II. GREEN ECONOMY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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CONSUMER AWARENESS AND THE ETHICAL FOOTPRINT OF FAST FASHION WITH A FOCUS ON SHEIN

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Abstract. With an emphasis on the Shein brand, this article explores how consumers view the environmental and social implications of the fast fashion industry's growth and how it has affected consumer behaviour. By comparing results before and after learning about the tactics and strategies used by the brand under study, as well as by testing the proposed hypotheses, this study, which focuses on generations Y and Z, seeks to understand, and analyse how consumers view the environmental and social implications of the fast fashion industry's growth and how that has affected consumer behaviour. According to the research, once consumers become aware of Shein's practices and policies, their consumption has negative effects regarding the brand's perception. This research helps to clarify some of Shein's dubious business practices. The study places these practices in context and shows how they affect consumer trust and brand reputation. Theoretical and practical discourse improves understanding of the topic's importance by identifying areas for practice improvement and putting forth important management implications.

Keywords: Shein, fast fashion, greenwashing, labour ethics, social responsibility, ethical consumption.

JEL Classification: M31, M21.

1. Introduction

The fast fashion industry is a contested topic as its benefits increasingly carry less weight when compared to the environmental and social responsibility consequences that stem from it (Burke, 2023). Héry et al. (2021) states that this change in ultra-fast fashion consumption patterns is accompanied by an evolution in all clothing-related procedures, from initial design to distribution. With this growth in mind, and focused on the Shein brand, the present article explores how consumers view the environmental and social implications of the fast fashion industry's growth and how that has affected consumer behaviour. Considering that Generation Z is the most prominent and powerful group in establishing a close relationship with brands Bjerre (2023), a questionnaire will be developed targeting Generation Y (1985-1999) and Generation Z (2000-2010). The core aim of this research is to leverage the questionnaire results to scrutinize how Shein's business strategies impact consumer attitudes and behaviours. It seeks to determine if the consumers' environmental concerns, social responsibilities, and ethical values can withstand the industry's greenwashing tactics, misleading marketing, and potential child exploitation, thereby influencing their fast fashion consumption habits.

With the results obtained from the questionnaire, the authors analyse how the business strategies of this fast fashion brand alter the behaviour and thinking of consumers. It's crucial to understand whether the environmental, social, and ethical principles of consumers are values that surpass greenwashing practices, which are

considered fraudulent marketing, and anticipate child exploitation situations, thus resulting in a decrease, or not, in this fast fashion consumption.

The article begins with an introduction that sets the stage by highlighting the significant environmental and social repercussions of the fast fashion industry, with a particular emphasis on the Shein brand. Following the introductory section, the literature review methodically examines relevant research and findings, segmented into two main areas.

In the methodology section, the article delineates the quantitative research strategy employed, providing a comprehensive description of the online survey conducted across various social networks in Portugal to collect data. It elaborates on the questionnaire's framework, which covers sociodemographic characteristics, consumption behaviours, and participants' awareness of Shein's practices, in addition to the analytical techniques used for data interpretation.

The results and discussion segment unveils the study's primary outcomes, offering insights into consumers' perspectives on Shein following their awareness of the brand's practices and how this awareness influences their purchasing choices. This section also highlights the study's contribution to elucidating the intricate interplay between consumer behaviour and fast fashion sustainability concerns.

The article wraps up by acknowledging its limitations, such as the specific focus on Shein and the constraints associated with its quantitative research approach. It also proposes directions for future research to further the understanding and insights obtained from this study.

2. Literature review

2.1. Fast fashion – Shein

The intensifying competition and expansion of the fashion industry have led to an increase in the number of fashion seasons and heightened consumer awareness, prompting individuals to update their wardrobes more frequently (Gupta & Gentry, 2018). According to the Cambridge Dictionary (2023), "fast fashion" denotes the rapid production and sale of inexpensive clothing, enabling consumers to frequently update their wardrobes. This concept is intertwined with the production of cost-effective apparel, which escalates the manufacture of lower-quality garments, leading to various negative outcomes (Fast, 2023). Avrhami (2023) points out that the textile industry is the second-largest industrial consumer and polluter of water resources. This industry is particularly attractive to nations with limited capital yet large workforces, unlike other industrial sectors. Health risks associated with hazardous chemical products found in clothing, as well as the inhalation or intentional ingestion of dust, are significant concerns (Durosko, 2023).

This concept, originated in the United Kingdom, was the result of some challenges faced by retailers that were forced to introduce new practices in the manufacturing process such as just-in-time, computer integrated manufacturing and total quality management (Bruce et al., 2004). These changes lead to the rise of fast fashion.

Héry et al. (2021) observes that the shift toward ultra-fast fashion consumption is accompanied by changes in all related processes, from design to distribution. Paço et al. (2021) argue that pollution from clothing is a responsibility shared by consumers and the industry. They suggest that heightened consumer awareness could influence more sustainable shopping choices.

In the fast fashion sector, the concept of sustainability is nuanced and multidimensional (Gomes de Oliveira et al., 2022). Consumers are becoming more conscious of social responsibility and environmental issues, on the one hand. This is demonstrated by the growth of the slow fashion movement, where consumers value ethical production, long-lasting materials, and high quality over fads that come and go quickly and inexpensive costs. According to Connell (2011), there is a rising market of customers that actively look for sustainable practices, buy clothes only, when necessary, prolong the life of their apparel, and support environmentally conscious businesses. This is consistent with research by La Rosa and Jørgensen (2021) showing that intentions to buy sustainable items are higher when people have a positive environmental drive.

But there's also a big difference between awareness and practice. Many customers are ignorant of the fashion industry's effects on society and the environment, or of how their wardrobe decisions affect these problems (Byrd & Su, 2021). Price continues to be a significant factor influencing buying decisions, even when intentions are positive. Additionally, as discovered by Bianchi and Gonzalez (2021) in their study on consumer perception in Chile, some sustainable products are connected to an upscale image, which further restricts accessibility. This emphasizes how important it is for fast fashion companies to close the gap between what consumers want and what they actually purchase. The sector may promote more mindful consumption by putting into place clear and reasonably priced sustainable practices (Hur & Cassidy, 2019).

However, McNeill and Moore (2015) note that fast fashion consumers, driven by the continuous desire for new products, often exhibit lower sustainability awareness.

Sustainability has gained traction among Generations X, Y, and Z. Yet, despite initiatives like "Fridays for Future" emphasizing sustainability, the allure of fast or ultra-fast fashion remains strong among younger demographics (Bläse et al., 2023). This article delves into the environmental and social repercussions of Shein's business practices, critiquing its purported commitment to environmental sustainability, its controversial labour conditions, and its minimal social accountability. Given that Generation Z significantly influences brand relationships (Bjerre, 2023), this study will develop a questionnaire targeting Generations Y (1985-1999) and Z (2000-2010).

2.2. Social responsibility and labor conditions

The societal and environmental impacts of fast fashion have become increasingly evident, encompassing a broad range of negative aspects from significant carbon footprints, extensive use of natural resources to the raise of a number of social concerns (Brewer, 2019). Nowadays, there is widespread concern about sustainability. The expansion of the fashion calendar to up to five collections per year significantly impacts the environment and leads to various challenges. Addressing sustainable and ethical issues often results in increased costs, making it difficult for many buyers to afford the higher prices of sustainable clothing (Moorhouse, 2020).

Indeed, despite growing consumer awareness of the unethical aspects of clothing production, this knowledge does not always translate into changes in their purchasing behaviours (McNeil & Moore, 2015). Concerning Shein, the brand's lack of sensitivity and its predisposition to repeatedly copy fashion designs are currently two major concerns in the fashion industry. In 2021, Shein was denounced for copying art by the same artist in six different occasions. After the artist claimed his rights, Shein's strategy was to pay a sum of money to own a limited license and only delete the products from its website. This comes in the face of a loophole in copyright law where clothing designs can still be replicated without permission (Liu, 2022).

In the discussion about social responsibility, Shein is criticized for crossing boundaries related to different cultures and religions. Repeatedly, products are put on sale that replicate Muslim prayer rugs and jewelry with the Buddhist swastika symbol, thus generating indignation and criticism from consumers (Liu, 2022).

In 2021, with Shein's "Sustainability and social impact report", it became public knowledge that the brand's employees work 75 hours a week, with three shifts a day and only one rest day a month. China's laws set a limit of only 40 hours per week, but workers are encouraged to work overtime by being paid for each garment produced. If online orders become scarcer or products are rejected due to quality problems, workers are left unpaid and without any kind of protection to force overtime pay (Liu, 2022). In the aforementioned report, it was noted that 14% of the violations detected relate to working hours and 27% include insufficient fire and emergency prevention, resulting in problems with an unstable and unsafe working environment. Lastly, there is child exploitation which, although it represents approximately 1% at the moment, is an issue that calls into question all the social responsibility practices that Shein wants to convey (Liu, 2022). Fast fashion is thus connected with labour abuses (Hall, 2017). The workers' precarious working conditions are one of the reasons why the company is able to sell its products at excessively low prices. Its manufacturing process is outsourced to small and medium-sized Chinese companies that don't respect labour legislation. These companies adapt to the minimum six-week period required by the administration for inspections to be triggered by regularly changing the name of their company, in order to be able to dismiss and shred employees without restrictions. The workers do not have formalized contracts and therefore do not pay social security contributions. Workers are thus condemned to adapt to all these factors that are harmful to their physical and psychological health and safety (Héry et al., 2021).

These subcontractors do not have any form of legal contract with Shein, making it possible, and very easy, for Shein to deny any responsibility towards these workers, who are mostly immigrants, mistreated and under enormous pressure, forcing them to manage extreme volumes of work (Holmes, 2022).

2.3. Environmental sustainability – greenwashing

Most consumers are unaware of the connection between sustainability and the fast fashion industry. With a growing number of advocates for ethical consumption, the demand for fashion in line with today's biggest trends continues to outweigh its significant environmental impact (Lu et al., 2022).

The environmental footprint of this industry is undeniable. Low-quality clothes contain chemicals that are toxic not only to the environment but also to humans (Burke, 2023). Inherent in all fast fashion companies, the clothes produced by Shein are also low-cost and of low quality, with no prospect of them being worn for a long time. However, these low prices point to the use of synthetic materials, namely polyester and nylon. This indicates that, in contrast to the short life cycle, this material will not deteriorate so quickly (Lu et al., 2022).

With the rise of the green economy and the leveraging of consumer awareness towards more sustainable consumption, it is crucial to adapt sustainable practices to improve brand performance (Lu et al., 2022). Shein is one of the companies that defrauds consumers of their sustainability, as its environmental initiatives do not have the necessary or sufficient results to change this problem (Burke, 2023). The company thus tries to cover up its unsustainable part with fake green marketing campaigns (Lu et al., 2022).

These campaigns can therefore, be linked to the concept of greenwashing. The term Greenwashing is defined as a "behaviour or activities that make people believe that a company is doing more to protect the environment than it really is."(Cambridge Dictionary, 2024). For Lu (2022), many consumers see no contradiction between their search for sustainability and their purchase of fast fashion products, thus assuming less concern for environmental impact.

Although some consumers consider this form of consumption to be beneficial, it is clear that it is always accompanied by significant environmental damage such as increased pollution, depletion of natural resources (land and water) and energy wastage during the production process (Héry et al., 2021).

2.4. Marketing strategies

Shein mainly uses two methods to create value: low cost and differentiation. These methods help the company gain and sustain its competitive advantage. The strategy of competitive prices on high-demand products is a global strategy and wins over mid- and low-level consumers who become regular consumers (Zhang & Gou, 2021). Holmes (2022) states that the company, by overproducing its products, relies on the idea that quality does not have to be at its best.

In addition to bad labour practices that affect and deceive workers, albeit in different ways, consumers are also manipulated. Shein's website is full of pop-up adverts, heavy discounts, and countless announcements of new trends (Holmes, 2022). The brand's product range targets teenagers and young adults as they are more likely to subscribe to premium plans to receive discounts of up to 80 per cent. However, the company is always cautious in implementing these promotional strategies to reduce their profit margins (Shen, 2022) only slightly.

The media is full of complaints about the brand's fraudulent advertising. The garments arrive at their final destination damaged, and the photographs do not correspond to what is publicized on the website, thus taking the truth out of the company's marketing (Liu, 2022).

2.5. Z generation

Unlike other generations, Gen Z has a high presence in the online world and a reliance on digitalization and social networks. As a result of this presence, consumer behaviour has changed mainly in the last decade with brands using online strategies to build their image and satisfy the desires of this generation (Bjerre, 2023). According to Bjerre (2023), a digital world has been unleashed, led by Gen Z. Being orientated towards low prices, this group is the target of Shein, which in turn is governed by low-cost products (Liu, 2022).

Gen Z is concerned with brand integrity and transparency and is strongly guided by values and opinions similar to their own. This factor reveals the shift from passive to active consumer behaviour with an impact on brand communication (Bjerre, 2023). Therefore, the perception of the value of a sustainable product encourages purchase when consumers feel that they are contributing to improving the environment (Castro-López et al., 2021).

Today, it is indisputable that young people no longer respond to marketing in the same way as previous generations and Shein offers a diverse range of channels including the website, mobile app, social media, and the choice of fashion influencers as brand representatives (Shen, 2022). Consumers have started to shop online at companies that were created exclusively to operate in the fast fashion industry, with Shein being one of the largest and most far-reaching (Williams, 2022).

3. Methodology: data analysis and definition of hypotheses

We used a quantitative methodology in which the data were collected by an online questionnaire survey, to address the research objectives. The questionnaire was available on several social networks (Instagram and Facebook during the months of March and April 2023. The questionnaire was divided as follows: the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents, behaviour consumption and the consumers' perceptions on the brand, followed by ten statements about its policies and practices. These scales follow the ones applied by Gomes de Oliveira et al. (2022).

In terms of data analysis, all the variables were statistically described, as for the 10 statements we applied the principal component analysis, with the varimax rotation method. We ran an econometric model to explain the profile of the consumer who intends to buy items from Shein. We used STATA (version 17) software to perform this analysis.

In order to meet the objectives of this study, the following hypotheses were outlined.

H_1: Consumer generations have an impact on the desire to buy the Shein brand in the future.

H_2: Educational level has an impact on the desire to buy the Shein brand in the future.

H_3: The monthly expenses incurred by consumers have an impact on the desire to buy the Shein brand in the future.

H_4: Currently being a Shein consumer has an impact on the desire to buy the Shein brand in the future.

H_5: The work, social and environmental policies implemented by the brand influence consumers to purchase the Shein brand in the future.

H_6: Price and brand policies influence consumers to purchase the Shein brand in the future.

4. Results and discussion

The sample consists of 409 complete responses. In terms of profile, the female gender predominates, with 64.3% of the total respondents, 35.5% correspond to the male gender, and 0.2% preferred to indicate another gender or did not respond. Generation Z has the highest representation (73.1%), followed by generation Y (19.6%) and, finally, generation X (7.3%). Regarding the level of education, 75.6% had at least a bachelor's degree, and the remaining 24.4% did not have any academic degree.

Regarding monthly spending, in relation to clothing, 44.0% indicated that they spent less than 100 EUR, 10.5% between 101 and 200 EUR, 6.8% between 201 and 300 EUR, 5.4% more than 300 EUR, and 33.3% stated that they haven't had any expenses   or chose not to indicate them. Regarding the concept of fast fashion, it was observed that 79.7% indicated that they were aware of the concept.

Regarding awareness of the Shein brand, 79.5% said they knew the brand, and the remaining 20.5% had no awareness of the brand. Regarding the purchase of the brand's products, 59.9% indicated that they had already purchased, while the remaining 40.1% have never purchased anything from Shein. Of those who have purchased Shein's items, 66.4% were satisfied with the purchase, and the remaining 33.6%, on the contrary, were not satisfied (Table 1).

Table 1. Sample description, behaviour consumption and Shein's knowledge

Variables	%
Sociodemographic characteristics	
Gender	
Female	64.3%
Male	35.5%
I prefer not to say/other gender	0.2%
Generations	41.3
Z	73.1%
Y	19.6%
X	7.3%
Education (complete)	
No degree	24.4%
Bachelor's or other degrees	75.6%
Behaviour consumption and knowledge	
Monthly expenses on purchasing clothes/ accessories:	
≤ 100 EUR	44.0%
[101 EUR – 200 EUR]	10.5%
[201 EUR – 300 EUR]	6.8%
> 300 EUR	5.4%
I prefer not to respond/do not spend	33.3%
Are you familiar with the concept of fast fashion?	
Yes	79.7%
No	20.3%
Are you aware of the existence of the Shein brand?	
Yes	79.5%
No	20.5%
Have you ever purchased from Shein?*	
Yes	59.9%
No	40.1%
Of those who had purchased the Shein brand, was you satisfied?	
Yes	66.4%
No	33.6%

The ten statements related to the policies and practices performed by Shein were evaluated through a 5-point Likert scale and the answers were provided by the respondents who were aware of this brand.

Although Shein's affordability is seen favourably by customers (ES5: 4.10), they have serious ethical concerns (ES1–ES4: all above 4.5). The greatest motivator for consumers to make a purchase is price (high mean, high standard deviation); however, they clearly criticize the brand because of its possible child labour allegations (ES2), environmental impact (ES3, ES4), and worker exploitation (ES1). Influencer endorsements (ES8) have limited effect, and deceptive tactics like greenwashing (ES3) and possibly misleading marketing (ES7) further undermining confidence. The allure of cheap costs and ethical considerations are clearly at odds, as seen by the lackluster brand preference (ES9) and overall satisfaction (ES10) (Table 2).

Table 2. Statements about Shein brand

Statements	Mean	Standard Deviation
ES1 – The fact that a brand exploits its workers and offers poor working conditions reduces my desire to consume its products	4.56	0.775
ES2 – The possibility of child exploitation practices has a negative impact on my perception of the brand	4.60	0.744
ES3 – The brand's greenwashing policy (fraudulent environmental sustainability practices) negatively influences my willingness to buy its products	4.57	0.707
ES4 – The brand's significant contribution to environmental degradation negatively influences my desire to consume its products	4.58	0.685
ES5 – The low prices offered by Shein are the main reason for my consumption of the brand	4.10	1.205
ES6 – The fact that the brand makes replicas of products from other individual artists decreases my desire to buy their products	4.24	0.979
ES7 – Fraudulent marketing practices make me feel deceived	4.67	0.574
ES8 – If any influencer I follow advertises the brand and recommends its products, it will increase my desire to purchase	3.80	1.393
ES9 – I prefer Shein over other fast fashion brands	3.15	1.586
ES10 – Overall, I am satisfied with the Shein brand	3.50	1.361

Notes: CDIS = Completely disagree; DIS = Disagree; INDIF = Neither agree or disagree; AGRE = Agree; CAGR = Completely agree.

The statements showed substantial loading on all constructs, with none of the statements loading on more than one, hence augmenting the independence of every construct. The constructs that have resulted from the data analysis were construct 1 – Ethical Erosion Triad for Shein and construct 2 – Pricing Impact and Consumer Sentiment.

The construct 1 explained 42.901% of the variance and it is a crucial factor regarding the perception of how

the Shein brand performs. The second factor refers to the influence that Shein's pricing strategy has on the overall perception and feelings of consumers (Table 3).

Table 3. The identification of the latent constructs: factorial analysis

Statements	Ethical Erosion Triad for Shein	Pricing Impact and Consumer Sentiment
ES3	0.9556	
ES4	0.9357	
ES1	0.9304	
ES2	0.9259	
ES7		0.649
ES9		0.890
ES8		0.831
ES10		0.754
ES5		0.679
ES6		0.,557
Eigenvalues/ Rotation Sums Squared Loadings	4.290	2.830
Variance (%)	42.901	28.303
KMO test	0.777	
Approx. Chi-square (sig.)	3679,16 (0.000)	

Note: *Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization; ** The results of KMO and Bartlett tests confirm the factorability and the adequacy of the analysis.

After the respondents had answered to the level of agreement with each statement, they were asked whether they were aware of Shein's policies and practices: 58.9% indicated that they were aware, and the remaining 41.1% were not aware of these policies, only 27.9% would repeat the purchase and 72.1% indicated that they would not buy products from Shein again.

The presented econometric model (Table 4) outlines the consumer profile inclined to purchase the Shein brand after being aware of its practices and policies. Findings indicate that Generation Y and Z exhibit higher probabilities of purchasing (10.80% and 9.33%, respectively). In this sense, the hypothesis 1 was supported.

Furthermore, individuals holding a bachelor's, master's, or Ph.D. degree show a 12.63% lower propensity to buy compared to those without an academic degree. Increased monthly expenses on clothing and accessories correlate with a stronger desire to buy the Shein brand. The hypotheses 2 and 3 were supported,

Customer loyalty plays a significant role, with previous buyers being 25.76% more likely to repeat purchases. We verify that being a Shein consumer has an impact on the desire to buy the Shein brand in the future, thus confirming hypothesis 4.

Awareness of the brand's practices regarding workers, child labour, and the environment leads to a 15.35%

decrease in the desire to buy (supporting hypothesis 5).

On the other hand, the brand's pricing policy, marketing campaigns, and influencer strategies contribute to an 8.96% increase in the probability of purchase (supporting hypothesis 6). At the end, all hypotheses were confirmed.

Management strategies may focus on leveraging education levels, cultivating loyalty, and addressing concerns related to ethical practices, while continuing to emphasize effective pricing and marketing strategies.

Table 4. Profile of the consumer who intends to buy the Shein brand – Econometric model.

Variables	Marginal Effect
Sociodemographic characteristics	
Gender	
Male	–
Female	0.0063
Generations	
X	–
Y	0.1080*
Z	0.0933*
Education (complete)	
No degree	
Bachelor's or other degrees	−0.1263***
Behaviour consumption and knowledge	
Monthly expenses on purchasing clothes/ accessories:	
I prefer not to respond/do not spend	–
≤ 100 EUR	0.0521
[101 EUR – 200 EUR]	−0.0028
[201 EUR – 300 EUR]	0.2639***
> 300 EUR	0.2813**
Have you ever purchased from Shein?	
No	–
Yes	0.2576***
Constructs	
Ethical Erosion Triad for Shein	−0.1535***
Pricing Impact and Consumer Sentiment	0.0896***

Notes: Significant at: * $p < 0.10$ level; ** $p < 0.05$ level; *** $p < 0.01$.

5. Conclusions

It's critical to understand how consumers behave towards fast fashion companies that engage in dubious ethical behaviour. Consumer choices can impact the environmental and social practices of the fashion business, which has a substantial impact on these areas. This study clarifies the intricate interaction between consumer awareness of Shein's possible drawbacks (labour exploitation, environmental damage) and the brand's allure (cheap prices, marketing). Results support our initial hypotheses. The

study's findings suggest several important strategies and implications for Shein's management. Specifically, management can adapt marketing strategies to specifically meet the preferences of the younger population (Y and Z) and consumers with a lower level of education (without a degree, which mostly coincides with the young segment). Pricing strategies and product offerings can be aligned with the spending habits of consumers with a higher fashion budget. Another strategy is to implement loyalty programs and personalized promotions that can capitalize on existing customer loyalty. Additionally, proactive steps must be taken to improve ethical practices and transparently communicate these efforts to consumers. And finally, they must demonstrate a continuous investment in effective pricing and marketing strategies that can increase brand visibility and consumer interest.

The managers should adopt a comprehensive approach, considering demographic targeting, ethical improvements, and continued investment in successful marketing to strengthen Shein's brand appeal and foster customer loyalty.

Although the study has limitations, it offers insightful information on how consumers behave towards Shein. First off, knowledge of Shein's policies is the primary emphasis of the poll rather than comprehension of their actual significance. Secondly, it doesn't look into other options that customers might think about. Lastly, the sample could not be entirely representative since it might leave out opinions from groups that are less likely to know about or be interested in Shein. Because of these drawbacks, more investigation is necessary to get a more sophisticated comprehension of how consumers make decisions about Shein and the fast fashion sector.

Acknowledgments

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