

FASHION WEEK

Lise Skov

DOI: 10.2752/BEWDF/EDch10031

Abstract

In the late twentieth century, *fashion week* became the standard name for biannual or annual trade fairs and fashion shows. For high-end designers' biannual presentations, the term *collections* has been widely used; for example, the Paris Collections or the Tokyo Collections, and the Moscow fairs that started in 2002 are identified by the abbreviation CPM (Collection Première Moscow, organized by Igedo). Trade fairs have been known by a number of different names; in the 1970s, Hong Kong Fashion Week was called a Ready-to-Wear Festival. Sometimes events are named after their sponsors, such as the Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week New York (Mercedes Benz also organizes fashion weeks in Los Angeles, Miami, Berlin, and, until 2006, Sydney) or L'Oreal Fashion Week in Toronto.

Fashion weeks bring together several different activities in the span of typically four to ten days. In exhibition grounds, temporary booths are occupied by companies that present new clothing samples with their order books ready. On the catwalk, designers and brands launch new collections in a tight choreography of parading models, loud music, and bags with sponsored gifts for the most important people in the audience. In addition to designers' individual fashion shows, group shows also occur in the fashion show schedule, including trend shows, which present a single statement for the whole fair based on garments from selected exhibitors, and talent contests for young local designers. At a fashion week, everything is ephemeral; the booths and the catwalk are dismantled when the crowds that populated the fairgrounds have gone back to their everyday business.

In the late twentieth century, *fashion week* became the standard name for biannual or annual trade fairs and fashion shows. For high-end designers' biannual presentations, the term *collections* has been widely used; for example, the Paris Collections or the Tokyo Collections, and the Moscow fairs that started in 2002 are identified by the abbreviation CPM (Collection Première Moscow, organized by Igedo). Trade fairs have been known by a number of different names; in the 1970s, Hong Kong Fashion Week was called a Ready-to-Wear Festival. Sometimes events are named after their sponsors, such as the Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week New York (Mercedes Benz also organizes fashion weeks in Los Angeles, Miami, Berlin, and, until 2006, Sydney) or L'Oreal Fashion Week in Toronto.

Fashion weeks bring together several different activities in the span of typically four to ten days. In exhibition grounds, temporary booths are occupied by companies that present new clothing samples with their order books ready. On the catwalk, designers and brands launch new collections in a tight choreography of parading models, loud music, and bags with sponsored gifts for the most important people in the audience. In addition to designers' individual fashion shows, group shows also occur in the fashion show schedule, including trend shows, which present a single statement for the whole fair based on garments from selected exhibitors, and talent contests for young local designers. At a fashion week, everything is ephemeral; the booths and the catwalk are dismantled when the crowds that populated the fairgrounds have gone back to their everyday business.

Although the fashion calendar coalesces around Prêt-à-Porter Paris, London Fashion Week, and New York Fashion Week, held in September or October and February, fashion-related trade fairs are held somewhere in the world in practically every single week of the year. It is not surprising that countries with a large export-oriented garment sector join the fashion week calendar—China International Clothing and Accessories (CHIC), held in Beijing each year in March since 1993, is considered the biggest fashion week, with more than 100,000 visitors. Sizable fashion weeks are held in other producer countries, such as Hong Kong Fashion Week, India International Garment Fair, Colombo Fashion Week in Sri Lanka, and Istanbul Fashion Festival in Turkey. In these cases, organizing a trade fair has not only been a means to attract

international buyers but also to upgrade the national industry to be more sophisticated in terms of brand building and design services. But small players in the global fashion economy also find it worthwhile to host fashion weeks—for example, Fashion Africa (held in Kenya), West Africa Fashion Week (held in Nigeria), Peru Moda, Ukrainian Fashion Week, Virgin Islands Fashion Week, and Fiji Fashion Week. In western Europe several new fashion weeks were launched in the 1990s in cities such as Amsterdam, Berlin, and Copenhagen, to facilitate the shift from a clothes-producing to an image-based fashion industry. The same transition is noted in the stepping up of fashion weeks in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Add to this a similar number of fairs throughout the world in fashion-related industries, such as textiles, leather, fur, accessories, jewelry, and cosmetics. The proliferation of fashion weeks in the first decade of the twenty-first century led the *New York Times* to headline a 7 September 2008 article about fashion weeks: “The Sun Never Sets on the Runway.”

At the 2009 autumn/winter London Fashion Week, the audience examines the latest Caroline Charles ensemble. Fashion week audiences are typically made up of professional buyers, the trade press, and celebrities. Adrian Dennis/AFP/Getty Images.

Biannual seasons are a fashion industry convention that originated in nineteenth-century Europe, when the upper classes required distinctively different clothes for the social and urban fall/winter season and the leisure-resort spring/summer season. Although, in the course of the twentieth century, the fashion industry sped up production cycles from the classic two buying seasons to almost-continuous delivery of new stock to retailers, fashion weeks still uphold the biannual pattern. They can do so because fashion production has become embedded in relatively stable business networks, based on regular collaboration. Therefore, the meeting of buyers and sellers is no longer the primary function of the gathering. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, fashion weeks were less an opportunity for trade, although that is still important, and more a time for networking with business partners from other countries through a few days of face-to-face interaction, in order to solidify the virtual communication that sustains the business throughout most of the year. This usually involves exclusive dinners and afterparties.

Likewise, the press has come to play a large role in fashion weeks. Until the 1980s, fashion show audiences consisted mostly of professional buyers, the dedicated trade press, and a few local newspapers. But with video technology, fashion shows became televised mass entertainment, and press attendance at fashion weeks, especially in metropolitan centers, exploded. At the same time, fashion shows began to attract celebrities, who were invariably placed in the front row, thus adding glamour to the overall spectacle. The hype of Paris Fashion Week is gently parodied in U.S. film director Robert Altman’s 1994 film *Prêt-à-Porter*, which was shot during the actual event and mixes documentary and fiction.

Wherever in the world they are held, fashion weeks mix business and pleasure. From the rather sober trade atmosphere that dominates in garment-exporting countries to the champagne, fancy drinks, and free product samples that have become institutionalized in Europe, fashion weeks mark out a few days in which the fashion business takes a break from chasing after the next deadline and celebrates itself. These days are both hectic and festive for journalists who rush to attend all the shows, exhibitors who are on their toes all day to serve customers, and buyers who work their way through their shopping lists. European sociologists [Joanne Entwistle](#) and [Agnés Rocamora](#) have said that fashion weeks are “the field of fashion materialized.” To be sure, the special feature of fashion weeks is their ability to make the abstract processes and networks of fashion concrete and visible. It is an event in fashion but also of fashion, since, by bringing performers and spectators in close contact with each other, it advances the symbiotic relationship between seeing and being seen, which Swiss sociologist [René König](#) considers to characterize fashion; with its short duration it feeds the heightened experience of the ephemeral, by which French sociologist [Gilles Lipovetsky](#) defines fashion.

References and Further Reading

Entwistle Joanne, and Agnés Rocamora. ““The Field of Fashion Materialized: A Study of London Fashion Week”.” *Sociology* 40, no. 4 (2006): 735–751.

König René. *A la Mode: On the Social Psychology of Fashion*. New York: Seabury Press, 1973.

Lipovetsky Gilles. *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994.

Skov Lise. ““The Role of Trade Fairs in the Global Fashion Business”.” *Current Sociology* 54, no. 5 (2006): 764–784.