns about the viability of slow fashion

Due to economic and social changes in the world, it seems clear that slow fashion is a valid way to address a variety of issues in clothing production and consumption. However, scholar Clark queried whether speed is intrinsic to the industry: ‘is the coupling of fashion, with its implications of the passage of time and change, with slowness, too much of an oxymoron?’¹⁰ This same incredulousness may be present in the suggestion that libraries slow processes down. Producing multiple lines of clothing per year is not the same as providing a set of information services to users, but librarians can find inspiration from slow fashion practitioners. They looked at their industry—known for its tacit acknowledgment of the passage of time and change—and determined that change was necessary and possible. If librarians are leaving the field due to burnout, why not examine the processes we engage in—information literacy instruction, collection development and reference—and imagine alternatives? For example, while librarians act more as facilitators than creators, the design planning that Pookulangara and Shephard reference can look like determining user needs, production sourcing can mirror determining which publishers and vendors are selected, and consumer education can include everything from creating research guides for subjects to communicating with faculty.

Before discussing specifically how slow fashion can provide a sustainable model for building a fashion monograph collection in an academic library, particularly as it relates to slow production schedules and zero waste—or fewer books sitting unused on shelves—let us survey the literature on library acquisitions budgets.

Declining budgets, increasing scrutiny

Library acquisitions budget trends

It is safe to say that few libraries are currently operating with inflated budgets, with their most difficult decision being just how much money to spend on what. As early as 1993, librarians started to question traditional allocation models in the face of declining budgets. Interestingly, in 1995, the growth of higher-education costs was lower than the inflation rate¹¹, and this did not occur again until 2010. During both time periods, collection development budgeting models shifted¹². The early ‘90s saw a surge in the idea of “access over ownership” and libraries began making more concrete plans for resource sharing in the new digital age in addition to advocating for budget models that accommodated larger groupings of subject areas.¹³ This new norm of

budgetary strife led librarians to continue searching for alternative collection development models to adapt for uncertain times.

Librarians scrutinized the approval plan model—which is a tool meant to help librarians quickly build collections by setting up profiles with vendors in which books that fit the established profile are automatically shipped to the library¹⁴—and standing orders to ensure that they spent the little funding they had well. One seminal study of the approval plans at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) and Penn State University sought to identify whether the two libraries were purchasing many of the same titles as well as their circulation. The results did not cast approval plans in a positive light, as there was a large amount of overlap between the two libraries and over a quarter of the purchases at each library failed to circulate¹⁵. Suddenly, these collections could have quite a bit in common with a stuffed closet full of barely-worn pieces of clothing. While this did not act as a call to rapidly move away from approval plans, it did signify the importance of continually reviewing plans and monitoring circulation of selected books in order to make adjustments for future purchases.

Patron-driven acquisitions (PDA) gained popularity during this time as well, thanks to its potential for cost-savings as well as its ability to easily provide e-books to patrons. While this could help users feel more invested in the library, it also changes the nature of collection development. If anything, the literature shows that as budgets have decreased, options and concerns about how to best spend the little funds available have flourished. Applying a slow fashion ethos to declining budgets does not attempt to add another fully-fleshed out model to the conversation, but rather act as a set of guiding principles that can support the creation of new collections.

Slow collection development

Developing a model of slow collection development

With libraries receiving fewer funds from their universities¹⁶—or in the case of the author's institution, receiving a long-delayed appropriation from their state—it is clear that now is not an opportune time to advocate building new collections or rebuilding outdated ones. By adopting slow fashion ethics, librarians can utilize practices and rhetoric that could allow us to

strategically build collections with minimal funds. We must ask ourselves what sustainability looks like in collection development. It could look like encouraging budgeting models that prioritize interdisciplinary resources to come forward; literally building collections slowly in a way that acknowledges and respects the labour of library staff people; utilizing a variety of different sources to determine the best resources in a field; and aligning new collections with institutional goals.

Interdisciplinary budgets

Even back in 1993, when interdisciplinary fields were not as common in academia as they are today, Webster called for ‘increasing an interdisciplinary and general purpose use fund to support the total collection.’¹⁷ Now the budget landscape has changed, so collection development models must use a combination of tools and models, incorporating the best of earlier models with new ideas. It is clear that budget models must not only shift to compensate for less money, but also to compensate for the ‘lack of fit between interdisciplinary needs and existing taxonomy and classification structures.’¹⁸ Committing to the development of this combination of tools and models is more crucial now than ever, as interdisciplinary degrees conferred rose to 48,348 in 2014, compared to 37,717 in 2010.¹⁹

By considering a move away from individual subject allocations and toward a general purpose fund or grouping several subjects together, library collection budgets can more easily encourage the purchase of interdisciplinary resources which benefit multiple potential collections, not just fashion collections. When making a case for building a fashion collection though, it is valuable to note that fashion is quickly becoming one of the more interdisciplinary concepts in academia. Lindsey M. King points out that fashion touches on ‘art history, theatre (costume design, in particular), photography, cultural and gender studies, design, anthropology, communication, modernity, identity, luxury/affluence, trend forecasting, and business/marketing.’²⁰ Identifying areas of confluence between existing departments and fashion helps to underscore the value of a fashion resource collection where previously there may not have been one.

Slow and steady purchasing

As libraries are continually asked to demonstrate their return on investment, it is only natural to want to have something substantial in size to show for the funds spent. However, as a reformed fast-fashion shopper cannot throw out pounds of Zara and H&M clothing and purchase an entirely new ethically-produced wardrobe, so we cannot make the case for building an entirely new and abundant fashion resource collection. Simply increasing an approval plan to include fashion-centric Library of Congress call number ranges might mean less upfront work for the librarian selecting materials, but it will lead to an expensive and less-tailored collection. It will also have created the expectation of quick influxes of new materials rather than the stable addition of a few carefully-selected resources at a time. The core rhetoric of the slow fashion movement can help librarians who may face scrutiny from library users for not having more to show for their efforts.

As slow fashion places a priority on fair and sustainable labour practices, it is important to consider staff resources. While cataloguing and acquisitions departments in libraries have seen a great amount of change and automation in the last few decades, there are still people doing the work of adding books to collections even in an age of “shelf-ready” approval plan options.²¹ Cataloguing backlogs still exist despite technological advances in processing, so to simply purchase a large number of materials quickly and expect for them to be catalogued and available to users is foolhardy. Rather, it is better for technical services staff to receive a trickle of high-quality materials rather than a deluge of 'potentially' interesting titles. Hand-picking titles in lieu of using an approval plan means librarians are less likely to be left with a large number of scarcely-used books sitting on the shelves, tantamount to a closet full of flimsy dresses that may only see one or two wears before being jettisoned.

In addition to consulting resources identified in the following section, a librarian should reach out to any faculty member who might provide insight into potential materials. Should a librarian wish to undertake building a fashion collection, albeit in a “slow” manner, they are likely interested in the topic and can help the faculty member understand why a collection like this might be beneficial. However, once a librarian reaches out to faculty members for input on the new collection, there may be a sense of impatience on the faculty member’s part for the collection to take shape. Employing language about careful selection and measured spending may not assuage all concerns. However, the alliance of user needs identification, vendor and

publisher selection, and the creation of resources to support new collections with the slow fashion processes of design planning, production sourcing and consumer education allows faculty members familiar with slow fashion a sense of perspective on collection development. For faculty members unaware of the slow fashion movement, it provides an opportunity for conversation outside of library transactions and can lead to larger conversations about the state of academic publishing.

Identifying core fashion resources

No matter how holistically a librarian proceeds when attempting to build a new fashion collection, it is still important to know where to look for these resources. Thankfully, the quality and number of fashion and fashion-adjacent publications has greatly increased, as have avenues for finding them. Lindsey M. King notes the growth:

Publication on fashion has increased significantly since 1950. According to decade-by-decade OCLC WorldCat figures of titles held by member libraries (derived from keyword searches of “costume” and “dress”), 220 books were published from 1950–1959; 427 in the 1960s; 865 in the 1970s; 1,498 in the 1980s; 2,581 in the 1990s; and 4,272 in the 2000s.²²

Librarianship is beginning to take notice, from forming the Fashion, Textiles, and Costume Special Interest Group within ARLIS/NA to producing valuable bibliographies for libraries looking to start new fashion collections or build upon existing ones. In the same way that slow fashion practitioners look to new types of materials and new production models, librarians can attempt to stay ahead of the curve on fashion publications and not just rely on traditional review sources. Investigating options like the *Fashion Librarian’s Resource Guide* compiled by members of the Fashion, Textiles, and Costume SIG²³ or a costume and fashion history resource guide created by New York Public Library²⁴ will impart a fashion novice with knowledge of everything from important publishers to mood board services. Additionally, tracking exhibitions at regional and national museums with fashion collections—like the Indianapolis Museum of Art or the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art—can help to identify current and future trends in fashion publishing.

Mapping fashion collections to institutional goals

Though the interdisciplinary nature of fashion publications is a helpful point to make when championing their purchase, it is not a magic word that suddenly unlocks previously unspoken-for funds. Aligning a fashion collection with both institutional goals and specific courses is crucial to gaining support for its development. While this is not a small undertaking, locating descriptions for each course taught during a traditional academic year in a couple of departments, such as art and anthropology, equips a librarian with an understanding of whether or not fashion monographs might enhance these courses. This will also guide a purchasing strategy. If the communication department includes theatre and costume design courses, perhaps historical fashion monographs would be a helpful initial direction for the collection in order to support costume design for era-specific plays. Also, if the institution offers gender studies courses, it would be useful to identify monographs that examine the performative nature of clothing and appearance. Besides looking to course descriptions, larger institutional goals should always be taken into account. While an outcome like “enhanced critical skills” may not directly lend itself to a specific purchase, underscoring how learning to examine and “read” fashion and material objects is just as important as reading text can further engender support.

Conclusion

Slow fashion is a burgeoning movement in fashion design, spurred on by conspicuous consumption, an increase in textile waste, and exhaustion on the part of designers. Scholars are still investigating the potential for the movement to become mainstream, but in the meantime, slow fashion points to several similarities between the fashion and library worlds. For years now, libraries have been asked to do more with less, in the same way that designers have been asked to create more and more collections, or to create the same clothes for less money. It may be impossible to completely stop the system, but slow fashion says one thing: the clothing that we make and wear matters. Because of cultural and historical value of clothing, librarians may wish to develop a fashion resource collection at their library. However, without an increased budget, it may be difficult to determine how to proceed establishing or refreshing the collection. How can librarians both advocate for building a fashion collection and actually do it without a large upfront investment? The answer lies in slow collection development. By hand-picking titles and

advocating for budgets that prioritize the purchase of interdisciplinary resources, respecting the labour involved in selecting and processing collections, and connecting the collection to institutional and program-specific goals, a fashion collection can be slowly and successfully built from the ground up.

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