

Ultra-fast fashion charms young despite damaging environment

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Britain's Boohoo, China's SHEIN and Hong Kong's Emmiol are the main players in a sector that produces items and collections at breakneck speed and rock-bottom prices.

So-called "ultra-fast fashion" has won legions of young fans who are able to snap up relatively cheap clothes online, but campaigners say the trend

masks darker environmental problems.

Britain's Boohoo, China's SHEIN and Hong Kong's Emmiol are the main players in a sector that produces items and collections at breakneck speed and rock-bottom prices.

Their internet-based business model provides fierce competition to better-known "fast fashion" chains with physical stores, like Sweden's H&M and Spain's Zara.

According to Bloomberg, SHEIN generated \$16 billion in global sales last year.

However, environmental pressure groups slam the "throwaway clothing" phenomenon as grossly wasteful—it takes 2,700 litres of water to make one T-shirt that is swiftly binned.

"Many of these cheap clothes end up... on huge dump sites, burnt on open fires, along riverbeds and washed out into the sea, with severe consequences for people and the planet," Greenpeace says.

Nevertheless, with inflation across the globe soaring to the highest level in decades, there is huge demand for low-price garments.

And after the coronavirus pandemic, high-street shops with big overhead costs are struggling to compete.

'Quantity not quality'

With T-shirts costing just the equivalent of \$4.80 and bikinis and dresses selling for just under \$10, for high-school students, such as 18-year-old Lola from the French city of Nancy, ultra-fast fashion shopping appears to offer unbeatable bargains.

Turning a blind eye to the environmental cost, she says brands such as SHEIN allow her to follow the latest trends "without spending an astronomical amount".

Lola says she normally places two or three orders per month on SHEIN with an average combined value of 70 euros (\$71) for about 10 items.

Ultra-fast fashion's young target demographic are looking for "quantity rather than quality," says economics professor Valerie Guillard at Paris-Dauphine University.

Much of the success of SHEIN, which was founded in late 2008, is attributable to its massive presence on social media networks, such as TikTok, Instagram and YouTube.

In so-called "haul" videos, customers unwrap SHEIN packages, try on clothes and review them online.

On TikTok alone, there are 34.4 billion mentions of the hashtag #SHEIN and six billion for #SHEINhaul.



Climate campaigner Greta Thunberg also slams the ultra-fast fashion trend.

The brands also extend their reach via low-cost partnerships with so-called social-media influencers to build trust and increase sales.

Irish influencer Marleen Gallagher, 45, who works with SHEIN and other firms, praised them for offering broader-size ranges.

"They are unrivalled when it comes to choices for plus-size women," she told AFP.

Carbon footprint

But not only does the industry have a reputation for devouring valuable resources and damaging the environment, ultra-fast fashion companies have also been plagued by scandals over allegedly poor working conditions in their factories.

Swiss-based NGO Public Eye discovered in November 2022 that employees in some SHEIN factories worked up to 75 hours per week, in contravention of China's labour laws.

Britain's Boohoo similarly faced criticism following media reports that its suppliers were underpaying workers in Pakistan.

The industry's carbon footprint is equally disastrous.

The French Agency for Ecological Transition estimates that fast fashion accounts for two percent of global greenhouse emissions per year—as much as air transport and maritime traffic combined.

It comes as no surprise, then, that climate campaigner Greta Thunberg is damning.

"The fashion industry is a huge contributor to the climate and ecological emergency, not to mention its impact on the countless workers and communities who are being exploited around the world in order for some to enjoy fast fashion that many treat as disposables," Thunberg wrote last year.

The authorities are also beginning to scrutinise the brands' practices.

The British Competition and Markets Authority has opened a "greenwashing" probe against Boohoo, Asos and George at Asda over concerns that some of the environmental claims about their products are misleading.

Charlotte, 14, says she has decided to stop ordering from SHEIN and Emmiol.

"I was happy to have new clothes, but then I felt guilty," she said.

Now "I look for them on Vinted", an online marketplace for buying and selling new and secondhand items, the teenager said.

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