Unsustainable Fashion: SHEIN and the Fast Fashion Consumption Model[*]

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Abstract

Fashion, which has always played an important role in the economy and culture of many countries, is a sector with a high environmental impact, responsible for significant water consumption and the production of a large amount of waste. In particular, fast fashion, a business model based on offering consumers new, cheap and trendy products, seems to be one of the main drivers of the constant quest for innovation in fashion products, with a consequent increase in the environmental and social impacts of this policy. Among the companies in the sector, the SHEIN platform, founded in China in 2008 under the name Zzko, has become a real competitor to global industry giants such as Inditex and H&M, leading to a business model that can be defined as *ultra-fast fashion*.

The article presents the results of a qualitative research project aimed at understanding the consumption model, purchasing motivations and possible concerns about sustainability of young female Italian consumers who use the platform. To this end, 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of university students, who are SHEIN customers, to identify their main purchasing motivations, their consumption habits, and the importance they attribute to sustainability issues. The results show that the main drivers for the platform success are the low price of the clothes and the wide variety of styles available. Students also proved to be quite sensitive to the issue of the company's unsustainable production practices, although this awareness does not automatically translate into a decision to stop buying the brand's products.

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1. SHEIN and the fast fashion model

Researchers have long highlighted the identity and expressive value of clothing choices (Crane, 2012; Barnard, 2013). Considering that the culture of consumption and its associated symbolic meanings also shape processes of self-construction, the importance of the fashion supply chain for both culture and the economy is equally apparent. This is especially true for countries like Italy and France, where the fashion industry accounts for a significant share of their GDP.[1]

However, in recent years, fashion studies have increasingly focused on the environmental and social impacts of the clothing industry.[2] These reflections have highlighted the unsustainable production model used by many companies in the sector, sparking significant public debate (Papasolomou et al., 2023). Fast fashion brands, in particular, have faced criticism for the environmental impact of their production and commercial practices (Niinimäki et al., 2020), the questionable working conditions imposed on their employees (López et al., 2022), and the cultural and symbolic model they propose to consumers. More broadly, as Cohen and Murphy (2001) argue, fully understanding the concept of sustainability requires considering the political, social, and cultural implications of the practices that shape it. In this regard, Mora et al.*,* (2014) emphasized the need for the fashion world to commit to building and promoting a symbolic imaginary that upholds the principles of equality, social justice, and environmental awareness. The authors emphasized the pivotal role of the cultural dimension in fostering a more sustainable approach to fashion. From this perspective, it is clear that in the fashion industry, sustainability concerns extend beyond the

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[1] In Italy, for example, the fashion sector (textiles, clothing, leather, leather goods) reached 73 billion euros in 2022, the 3.8% of GDP, with a projection of 4% in 2023 (NetConsulting cube data, see https://quifinanza.it/economia/moda-la-spinta-della-digitalizzazione-quali-impatti-sul-pil/764533/). According to the Institut Français de la mode, in contrast, the fashion sector in France represented 1.7% of national GDP in 2022 (see https://business.ladn.eu/experts-metiers/par-secteurs/retail/mode-luxe-seconde-main-virtuel/).

[2] As Roozen and Raedts (2020, p. 383) write: "the literature shows that consumers are also more and more aware of the social consequences of their apparel purchases". On this topic, see also Zhang et al. (2021).

material production, commercialization and disposal of goods (Fletcher, 2012). It must also encompass the immaterial and symbolic content they convey. Indeed, the fashion industry now recognizes that a significant part of a brands' reputation is tied to the sustainability policies adopted by its main actors and that it is increasingly important to offer consumers cultural models that diverge from dominant paradigms.

However, this orientation, especially in the fast fashion segment, risks clashing with the production policies of the most successful brands, which aim to consolidate "[...] an environment where design, sourcing and manufacture decisions are made with an emphasis on speed rather than sustainability" (McNeill & Moore, 2015, p. 213). According to Bhardwaj and Fairhurst (2010, p. 165), the fast fashion model also forces producers to "[...] compete with others by ensuring speed to market with their ability to provide rapidly the fashion trends revealed by fashion shows and runways [...] reducing the time gap between designing and consumption on a seasonal basis". A key element behind the success of the fast fashion business model is precisely the time factor, which operates on two levels: firstly, it involves reducing the interval between identifying a new trend and launching garments inspired by it; secondly, it imposes a temporal limit on consumers' ability to purchase the new collections, adhering to the "here today, gone tomorrow" logic (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst 2010, p. 166). In fact, the constant supply of new models, characterized by a very short life cycle and virtually no possibility of replenishment, increases customers' propensity to make impulse purchases for fear that their favourite garments will disappear from stores, even virtual ones.

In this scenario, fast fashion brands such as Zara, H&M and Mango have succeeded in establishing themselves on the global market by reducing the time to market of new collections to 3-5 weeks. The adoption of such a *just-in-time production model*, which follows the logic of flexibility and speed of reaction, allows companies to multiply their offer by de-seasonalizing it, thus moving from a *production-driven* approach to a *market-driven* approach, which allows brands to exploit in real-time the data coming from the continuous algorithmic monitoring of the web.

However, such organizations, based on globalized supply chains and highly efficient multi-channel distribution (Le Bon, 2015), owe much of their success to an organizational model that favours cost containment, even at the expense of product quality and worker protection. Fast fashion companies focus on creating highly efficient organizational and production systems, frequently neglecting the quality of materials used, the environmental impact of their manufacturing processes, and the working conditions of their employees.

In this scenario, the Chinese platform SHEIN emerged in 2008 as a giant of *ultra-fast fashion* (Dzhengiz et al., 2023), operating without permanent physical

stores and producing on demand in a continuous cycle.[3] Initially relying on a "drop shipping" sales system – a business model in which the seller delivers a product to an end user without physically possessing it in their own warehouse – the Chinese brand gradually transformed into a fully integrated retailer with its own production chain and capillary distribution network (Nguyen, 2021). As Camargo et al., (2020, p. 538) write, the production dynamics of ultra-fast fashion "can bring products from design to sale in just a few days, with a focus on responding quickly to consumers' increasing demands for immediacy and fashion innovation". Indeed, since 2016, SHEIN has been building a network of suppliers capable of producing requested items in as little as three days. Utilizing an algorithmic web monitoring system, SHEIN intercepts the latest trends and translates them in real time into marketable products.[4] The industrial logic behind this system is to reduce production quantities, which can be limited to around one hundred pieces per item, in order to speed up work and minimize the storage costs of unsold goods.

In addition to cost containment and its innovative organizational model, the global success of the Chinese brand SHEIN is also driven by an aggressive promotional strategy that leverages influencers to boost its popularity, particularly among younger consumers: "fashion influencers showcased SHEIN products and hauls alongside other retailers such as Fashion Nova and Zaful. It was, however, the retailer's early use of TikTok and ability to market viral products that skyrocketed SHEIN's popularity" (Nguyen, 2021). Indeed, as Kharuhayothin and Patarapongsant's study (2023) indicates, consumer interest in fast fashion brands increases directly in proportion to the popularity these brands achieve among influencers, leveraging endorsement mechanisms to strengthen bonds with prospective customers. In practical terms, social media is crucial to SHEIN's promotional strategies, with the brand's strong relationships with numerous influencers representing one of its core strengths.

2. Methodology and research design

The primary aim of our research project was to examine consumers' relationship with fast fashion, with a particular focus on the sustainability of

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[3] For the sake of simplicity, we will use the terms 'fast fashion' and 'ultra-fast fashion' interchangeably throughout this article, as they share many of the same production and commercial logics.

[4] According to Curry (2023), SHEIN produces "thousands of new items to match the current trends every week. On an average day, SHEIN adds 2000 new items to its store".

consumption choices. For this purpose, we utilized the Chinese platform SHEIN as case study. To achieve this goal, we chose to first investigate the motivations driving users of the Chinese brand (RQ1a) and then to further explore the potential influence of media and peer groups on these choices, from a perspective that considers the dynamics of consumer socialization theory (RQ1b) (De Vreede et al*.,* 2014; Essiz & Mandrik, 2022).

Since sustainability is increasingly prominent in public discourse and media within the fashion industry, influencing many consumer and retailer choices (McNeill & Venter, 2019), the second research question focused on this macro-dimension. It aimed at understanding to what extent sustainability considerations impact the purchasing practices of consumers of the Chinese brand (RQ2), with particular attention to the gap among beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours that seems to characterize their conduct (Bernardes et al., 2018; Ronda, 2024).

Finally, a third area of investigation involves analysing consumers' usage patterns of the SHEIN platform (or its mobile app, downloadable on cell phones) to understand its functionality and effectiveness concerning the fashion choices of the selected target audience (RQ3).

The project, which employed a qualitative methodology, involved a sample of 30 Italian university female students registered on the platform. The choice of a female sample was guided by the consideration that, as highlighted in previous studies (McNeill & Moore, 2015), young women struggle to become aware of the significant social impact of their fashion consumption and, at the same time, are more likely to frequently update their wardrobe, often purchasing a new garment every week (Morgan & Birtwistle, 2009). Furthermore, SHEIN main target audience is precisely young women (Bak & Sollwedel, 2023; Martinicorena Gómara, 2023), as confirmed by the analysis of the communication strategies implemented by the platform and the promotional use of social networks such as TikTok, primarily aimed at a youthful audience.

Indeed, if many studies (Deloitte, 2022) have highlighted how the new generations adopt a consumption style characterized not only by the habit of online shopping but also by attention to sustainability and the search for authenticity in brands, it becomes even more relevant to understand their consumption patterns. This provides valuable insights into emerging consumption trends, the importance of sustainability for brand success, and the future of digital commerce.

From an operational perspective, it was decided to analyse the consumption choices of female university students because, as the literature shows, young women with high cultural capital seem to be quite sensitive to sustainability issues (Cochrane, 2006; Degli Esposti et al., 2021). The authors acknowledge that this choice could lead to emphasising a higher concern for

sustainability compared to other generic fast fashion consumers. At the same time, girls represent one of the main target groups of the fast fashion industry, which allows researchers to verify the actual existence of the *dilemma* (McNeill & Moore, 2015) between choosing sustainable clothing and the attractiveness of a fashion that constantly renews its range: "even when consumers seek out products made under ethical conditions or from sustainable fabric sources, the desire for updated fashion increases waste and disposal of goods deemed 'unfashionable' after only limited use" (McNeill & Moore, 2015, p. 213).

The survey, conducted between March and September 2023, was carried out online via the Teams platform and consisted of semi-structured interviews. The choice of this qualitative instrument was driven by the need to explore in depth the complex relationships between consumption models, purchasing behavior and the cultural horizons of young consumers, with meetings taking place in an informal setting. Semi-structured interviews (Adams, 2015) enable a deeper understanding of individual experiences, which is crucial when investigating complex topics like consumption styles and perceptions of sustainability, as these can vary significantly from person to person. In this way, it was possible to have open conversations while maintaining a common thread of pre-defined questions, which also allowed for reflection on issues that arose during the interviews (Patton, 2015). This approach facilitated the collection of detailed and contextualized data, enhancing the various aspects that influence consumer behavior (Mason, 2018).

The interview guide was structured along three main axes: the study of the purchasing motivations of the students interviewed, their assessment of the importance of sustainable consumption practices and the analysis of the consumption dynamics driven by the SHEIN platform or its mobile application.

The thirty respondents who took part in the study were born between 1997 and 2006 (specifically, two were born in 1997, two in 1998, three in 1999, nine in 2000, four in 2001, five in 2002, three in 2003, and two in 2006). The participants come from diverse locations: 10 are from Milan, 10 from Bologna, and 10 from Rome, ensuring a geographically diverse representation of the sample. This diversity partially reduced the risk of obtaining results influenced by specific demographic or geographical characteristics of a single city. All three cities are important university centers as well as important youth centers that can attract young people from different regions of Italy. However, it is important to point out once again that the qualitative approach chosen in the study does not allow any statistically significant conclusions to be drawn that can be generalized to the entire reference group. In general, interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes to ensure respondents' concentration and attention. In terms of the analysis, all researchers read the interview transcripts

(automatically generated by the Teams platform), manually categorised the responses first individually and then collectively into categories that could reflect the key themes and concepts that emerged and accompanied the analysis with selected *verbatim*. Practically speaking, as in other studies (Mayan, 2009; Spiggle, 1994), a four-stage content analysis (coding, categorisation, researcher comparison and theory formulation) was conducted to categorise and evaluate the acquired knowledge. The researchers developed thematic maps to identify the main categories and interconnections between the different issues, comparing all data extracts relevant to each theme. The results were then interpreted against the research questions to draw meaningful conclusions.

3. Analysis of results

3.1 "I choose SHEIN because...": key purchase drivers between savings and catalogue variety

As Statista reports,[5] the value of global fast fashion market exceeded 120 billion dollars in 2023 and is expected to reach 185 billion dollars by 2027. In such a scenario, it seems increasingly necessary to reflect on the impact of this sector on individual consumption habits in order to gain a deeper understanding, also from a critical perspective, of the social and economic implications of such consumption practices.

As for the SHEIN brand, although its commercial growth has slowed in the last year,[6] it is still very popular with consumers, as the statements of our interviewees show:

> "[I like SHEIN because] it saves me time and money, because I can do everything from home and because I can find everything I need in a single app" (Eleonora, MI).

Regarding the first research question (RQ1a), which related to the main motivations for choosing the platform, most of the students' answers centred on three aspects: 1) the prices, as SHEIN offers its products at extremely affordable costs; 2) the wide variety of the catalogue, with an inclusive offer also for non-conventional sizes; 3) the possibility of constantly renewing one's style

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[5] For the data, see https://www.statista.com/statistics/1008241/fast-fashion-market-value-forecast-worldwide/

[6] According to some estimates (Curry, 2023), thanks to its entry into the US and European markets, the platform's valuation surged from of 5 billion dollars in 2019 to 100 billion dollars in early 2022, before falling to 64 billion in 2023.

by buying clothes inspired by current trends, in line with the fluidity of choice that seems to characterize contemporary *nomadic* consumers (Bauman, 2007). In this regard, the act of continually updating one's style through the acquisition of trendy clothing reflects not only a desire for self-expression, but also a deeper engagement with the *postmodern ethos* of fluidity and fragmentation (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). In liquid societies, where fixed identities are often eschewed in favour of more malleable and transient self-conceptions, fashion becomes a crucial medium through which individuals navigate and construct their identities (Featherstone, 2007). This process is further reinforced by the proliferation of fast fashion brands that cater to the ever-changing tastes and preferences of consumers, enabling them to continually reinvent themselves. As a result, fashion consumption is not only about aesthetics, but also about the ongoing performance and redefinition of the self in a landscape where traditional markers of identity are increasingly unstable (Entwistle, 2023).

In any case, regarding the first element that emerged from the analysis, Francesca's reflections on the link between the need to save money and the age of the consumers primarily targeted by the platform are particularly interesting:

> "In my opinion, SHEIN mainly aimed at teenagers, young people who obviously do not have their own salary yet. Teenagers have to take money from their parents and don't want to spend much, so they want to buy as much as they can with as little money as possible. I think that's exactly what SHEIN is aimed at" (Francesca, MI).

However, as we will further examine in the following section, the cost-cutting strategy applied in SHEIN's production model has a negative impact on the overall sustainability of the brand policies. This approach leads to extremely low wages for workers, often unethical business practices and the use of environmentally harmful materials.[7]

Regarding the availability of products for all sizes, interviewees often linked the breadth of the product range to an increasingly central issue for younger consumers: inclusivity and the acceptance of body ideals other than the normative standard of extreme thinness. As some young women reported, the availability of plus-size products contributes to a culture of *body positivity* that the new generations seem to be increasingly embracing:

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[7] According to Caniato et al. (2012, p. 661): "the textile sector has experienced significant environmental problems linked to the production process, which is characterized by the intense use of chemical products and natural resources, resulting in a high environmental impact". On this topic see also Cook & Yurchisin (2017).

"You can find all kind of sizes at SHEIN. For someone like me who has trouble finding my size in many of the stores I like, I can definitely find it there and appreciate the variety of products they sell" (Corinna, RM).

"As for plus sizes, talking with a friend of mine, for example, it's difficult to find clothes in the stores, and SHEIN has become an opportunity because it allows you to get fashionable clothes there... in short, you can find them at a low cost and still be fashionable, regardless of your body shape" (Elisa, RM).

Even if the adoption of such a production policy is primarily due to commercial motivations, it allows us to reflect on how the fashion sector as a whole still tends to promote a rather divisive ideal of body aesthetics today. In the symbolic imagery constructed by fashion, the standard of beauty to aspire to is based on physical thinness, on a slim and agile appearance, which leads consumers to internalize, often unconsciously, a normative stereotype that associates beauty to thinness (Volonté, 2019). Particularly in the past, fashion always aimed to hide *non-conforming bodies*, to conceal them rather than highlight their uniqueness: "the clothing offered to overweight and obese people in recent decades was, with a few exceptions, not 'fashionable' clothing, but simply clothing. It is not aimed at enabling consumers to use their body language freely, creatively and personally" (Canina & Volonté, 2014, p. 14, *our translation*). It was as if clothing for non-standard bodies could not fulfil its inherent identity-creating, social and communicative function, but had to be limited to its basic dressability according to a normatively defined model of "un-acceptability". If fashion has begun to represent curvy, plus-size bodies (Czerniawski, 2022), far from the hegemonic model of the perfect physique, it has also enabled the creation of a social and cultural landscape populated by plural, complex and diverse body ideals. Indeed, SHEIN's commercial strategy seems to be moving in this inclusive direction:

"SHEIN can be inclusive as a company because it also offers a lot of plus sizes, if we want to define it that way, complete with plus-size models. That is something that needs to be recognized" (Antonietta, RM).

The third dimension identified by the students refers to the company's ability to constantly renew the collections it sells by using algorithmic monitoring of the Internet to identify the trends most appreciated by users:

"Because in terms of trends, it's very contemporary, so it's up to date, it's youthful, because it has things for us, it's current" (Greta, MI).

"It attracts me because there are products, clothes that you can't find anywhere else, that is, you can't find them in physical stores. Very unique styles that you can only find there or maybe on other similar sites. But at the moment I haven't found any others" (Elisa, RM).

In a sense, this constant renewal of the products offered by the platform seems to reflect the perpetual desire of consumers for novelty and to accommodate them in their attempt to display different aspects of their self-identity through their choice of clothing. From this perspective, the voluntaristic stance of identity construction implies the adoption of revocable and temporary practices – including consumption (Crane, 1992) – capable of expressing aspects of ourselves in different contexts of interaction.

"Using SHEIN was also satisfying because you know you have a lot of clothes in your wardrobe that you can wear often, so you can change, you can play with outfits" (Beatrice, MI).

The final answer that emerges from the analysis relates to the potential influence of media and peer groups on the purchasing behaviour of the sample (RQ1b), aiming to understand if and how the decision to use or not to use the Chinese platform might be related to the typical dynamics of consumer socialization among younger individuals (Lachance et al., 2003; Desfiandi, 2020). In this context, many of the respondents stated that they had heard about the brand through their friends, a kind of grassroots word-of-mouth that has made SHEIN extremely popular among younger generations:

"I discovered it through my friends, because they often placed these orders on SHEIN: I was a bit sceptical at first, but then, after seeing them try it several times, I decided to place an order" (Erika, RM).

"I heard about SHEIN from friends who had started to shop there. At first nobody really knew much about it, so everyone tried it out a bit... That's how I discovered it and then gradually started using it" (Gaia, MI).

In this sense, as widely acknowledged in the scientific literature, "media, parents and peers all contribute to adolescent consumer socialization, with the general consensus that peers are the primary influencers, followed by media and parents" (Nelson & McLeod, 2005, p. 517). For younger people, shared consumption practices can indeed strengthen their relationship with their peer group.

Even more interesting are the reflections of those who have decided to stop buying from the platform. While some, as expected, justify their decision

with the poor quality of the items offered, others cite the lack of sustainability of SHEIN's production policies, often explicitly referring to reports in the media about unethical practices associated with the platform:

> "My opinion of SHEIN has been influenced by what I read in the media, because at one point there was a lot of talk about the exploitation of workers behind SHEIN. Investigations were carried out, and then there was also the issue of pollution ... so at a certain point, when I found out more and saw what it was behind, it made me not want to use it anymore" (Corinna, RM).

While many studies (see e.g. Valkenburg, 2000; Ewing, 2013) have highlighted the media's ability to positively influence young people's purchasing behaviour by presenting consumption models and lifestyles to be adopted, it is equally interesting to analyse the role of the media in the decision to abandon a certain type of consumption. In the case of SHEIN in particular, some students' narratives show the importance of information found online and in mainstream media in the decision to leave the platform:

> "Over time, I realized the reality behind it, also through television. I had seen a documentary that was about exploitation, about all the things behind it, and also through an article I had read on Instagram, also because of the pictures that had shocked me a bit, how can I say, I mean I said: 'damn, it's better not to do this kind of shopping', and so I stopped completely" (Beatrice, MI).

> "There was a time when nothing else was being talked about, I mean, at least on my social media, I didn't see any other news. I watched more videos... that's also when I realized that maybe we tend to buy, but we don't look at what's behind it... You opened social media and you read nothing else: TikTok was full of these videos" (Federica, RM).

As Mary Douglas (1996) has pointed out, in different cultural contexts goods are chosen by consumers as significant, *non-neutral* objects. Conversely, the rejection of a product (or brand) may represent a form of symbolic hostility, implying opposition to a social model in which one does not want to live. In any case, it is a statement of alienation from a particular cultural paradigm, as the words of one of the students interviewed make clear:

> "I hope SHEIN fails, because I actually realize the serious damage it causes not only to the environment but also to the people [who work there]" (Corinna, RM).

3.2 The (un)sustainability of fashion and the gap between attitudes and consumer behaviour

In recent decades, the issue of sustainability has been at the heart of many considerations, including in the fashion industry, a sector known to be characterized by high carbon dioxide emissions, high water consumption and abundant waste production; moreover, the sector also seems to be responsible for the pollution of many waters by waste from processing and the dyes used in dyeing fabrics. As Mora et al*.,* (2014) point out, the entire life cycle of fashion products, from their manufacture to their maintenance and disposal, is not very sustainable, which calls into question the economic and commercial model on which clothing production has always been based (Fletcher, 2010).

Since the first complaints in the mid-1990s about the exploitation of child labour by some Nike suppliers (Klein, 1999; Khurana & Ricchetti, 2016), companies in the sector have been repeatedly called upon to behave more responsibly towards the environment and workers, partly as a result of growing consumer interest in these issues (Shaw & Tomolillo, 2007; Crane, 2016). This has not stopped fast fashion, which is known for the lack of sustainability in its supply chain, from growing steadily (Niinimäki et al., 2020). As Valerie et al*.,* argue (2022, p. 185): "many consumers still buy fast fashion, although they typically remain aware of the hedonism related to never-ending new trends and consumptive usage. Consumers today might purchase up to 60 fashion items a year; in previous decades, consumers purchased on average nine fashion items per year".

So, if, on the one hand, consumers declare that they are increasingly interested in sustainability in the fashion sector too, on the other hand, the growth of fast fashion confirms the existence of the well-known gap between consumer attitudes and behaviors typical of ethical and responsible consumption (Carrington et al., 2010). According to Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002), there are various factors that influence ethical behavior: external factors – such as price, the availability of products, but also the value placed on brand image (which may be perceived as more important than concern for the sustainability of the purchase) – and internal factors – such as the motivation to actually want to change one's consumption behavior (a change that is more difficult when there is a high level of brand loyalty), an adequate level of information on sustainability issues, the perception of the impact of one's actions on the context (*locus of control*) and the system of attitudes and values. A study conducted by Wiederhold and Martinez (2018) shows that the main factors leading to a gap between attitudes and behaviors in the field of ethical fashion are: image (ethical fashion is considered less aesthetic), price, difficulty in finding sustainable products, lack of information, transparency (fear that the

information received is not correct), inertia (the belief that the individual's actions have little power) and consumption habits. More recent research (Martinicorena Gómara, 2023; Neumann et al., 2020) also highlight that the main reasons that explain the reluctance of consumers in the Western world to change their purchasing behavior in relation to fast fashion are due to a lack of awareness of the unsustainability of the sector, the belief that the behavior of individuals is not able to change what is happening in the market, but above all to the fact that many people, especially those who are most focused on themselves, continue to prioritize price and speed of turnover over all other ethical concerns. Indeed, it is well known that ethical fashion can be more expensive, both because sustainable fabrics are more expensive (higher quality means higher production costs) and because the good working conditions and decent wages offered to workers are reflected in higher prices for the end consumer.

Some of the dimensions of the gap between attitudes and behaviors also emerge from the interviews with students (RQ2). The lack of information and the need for greater transparency can be traced back to the fear that the measures taken by many companies in the sector towards greater attention to the environment are in reality only cosmetic actions. For example, the term *greenwashing* often appears in the girls' stories; as other research has also shown (Kim & Oh, 2020), young consumers fear that fast fashion companies are often prone to opportunistic behavior:

> "[…] Then there is the fake sustainability of fast fashion, that of recycled garments" (Chiara, RM).

> "I don't know how much I believe in it, so many scandals have come to light, like the H&M scandal two years ago or last year […]" (Matilde, MI).

In any case, there is a consensus that the fashion industry is a sector that tends to be unsustainable:

> "[…] The textile industry uses a lot of water, so they're trying to reduce this consumption, but I don't have the impression that they have made any major changes yet […]" (Gaia, MI).

However, in the relationship between consumers and companies, the dimension of trust, which is often based on a qualitative assessment of the products offered, plays a fairly important role, also because it leads consumers to believe, at least in part, in the veracity of the brands' sustainable behaviors.

> "For example, if you go to their websites, they now talk a lot about sustainability and so on. So how do you really know that? Maybe I trust a bit more. Here, but I never quite trust that it's all true, that it's not just made up, a bit of greenwashing [...]" (Alessandra, BO).

> "No, because in my opinion interest is just a return of advertising to say, ok, yes, I'm sustainable. But in practice you can never be 100%" (Margherita, MI).

As widely confirmed in the literature (Devinney et al., 2010), the price of products is the variable with the greatest discriminating power: on the one hand, respondents believe that only luxury companies, possibly Made in Italy, can really afford to be environmentally and socially sustainable and thus represent a real alternative to non-sustainable fast fashion; on the other hand, they emphasise that this choice is only open to a limited group of people due to the very high retail prices:

> "[…] But it is also true that people cannot afford all the clothes from Gucci, Prada or Dolce and Gabbana, if they want sustainability etc., they have to increase their budget" (Virginia, MI).

Despite the awareness of the lack of sustainability of fast fashion, respondents often see no alternative; SHEIN in particular guarantees an extensive catalogue at very low prices and enables consumers to satisfy their hedonistic urges:

> "The products that are put on the market are, let us say, very similar, they follow fashion a lot, therefore it is possible to find items with a low price, and in fashion" (Beatrice, MI).

However, it seems clear that the issue of sustainability is not always a priority for female students. The cheapness of fast fashion and the ability to always keep up with the latest trend also attract respondents who pay more attention to the environmental impact of their clothing choices in order to suit their personal tastes:

> "If I then have a choice between two items that I like, one of which is more environmentally friendly and the other less environmentally friendly, I tend to buy the more environmentally friendly one, but if I like something, I buy it anyway" (Corinna, RM).

Even though the dimension of inertia often emerges in the interviews, i.e. the awareness that the actions of the individual can do little for sustainability, one of the students, in contrast, recognises that the power on the market lies in the hands of the consumer (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013):

> "And yes, let us say that, in my opinion, the time has come to make a decision, because if brands do not choose to become more sustainable, in short, to go down this path, I think it is right that we do so" (Elisa, RM).

Overall, then, fashion seems to be an area that is still not very sustainable, even if important steps forward are being made. On the one hand, large companies seem to be increasingly involved in activities that fall under corporate social responsibility policies, and on the other hand, the proliferation of establishments dedicated to second-hand trade, both physical and online, seems to be moving towards greater attention to the environmental and social impact of the sector:

> "In general, I do not think the fashion sector is very concerned about sustainability, but lately I have the feeling that it is becoming much more so, more and more so. For example, the fact that chains like Humana Vintage and websites like Vinted etc. have become very popular is also important" (Alice, BO).

3.3 The consumer's relationship to the application

The shopping experience on SHEIN cannot ignore the use of the platform and the application, which was the most downloaded shopping app in the world in 2022, surpassing even Amazon (Koetsier, 2023). In general, ease of use – which can be broken down into nine factors: efficiency, effectiveness, learnability, memorability, errors, satisfaction, cognitive load, simplicity, and interruptibility (Saleh et al., 2017) – is certainly one of the fundamental characteristics for the success of an application. In the context of apps related to the fashion industry, the study by Trivedi and Trivedi (2018) adds the variable of personalization, understood as the ability of the app to respond to the needs of the individual user. Personalization, along with user-friendliness, speed, fun and omnipresence, is one of the five characteristics that define usability for users of apps associated with a brand, according to the study by Baek and Yoo (2018). For the authors, personalization corresponds to the quality of matching consumers' individual interests and expectations with brand-related content within an app.

In our research project, respondents stated that both the platform and the SHEIN app are easy and intuitive to use (RQ3). After the first purchase, the homepage is personalized based on recent shopping activity and provides an overview of the categories of items available as well as the ability to use coupons and discount codes.

Equally important in terms of user-friendliness is the richness of the content, which is a key feature of the application. In particular, the extent of the catalogue offered by SHEIN seems to be the predominant element in the relationship between consumers and the app. All respondents refer to the constant activity of browsing by scrolling through the pages of the website on the smartphone or computer screen. The SHEIN catalogue is seemingly infinite, offering different styles and many colour variations for the same garment; this overabundance of choice is perceived as a positive element by some users, while for others it creates the feeling of fatigue and disorientation that is well documented in the literature (Chernev et al., 2015). According to Nagar and Gandotra (2016), excessive choice when shopping online leads to anxiety in consumers and reduces the likelihood that they will return to the site for further purchases. As choice increases, participants feel overwhelmed, have difficulty remembering options and consequently feel lost. Finally, the recent study by Matte et al., (2023) shows how the confusion caused by excessive choice manifests itself both in terms of the colour palette and the different styles suggested.

The narratives of the interviewees thus show that the initial euphoria caused by the wide range of choices turns into a sense of disorientation and fatigue with use:

"I'm generally euphoric before using it, I like to go shopping without having to worry about going out at all, but then there are so many things I don't want to do" (Virginia, MI).

"In the beginning I was more than happy because I mainly ordered things that I couldn't find in the store, things that were a bit more special; so I was happy about that… before SHEIN was seen as a wow, wonderful app where you can buy anything you want, etc… now SHEIN is like Zalando, like Asos, like any other app" (Corinna, RM).

The feeling of fatigue resulting from the need to consult a seemingly endless catalogue seems to be exacerbated by the pressing promotional communications that make use of constant push notifications – used to inform about limited-time promotions and share discount codes – and that end up being so intrusive that you even remove the app from your phone:

> "No, no, I really have unsubscribed from e-commerce, I'm done, that is, I'm completely done" (Margherita, MI).

> "I still have the application, I haven't removed it yet, but I don't use it... if I see that I won't be opening it for a long time, it'll of course end up in the trash because it takes up too much space" (Federica, MI).

The role of reviews also seems to be crucial for the use of the application. It is well known that online reviews, the digital equivalent of word of mouth, have taken on a crucial role in the age of e-commerce, as they facilitate the purchasing decisions of future customers and also help online retailers to understand how customers rate their products (Majumder et al., 2022). In online fashion, given the variety of options available, an effective recommendation system is becoming increasingly necessary to enable users to place a correct order and provide complete and relevant information about product materials or sizes.

In the case of the sample studied, respondents prefer to read buyers' comments, which are often accompanied by photos showing the garment being worn, rather than referring to the sheets containing information about the product, which are often considered not very detailed. The pictures are considered particularly useful as they make it possible to dispel any doubts when choosing the right size, considering how difficult it is to use different sizing systems depending on the markets in which SHEIN operates.

> "A friend of mine had placed an order, she had tried it out, and she told me that the items were definitely not that bad if you look closely at the reviews, if you read them carefully" (Chiara, RM).

> "You must actually look at the reviews and therefore all the photos before you buy" (Francesca, MI).

4. Conclusions

Our research has shown that the relationship between young students and the fast fashion sector is generally complex and controversial. The interviews reveal a kind of *dilemma* between concerns about the sector's lack of sustainability – reinforced by media reports and scepticism about most companies' environmental initiatives, which are often interpreted as mere attempts at *greenwashing* – and the appeal of brands that offer trendy clothes at very competitive prices and satisfy the consumer's constant desire for change. Furthermore, the influence of social media and peer pressure cannot be

underestimated. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok promote a culture of rapid fashion turnover, where showcasing the latest trends is highly valued. Social media influencers and advertising campaigns perpetuate the allure of constantly refreshing one's style, leading to a phenomenon known as the "Instagram effect", where the desire to appear fashionable online drives purchasing decisions.

This relationship becomes even more conflictual when the brand in question is SHEIN. While other fast-fashion brands have focused on a single characteristic (Zara, for example, on speed; H&M on widespread presence with a large number of stores; Primark on low prices; Bershka on a specific generational segment), SHEIN, the ultra-fast fashion giant, has taken the strengths of each of its competitors and pushed them to the extreme. The motivations of our interviewees to shop on the Chinese platform perfectly reflect its characteristics: an almost infinite and inclusive offer for body shapes and sizes that deviate from the prevailing cultural model, products sold at a very affordable price, allowing the purchase of a large number of items. The downside is the awareness that this often-compulsive purchase of items, perceived as mediocre, inevitably leads to an accumulation of garments and accessories that need to be discarded, perhaps without even being worn, thus promoting the overall unsustainability of the fashion supply chain.

In this respect, the research results seem to confirm the need to change the model of clothing consumption of these young women. While our informants recognize the importance of sustainability, they often do not translate this awareness into more responsible consumption behavior. This imbalance could be overcome through a cultural change that, on the one hand, contributes to the definition of a socially sustainable fashion imaginary and, on the other hand, leads companies in the sector to reckon with the social and environmental costs of their production policies. This cultural change could be facilitated by the availability of affordable and attractive sustainable clothing. While awareness of the environmental impact of fast fashion is increasing, many consumers find it challenging to locate sustainable brands that offer the same variety, style, and prices as their fast fashion counterparts. Sustainable fashion is often perceived as expensive and less trendy, thus a less viable option for those who are both fashion and budget-conscious. This perception is reinforced by sustainable brands' limited visibility and milder application of marketing tools compared to the aggressive advertising strategies employed by fast fashion companies like SHEIN.

This study has several limitations. The first limitation lies in the chosen methodology, which does not allow for generalization of the results. Additionally, the highly homogeneous sample selected does not capture differences in purchasing behaviour among people of other age groups,

different cultural backgrounds, or of the male gender. Further research should focus on expanding the sample to include different age groups and genders, as well as comparative analyses across different cultures and countries.

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