

America can't resist fast fashion. Shein, with all its issues, is tailored for it

Warm-Up Question: How do you make your fashion choices, and what factors influence them?

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A MARTÍNEZ, HOST:

One of the fastest growing online stores is also facing multiple allegations of misconduct. We're talking about Shein. It's a clothing retailer that plays to America's hunger for fast fashion. Here's NPR's Alina Selyukh.

ALINA SELYUKH, BYLINE: When the Chinese company Shein came to the U.S. in 2015, Emilie Delaye in Pennsylvania was preparing for high school, the birthplace of this teenage worry.

EMILIE DELAYE: I have to go out Friday night. I don't want to wear the same outfit and be an **outfit repeater**.

SELYUKH: Not repeating outfits on a teenage budget from a job scooping ice cream - for her friends, that used to mean a trip to Forever 21.

DELAYE: But then Shein **came on to the spot**, and all of a sudden, we went from cheap prices from Forever 21 being, like, \$12 for a shirt to all of a sudden, like, \$3, \$4.

SELYUKH: With clothes and accessories cheaper than a latte, Shein is writing a new chapter of America's fast-fashion love story. Its shoppers are mostly women, mostly Gen Z and millennials, generations super worried about the environment, the very shoppers leading today's **renaissance of thrifting** and resale. But Shein was **tailor made** for our age of social media and microtrends.

DELAYE: This week, we're wearing zebra print. Next week, we're wearing cheetah print. They were so quickly changing, right? You didn't want to be caught wearing zebra print when everybody else was wearing cheetah print.

SELYUKH: Shein is built for this fashion race. It **drops** up to 10,000 new items on its website every day. Shein can do this because it doesn't actually make new clothes in large quantities until enough people buy that design. Fast, cheap, in every size and style, Shein's become one of the most downloaded apps in America and the most followed clothing name on TikTok.

SELYUKH: Plastic pouches of **polyester** pouring out of shipping boxes by the dozen. In the comments section, **inevitably** someone brings up something bad Shein has been accused of as people try to understand how it's possible to buy a textile, pay someone to design and stitch and ship clothes all for 15 or even \$5. Here's Sheng Lu, professor at the University of Delaware.

SHENG LU: The actual cost of making a \$5 garment, the actual cost is far more, is much higher than these \$5 if you also consider the impact on garment workers, its impact on the environment.

SELYUKH: In fact, Shein has **collected a full bingo card of controversies** - a **racketeering** lawsuit accusing it of stealing designs, Congress saying it abuses a **loophole** in import tax. Lawmakers urging an investigation into the alleged use of **forced labor**. I met Shein executive Peter Pernot-Day to ask about this.

PETER PERNOT-DAY: I am wearing an overcoat of some kind, a dress shirt.

SELYUKH: He came to NPR in a shirt from Shein, dark plaid, in a more premium fabric.

PERNOT-DAY: This is its 15th use, so claims about our poor quality may be **overstated**.

SELYUKH: He spoke at length about Shein starting to use recycled materials and recyclable packaging, hiring many designers and a team **to police intellectual property** violations, **auditing** its 5,000 manufacturers and firing bad actors.

PERNOT-DAY: We have zero tolerance for forced labor. We have zero tolerance for child labor. We require all of our contract manufacturers to adhere to local laws on wage and hours and worker protection.

SELYUKH: Local laws, meaning where its stuff is made, which is still mainly China. Shein has been trying to distance from its Chinese origin, moving headquarters to Singapore, adding factories in Brazil and Turkey, opening offices in California and Washington, D.C. Shein won't comment on rumors that it wants to list on a U.S. stock exchange. Its reported value could be more than rivals Zara and H&M combined. A few weeks ago, Shein signed a partnership with Forever 21.

DELAYE: I really tend to stay away from Shein, Forever 21, all those places.

SELYUKH: Once a fan, Emilie Delaye is now 21. She ended up at the University of Delaware taking Professor Sheng Lu's class.

DELAYE: **It started to click** for me like, oh, shoot, these prices are not because the quality is just so poor. There's other reasons. And I didn't even factor in that people actually have to make our clothes. And how are they getting paid?

SELYUKH: She says it's easy to quickly judge shoppers who don't think about this, but it's hard to know what you don't know.

Vocabulary and Phrases:

1. **Outfit Repeater:** Someone who wears the same clothes multiple times.
2. **Came Onto the Spot:** Entered or became prominent in a particular scene or market.
3. **Renaissance:** A revival or renewed interest in something.
4. **Thrifting:** The act of shopping at thrift stores, where secondhand items are sold.
5. **Tailor-Made:** Custom-made or perfectly suited for a specific purpose or person.
6. **Drop:** Release or launch of new products.
7. **Polyester:** A synthetic fabric commonly used in clothing.
8. **Inevitably:** As is certain to happen; unavoidably.
9. **Collected a Full Bingo Card of (Controversies):** Faced a wide range of different controversies or problems.
10. **Racketeering:** The act of running a dishonest or fraudulent business.
11. **Loophole:** An ambiguity or inadequacy in the law or a set of rules.
12. **Forced Labor:** Work that people are forced to do against their will.
13. **To Police:** To control, regulate, or keep in order.
14. **Intellectual Property:** A category of property that includes intangible creations of the human intellect.
15. **(It Started to) Click:** To become clear or make sense suddenly.

Comprehension Questions:

1. What is the primary market appeal of Shein's clothing?
2. How does Shein manage to produce such a large volume of new clothing items daily?
3. What are some of the controversies and issues associated with Shein?

4. What efforts has Shein made to address concerns about its business practices?
5. How has Shein's business model impacted the perception and practices of fast fashion consumers?

Discussion Questions:

1. Discuss the ethical implications of fast fashion and its impact on the environment.
2. How do you think the fashion industry should balance affordability with sustainability?
3. What are your thoughts on the role of social media in shaping fashion trends?
4. How can consumers make more informed choices regarding where and how their clothes are made?
5. Discuss the impact of companies like Shein on traditional retail and fashion industries.

Additional Activity: Group Discussion

- Organize a group discussion on the future of fashion, focusing on trends, sustainability, and consumer behavior.

Writing Task: Reflective Essay

- Write an essay reflecting on your own fashion choices and how learning about industry practices might influence them.