



# Fashion, functionality, and the contemporary consumer

**Nebahat Tokatli**

The New School, USA

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## Abstract

*Uniqlo* has recently been challenging the paradigm behind the phenomenal success of *Zara*: while *Zara* has been all about fashion, *Uniqlo* claims to be all about functionality. Here I examine this corporate narrative within the context of a new paradigm in cultural sociology that brings to the fore the material and functional aspects of clothing consumption (as opposed to its fashion and identity-related aspects). This case study shows that we might be able to understand the contemporary consumer better, if we study the corporate narratives of our most popular retailers of fashion. After all, their survival depends upon a correct understanding of how exactly today's consumers behave.

## Keywords

Fashion, identity forming consumption, ordinary/routine consumption, *Uniqlo*, *Zara*

## Introduction

The Fast Retailing Group (the owner of *Uniqlo*) has recently been challenging the paradigm behind the phenomenal success of its competitor Inditex (the owner of *Zara*) by claiming that while *Zara* has been all about fashion, *Uniqlo* is all about functionality. Around the time that *Uniqlo*'s management was characterizing *Uniqlo* as a technology retailer (as opposed to a fashion retailer – something which is quite unique among its immediate competitors), a number of cultural sociologists and anthropologists were also questioning the still somewhat prevailing sociological paradigm which brings to the fore the fashion and identity-related aspects of clothing consumption (as opposed to its material and functional aspects).<sup>1</sup>

It is useful to relate these two paradigm changes: on the one hand, there is the recent corporate narrative of the Fast Retailing Group with its focus on the

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### Corresponding author:

Nebahat Tokatli, The New School, New York, NY 10011, USA.

Email: tokatlin@newschool.edu

functional aspects of clothing consumption; and, on the other, there is the work of a group of researchers who are interested in “the mundane, ordinary aspects of consumption and the routine-like, non-reflexive and non-conspicuous aspects of consumer behavior” (Sweetman, 2003; van der Laan and Velthuis, 2016: 24–25; Warde, 1994; Wilska, 2002).<sup>2</sup> Here I argue that the corporate narrative of *Uniqlo* and the recent sociological work represented by the above-mentioned researchers and others share a new understanding of the contemporary consumer – an understanding which is, in my opinion, more realistic than that associated with the earlier work of, among others, Anthony Giddens and Zygmunt Bauman.

The earlier understanding has been steering consumption research toward issues of identity. It requires that consumers be seen as individuals using fashion in their conscious search for identities for themselves – identities being perceived as either stable/coherent (see Bauman, 1995; Giddens, 1991); or, more recently, playful/creative (see Bauman, 2005). This framework has certainly had a compelling conceptual quality; and has led to an interesting body of work by those that Arnould and Thompson (2005: 868) call “consumer culture theory” researchers. This particular body of work includes, among others, that of some marketing researchers who believe that consumers “author their own lives” through fashion consumption (see Holt, 2002: 87).

Fashion consumption might indeed be one of several means that consumers have at their disposal if they wish to construct, reconfigure, and play with their identities. However, at the very least, an empirical question remains: what proportion of today’s consumers is actually into constructing, reconfiguring, and playing with their identities through fashion consumption? Moreover, not every cultural sociologist finds the identity-related issues to be the most important and interesting aspect of consumption. For example, consider Warde (1994) and Gronow and Warde (2001) who suggest that self-identity might not be the paramount value in consumption after all; Reckwitz (2002) who criticizes the focus in the literature on symbolic aspects of social life as opposed to its material attributes; Miles (1998) who understands consumption as an everyday and ideological action; and Warde (2005) and Halkier et al. (2011) who explain how consumption can be approached differently: as a moment in practices rather than as an act of purchase.

The overall empirical question on the extent to which consumers are using fashion in their conscious search for identities is indeed open: exactly how many of us are, in any significant manner, into identity forming consumption? If a significant proportion of us fits this model, then would it not follow that the stores where we do most of our clothing shopping would function as “volitional sites of self-creation . . . stimulating our creative imaginations, inspiring and provoking us so that we can narrate our . . . own lives” (Holt, 2002: 82, 87)? However, I wonder whether today’s fashion stores are indeed the sites of self-creation that the above position suggests. Accordingly, I start by considering today’s retail landscape. But since the entire retail landscape cannot possibly be investigated within the space of a journal-length article, I single out a particular segment: the global fashion

specialty retailers represented by Inditex's *Zara* and the Fast Retailing Group's *Uniqlo*. Together with their immediate competitors (such as *Hennes & Mauritz*, the *Gap*, *Limited Brands*, *PVH*, *Ralph Lauren*, *Next*, *Abercrombie & Fitch*, and *American Eagle Outfitters*) these two retailers constitute an important part of today's fashion retailing – although department stores such as *Macy's* and *Harrods*, couture and designer boutiques such as *Chanel* and *Dolce & Gabbana*, online retailing, and many other segments also remain noteworthy. The importance of Inditex's *Zara* and the Fast Retailing Group's *Uniqlo* is, in my opinion, unquestionable: these two have remarkably high global annual sales (as of 2016, US\$26.28 billion and US\$16.17 billion, respectively).

In this article, I focus on the following research question: do today's consumers (who have already turned Inditex and the Fast Retailing Group into global powerhouses) really believe that who they are is somewhat undetermined and that they can create identities for themselves – the first step being “to look the part” through fashion consumption? There are basically two ways of answering this question. First, researchers can closely examine consumer behavior, ask ordinary people questions, and find (or fail to find) evidence suggesting that perhaps this is the case. Alternatively, they can take a closer look at today's retail landscape and into the corporate narratives of our most popular retailers of fashion who have no choice but to try to correctly understand how consumers behave. Here, I chose to do the latter believing that the firms that meet the clothing needs of an impressively large number of people all over the world cannot afford not understanding today's consumers. As mentioned before, my focus is primarily, although not exclusively, on a particular firm: the Fast Retailing Group, the corporate owner of *Uniqlo*. The case study is predominantly based on somewhat atypical academic sources: material and information from popular magazines and corporate publications. More specifically, I pay particular attention to a number of interviews conducted with Tadashi Yanai (the owner of *Uniqlo*) that are available in popular literature, and especially to the annual reports of the Fast Retailing Group between 2000 and 2016. The research argument revolves around the degree to which the corporate narrative of the Fast Retailing Group helps us re-evaluate what is written on the contemporary consumer in the sociological literature.

Here, by focusing on one corporation, I certainly do not mean to imply that all corporate narratives point in the same direction – something which brings us back to the earlier point about the difference between *Zara* and *Uniqlo*. Accordingly, I will first present a brief section on *Zara*, and then examine more closely the case of *Uniqlo*.<sup>3</sup> The underlying thesis is that the still somewhat prevailing sociological understanding of consumers as identity seekers might not be a realistic one. After all, the stores where many people do their clothing shopping are not exactly the creative sites that one would expect them to be if the relationship between fashion consumption and self-identities were indeed strong. However, first let me elaborate on some of the relatively more recent insights into consumption that I have already mentioned in the introduction.

## **A few new insights into consumption**

After Warde (1994: 877, 891) expressed some doubts about self-identity possibly being the paramount value in consumption, some other sociologists have also found the notion of fashion primarily as a source of identity “tendentious”; and have concluded that almost all accounts of consumption based on this position are, at least, “exaggerated.” There really might be something “obscure” and even “empty” about the admittedly compelling conceptual understanding of fashion primarily as a source of identity (see Wilska, 2002: 196; Sweetman, 2003; van der Laan and Velthuis, 2016). What makes the paradigm difficult to understand and accept is, first, its neglect of the core sociological variables such as class, age, ethnicity, and gender (Sweetman, 2003), as well as its inattention to some basic values such as “sheer utility” (van der Laan and Velthuis, 2016: 22–23).

Second, there is a lack of empirical evidence concerning the claim that self-identity is the paramount value in consumption. For example, what about the fact that many people actually appear to be “content with their self-image,” and buy the same things repeatedly, as in the “homely wisdom” of finding whatever suits them and sticking to it (Warde, 1994: 892)? How about spouses buying clothes for spouses who claim to intensely dislike shopping (Warde, 1994)? How about those seeing clothing as a “negative act” as they seek to avoid attracting attention through what they wear and find comfort in dressing similar to the people around them (van der Laan and Velthuis, 2016: 22–23)? How about those who do not seem to be at all keen to experiment with their appearance; and in fact, regard an interest in fashion and the manipulation of one’s appearance as “suspect” (Crane, 2000: 179)?

I believe that these are all good questions and that it makes sense to imagine that in reality quite a number of people invest “little” in their fashion choices as they shop in stores in a more or less random fashion without “principle” and without much “anxiety.” If so, this thinking actually renders “choice” (not to mention “creativity”) too strong a word here since what most people do is to simply “select” among what is available in stores without much thought – their selection being “more or less meaningless” (Warde, 1994: 896).

Yet another question raised by Warde (2005) concerns whether or not consumption is better approached as a moment in practices rather than as an act of purchase. Warde (2005: 137) elaborates on this interesting point by providing the example that, after all, “cars are worn out and petrol is burned in the process of motoring.” To put it simply, the act that should interest us is driving not the consumption of cars or gasoline. This idea can certainly be translated into fashion: surely, dance shoes are worn out during the practice of dancing, and swimwear, during the practice of swimming or sunbathing. However, clothing might not be the most straightforward example here when compared with, say, driving: there are complications such as the fact that tennis shoes, yoga pants, and exercising leggings are now being worn by contemporary consumers even (and in fact, especially) when they are not playing tennis, doing yoga, or exercising. Still, the shift in focus, in Warde’s (2005) approach, from individual choices to the manner in which

consumption-related practices are organized is consistent with an approach to consumption which stresses its ordinary nature.

Of course, it does not follow from the above argument that fashion consumption is not significant. What does follow is that it is “significant for reasons other than those identified in many [sociological] accounts” (Warde, 1994: 897). For example, fashion shopping is a “bewildering” activity; and in fact, it has become even more so since Warde (1994: 897) wrote the above. As a number of supplier firms in countries such as China, India, and Turkey have gained the competence to manufacture all sorts of clothing not only inexpensively but also with the required quality, flexibility, and speed, there has appeared even a richer variety in stores. When people visit one of today’s fashion retailers, it is almost certain that they will see something even more pleasing than that which they recently bought, and that the price tag will be as affordable as previously. Thus, fashion shopping is now both more “bewildering” and quite affordable for many. As a result, it is not surprising that fashion intermediaries are now able to encourage ordinary consumers to buy all sorts of items (designer, fast fashion, vintage; expensive, inexpensive; etc.) and “throw them together” in a style that is “uniquely personal” (Tungate, 2005: 45, 228).

What is especially interesting here is that the above mentioned creativity (that of throwing all sorts of clothing items together and achieving a uniquely personal style) occurs not before but after retailers are done with selling their items. Thus, in reality, what people buy is not significantly different from what everybody else buys; it is in the manner in which these items are thrown together that creativity is possible. Simply put, it is after you buy your graphic black and white dress from *Zara* (for US\$22.90), from *H&M* (for US\$17.99), or from *Uniqlo* (for US\$29.90) that you “style your own look” (by mixing and matching the dress with any item you choose) and thus ‘author your own life’: after all, the same dress can be worn with, for example, high heels, boots, or sneakers. I argue that this concept of creativity is of too low a standard to support the relationship between fashion consumption and self-identity (see Figure 1).

It is important that self-creation starts after the purchases are made. What happens during the purchase itself is something else: for example, consider that while marketing researchers write about consumers “authoring” their own lives through fashion consumption, they also study the manner in which consumption selection can be made “unconsciously,” or “at least almost unconsciously” under the influence of, say, the kind of music that is playing in a store (see Dijksterhuis et al., 2005: 193).

Could it be that, as Wilska (2002) suggests, most consumers are “less omnipotent (and exciting)” than cultural sociologists have been imagining for some time? In other words, could Warde (1994: 894) be right when he suggests that Bauman’s (1995, 2005) followers simply “misunderstood” the contemporary consumer, partly because they have neither studied “inconspicuous consumption,” and “routine, conventional and repetitive conducts” around consumption, nor the “contextual and collective constraints” of consumption, or “practical contexts of appropriation and use” (Gronow and Warde, 2001: 4)? Here I argue that these are all reasonable



**Figure 1.** The black and white dress from *Zara*, *H&M*, and *Uniqlo*.  
Source: Company web sites (2016).

questions – an argument that I will return after making a few observations about *Zara* (*Uniqlo*'s competitor) and then examining *Uniqlo*'s corporate narrative more thoroughly. When taken together these two retailers offer some insights into the above mentioned questions.

### **From *Zara*'s fashion to *Uniqlo*'s functionality**

What exactly does it mean to say that *Zara* is all about fashion? This question is not an easy one to answer if what it actually asks is the extent to which *Zara* fits the model of a site of self-creation. However, it is easier to confirm that the variability that *Zara* offers is indeed, in the words of Warde (1994), “bewildering.” What makes *Zara* a success is the retailer's exceptional collaboration with a team of trend-trackers that enables its designers to spot and copy the fashion trends of the day with great accuracy and bring the budget interpretations of these trends to their customers with incredible speed. It takes *Zara* only a couple of weeks to hang a good copy of a designer dress in its stores once the dress is photographed on a model during fashion week (Tokatli, 2008; Tungate, 2005). However, the process of making this happen is somewhat at odds with the very individualistic consumer model that sociologists have been writing about. The design process in *Zara* is that its designers consider all the fashion ideas appearing during fashion week, ignore the differences between them, concentrate on the similarities and select only the most marketable trends before they “go off and copy them” (*Financial Times*, 2004 cited in Tokatli, 2008). By concentrating on similarities and themes and the chance to say that this is “the recent look” (say, the “graphic black and white dress of 2016”), *Zara* actually does the opposite of what we would expect from our retailers if we constructed, reconfigured, and played with our identities through fashion consumption on a day-to-day basis – something which points to differences among fashion ideas, not similarities.

Moreover, the manner in which consumers buy the “recent look” (say, the “black and white dress”) does not really fit the model of a world filled with

**Table 1.** The fast retailing and its competitors by annual sales, 2014.

Retailers	Sales (billion dollars) in fiscal year 2014
Inditex	20.31
H&M	18.04
Gap	16.43
Fast Retailing	11.59
Limited Brands	11.45

Source: <http://www.fastretailing.com/eng/ir/direction/position.html>  
 The fiscal years of 2014 ends in January 2015 for Inditex, Gap and the Limited Brands, November 2014 for H&M, and August 2014 for Fast Retailing.

individualistic and creative consumers but rather suggests the importance of the role of the supportive social contact in the process. This is because consumers typically make their selections after either friends or strangers around the dressing rooms tell them that they not only look “cute” in them, but also that it would be silly not to buy these items given their remarkably low price: “buy it . . . it is practically free anyway.” When a typical contemporary customer comes across a piece which is both “cute,” and “affordable,” the decision to buy is typically the default position.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, neither *Zara* nor any of its competitors (including *H&M*, *Gap*, *Uniqlo*, and *Limited*) give anything away for free – as their impressive global sales figures make clear (see Table 1). As the table shows, *Zara*’s owner Inditex is the financial leader among its most immediate competitors. However, in April 2015, *Forbes Magazine* reported that the Fast Retailing Group had revealed an ambitious plan of achieving US\$21 billion in global sales (see Thau, 2015). The figure seems to have been carefully chosen: in the fiscal year 2014, the Spanish Inditex had registered US\$20.31 billion in global sales. The Japanese Fast Retailing Group, which sees itself in competition with Inditex and other similar retailers, obviously had its eye on the leadership position of Inditex. In 2014, its own global sales were a smaller but still impressive figure of US\$11.59 billion.

Since at least 2010, the popular literature has been taking the ambitions of the Japanese group quite seriously; and there is an overall impression among observers of the industry that it is only a matter of time before the Japanese retailer surpasses Inditex.<sup>5</sup> What is interesting is that the Fast Retailing Group has not tried to outperform Inditex by making *Uniqlo* into the new *Zara*. Rather, the idea seems to be to challenge the entire paradigm behind *Zara*’s phenomenal success. While *Zara* is said to be all about fashion, *Uniqlo* claims to be all about functionality.

As mentioned earlier, *Zara* works with a team of trend-trackers that enables its designers to spot and copy the fashion trends of the day with great accuracy and incredible speed. In the process, *Zara*’s customers are teased with a message which

says “buy it now, or what you like today might not be here tomorrow.” In comparison, *Uniqlo* stores carry a collection which is “meant to be continued every season . . . Like iPhone 4, iPhone 5” (Kansara, 2013).<sup>6</sup> Instead of trend-trackers, the Fast Retailing Group relies on the resourcefulness of, first, the team of material scientists at the Japanese Toray industries who are behind Toray’s fiber, yarn, and fabric-related innovations, and, second, on its own minimalist designers, head by Naoki Takizawa, who come up with functional items which make use of these innovations.<sup>7</sup> It is *Uniqlo*’s collaboration with Toray that makes its owner Tadashi Yanai believe that he cannot overemphasize the difference between Inditex and themselves:

“We are not a fashion company . . . We are a technology company.” He is so fond of this line [that] he repeats it during each of my three meetings with him. (Chu, 2012)

Perhaps some background information on *Uniqlo* would be useful here.

## **A Japanese retailer: *Uniqlo***

The first *Uniqlo* store was opened in Japan in 1984 – almost a decade after Inditex opened its first *Zara* store in Spain. This was followed soon after by the opening of a number of suburban and urban stores under the same name. In 1994, the retailer became a public company; and in 1998, while Japan was still suffering its long economic stagnation, it conducted a hugely successful fleece campaign (Choi, 2010; Makioka et al., 2009).<sup>8</sup> Although consumption rates were low due to the Asian financial crisis of 1997–1998, *Uniqlo* flourished to such a remarkable extent during this period that the retailer was able to increase the number of its stores across Japan from 7 (1984) to 336 (1998) and then to 433 (2000).

The 2000s were the period during which the Fast Retailing Group turned itself into an international multi-brand retailer. In 2001, *Uniqlo* opened 21 stores in Britain (not all of which were immediately successful), followed by others in China (2002), South Korea (2005), and the United States (unsuccessfully in New Jersey in 2005, but then successfully in New York in 2006). Meanwhile, the retailer also acquired a number of other brands: first the French brands *Comptoir des Cotonniers* (2005) and *Princesse tam.tam* (2006), and then the US-based brands *Theory* (2009) and *J Brand* (2012). Among these, the Fast Retailing Group had previously had a special relationship with *Theory*: in 2004, the New York brand had been introduced to Japanese customers through a licensing agreement when the Fast Retailing Group had invested in the brand. After their acquisitions, the Fast Retailing Group kept operating these retailers under their original trading names and maintained their original atmosphere in order to retain intact the segment of the consumer market that they appealed to. These acquisitions were followed by the establishment of *GU* (2013) – a lower-price brand of the group. Meanwhile, the popular literature reported that acquisition discussions with both *Barneys* (2007) and *J.Crew* (2014) had failed. Despite these failures, in 2015, the



Japanese group ended up with more than 2900 stores worldwide, including more than 1600 *Uniqlo* stores located in Japan, China, Korea, Taiwan, the United States, and other countries (see Table 2).

Here it is important to note that simply stating the number of stores does not do justice to the retailer: *Uniqlo* stores are typically significantly larger than those of its

**Table 2.** Stores of the fast retailing group.

Units: Stores	As of August 31, 2015
<i>Uniqlo</i> Operations	1639
<i>Uniqlo</i> Japan:	841
Own stores	811
Large-scale	208
Standard	603
Franchise	30
<i>Uniqlo</i> International:	798
China	387
Hong Kong	25
Taiwan	55
Korea	155
Singapore	23
Malaysia	25
Thailand	23
Philippines	23
Indonesia	8
Australia	6
USA	42
UK	9
France	8
Russia	8
Germany	1
Global Brands	1339
<i>GU</i>	319
<i>Theory</i> *	504
<i>Comptoir des Cotonniers</i> *	368
<i>Princesse tam.tam</i> *	145
J Brand	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>2978</b>

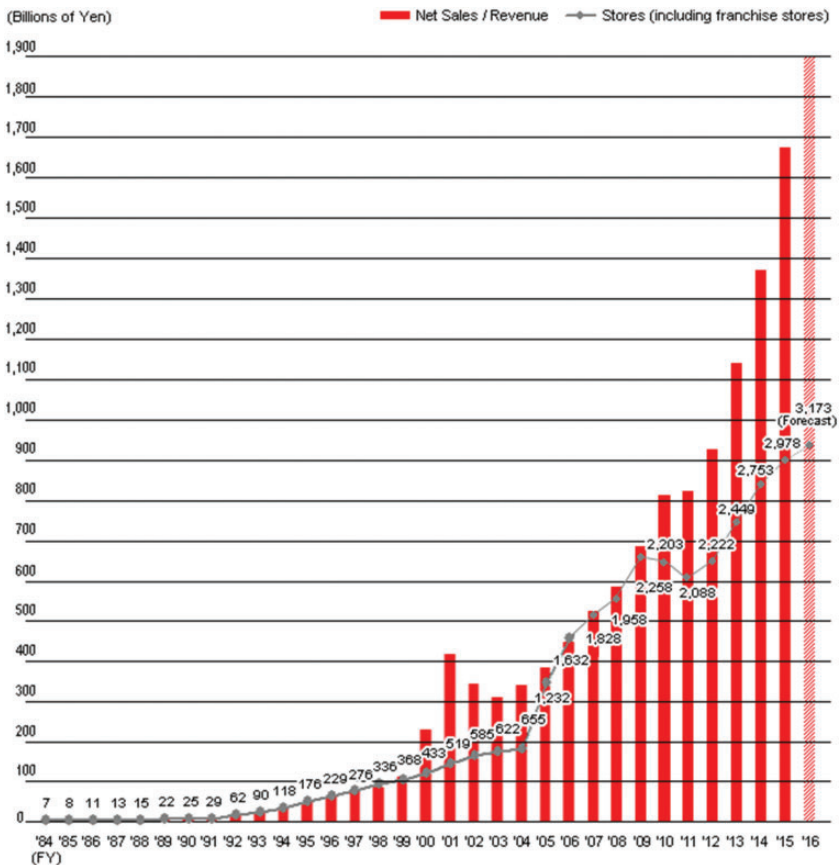
Source: Group outlets update at [www.fastretailing.com](http://www.fastretailing.com).

\*Including franchise stores.

competitors. For example, compare the *Zara* and *Uniqlo* flagship stores in Manhattan which are located in the same Fifth Avenue building (number 666): the *Zara* store at the south corner of the building has around 32,000 square feet of shopping area, while the *Uniqlo* store at the northern corner has over 89,000 square feet. Thus the following graph gives a better idea of the manner in which the retailer has been growing: while the number of its stores has been increasing in an impressive manner, the increase in net sales/revenue has been even more striking (see Graph 1).

As mentioned before, the sales figures for fiscal year 2014 of the Fast Retailing Group and its competitors are also useful indicators of where the Japanese retailer currently stands among its immediate competitors, including Inditex (see Table 1).<sup>9</sup>

In 2016, the Fast Retailing Group had 3173 stores and US\$16 billion net sales/revenue – a figure which it hopes will soon reach US\$21 billion, and then will reach



**Graph I.** The Fast Retailing Group (Sales and Stores).

Source: The Fast Retailing (2015).

US\$50 billion by 2020. This is certainly a very ambitious plan. However, even if the figures are later revised downward, the target of outdoing *Zara* might not be unrealistic, given that *Zara* is already well known, while *Uniqlo* is still in the process of introducing itself to customers outside Asia.

As a factor in its success, *Uniqlo*'s collaboration with Toray – an integrated chemical group established in 1926 – needs to be singled out. Here it should be mentioned that Toray is a success story in its own right: it is currently active in fibers, yarns, textiles, its own apparel brands, plastics and chemicals, IT-related products, carbon fiber composite materials, environmental engineering, and pharmaceuticals and medical devices.<sup>10</sup> *Uniqlo*, which sells 800 million clothing items every year (as of 2014), has been in collaboration with Toray since 1998 when the Fast Retailing Group decided to use a particular fleece fabric of Toray in its *Uniqlo* brand. What followed was a hugely successful fleece campaign which resulted in “explosive sales” (words taken from corporate documents) in Japan. In 1999, encouraged by its domestic success, the retailer became one of the first clients of John Jay, a Chinese American who had worked at Bloomingdale's in New York for more than a decade (first as a creative director and then as a marketing director) before opening Wieden + Kennedy's Tokyo office in the mid-1990s. After *Uniqlo* became his client, Jay began to investigate whether or not *Uniqlo*'s fleece items might also be successful in the US market. His research associates spent two days getting people to try on some *Uniqlo* fleece items around the Soho neighborhood of New York.

People said, “Incredible! Luxurious! How lightweight!” Then we asked, “How much would you pay for it?” And they said, “This has got to be US\$50 or US\$75.” Some even said US\$100. But the fleece was US\$19. I showed the video to Mr. Yanai, and I said, “Here's your future.” (Jay cited in Chu, 2012)

This is interesting since fleece had first been developed by the US-based Malden Mills in 1981 and had been trademarked in the United States as Polar Fleece. A few years later, the same manufacturer improved on its product and renamed it Synchronilla for the retailer *Patagonia* which marketed the product until 1987 – after which the product was marketed by Malden Mills itself under the name Polartec fleece. Even more interestingly, in 1999, when New Yorkers were finding *Uniqlo*'s fleece “incredible,” *Time* magazine had already named Polartec “one of the hundred great things of the 20th century.” Although *Uniqlo*'s corporate narrative suggests that what impressed New Yorkers was Toray's version of fleece fabric, this claim seems to have a “reality enhancing” quality: John Jay may be correct about comparing their idea of “selling fleece to Americans” to “selling rice to the Chinese,” but perhaps what really impressed the New Yorkers was not Toray's fleece but its US\$19 price tag (cited in Chu, 2012).<sup>11</sup>

*Uniqlo*'s corporate documents indicate that immediately following its explosive domestic sales during the 1998 “fleece boom,” the firm decided to apply their fleece experience to “the marketing of clothing made of other hit fabrics, for instance, cashmere” (Fast Retailing, 2005). Although it took *Uniqlo* some time to develop

the product (Uniqlo's cashmere sweaters with their US\$99 price tags first became available in the fall of 2003), it was during the 1998–1999 period that the management decided to involve itself in cashmere products. This becomes interesting when one considers a *New Yorker* magazine article published in 1999 entitled “Letter from Mongolia: The crisis in Cashmere” (Mead, 1999). This article revealed that cashmere was especially popular in New York in 1999 (as indicated by the US\$1600 cashmere sweaters at the Lucien Pellat-Finet boutique, the US\$900 cashmere thermals at Marc Jacobs stores, and the US\$250 pullovers at the Banana Republic chain); and the author sensibly pointed to some non-fashion-related reasons for the prevalence of cashmere that season:

If you ask members of the fashion community to explain the current popularity of cashmere, you'll be told that fabric's understated luxury is well suited to a cultural moment in which un-showy self-indulgence is the highest ideal . . . But the ubiquity of cashmere this season is more complicated than that. It is a consequence of much larger political and economic issues that have nothing to do with fashion. (Mead, 1999: 58)

The larger political and economic issues that Mead (1999: 58) refers to here are related to the collapses in 1991 of the Soviet Union, and also of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) – an economic organization led by the Soviet Union. Following these collapses, there was a consequent opening up of the markets in Mongolia (a major supplier of cashmere) and the result was “a dramatic increase in production” of cashmere “to the point of oversupply” (Mead, 1999: 58). More specifically, following the collapses of the Soviet Union and COMECON, there was a doubling of the number of cashmere goats in Mongolia, a substantial increase in their cashmere exports, and a decline in the quality of Mongolian cashmere (Arulpragasam et al., 2004). And then came “the collapse of the Japanese economy which caused a fall in cashmere sales there, creating a worldwide glut” (Mead, 1999: 58).

The cashmere industry is actually in crisis, with stockpiles of the raw fabric sitting unused in Chinese warehouses, and with cashmere companies worrying about how to afford to keep their machinery running. The array of cashmere sweaters in Soho, it turns out, is a knotty lesson in late-twentieth-century capitalism waiting to be unraveled. (Mead, 1999: 58)

I find it telling that just when *New Yorker* readers were reading about the stockpiles of raw cashmere fabric sitting unused in Chinese warehouses, *Uniqlo's* management were, in their own words, planning to apply their fleece experience to cashmere: their material development teams started negotiating directly with Chinese manufacturers (presumably those with warehouses stockpiled with cashmere) to procure the material at such advantageous terms that it would lead to “unprecedentedly low prices of clothing made using precious cashmere” (Fast Retailing, 2005). Simply put, the result was that *Uniqlo* started selling cashmere

sweaters for US\$99 in New York at a time when Lucien Pellat-Finet was selling them for US\$1600.<sup>12</sup>

*Uniqlo*'s project was a huge success, partly because the retailer was also very successful at turning itself into what Ferdows (2003) calls a superior manager of dispersed manufacturers, mainly in China (as well as in Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Vietnam). The firm's mastery was remarkable in that it not only took advantage of the lower costs in these countries but also improved its speed and response to market changes and made more mass customized products possible: it was good at balancing schedules and capacity utilization, maintaining just-in-time flow through the chain, responding quickly to unforeseen changes, focusing on time as much as on cost, and was obsessed with monitoring the flow of products in the entire supply chain. In sum, it was a superior manager of its suppliers (see Ferdows, 2003).

*Uniqlo*'s items are mostly known as "basics" – a reputation that the retailer owes to the minimalist design sense of its own designers (as well as that of some other designers with whom the retailer collaborates from time to time, such as the well-known minimalist Jil Sander and Charlotte Ronson who is known for her "cute" youth designs). Simply put, the designers at *Uniqlo* spend most of their times eliminating details that do not contribute to the item's functionality. "Cut, cut, cut!" is the way *Uniqlo*'s fashion director Naoki Takizawa explains the principle (cited in Chu, 2012). This minimalist design (in addition to appealing to customers who share the same sense of esthetics) makes the manufacturing of these items especially fast and easy. Simply put, a single seam is better (i.e. much more economical) than two:

Two lines are much more complicated to sew. One continuous line is easier. And 20 seconds shorter... [By taking away details from, say, a parka, *Uniqlo* can save] 90 seconds... Multiplied by 600,000 parkas, that's an immense savings of time and money. (Naoki Takizawa cited in Chu, 2012)

However, the fact that they are known as basics does not prevent customers from buying the same *Uniqlo* items again and again. First of all, despite their minimalist look, the designers strive to make *Uniqlo* collections looking cutting edge in the way that they are cut and presented: their task is to reinvent what is understated and pure again and again, so that the same basics can be sold season after season. The idea is not to find out what designs and fabrics are the most fashionable and trendy (which is what *Zara* does), but rather to decide what designs and fabrics make the most functional clothes: "More than trends, consumers need functionality... Everything needs an element of fashion, but that's more like a spice" (Naoki Takizawa cited in Chu, 2012).

Second, these cutting edge basics come in a dizzying abundance of colors. "We started out with a few different colors... but then we came up with this crazy idea: Why not 50 colors instead of 10?" (Tadashi Yanai cited in Chu, 2012). As a result, *Uniqlo* sells the same understated basics "like sweets to children on a school trip" (Finnigan, 2015). For example, a simple V-neck (or crewneck, or turtleneck) *Uniqlo*

sweater for women (made either with cotton, lambs-wool, cashmere, merino wool, or some innovative blend) comes in an incredible range of cheerful colors. Simply put, you may already have a blue V-neck sweater. But do you have one in “blue 61” or “blue 66”?

Third, *Uniqlo* basics appear continuously in new knits and fabrics created by Toray through the blending of high-tech synthetics with silk, premium linen, or cashmere. Here the *Uniqlo*-Toray partnership is key: without Toray, the development of HeatTech in 2007, Silky Dry in 2008, and an ultra-light down in 2010 would not have been possible. HeatTech (which is made up of a combination of four fibers, namely acrylic, rayon, polyester, and polyurethane, and softened with Camellia oil for a gentle feel) is a high-tech fabric that keeps the wearer warm in the winter. Silky Dry (which was improved on and rebranded as AIRism in 2012) is a stretchy fabric made out of ultrafine synthetic microfibers that keep the wearer cool and dry in the summer. *Uniqlo*'s ultra-light down makes its vests, jackets, parkas, and coats incredibly light, so much so that they can be folded into tiny bags or into their own pockets.

In addition to products such as their HeatTech or Silky Dry items, ultra-light outerwear, inexpensive cashmere products, or fleece pieces, *Uniqlo* stores are also filled with ordinary shirts, pajamas, pants, dresses, and other products that cannot be differentiated from those sold at *Uniqlo*'s competitors. Simply put, *Uniqlo* is also a clothing retailer where ordinary products are presented in rack after rack, on floor after floor, and in store after store. The stores are well run, the quality of service is impressive (including in-store alterations), and customers who are in the stores for innovative products end up pushing carts or carrying baskets containing both innovative and ordinary products – probably without questioning what makes shopping at *Uniqlo* especially affordable.

What makes shopping at *Uniqlo* especially affordable is its collaboration with its suppliers and their workers – something which remained obscure until very recently (not only in the academic but also in the popular literature). According to the retailer, *Uniqlo*'s 800 million items of clothing (as of 2014) are manufactured by roughly 70 manufacturing suppliers, mainly in China (and also in Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Vietnam). Although the group has production offices in Shanghai, Jakarta, Dhaka, and Ho Chi Minh City, it does not provide comprehensive data on its manufacturing suppliers. An exception is the mention of two manufacturers: the Chinese Chenfeng which has 8 factories and thousands of employees, and the Indonesian PT Pan Brothers which has 16 factories and, once again, thousands of employees.

In 2013, when a number of factory accidents in Bangladesh (that killed more than 1100 people) forced *Zara*'s Inditex and *H&M* to come together and sign a legally binding accord on fire and building safety, the Fast Retailing group (together with others such as *Walmart* and the *Gap*) chose to stay out of the agreement. Even on this occasion, and despite increased attention in the press, the group declined to disclose the total number of its factories – except for the piece of information that in 2013, the Fast Retailing Group had monitored 294 factories in China, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Vietnam.

The findings of a 2014 study conducted by SACOM (Students and Scholars Against Corporate Misbehavior) and its collaborators HRN (Human Rights Now) and LAC (Labor Action China) are useful here (SACOM, 2015). This primary research focused on two *Uniqlo* suppliers (namely Pacific and Luenthai) in China's Guangdong province – both Hong Kong-based firms. Pacific, a key supplier of *Uniqlo*, is an integrated provider of knitting, dyeing, printing and finishing, with an annual production capacity of around 87 million kilograms; and employs more than 6500 people. Luenthai is another key supplier with an annual revenue of over US\$1.2 billion and 45,000 employees worldwide. From July to August 2014, a number of undercover SACOM investigators worked in these two factories as laborers in order to collect data on working conditions; and in doing so, obtained documents such as contracts, salary slips, working hour records, and documents on rules, regulations, and disciplinary fines. The investigation also included more than 30 interviews conducted in and around dormitories, restaurants and food stands. In late September, representatives from SACOM and HRN visited the same sites to verify the information collected by their undercover investigators. The documents that the investigation produced are now available in their reports on the Internet and include photographs of workers and factories, as well as paper documents. Overall, these photographs and documents reveal very long working hours, very low basic salaries, highly risky and unsafe working environments, and harsh management and punishment styles – which exhibit strikingly the dark side of *Uniqlo*'s low prices. For example, there are photographs of topless male workers in apparently extremely hot temperatures, of dusty rooms with sewage on the floor, of workers standing on tall stools in apparently very uncomfortable positions while working with knitting machines, and so on.

It is not yet clear whether or not *Uniqlo* will indeed soon become the largest clothing retailer in the world, opening 1000 stores every year and reaching US\$50 billion global sales by 2020. At the moment, at least in the US market, *Zara* is said to be still outperforming *Uniqlo* (Susan Scafidi cited in Thau, 2015). However, it was only as recently as the 2015 Christmas season that, thanks to an aggressive advertising campaign, millions of US consumers started hearing about HeatTech and Silky Dry. Obviously, students of the retailing industry have ample reason to keep an eye on this particular retailer's trajectory.

## Conclusion

If we wish to construct, reconfigure, or play with our identities, then fashion consumption might serve as a means. However, it is doubtful that a significant proportion of us actually wish to do so. My argument here is that if this were the case, then the clothing stores of those retailers that we frequent a good deal (enough to turn them into powerhouses with tens of billions of dollars annual sales – here I am referring to the stores of global fashion specialty retailers such as *Zara*, *H&M*, the *Gap*, and *Uniqlo*) would function as our “volitional sites of self-creation” (Holt, 2002: 87).

In this article, I have expressed some doubts about this: first of all, as I mentioned earlier, what retailers such as *Zara*, *H&M*, and the *Gap* actually do is to consider the fashion ideas appearing during fashion week, concentrate on the similarities, select only the most marketable trends, copy them, and thus decide on “the recent look.” I believe that this is actually the opposite of what we would expect from our retailers if we constructed, reconfigured, and played with our identities through fashion consumption on a day-to-day basis. What we would expect would be for them to point to differences among fashion ideas rather than to similarities.

Moreover, I find that what counts as creativity in today’s world of fashion has too low a standard to support a strong relationship between fashion consumption and self-identity. It is an open question to what extent it is a creative endeavor for customers to select all sorts of clothing items from what is made available by retailers, and then mix and match these items in the hope that the resulting style will be a personal one. Of course, not all consumers have the same amount of resourcefulness here. For example, consider the following comment accompanying a photograph from Scott Schuman’s popular fashion blog the Sartorialist – a blog in which Schuman takes photographs on the streets of New York, Paris, Milan, and other global cities and lets readers comment on them:

In theory this ensemble should strike fear... Loud patterns?... Chunky open-toed shoes?... Thermofleece-esque overcoat and oversized felt hat? What has the world come to!? But somehow this... girl manages to make the whole thing look elegantly flung together and really quite chic. How and why it works we will never know, but somehow it does.

Obviously, some people understand it better when they are told to achieve a well-balanced, daring, and complete look and to make it work, by basically bringing together pieces in a manner that was not acceptable in the past. For the rest, being creative is basically about purchasing a dress that represents “the recent look,” and then wearing it a bit differently from everybody else: say, with cowboy boots rather than with shoes. Here I do not mean to overlook the creativity that this requires, but simply to suggest that we should be careful about making sweeping generalizations about the relationship between fashion consumption and creativity/identity formation for the population at large.

Also, not all retailers owe their success to their efforts to find out what designs and fabrics are the most fashionable and trendy (although that is obviously what *Zara* does). For example, the owner of *Uniqlo* claims that consumers need functionality more than they need fashion trends: “Everything needs an element of fashion, but that’s more like a spice” (Naoki Takizawa cited in Chu, 2012). By the functionality that *Uniqlo* offers, the management means, for example, the retailer’s HeatTech underwear items that keep the wearer warm in the winter, its AIRism underwear items that keep the wearer cool and dry in the summer, its ultra-light down coats which can be folded into tiny bags or into



their own pockets, and so on. I take seriously *Uniqlo*'s claim that consumers look for functionality more than they look for trendiness: after all, the corporation's survival depends upon a correct understanding of how exactly today's consumers behave.

*Uniqlo*'s management seems to believe that they are successful because they focus on functionality. However, there is another factor which has not yet been reported in the popular or scholarly literatures – not to mention in the corporation's official documents. Here I refer to larger political and economic issues that have nothing to do with fashion including, for example, what has been happening in Mongolia (a major supplier of cashmere) since the 1990s. As explained earlier, one of the factors that opened the doors of success for *Uniqlo* at the end of the 1990s and early 2000s was its ability to offer cashmere items for US\$99 (when other retailers were asking hundreds or thousands of dollars for similar items). What was most important here was the corporation's discovery, at that time, of the stockpiles of raw cashmere fabric sitting unused in Chinese warehouses. Once *Uniqlo*'s material development teams started negotiating directly with the Chinese manufacturers for these stockpiles, it became obvious that the procurement of the material at unusually advantageous terms could lead to cashmere items being offered at unusually low prices. Sure enough, *Uniqlo*'s \$99 cashmere sweaters became available in the Fall of 2003 – during the time period when fashion experts were talking about how well cashmere's understated luxury was suited to the cultural moment of that time period when un-showy self-indulgence was the highest ideal. Obviously, there is much to be researched about what came first: consumers finding out that they could buy cashmere sweaters at US\$99 at *Uniqlo* at a time when Lucien Pellat-Finet was selling them for US\$1600, or cashmere's understated luxury becoming especially suitable for the cultural moment of the late 1990s and early 2000s.

What does it say about today's consumers that *Uniqlo* intends to become the largest clothing retailer in the world by selling its customers the same fleece vests, cashmere sweaters, or pocketable parkas year after year in a similar manner to that in which Apple sells iPhones? It looks as if Wilska (2002) is correct to observe that most consumers might be "less omnipotent (and exciting)" than some cultural sociologists suggest. Similarly, it could it be that Warde (1994: 894) and Gronow and Warde (2001: 4) have a point when they suggest that we might understand the contemporary consumer better if we were to further study "inconspicuous consumption," "routine, conventional and repetitive conducts" around consumption, together with the "contextual and collective constraints" of consumption. Let me reiterate that one way to advance this position would be to further study the corporate narratives of our most popular retailers.

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## Notes

1. In this article, I often use the words clothing and fashion more or less interchangeably. Today, almost all clothing items have some fashion-related quality.
2. By corporate narrative, I basically refer to what the annual reports of the Fast Retailing Group, the interviews conducted with the owner of *Uniqlo*, and other similar material reveal.
3. The asymmetry concerning *Zara* and *Uniqlo* is due to the fact that *Zara* has already been studied while *Uniqlo* has not. For *Zara*, see, among others, Tokatli (2008, 2015).
4. These claims are based on my almost countless hours of observations over the years in New York: “this suits you,” “how cute,” “buy it” are how strangers generously offer social approval and remind each other of the items’ affordability.
5. By popular press, I mean the sources mentioned in the second half of my reference list. Especially see, Urstadt (2010), Finnigan (2015), and Thau (2015).
6. The interest of Tadashi Yanai in Apple is well known: “around the corner from his Tokyo office, there’s a large map of Manhattan. There are push pins marking... [the stores] that could be considered immediate competitors. Significantly, there’s one outlier marked: the Apple Store” (Chu, 2012).
7. Functionality refers to the breathability and moisture management qualities of the item, softness, fabric elasticity, and so on. In all of these, the type and geometry of the fiber (especially including synthetic fibers such as nylon, polyester, and acrylic), yarn parameters, and fabric structure and finishing treatments play a role.
8. *Uniqlo* fleece was, according to Choi (2010), developed in cooperation with Toray industries – a statement which is based on interview data. However, for years, the collaboration was somewhat informal. It was only in 2006 that a formal contract of strategic alliance was signed (Choi, 2010). In 2010, the partnership was extended for another 5 years.
9. The popular literature has another way of comparing the Fast Retailing Group with Inditex: the owner of Fast Retailing (Tadashi Yanai) is not yet as wealthy as the owner of Inditex (Amancio Ortega) although in 2014, he was reported to be Japan’s richest individual with US\$17.6 billion worth of wealth. See <http://www.bloomberg.com/billionaires/2014-07-25/cya/acyaa> (accessed 7/28/2014).
10. Toray’s fiber, yarn, and fabric-related innovations include products such as *Toray Nylon* (developed in 1951), *TETRON* (1958), *SILLOOK* (1964), *TORAYLON* (1964), *BCF Nylon* (1970), *ECSAINE* (1970), *AXTAR* (1979), *ENTRANT* (1979), *Airbag Nylon* (1988), and *FORESSE* (2006). Today, Toray is also the brand owner of *ultrasuede*, *TOREX*, *DERMIZAX*, *FIELDSENSOR*, *TRINTEE*, *Primeflex*, *Airtastic*, *MAKSPEC*, *TORAYSEE*, and *INNOVARAY*. These are products with a number of functional properties: some have moisture-permeable qualities, some dry extremely

- quickly, some are water and chlorine resistant, some are extremely lightweight, some keep the wearer cool or warm, and some even can have, among others, antibacterial qualities. Toray is also a brand-owning clothing manufacturer with brands *3DeFX+* (outdoor and sportswear items) and *ECOUSE* (clothing items made from PET bottles and other recycled leftover manufacturing materials).
11. The group's management never forgot what John Jay did for the firm in 1999 – something indicated by the fact that in 2014 *Uniqlo* hired him despite the fact that at one point John Jay's other highly technical client Nike had made Jay's company drop *Uniqlo*. The hiring seems to be a part of *Uniqlo*'s “big American push” which has recently escalated, with the help of a “multiplatform advertising tsunami” (Chu, 2012).
  12. My 2015 investigation on the Internet updates Mead's (1999) observations: a Lucien Pellat-Finet cashmere sweater costs US\$2990, a Marc Jacobs sells for US\$400, and at Banana Republic one can find a cashmere sweater now for US\$248. *Uniqlo*'s regular price is US\$99 which the retailer occasionally lowers to \$69.50. I should also add that, in 2015, Fjäll Räven sold lightweight polyester jackets for US\$250, Northface for US\$180, and *Uniqlo* for \$39.90.

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### **Author Biography**

**Nebahat Tokatli** teaches at the New School, New York. She has previously authored articles in journals such as *Economic Geography*, *Journal of Economic Geography*, *Environment and Planning A*, *Urban Studies*, and *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*.