



THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF THE FASHION INDUSTRY

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As the economy continues to grow and evolve, one of the many bright spots of the new creative economy is the fashion industry. With numerous high-value jobs that pay high wages, fashion is now having a big economic impact not only in fashion centers on the coasts, but also in smaller cities around the country.

Fashion is a more than \$1.75 trillion global industry, according to one estimate, with nearly \$370 billion spent on apparel and footwear in the United States in 2014.¹ Fashion- and apparel-related industries employ more than 1.8 million people in the United States and have a positive impact on regional economies across the country.² The New York City and Los Angeles metropolitan areas are the two largest fashion hubs in the United States, with nearly two-thirds of all fashion designers employed in these areas.³ But they are not the whole story, and cities such as San Diego, Dallas, Kansas City, Oakland and San Francisco are beginning to reap economic benefits, including high-paying jobs in fashion design.⁴

Fashion is a structurally diverse industry, ranging from major international retailers to wholesalers to large design houses to one-person design shops. The industry employs people across occupations—including fashion designers, computer programmers, lawyers, accountants, copywriters, social media directors and project managers. According to a report by the California Fashion Association, manufacturing is only a fraction of the modern apparel industry, as “it is a highly sophisticated industry involving fashion and market research, brand licensing/intellectual property rights, design, materials engineering, product manufacturing, marketing and finally, distribution.”⁵

U.S. Apparel Manufacturing Produces High-Fashion, High-Value Products

The fashion industry in America has changed dramatically over the past century. In 1931, the Garment District in New York was home to the highest concentration of clothing manufacturers in the world.⁶ Many of these jobs have since moved offshore. Over the past quarter-century, U.S. employment in the apparel manufacturing industry has declined sharply, from almost 940,000 in 1990 to about 143,000 in 2014.⁷

However, while many apparel manufacturing jobs have left the United States, new high-value fashion industry jobs are being created in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco and other U.S. cities. As with many industries in the manufacturing sector, the United States now concentrates on the high-value parts of the apparel global supply chain: research and development (R&D), design, and marketing.⁸ Jobs in these fields require more education and training—and they also hold the prospects of higher wages.⁹

The U.S. apparel manufacturing industry currently runs a trade deficit. Through July, U.S. apparel exports in 2015 total roughly \$3.5 billion, while imports are about \$49.3 billion.¹⁰ Over one-third of these imports come from China (35 percent), with Vietnam (12 percent), Bangladesh (6 percent), Indonesia (6 percent) and India (5 percent) rounding out the top five.¹¹ While many apparel products are manufactured overseas, much of the value that goes into them is generated in the United States. Various studies note that

conventional trade statistics may overstate the size of the trade deficit because they fail to accurately capture the value added at different stages of the design and development process.¹²

Other consumer products, such as smart phones, electronics, and toys, operate with similar business models. Profits in these industries derive more from establishing a strong brand name, researching market needs and finding a niche than from scaling up production of a product and pushing it out to retailers.¹³ Recent studies focusing on Apple's iPod—an example of a product designed and distributed in this country but largely manufactured overseas—have found that many of the highest-value, highest-wage activities take place right here in the United States.¹⁴

While much apparel manufacturing now takes place overseas, what remains in the United States is focused on high-fashion, high-value, quick-turnaround, high-margin orders. Computer-aided design helps designers turn concepts into samples, and helps manufacturers move from prototype to finished product on an accelerated timetable.

Cities like New York and Los Angeles retain manufacturing bases that support the fashion industry. Apparel manufacturing represents three-in-ten manufacturing jobs in New York City.¹⁵ Nearly two-in-ten manufacturing firms in the Los Angeles area are in the apparel and textile business.¹⁶

The Fashion Industry Creates High-Paying Jobs

Overall, fashion- and apparel-related industries employ more than 1.8 million workers across the country, in professions requiring a range of education and skills.¹⁷

The number of people working as fashion designers in the United States has grown by nearly 50 percent in the past 10 years to nearly 18,000.¹⁸ Fashion designers—the profession at the heart of the industry's creative process—are concentrated in apparel industries, namely manufacturing and wholesale merchandising. Across industries, fashion designers earn an average of \$73,690 annually (see **Table**).

The U.S. apparel manufacturing industry employs nearly 143,000 workers. While there are still occupations such as sewing machine operators, tailors, and textile machine operators who earn lower wages, today's manufacturing jobs include a number of higher-paying occupations. These include market research analysts and marketing specialists, who earn \$64,830 annually on average, and computer professionals, who earn \$73,220 on average. Also within the production stages, fabric and apparel patternmakers earn an average of \$52,150.

The wholesale apparel merchandising sector employs roughly 145,000 individuals. These include graphic designers earning \$48,320 on average; production, planning and expediting clerks earning \$47,680 on average; and installation, maintenance and repair workers earning \$43,430 on average.

The majority of fashion and apparel jobs are in the retail sector, with more than 1.4 million individuals employed throughout the country in retail establishments. These jobs, on average, pay \$26,650 per year, but even within the retail sector there are higher-wage jobs for accountants, auditors, buyers, purchasing agents and others. Marketing and sales managers, for example, earn \$84,600 on average.

Table: Employment in Selected Fashion and Apparel Industries and Occupations

	Number of Employees	Median Hourly Wage	Average Annual Wage
Fashion Designers (All Industries)	17,840	\$30.78	\$73,690
Apparel Manufacturing Industry (All Occupations)	142,860	\$11.37	\$34,110
<i>Selected Occupations</i>			
• Market research analysts and marketing specialists	570	\$28.84	\$64,830
• Computer occupations (such as information analysts, developers, and system administrators)	940	\$33.93	\$73,220
• Industrial machinery installation, repair, and maintenance workers	1,660	\$16.73	\$36,610
• Fabric and apparel patternmakers	2,770	\$23.34	\$52,150
• Tailors, dressmakers, and sewers	3,050	\$11.38	\$27,510
• Textile bleaching and dyeing machine operators	560	\$11.47	\$26,440
Apparel Wholesale Merchandising Industry (All Occupations)	144,850	\$17.21	\$52,350
<i>Selected Occupations</i>			
• Graphic designers	1,450	\$21.44	\$48,320
• Merchandise displayers and window trimmers	280	\$15.12	\$35,680
• Production, planning, and expediting clerks	2,420	\$20.62	\$47,680
• Installation, maintenance, and repair occupations	650	\$19.75	\$43,430
Apparel Retailers (All Occupations)	1,425,380	\$9.93	\$26,650
<i>Selected Occupations</i>			
• Marketing and sales managers	5,490	\$32.18	\$84,600
• Accountants and auditors	1,570	\$30.36	\$69,960
• Buyers and purchasing agents	2,710	\$24.37	\$56,550
Source: JEC Democratic staff based on data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment Statistics (May 2014 data).			

New York City is a World Fashion Capital

New York City is one of the world’s fashion capitals, along with Paris, Milan and London. According to the New York City Economic Development Corporation (NYCEDC), more than 900 fashion companies have their headquarters in New York City, and the city is the largest retail market in the country, generating more than \$18 billion in annual retail sales.¹⁹

According to NYCEDC, the fashion industry employs more than 183,000 people in New York City; approximately half of them work in retail.²⁰ The industry pays nearly \$11 billion in wages and generates almost \$2 billion in tax revenue each year.²¹ Fashion trade shows, showrooms and fashion shows attract more than half a million visitors annually to New York City.²²

New York City’s preeminent role in the fashion world is showcased during the city’s semiannual Fashion Weeks, which are held in February and September each year.²³ Fashion Week generates close to \$900 million in total economic impact each year, including more than \$500 million in direct visitor spending, according to an analysis by the NYCEDC.²⁴ The economic benefit from Fashion Week surpasses events such as the New York City Marathon (\$340 million in 2010), the 2014 Super Bowl in New Jersey (about \$550 million) and the U.S. Open (about \$800 million).²⁵

New York is a hub for major fashion publications such as Women’s Wear Daily, Vogue and Harper’s Bazaar, and home to some of the largest advertising companies in the world. The city has sophisticated media and marketing resources that designers can utilize to promote their products and build their brands. New York is the headquarters of such internationally recognized brands as Ann Taylor, Calvin Klein, Rocawear and DKNY.

The Fashion Industry’s Footprint Expands to Cities Across the Country

Beyond the New York City and Los Angeles areas, which have the highest concentrations of fashion designers in the country, several cities are building their own reputations for fashion design. According to the most recent data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there are about 350 fashion designers in the Bay Area, including both San Francisco (where Levi Strauss & Co. and Gap Inc. are headquartered) and Oakland.²⁶ Average annual earnings among fashion designers in the Bay Area are roughly the same as the average salary of about \$80,000 that fashion designers make in the New York City area. In addition, the San Diego area, where Reef sandals and the apparel companies Tribal Wear and Bad Boy are headquartered, is home to more than 250 fashion designers, earning an average of about \$67,000 per year. Outside of the coasts, Dallas and Kansas City are each home to about 200 fashion designers, with average annual earnings of about \$60,000 and \$48,000, respectively. Columbus and Nashville have also been listed among the most fashion-forward cities in the United States.²⁷

Fashion is Part of the Creative Economy

More than 200 postsecondary schools across the country offer fashion-related programs and prepare students for jobs in the fashion industry.²⁸ These programs build skills that are marketable not only in fashion, but across industries. For instance, more than 5 percent of fashion designers worked in the motion picture and video industries in 2014.²⁹

Three of the most prominent design schools are located in New York City—Parsons The New School for Design, Pratt Institute and Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT). The Los Angeles area is home to several schools with programs dedicated to apparel design and merchandising, including the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising and Otis College of Art and Design. The Rhode Island School of Design and Columbus College of Art and Design also are well-known for their strong design programs.

In addition to preparing students for careers in the fashion industry, many design schools have a significant positive economic impact in their areas. For example, FIT attracts more than 200,000 visitors each year to its Chelsea campus, including 105,000 visitors to the Museum at FIT, and generates more than \$280 million of spending in New York.³⁰

Fashion Clusters Promote Knowledge-Sharing and Efficiency Gains

The fashion industry is characterized by clusters of activity, whether in the large fashion hubs of New York or Los Angeles or in smaller hubs in a number of states. This mirrors trends in a range of industries, where clusters often develop in certain regions—for example, technology and computing in Silicon Valley, the film industry in Los Angeles, and life sciences in a number of areas including suburban Maryland and North Carolina’s Research Triangle.³¹

Research shows there are economic benefits when businesses in a particular industry cluster together in close proximity. This allows these businesses to take advantage of a skilled pool of labor and build relationships between suppliers and producers.³² Local educational institutions may develop specialized curricula and partner with area businesses to prepare students to enter jobs in the industry. Knowledge-sharing across businesses can foster innovation and enhance productivity, helping to boost wages for workers in the industry cluster.³³ Successful industry clusters can also enhance economic opportunity for workers in other industries in the area by spurring demand.³⁴

Reshoring: Signs Show that Some Apparel Manufacturing is Returning to the United States

At the same time that the United States is specializing in the high-value-added parts of the supply chain, there are signs that companies may be bringing some production back home. In fact, according to the global strategy and management consulting firm A.T. Kearney, apparel was the third largest reshoring industry in the manufacturing sector in 2014 and accounts for 12 percent of manufacturing reshoring cases since 2010.³⁵ This may stem in part from an increasing recognition of the value of “fast fashion”—which is characterized by short production and distribution lead-times, smaller product runs, and a focus on trendy product design.³⁶ Fashion retailers may be better able to keep up with emerging trends and complete orders faster by shortening their supply chains and locating some production in the United States.

Conclusion

Fashion is a sophisticated, thriving industry that employs people in a diverse set of occupations across the United States. Apparel manufacturing is only one piece of the industry. As the industry has evolved, U.S. employers have changed with it, focusing on the high-value parts—R&D, design and marketing. Jobs in these fields pay well, and demand for these skills is growing.

Fashion is big business. In New York City alone, it is a \$98 billion industry.³⁷ While much of the industry’s economic impact is concentrated in New York and Los Angeles, where most U.S. fashion designers live and work, cities all across the country are seeing positive economic impacts from the fashion industry. As retailers and fashion designers cluster outside the traditional fashion hubs, this can help facilitate innovation in the fashion industry and benefit other industries in those regions as well.

Today’s fashion industry looks very different from even 25 years ago. Fashion design schools are arming graduates with the advertising, design, web and other skills needed to compete in the rapidly changing global fashion industry. With numerous high-paying jobs in the industry, the United States should look to extend its leadership in the fashion world.

Endnotes

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- ¹ Euromonitor International, "[New Insights in the Apparel and Footwear Market in 2015](#)" (March 26, 2015); Bureau of Economic Analysis, "[Table 2.4.5 Personal Consumption Expenditures by Type of Product](#)," line 30 (last revised August 6, 2015); for the purposes of this calculation, fashion is defined as apparel (clothing) and footwear products.
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- ³ JEC Democratic staff calculations based on data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, "[Occupational Employment and Wages, May 2014](#)," 27-1022 Fashion Designers (March 2015).
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Los Angeles County Economic Development Corporation, "[The Los Angeles Area Fashion Industry Profile](#)" (November 2011).
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- ⁷ Bureau of Labor Statistics, "[Apparel Manufacturing: NAICS 315](#)" (accessed September 10, 2015); Bureau of Labor Statistics, "[May 2014 National Industry-Specific Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates](#)" (March 2015).
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- ¹⁴ Kenneth L. Kraemer, Greg Linden and Jason Dedrick, "[Capturing Value in Global Networks: Apple's iPad and iPhone](#)" (July 2011).
- ¹⁵ New York City Economic Development Corporation, "[Fashion.NYC.2020](#)" (accessed September 10, 2015).
- ¹⁶ CIT Group and the California Fashion Association, "[The Los Angeles Area: Fashion Industry Profile and 2014 Outlook](#)" (accessed September 10, 2015).
- ¹⁷ JEC Democratic staff calculations based on data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, "[May 2014 National Industry-Specific Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates](#)" (March 2015). This includes employees working in the following industries: textile mills; apparel manufacturing; footwear manufacturing; apparel, piece goods, and notions merchant wholesalers; and clothing and clothing accessories stores.
- ¹⁸ JEC Democratic staff calculations based on data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, "[Occupational Employment and Wages, May 2014](#)," 27-1022 Fashion Designers (March 2015).
- ¹⁹ Ibid.; New York City Economic Development Corporation, "[Fashion Industry Infographic](#)" (accessed September 10, 2015).
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