

HOW FAST FASHION LOWERS PRODUCTION COST BUT INCREASES ENVIRONMENTAL COST

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ABSTRACT - *In an effort to meet the increasing demand for inexpensive, disposable goods, the fashion industry has adopted a business model which prioritises cost effectiveness above all else. This business model, known as 'fast fashion', had been reportedly known to encourage consumers to discard clothing at an alarming rate which in turn burdens landfills, creating a cycle of waste. This throwaway culture stemming from fast fashion raises alarms of the impact of the incessant reliance of synthetic fibres and chemically intensive processes which exacerbates environmental degradation over a long period of time.*

Objective – *This paper aims to highlight and explore the need for a shift in the fashion industry's standards. This paper also aims to further encourage sustainable business models, advocate for consumer awareness, emphasising these factors as crucial drivers of change.*

Methodology – *The literature review method was employed to analyze the data in order to acquire a more comprehensive understanding of the complex interrelationships among fast fashion, manufacturing costs, and environmental impacts.*

Findings – *This paper has revealed the realistic hard and soft, short, medium and long-term solutions to attack the problem at its root cause. Furthermore, fast fashion's impact on the environment is detrimental and requires a dire need of reevaluation of its practices to urgently ensure a more sustainable and responsible future of the fashion industry.*

Novelty – *For companies which indulge in the fast fashion business model like SHEIN to implement sustainable alternatives such as using eco-friendly materials and textiles, ethical labour practices, and innovative recycling methods to be used as potential solutions in order to mitigate the environmental damage caused by the fast fashion industry and possibly encourage their consumers to understand the damage caused by the cycle of waste.*

Keywords: *fast fashion, environment issues, sustainability, green policy*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Fast fashion has become a prominent force in the modern retail industry, known for its capacity to make the latest trends accessible rapidly and inexpensively to many people. Companies such as SHEIN exemplify this pattern by providing a wide range of styles at very low prices. Nevertheless, this ostensibly advantageous business model conceals a significantly pernicious reality: a considerable ecological impact. Fast fashion practices are responsible for substantial environmental damage, a decline in biodiversity, an upsurge in carbon emissions, and the exhaustion of local water supplies (Bick et al., 2018). Despite an increasing recognition of these effects, the attraction of inexpensive and fashionable apparel still motivates consumer actions, resulting in a worldwide predicament of environmental justice (Bick et al., 2018; Pringle, 2021).

The selection of SHEIN as the principal subject of this research was based on its significant influence in the quick fashion sector. SHEIN, being a prominent brand, exemplifies the operational methods of the fast fashion industry, which involve swift production cycles, design emphasis on current trends, and large-scale output. The brand's market dominance enables a thorough analysis of the environmental repercussions associated with fast fashion, including resource-intensive manufacturing, pollution, and unsustainable supply chain methods (Teowarang et al., 2022). The wide range of customers that SHEIN has also offers significant information about how consumers behave and how successful sustainability communications are. The disparity between SHEIN's assertions of sustainability and its tangible operational procedures provides a distinct viewpoint on corporate openness and deceptive environmental marketing (Toprak & Anis, 2018). Moreover, if SHEIN were to adopt more sustainable methods, it might establish a standard for the whole fast fashion business, emphasizing the significance of exploring environmental responsibility in this sector.

In order to address these environmental repercussions, it is crucial to embrace more sustainable methodologies within the fast fashion sector. This encompasses the use of environmentally sustainable products, the reduction of waste, and the optimization of supply chains to reduce negative impacts on the environment (Shen, 2014). In addition to business responsibility, there is an urgent requirement for consumer education. Consumers who possess knowledge and awareness are more inclined to choose things of superior quality that may be recycled, thereby promoting a culture of ethical consumption (Wu & Islam, 2022). In order to effectively address environmental and social concerns, it is imperative that transparency and sustainability be established as fundamental principles within the business models of the fashion industry (Thorisdottir & Jóhannsdóttir, 2019).

Nevertheless, there are notable deficiencies in the journey towards achieving sustainable fast fashion. An important problem is in the insufficient consumer awareness and education on the inherent sustainability issues in this industry. Despite SHEIN's professed dedication to sustainable production, their extensive manufacturing processes and lack of transparency have a substantial impact on climate change, a reality that consumers frequently disregard (Ultra-fast fashion risks undermining progress in sustainability, 2021). The disparity between how consumers perceive enterprises like SHEIN, and the actual environmental consequences underscores the necessity for enhanced comprehension and openness regarding their ecological footprint.

This research seeks to address these disparities by conducting a comprehensive analysis of the ecological expenses linked to the fast fashion industry, with specific emphasis on brands such as SHEIN. The study will assess the efficacy of suggested remedies and pinpoint regions necessitating additional measures. The objective is to not only illuminate the concealed ecological costs of fast fashion but also to suggest a holistic approach for the industry and consumers to transition towards sustainability and ethical standards. This article aims to emphasize the pressing necessity for a fundamental change in the fashion industry, shifting from the conventional fast fashion model to a more sustainable and ethically accountable approach. It does so by analysing the impact of design choices, customer attitudes, and environmental concerns.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

As a result of its negative effects on the environment, fast fashion has been a matter of increasing concern. Fast fashion does have cheaper manufacturing costs, but the environmental costs are raised in the process. The production of textiles has several negative effects on the environment and society, including the proliferation of water-intensive cotton, the leakage of untreated colours into nearby water sources, low pay for workers, and unfavourable working conditions (Bick et al., 2018). Customers who purchase fast fashion have an intrinsic dissonance as, although caring about environmental concerns, they frequently follow consumer behaviours that run counter to ecological best practices (Joy et al., 2012). Fast fashion systems may be very valuable, especially when customers act strategically, but they can cause unfavourable externalities at every stage of the supply chain, which poses a problem for environmental justice globally (Cachon & Swinney, 2011).

Although consumers of fast fashion have good attitudes about the environment, negative press on the industry's labour conditions and environmental effect has a substantial impact on customers' sentiments (Joung, 2014; Roozen & Raedts, 2020). In order to satisfy customer demand and reduce production costs, fast fashion firms often offer items of "acceptable" quality. However, studies of consumers' behaviours and habits regarding fast fashion products are few in the literature (Luximon & Chan, 2017; Gabrielli et al., 2013). Fashion businesses frequently employ the fast fashion business model since it may boost their competitiveness, lower manufacturing costs, and cut the lead time for production (Rahman & Gong, 2022). The harsh reality of rapid fashion is shown by the fact that although the cost of apparel has been rising, the costs to people and the environment have been falling (Ertekin, 2017).

Building eco-materials, offering safety training, overseeing sustainable production, cutting carbon emissions during distribution, and promoting eco-fashion are all parts of the fast fashion industry's sustainable supply chain, as demonstrated by H&M (Shen, 2014). According to Kim et al. (2013), several fast-fashion shops are taking proactive measures to address environmental problems by initiating pro-environmental campaigns or introducing slow fashion brands. It is possible to partially mitigate the issues associated with fast fashion and reconcile the goals of environmental sustainability and fashion by charging extra for items that satisfy consumer demands for greater transparency about sourcing and production (Ertekin & Atik, 2014). However, there hasn't been much research done on the wider effects of fast fashion and how consumers see the short lifespan of fast fashion clothing (Collett et al., 2013; Sheridan et al., 2006).

The literature assessment concludes that there is a complicated interaction between consumer behaviour, production processes, and environmental repercussions when it comes to fast fashion and its effects on the environment. Fast fashion reduces manufacturing costs, but it also greatly raises the cost of the environment, creating a worldwide environmental justice conundrum. In order to lessen the damaging effects of fast fashion on the environment, the industry must respond to these issues by creating eco-friendly supply chains and adopting sustainable methods.

III. METHODOLOGY

By conducting a literature evaluation, this study addresses the lack of research regarding the environmental and production costs associated with fast fashion. Data was collected from an extensive range of sources, including scholarly articles, journalistic articles, industry reports, and other relevant publications. Extensive literature searches were undertaken by employing electronic databases, including Google Scholar, and online libraries (Byrne et al, 2012). Our search terms included "fast fashion," "SHEIN," "sustainability," "environmental impact," and "waste management." Utilizing inclusion criteria, resources that are directly relevant to the rapid fashion industry, SHEIN's manufacturing and waste management processes, its environmental impacts, brand sustainability, and environmental degradation were identified during the selection process. The sample was chosen from the latest and pertinent material accessible online, employing keywords such as "fast fashion," "SHEIN," "environmental impact," "sustainability," and "waste management."

The literature review method was employed to analyze the data in order to acquire a more comprehensive understanding of the complex interrelationships among fast fashion, manufacturing costs, and environmental impacts. Undergraduates from the University of Jakarta, Indonesia, who were chosen for the research team on the basis of their aptitude and enthusiasm for environmental studies, comprised the group. The review focused on SHEIN and other comparable companies operating in the rapid fashion industry, given their significant impact on manufacturing expenses and environmental impacts within the sector. A meticulous adherence to citation references was maintained during the review process in order to ensure the integrity and credibility of the material and findings attributed to their respective sources (Jahan et al, 2016).

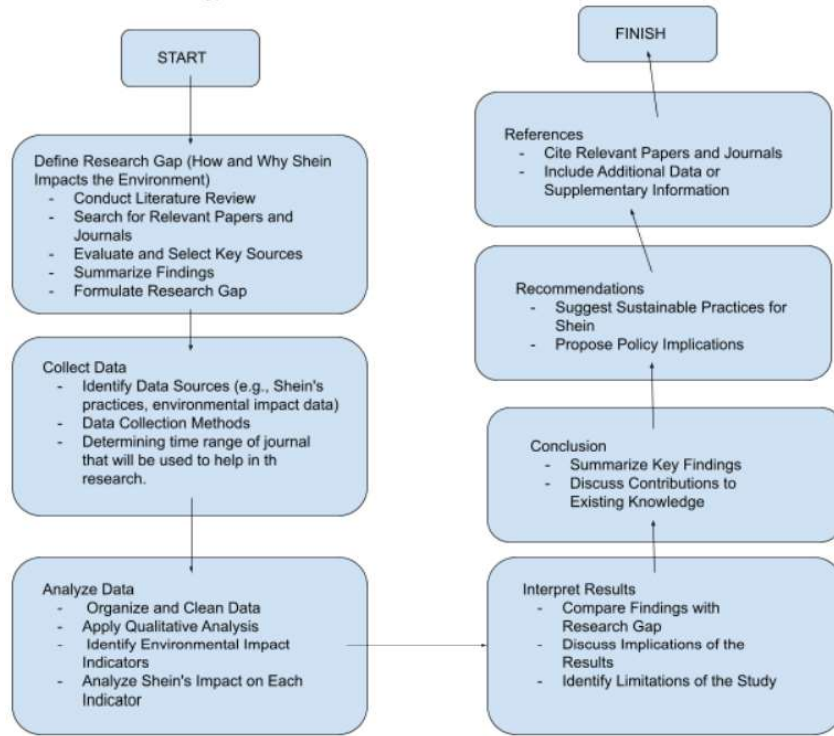


Figure 1. Literature Review Process

Additionally, a literature review is used to perform the study, in which experts in the relevant field evaluate and analyse a research effort (see Figure 1). The goal of a literature review is to confirm the paper's correctness and originality. It also ensures that the conclusions are drawn logically from the presented facts and that the claims are supported by the evidence presented. This method works well in the field of fast fashion, where striking a balance between production costs and environmental effects is a complex issue. As a result, this study could establish if the issue covered in the paper has been successfully addressed. Identifying any biases or prejudices that can compromise the reliability and accuracy of the study findings is also very important.

IV. RESULTS

This is the first study analysing the involvement of the fast fashion brand SHEIN in environmental degradation through unsustainable practices, which have consequences on the planet. Like many other fast fashion brands, SHEIN overproduced clothing items to meet the high and ever-changing demands of the market. This led to excessive textile wastes where unsold items often end up in landfills (The True Cost). As the name “fast-fashion” states, SHEIN released new clothing collections at a very fast pace, encouraging their consumers to purchase more, thus disposing of their clothing much faster, resulting in the “throwaway culture”. Not only did this contribute to the production of greenhouse gases, but the low-quality materials that SHEIN used to maintain low costs are often non-biodegradable (Holman, 2023).

In SHEIN’s case, it was explored more thoroughly that in November of 2022, 15% of SHEIN’s products exceeded EU regulatory limits for hazardous chemicals, highlighting the environmental and health risks associated with the fast-fashion brand. A subsequent assessment in the following year found that SHEIN had no publicly available climate targets, indicating a lack of commitment to sustainability. The brand only further states, “Currently baselining energy consumption and establishing goals around renewable energy use in our own operations. We look forward to publicly disclosing our baseline GHG emissions calculations,” without actually disclosing numerical and qualitative information about their relationship with synthetics (The Changing Markets Foundation, 2022). Furthermore, SHEIN’s rapid production model, utilising virgin polyester and large quantities of oil, results in CO2 emissions equivalent to 180 coal-fired

power plants, contributing to an annual carbon footprint of about 6.3 million tons (Rajvanshi, et al.). Though it is true that SHEIN has publicly announced making donations over 3 years to a charity working at Kantamanto in Accra, according to Barber (2023), around 15 million pieces of used clothing that is said to be donated arrived every week in which, as stated by Britten (2022), director of the Or Foundation, a Ghana- and US-konwarbased not-for-profit working with Accra's textile waste workers, announced that 40% of those 15 million garments were a waste as much of it cannot be reused. Ricketts further elaborated that with the absence of landfills in Ghana, the unused garments entered the environment and millions of the garments went into the oceans resulting in the pollution in African nation's beaches as the current pushes the garments into the beach from the ocean floor (Britten, 2022).

It is crucial that fast fashion corporations such as that of SHEIN, be equipped with the capacity to confront the environmental issues engendered by industry practices. This paper aims to gather empirical data which alludes to the potential environmental degradation that is being caused by these practices, with the dual objectives of being able to raise awareness and proffer sustainable, long-term solutions.

Bick (2018) discusses the negative externalities and environmental health hazards associated with the fast fashion supply chain, emphasising the disproportionate burden on workers and communities near textile manufacturing facilities. Niinimäki et al. (2020) emphasizes the environmental impacts of the textile and fashion industry, including water, material, chemical, and energy use, as well as the large amounts of textile waste generated by fast fashion consumption practices. Muñoz (2017) addresses the degradation of the environment caused by the fashion industry's production and consumption patterns, particularly with the emergence of fast fashion. These papers provide evidence of the environmental consequences of SHEIN's fast fashion practices and highlight the need for sustainable production and ethical consumption in the fashion industry (Bick et al., 2018; Muñoz, 2017; Niinimäki et al., 2020).

Konwar and Boruah (2020) emphasizes the use of hazardous chemicals in textile manufacturing, which can be damaging to human health and the environment. Sondergård et al.'s (1999) study discusses the cumulative effects of industrial activities on ecosystems, emphasizing the need for economically and ecologically sustainable pathways. Toprak (2018) focuses on the environmental pollution caused by the textile industry, particularly the discharge of high amounts of chemicals and dyestuffs. These findings suggest that fast fashion brands like SHIN contribute tremendously to environmental deterioration through their wasteful production processes, including the consumption of water, energy, and raw materials, as well as the generation of waste (Konwar & Boruah, 2020; Sondergård et al., 1999).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are consistent with the prior research conducted by Bedard and Tolmie (2018), which revealed that millennials and upcoming generations exhibit a preference for purchasing from firms and brands that demonstrate a commitment to environmental sustainability and offer more ecologically sound products. This indicates a rising consciousness and desire for ethical and environmentally friendly fashion among consumers, particularly the younger demographic. Nevertheless, this study also emphasizes the limited knowledge and comprehension among SHEIN's customers regarding the reasons and mechanisms through which the corporation impacts the environment. A significant number of consumers are either uninformed about or deliberately disregard the concealed expenses associated with fast fashion, including the depletion of resources, the development of waste, and the emission of greenhouse gases. The costs associated with SHEIN, like as environmental impact and labour exploitation, are not evident in the low prices and fast fashion cycles that the company offers. This creates a deceptive perception of affordability and convenience. Hence, it is imperative for consumers to acquire greater knowledge and exercise accountability about their fashion selections, while also considering the ecological repercussions of their purchasing patterns.

An effective method to enhance SHEIN's consumers' awareness and comprehension is to educate them regarding the ecological consequences of rapid fashion production methods, and how they can mitigate these consequences by embracing more sustainable approaches. Consumers can acquire knowledge on the quantity of water, land, energy, and chemicals utilized in the production of various fabric varieties, including synthetic and natural fibres. Additionally, they can get knowledge regarding the quantity of waste and emissions that arise from the production, transportation, and distribution of fast fashion. Additionally,

customers can acquire knowledge on alternate options to rapid fashion, like circular fashion, slow fashion, and ethical fashion. These alternatives strive to mitigate the ecological effects of the fashion industry by employing renewable materials, prolonging the lifespan of products, minimizing waste, and assuring equitable labor conditions. Through the dissemination of knowledge regarding the ecological ramifications of fast fashion and the viable alternatives to it, customers can acquire a greater understanding and exercise more discernment when making fashion-related purchases, so acting in a more informed and responsible manner.

The findings of this study align with the research conducted by Bedard and Tolmie (2018), which indicates that both current and future generations have a preference for organizations that do environmentally friendly measures and provide sustainable products. This suggests a rising consciousness and desire for ethical and environmentally sustainable fashion among consumers, particularly among younger generations. However, this study highlights the insufficient understanding and awareness among SHEIN's customers on the causes and processes underlying SHEIN's environmental impact, such as the depletion of resources, development of waste, and emission of greenhouse gases. SHEIN's ability to provide affordable and convenient options through cheap costs and fast fashion cycles effectively masks the negative externalities associated with their operations. Hence, consumers must exhibit greater consciousness and accountability when it comes to their fashion choices, taking into account the ecological consequences of their buying patterns.

Enhancing consumers' knowledge and comprehension can be achieved by educating them about the environmental consequences of rapid fashion production and the potential for companies to mitigate these impacts through the adoption of sustainable methods. Consumers can be informed about the quantity of water, land, energy, and chemicals utilized in the production of various fabric kinds, whether they are synthetic or made from natural fibers. Furthermore, regarding the amount of waste and emissions produced by the creation, transportation, and distribution of fast fashion. In addition, consumers can get further knowledge on alternatives to fast fashion, such as circular fashion, slow fashion, or ethical fashion. These alternatives strive for sustainability by utilizing renewable resources, prolonging the lifespan of products, reducing waste, and guaranteeing fair labour conditions. By imparting this knowledge to customers, regarding the environmental consequences of fast fashion and its alternatives, individuals might become better informed and thus more conscientious in their buying patterns.

V. CONCLUSION

It is apparent that the consumers of SHEIN are not aware of the company's unethical practices which have a significant impact on the environment. Taken from the company's insistent use of materials which are not eco-friendly, nor sustainable in the long term, such as synthetic fabrics which contain hazardous chemicals and microplastics. In other words, SHEIN is responsible for producing a large amount of waste and greenhouse gas emissions due to its fast fashion model. This act only further encourages overconsumption and the throwaway culture from the disposal of clothing. These issues are not fully understood by SHEIN's consumer base, who are mainly attracted by their low prices and fast trendy styles and marketing strategy.

This further dictates the insistence of large companies like SHEIN which hold a significant amount of presence as well as holding power capable of impacting the environment in a large scale, to be taken accountable. Their unsustainable business practice only furthers the degradation of the environment, and their consumer base needs to be educated on the impacts of supporting large corporations like SHEIN. Companies like SHEIN not only endanger the environment, but they also endanger their consumers.

In conclusion, implementing greener policies would not only be beneficial for the environment but also provides a more sustainable business model. By reducing their environmental footprint, companies like SHEIN would more likely be able to meet consumer expectations at a greater rate. As by staying ahead of regulatory changes, these companies are capable of sustaining their position in an ever changing market whilst contributing to a more sustainable future

Limitation and Future Research.

Studies on the phenomenon of fast fashion, particularly in relation to labels such as SHEIN, have pinpointed specific issues that require additional investigation. There is a notable lack of knowledge among consumers regarding the environmental consequences of fast fashion, underscoring the necessity for comprehensive research on consumer behaviour and the creation of impactful communication tactics. Furthermore, there is a conspicuous absence of comprehensive quantitative data regarding the precise environmental effects caused by these companies, such as measurements of water use, carbon emissions, and trash production. Longitudinal studies are crucial for assessing the true dedication of organizations such as SHEIN to environmental sustainability by tracking their compliance with sustainability commitments over an extended period.

Moreover, the study emphasizes the significance of developing tactics to inform customers about the ecological ramifications of their buying choices in the fast fashion sector. Conducting comparative studies between fast fashion and more sustainable firms is essential for comprehending the differences in their environmental footprints. Thorough analysis is necessary to assess the long-term effectiveness and execution of sustainability measures in the fast fashion industry. It is crucial to analyse the economic consequences of implementing sustainable practices, considering both expenses and consumer reaction. Thorough examinations of fast fashion supply chains will provide valuable insights into the industry's overall environmental footprint. Future study should prioritize policy analysis to establish effective incentives for sustainable practices, as well as investigate technological advancements in sustainable fashion, such as novel materials and production techniques.

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