

How “Fast” is Fast Furniture?

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Abstract: This paper explores the emerging concept of fast furniture, a rapidly growing sector characterized by quick production, low costs, and short product life cycles. Despite its substantial environmental impact, fast furniture remains underexplored in academic literature. Drawing parallels to fast fashion in its focus on trends, disposability, and mass production, this study examines the intersections of consumer behaviour, industry practices, and sustainability challenges within the context of fast furniture. Through a mixed-methods approach, combining a quantitative/qualitative survey of UK consumers and interviews with industry professionals, the study reveals significant insights into consumer perceptions, motivations, and the role of fashion-driven consumption in shaping the furniture market.

Key findings indicate that while consumers increasingly engage with trend-driven furniture purchases, many are unaware of the term "fast furniture." Moreover, despite their significant market share, brands like IKEA are not strongly associated with the "fast" model by consumers, who instead view their products as affordable and functional, yet temporary. Industry professionals, meanwhile, emphasize that the "fastness" of furniture is determined largely by consumer choices, not necessarily the manufacturing process.

This research stems from a larger doctoral study that contributes to the growing body of knowledge on sustainable consumption, advocating for a broader understanding of fast furniture as a consumer-driven phenomenon rather than an industry-defined product category. Future research is suggested to further explore the global dynamics of fast furniture consumption, the role of consumer education, and sustainability initiatives within the industry.

Introduction

Context and Background

The global furniture industry is valued at over \$579 billion (Statista, 2024); yet more than 12 million tonnes of furniture are discarded in landfills each year. This staggering statistic highlights the significant waste generated by the furniture industry, which is often overlooked in comparison to other consumer goods. It paints a stark picture of the environmental cost of furniture consumption worldwide and underpins the urgency for a more sustainable approach to both the production and disposal of furniture. While much research has focused on automobile emissions (Buberger et al., 2022; Fekete et al., 2021), the efficiency and disposal of white goods (Yilmaz et al., 2019; Cole et al., 2019), and fast fashion (Cooper, 2022; Centobelli et al., 2022), the furniture sector—and more specifically, the issue of fast furniture—has received relatively little

academic attention. Fast furniture is a concept that remains academically undefined and presents an exciting avenue for exploration.

Framing Fast Furniture

The term "fast furniture" has yet to be fully explored or defined within the literature, offering a unique opportunity to examine the intersection of consumer behaviour, design practices, and sustainability in a rapidly growing sector. Similar to the rise of fast fashion, where trends in clothing are driven by rapid production, quick turnover, and disposability, fast furniture refers to quick manufacturing, affordable pricing, and a short life cycle of furniture items. This practice aligns with the broader pattern of hyper-consumerism that prioritizes convenience and low cost over longevity and quality.

The throwaway notion of fast implies a lack of value placed on these items as they are easily discarded. Value can be defined as “the regard

in which we perceive something." But if consumers place little value on their furniture, how can this lead to keeping and enjoying items, ensuring their longevity?

Literature Review

The Rise of Fast Consumption

Globally, the rise of hyper-consumerism has driven an increasing demand for products, with the fashion industry being one of the most notable examples. For instance, high street brands like Zara produce 450 million items of clothing annually, while Shein, a Chinese brand, releases 2 million items every year—equating to around 6,000 new styles per day (Vara, 2022). This rapid turnover of products has transformed consumer expectations, leading them to expect constant novelty. Similarly, in the furniture industry, trends change every one to four years (Mote, 2023), and the desire to stay "on-trend" has led to the emergence of fast furniture, a term that reflects the low-cost, trend-driven, and disposable nature of furniture in today's market.

Historically, fast consumption has been studied in industries like fast food and fast fashion, which share similar characteristics—namely, a focus on affordable, mass-produced, and disposable products. The key similarity between fast food, fast fashion, and fast furniture lies in the rapid turnover and the temporary satisfaction of meeting immediate consumer needs. As consumer demand for inexpensive, trendy, and disposable products has grown, it has created a pattern of high consumption and waste, leading to environmental concerns.

Defining Fast Furniture

The concept of fast furniture has yet to be academically defined, but it draws heavily from the concept of fast fashion. Like fast fashion, fast furniture is characterized by low-cost production, mass manufacturing, and quick consumption cycles and disposability (often driven by fashion trends).

The term "fast furniture" first emerged in internet searches around 2008 (Matroka, 2008), but earlier references can be found in mainstream media, with publications like The New York Times using the term to describe aspects of rapid manufacturing or distribution in furniture production (Clancy, 1996; Kight, 1993). However, the term has since evolved to more broadly capture the short-term nature of the furniture cycle—highlighting the fast

consumption, disposal, and replacement of furniture items.

While the term "fast furniture" lacks a unified academic definition, it shares several traits with fast food and fast fashion, which are typically characterized by:

- Quick production
- Inexpensive pricing
- Non-durable quality
- Trend-driven appeal
- Short lifespan

Drawing from both grey literature and academic sources, fast furniture is often described as fashionable, inexpensive, non-permanent, poor quality, mass-produced, and easily thrown away (Kirchmer, 2023; Maier, 2021; Young, 2023; Kamin, 2022). These characteristics align with the ephemeral nature of the products, where the focus is on immediate consumer satisfaction rather than long-term durability. Russell et al. (2021) and Cummins (2020) emphasize this disposable nature and highlight the lack of long-term investment in fast furniture, making it an important area for further research.

For this study, fast furniture will be defined as: "Furniture that is quick and low cost to make, purchase, consume, and dispose of."

This definition reflects the rapid production and consumer turnover, while acknowledging that not all cheap, quick-to-make furniture is inherently poor quality. The focus of the definition is on the speed and cost of the process rather than the inherent quality of the product.

Consumer Behaviour and the Lifespan of Fast Furniture

The concept of how fast furniture is "fast" is often tied to the lifespan of these products. Fast furniture typically has a lifespan ranging from one to five years (Delgado, 2022). However, this range is not fixed; the actual lifespan depends on factors such as how the furniture is treated, the environment it is placed in, and the material quality. As fast furniture is often purchased to fulfil temporary trends, its short lifespan is seen as a justification for replacing it when trends change.

In line with consumer redecorating behaviours, studies suggest that British consumers redecorate their homes every one to five years, with the living room being the most frequently updated space (Heath, 2017; Evans et al., 2024). As consumers seek to stay in style, they turn to inexpensive and disposable furniture

that can easily be replaced when their décor changes. This cycle of purchasing and discarding is integral to the fast furniture model, with the quick turnover of affordable, on-trend items enabling consumers to stay up to date with the latest fashion trends in home interiors. With the above in mind the question of what consumers and industry professionals themselves think of fast furniture is important to consider.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to examine consumer and industry perspectives on fast furniture. The research combines a quantitative/qualitative survey to gather insights into consumer attitudes and behaviours, alongside qualitative interviews with industry professionals to explore the production and sustainability challenges of fast furniture.

A quantitative/qualitative online survey (Table 1) was distributed to UK-based consumers aged 18 and over. The survey focused on understanding consumer attitudes toward fast furniture, including purchasing patterns, motivations, and perceptions of sustainability. Using a combination of multiple-choice and open-ended questions to gather data on these topics data collection was done through social media platforms and online communities, ensuring a diverse and varied sample. The survey was open for 6 months and received 620 responses.

Questions
Which age category do you fit into?
What is your employment status?
What is your household income before tax?
How many adults live with you?
Do you have knowledge or familiarity of the furniture industry?
Where do you purchase/ acquire your furniture from?
Why do you purchase these items?
What might deter you from purchasing a second-hand item of furniture?
At what point would you consider getting rid of a piece of furniture?
Where would you get rid of your furniture?
How many of your pieces of furniture have lasted less than 5 years?
What type of furniture was this?
Which room of the house was the furniture located in?
What is your understanding of 'fast furniture'?

Table 1. Survey Questions

To complement the survey data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 5 industry professionals, including furniture designers, manufacturers, and sustainability experts. These interviews focused on understanding the challenges of producing sustainable furniture, the influence of consumer demand on production practices, and the perceived environmental impact of fast furniture. The interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams and recorded with participant consent for transcription and analysis. These individuals were approached based on their expertise in the industry, ensuring insights into both design and manufacturing processes.

Data Analysis

Survey responses were analysed using a combination of descriptive statistics, such as frequency counts and mean scores, to identify trends in consumer behaviour and purchasing decisions on Excel, and thematic analysis to understand consumer attitudes toward fast furniture and sustainability.

The interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Key themes related to sustainability, consumer demand, and production practices were identified and coded. This allows for a deeper understanding of the industry's perspective on fast furniture and how it aligns with or contrasts consumer attitudes.

Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided informed consent before participating. The survey responses were anonymised, with no personally identifiable information collected. Interviews were recorded with consent, and transcripts anonymised to protect participants' privacy. The data is securely stored and used solely for research purposes.

Limitations

This study is limited by its focus on UK-based consumers and industry professionals, which may affect the generalizability of the findings to other regions or markets, however, it is important to note that the companies spoken to are all global.

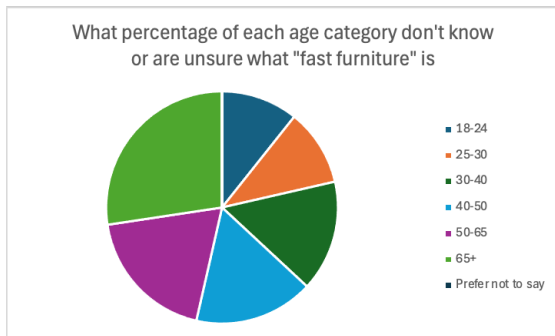


Figure 1. Pie Chart showing unsure viewpoints of fast furniture from the survey.

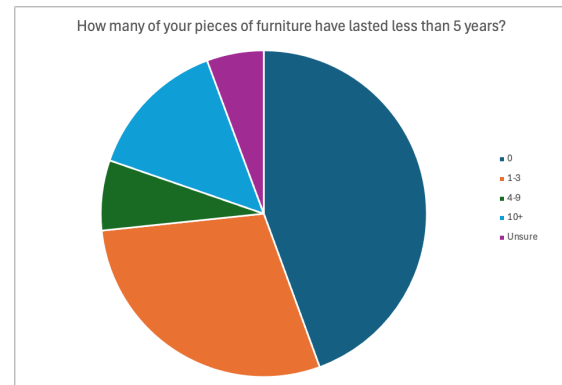


Figure 2. Pie chart looking at survey data around broken furniture.

Discussion

Attitudes to Fast Furniture

This study reveals significant insights into the concept of fast furniture and the consumer's relationship with it, as well as highlighting the disconnect between consumer perceptions and industry viewpoints.

One of the most striking findings from the survey is that 24% of respondents—particularly from those over-50—were unfamiliar with the term “fast furniture” (Figure 1). This suggests that the concept of fast furniture may not yet be a widely recognized or understood term for many consumers, especially in older generations. This aligns with Russell et al. (2021), who note that the lack of academic literature around fast furniture may contribute to such gaps in consumer awareness. In contrast, younger consumers—who are more likely to be engaged in trend-driven consumption—appear to have a clearer understanding of the idea of disposable or trend-based furniture. This could be why “fashion furniture” is a more fitting term for this concept, where the lifecycle of the product is dictated less by durability and more by aesthetic trends.

Consumer Behaviour and the Ikea Effect

The global furniture industry, valued at \$579 billion (Statista, 2023), has witnessed an increase in demand for affordable, mass-produced furniture that can be replaced quickly. IKEA—a dominant player in the global furniture market—emerges as a key example. Although 60% of survey respondents reported purchasing furniture from IKEA (Figure 2), only 5% of respondents associated the retailer with the term “fast furniture.” This disconnect suggests that, despite IKEA's reputation for producing cheap, stylish, and easily replaceable furniture, consumers don't explicitly

equate it with the “fast” consumption model typical of fast food or fast fashion.

The findings indicate that consumer perceptions of IKEA (and similar brands) are more closely linked to affordability and convenience, rather than the disposable nature of the products. The “IKEA effect” could be playing a role here, as consumers may view their products as temporary but still functional for a significant period, thus obscuring the “fast” concept.

The survey findings suggest that while IKEA is a dominant player in the UK market, its global footprint means that the perceptions of fast furniture are not just limited to the UK but are indeed part of a larger, global consumption pattern. Consumers across the Western world often share similar values about affordability, convenience, and design trends, even if they are not using the exact term “fast furniture.” Moreover, 44% of respondents stated they have never had a piece of furniture break (Figure 3), which could suggest a misalignment between the perception of furniture as a durable asset and its role in trend-driven consumption. This is especially notable when examining the 18-24 age group, which represented 7% of the sample. This age group, often characterized by

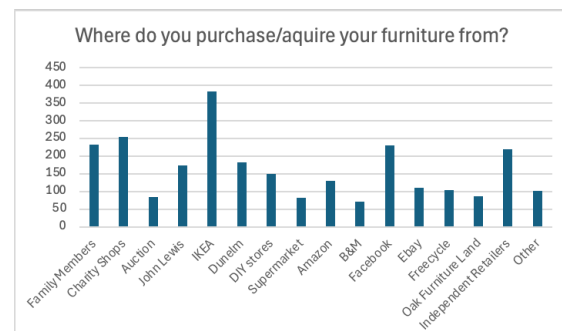


Figure 3. Chart to show where consumers from the survey purchase their furniture.

shorter ownership cycles and a greater tendency to redecorate or "refresh" their homes, likely influences the overall perception that furniture is designed to last longer than it does in practice.

Interestingly, when asked about their behaviour toward replacing furniture, most participants indicated they would only buy new furniture when the existing item was broken or unsuitable, aligning with findings in the fast fashion literature (Fletcher, 2015; Fletcher, 2019) where items are typically replaced due to perceived obsolescence rather than quality degradation. This highlights the cyclical nature of furniture consumption, where fashion-driven factors prompt consumers to replace furniture long before it has reached the end of its useful life cycle.

It is clear from both the survey data and industry insights that fast furniture is a subjective concept shaped by consumer behaviour and the value placed on furniture. While furniture might be inexpensive, mass-produced, and trendy, it is ultimately the consumer who determines its longevity and disposability based on how well they care for and utilize it. This suggests that fast furniture is as much about the consumer's engagement with the product than it is about its manufacture.

This brings us to a deeper reflection: if consumers view fast furniture as an aesthetic choice, influenced by the trends of the moment, can we really claim that such pieces are inherently "fast"? Or is fastness simply a function of the consumer mindset? The global nature of this issue—demonstrated by the fact that major furniture companies like IKEA have international reach—further complicates the question.

Industry Viewpoint

On the other hand, industry representatives view time in a different context. From a production and lifecycle perspective, many professionals assert that domestic furniture does not inherently have a set lifetime, nor is it classified as "fast" by the industry. Instead, they emphasize the importance of consumer behaviour in determining the product's longevity. The industry's perspective is grounded in the idea that how long furniture lasts depends on how well it is cared for, rather than being an issue of design or production speed. This resonates with findings from McDonagh (Delgado, 2022) and Kirchmer (2023), who suggests that fast furniture, in the

context of domestic settings, is more about how it fits into a trend-based cycle rather than its functional durability. Industry professionals emphasized that furniture could last a long time if it is maintained well, indicating that the "fastness" of furniture is subjective, and consumer driven.

However, there is an inherent tension between the industry's longer-term view of furniture's lifecycle and the consumer's shorter-term consumption habits. While industry representatives may believe that furniture can last for many years if maintained properly, consumer habits suggest that the temporal lifespan of furniture is largely defined by shifting trends and the desire for novelty, rather than the inherent durability of the product.

Thus, time plays a dual role: on one hand, the consumer-driven need for frequent trend updates compresses the lifespan of the product, leading to rapid turnover; on the other, the furniture itself could potentially have a longer usable life if cared for appropriately.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the concept of fast furniture is not necessarily tied to any intrinsic qualities of the product itself, but rather it is a value-based perception created by the consumer's actions and attitudes. While designers do not intentionally create furniture to be "fast" or disposable, it is ultimately the consumer's choices—driven by consumer culture, fashion trends, and disposability norms—that determine whether furniture is perceived as fast. The term "fast furniture" should, therefore, be understood less as a description of the product's inherent properties and more as a reflection of how quickly it is purchased, consumed, and discarded.

From this study, we can define fast furniture as "quick and cheap to make, purchase, consume, and dispose of." However, as fast furniture is a complex area, an open definition allows for different interpretations. This is just one part of the larger doctoral study and will, therefore, continue to develop as more is understood. This definition doesn't necessarily rule out the possibility that items within this category could become slow over time. For example, an item of furniture may be mass-produced cheaply, but its longevity or durability could extend depending on how the consumer treats it or how it fits into their changing needs or spaces. Fast furniture, therefore, cannot always be easily categorized by clear beginning and end points. There is nothing in the definition that dictates

whether a piece of furniture must have a set lifespan or whether it should inevitably reach an end point of disposability.

The study also highlighted how difficult it is to definitively classify fast furniture within the domestic setting, as consumer behaviours and trends, rather than inherent product characteristics, largely determine the pace of consumption. This stands in contrast to sectors like the commercial furniture market, where health and safety regulations and defined lifespan standards give a clearer picture of time frames and more specific notions of product lifecycle. In this context, there is much to be explored in the concept of fast furniture in commercial spaces, where the pace of consumption might be more regulated, and the lifecycle more predictable.

Looking ahead, this study suggests that more research is needed to fully understand how the concept of fast furniture can be applied to different contexts—whether in domestic or commercial settings—and to explore how cultural, economic, and environmental factors influence consumer attitudes. The concept of fastness is not a one-size-fits-all definition, and consumer values will continue to shape this understanding. While sustainability concerns might encourage consumers to hold on to their furniture for longer, the short lifespan of trends and the need for regular updates to interior spaces suggest that fast furniture will remain a complicated concept—one that deserves further investigation.

Ultimately, while fast furniture is not inherently "bad", the current consumer-driven cycle raises important questions about how we value the durability, longevity, and disposability of the objects that furnish our homes. Further exploration is needed to untangle the complexity of how we define and regulate what is, after all, a highly subjective and culturally constructed concept.

Future Research

Given the complexities outlined in this study, future research could explore:

- The impact of consumer education on the lifespan of fast furniture and how maintenance and care influence its longevity.
- A deeper exploration of the global context, particularly focusing on how consumer values and fashion cycles differ across regions and how this shapes perceptions of fast furniture.

- Investigating commercial furniture as a specific area where time frames and expectations of product longevity are clearer and more regulated, offering a contrast to domestic fast furniture.
- Further qualitative research into the sustainability practices in the industry, focusing on how designers and manufacturers view the sustainability of mass-produced furniture and whether they have a role in mitigating the "fast" model.

By investigating these areas, we can continue to unravel the multifaceted nature of fast furniture and how the concept of "fastness" may evolve in response to changing consumer values and global sustainability goals.

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