

Master's Thesis in Organisational Design & Development

Tailored Responses:
How multi-dimensional legitimacy management plays out with competing
stakeholder demands

Radboud Universiteit



Author: Laurens Johan Herman Hofstede
Student number: S1107728
E-mail: Laurens.Hofstede@ru.nl

Supervisor: Claudia Gross
2nd examiner: Stefan Heusinkveld

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Abstract

The fast fashion industry faces increasing scrutiny over its environmental and social impacts. Companies like Shein continue to experience unprecedented growth despite widespread criticism. This study explores the legitimacy strategies fast fashion companies use to maintain stakeholder support while running seemingly contradictory business models. It draws on Suchman's (1995) legitimacy theory, with the support of Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory. A qualitative approach is used, based on discourse analysis of 45 documents. These include corporate sustainability reports, policy papers, media articles, government publications, and environmental investigations. The findings show a concept that is called 'avoiding responsibility', where companies can maintain legitimacy and keep growing while ignoring stakeholder expectations, because of the strength of cognitive legitimacy. The study suggests adding these empirical findings to Suchman's theory to better fit current market circumstances. Finally, it highlights how global digital platforms avoid traditional strategies because of vague supply chains and selective transparency.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the fashion industry has undergone a radical transformation with the rise of the fast fashion business model. This business model is characterized by quick trend response production, fast design-to-shelf cycles, and low pricing (Caro & Martínez-de-Albéniz, 2015). Companies like Zara, H&M, and, more recently, Shein have revolutionized how clothing is produced, marketed, and consumed. While this transformation made trendy clothing accessible to a wider audience, it has simultaneously generated societal and environmental challenges. The fashion industry faces global scrutiny for its environmentally harmful practices. Despite widely criticized business models, they continue to grow. The industry is responsible for approximately 4-10% of global carbon emissions, making it one of the most polluting sectors worldwide (Niinimäki et al., 2020).

On the social dimension, the industry is accused of labor rights violations throughout its supply chains (Bick et al., 2018). Although research finds that consumers are increasingly aware of sustainable fashion (Mandarić et al., 2021), the industry continues to thrive and expand.

In recent research conducted by Ertekin et al. (2020), they acknowledge that consumers are important stakeholders in transforming the current fashion model into a more sustainable one. The research also emphasizes the importance of other stakeholders, such as designers, retailers, fashion associations, and policy makers. These stakeholders can exert pressure on fashion institutions. They further argue that large fashion brands and retailers have the biggest impact in slowing down fashion cycles, creating awareness of sustainability problems, encouraging circular production, and improving the transparency of the entire industry. Mukendi et al. (2020) emphasise the need for more exploration in the sustainable fashion literature. Busalim et al. (2022) focus their research on consumer behavior in sustainable fashion, and end with a future research agenda mostly focused on the consumer side. Tiia et al. (2024) examined the social media discourse of fast fashion companies to look at their legitimation strategies. Other research focused on stakeholder response towards fast fashion's Corporate social responsibility (CSR) communications (Silvennoinen, 2022; Thorisdottir & Johannsdottir, 2020). Silvennoinen's research was conducted to better understand the sustainability communication strategies of fast fashion companies through the eyes of consumers, as they become more environmentally aware.

Although prior studies have explored legitimacy in sustainable contexts (Dare et al., 2021; (Silva et al., 2021), few have examined how organizations manage multiple legitimacy types when dealing with different stakeholder expectations. This study will examine the underexplored concept of legitimation strategies that fast fashion companies use to satisfy different stakeholders. This will be done by examining companies' policy documents, critical reports, and responses to both. The aim is to investigate *“strategies that fast fashion companies employ to gain legitimacy despite stakeholders' concerns about their business model.”*

The contradictions in the fast fashion business model will be analyzed through the lens of Suchman's (1995) legitimacy theory. Freeman's (1984) Stakeholder theory is used to support the analysis. The legitimacy theory is a concept in which firms strive to align their business models with societal norms and values to meet stakeholders' expectations. The stakeholder theory helps to understand the different interests of stakeholder groups and how to prioritize them.

To thoroughly investigate the challenges companies face in their pursuit of legitimacy, Suchman divides the theory into three types: Moral legitimacy, Pragmatic legitimacy, and Cognitive legitimacy. Collectively, these three provide a comprehensive view of a company's actions and responses to its stakeholders. The different legitimacy types are used to create the following sub-questions:

(1) "How do fast fashion companies attempt to establish pragmatic legitimacy through their business strategies and stakeholder communications?" (2) "In what way do fast fashion companies address moral legitimacy concerns regarding their environmental impact and social responsibility practices?" (3) "What strategies do fast fashion companies employ to gain cognitive legitimacy in a society where stakeholders are increasingly concerned with sustainability?"

Investigating legitimation strategies in a controversial industry will be done by examining the strategy of Shein. Shein has emerged as an ultra-fast fashion retailer, transforming the industry with its exclusively digital business model, which presents new styles daily in unprecedented quantities. By 2024, the company had reached a reported value of over 100 billion U.S. dollars (Statista, 2024), surpassing established competitors like H&M and Zara. The company has faced scrutiny regarding labor practices, copyright infringement, product safety, and environmental impact (Public Eye, 2021). As Sollwedel & Bak (2023) found in their

research, despite these controversies, Shein continues to grow its market share, particularly among younger consumers. This raises several questions, which this research tries to answer. By examining these strategies maintains legitimacy across pragmatic, moral, and cognitive dimensions, this study aims to uncover the mechanisms that allow problematic business models to persist and thrive even as awareness of their negative impacts grows. This understanding is essential for both theory development and practical efforts to improve sustainability in fashion. This research makes theoretical contributions by extending the legitimacy literature in combination with stakeholder literature into the domain of fast fashion. The fast fashion sector is known for misleading communications as legitimizing tactics (Tiia, 2024). The sector deals with the tension between a questionable business approach and environmental sustainability communications to satisfy stakeholders. Consumers, who are increasingly aware of corporate greenwashing tactics, can benefit from an improved understanding to critically evaluate sustainability claims (Mandarić et al., 2021).

By analysing a variety of different documents as an integral part of the legitimacy strategies, this study provides empirical depth to existing studies that address sustainability within the fashion industry (e.g., Ertekin and Atik 2020; Mukendi et al. 2020).

2. Theoretical Background

A deeper understanding of theories is needed to answer the research questions. This chapter explains the legitimacy theory (Suchman, 1995). To explore how fast fashion companies struggle with growing societal expectations that contradict their core business model and how they communicate to legitimize this (Mandarić et al., 2021). The Stakeholder theory enhances the legitimacy theory by identifying relevant stakeholders.

This chapter establishes the theoretical basis by analyzing how Suchman's legitimacy theory (1995) can be applied to the fast fashion industry. Paragraph 2.1 explains the lens of this research, including the sub-categories that will be used during this research. Paragraph 2.2 explains the Stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), which complements the legitimacy theory.

Finally, Paragraph 2.3 explains what is already known about the fast fashion industry. Subparagraphs 2.3.1 and 2.3.2 provide insight into the company Shein and its business model.

2.1 Legitimacy Theory

Many fashion brands use a form of social and environmental accounting to gain and maintain consumers' trust. These accounting tactics can be seen as legitimacy strategies. The legitimacy theory by Suchman (1995) will help to explain these strategies. The theory serves as a theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between an organization's communications and societal values. Organizations strive to align their business activities with societal values. In the 1995 article in the *Academy of Management Review*, Suchman defined legitimacy as: "*a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions*" (Suchman, 1995). This definition has gained wide acceptance. According to the framework, organizations can strategically manage their legitimacy, but they do so within an institutional environment of stakeholders that shapes and constrains their actions.

Suchman (1995) breaks legitimacy management into three broad approaches: *Gaining legitimacy*, where a player builds legitimacy among existing or new stakeholders. *Maintaining legitimacy*, preserving existing legitimacy to stay relevant. Lastly, *repairing legitimacy*, recovering legitimacy after loss or threat.

Legitimacy is crucial for the survival of firms (Hooghiemstra, 2000; Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002). Transparency is linked to legitimacy and, therefore, important for a firm's survival. Being transparent involves a company publicly disclosing information to stakeholders, thereby enhancing their perception of the company. This information is important for sustainability ethical justifications (Reilly & Larya, 2018). The literature indicates that transparency has the potential to generate legitimacy for companies. However, communicating more does not necessarily lead to higher perceived transparency (De Fine Licht, 2011; Schulz-Knappe et al., 2019).

If an organization fails to adapt to changing societal expectations, a legitimacy gap arises (Nasi et al., 1997). The authors found that the amount of information about the organization that is

inaccessible to the public can pose a threat to the organization's credibility. A legitimacy gap may develop when part of an organization's "shadow" is revealed, whether by accident, by an activist group, or through a journalist's actions. Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that this information, which would not have been made public, creates pressure on the organization's reputation (Martens & Bui, 2023). A legitimacy gap should be addressed appropriately; without any legitimacy management strategies, the company will remain vulnerable.

For fast fashion companies, legitimacy amongst their stakeholders is crucial. Legitimacy appears to be two-sided. On the one hand, companies use their position to advocate for a more sustainable fashion environment, while on the other hand, companies exploit fast fashion cycles for business purposes (Ertekin and Atik 2020). This study builds on these insights and uses Suchman's three primary types of legitimacy to analyze how fast fashion companies employ legitimacy strategies when attempting to create and maintain legitimacy through their communications. These types are *Pragmatic legitimacy*, *Moral legitimacy*, and *Cognitive legitimacy*. To operationalize these concepts for analysis, this study further categorizes each type into measurable subtypes (Schoon 2022). These can be found in subchapters 2.1.1, 2.1.2, and 2.1.3.

Multiple studies have been conducted in the domain of communications and reporting. For example, Ojala (2015) conducted a longitudinal study on how clothing retailers developed their sustainability reporting, while Jestratijevic et al. (2021) analyzed different brand strategies for enhancing transparency in their communications. Similarly, studies have addressed CSR reporting (Nguyen et al., 2020; Wei & Jung, 2021), reflecting growing public and academic interest. However, fewer studies have examined what strategies companies use to maintain stakeholder acceptance under ethical pressure. This study aims to address that gap by analyzing legitimacy strategies within the fast fashion industry.

2.1.1 Pragmatic legitimacy

This form of legitimacy is based on organizations' self-interest and the interests of their key stakeholders. It primarily relies on practical results. The idea is that legitimacy comes from outcomes, not from processes (Suddaby et al., 2017). This type of legitimacy depends on

consistent performance. Pragmatic legitimacy consists of *Exchange legitimacy*, *Influence legitimacy*, and *Dispositional legitimacy*. When a company fails to achieve steady outcomes, its stakeholder acceptance may decrease because the relationship is mainly transactional. Exchange legitimacy occurs when stakeholders trade compliance, loyalty, or trust in exchange for goods, services, or benefits (Schoon, 2022). *Influence legitimacy* is based on the concept that stakeholders support a company because it successfully represents their interests. Lastly, *Dispositional legitimacy*. This form of legitimacy is based on the personal characteristics, qualities, or attributes of the company. Stakeholders are more likely to support a company when they trust or admire the personality traits, which are seen as instruments for achieving the outcome (Schoon, 2022).

These three forms will be used to analyze fast fashion policy documents and statements. To further gain insights into legitimacy tactics. The subdivision is needed to better specify the different elements of legitimacy in communications. An example of this is Shell's main focus on shareholders' interests instead of environmental concerns (Shell Global, n.d.). In this case, direct shareholder benefits are seen as more important than ethical considerations.

2.1.2 Moral legitimacy

Moral legitimacy focuses on the "right thing to do." The main question asked is: Are organizations' activities in line with societal norms and values? Unlike pragmatic legitimacy, moral legitimacy does not look at direct outcomes, but at whether the activity is considered ethically right. Moral legitimacy consists of *Consequential legitimacy*, *Procedural legitimacy*, and *Structural legitimacy*. Stakeholders support an organization when they think the organization represents what is morally right (Willke & Willke, 2007). Where exchange legitimacy's main focus rests on direct outcomes and benefits for stakeholders, Moral legitimacy subforms *consequential legitimacy* rests on moral outcomes that are not (fully) intended. Outcomes are mostly centered on ethically controversial topics. Societal impact, greenhouse gases, and pollution are examples of consequential legitimacy outcomes. *Procedural legitimacy* looks at fairness and how morally right (steps or entire) procedures are. The core principle is that stakeholders are more likely to accept and comply with decisions

when they believe the process used to reach those decisions was fair, transparent, and followed appropriate rules (Schoon, 2022). Last, *structural legitimacy*. In structural legitimacy, the design, structure, or procedures of an organization are influential for the degree of legitimation from stakeholders. Structural elements should align with moral norms and values.

These three sub-forms of legitimacy will be used to analyze how morally right the communications and actions of fast fashion companies are. An example of this is Patagonia. This American outdoor apparel company is known for its environmental commitments and its profit donations to the planet (*Patagonia*, n.d.).

2.1.3 Cognitive legitimacy

Cognitive legitimacy is seen as one of the the hardest form of legitimacy to achieve because of the embeddedness in people’s mental frameworks. This form is focused on acceptance without evaluation. Also known as “taken-for-granted.” Is the organization seen as necessary, or does its existence make sense? Cognitive legitimacy consists of *Comprehensibility and Taken-for-granted*. *Comprehensibility* is the degree to which stakeholders can understand how the authority structure works, what its purposes are, and how it operates. *Comprehensibility* refers to how well an organization and its activities fit into existing frameworks. *Taken-for-granted* within cognitive legitimacy refers to how a company or its practices become so deeply embedded in people’s mental frameworks that it becomes necessary or inevitable instead of a conscious choice (Schoon, 2022; Suchman, 1995; Deephouse et al., 2016). An example of this is how Google is so deeply embedded that in 2006, Google was added as an official verb. The meaning is: the act of searching for information on the internet, particularly using the Google search engine (*Oxford English Dictionary*, n.d.).

2.2 Stakeholder Theory

The legitimacy theory (Suchman, 1995) and the stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) are interconnected frameworks that complement each other in understanding organizational behavior and accountability (Silvennoinen, 2022). Stakeholder theory identifies different stakeholders to whom an organization is accountable, while legitimacy theory explains why and how organizations seek acceptance from these groups. Stakeholders are the actors who

collectively determine whether an organization has the right to exist and operate in society (Mahajan et al., 2023).

Robert Edward Freeman transformed the widely accepted shareholder thinking with his book, *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*, into stakeholder thinking. The shareholder perspective dominated business thinking for decades. Its main focus is on shareholders' benefits (Castelo, 2013). Freeman argued that organizations should create value for multiple stakeholders rather than focusing solely on shareholder wealth maximization. The theory emerged from the recognition that modern organizations operate within complex and interconnected environments, which extend beyond owners and investors (Wixted & Holbrook, 2012).

Freeman's conceptualization defined stakeholders as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives" (Freeman, 1984). This definition included not only owners, investors, customers, and employees but also communities, governments, and society.

The theory argues that organizational success depends on effectively managing relationships with diverse stakeholder groups.

2.2.1 Stakeholder Tensions in Fast Fashion

The fast fashion industry has a complex stakeholder environment. The industry is characterized by competing interests and conflicting expectations. Primary stakeholders include shareholders seeking profit, employees across the global supply chains, consumers demanding affordable and trendy clothing, and suppliers operating under intense cost and time pressures. Secondary stakeholders include environmental organizations, labor rights groups, governments enforcing rules and laws, and communities affected by production (Silvennoinen, 2022).

The geographical dispersion of fast fashion operations creates stakeholder complexity. Production mainly occurs in developing countries where labor costs are low. Consumption is mainly concentrated in developed markets where environmental and social consciousness is rising. This geographic separation often creates tensions between different stakeholder groups. The pressure to deliver new styles rapidly can lead to poor working conditions, environmental shortcuts, and supply chain obscurity, all of which conflict with various stakeholder expectations (Dickson et al., 2012). These tensions make the fast fashion industry an interesting

context for examining how organizations balance competing stakeholder expectations while trying to gain and maintain legitimacy.

2.3 (Ultra-)Fast Fashion

The fashion industry, particularly the fast fashion segment, operates under significant tension due to its rapid production cycles and ethical challenges. Fast fashion is characterized by low predictability, high impulse purchasing, short product life cycles, and volatile market demand (Ferne et al., 2010). It transforms high-end runway trends into affordable clothing through low-cost manufacturing and mass production (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010).

Traditional fashion started with two to four new launches every year, by companies like Chanel and Dior. After the 1990s, brands like Zara and H&M started launching new styles every week. In the period after 2010 (Barnes & Lea-Greenwood, 2006). Shein entered the market and pushed this model further, publishing new products in as little as three to seven days. By doing this, they abandoned cycles entirely in favor of continuous production (Amed et al., 2019). This leads to shorter garment lifespans and increased consumer turnover, a phenomenon aligned with planned obsolescence (Zamani et al., 2017; Vitorino & Filipa Martins, 2016).

Given its environmental and ethical implications, fast fashion has become a focal point for research related to ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) performance (Beko & Sjöberg, 2024; Miotto & Youn, 2020). ESG frameworks help assess corporate responsibility and are also used as tools for building green portfolios (Clément et al., 2023). A closely related concept is transparency, which significantly enhances organizational legitimacy (De Fine Licht et al., 2012). Subsequent research has emphasized transparency within fashion supply chains and reporting practices (Aakanksha & Aravendan, 2023; Fraser & Van Der Ven, 2022; Nijhof et al., 2008).

2.3.1 Shein as a Company

Shein is a Chinese company founded in 2008 by entrepreneur Chris Xu Yangtian. As of 2024, the company's estimated value exceeds 100 billion U.S. dollars (Statista, 2024). Shein is currently considered one of the fastest-growing e-commerce companies globally (Hooker, 2024; Jin et al., 2023). They have already overtaken H&M in size and is approaching that of

Zara (Pucker, 2024). It all started as a drop shipping firm specializing in wedding dresses. Drop shipping is a business model where a company sells directly to the customer without holding any inventory (Singh et al., 2018). The company has since expanded to offer a wide variety of fashion items, selling to over 200 countries (Zhang & Gou, 2021). Its popularity stems from the rapid introduction of new items at low prices. Shein operates without physical stores and relies entirely on e-commerce. It utilizes large databases to analyze customer behavior and define trends, allowing for quick responses. This approach creates a unique business model known as ultra-fast fashion, where new items are introduced in unprecedented quantities and product life cycles are very short (Chen, 2023; Liu, 2022).

2.3.2 Shein's Business Model

Shein has disrupted the fashion industry in multiple ways. As one of the fastest-growing companies of this century and one of the biggest e-commerce companies in the world, Shein has a business model that fits today's needs. Shein's business model is an evolution of the fast fashion business model (Uchańska-Bieniusiewicz & Obloj, 2023). First of all, using a large database combined with the use of data analytics, real-time consumer demand tracking, and efficient supply chains to produce and sell new clothing at unprecedented speeds. They reduce costs, thus making fashion affordable to the larger public. Secondly, the company's time-to-market has drastically been reduced from the industry standard of 2-3 weeks to 3-7 days (Caro & Martínez-de-Albéniz, 2015; Coresight Research, 2023). While traditional fashion and fast fashion brands operate on a demand basis, ultra-fast fashion has a fast reaction time and also predicts customer behavior (Cachon & Swinney, 2011).

The business model aligns with Anderson's (2006) "long tail" economy theory. This theory explains that, in the current environment, not every producer needs to search for best sellers; instead, the combined sales of many small products can achieve the same outcome.

Third, Shein has fundamentally transformed merchandising decision-making from a creative-commercial hybrid function to a predominantly data-driven process. While established fast fashion retailers incorporate data analytics, they maintain significant human intervention in style selection and quantity decisions (Caro & Martínez-de-Albéniz, 2015).

Shein's business model extends the use of technology, where data analytics systems not only inform but effectively direct product development and decisions (Kherbachi et al., 2024). This data is gathered through algorithmic analysis of social media trends, competitor offerings, and real-time sales data.

This approach aligns with emergent theory regarding algorithm-driven decision making in consumer markets. Specifically, it demonstrates what Agarwal et al. (2018) term "prediction machines," replacing human judgment in domains previously considered resistant to automation due to their creative and knowledge requirements. They adapted and improved the fast fashion model to better fit the current demands, making them one of the fastest-growing companies to date (Hooker, 2024; Jin et al., 2023).

3. Research Methodology

This chapter describes the methodological approach used to investigate how fast fashion companies use legitimacy strategies to maintain and gain legitimacy, and how companies respond to critiques. Following the framework of legitimacy explained in Chapter 2, the study applies a qualitative, interpretive design aimed at uncovering how legitimacy strategies are used in practice.

Shein can be seen as one of the pioneers of ultra-fast fashion. This makes Shein a relevant and extraordinary company to analyse for this research. Shein operates in a relatively new ultra-fast fashion sector, which comes with different responsibilities and challenges. Their business model and supply chain differ from those of regular fast fashion companies like H&M and Zara, making Shein an exceptional case for applying the different legitimacy typologies. A qualitative methodology is appropriate because it provides an in-depth view of the various legitimacy strategies they use in their communications and policy documents. Qualitative research aligns well with this approach since legitimacy is context dependent. Discourse analysis will be the primary research method due to the type of data collected for this research (Gill, 2000).

3.1 Data Collection Methods

Given the limited transparency and restricted access to internal stakeholders at Shein, this study uses document analysis as its main research method. Because of ongoing critiques, it is important to highlight multiple perspectives and try to maintain as much neutrality as possible. A well-defined coding structure is needed to ensure this (Salminen et al., 1998).

Conducting interviews with employees is nearly impossible due to the lack of transparency and operational opacity. Secondary data will be the main source of data (sustainability reports and policy documents), scholars, and interview reports will be the most relevant sources to understand what is already known about the company and the way it works and communicates. Documents will be selected based on their relevance, credibility, and contribution to understanding the research question. These documents will include a wide variety of sources, such as: Company statements and reports available on Shein's official website, press releases

and blog posts by Shein, media coverage and investigative reports from reputable news channels, social media content, campaigns released by Shein, and public responses to controversies involving Shein. Other documents may be added if the relevance is clear for this research.

The inclusion of diverse document types ensures a broader understanding of the discourse surrounding Shein's business approaches and reputation. To understand Shein's perspectives, purposive sampling in combination with snowball sampling will be used. This approach allows the researcher to deliberately target sources that are most likely to provide relevant, rich, and detailed information about the company's legitimacy strategies.

The sources can be divided by stakeholder category. These categories are *Shein's communication, media articles, government reports, and environmental agency reports*.

Shein's communications is an essential category because it reveals the organization's intentional legitimacy construction. The media serves as an intermediary that translates complex organizational communications and reports to the public. Government reports represent regulatory legitimacy and formal accountability pressures. These reports are important because they demonstrate how fast fashion companies navigate legal and regulatory requirements. Environmental agency reports function as a moral compass to evaluate practices against sustainability and ethical standards.

A full table of all data sources and categorization of the stakeholder groups can be found in Appendix II.

3.2 Data Analysis Methods

Qualitative data analysis is conducted using ATLAS.ti (2023), which enables systematic coding across different documents. The software assists with the categorization and thematic development of textual data. All data sources will be coded using the same codes derived from the theory (see chapter 2.1, legitimacy theory). This is to enable comparison across sources. The data collected will be analyzed using discourse analysis (Gill, 2000; Glynos & Howarth, 2008). Discourse analysis will help to find underlying legitimacy tactics. Things such as language choices, argumentation structure, and presuppositions (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). Discourse analysis combines an "internal" study of language with an "external study of its

context (Cheng, 2009). This is needed to understand the position that fast fashion companies are trying to maintain. Pattern analysis will be used to look at the number of times legitimacy types are being recognized in the documents, and to see if patterns appear. Together, these two methods give guidance to the analysis; the following steps need to be considered (Bondarouk & Ruël, 2004):

1. Defining research questions and approach
2. Select and prepare the data
3. Initial data familiarization
4. Develop a coding framework
5. Systematic analysis of discourse
6. Pattern identification
7. Interpretation and theory building

The analysis process began with the deductive utilization of the three legitimacy types: *pragmatic, moral, and cognitive* (see chapter 2.1). These codes were further categorized in chapter 2.1.1 up to 2.1.3. These eight subcategories will be used to analyze fast fashion policy documents, statements, and reports, to further gain insights into legitimacy tactics. The full codebook can be found in Appendix I.

In total, over 640 initial codes were generated across 45 documents. During the coding phase, an open inductive approach was applied to identify new patterns. A code that was added during the coding process was *avoiding responsibility*. This code was not part of the initial codebook but showed up many times in different documents. This tactic is criticized by different stakeholder groups in various documents. Because of the presence and repetition of this strategy, the decision is made to include it in the analysis.

To ensure analytical rigor, codes were tested for internal consistency, and thematic boundaries were refined through continuous feedback and pattern verification. This approach verifies whether themes consistently appear across data sources. Additionally, negative case analysis helps identify internal consistency issues. By actively seeking data that contradicts the themes, it becomes possible to determine if the analysis is overly simplistic or if themes require adjustments. Thematic analysis provides nuanced and transferable insights into legitimacy strategies within the fast fashion sector.

4. Findings

This chapter contains the empirical findings of this research. These findings come from different data sources, such as sustainability reports, policy documents, and media reports. The results are structured around the three different legitimacy types: pragmatic, moral, and cognitive, as introduced in Chapter 2. The three legitimacy types are further divided into eight sub-sections to better capture the essence of the communication tactics. The full codebook can be found in Appendix I.

In addition to the eight sub-characters that emerged from the theory, the analysis inductively revealed a ninth dimension: *Avoiding Responsibility*. This dimension covers strategic uses of denying or downplaying accusations about reasonability.

4.1 Pragmatic Legitimacy

The fashion industry is a tight market where constant stakeholder engagement is needed to maintain loyalty. Companies strive to demonstrate direct benefits to stakeholders to maintain their loyalty. The different sub-categories combined form pragmatic validity, namely: *Exchange Legitimacy*, *Influence Legitimacy*, and *Dispositional Legitimacy*. These dimensions explain how Shein balances direct stakeholder benefits while simultaneously legitimizing its decisions and practices.

4.1.1 Exchange legitimacy

Across documents, Shein's low pricing strategy is mentioned multiple times. One of the strategic pillars from Shein also mentions this: "*Shein is all about offering the products people want at more affordable prices.*" And: "*At Shein, our mission is to make the beauty of fashion accessible for all.*" (Shein sustainability report 2023, p. 4). A Times report also mentioned the low pricing: "*Its biggest selling point is the low pricing of clothes that are shipped worldwide.*" (Times 2023, p. 1). For a lot of stakeholders worldwide, pricing is the most important selling point for choosing a retailer. This is why Shein's whole business model is centered around cheap and fast production and why they keep emphasizing this across their communications and marketing campaigns. The low pricing means costs have to be cut throughout their

structure and supply chains. A more in-depth analysis of their structure and supply chain, and Shein's response to accusations about their supply chains can be found in chapter 4.2.3.

Shein also emphasizes the importance of their platform as a marketplace for third-party sellers as a unique selling point: *“With the launch of our integrated marketplace across select markets in 2023, we are, for the first time, also enabling third-party sellers to list items on our site, supporting them in reaching customers globally.”* (Shein 2023, p. 4) and: *“Shein Marketplace supports the growth of small and independent businesses by connecting them to our extensive global customer base and equipping them with the tools to succeed. By bringing new sellers onto SHEIN Marketplace, we seek to maximize value for our customers while also enabling local businesses to grow with us.”* (Shein 2023, p. 23). Their global presence and worldwide logistical network are used not only to satisfy customers with more products, but also to grow as a company without having to invest lots of money. This is called leveraged growth. Leveraged growth is a business expansion strategy where companies use existing assets, capabilities, or resources to generate additional revenue and market presence without making proportional new investments.

This dual approach of aggressive pricing and marketplace expansion shows how Shein constructs exchange legitimacy by creating tangible, immediate value for multiple stakeholder groups, offering consumers unprecedented affordability while providing third-party sellers access to global markets. By doing this, they establish legitimacy through direct transactional benefits that address stakeholders' most pressing economic interests.

4.1.2 Influence legitimacy

The main focus of influence legitimacy is to make decisions that represent stakeholders' interests. An example of this is Shein's statement in their sustainability report in the section about improving lives in communities: *“As SHEIN — and the wider fashion industry — works to realize increasingly robust ethical standards, we also aim to meet the various expectations of governments, investors, civil society, and customers.”* (Shein 2023, p. 17). By stating this, Shein shows how stakeholder interests shape their decision-making to meet expectations and maintain trust. External stakeholders can also negatively affect decision-making: *“Fast-fashion retailer Shein said it would increase its testing of products this year, after the*

European Union warned of fines if it does not address concerns about unsafe and dangerous products sold on its site.” (Reuters 2025, p. 2). In this case, Shein is obligated to obey the stakeholder demands.

Shein also states it lets customer feedback help improve their product: *“Shein adopts rigorous targets for the continual improvement of apparel product quality, drawing on standardized testing and customer feedback to guide our efforts.”* (Shein 2023, p. 35) and: *“Any new product we offer online starts with a small test batch so that we can assess how it resonates with our customers before we scale up orders to meet demand.”* (Shein 2023, p. 46). By doing this, Shein wants stakeholders to feel engaged and heard in the decision-making process.

This approach demonstrates how Shein strategically positions itself as responsive and accountable to stakeholder concerns, using public commitments and feedback mechanisms to build pragmatic legitimacy through alignment with diverse stakeholder expectations and active engagement in the decision-making process.

In an investigation conducted by the Public Eye, which interviewed factory employees from Shein, they found evidence of poor working conditions and low wages. Shein reacted: *“The company’s response to this investigative report also mentioned an audit highlighting that everything was completely different and much better in Shein’s Guangzhou factories.”* (Public Eye 2024, p. 2). This reaction is a form of influence legitimacy where Shein tries to address stakeholders’ concerns. Public Eye reacted with the following: *“The online summary sounds more like a reactive PR message than a professional analysis. This is not only due to the scarcity of detail, but mainly to the lack of two key elements, without which a wage audit simply doesn’t make sense. Firstly, there is no mention of working hours ... The audit’s second shortcoming is the lack of mention or concealment of the lowest wages.”* (Public Eye 2024, p. 6). Shein’s responses lack detail, as they did not address stakeholders’ concerns, still leaving them with unanswered questions. This illustrates how superficial attempts to shape perceptions through selective disclosure can backfire and further undermine legitimacy.

4.1.3 Dispositional Legitimacy

Shein positions itself as a sustainable and social fashion company to attract and satisfy stakeholders: *“We believe our three-pillar ESG strategy, the evoluSHEIN roadmap, will be*

critical in getting us there while also guiding us towards a more desirable and sustainable future.” (Shein 2023, p. 7), and as a Shein spokesperson said: *“It has a zero-tolerance policy for forced labour, and we are committed to respecting human rights. We take visibility across our supply chain seriously and have invested millions of pounds in strengthening governance and compliance.”* (The BBC 2025, p. 5). These two quotations from Shein let stakeholders believe that Shein is a socially responsible organization. While a documentary from The Guardian discovers otherwise: *“At one of the factories, working up to 13-and-a-half-hour days with two to three days off a month, while those at the second site were working up to 12-and-a-half hours a day, with no fixed structure for days off.”* (The Guardian 2022, p. 1). The BBC also did some serious discoveries against Shein: *“One of the biggest challenges Shein faces is accusations that it sources cotton from China's Xinjiang region. Xinjiang's cotton has fallen out of favour after allegations that it is produced using forced labour by people from the Muslim Uyghur minority.”* (The BBC 2025, p. 4). A Lawyer from Shein got accused of the use of this cotton: *“The company... has come under fire over its environmental impact and working practices, which include allegations of forced labour in supply chains. Shein has denied this.”* (The Guardian 2023, p. 2). The pattern reveals the tension in Shein's dispositional legitimacy strategy. The company strategically positions itself through public commitments to sustainability and human rights to align with stakeholders' values. While empirical findings expose significant gaps between these stated dispositions and actual practices, creating a legitimacy gap that threatens long-term stakeholder trust. Also interesting is the denial from Shein's lawyer about the use of forced labour. While multiple investigations, for instance, from Public Eye and The BBC have proven otherwise. The data suggests that avoiding responsibility or being vague about accusations is a strategy that Shein uses repeatedly in their responses. An in-depth analysis of this strategy can be found in paragraph 4.4.

Dispositional legitimacy remains vulnerable when organizational values and characteristics are contradicted by investigative evidence. This reveals how Shein's repeated denials and responses not only fail to establish commitment to stated values but actively undermine stakeholders' perceptions of the company's morals and trustworthiness.

4.2 Moral Legitimacy

The analysis of moral legitimacy within the fast fashion industry reveals how companies navigate fundamental questions of whether their practices are ethically appropriate and align with societal norms and values. Unlike pragmatic legitimacy, which focuses on immediate stakeholder benefits, moral legitimacy concerns whether an organization's activities are considered ethically appropriate and socially beneficial. Moral legitimacy will be examined through three concepts: *Consequential legitimacy*, *Procedural legitimacy*, and *Structural legitimacy*. Together, these concepts will demonstrate how a company attempts to balance ethical contradictions, its business model, and evolving societal values.

4.2.1 Consequential Legitimacy

The analysis of consequential legitimacy in fast fashion examines how companies navigate intended and unintended moral outcomes of their activities. Unlike other types of legitimacy that focus on intentions or deliberate actions, consequential legitimacy examines whether stakeholders accept an organization despite the societal effects of its business model. In Shein's sustainability report, Shein expresses to its stakeholders how important environmentally sustainable initiatives are for them: *"Through collective action, we strive to decarbonize our supply chain, source responsible materials and protect biodiversity and animal welfare."* (Shein 2023, p. 8). Due to the nature of their business model, Shein faces accusations of several violations related to their operations, such as human rights abuses and environmental issues: *"Several reports over the last years reveal the company's shocking track record of human rights violations and an environmentally-unsustainable model—leaving many to wonder how its popularity continues to soar among consumers."* (Times 2023, p. 2). Additionally, *"The undercover investigation by Channel 4 alleged employees at the factories were working up to 18 hours a day, throughout weekends, and being paid as little as 3 pence (£0.03) an item, with only one day off a month."* (The Guardian 2022, p. 2). Greenpeace also conducted research: *"The most visible of these is the vast quantity of polluting textile waste increasingly making its way to East Africa and other Global South countries, as recently revealed by Greenpeace Germany."* (Greenpeace 2024, p. 3). Multiple independent sources agree, there is a gap between what Shein's sustainability reports promise and what happens. Fast fashion

companies face unique challenges in managing consequential legitimacy because their core operations produce significant unintended effects. These challenges include greenhouse gas emissions, waste, and social issues, which are key points for stakeholder evaluation. This suggests that for fast fashion brands, gaining consequential legitimacy might require a fundamental change to their business model rather than incremental improvements or enhanced communication strategies. The gap between Shein's sustainability promises and actual outcomes shows that consequential legitimacy depends on measurable results, not just commitments, making it a particularly challenging type of legitimacy for companies whose main activities contradict societal expectations.

4.2.2 Procedural Legitimacy

Procedural legitimacy focuses on the fairness, transparency, and moral appropriateness of the processes through which companies make decisions and conduct their operations. The underlying premise is that stakeholders are more willing to accept organizational decisions and maintain trust when they believe the processes leading to those decisions were conducted fairly. Shein expresses its transparency throughout their sustainability report: *“Our approach to human rights is guided by our human rights policy, developed in line with the United Nations Guiding Principles Reporting Framework...By identifying and evaluating risks, we prioritize the most relevant actions so that people and communities can exercise their fundamental human rights. We recognize the importance of mitigating risks to worker wellbeing through robust policies.”* (Shein 2023, p. 17). These are attempts to establish procedural legitimacy through systemic, transparent, and rule-based processes connected with international standards. Additionally, Shein provides concrete numbers to strengthen this form of legitimacy: *“SHEIN makes significant efforts to strengthen awareness of our SRS Policy among suppliers and equip them with tools and knowledge to act responsibly in compliance with our requirements. In 2023, we organized 133 group workshops and 276 one-on-one training sessions, with participant numbers totaling over 5,200. Through these interactive sessions, suppliers sharpen their understanding of SHEIN’s supply chain governance policies.”* (Shein 2023, p. 20). Transparency is further emphasized in Shein’s response to accusations of long working hours: *“We also provide supply chain workers with access to grievance mechanisms for reporting of*

concerns to SHEIN, and have clear policies prohibiting retaliation against whistleblowers.” (Shein response 2024, p. 1).

The Alliance for American Manufacturing accused Shein of bypassing laws to avoid border checks: *“The truth is, we’d probably find out a lot more about SHEIN’s supply chains if U.S. Customs officials were able to inspect the brand’s products more often. But SHEIN is gaming the system through its direct-to-consumer model, which allows it to ship orders directly from China to customers in the United States.”* (Alliance for American Manufacturing 2023, p. 2).

Another government-led organization accused Shein of breaking their own code of conduct as well as Chinese labor laws: *“The report further found workers in Shein factories working 18-hour workdays with one day off a month, clear violations of both Chinese labor laws and Shein’s own supplier Code of Conduct.”* (US-China Economic Data Risk 2023, p. 4).

The BBC concluded in their report that Shein is one of the least transparent fashion companies: *“Unlike some other fashion companies, Shein does not reveal its suppliers.”* (The BBC 2024, p. 2).

Greenpeace also accused Shein of not being transparent about its suppliers: *“The suppliers that make these products for SHEIN are shrouded in mystery; little is known about the thousands of cut and sew supplier in Guangdong, China, which churn out orders 7 days a week, and even less about the factories that wash and dye their fabrics – the biggest contributor to SHEIN’s pollution footprint.”* (Greenpeace 2024, p. 5).

During the analysis, some patterns emerged, for instance, the texts coded for procedural legitimacy had a lot of overlap with the codes for structural legitimacy. This can be explained by the lack of information and transparency about Shein’s supply chains and structures. Also, a selective disclosure of information contributes to this lack of understanding.

The analysis of Shein's procedural legitimacy reveals a significant disconnect between the company's self-reported processes and external stakeholder perceptions of fairness and transparency. The evidence suggests that Shein's approach to procedural legitimacy is primarily symbolic rather than substantive. Although the company provides detailed descriptions of training programs and policy frameworks, multiple independent sources highlight critical gaps, including a lack of supplier transparency, allegations of regulatory avoidance, and violations of both internal codes of conduct and local labor laws. The BBC states that Shein is among the least transparent fashion companies at the time. This directly contradicts the company's claims of procedural transparency, while Greenpeace characterizes

its suppliers as "shrouded in mystery." Shein struggles to meet stakeholders' expectations because of its gaps between procedurally legitimate frameworks on paper and their implementations in practice, as seen in critical reports.

4.2.3 Structural Legitimacy

Structural legitimacy analyzes how the structural components of fast fashion organizations either support or undermine their legitimacy claims. Unlike other forms of legitimacy, this form purely focuses on whether the internal structure of a company aligns with moral norms and societal values. In fast fashion, structure is important because of the industry's tension between rapid production and growing societal expectations for sustainable and ethical business practices. As Greenpeace describes it: "*SHEIN sells almost exclusively online. So instead of maintaining expensive stores, SHEIN delivers directly to its customers, gathering real-time customer feedback from the app and sharing it with its suppliers to control the production of goods*" (Greenpeace 2024, p. 22).

Because of its online business model, Shein has some competitive advantages: "*Shein draws on customer data and search history with the assistance of artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms to discern emerging fashion preferences and patterns. With these rapid insights, Shein can begin manufacturing and delivering clothes to market ahead of competitors.*" (US-China Economic data risk 2023, p. 2). Its artificial intelligence-driven business model is one of the most efficient in the world. The production of garments, in contrast, is one of the most socially harmful: "*Standard working hours appear to be from 08:00 to well past 22:00, the BBC found.*" (The BBC 2025, p. 3). And additionally: "*Shein's emissions are especially high because of its reliance on air shipping, said Sheng Lu, a professor of fashion and apparel studies at the University of Delaware. "AI has wide applications in the fashion industry. It's not necessarily that AI is bad," Lu said. "The problem is the essence of Shein's particular business model.*" (Yale Climate Connections 2023, p. 3).

Shein itself does not openly communicate about their structures. A lot of details are hidden from stakeholders. They only communicate about the number of subcontractors and the regions where garments are made: "*SHEIN works with a network of third-party contract manufacturers*

globally, including China, Brazil, and Türkiye.” (Shein’s commitment to sustainability 2024, p.1).

The analysis of structural legitimacy reveals some contradictions at the core of Shein’s organizational design. While the company has developed one of the most sophisticated and efficient business models with artificial intelligence, its structure creates misalignments with moral norms and societal values. Shein’s structural legitimacy creates a disconnection between its technological infrastructure and its exploitative production practices. Their most critical gap is its lack of transparency.

4.3 Cognitive Legitimacy

The findings of cognitive legitimacy within the fast fashion industry reveal how companies establish acceptance through the mental frameworks and cognitive processes that stakeholders use to understand and evaluate their operations. Cognitive legitimacy operates through two mechanisms: *comprehensibility*, where stakeholders can clearly understand how and why organizations function as they do. And *taken-for-granted*, where organizational practices become so embedded in their mental models that they are accepted without conscious evaluation.

4.3.1 Comprehensibility

Comprehensibility is important in gaining cognitive legitimacy. If stakeholders understand what a company does, or why it operates the way it does, cognitive legitimacy is gained or maintained. To analyze this form of legitimacy, a clear distinction between stakeholder expectations is needed. Different stakeholders expect different information. Shein’s Sustainability Report covers very diverse topics (People, Planet, Process, and Governance). These topics cover most of the stakeholders’ needs. Texts like: *“Respecting human rights is not only critical for our long-term business success; it’s a fundamental responsibility. Across all our operations, we are committed to treating individuals fairly and ethically.”* (Shein’s Sustainability Report 2024, p. 17) and: *“We also continue to invest in programs that support our suppliers in continually improving the wellbeing of their workers, their families, and their communities.”* (Shein Sustainability Report 20204, P. 3). These quotations give the impression

that Shein is a socially conscious company that cares about human rights and ethics. Multiple critical reports have found pressing evidence that this is not true. Accusations about long working days and harsh punishments for manufacturing mistakes prove the opposite.

Shein also promotes the reuse of their products: *“We seek to extend the lifespan of our garments by promoting the resale of pre-loved clothing and facilitating clothing exchange.”* (Shein’s Sustainability Report 2024, p. 45) these texts are examples of information shared to satisfy sustainable conscious stakeholders, while their business model aims at creating cheap clothing of low quality, *“Shein, the fast-fashion giant famous for \$2 T-shirts.”* (fortune 2024, p. 1).

An example of complex information that is intended to satisfy stakeholders, but which in practice is not applicable: *“SHEIN’s Global Code of Ethics (CoE) outlines employee requirements, rights and obligations. Every SHEIN employee undergoes training on the CoE and agrees to be bound by its requirements throughout their employment with the company.”* (Shein Sustainability Report 2024, p. 49). Most employees who would benefit from the global code of ethics would be manufacturing staff who are mostly hired by the factories themselves instead of being Shein employees, thus missing out on the work improvements promised in Shein’s reports.

A word from Sky Xu (the CEO of Shein): *“I am proud of our team’s efforts to date in mitigating our environmental impact and promoting positive social change.”* (Shein Sustainability Report 2024, p. 3). This statement seems positive about the impact Shein has on the environment and society. Multiple reports from The BBC, Greenpeace, Yale, and Public Eye show that Shein’s impacts are among the worst in the industry: *“Shein’s emissions are especially high because of its reliance on air shipping, said Sheng Lu, a professor of fashion and apparel studies at the University of Delaware. “AI has wide applications in the fashion industry. It’s not necessarily that AI is bad,” Lu said. “The problem is the essence of Shein’s particular business model.”* (Yale Climate Connections 2023, p. 3) and Greenpeace confirms this: *“While credible attempts to change the business model are thin on the ground, there’s no shortage of ‘sustainability’ or ‘circularity’ initiatives, which are mostly not a serious attempt to address the problem – and are increasingly being proven as greenwashing.”* (Greenpeace 2023, p. 3).

Companies selectively enhance or obscure the comprehensibility of different aspects of their operations based on stakeholder expectations. Environmental and social impact are presented

in overly positive formats that satisfy environmentally conscious stakeholders. Labor practices are often described through complex certification and supplier codes that create an appearance of transparency without enabling meaningful stakeholder insights.

This strategic manipulation of comprehensibility creates what can be termed "performative transparency", communication practices that fulfill formal disclosure requirements while maintaining information asymmetries. The analysis shows how fast fashion companies balance comprehensibility by providing information that appears accessible and comprehensive. What actually matters, however, is protecting sensitive or potentially damaging details.

4.3.2 Taken-for-granted

Taken-for-granted is a concept that describes a state where organizations and practices become so deeply embedded in social consciousness that they are no longer questioned. This represents one of the highest forms of legitimacy, when organizations become invisible through complete normalization. Unlike other forms of legitimacy, which require continuous alignment or persuasion, taken-for-granted operates through universal agreement, as alternatives become unthinkable. Empirical evidence reveals that Shein has achieved some remarkable levels of cognitive legitimacy through taken-for-granted: *“Just over a decade ago, SHEIN was launched with the mission to make the beauty of fashion accessible to all. SHEIN has since established a truly global presence, serving customers in more than 150 countries.”* (Shein Sustainability report 2024, p. 1). Other data sources also describe the size and global presence: *“Shein is the world's most popular fashion brand with sales reaching 100 billion in 2022, and the company became the most googled name in 2022.”*. According to a Report compiled by Money.co.uk: *“Shein has taken over giants like Nike and Adidas as the most googled clothing brand, and Zara and Macy’s in online sales.”* (Times 2023, p. 1). The Alliance for American Manufacturing also confirms these numbers as Shein keeps growing and exceeding the combined sales of H&M and Zara. These quotations strengthen Shein’s belief in a business model where consumers want quick and accessible fashion by showing its market penetration and consumer adoption rates: *“Finishing the year as the most downloaded platform for beauty and fashion across the U.S. application marketplace.¹¹ With 27 million downloads, Shein had*

more than double second-place Nike's 12.5 million downloads." (US China Economic Data Risk 2023, P. 3).

The strength of Shein's cognitive legitimacy through taken-for-granted becomes apparent when examining how it persists against stakeholder concerns: *"There's a whole lot of chemicals found in fast fashion, and SHEIN products are among the worst offenders. An investigation by Greenpeace showed seven out of 47 SHEIN products it tested contained hazardous chemicals banned by the European Union; other studies have found lead in children's products sold by SHEIN."* (Greenpeace 2023, p. 2). Further, greenwashing accusations are part of criticisms of the firm: *"While credible attempts to change the business model are thin on the ground, there's no shortage of 'sustainability' or 'circularity' initiatives, which are mostly not a serious attempt to address the problem – and are increasingly being proven as greenwashing."* (Greenpeace 2023, p. 3).

Even high-level officials question the company's legitimacy. In June, Donald Trump's pick for US Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, said: *"grave ethics concerns about Shein's "deep ties to the People's Republic of China: Slave labour, sweatshops, and trade tricks are the dirty secrets behind Shein's success,"* he wrote (The BBC 2025, p. 2). Despite these serious allegations about environmental, health, and labor concerns, consumer behavior continues to demonstrate the taken-for-granted acceptance of Shein.

The levels of taken-for-granted Shein has achieved despite facing substantial criticism over its environmental and social practices are remarkable. This paradoxical situation demonstrates how cognitive legitimacy can function independently from moral or pragmatic legitimacy. And also, how different stakeholder groups can establish varying levels of taken-for-granted.

4.4 Avoiding Responsibility

The analysis has revealed an emergent dimension of legitimacy that operates differently from the traditional typologies in legitimacy theory. This dimension, termed "avoiding responsibility," represents a systematic approach to legitimacy maintenance through the strategic avoidance of accountability. Unlike traditional legitimacy strategies that seek to gain stakeholder approval through conformity, avoiding responsibility is used as a protective mechanism that maintains legitimacy by preventing accountability to the organization or

redirecting it to others. This dimension emerged from empirical observations in which fast fashion companies distance themselves from accusations while, in the meantime, maintaining stakeholder acceptance. Rather than directly addressing criticism through improved practices or enhanced transparency. Organizations deploy a range of tactics designed to avoid accountability. Research has been done on similar behaviors such as “*strategic ignorance*” (McGoey, 2012), and “*willful blindness*” (Heffernan, 2011), neither of which has been explicitly theorized as a legitimacy strategy.

Avoiding responsibility operates through several legitimacy types. One of these is a lack of structural understanding. As seen in the following accusations: “*Mathias Bolton, head of commerce at UNI Global Union said: “Shein shouldn’t be rewarded with the credibility of being listed in the City, or anywhere else, given the lack of transparency in their supply chain and shocking reports of severe labour violations.”*” (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre 2023, p. 2). This quote comes as a response as Shein tries to become public. Throughout Shein’s existence, no clear structural insights have been given because of the lack of transparency.

Consequential legitimacy is another important type where avoiding responsibility tactic is used multiple times. Accusations are mostly about working hours, working conditions, and environmental impact. It appears that Shein is denying and ignoring the accusations: “*However, the company has come under criticism for things such as allegedly poor working conditions in factories, alleged copyright infringement on independent artists’ designs, along with criticism of fast fashion’s impact on the environment. Shein has denied the accusations.*” (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre 2023, p. 1).

On a rare occasion when they respond to serious accusations, they downplay them and answer without evidence: “*While we do not recognise many of the allegations in this report, the discussion on working hours and wages raised by Public Eye is important to us, and we have made significant progress on enhancing conditions across our ecosystem.*” (Shein’s response 2024, P. 1). Evidence for improved conditions were never given.

When responding to a critical report from Public Eye, Shein mitigates the facts, and does not come with an answer: “*The Public Eye Report is based on a sample of 13 interviewees and, while all voices in our supply chain are important, this small sample size should be seen in the context of our comprehensive ongoing process to continually improve our supply chain, which*

involves engaging with thousands of suppliers and workers within the supply chain.” (Shein’s commitment to sustainability 2024, p. 1).

In January 2025, Shein’s general counsel for Europe, the Middle East, and Africa faced some tough questions from lawmakers. Shein did not answer any question: *“Instead of offering transparent answers, Zhu repeatedly avoided confirming or denying.”* (Supply Chain World 2025, p. 2). Opponents even go so far as to call Shein’s responses ‘Wilful Ignorance’: *“Ms Zhu’s refusal to answer questions was met with backlash from a committee of MPs, who accused her of ‘wilful ignorance’ regarding the integrity of its supply chains. Byrne stated, “You’ve given us almost zero confidence in the integrity of your supply chains,” highlighting the gravity of the situation.”* (Supply Chain World 2025, p. 2). This shows how avoiding responsibility does not work for every stakeholder group. In this example, Shein fueled stakeholder concerns about its practices: *” Despite claiming a zero-tolerance policy on forced labor, Shein has yet to provide concrete evidence demonstrating compliance with ethical sourcing standards. The company’s evasiveness has only fuelled concerns about its labor practices.”* (Supply Chain World 2025, p. 2).

The identification of avoiding responsibility as a distinct legitimacy dimension has important implications for understanding how organizations navigate accountability. It suggests that legitimacy theory should expand, focusing on gaining stakeholder approval through responsibility deflection.

The empirical evidence demonstrates that strategic legitimacy management can focus on economically critical stakeholders while tolerating disapproval from others. The data suggest that this may be effective as a short to medium-term strategy for companies that can maintain rapid growth. However, long-term effects are still unknown.

5. Discussion

5.1 Interpreting the Findings

The empirical analysis of Shein's legitimacy strategies reveals a complex and often contradictory approach to stakeholder management within the fast fashion industry. The empirical analysis examines pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy types, alongside the emergent avoiding responsibility strategy. Similar behaviors have been discussed under labels such as “*strategic ignorance*” (McGoey, 2012), and “*willful blindness*” (Heffernan, 2011), neither of which has been explicitly theorized as a legitimacy strategy. Traditional legitimacy theory assumes that organizations either gain approval or manage disapproval through various strategic responses. However, avoiding responsibility represents a third pathway where organizations seek legitimacy through strategic accountability avoidance rather than stakeholder approval. Shein's approach to avoiding responsibility operates across pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy.

The analysis also reveals limitations of this approach. While avoiding responsibility may be effective with certain stakeholder groups, for instance, consumers influenced by cognitive legitimacy. It can backfire with institutional stakeholders such as regulators and lawmakers who interpret stubbornness as suspicion of violations. The characterization of Shein's strategy as “*wilful ignorance*” by government officials demonstrates how this strategy can actively undermine legitimacy within certain stakeholder groups. In this case, this raised interest in further investigations.

Looking at research question 1 on pragmatic legitimacy, Shein has achieved organizational success through exchange legitimacy by offering unprecedented affordability and global market presence. Creating tangible benefits for both consumers and third-party sellers through their platform. The immediate economic value creation is the key principle for their legitimacy claims.

The strategy of selective disclosure and the fact that some arguments did not have substantial evidence give stakeholders more reasons to be suspicious about its practices and communications. This suggests that Shein's pragmatic legitimacy strategies prioritize short-term stakeholder satisfaction over long-term trust building.

A central paradox emerges from this analysis. Shein's business model, which is aimed at exchange legitimacy through low prices, simultaneously undermines its dispositional and influence legitimacy through the structural necessities of cost reduction. The company's emphasis on affordability requires supply chain practices that conflict with stakeholder expectations.

The analysis of research question 2, about moral legitimacy, reveals contradictions in Shein's strategy. Across consequential, procedural, and structural legitimacy types. There exists a disconnect between the company's public commitments and operational practices, which go beyond societal morals. While Shein presents in-depth sustainability reports and policies. Independent investigations consistently expose violations of labor standards, environmental regulations, and transparency requirements. These inconsistencies are what Nasi et al. (1997) call legitimacy gaps. Research conducted by Tiia et al. (2024) also found that Shein aims to legitimize its unsustainable business model by harnessing sustainability claims. This research confirms this statement with data from policy documents.

This gap between stated intentions and measurable outcomes suggests that Shein's moral legitimacy efforts are based on empty promises. As Greenpeace (2024, p. 28) states: *“Worse than greenwashing as it makes no sense at all.”* The company's environmental and social responsibility is consistently contradicted by investigations. This suggests that for fast fashion brands, achieving moral legitimacy requires fundamental business model transformation rather than enhanced communication strategies. Business models should evolve with growing societal expectations (Mandarić et al., 2021) to gain moral legitimacy.

Perhaps most remarkable, the examination research question 3, about cognitive legitimacy. This subtype of legitimacy demonstrates Shein's ability to maintain stakeholder acceptance despite widespread criticisms. Through ‘performative transparency’ of comprehensibility and the achievement of taken-for-granted among consumer segments. As seen from the data, Shein's position as one of the most popular fashion brands, the most googled clothing company, and the most downloaded fashion app, demonstrating how cognitive legitimacy can function independently from other forms of legitimacy. The company's global market presence and continued growth, even when they face serious allegations, illustrate how cognitive legitimacy can grow while other forms of legitimacy are lacking. This might be due to the digital characteristics of Shein’s business model and its selective transparency to stakeholders.

Cognitive legitimacy can function as a protective mechanism against stakeholder criticisms. As Ertekin et al. (2020) also found in their research, consumers are amongst the most important stakeholders in transforming fashion into a more sustainable model. This research also finds that it works the other way around. When cognitive legitimacy is gained among consumers, changing the business model becomes a real challenge.

5.1 Conclusion

Shein's legitimacy strategies reveal a complex and multifaceted approach to stakeholder management within the fast fashion industry. Across the legitimacy dimensions can be seen that legitimacy may operate independently and even contradictorily. This research shows how, in globalized industries, organizations can maintain overall legitimacy by using different legitimacy strategies for different stakeholder groups. Consumers primarily seek pragmatic legitimacy to have the best outcome for themselves. When consumers are satisfied for a long period of time, their loyalty can shift to cognitive legitimacy, which in this case appears especially durable. Institutional stakeholders, on the other hand, demand moral legitimacy. Their interests are focused on societal ethical business practices and transparency.

The analysis further indicates that in digital consumer markets, cognitive legitimacy may be one of the most influential and enduring type of legitimacy. This type of legitimacy can surpass stakeholder concerns regarding ethical practices. This independence effect seems especially evident when cognitive legitimacy is established through beneficial outcomes and digital dominance rather than social acceptance.

While accusations like 'wilful ignorance' are serious threats, avoiding responsibility works as a strategy to keep expanding global presence for fast fashion brands. Suchman (1995) defined 3 main legitimacy management strategies: gaining legitimacy, maintaining legitimacy, or repairing legitimacy. Building on the theory, this study identified avoiding responsibility as a distinct maintenance strategy that operates by deliberately deflecting accountability. Unlike the repairing strategy, which addresses threats through explanations, avoiding responsibility bypasses the repair process entirely. This addition to Suchman's (1995) theory adds a strategy that relies on strong cognitive legitimacy among key stakeholders combined

with structural opacity to sustain legitimacy. This addition reflects how certain organizations can maintain growth and acceptance while strategically avoiding accountability.

5.3 Limitations

While this research offers insights, its limitations should also be considered. A significant limitation of this study is the limited access to primary data from Shein. The company is known for its lack of transparency, which complicates acquiring first-hand information about its internal operations, decision-making processes, and sustainability practices. This research heavily relies on publicly available data, which may be incomplete or potentially biased. Documents from the company itself can intentionally downplay or obscure accusations, necessitating careful analysis.

Secondly, because of the single case, the generalisability of this research is very limited. Furthermore, Shein is an extraordinary example of a fast fashion player, making it especially hard to generalise findings across the sector.

Lastly, personal biases play a crucial role in this research during the analysis and interpretation process. As a researcher, my values, perspectives, and assumptions regarding ethical practices and sustainability may influence the processes. This is especially relevant in topics as controversial as fast fashion. Although efforts were made to remain objective and grounded in theory, complete neutrality is difficult to achieve. To best ensure analytical rigor, continuous feedback and pattern verification were used. This approach verifies whether themes consistently appear across data sources. Also, the use of negative case analysis helps identify internal consistency issues. Readers should consider how these biases may have affected the framing of legitimacy strategies and stakeholder analysis.

5.4 Future Research

While this research offers empirical insights into how legitimacy strategies are used in fast fashion, it also reveals interesting directions for future research. A first suggestion would be to analyze further how avoiding responsibility interacts with a company's legitimacy over time. Also, how avoiding legitimacy is used in other branches and its effectiveness. A comparison

between different fashion companies can also be made to analyze whether similar legitimacy strategies appear.

The call from Mukendi et al. (2020) for more exploration in the sustainable fashion literature is partly covered, but still more research is needed to uncover hidden dynamics. As seen across documents. Fast fashion companies operate in a sector where a lot of unethical and unsustainable practices are in place. More research and ultimately more awareness is needed to tackle these societal problems. A direction for research could be to incorporate consumer interviews to offer a deeper insight into how consumers construct legitimacy. This would further enrich our understanding of how legitimacy is constructed and maintained in digital consumer economies.

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Appendix I, Codebook

This codebook is designed to analyze organizational communications and statements through the lens of Suchman's (1995) three types of legitimacy: (1) Pragmatic legitimacy, (2) Moral legitimacy, and (3) Cognitive legitimacy. These types are further divided according to Johansen's (2017) sub-categories, a full explanation of the subdivision can be found in Chapter 2.1.

1. Pragmatic Legitimacy

Theoretical Definition: Legitimacy is based on organizations' self-interest and their most important stakeholders. This form of legitimacy rests mainly on practical consequences and utilitarian calculations.

Operational Definition: Evidence of organizations attempting to gain legitimacy by demonstrating practical benefits, utility, or self-interested exchanges with stakeholders.

Exchange Legitimacy

Definition: Direct benefits or exchanges between the organization and stakeholders.

Examples:

- *"Shein is all about offering the products people want at more affordable prices"* Shein Sustainability Report 2023, p. 4.
- *"With the launch of our integrated marketplace across select markets in 2023, we are, for the first time, also enabling third-party sellers to list items on our site, supporting them in reaching customers globally."* Shein Sustainability Report 2023 P4.
- *"By adopting an on-demand business model, we strive to offer diverse products at accessible prices"* Shein Sustainability Report 2023, p. 5.

Guidelines:

- The organization emphasizes direct material benefits to stakeholders
- Include references to cost savings, job creation, and economic value

Influence Legitimacy

Definition: An Organization incorporates stakeholders' interests into decision-making.

Examples:

- " *SHEIN adopts rigorous targets for the continual improvement of apparel product quality, drawing on standardized testing and customer feedback to guide our efforts*" Shein Sustainability Report 2023, p. 35.
- " *The lack of change in terms of excessive overtime and the other findings from our investigations indicate: Shein will only assume more social responsibility when subjected to external pressure.*" The BBC 2024, p. 4.
- " *Interviews with factory employees refute Shein's promises to make improvements*" 14 May 2024." Public Eye 2024, p. 2.

Guidelines:

- The organization claims to respond to stakeholder input
- Include mentions of feedback incorporation, responsive changes
- Look for language about "listening," "responding," or "adapting"

Dispositional Legitimacy

Definition: Stakeholders perceive the organization as having desirable character traits and therefore legitimize its actions (Baba et al., 2021).

Examples:

- " *We are dedicated to fostering an inclusive work environment where all team members feel encouraged to thrive.*" Shein sustainability Report 2023, p. 15.
- " *Respecting human rights is not only critical for our long-term business success; it's a fundamental responsibility. Across all our operations, we are committed to treating individuals fairly and ethically.*" . ." Shein sustainability Report 2023, p. 17

Guidelines:

- The organization makes claims about its character or disposition
- Include references to company values, leadership qualities, and organizational culture
- Look for personality-like attributions to the organization

2. Moral Legitimacy

Theoretical Definition: Legitimacy focuses on the "right thing to do." Evaluates whether organizations' activities are in line with societal norms and values, regardless of benefits.

Operational Definition: Evidence of organizations attempting to gain legitimacy by demonstrating ethical behavior, social responsibility, or alignment with moral standards.

Consequential Legitimacy

Definition: Evaluation based on organizational outputs and their moral consequences.

Examples:

- *"We are committed to getting better every day and will remain anchored by the fundamentals in our evoluSHEIN roadmap. Our goal is to build a resilient business that contributes to a more equitable and sustainable future for all."* Shein sustainability Report 2023, p. 3
- *"several reports over the last year reveal the company's shocking track record of human rights violations and an environmentally-unsustainable model—leaving many to wonder how its popularity continues to soar among consumers."* Time Report 2023, p. 4.

Guidelines:

- The organization emphasizes positive moral outcomes of its activities
- Include references to environmental benefits, social contributions, and harm reduction
- Look for language about "impact," "contribution," or "making a difference."

Procedural Legitimacy

Definition: Evaluation based on whether techniques and procedures are morally appropriate.

Examples:

- *"We offer development and career-growth opportunities to our employees around the world, respecting all cultures, abilities and lifestyles."* Shein sustainability Report 2023, p. 14

- *“Where suppliers commit severe human rights violations such as use of forced labour or child labour, or fail to remediate other serious violations within required timelines, we have not hesitated to terminate business relationships in line with our policies.”*
Shein response 2024, p. 2.

Guidelines:

- The organization emphasizes ethical methods or processes
- Include mentions of standards compliance, ethical procedures, and responsible practices
- Look for process-oriented moral claims

Structural Legitimacy

Definition: Evaluation based on whether organizational structures embody moral values.

Examples:

- *"We analyze demand signals from the way users engage with our app or website, and use these insights to make the products we know our customers want, when they want them."* Shein Sustainability Report 2023, p. 5.
- *"By adopting an on-demand business model, we strive to offer diverse products at accessible prices, while also seeking to reduce inventory waste left over from unsold products in Shein's warehouses."* Shein Sustainability Report 2023, p. 5.

Guidelines:

- The organization highlights structural elements designed for ethical purposes
- Include mentions of governance structures, oversight mechanisms, and dedicated roles
- Look for an organizational design justified on moral grounds

3. Cognitive Legitimacy

Theoretical Definition: Legitimacy based on acceptance without evaluation, also known as "taken-for-granted." Focuses on whether the organization is seen as necessary or if its existence makes sense within existing cultural frameworks.

Operational Definition: Evidence of organizations attempting to gain legitimacy by demonstrating inevitability, necessity, or natural fit within existing systems and expectations.

Comprehensibility

Definition: An organization and its activities make sense within existing cultural frameworks.

Examples:

- *"Shein was launched with the mission to make the beauty of fashion accessible to all."* Shein Sustainability Report 2023, p. 4.
- *" Respecting human rights is not only critical for our long-term business success; it's a fundamental responsibility. Across all our operations, we are committed to treating individuals fairly and ethically."* Shein Sustainability Report 2023, p. 17.

Guidelines:

- The organization presents itself as logical or inevitable, given current conditions
 - Include references to natural evolution, obvious solutions, and common sense
- Look for language that makes organizational existence seem self-evident

Taken-for-Granted

Definition: An organization is accepted as a necessary or inevitable player.

Examples:

- *"Shein has since established a truly global presence"* Shein Sustainability Report 2023, p. 4.
- *Fast fashion giant Shein has reportedly lodged confidential paperwork with US securities regulators, informing them of an intention to go public in the US."* The Guardian 2023, p. 2.
-

Guidelines:

- The organization presents itself as inevitable or necessary
- Include claims about meeting unavoidable needs or following natural patterns

Look for language suggesting the organization's existence is unquestionable

Appendix II, Data Sources

publisher	Name	group	Size Pages	URL
Shein (2023)	Shein’s own sustainability report 2023	Shein	64	https://www.sheingroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/FINAL-SHEIN-2023-Sustainability-Social-Impact-Report.pdf.pdf
Shein (2024a)	Shein’s Commitment to Sustainability and Fair Practices: A Response to Recent Media Reports	Shein	5	https://www.sheingroup.com/corporate-news/company-updates/sheins-commitment-to-sustainability-and-fair-practices-a-response-to-recent-media-reports/
Shein mail response (2024b)	Shein’s response to Publiceye’s research	Shein	7	https://www.publiceye.ch/fileadmin/doc/Mode/20240412_Response_Shein_geschwaerzt.pdf
The BBC Report (2025)	<i>The truth behind your \$12 dress: Inside the Chinese factories fuelling Shein's success</i>	Media Article	12	https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cdrylgvr77jo
Business & Human Rights Resource Centre (2024)	<i>Shein response on 2024 Ethical Fashion Report</i>	Government	3	https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/shein-response-on-2024-ethical-fashion-report/
Public Eye (2024)	Interviews with factory employees refute	Media Article	8	https://www.publiceye.ch/en/topics/fashion/interviews-with-factory-employees-refute-sheins-promises-to-make-improvements



	Shein’s promises to make improvements			
World Benchmarking Alliance (2023)	Corporate Human Rights Benchmark 2023	Government	13	https://assets.worldbenchmarkingalliance.org/app/uploads/2023/11/SHEIN-CHRB-scorecard-2023.pdf
Time Magazine (2023)	<i>Shein Is the World’s Most Popular Fashion Brand—at a Huge Cost to Us All</i>	Media Article	10	https://time.com/6247732/shein-climate-change-labor-fashion/
U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission (2023)	<i>Shein, Temu, and Chinese E-Commerce: Data Risks, Sourcing Violations, and Trade Loopholes</i>	Government	12	https://www.uscc.gov/research/shein-temu-and-chinese-e-commerce-data-risks-sourcing-violations-and-trade-loopholes
Business & Human Rights Resource Centre (2024a)	<i>China: Shein refutes Public Eye report's labor violation claims, citing audits showing above-average wages</i>	government	3	https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/china-shein-refutes-public-eye-reports-labor-violation-claims-cites-audits-showing-above-average-wages/
abc News (2025)	<i>Shein and Temu set to raise prices in response to tariffs</i>	Media Article	3	https://abcnews.go.com/Business/shein-temu-price-increases-set-effect/story?id=121155117



Alliance for American Manufacturing (2023)	Bad practices. The brand’s response? Mount a PR campaign!	Government	5	https://www.americanmanufacturing.org/blog/shein-is-facing-scrutiny-over-its-bad-practices-the-brands-response-mount-a-pr-campaign/
The Guardian (2022)	Shein admits working hours breaches and pledges £12m to improve sites	Media Article	3	https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/dec/05/shein-admits-working-hour-breaches-and-pledges-12m-to-improve-sites
Reuters (2025)	Shein aims for London IPO by mid-year, sources say	Media Article	3	https://www.reuters.com/business/retail-consumer/shein-aims-london-ipo-by-mid-year-sources-2025-01-09/
The BBC (2025a)	Shein lawyer refuses to say if it uses Chinese cotton	Media Article	3	https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/clyg7n1d85go
The BBC (2024b)	Shein reveals child labour cases at suppliers	Media Article	2	https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c4glzzdd88lo
The Guardian (2024)	Human rights group urges UK financial regulator to block Shein’s LSE flotation	Media Article	4	https://www.theguardian.com/business/article/2024/jun/26/human-rights-group-fca-shein-lse-flotation-uyghurs

Amnesty international (2024)	SHEIN flotation would be 'badge of shame' for London Stock Exchange	Environmental Agency	2	https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/shein-flotation-would-be-badge-shame-london-stock-exchange
The Guardian (2024)	Stop Shein listing on the FTSE, workers' rights campaigners urge	Media Article	3	https://www.theguardian.com/business/article/2024/jun/09/stop-shein-listing-on-the-ftse-workers-rights-campaigners-urge
Forbes (2024)	Shein Needs To Stop Outsourcing Responsibility For Its Apparel Juggernaut	Media Article	6	https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelposner/2024/06/04/shein-needs-to-stop-outsourcing-responsibility-for-its-apparel-juggernaut/?sh=6bc5062b4c3d
Le Monde (2024)	South Korea: Seoul authorities find Shein products contain high levels of toxic chemicals	Media Article	2	https://www.lemonde.fr/en/economy/article/2024/05/28/seoul-government-finds-shein-products-contain-high-levels-of-toxic-chemicals_6672910_19.html
Public Eye (2024a)	Interviews with factory employees refute Shein's promises to make improvements	Media Article	7	https://www.publiceye.ch/en/topics/fashion/interviews-with-factory-employees-refute-sheins-promises-to-make-improvements
SHEIN Response (2024c)	Shein's response to Public Eyes research	Shein	7	https://www.publiceye.ch/fileadmin/doc/Mode/20240412_Response_Shein_geschwaerzt.pdf



Fortune (2024)	Shein, the fast-fashion giant famous for \$2 T-shirts, is exploring a London IPO after New York was too tough, sources say	Media Article	4	https://fortune.com/2024/02/26/shein-ipo-london-not-new-york-sec-fast-fashion/
Business of Fashion (2023)	Shein’s IPO Plan to Fuel Scrutiny Over Cotton, China Roots	Media Article	4	https://www.businessoffashion.com/news/retail/shein-ipo-fuels-scrutiny/
The Guardian (2023)	Chinese fashion giant Shein has filed paperwork to float on US stock market – reports	Media Article	3	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/28/shein-chinese-fast-fashion-label-us-stock-market-shares-ipo
CNN Business (2023)	Shein sent American influencers to China. Social media users are furious	Media Article	5	https://edition.cnn.com/2023/06/28/business/shein-influencers-brand-trip-china-hnk-intl/index.html
Business of Fashion (2023)	‘Stop Shein’ Campaign Launches in France Backed by MEP Raphaël Glucksmann	Media Article	4	https://www.businessoffashion.com/news/sustainability/shein-over-consumption-regulation-campaign/



CNN (2023)	Congress presses Chinese fast-fashion giant Shein on forced labor	Media Article	2	https://edition.cnn.com/2023/05/02/business/shein-forced-labor-congress/index.html
Just Style (2023)	New campaign highlights Shein's alleged human rights abuses and unethical business practices	Media Article	4	https://www.just-style.com/uncategorized/shut-down-shein-campaign-launches-to-protect-americans/
Fashion Network (2022)	Shein says exposé claims partly untrue, doubles investment in conditions	Media Article	3	https://ww.fashionnetwork.com/news/Shein-says-expose-claims-partly-untrue-doubles-investm-in-conditions,1465136.html
Bloomberg (2022)	Laboratory Results Finds Shein Garment Samples Shipped to the U.S. Contain Cotton Sourced from Xinjiang	Media Article	7	https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2022-11-21/shein-s-cotton-clothes-tied-to-xinjiang-china-region-accused-of-forced-labor?embedded-checkout=true
Business Insider (2023)	Shein factory employees work 18 hours a day with no weekends earning just two cents per item, report finds	Media Article	5	https://www.businessinsider.com/shein-factory-workers-18-hour-shifts-paid-low-wages-report-2022-10?r=US&IR=T

Wired (2022)	Fast, Cheap, and Out of Control: Inside Shein’s Sudden Rise	Media Article	2	https://www.wired.com/story/fast-cheap-out-of-control-inside-rise-of-shein/
abc News (2022a)	Shein is the new darling of China's fast fashion industry — but at what cost?	Media Article	6	https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-04-05/shein-is-the-new-darling-of-china-s-fast-fashion-industry-but-at/100964524
Business of Fashion (2021)	Report: Shein Violating Labour Laws	Media Article	3	https://www.businessoffashion.com/news/retail/report-shein-violating-labour-laws/
Reuters (2021)	EXCLUSIVE Chinese retailer Shein lacks disclosures, made false statements about factories	Media Article	4	https://www.reuters.com/business/retail-consumer/exclusive-chinese-retailer-shein-lacks-disclosures-made-false-statements-about-2021-08-06/
Greenpeace (2024)	Taking the Shine off SHEIN	Environmental Agency	57	https://www.greenpeace.de/publikationen/S04261_Konsumwende_StudieEN_Mehr%20Schein.pdf
Yale Climate Connections (2024)	Shein is officially the biggest polluter in fast fashion	Environmental Agency	8	https://yaleclimateconnections.org/2024/09/shein-is-officially-the-biggest-polluter-in-fast-fashion-ai-is-making-things-worse/
Reuters (2025)	Shein to increase product safety testing after EU probe	Media Article	4	https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/shein-increase-product-safety-testing-after-eu-probe-2024-05-29/

International Consumer Protection And Enforcement Network (ICPEN) (2025)	European Commission and national authorities urge SHEIN to respect EU consumer protection laws	Government	4	https://icpen.org/news/1426
Financial Times (2025)	Shein hit with 40mn fine in France over misleading discounts	Media Article	5	https://www.ft.com/content/ef72f186-2a02-4c51-927d-2c01ddec05
Geneva Environment Network (2025)	Environmental Sustainability in the fashion industry	Environmental Agency	5	https://www.genevaenvironmentnetwork.org/resources/updates/sustainable-fashion/
David Suzuki Foundation (2023)	The environment costs of Fast Fashion	Environmental Agency	3	https://david Suzuki.org/living-green/the-environmental-cost-of-fast-fashion/
Supply Chain World (2025)	Fast-Fashion under fire: Shein accused of 'wilful ignorance'	Media Article	3	https://scw-mag.com/news/fast-fashion-under-fire-shein-accused-of-wilful-ignorance/
Total	-	-	333	-

Appendix III, OpenAI prompt example

LH my research is about legitimacy strategies in the fast fashion industry. i am looking for options to gain public documents to analyse for my research, what methods can i use to collect different document types

For research on legitimacy strategies in the fast fashion industry, you can access several types of public documents through various collection methods:

Corporate Documents

- Annual reports and 10-K filings from SEC's EDGAR database for US companies
- Corporate sustainability reports and CSR documents from company websites
- Investor presentations and earnings call transcripts
- Corporate governance documents and codes of conduct

Regulatory and Legal Documents

- Securities filings and proxy statements
- Patent applications and intellectual property filings
- Legal case documents from court databases (PACER in the US)
- Regulatory compliance reports and environmental impact assessments

Media and Communications

- Press releases archived on company websites and PR distribution services
- Social media content and corporate communications
- Industry trade publication articles
- News coverage and media statements

LH I found a new dimension in my analysis phase for the legitimacy strategy, do I need to cover this in chapter 2 already (theoretical background)?

The answer depends on what type of "dimension" you've discovered and how it relates to your existing theoretical framework. Here are some considerations:

Include in Chapter 2 if:

- It's a theoretical concept that provides foundational understanding for your analysis
- It's an established dimension from legitimacy theory literature that you initially overlooked
- It significantly changes or expands your theoretical framework
- Readers need this theoretical grounding to understand your later analysis
- It's a core component that connects to your research questions

Consider placing elsewhere if:

- It's an emergent theme that arose purely from your data analysis (better suited for findings/discussion)
- It's a sub-dimension or nuanced aspect of concepts already covered in Chapter 2
- It's more of an analytical insight than a theoretical foundation
- Including it would make Chapter 2 too lengthy or unfocused