

SHEIN: The Perfectionists of Manipulation and Exploitation

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The fast fashion industry possesses a complex structure, and *SHEIN* in particular, adopts both Fordist and Post-Fordist methods of production and marketing. This overlap creates a complex issue concerning power, surveillance, and control. This contribution hopes to reveal these issues and express the consequences for customers and workers in a contemporary information society.

Fast fashion is a relatively new term that first made its appearance in the early 2000s with its one aim to replicate catwalk and celebrity fashion trends to sell for low prices to the public. The fast fashion industry took a large hit during the COVID-19 lockdowns due to restrictions on social distancing and remote working, resulting in a -3% drop in compound annual growth (Cision, 2021). Now with restrictions eased, the fast fashion market is expected to grow with a CAGR of 53% between 2025 and 2030 (Cision, 2021).

This growth is made possible due to the adoption of popular clothing trends, higher demands for low-cost clothing, and the growing emergence of informational technologies used in advertising and marketing strategies. The popular clothing brand *SHEIN* appears to be at the top of the fast-fashion chain with an estimated value of \$15 billion and its recent surpassing of H&M

and ZARA, making *SHEIN* America's top-selling fast fashion retailer (Walk-Morris, 2021).

The fashion brand also appeared to overtake *Amazon* in the number of downloaded shopping applications. However, this was later found to be due to a cyber-attack on *SHEIN* which affected 6.4 million users, and included the sharing of personal information such as emails and passwords (O'Shea, 2018). It highlighted the implications of informational technologies and its effects on surveillance and privacy and is the prompt for this critical

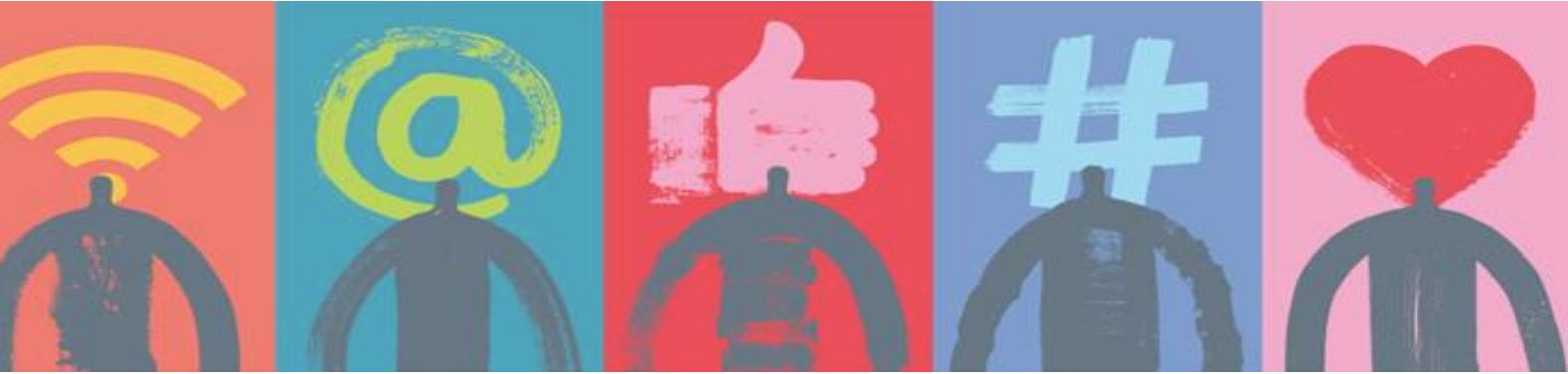
SHEIN

reflection to explore *SHEIN*'s organisational and production model by drawing on Fordist and Post-Fordist theory and the implications of a technological information society in

relation to key sociological changes.

The fashion giant *SHEIN* now ships to 220 different countries worldwide, each having its unique websites and advertisements (Faithful, 2021), to meet this demand *SHEIN* employs hundreds of 'unregistered businesses' in the Chinese megacity Guangzhou (Morgan, 2021). The assembly line workshops in Guangzhou are known to regularly ignore Chinese labour laws, house unfit working conditions and have extreme fire risks.

These businesses, however, have no legal contract with *SHEIN*, making it very easy for



the fashion company to deny any responsibility to the mistreated workers. This captured the attention of the *Public Eye*, a Swiss NGO advocacy group. The organisation's report found *SHEIN* warehouse workers to be clocking in 75 hours per week with only one day off per month (Kollbrunner, 2021), this exceeding China's local labour laws of 40 hours per week and a maximum of 8 hours per day.

In their report, Kollbrunner & Hachfeld (2021) state that workers were under 'enormous pressure' to turn clothes around, even during interviews the workers constantly received orders and continued to work. This could be partially due to *SHEIN* adopting a 'cash in hand' and 'more pay for more work' ethos (Kollbrunner, 2021), constantly pushing their employees, mainly migrants, to turn in an increasingly higher number of orders.

It could be argued that this method has drawn influence from themes of Taylorism, using a monetary incentive as a motivator for increased production and efficiency (Taylor, 1911), workers are paid daily on a piece-rate wage, encouraging them to continue working long hours. The *Public Eye's* report found employees to be working in assembly-line environments, however, the production of the clothing was not seen to be divided between the workers (Kollbrunner, 2021), which would be expected in a Fordist like production model. Taylor (1911) suggests that scientific management is necessary to reach maximum

efficiency and production by analysing the best way to structure production.

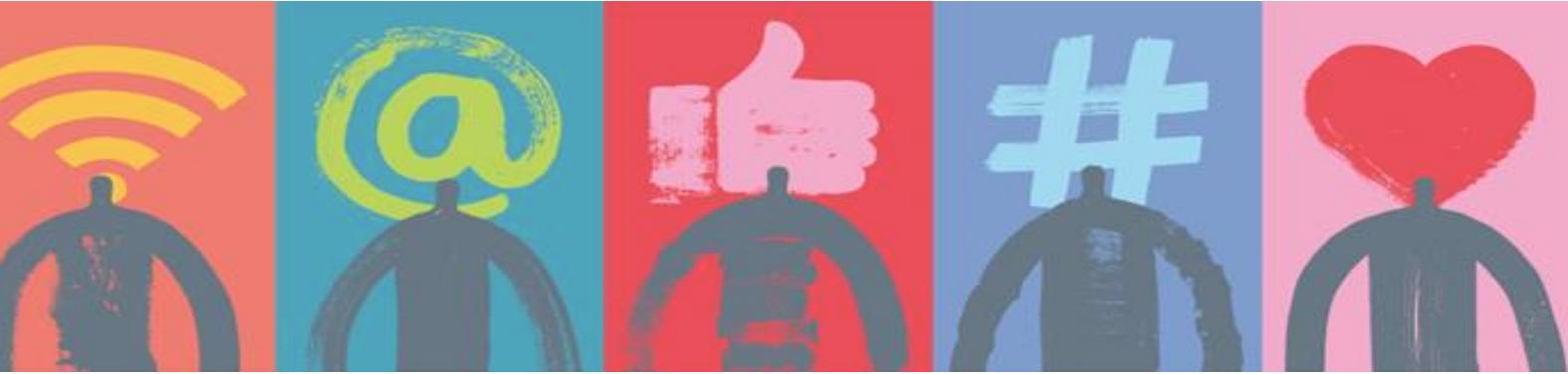
This approach is seen in the warehouses as workers are paced by a constant flow of orders to minimise the amount of slacking workers were doing, the fast-paced work environment is justified with the piece-rate wage, making the clear exploitation justifiable to the workers themselves, suggesting an even meritocratic, neo-liberal approach whereby the workers quality of life is independently theirs to control through the number of orders they complete.



Here is where the complex structure of the industry is presented, and Castells (2000) suggests that large firms increasingly 'contract out' orders to smaller specialist businesses through global/ local connections, made up of [information] networks of communication, which is made possible through the new information/communication technologies (Castells, 2000) which *SHEIN* employs.

This implies that the fast fashion industry is post-Fordist in a sense, increasing flexibility and minimising risk by not having full, legal contracts with these smaller businesses. Grint and Nixon (2015) argue that flexibility is a critical component of the new models of working technology. However, the Taylorist incentives and assembly line standardisation suggests that a Fordist approach is also being implemented in this industry.

A problem with this contradictory combination is that the workers are under constant stress and subdue to harsh regulation and subject to power, however, without the definite legal ties



to that subcontracted company. Making the very clearly exploited workers gain an illusion of control over their lives by giving them the power to control how much money they will earn. This manipulative loophole makes this production method justifiable yet still alienates the workers in the industry.

Modernization and the intensification of technology have also changed the way surveillance and monitoring are organised in the workplace. Each *SHEIN* employee is required to scan a personal QR code after each shift to record the number of orders they completed that day, seemingly done as a more efficient and faster method to record stock and customer orders. However, it could be argued that this is a capitalistic method of surveillance and authoritative monitoring with Lyon (2010) suggesting that surveillance has become a 'crucial component' in all contexts relating to ICTs, that surveillance has the sole purpose of influence, management, or control.

The requirement to record how many orders were completed creates a similar effect to Foucault's panopticon (Wood, 2003). Workers are continuously aware that at the end of their shift the number of orders completed will be recorded down and their progress will be tracked. This creates a form of self-discipline to constantly work and produce so they do not get punished for a lack of work. However, in this environment, workers are under surveillance of technology, not a human. This problematic effect of modernization reduces the workers into quantified selves (Lupton,

2015) as their progress is tracked from numerical data rather than the quality of their labour.

SHEIN thrives of the 'buy, ware, throw' (Hawkins, 2021) ethos meaning the quality does not have to be the best it can be. The result of this is *SHEIN*'s employees producing meaningless work to which they gain no fulfilment (Bauman, 2005), leaving them with only alienation and lack of transitional skills, trapping them within the exploitative fast fashion industry.

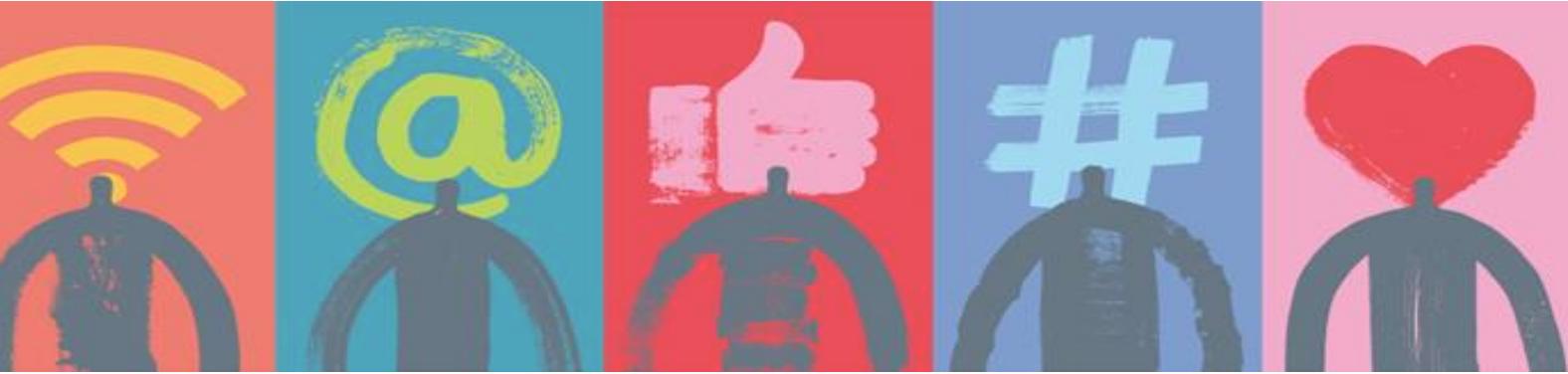
Fast fashion warehouse workers are not the only people under constant surveillance, the consumers are equally surveyed and manipulated. *SHEIN*'s online shopping website is full of pop-up ads, trending stickers, discount



countdown timers and segments of 'you might also like'. Each shopper is prompted with an option to give their email and phone number to *SHEIN* to receive a discounted shopping basket for a more 'personalised experience'. The face value of this prompt

would be to make the consumers experience easier and more individualised to themselves. However, from an informational societies perspective, the act of the consumer willingly giving *SHEIN* their personal information only makes it easier to develop the consumers 'data double' (Haggerty, 2000).

And this information is used to target the consumer and draw them into a 'never-ending loop of buy, wear, throw' (Hawkins, 2021) by presenting them with endless fashion options



catered to themselves. Bauman argues for a 'consumerist syndrome' whereby consumption is driven by infinite desire (Rojek, 2004). *SHEIN* and the fast fashion industry has almost perfectly exploited this social transition into a consumption era by utilising new information technologies and digital marketing such as *TikTok* and *YouTube*.

SHEIN adopts new surveillance technology and algorithmically feeds products to online users to keep them in a state of always wanting to buy more things (Bauman, 2005). In a similar sense to the workers gaining an illusion of control, online consumers are led to believe that the more personalised shopping experience is beneficial to them when *SHEIN* are really using the new information and knowledge economy to exploit their customers to keep buying more and more of their products. *SHEIN* have the capability and power to constantly adapt and change their marketing techniques due to their ability to gather information on their customers quickly and efficiently, which Castells (2010) argues to be a necessity to keep up with the now rapid global and social changes.

In conclusion, the fast fashion industry, specifically *SHEIN*, have displayed a very efficient production and marketing technique by adopting Fordist and Post-Fordist methods which have resulted in a very profitable industry, suggesting that *SHEIN* has possibly mastered a complex model of informational capitalism. The industry has shown its ability to change and adapt to global and societal changes by implementing modern surveillance technologies to their business structure to constantly gain information on trends, consumers and producers to reach the highest levels of efficiency and mass production. However, the industry alienates its warehouse

workers, mistreats and is extremely exploitative, and attempts to cover this up through distancing themselves from these unpleasantities enabling them to deny responsibility. It is a concerning matter that one of the most profitable global industries lack so much responsibility for their operations and it asks the question of what future implications will arise from a new societal change.

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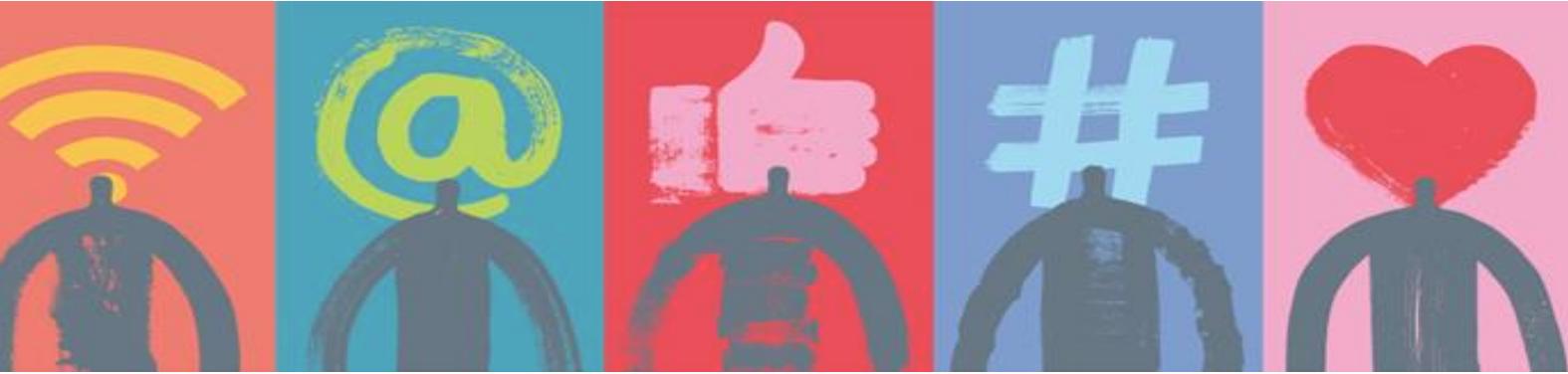
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