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Katia Jean Paul ruminates on the trends and the elements of style within the culture at large.

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When High Meets Low: Luxury Brands and Retail

Chain Collaborations by Katia Jean Paul published April 22, 2014

Matthew Williamson and Isabel Marant as the latest designer to join forces with H&M on an exclusive collection. On the heels of this newsworthy announcement, Katia Jean Paul reflects on the now ubiquitous trend of designer and retail chain collaborations.



tops, offers a fresh take on basics. All in all, this urban label is fashion foie gras for city big kids. And as creative director of Balenciaga since 2011, Wang is now playing in the big leagues. It's evident fashion fiends, who up

"Parental Advisory" sheer and neoprene sweatshirts from his spring/summer 2014 collection were a hit among celebrities is an understatement). His sister line, T by Alexander Wang, with its perfectly draped t-shirts and tank

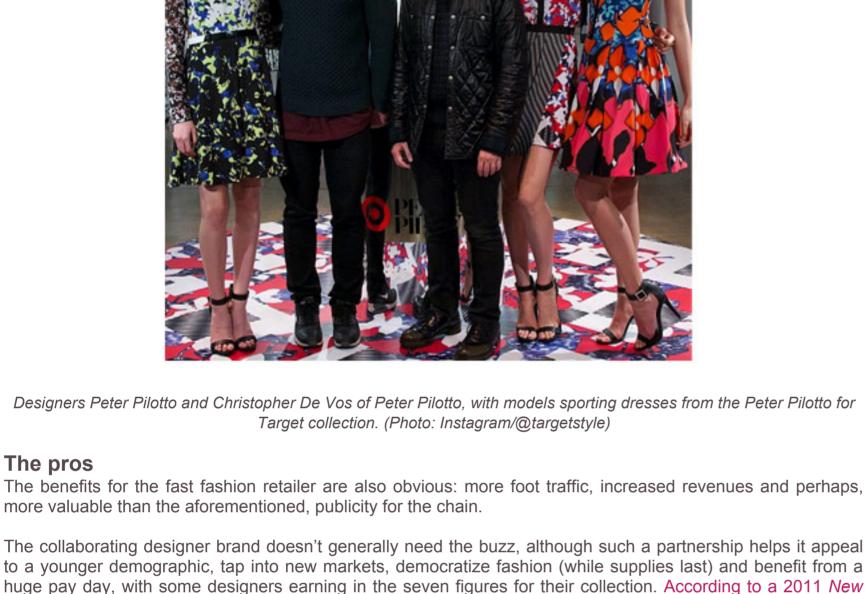
until now have only dreamed of getting their hands on the makings of Wang's urban uniform, will come out in droves to snatch up the wares from this fashion wunderkind. There was a time when designer and retail collaborations were unheard of. But H&M—who first launched a designer collection with Karl Lagerfeld in 2004 with immense success—has been at it for 10 years now. Since then, other mass retailers have followed suit, making the once experimental creative pursuit a common—and profitable—one. Among them: Target, which has previously put out an exclusive designer collection by Proenza Schouler; Payless, which has an ongoing guest designer collaboration with Christian Siriano since 2009; and Topshop, whose capsule collections with Mary Katrantzou and Christopher Kane sold out in a matter of hours. In fact, there does not seem to have been a single designer collection that has not done extremely well. That

Target's recent collaboration with London-based designer Peter Pilotto sold out within the hour it was launched

at the retail giant's downtown Montreal location is no surprise. Consumers who aspire to something previously out of reach would not pass up the chance to acquire designer articles. While these pieces are more expensive

than the retailer's usual fare, they still come at a fraction of the price of the designer label's runway offerings. Who wouldn't spend \$125 on a Maison Martin Margiela x H&M draped skirt when the fashion house's signature

creations normally range in the thousands of dollars? For the average consumer, it's a win-win.



York Times article on the subject, Lagerfeld reportedly made \$1 million for his collaboration with H&M. The cons

Does associating with a fast retail chain cheapen the luxury brand, as some argue? What is luxury if not a quest for exclusivity, quality and craftsmanship? Designer collaborations, to remain affordable, cannot be fashioned out of silk, organza or mousseline. Nylon, cotton and polyester are less expensive fabrics where mass production is concerned. But collections have suffered as a result. The poor fit and quality of the clothes of

some of these collaborations have left consumers—some of which were introduced to the luxury brand's wares for the first time—unimpressed with the name behind the brand. And when the average customer of today could become the luxury consumer of tomorrow, that's just no way to build brand loyalty. A lot is at stake when signing on the dotted line. Additionally, if everyone has got a Proenza Schouler bag, doesn't it lose its value, its "it" factor? While the

poorer quality may turn off the average consumer, the latter's sudden accessibility to a designer brand may alienate the luxury consumer market, which while it may constitute a smaller consumer base, often accounts for a large part of the revenues for any given luxury brand.

The pros

The bottom line Perhaps it all boils down to how we define luxury. The concept of luxury to one may not be the same to another. As Zac Posen once remarked: "The media is constantly redefining what luxury is. Luxury can be a dirty sock dressed up the right way." And yet, no one would argue that brands like Hermès, Louis Vuitton and Chanel aren't luxury labels. Incidentally, none of these brands have gone the collaboration route, which speaks volumes about the nature of these collaborations. The latter brands don't need the publicity. But a young, independent designer can only benefit from the exposure and financial support that a collaboration with a mass retailer undoubtedly provides. As Eric Wilson, former writer for the *New York Times* stated, "Perversely, selling clothes at Target has become a status symbol for up-and-coming designers."

Despite the growing number of designer and fast fashion chain collaborations, the luxury market remains its own exclusive entity. Like luxury customers, consumers who line up outside their local H&M, Target or Topshop know what they are in for. There aren't any delusions as to what they are buying into. That the garment isn't made of silk or mousseline doesn't change the fact that a luxury designer has had a hand in its creation. It still

bears the brand name. And perhaps, for the average consumer, that's just as good as the real thing.

Fashion, art, architecture, design, TV, and film: Katia Jean Paul is a Montreal-based writer who casts a critical eye on her many idées fixes, unearthing the aesthetic and cultural dimensions within each and every subject. / Follow Katia on Twitter: @KatiaJeanPaul



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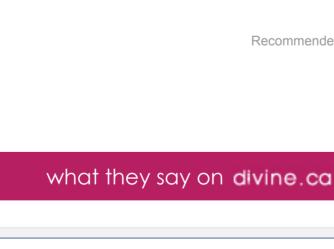
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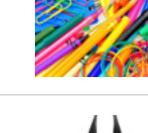
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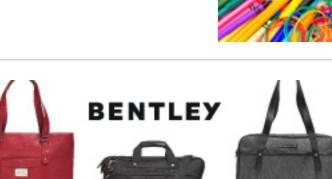
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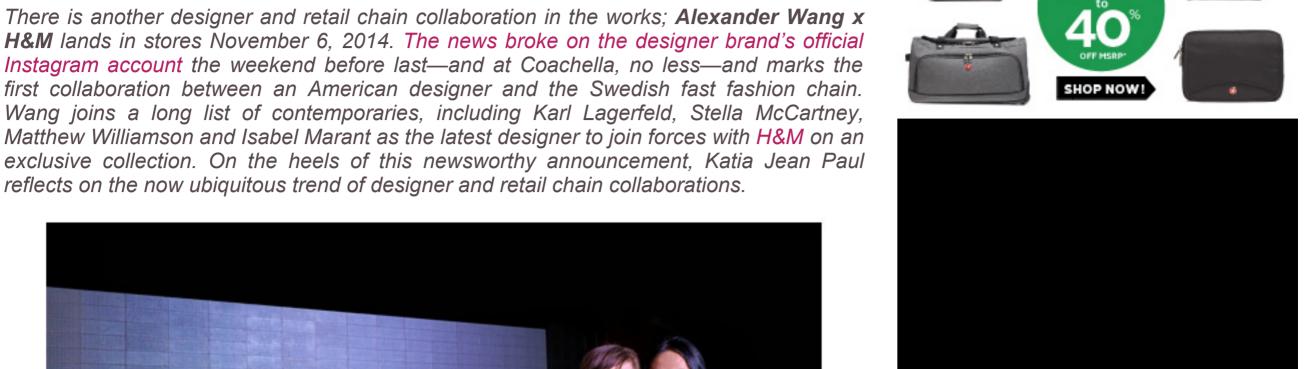
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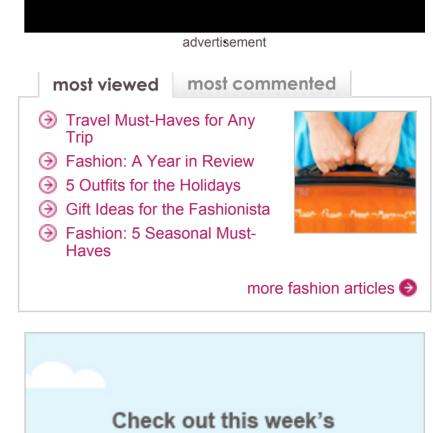
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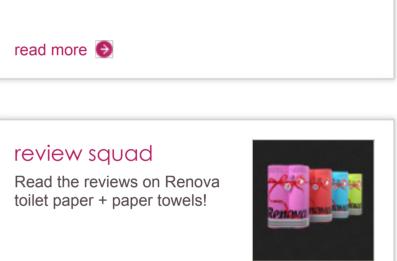
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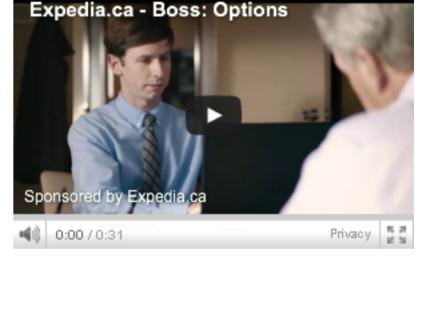
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