

# Ethical Challenges in the Fast Fashion Industry: The Case of Shein

## Desafíos éticos en la industria de la moda rápida: El caso de Shein

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## ABSTRACT

This article investigates the main ethical challenges faced by the fast fashion sector and Shein, given the promotion of unrestrained consumption. It aims to answer the following question: “What are the ethical implications associated with the mass production conduct of fast-fashion brands?” It addresses the gap in the literature corresponding to the analysis of the current market leader, Shein, with an updated study on the ethical challenges of the fast fashion model. It concludes that the international ethical challenges of this industry generate two main consequences: environmental impact and labour exploitation. Thus, reversing the traditional dependency theory scenario, Shein has established itself with great importance in this industry. However, it faces growing concerns about its business conduct, especially in relation to human rights and environmental sustainability.

**KEYWORDS:** Consumption; Ethical challenges; Fast Fashion; Shein.

## RESUMEN

Este artículo investiga los principales retos éticos a los que se enfrentan el sector de la moda rápida y Shein, dada la promoción del consumo desenfrenado. Se pretende responder a la siguiente pregunta “¿Cuáles son las implicaciones éticas asociadas a la conducta de producción en masa de



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las marcas de moda rápida?”. El artículo aborda la laguna en la bibliografía correspondiente al análisis del actual líder del mercado, Shein, con un estudio actualizado sobre los retos éticos del modelo de moda rápida. Se concluye que los retos éticos internacionales de esta industria generan dos consecuencias principales: el impacto medioambiental y la explotación laboral. Así, revirtiendo el escenario tradicional de la teoría de la dependencia, Shein se ha consolidado con gran importancia en esta industria. Sin embargo, enfrenta crecientes preocupaciones sobre su conducta empresarial, especialmente en relación a los derechos humanos y la sostenibilidad ambiental.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Consumo; Desafíos éticos; Fast Fashion; Shein.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Although recently, fast fashion is a market model that has grown and gained relevance in the fashion industry, conquering everything from traditional consolidated brands to small companies. At first glance, this fashion sector seems to be characterised by innovation in production, speed in changing collections and the arrival of clothes in shops, and the constant satisfaction of the consumers involved. On the other hand, many of those who consume fast fashion goods do not have a solid understanding of what happens in the production chains and what the impacts are of the processes involved (Neves, 2020).

In March 2024, the French Parliament announced that it would legislate fast fashion companies with taxes and a ban on advertising. The aim of this measure is to make platforms like Shein less attractive. From 2025, all garments will be taxed at five euros to compensate for their environmental impact. In this way, it is clear that the manufacture of goods in this sector has certain constraints in order to guarantee the continuity of unbridled consumption and ever-accelerating production. This constant high demand is maintained by companies in this market at the cost of major environmental and social impacts (Público, 2024).

The European Union is betting that the fast fashion model may finally be running out of steam. The Union believes that many consumers, especially generation Z, are already looking for brands that are considered more sustainable, which is corroborated by the fall in profits in recent years at large companies in the sector, such as Boohoo, Pretty Little Thing and ASOS. On the other hand, Zara, H&M and Shein continue to record huge gains. In particular, Shein, despite facing constant accusations involving intellectual property infringement, continues to attract thousands of customers, eager for cheap and trendy clothes (Euronews, 2023).

The capitalist system promotes a division of labor between the central countries, which are industrialized, and puts pressure on the peripheral countries to specialize in the production of primary goods, such as agricultural products and minerals, to supply the global North. Nevertheless, China is also transforming itself, ceasing to be a peripheral country to become a central country, inverting the traditional rules of the International System (Hoult, 2023, Yankittikul, 2024).

Previous decades have seen a proliferation of works focusing on analysing the fast fashion production model, such as Erner (2005) and Egri (2019). Similarly, there has already been extensive analysis focusing on the companies of the Inditex Group, which has remained the sector

leader for many years. On the other hand, there is a notable gap in the literature when it comes to analysing the current market leader, Shein, with an up-to-date study of fast fashion. Therefore, this study is an invitation for renewed reflection on the ethical challenges facing the fast fashion industry, with an emphasis on the Shein case study.

This article aims to answer the following question: "What are the ethical implications associated with the mass production behaviour of fast-fashion brands?". In order to answer this question, a qualitative analysis is used, with recourse to primary sources (including the BBC News Brazil and New York Times news agencies, Shein's official website) and secondary sources (including *Victims of fashion? How do we create it? Why do we follow it?* by Erner and *Research on the Business Strategy and Deficiency of the Fast Fashion Industry to Enhance Development - a Case Study of Shein* by Liu). The theoretical framework is hereby presented with the dependency theory, with a slight inversion: China becomes the new center as the world's factory. In the process, it stimulates consumption all over the world, fueled by massive dependence on cheap goods made in China. The specific objectives of this article are to understand the main ethical challenges faced by the fast fashion industry and Shein as a result of promoting unbridled consumption. Thus, in the first section, the framework of the fashion sector will be portrayed, while the fast fashion model will be addressed in the second section with a focus on analysing the promotion of unbridled consumption and the consequent labour exploitation and environmental impact. In the last section, a case study of Shein will be carried out, focusing on the company's history and growth, production strategies, ethical impact and the business response to these challenges.

## **2. THE FRAMEWORK OF THE FASHION INDUSTRY**

Despite being one of the most polluting industries, the fashion sector is an economic powerhouse that employs millions of people worldwide. This is due to the transience of the product life cycle, which leads to production and consumption being maximised every six months. The big brands on the market seem to be trying to adjust to a possible renewal of society's awareness, which demands not only environmental but also social responsibility from them (Black, 2008; Morais & Figueiredo, 2013). According to Neves and Branco (2000) and Kawamura (2005), fashion can be seen as a doctrine with a set of individuals and structures in a method of inventing symbologies, including their subsequent transformation into cultural goods. Thus, in addition to the main function related to the role of clothing, protection and beautification of the body, it is also responsible for rebuilding social and cultural values, becoming part of behavioural factors in the development of groups and social relations, following the determinations of consumerist society (Duarte, 2021).

According to Egri (2019), there are three driving forces in the fashion industry: capitalism, trends and time, which together keep the structure of the fashion world in motion. According to Wilson (2003), fashion is a child of capitalism, which brings us to the approaches of Karl Marx, one of the main critics of this system and who dealt with the class inequalities and exploitation that prevail under this regime. From this perspective, this exploitative system produces goods to generate profit for the capitalists, who own the means of production, i.e. everything from the raw materials to the machinery used in production, and the workers, who manufacture these goods, sell their labour power and receive wages for their subsistence. On the other hand, these same workers are transformed into consumers, forced to buy what they have made. In this way, the

exploitative system of production and consumption reproduced in capitalism is also the central problem in the development of fashion (Sullivan, 2016). In addition, fashion is also inextricably linked to ephemerality. Thus, fast fashion cycles recycle and repeat the past, creating a false illusion of novelty by repeating an already outdated trend; in convergence with this industry, capitalism projects a false illusion of progress in the countries that adhere to it in the international system (Vinken, 2005; Geczy & Karaminas, 2016).

Dependency theory, a perspective in international relations that emerged in the mid-20th century, applies aptly to this fashion industry, as wealthier nations have dominated the global supply chain, designing high-value brands and controlling retail, while production often falls to countries with lower labor costs. The reliance on developing countries for inexpensive manufacturing maintains an economic imbalance, where these nations become dependent on the demands and policies of multinational corporations from developed regions (Hoult, 2023).

In addition, fashion is seen as a product of class distinction, with a dual function: it gravitates towards a certain stratum and emphasises the separation from the others. In this way, the lower classes, who are ideologically trained to idealise their social ascension, see adherence to the consumption patterns of the upper classes as a way of promoting their ascendancy, consequently positioning themselves as subjects to the whims of this sector. As a result, clothing is a fundamental way for the ruling class to consolidate and project its power. That said, we can see how the fashion industry is one of the remarkable fields of capitalism, especially when analysed from a class perspective. Although the term lower fashion is not used by the fashion industry, ready to wear or fast fashion is used to generate desire and affect consumer emotions. On a worldwide scale, dependency theory explains how fashion also maintains a structural hierarchy within the global economy that often leaves poorer countries reliant on and subject to the whims of fast-fashion giants (Simmel, 1904; Barnard, 1996; Fracaro et al., 2012).

Within the fashion sector, fast fashion production moves at an accelerated pace, making it difficult for consumers to make decisions, since the supply and availability of collections is uninterrupted, ideologically promoting the constant renewal of stocks and a frenetic regular purchasing cycle. These issues are dealt with today by means of increasingly early big sales, which consequently generate the launch of new collections and purchase transactions (Paula, 2015).

### **3. BRIEF LOOK AT FAST FASHION**

#### **Unbridled consumerism and environmental impact**

In the 1990s, fast fashion emerged in Paris, with small textile merchants starting their production late, after confirming certain trends and not reducing their production so as not to lose out on sales. This process came about as a result of the media taking the opportunity to highlight the constant changes in fashion. This form of production arises from the social strata's need for distinctive and unique products that make them stand out socially, thus initiating a new conception, which further instils the excessive need for consumption, since merchandise is renewed every fortnight (Erner, 2005; Egri, 2019).

There are some factors that form the basis of the acceleration of fashion and are relevant to understanding the context of the creation of fast fashion. Firstly, globalisation and the emergence of the internet have made any information accessible to any individual, since the digital reach of fashion shows and news is unlimited. In effect, companies' marketing departments, together with the media, create promotional campaigns, reaching even more customers and spreading the word about their shops worldwide. Even fashion events and the launch of collections themselves help to expand and publicise brands. It should be emphasised that one of the pillars of fashion is ephemerality, making renewals ever more rapid (Mesquita, 2006).

Secondly, there is the issue of time and variations in merchandise, which are also primary factors in fast fashion. The high turnover of products favours the reduction of stocks and projects a new consumption behaviour. You can't wait for prices to fall to buy items from a collection, so the likelihood of impulse purchases increases. The desired effect is for consumers to expect new items every week, to feel that the products will be available for a limited time and to increase their shopping frequency. In addition to this, there is also a rapid changeover of shop windows and decoration and high investment in marketing. The difference between haute couture and fast fashion is that the former doesn't launch new products quickly, as manufacturing takes longer, the designer's labour is more highly valued and production is more geared towards luxury items. The latter, on the other hand, relies solely on complex and more efficiently organised logistics and distribution in order to generate higher revenues (Erner, 2005; Duarte, 2021). The Inditex Group, which owns Zara and H&M, was one of the pioneers of fast fashion as a sales strategy, but Shein has become the current market leader (Público, 2023).

In short, fast fashion arose as a result of the maximised globalisation of fashion trends. Due to its transience, this sector is highly competitive, promoted by globalisation and the rapid availability of information, stimulating the creation of new products. In this way, this industry is intrinsic in society and in all environments that have encountered this situation today. Sull and Turconi (2008) state that brands including Benetton, Zara and Shein have revolutionised the industry with fast fashion, as they bring contemporary and inexpensive models to the public. Fast fashion describes the strategy of brands to adapt merchandise to trends as quickly as possible, being responsive to the market within a few weeks and with an industry average of six months.

It is essential to emphasise that low-cost clothing production, high demand and rapid consumption lead to a complex production chain with environmental and social impacts caused by unbridled manufacturing (Cietta, 2010). This undisciplined consumerism, combined with the rapid obsolescence of clothes, leads to problems with after-use and improper disposal of clothes and waste. In this disposal process, much of the waste is discarded into the environment without any sorting or recycling. Fast fashion's dependency-driven structure exacerbates ecological degradation in developing countries, where relaxed environmental standards are often tolerated to attract business. This leads to substantial waste generation, chemical pollution, and water resource depletion in production hubs (Hoult, 2023). Today, there are mountains of textile waste in the Atacama Desert in Chile, as the area has become one of the main illegal destinations for textile waste in the world as a result of the excessive and rapid use of clothes and irregular disposal. As for the environment, some impacts have been observed, such as climate change, chemical pollution, huge waste generation and environmental imbalance. According to the UN in 2019, clothing production doubled worldwide between 2000 and 2014, and this industry is responsible

for 20% of water waste globally, as well as 8% of greenhouse gases (Silvia & Troncoso, 2013; R7, 2021).

However, in addition to environmental impacts, fast fashion also presents social problems, since it hides labour exploitation in the production of clothing. Thus, in addition to environmental unsustainability, there is social unsustainability, especially after the collapse of a three-storey building where a fabric factory was operating in Bangladesh, which revealed a failure to comply with basic safety standards. It is therefore important to analyse the impacts of this production model on the lives of the workers involved (BBC News Brasil, 2013; Veronese and Laste, 2022).

## **Labour exploitation in fast fashion production chains**

The fashion industry is a traditional and important sector for the world economy. It is the largest segment in terms of global turnover in B2C e-commerce, i.e. direct to consumer, with sales of US\$525 billion a year. It is also growing by an average of 11.4 per cent a year and is expected to earn US\$1 trillion by 2025 (Valor Investe, 2021). On the other hand, the fashion industry also has the reality of labour exploitation by major brands. Considering that the fast fashion production model strives for uninterrupted trend fulfilment, as well as low prices on the market to maintain high consumer demand, companies in the textile industry are constantly looking for low costs in their production (Contino, 2016).

Resources such as precariousness, subcontracting and outsourcing are instruments used by fast fashion brands to deal with market volatility and increase profits by reducing the cost of the workforce. In addition, the constant diversification of products requires flexibility in production, which is also achieved by competitive prices. In many cases, this leads to poor pay for labour and inappropriate and undignified working conditions, which can be considered work analogous to slavery, such as the case mentioned in Bangladesh in 2013 (Veronese and Laste, 2022). According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), modern slavery is still marked by the following indicators: abuse of vulnerability, false promises (wages, etc.), restriction of freedom, intimidation and threats, and abusive working and living conditions (Just Style, 2018).

Fast fashion supply chains are complex and opaque, with violations at different stages of the clothing journey, from field to shelf - from the cotton factories to the weaving, dyeing and finishing stage. One of the main reasons why the fashion industry is unable to address the issue of labour abuse and exploitation is that it uses the fact that fashion is an industry of industries as a leeway. In this way, one item of clothing can have passed through five different countries, all with different legislation and definitions of modern slavery, especially in developing countries, leading to the fast fashion industry's claim that it is impossible to have concrete control (New York Times, 2021).

The NGO Anti-Slavery International defines modern slavery as the severe exploitation of other people for personal or commercial gain. However, there is a lack of a unified approach among the different organisations and regulatory bodies worldwide. Each country has its own specific legislation and ensuring compliance with all of them is a Herculean task, which the big fast fashion brands are unwilling to take on, as it would increase their expenses and responsibilities, reducing their profit margins. Thus, the lack of enforcement of modern slavery laws is the main reason why

violations happen, from failure to enforce them to the indifference of regulatory bodies in general (assuming they even exist) (Fashion & Law Journal, 2021).

Wealthier nations that dominate fast fashion brands rely on cheap production in economically disadvantaged regions, creating a cycle of dependency where these countries become economically reliant on fast fashion contracts. To remain competitive, developing nations often make concessions, such as minimal enforcement of labor standards and environmental regulations, which lead to exploitative working conditions. This dependency-driven dynamic allows brands to benefit from low-cost labor and resources while distancing themselves from the ethical and legal implications of exploitation, as supply chains stretch across borders with varying labor laws and oversight. Consequently, this system reinforces a hierarchy where developing countries bear the social and economic costs, while developed countries maintain economic gains (Duarte & Graciolli, 2011).

Some of the main sources of slave labour in fast fashion are in China, Bangladesh, Cambodia and countries in the Americas. In 2011, Zara admitted in testimony to an investigation into slave labour in the São Paulo Legislative Assembly that an outsourced clothing company carried out slave labour and that there was no monitoring of its suppliers. The current giant in the fast fashion market, Shein does not give details about the locations and conditions of manufacture of the clothes produced for sale through its e-commerce. It is therefore necessary to analyse the impacts caused specifically by the current market leader (Jornal da USP, 2021).

#### **4. CASE STUDY: SHEIN**

Shein's meteoric rise on the global online commerce scene has been nothing short of impressive. As an example of how technology, agile marketing and a deep understanding of consumer demand can transform a company into a consumer market giant, Shein has captivated the attention of entrepreneurs, market analysts and consumers worldwide.

This case study sets out to examine Shein's unique trajectory, from its modest origins to becoming an international powerhouse in the online fashion sector. We will explore the key factors that have contributed to the company's extraordinary success, including its innovative approach to production, distribution and marketing. In addition, we will analyse the challenges faced by Shein throughout its growth journey and how it has established itself in the International System.

#### **Shein's history and growth in the global market**

Founded in 2008 in China, Shein offers top-of-the-range fashion items, including women's and men's garments, children's clothing, stylish accessories and various trendy products and adornments. In a short space of time, Shein has grown from a modest local company to a global powerhouse in the world of online fashion retail. Standing out for its diverse range of affordable and trendy clothing and accessories, Shein has attracted the interest of those who closely follow fashion trends around the globe (Ria, 2023).

Shein's success can be attributed to its ability to adapt seamlessly and quickly to the fast-paced world of fashion. The company operates on a model that prioritises digital, using cutting-edge

technology to stay at the forefront of the latest trends and deliver them to a vast and diverse customer base. From its beginnings to its current status as a global fashion giant, Shein's journey is a testament to the power of digital innovation and adaptability in an ever-evolving fashion industry (ibid.). Initially known as ZZKKO, in March 2011 it was registered as "Sheinside.com" in order to attract more attention, presenting itself as a global leader in wedding dresses, as well as offering a variety of women's clothing. Initially, however, the idea was to commercialise wedding dresses, which had high prices and were in high demand in parallel, in a cheaper way. The company sources its products from the clothing resale market in Guangzhou, an important centre for various clothing manufacturers and markets used by the company. During this period, Shein played no role in creating or manufacturing the clothes; it operated as a dropshipping company, i.e. selling outsourced resale products directly to customers all over the world. In early 2010, Shein expanded its product range to include cosmetics, footwear, handbags, jewellery and clothing. They also expanded into markets in Spain, France, Russia, Italy and Germany. In 2015, the company changed its name again to what we know today as "Shein" with the aim of achieving global recognition. In 2016, the company, which three years earlier had 100 employees, grew to 800 workers (ibid.).

As mentioned earlier, the brand is famous for selling clothes at affordable prices and its main triumph is often linked to its popularity among Generation Z shoppers. Initially, the company was likened to a dropshipping operation, because it didn't design or produce items, but sourced them from the retail clothing market in Guangzhou. It was in 2012 that Shein began to build up its product supply system, becoming a full retailer. As of 2022, the company has set up a supply network in Guangzhou involving more than 3,000 suppliers (ibid.).

In fact, Shein's turning point was in 2020: the lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During the lockdown, customers spent a lot of time looking and buying, which led to a considerable rise for the company. Shein has a very powerful social media strategy, especially on Tik Tok, where unboxings go viral (Gómara, 2023). Shein is one of the most popular brands for young people on TikTok. The truth is that the continuous flow of discounts encourages shoppers to visit the site (Liu, 2022). Another factor that generates interest is the brand's seasonal partnerships with celebrities, such as Khloe Kardashian, Rita Ora, Katy Perry, Anitta and Rita Pereira, among others (Caeiro, 2023; Woodland, 2024).

In 2022, Shein achieved the title of most downloaded shopping app, eventually surpassing even the giant Amazon. In addition, in April of the same year, its valuation reached the impressive mark of US\$100 billion, equivalent to the sum of the valuations of Zara and H&M combined. This company adopts a completely digital business model, known as digital-first, which has proved to be a significant advantage during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is this digital approach that sets Shein apart from other fast fashion retailers, such as Zara or H&M, while also playing a crucial role in its resilience and success during times of crisis (Gómara, 2023).

## **Production strategies and their ethical impact**

As indicated in a study carried out by Haqqi (2022), Shein has overtaken giants such as Nike and Adidas to become the most searched fashion brand on Google, and has overtaken Zara and Macy's in online sales. However, several reports over the last year have exposed the company's worrying



record in relation to human rights violations and an environmentally unsustainable business model. This raises questions about how its popularity continues to grow among consumers (Rajvanshi, 2023).

Recently, a new report released in November 2021 exposed shocking details about the working culture in Shein's Chinese factories. It found that employees are subjected to a gruelling workload totalling 75 hours a week, with three shifts a day. In addition, many workers only have one day off a month, a practice that clearly violates local labour legislation. As established by labour laws in China, the maximum working time is eight hours a day, which totals 40 hours a week. These revelations highlight serious concerns regarding compliance with labour rights and ensuring fair and safe working conditions at Shein's production facilities in China. Employees are encouraged to work long hours due to a remuneration system based on production per article. In this "pay per article" model, workers are paid for each piece of clothing they make. This means that they don't get paid if the work is rejected due to quality problems, and there is no guarantee of payment if there is no work available (Liu, 2022).

In addition, the lack of security is a concern, as workers run the risk of not being paid if there is no demand for their labour. The company's 2021 Sustainability and Social Impact Report reveals that 14 per cent of the violations identified in its supply chain are related to compliance with working hours, while 28 per cent of them are linked to a lack of fire and emergency preparedness. These problems contribute to a precarious working environment and represent significant challenges for the company in terms of workers' well-being and the sustainability of its business practices (*ibid.*).

Every year, the sector generates 92 million tonnes of waste due to low-cost production, therefore short-lived products and excessive consumption. However, the planet faces threats beyond waste. In fact, clothing manufacturing consumes 79 trillion litres of water, involves the use of toxic chemicals and results in 1.7 billion tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (*ibid.*).

Dependency theory offers insights into Shein's rapid expansion and its impact on global supply chains, particularly in the developing countries that manufacture its products. Shein's success hinges on a production model that leverages low-cost labor from economically disadvantaged regions. This reliance on suppliers in developing countries fosters economic dependency, as these regions become tied to Shein's production cycles and profit margins. To remain competitive, these countries often make concessions on labor rights and environmental regulations, reinforcing a dependency on Shein's contracts to maintain economic stability. By structuring its supply chains across nations with varying legal standards, Shein benefits from reduced production costs while deflecting accountability for the social and environmental consequences. This dynamic exemplifies dependency theory, where wealthier markets drive consumption, while developing regions bear the operational and ethical burdens of production (*ibid.*, Hoult, 2023).

For a long time, the West mostly exploited peripheral countries in isolation, allowing them to supply the developed central countries. However, today, it is possible to see China, through Shein, ceasing to be a peripheral country to become a central country, inverting the rules of the traditional dependency theory. In other words, peripheral countries also buy from and depend on China for

cheap products. This creates a new wave of dependency, causing the Chinese machine to always offer more suggestions and send new products for consumption (Yankittikul, 2024).

## **Shein's response to the sector's ethical challenges**

As Shein emerges as a disruptive powerhouse in the world of online fashion, its successful trajectory is accompanied by a series of ethical challenges inherent to the sector. As one of the leading fast fashion brands, Shein faces criticism and scrutiny for its business practices, which range from human rights issues in supply chains to environmental concerns related to mass production.

Shein has set objectives to reduce the environmental impact of its products and operations, which include: reducing its greenhouse gas emissions (scopes 1, 2 and 3) by 25 per cent by the year 2030. It also aims to achieve carbon neutrality in scope 2 by 2030. The company has also committed to obtaining 100 per cent of its packaging from safe forest sources, including viscose and paper, by the year 2025 (Shein, 2024).

Peter Pernot-Day, Shein's head of strategic communications, discussed the company's unique on-demand business model. This model involves producing and testing small batches of clothing based on customer interactions. Pernot-Day emphasised Shein's commitment to transparency, responding to criticism stemming from influencers' visits to its factories. Despite the criticism, Shein tries to demonstrate its responsible business conduct, with an emphasis on its commitment to treating suppliers with respect. During the discussion, Shein's efforts to improve working conditions in its factories through a supplier community training programme were addressed. Pernot-Day emphasised the company's investments in physical infrastructure and human capital, aimed at providing workers with access to education, safe working environments and opportunities for education and care for their children. At a time when the fashion industry is under increasing scrutiny in relation to labour practices, Shein's approach to its supplier relationships and workers' welfare becomes the subject of discussion. With regard to regulations on fast fashion, Pernot-Day expressed an interest in a proactive approach. He advocated promoting recycling capacities, visualising a future in which customers are actively involved in recycling clothes. Ideas about public-private partnerships to fund technical developments such as chemical recycling and research into innovative fabrics emerged as possible solutions to address the environmental concerns associated with fast fashion (Tech Vibes, 2023).

Finally, fast fashion brands need to commit to investing in more sustainable materials and adopt production behaviours that are ecologically responsible. It is becoming increasingly essential for these companies to make the transition to a more circular business model, where materials are repurposed for efficient use and waste is significantly reduced, thus contributing to environmental sustainability and managing damage to the environment.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The article that ends here sought to answer the research question that was previously stated and which we would like to remind you of: "What are the ethical implications associated with the mass production behaviour of fast-fashion brands?". In light of the analysis, it is clear that the

international challenges are concentrated in two main areas: environmental impact and labour exploitation. Firstly, the cause of these impacts is the fast fashion business model. Fast fashion promotes excessive consumerism, encouraging consumers to regularly buy new clothes due to the rapid obsolescence of products and the constant renewal of collections. This contributes to a culture of rapid disposal and generates a significant amount of waste. The first impact is that the rapid production and frenetic consumption characteristic of fast fashion has devastating consequences for the environment. Indeed, the demand for cheap products and the rapid obsolescence of clothes lead to a complex production chain, resulting in huge amounts of textile waste and chemical pollution. Improper disposal of clothing and waste contributes to serious environmental problems such as climate change, pollution and environmental imbalance. Finally, with regard to labour exploitation, it is stressed that the incessant search for profits and the pressure for low prices lead fast fashion brands to resort to precarious working practices, subcontracting and outsourcing to reduce labour costs. This results in undignified working conditions, low wages and even slavery-like labour in some parts of the world. The lack of transparency in supply chains and enforcement of modern slavery laws leads to constant human rights violations. This creates an unequal relationship where major brands profit while producing countries bear social and environmental costs, perpetuating a cycle of exploitation and global inequality.

As a second major conclusion, the Shein case study reveals not only its impressive success on the global e-commerce scene, but also exposes its significant ethical challenges. While the company stands out for its rapid rise and innovation in affordable fashion, there are growing concerns about its business conduct, especially in relation to human rights and environmental sustainability. Reports of poor working conditions in partner factories, accusations of copying designs and a lack of transparency in its supply chain cast a "shadow" over Shein's reputation. In addition, its fast, decentralised approach to production and distribution can increase the risks of labour exploitation and harmful environmental impacts. Faced with these ethical challenges, Shein faces a crucial decision: continue to prioritise rapid growth at all costs or adopt a more responsible and sustainable approach to its operations. Dependency theory helps to illustrate Shein's expansion and its impact on global supply chains, particularly by highlighting how the brand's production model relies on low-cost labor from economically vulnerable regions. This approach fosters economic dependency as these regions adjust labor rights and environmental standards to secure contracts with Shein. This model exemplifies how wealthier markets drive consumption while developing countries bear the costs. Moreover, Shein represents a shift in dependency theory: as a Chinese brand, it reflects China's transition from a traditionally peripheral role to a central one, creating a new dependency dynamic in which peripheral countries now rely on China for affordable goods. This shift marks a new phase of global dependency, reinforcing consumption patterns driven by China's production capabilities.

It is suggested that future authors exploring this topic investigate Shein's production practices and supply chains in more detail, as well as those of other fast fashion brands, focusing on their environmental impacts and working conditions. Transparency in supply chains, the promotion of sustainable models and conscious consumption are crucial to facing the ethical and environmental challenges of this industry.

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## **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

*Código JEL:* E21; E23; F23; I31; P12; O44.