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## Style Showdown

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## **Abstract**

- Students will utilize their knowledge of textile science and textile science terminology, serviceability of textile products, and basic aspects of the organization of the apparel industry, when reading a popular press newspaper article.
- Students will review their understanding of textile production, assumptions about product quality, and consumer expectations for textile products.
- Students will review their understanding of the impact of labor costs and environmental issues on cost of garments.
- Students will engage in written and oral communication by responding to the questions provided.

## **Disciplines**

Fashion Design

## **Comments**

This chapter is from E. Parker and M. A. Dickson, eds. *Sustainable Fashion: A Handbook for Educators* (Bristol, UK: Labour Behind the Label, 2009): 41–44.

# Style Showdown

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1. Level	FE, UG
2. Pre-requisite knowledge required by educators	B. General knowledge of the textiles and garment industry required
3. Pre-requisite knowledge required by students	C. Some knowledge of discipline required
4. Number of students	Any number
5. Length of time required	20 to 60 minutes
6. Type of activity	Individual work, Group work, Article, Discussion and debate
7. Discipline	Business, Cross-curricular, Design
8. Topics covered	Environment, Prices, Supply chains, Textiles, Wages, Workers' rights

## FOLLOW-UP / RELATED ACTIVITIES:

What price a living wage by Doug Miller in the Business Chapter in this Handbook.

## OBJECTIVES / LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Students will utilize their knowledge of textile science and textile science terminology, serviceability of textile products, and basic aspects of the organization of the apparel industry, when reading a popular press newspaper article.
- Students will review their understanding of textile production, assumptions about product quality, and consumer expectations for textile products.
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- Students will engage in written and oral communication by responding to the questions provided.



## INSTRUCTIONS FOR USING THE LEARNING ACTIVITY

Require that students read the “Style Showdown” article (below) by either presenting a copy of the article in class or posting the article electronically through email or other course management software. Instruct the students to write answers to the following questions. Questions 4-7 are particularly suitable for debate or discussion in small or large groups. Timing required for this exercise ranges from 20 minutes to one hour depending on the number of questions discussed as a group and if oral summaries of the discussions are shared by each student with the group as a whole. The number of participants is unlimited.

### Learning Activity Questions

1. Identify and correct all errors in the article related to textile terminology.
2. Describe the differences between the two sweaters in terms of:
  - a. textile quality
  - b. design features
  - c. manufacturing steps for the sweaters
  - d. labor standards and conditions for the workers constructing the sweaters
3. Predict serviceability components of the two sweaters based on:
  - a. fiber content
  - b. yarn type
  - c. fabric structure
  - d. finishes
4. What basic assumptions does the author make about the products, access to information from the two companies, and manufacturing of the two sweaters?

Are these assumptions valid? Why or why not?

5. The author states at the end of the article, “it’s safe to say that the Cucinelli (\$1000 sweater) is the superior sweater when it comes to style, quality, and global social awareness”. Do you agree with this statement? What evidence is provided that this company is more socially aware than Lands’ End? Does a higher priced garment always ensure socially responsible business and labor practices?

**Note to instructors:** Students should be reminded that price does not necessarily equate to socially responsible business practices and that garments of different price points may, indeed, be produced in the same factory.

6. Do design details alone justify the cost difference between the two sweaters?
7. Explore possible reasons why one company provided more information about their manufacturing processes, while the other company was more reluctant to provide this information. What does this suggest about competition within target markets? Does the lack of information shared by one company suggest actual differences in working conditions? Why or why not? For what reasons do you think Lands’ End might be unwilling to share more information?

### Feedback from students

Students in an introductory textile science class at a four-year institution responded to this article through postings on a course management Blackboard (Web-Ct) system. In their responses, students considered the implications of socially responsible business practices the final cost of a garment. Students could relate to the concepts presented in the article, specifically the availability of similarly styled but differently priced garments. This reading helped students think about the fashion industry as a vital component of the global economy. Students did struggle with the idea of purchasing a sweater for \$1,000. Instructors could consider asking students to research and compare/contrast middle to lower priced companies’ production and manufacturing processes for a project in an introductory textile science or production and sourcing course.



## Actual material provided to students

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Style Showdown:

\$1,000 Sweater Faces \$100 Rival

By Christina Binkley

Wall Street Journal November 29, 2007; Page D1

It's one of the abiding mysteries of fashion: Is it really worth paying \$1,100 for a white cotton blouse or \$750 for one of the turtleneck sweaters we see in high-end stores and magazines?

If the labels fell off, would these basic items still feel like they're worth so much? The question arises more often these days, as stores like Zara and H&M thrive on selling inexpensive fashions that resemble those of high-end designers like Chanel and Dior.

With the holiday gift-giving season upon us, I decided to put a couple of standard sweaters to the test. While I anticipated differences in style and quality, I was unprepared for the political issues that arose from my study of these two sweaters. What started out as a look at fashion choices turned into a lesson on globalization.

For this test, we chose two cashmere sweaters from clothiers with excellent reputations for quality and service, one at each end of the price spectrum. One came from Lands' End and cost \$99.50 before tax and shipping. The other, from Italian luxury cashmere maker Brunello Cucinelli, cost \$950 before tax and the valet parking fee at Saks, Fifth Avenue in Beverly Hills.

The sweaters are outwardly similar: long-sleeved black mock turtlenecks, knitted with two-ply yarn, which means each string is made of two strands that have been twisted together. Both sweaters are made of cashmere combed from Mongolian goats, which are said to grow fine, long hairs to survive the tough winters. The long hair leads to less pilling, which is a real sweater killer.

And both garments arrived with deficiencies. My Lands' End sweater felt stiff and glossy. After wearing it twice, I tossed it in the delicate cycle of my washing machine, and it emerged soft and supple.

I chose a style called a "cashmere tee" that is trimmer and more feminine than the company's core big and snuggly cashmeres. New this fall, the mock turtle is cut to layer under a jacket. Despite the fresh styling, it lacks sophistication, and the fabric tends to wrinkle, particularly at the crook of the arm. Still, it's an attractive, basic sweater - soft, comfy and, hey, the price was right. According to Michele Casper, a spokeswoman for Lands' End, it should last for many years. If not, she noted, I can exchange the item or get a refund. *"Everything we sell at Lands' End is guaranteed. Period."*

The Cucinelli sweater has a springier weave that drapes gracefully and hasn't wrinkled or bagged at stretch points. It was a little more uniformly soft than the Lands' End fabric. While all Mongolian goat hair is prized, prices vary according to quality, and some Italian manufacturers pride themselves on buying the best grades of cashmere at auction - one reason for some sweaters' higher prices. The sweater also has subtly stylish details -- such as small buttons at the back of the neck that make it easy to pull the sweater over a hairdo and makeup.

That's a nice feature, but when I got it home, I discovered the sweater had unraveled at the teardrop opening at the nape of the neck. This required a tiresome trip back to Saks, where they repaired the tear, telling me that if it happens again, I should bring it right back. At that price, they can count on it. But Cucinelli should probably incorporate some sort of reinforcement at that pressure point. A spokesman for the designer called the flaw a "fluke" and said Cucinelli has a damage-return rate of just 0.005%.

The standout facets of the Cucinelli sweater are sleeves that taper at the forearm and then flare at the wrist, and layers of silk chiffon that have been hand-sewn at the neck and wrists. My friend Roberta tried it on. *"It does feel really nice on my neck,"* she said, noodling her head around. These style details drew attention as I wore the sweater (the Lands' End sweater garnered no compliments). But people looked stunned if I told them the price.

So there were style differences between the luxurious designer sweater and its counterpart, however solidly made. Another sort of distinction emerged as I learned how each sweater was manufactured. The goat hairs took very different paths after being bundled into bales and taken to auction in Mongolia.



The label of the Lands' End sweater says "Made in China." Lands' End gave me an extensive primer on its Mongolian yarns. But it turned out that the company isn't involved in that part of the process. It purchases the finished sweaters from a factory in China - and it's the factory that buys cashmere at auction. Ms. Casper said the Chinese factory spins, cards, combs and dyes the yarn and weaves it into garments according to Lands' End's specifications. Lands' End, she said, tests the results and requires the factory to meet "all compliances" from Sears Holding Corp., which owns Lands' End. She declined to elaborate or to divulge the name of the factory or even the region of China where it's located. She did say: *"The cashmere factories are very clean and feature all state-of-the art, updated equipment. The employees feel honored to be employed there."*

I was troubled by the company's reticence about the factory that made my sweater. This came against a backdrop of news stories out of China's industrial sector that included recalls of toys, toothpaste and other consumer products. Many people have seen film and photos of Chinese factory workers living in sparse dormitories far from home and working long hours. Concerns about Chinese labor and manufacturing standards have led to the recent increase in "Made in the USA" labels on products made here.

All this contrasts sharply with Brunello Cucinelli, a company founded in 1978 by 54 year old designer Brunello Cucinelli. Both the Saks saleswoman and Massimo Caronna, Cucinelli's U.S. spokesman and owner of Italian fashion distributor IMC Group, eagerly elaborated on the manufacturing. Mr. Caronna even invited me to visit the factory where my sweater was made, in the tiny Italian village of Solomeo in Umbria, though I didn't make the trip.

According to him, the goat hairs in my sweater traveled in bales from Mongolia to one of several factories in Italy where it was made into yarn. Cucinelli buys about 70% of its yarn from the Italian luxury thread purveyor Cariaggi.

The yarn was then shipped to the Cucinelli factory, which is in a 17th-century castle. Each of its 1,500 employees has a key, says Mr. Caronna. They work each day from 8 a.m. until 1 p.m., breaking for a 90 minute lunch. Many go home for lunch, but Mr. Caronna says that those who stay are served a free three course meal cooked up by three local women who shop for fresh groceries every morning. Employees return to work from 2:30 until 6 p.m. and then head home.

Mr. Cucinelli wanted to improve on the conditions he saw his father endure as a farm laborer; Mr. Caronna says. The designer has donated some company profits to improvements in Solomeo, such as restoring the town square, building a local school and, most recently, constructing a town theater. The company, which competes with Loro Piana and also owns the Gunex and Riva Monti fashion lines, expects revenue of \$163 million in 2007, Mr. Caronna said.

The Italian manufacturing process also explains a little more about the cost of my \$950 sweater. Hand work allows sophisticated design details, like the chiffon, that would be impossible in a garment made entirely by machine. And 25% of the factory employees are devoted to quality control. Before leaving the factory, every item is washed by hand - one reason the Cucinelli sweater arrived softer than the Lands' End.

Lands' End won't tell us details such as whether its Chinese factory has paid for local schools or serves its workers free three course meals. But it's safe to say that the Cucinelli is the superior sweater when it comes to style, quality and global social awareness.

Whether it's worth nearly 10 times the price, though, is a matter for you and your wallet.