



## ACADEMIC PAPER

Buyer behaviour

# Buyer behaviour for fast fashion

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper seeks to address the complex nature of fast fashion buying through case studies with a supermarket, department store and own brand label. The phenomenon of fast fashion raises questions about traditional approaches to sourcing and buying, which are addressed here.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Case studies were compiled with companies managing fast fashion, alongside other purchase and retail activities, namely a supermarket, department store and specialist fashion chain.

**Findings** – Reveals the buying practices for fast fashion, namely, a combination of global and local suppliers, a league approach is typical; trust is an important factor in the supplier-retailer relationship to ensure fast delivery at an agreed quality; and integration of key internal activities and processes to facilitate the speed of buying decisions that may be required.

**Originality/value** – Gives insight into the factors affecting buying behaviour for fast fashion.

**Keywords** Fashion industry, Buying behaviour, Suppliers, Sourcing

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

The fashion industry is turbulent and certain factors have driven this change (Kilduff, 2005), particularly overseas sourcing to take advantage of cheaper labour costs. The industry can no longer compete on price alone, and thus is facing tough competition from low labour cost countries (Jones, 2002). In fast fashion, sourcing and buying decisions are compounded by the speed by which decisions have to be made and innovation introduced into the store. Fashion consumers expect and thrive on constant change and so new products have to be available on a frequent basis. This fast turnaround is achieved through sourcing new suppliers with different products and having a relationship with existing suppliers who understand the need for change and have the capability to deliver this.

In fast fashion, buying activities play a crucial role through supplier selection and product decision-making, and indeed, buying is arguably changing from purely operational to much more strategic. This paper addresses the complex nature of fast fashion buying through case studies with a supermarket, department store and own brand label. It is proposed that effective buying behaviour for fast fashion focuses on the management of a portfolio of suppliers, relationship building, as well as interfacing effectively with internal activities.

### Dynamics of fast fashion

The fashion retail market is split into a number of segments – luxury, high street, and supermarket/out-of-town discounter. Gannaway (1999) suggests that “supermarkets



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are racing to make apparel an even smarter cash generator". The entrance of supermarkets into the clothing market has increased competition and redefined how customers shop for clothing, with time-starved customers able to purchase cheap fashionable clothing as part of the weekly shop, rather than visiting the high street. Indeed, fast fashion is a growing phenomenon in the UK.

Zara is a specialist fashion chain and an important example of a fast fashion retailer, with rapid stock turnaround and vertical integration. Indeed, Zara is credited with being a leader in fast fashion (*The Economist*, 2005; *Strategic Direction*, 2005, Foroohar and Stabe, 2005). However, contributing to Zara's success is its focus on a limited range of and basic shapes, so that it deals with a rather narrow product range. However, fast fashion does not apply to the whole range in stores, and as much as 80 per cent of goods may be core and basic lines, with fast fashion accounting for up to 20 per cent (Mintel, 2002a, b). The cases explored in this paper are offering fast fashion in addition to other products. This raises the question of how are the demands of buying for fast fashion met alongside buying activities for other lines?

#### *Timing is a priority*

Fast fashion has the objective of getting clothing into store within the shortest time possible. This has resulted in an increasing number of "seasons", and shipping times from suppliers must be taken in to consideration (Mintel, 2002a, b). Distance is key – goods from China can have a shipping time of 22 days, compared to five days from Turkey (*Financial Times*, 2005a, b, c, d, e, f). Retailers are switching production to Eastern Europe, Turkey and India, in response to competition from fast fashion specialists, such as Zara, who are able to push the latest trends quickly by sourcing closer to home (*Financial Times*, 2005a, b, c, d, e, f). Some high street retailers are sourcing and buying on a weekly basis to introduce new fashionable items and to replenish stock.

Companies in the fashion industry are increasingly using time as a factor for enhancing competitiveness. Development cycles are becoming shorter, transportation and delivery more efficient and merchandise is presented "floor ready" on hangers and with tickets attached (Birtwistle *et al.*, 2003). In response to the pace of fast fashion, companies in the Far East are becoming increasingly adept at moving from the manufacture of commodity products to incorporating design and branding.

#### *Cost factors*

Cost is still uppermost in the buying decision and companies are taking advantage of lower priced products from overseas (Lowson, 2001; Mattila *et al.*, 2002), often from the Far East, Italy, Portugal and Turkey (Vinhas Da Silva *et al.*, 2002). In 2004 developing countries accounted for nearly 75 per cent of all clothing exports (*Financial Times*, 2004), and more recently, with the removal of trade quotas, companies have greater opportunity to take advantage of goods from low-cost overseas manufacturers.

#### *Fashion buying cycle*

The traditional fashion buying cycle is based on long-term forecasts from historical sales, and occurs one year before a season, with leads for orders placed six months prior to product launch (Birtwistle *et al.*, 2003). However, there is a risk of inaccuracy from out-of-date data and difficulties in predicting popular sellers (Birtwistle, 2003). It

is estimated that merchandise sold at mark-down price has grown to over 33 per cent, that one in three customers cannot find goods required in stock and that pre-season forecasts errors may be as high as 50 per cent. In comparison, forecasts based on 20 per cent of sales had errors as low as 8 per cent (Fisher and Raman, 1996, cited in Mattila *et al.*, 2002). Constant reductions and sales aim to get rid of unwanted stock quickly and replace this with more fashionable items.

In companies with a focus on fast fashion, buying can occur frequently, even on a weekly basis (Kline and Wagner, 1994):

[...] so there'll always be something being bought every week, whether it'll be one line or 20 lines. It depends on what stage they're at in their placing order stage. You know, from a buying point of view, they wouldn't say oh I'm ... and sit down and place all their orders, it's not like that. It's just very ad hoc, it's just reacting (Interview Merchandiser, 24.2.05).

A frequent buying strategy results in higher overall costs, but reduces excess stock/markdowns and out-of-stock/lost sales.

By using quick response (QR) companies aim to reduce both excess stock holding in the supply chain and risk associated with forecasting as product specifications are not finalised until closer to delivery (Birtwistle *et al.*, 2003). The focus is on demand rather than forecasting, which requires close partnerships between the retailer and its suppliers (Birtwistle *et al.*, 2003). However, companies recognise that a quick response strategy can result in forecast accuracy as high as 95 per cent, with 95 per cent sell-through and goods delivered directly to store (Mattila *et al.*, 2002).

When product is manufactured in low-labour cost countries such as the Far East, replenishment/re-manufacture is not practical due to long-lead times. Indeed, the decision to source globally may be made without consideration of the true costs associated with such a move (Mattila *et al.*, 2002). Hines (2001) identifies a number of hidden costs associated with overseas sourcing, whilst transportation delays, costs and quality issues are also problems (Lui and McGoldrick, 1996; Popp, 2000).

Many companies use a combination of manufacturers, with low-cost basic lines supplied by the Far East, fashion lines supplied by North Africa and Eastern Europe, and replenishment/re-manufacture from UK manufacturers (Birtwistle *et al.*, 2003). An off-shore/local sourcing mix is one strategy a retailer may adopt.

#### *Approaches to supply-chain management for fast fashion*

The increasing size of retail organisations and homogenisation of merchandise means vendor selection is a key activity (Moin, 1986; cited in Wagner *et al.*, 1989). Many vendor selection criteria are particular to the retail industry, such as the role of the buyer in meeting company profit objectives, and that goods purchased are intended for re-sale. Consequently, retail buyers use information regarding sales history, merchandise fashionability (Wagner *et al.*, 1989) and supplier ethics (Shaw and Tomolillo, 2004) for vendor selection.

Important factors of negotiation for buyers include responsiveness, price, time of payment, stock keeping, cooperative activities, volume, delivery times and physical distribution, product quality and specifications, manufacturer assortment (Bowlby and Foord, 1995; cited in Hansen and Skytte, 1998). The fashion buyer makes trade-offs between factors, especially price, packaging, assortment, and delivery (Dandeo *et al.*, 2004). In a fast fashion environment, time and cost are the key parameters dominating vendor selection.

Often, fashion companies combine agile (Abernathy, 2000; Naylor *et al.*, 1999) and lean supply chain management to respond to changing markets through rapid replenishment (Iacocca Institute, 1991; Hiebelar *et al.*, 1998). The use of information technology to share data is crucial for agile supply (Harrison *et al.*, 1999) as it improves visibility of requirements and reduces the amount of stock (Hewwit, 1999). The adoption of the lean principles is appropriate for commodity products with predictable demand, whilst agile principles are relevant for innovative products unpredictable demand (Childerhouse and Towill, 2000). A combination of the two is known as “leagile” (Van Hoek, 2000; Bruce *et al.*, 2004).

So, within a fast fashion environment, traditional approaches to sourcing, buying and the momentum of the fashion cycle are challenged. A portfolio of supplier relationships offering a balance between time to deliver and cost is emerging. A blend of close to market suppliers for the introduction of new products mid-season and long distance suppliers for cheap core and commodity items is important. In other words, sourcing strategies are placed within the framework of a leagile approach.

- P1. Leagile approach is appropriate for supply chain management for fast fashion.

#### *Managing a portfolio of supplier relationships*

Relationship building is argued to be a key aspect of a buyer's role (Wingate and Friedlander, 1978; cited in Fiorito, 1990). A company will have a variety of relationships ranging from close partnerships with key suppliers to develop products, through to distant relationships for a one-off purchase and an emphasis on getting the lowest price (Table I). Kilduff (2005) suggests that an adversarial and arm's length approach is typical of fashion retailers. Often long-term relationships will involve social and interpersonal relationships, as well as formal and contractual relationships between organisations (Bruce and Morris, 1998; Palmer, 2000; Tucker and Jones, 2002). Within fast fashion, the question arises, are long-established suppliers able to provide a time-compressed service in a tight budget? Some suppliers are investing in design capabilities to reduce time to market to achieve these constraints. Buyers have to switch supply to bring on-stream local suppliers to introduce innovation rapidly into the market which may involve buying weekly. Flexibility is critical in fast fashion to ensure rapid replenishment.

In a partnership the emphasis is not always on price, but on trust and the long-standing relationship between the two companies. The comments of senior buyers in departmental stores illustrate this well, as follows:

If it was only cost we would go out of business tomorrow because as far as the customer is concerned they go a retailer because they can trust it. “I might not always find what I want but at least the quality is going to be good irrespective of where that product is manufactured”, and with the same ethical quality that you would expect in the UK (Menswear Buyer, Major Department Store).

We tend to work direct with factories as much as we can, we don't, we try not to work through agents. That's really so that we can have, not necessarily the best prices but we can have as much one on one contact, therefore we've got quite a tight supply base but it's a supply base that we've known for a long time, they understand what the company is all about, they've been with us for the last five years, right from the beginning, and that's very important, the relationship that we have with them (Buying manager, Major Department Store).

Relationship	Characteristics
Strategic alliance (Dossenbach, 1999; McCutcheon and Stuart, 2000; Hines, 2001)	Integrate core competencies and add value to the relationship
Cooperative (Ford, 1980; Ford, 1997)	Equality
Partnership (Croom <i>et al.</i> 2000; Ford <i>et al.</i> , 1998; Buttle, 1996a, b)	Information is shared
Collaborative (Loughlin, 1999; Williams <i>et al.</i> , 2002)	A more efficient supply chain
Operational partnership (Hines, 2001)	A partnership based on one partner benefiting from the other's core competence Partners may not benefit equally More risk for one of the partners Information sharing is selective
Opportunistic partnership (Hines, 2001; Williams <i>et al.</i> , 2002; Bruce and Morris, 1998)	One party performs activities that the other no longer will Power inequality One party gains at the expense of the other Risk for one partner Information rarely shared
Arms length (Gadde and Snehota, 2000)	Short-term
Adversarial (Stuart, 1997; Towill <i>et al.</i> , 2000; Ford, 1980)	Competitive
Conflictual (Ford, 1997)	Price-focused
	Low quality

Source: Daly (2004)

**Table I.**  
Types of relationships

- P2. A blend of long-standing and short-term relationships is appropriate for fast fashion.

### *Internal interfaces*

However, internal relationships between members of the buying team are as important as external relationships, as the team makes both buying and assortment decisions. Fashion buying is a key role and it has been suggested that the various retailer functional activities are used to facilitate and assist the buyer in purchasing merchandise that satisfies consumer demand (Rachman, 1979; cited in Fiorito, 1990). Typically, the buyer will liaise closely with merchandising and design. The following quote from a merchandiser in a high-street fashion retailer illustrates this point well:

So, it's really the merchandisers who once the stocks in place, and you've got delivery dates on it, it's really the merchandisers role to make sure that they're (Buyers) still happy with those lines coming in. I mean often the buyer has to get involved because a lot of it's about styling and colour, but for example you know white's not working and we've got two more lines coming in and I'd be like "should we still be doing them and is there any opportunity to change it, you know anything like that" (Interview Merchandiser, 24.2.05).

The process is likely to involve considerable information, including market trends, and consumer behaviour (Johansson, 2002) and also longer-term trends in the supply

market, e.g. concentration and switching costs. Often standardised and modified re-buys require internal and operational information, including sales and cost figures (Johansson, 2002). Thus, fashion buying has strategic implications for the retailer as wrong decisions can have disastrous consequences for retailer reputation and economic performance. The buyer works closely with design functions to ensure a fit between trend forecasting and the consumer profile. One of the acknowledged leaders in fast fashion is Zara, which has tight internal processes, of which design, buying, production and merchandising are core (*The Economist*, 2005, Strategic Direction, 2005, Foroohar and Stabe, 2005).

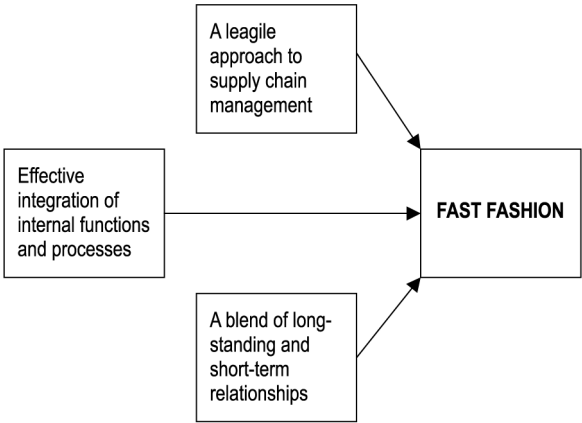
P3. Fast fashion requires effective integration of internal functions and processes. These propositions are summarised in the model shown in Figure 1. It is proposed that buying for fast fashion encompasses a leagile approach to supply chain management; supplier relationships comprised of a mix of long-standing and short-term relationships; and, the effective integration of internal functions and processes. These elements enable the flexibility and speed of response to market demands demanded by fast fashion.

*Aims and methods*

The overall aim of the paper is to understand the role of sourcing and buying in a fast fashion context. As such, the objectives are to:

- identify the key parameters of the fast fashion environment;
- highlight their impact on sourcing and buying activities;
- explore the approach taken to sourcing and relationship building; and
- examine organisation of internal processes to support fast fashion.

Three companies were selected for case studies, one supermarket retailer, one department store and one specialist fashion chain. It was felt that this then would give a representation of the recent changes in the fashion retail sector, and facilitate an analysis of the approaches to sourcing across the different sub-sectors, enabling identification of similarities and disparities.



**Figure 1.**  
Model of sourcing for fast fashion

A case study methodology was employed to gain insight into the approaches and processes adopted by companies. Semi-structured interviews were held with senior executives representing sourcing, buying and merchandising activities and also, where possible with overseas agents and first tier suppliers. An “aide-memoire” was used to underpin interviews and allow for collection of comparative information, probing and more in-depth discussions. Secondary sources were used, including company documentation, newspaper reports, trade journals, web sites and market reports. Interviewees were involved in the development of case studies in order to ensure validity and reliability of the research. Content analysis elicited the main themes concerning sourcing and buying in a fast fashion context.

### *Cases*

Each of the cases presented illustrate sourcing and buying in a fast fashion context. The department store has own-brand and private label collections with fast fashion targeted at the young consumer. The supermarket has its own brand collection, which is aimed at a broad age and size category of women and family consumers and includes accessories and shoes to put together a complete outfit. The specialist chain centres around a classic style with in-seasonal changes to update the collection and to respond quickly to the changing market demands.

### **Case study A: Supermarket**

#### *Company background*

Company A is a major high UK retailer, with over 375 stores nationwide, and a further 155 franchised stores overseas. The company has a turnover of £7.3 billion, and in 2003 saw a profit of £822.9 million. The company employs approximately 66,000 people in UK stores and head office. The company has its own brand fashion, which ranges from teenagers to young women to older women, seeking a more “classic style”. Men’s wear along these categories is offered too.

#### *The buying function*

Buying is a crucial activity and is well represented at Board level. The structure is flat, with the buyer/product developer reporting to the director for their department, who then reports to the executive director. This allows decisions to be made rapidly, which is essential in a fast-moving market such as clothing retail.

There are both operational and strategic elements to the buyer’s role. Operational work includes liaising with current suppliers, but at the same time the team is thinking more strategically about how the company should optimise the combination of product, speed to market and cost.

The buying function is split into multi-functional departmental teams. This enables the buyer to work closely with the merchandiser and garment technologist for that product area. However, it does mean that the company does not aggregate orders for product types across the business, in order to leverage scale.

#### *The buying process*

The process is complex and comprises a number of activities, including analysing sales figures for the current season to identify strengths and weaknesses. The buyer conducts trend shopping in New York, Paris and Milan, and also comparison-shopping



in the UK in order to identify competitor activity. Concurrently, the merchandiser develops the buying budget, deciding on the number of UPCs to be merchandised in stores, and on the total quantities of products required.

Finally, the team works with suppliers to define the production programmes, including pre-production, production planning, capability planning and delivery to stores.

#### *Sourcing*

Company A sources 45 per cent of its product from Europe, Eastern Europe, Turkey and Morocco, and the remaining 55 per cent from India, Sri Lanka and China. Decisions are based on whether the product is “core” or “fashion”. Demand for a core product is much more stable and easily forecast, and therefore more suitable for manufacturing in a low labour-cost country with long lead times than a fashion product with unpredictable demand.

Suppliers are categorised into two types – full service vendor and direct factory, depending on the working relationship, and the nature of the work. The decision rests with the buying team, and is based on capability. Company A will always choose to manufacture in a full service vendor providing the garment can be produced at the right quality, price, design, and lead time. If this is not possible then the product will be produced in a direct factory.

The full service vendor plays an important role for the company’s success, collaboratively designing the product, and managing the manufacturing process. Company A only pays a full service vendor for the goods as they are moved into store from the supplier’s warehousing facility.

The relationship between a direct factory and Company A is much more arms length. Company A designs the product in-house and develops the pre-production package, which is then passed to the factory for sampling and production. Following manufacture Company A will arrange for a logistics operator to transport the goods to a Company A owned warehouse. Direct factories are paid FOB.

#### *Internal processes*

Within the buying function there is a mix of bottom-up and top-down information sharing. The buying team takes a bottom-up approach to sharing trend information. This information and information on sales is shared with the top 15 suppliers, which account for some 80 per cent of the total supply base.

The board share strategic information including future aims and strategies downwards with the buying team. This allows the buying team to take account of such considerations when developing collections.

### **Case study B: Department store**

#### *Company background*

Company B is the leading department store for branded goods in the UK with a reputation for quality and with retail stores in all the major cities throughout the UK. The target market consists of top-end customers, falling in A, B and C1 sub-groups. A focus is placed on identifying exclusive niche brands.

For women’s wear, the company buys in brands and also develops a number of brands in-house. Customers range from “fashion lover” to “traditional”, with



traditional customer's needs being met solely by concessions. Bought-in brands include Diesel and Miss Sixty, through to Jerry Weber and MaxMara. Own brands are designed for the younger consumer; another line for career customers; and a third category for classic customers.

### *The buying function*

The company works closely with suppliers when developing ranges. Information for themes comes from Worth Global Style Network, catwalk shows and information held by the designers themselves. Teamwork plays a key role, and buyers and designers get together weekly to share ideas. Suppliers provide up-to-date market and trend information.

Manufacturers play a key role in designing ranges – either the buyer suggests an idea to the manufacturer who designs a product to meet requirements, or the buying team select from a collection that has been produced by the manufacturer.

A colour pallet is defined for each season, but if a new colour emerges mid-season the company is in a position to address this. This allows greater flexibility, as fast fashion moves quickly. By buying weekly the company is able to address any emerging trends and also to pull out of ranges that are not working quickly and easily. Within this brand, it is generally felt that if a product is not selling within two weeks it is unlikely to be a successful product, and thus will be marked down accordingly.

A seasonal plan exists but will change according to market behaviour. If a product is selling well the team will trade above the original plan. The buyer is given a weekly buying budget to address the fast moving nature of the market. This can be complex to manage, as product is bought from suppliers in Turkey, the Far East and the UK.

### *Internal processes*

Designing a range begins approximately one year before the product is due in store, and initially involves looking at budgets and different options including colour, which is done using a colour consultant. Fabric boards are built with information from Premier Vision.

After, sketches will be developed and sent to manufacturers (mostly based in Hong Kong) giving details of the key stages for the season. Manufacturers have their own design team and communicate with the UK designers using information technology.

The next stage in the design process begins with a trip to Hong Kong, to view manufacturer samples. Once in Hong Kong, issues such as collection themes, moods for the season and final decisions on colour will be discussed. Delivery phasing is also discussed, deciding at what point in the season it is appropriate to introduce different themes.

Once the team is back in the UK the collection is organised into a series of monthly packs, decided by the team through a process of meetings, and signed off by the buying director. The team also budgets for trends that arise during the season. Feedback from retail outlets is crucial and this information is shared on a weekly basis throughout the company.

### *Sourcing*

The company prefers to liaise directly with manufacturers, rather than using agents, as the one-on-one contact that this provides is important. The company has used the same

supply base since the range was introduced five years ago, and has developed strong relationships. Often buyers and designers bring suppliers with them from other organisations; otherwise they are sourced by word-of-mouth.

To meet the demands of fast fashion consumers, the company is building relationships with “up-and-coming” artists from areas including Spitalfields Market and Portobello Market to invest in a local supply base. This allows the company to introduce weekly changes to its collection.

From the perspective of one Hong Kong-based manufacturer, people are an important relationship factor. Communication can often be difficult, which is why they choose to deal directly with their clients. Relationships between organisations enable the two companies are able to define the critical path and order confirmations together. Trust is important as suppliers intuitively know the company’s product and quality requirements.

### **Case company C: Specialist fashion chain**

Company C is a global designer lifestyle brand and in 1970 opened its first retail outlet. Today, the company has over 220 shops worldwide, with merchandise sold in over 42 countries, and an annual turnover in excess of £180 million.

#### *The buying function*

Company C is privately owned by designers, and the approach to fast fashion is design driven. The owners are “hands on” and involved day-to-day with key collection and sourcing decisions. Buying is incorporated in the multi-functional team that is responsible for sourcing fabrics, dyes, embellishments and accessories. The technical activity liaises with fabric mills and other suppliers to ensure that the products are produced to the appropriate quality and on time.

#### *Internal processes*

The company’s core competencies come from design and company culture, which is “friendly, trusting and relaxed”, enabling effective communication and job satisfaction. The designer has excellent technical knowledge, which is used to create evolutionary products.

The team is small and cross-functional and integrates design, technical design development, production and sales. This enables effective communication between functions throughout the process of putting the collection together.

A major role of the technical assistant is to liaise with factories, and check that the right product components are sent out to the right factories at the right times, and to communicate between the factory and the designer until fabrics are correct.

#### *Sourcing*

The majority of fabrics are sourced from Italian mills. The company has good relationships with ten manufacturers, to facilitate negotiation on volumes and lead times; some have been working with the company for 15 years. Company C is active in building relationships, visiting the mills personally to build a rapport, and ensuring that technical staff have good language skills. They also have a portfolio of another 20-30 companies that they use on a less frequent basis, and “flavour of the month”

mills, which tend to have short-term relationships often only lasting for up to two seasons. The company does not work through agents. Buyer behaviour

The company has established strong relationships with both the factory floor and CAD programmers at knitwear manufacturers. Although factories are technologically advanced they are often hesitant to try new styles, and it is the technical assistant's job to encourage and teach them, requiring diplomacy so as not to break down relationships.

### Discussion and managerial implications

It is clear that fast fashion has become a way of life for fashion companies in the UK and they have adapted their supply base and internal processes to manage the speed and flexibility required to meet the resulting demands. The impact of fast fashion is in the increasing number of "seasons" and the management of a portfolio of suppliers to balance time of delivery and cost for core and basic lines and fast fashion items. Fast fashion does not apply to the whole range in store, indeed, 80 per cent of fashion may be core and basic lines with fast fashion accounting for about 20 per cent. The cases give a snapshot from each main category of fashion retailer, including supermarket, department store and retailer formats. The approaches the companies take to managing suppliers, the relationships with these and the internal processes for fast fashion are compared in Table II.

Common to each case was an integrated internal process whereby sourcing, buying, merchandising and design interfaced effectively to enable rapid decisions about the collection to be made. Technology was used in internal processes and the supply chain to convey the design of the collection, to enable changes to be made quickly and to speed up the design agreement and signing off process. In some cases, sourcing and management of suppliers was an integrated aspect of buying, as in the supermarket case. For the specialist fashion company, the technical team liaised closely with the suppliers, together with the buyers, to ensure that the design was interpreted correctly and to speed up the production time. For all three cases, merchandising was a separate activity, but was involved closely in the whole process of ensuring that product was presented in store quickly. The supermarket tended to react to trends set by the catwalk shows and had a readiness to bring fashion reflecting trends quickly into

	Company A	Company B	Company C
Relationship types	Long-term Partnership Short-term Arm's length	Long-term Partnership Close Short-term Adversarial Trust	Long-term Partnership Rosta of short-term Social element Trust
Integration of internal processes	Design, buying, sourcing, merchandising Board level	Design, buying, merchandising	Design, production, technical, merchandising Board level
Approach to sourcing	Leagile	Leagile	Lean

**Table II.**  
Case comparisons

store. The specialist chain was involved in setting trends and was able to bring in-seasonal changes, using shorter print runs from European suppliers to update stock. The department store had an in-house design team to produce its own innovative garments, and outsourced its youth brand to a separate company to design, manufacture and be store ready. This youth brand was produced in short print runs from Eastern Europe and introduced in-seasonal changes on a weekly basis. Weekly purchases were made to update stock.

A portfolio of relationships were managed by the buying team. These included a mixture of European or local suppliers to overseas suppliers to maximise cost efficiencies and to trade off with time to store. In other words, all were operating in a context of leagile and had a complex array of relationships to manage to implement this approach. Relationships contained social elements, as well as operating at arms-length. The specialist fashion company employed buyers with language skills and an insight into Italian business practices, in order to develop an empathic relationship. The approach was to engage the suppliers as part of the “family” with the underlying belief that this would ensure priority treatment to facilitate on-time delivery. The supermarket operated a vendor selection programme encompassing ethical sourcing. Relationships were arm’s-length and if the supplier failed to meet with expectations, then they would be changed. This approach was intended to prevent a complacent attitude and to put pressure on the suppliers to deliver. The department store managed relationships directly with the suppliers in the Far East and relationships were akin to a partnership. Trust was built up over time and quality assurance was delegated to the supply base. Rapid replenishment of fast fashion stock was from Europe and buyers dealt directly with suppliers buying weekly to keep abreast of market trends.

### Conclusions

The dynamic environment of fast fashion has been a challenge to retailers. They have had to adapt internal processes to manage the fast fashion cycle and review the supply base to meet the cost and time demands for fast fashion. The strategic role of the fashion buyer has not been explored in current academic literature, but with the dynamic market context in which fashion retailers are placed, this role needs to be examined. This presents opportunities for significant future academic research into the nature and processes of fast fashion sourcing across the various retail segments, and ways in which retailers manage core and fast fashion product portfolios.

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