Competitive Advantages in Fast Fashion: How Shein's Integrated Marketing Strategies Distinguish It from Competitors

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Abstract:

This study takes Shein as a case study to analyze its success in the global fast fashion industry and discusses the role of its marketing strategy. Shein's success stems from two core strategies: firstly, by leveraging Netflix marketing on social media, Shein has built a strong brand presence, especially among Generation Z consumers, by increasing brand awareness through collaboration with micro Netflix. Second, through data-driven product supply chain management, Shein leverages large-scale data analytics and artificial intelligence technology to quickly capture market trends and optimize product offerings, thereby increasing consumer satisfaction and brand loyalty. Despite Shein's significant growth in the market, the company is still facing environmental issues, labor disputes, and brand reputation risks. This study concludes that for Shein to achieve long-term sustainable growth in the future, it needs to further strengthen its focus on environmental protection and corporate social responsibility (CSR) beyond profitability to ensure that its competitive advantage is strengthened in the future.

Keywords: Shein; Marketing strategy; Influencer marketing; Data-driven product offering.

1. Introduction

Marketing strategy has a broad range of definitions. In a broader philosophical sense, marketing strategy impacts the business by instilling a market orientation approach throughout the entire organization and thus becomes the business philosophy [1]. From a narrower functional perspective, marketing strategy is simply the endeavor of the marketing function to develop a competitive advantage [2]. Hence, firms should have compatible and unique capabilities, core competencies, and resources in order to envision, anticipate, and make responses to the current and varying nature of customer preferences and demand in a more agile way than their competitors [3].

In this study, the discussion is focused on the functional perspective of marketing strategy, studying a particular business case as an exemplification of successful utilization of marketing strategies - Shein, an increasingly popular Chinese fast-fashion brand

rising at an incredibly rapid rate within the fashion industry. This study will seek to find out the role marketing strategy plays in helping Shein gain immense success in a relatively saturated industry in terms of targeting consumers, satisfying consumers' needs and wants, anticipating consumers' alterations in tastes, establishing customer loyalty, and therefore, gaining competitive advantage in a dominant market position.

2. Case Description

Shein is a globally renowned, highly influential B2C e-commerce platform that has redefined the landscape of fashion retail with consistently rising popularity and sales. Founded in China in 2008, Shein offers top-notch fashion items, encompassing women's and men's attire, kids' clothing, stylish accessories, and various trendy products and embellishments.

Shein is operating in a challenging landscape with various potential threats - the fast-fashion industry, which requires high levels of flexibility from market incumbents in defense of unexceptional changes. In terms of competitive pressure, Shein is experiencing threats and tension inflicted by dominant forces in the apparel market. This includes the biggest companies, such as Nike, with the highest brand value of $74,890 billion, and LVMH, with a market capitalization of 400 billion dollars, with supply chain issues and economic factors such as inflation continually disrupting the stability of the apparel industry. According to Porter's five force analysis, the competitive pressure Shein faces is not merely coming from fast-fashion market incumbents such as H&M and Zara, who are Shein's powerfully threatening competitors, but also traditional clothing and apparel brands with established and differentiated global brand images or localized market presence such as Adidas - seemingly suppressing Shein's survival and growth potential during first stages of market entry, especially with its majority of target audience being middle-income or lower-middle-income, universally possessing low levels of brand loyalty due to budget constraint[4]. Also, the effective bargaining power of consumers due to the high availability of alternatives and substitutes could further pressure Shein into potential price reduction, therefore generating declining revenue, less gross profit, and reduced retained profits after all other expenses are deducted. This, in turn, would constrain the growth opportunity of Shein, therefore restricting its market share.

Geo-politically, the 2018 trade war between China and the US, which persist into 2024, potentially reduces Shein's growth in the overseas market. With high tariffs inflating American consumer prices over Chinese clothing imports, tariffs on Chinese apparel and textiles could add about $4 billion to the cost of clothing for US consumers [5]. If the political tension deviated from the current de-escalation atmosphere towards decoupling, Shein would still be facing immense challenges, including limited sales, increased costs, supply chain delay, and deteriorated publicity.

There has also been an abundant amount of environmental concerns regarding the sustainability of Shein's products by selling apparel with a high turnover rate under rapid product and frequent replacement with a lack of recycling, Shein's environmental footprint in 2021 reached about 6.3 million tons of carbon dioxide equivalent [6], with its clothes mainly made from synthetic fabrics like polyester that are derived from fossil fuels, from which the rapid use of polyester and large consumption of oil made Shein accounted for the carbon dioxide emission approximate to 180 coal-fired power plants. Also, in an investigation by the University of Toronto, scientists found that a jacket for toddlers sold by Shein contains almost 20 times the amount of lead that Health Canada says is safe for children [7]. Moreover, with Shein's modeling and claiming on speed and efficiency, approximately 2,000 new models are launched in batches of 100-200, representing nearly 200,000 new items produced per day by Shein, where most of the clothes purchased will soon be disposed of, ending up in a landfill in the Global South, taking up 200+ years for the materials to decompose, leading to long-term pollution of the environment.

Socially, Shein has been accused by the Swiss non-profit organization Public Eye of violating labor laws in China with operations in unsafe and unhealthy conditions with workers receiving payments below minimum wage; in 2022, the French fined Shein 1.5 million euros for misleading consumers about the environmental impact of its products; in the US, it has been sued by several brands for alleged copyright and trademark infringement [8]. Moreover, the research by Kollbrunner found out that Shein established its supplier factory in a small residual building in Nancun village, a neighborhood in the district of Panyu, Guangzhou [9]. The production sites have bags of clothes blocking the corridors and stairways with no emergency exits, and the workers are forced to work 75 hours per week, with over 100 employees not issued employment contracts. This is a blatant violation of Chinese labor law, which explicitly stresses that a working hour can be comprised of a maximum workweek of 44 hours, overtime cannot surpass 36 hours per month, and workers must have at least one day off per week [10].

From the economic perspective, when it came to the recession stage, such as the most recent one induced by Covid-19 in February 2020, where unemployment soared to 14.8% in the U.S. - greater than its highest during the

Great Recession [11], consumer spending in the second quarter of 2020 declined to nearly -10% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics) and retail sales of clothing became 43.5% down the prior year [12], with consumption in Chinese apparel industry declining by 40-50% [13].

However, Shein successfully stood out in this sluggish trend. Compared to the overall US apparel and footwear market, whose growth rate has descended by over 20%, Shein's sales dramatically grew by 150%, with its retail sales price reaching approximately $3200 million in 2021, defeating its powerful competitors - Zara and H&M, with Shein's market share being 23.2 % higher than the former and 13.1% higher than the latter in 2022, becoming firm withholding largest market share in the fast fashion industry.

From 2020 to 2023, the annual number of Shein users has grown exponentially from 124.43M to 261.94M, in which the average Shein customer has an annual income of $63,500 and spends an average of $100 on women's clothing. With 88.8 million active shoppers, it generated an estimated $32.5 billion in revenue in 2023, a 43% increase on the $22.7 billion it made in 2022 [14], with its profits doubling in 2023 to over $2 billion [15]. Globally, Shein will be one of the highest-valued unicorn companies in 2024. June 1, 2023, its average price hikes in the last year exceeded powerful rivals ZARA and H&M, enabling it to enjoy the lucrative fast-fashion market share of 50% in the US, with its expected revenue hitting $50 billion in 2024 after its IPO [16].

One may wonder what the invisible propelling forces behind Shein's colossal success in the volatile and unpredictable fast-fashion industry with intense competitive pressure and a high risk of gaining damaged publicity under the trend of sustainable development incurring extra cost. Shein's success is especially questionable in regard to the considerable level of CSI it committed and the lawsuits it received, which have not only weakened its consumer base of 262 million but are incapable of stopping Shein from increasing its prices by as much as a third on core products in June 2024 [17]. Apart from its cross-border e-commerce model, which has been criticized as environmentally costly from a different spectrum of efficiency and uniqueness, its fast response towards demand from consumers of all ages, where the excessive production incurred a huge burden over the UN's sustainable development aim and utilization of low-cost labor force which increases gross profit yet unethical, the ultimate and most important factor contributing to Shein's outstanding performance and prevalence over competitors could be considered as its marketing strategy. This is because it is Shein's marketing approaches that beautified its unethical CSI and sacrifice of the sake of natural resources in pursuit of concreting its image as a speedy and productive product provider, which greatly distinguished it from its competitors with a lower product launching frequency and relatively inefficient distribution channel.

3. Marketing Strategy Analysis

Unquestionably, Shein's notable virality is inseparable from its marketing success in social media, which establishes its image as an e-commerce platform exporting products all around the globe, capturing the tastes and preferences of overseas consumers without deliberate alterations aligning cultural context and promoting its agile response to the cutting-edge fashion trend and maintaining high levels of customer loyalty of Shein.

Quantitatively, Shein's app recorded over 261.9 million downloads in 2023, with more than 53 million users worldwide. Its annual revenue surged to $22.7 billion in 2022, up from $16 bn in 2021. Moreover, its hashtag on Tiktok has generated over 84.4 billion views, with its near-break-even performance in 2022 turning around in 2023 to a recorded profit, gaining an online revenue of $48.2 bn by 2024 [18]. The marketing strategies contributing to Shein's considerable achievements are diverse, and this study seeks to examine the two main strategies of Shein: influencer marketing and data-driven product offerings.

3.1 Online Influencer Marketing

In order to capture the attention of a wider potential target audience, especially the Gen Z population whose awareness towards the brand powerfully revolves at 83% in the US, among which Shein's 30.65% of customers concentrate at ages of 25-34, with the age of 18-24 accounting for 17.84%. According to the data from BBC, Gen Z represents an estimated $450 bn in spending power across the world, and their economic influence is only expanding as they approach closer towards their adulthood. Experts claim that Gen Zers possess a high propensity to the consumer instead of saving with a deeply entrenched attitude of "you-only-live-once" towards money, desensitizing them from the rising cost of necessities, sky-high interest rates, depleted savings, and grinding inflation [19]. In order to maintain the loyalty of Gen Z customers whose purchasing power is unshakably high, among which 64% of them indicated that they would pay more to shop with brands they're loyal to [20], prudently choosing promotional channel is vital for Shein to raise awareness for its brand amidst this age group to gain increased and stabilized sales.

As a result, according to the 2021 Consumer Culture Report, Shein adopted influencer marketing as its main tactic

since 47% of Gen Z users use social media as inspiration for their shopping, and 11% of them consider influencers as their most trusted source for product recommendations. Shein's influencer marketing first revolved around its collaborations with micro-influencers on various social media platforms, including TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram. By delivering these influencers complementary products every month with the app's referral sales partially sending commission up to 10-20%, Shein effectively established a solidly stable collaborating mechanism with micro-influencers across the globe, with the retribution being their products acquiring promotion by content creators in the form of short videos including unboxing video, outfit sharing and clothing sharing on Tiktok, where haul videos of micro-influencers purchases under the hashtag "#Shein" gained 96.2 billion views, making it the most-mentioned brand on Tiktok by 134,000 influencers [21]. On YouTube, the interactive fitting video of the bloggers provided a gamified experience, allowing the shoppers to feel self-satisfied by finding out the perfect outfit style for others and, therefore, being incentivized to make a purchase. Similarly, by posting pictures of models with diverse body shapes and weights, Shein's official account on Instagram gained 33.5 million followers up to June 2024 [22].

The virality bred by collaboration with microinfluencers could be generalizable explained by the research findings of Jin et al., consumers exposed to Instagram celebrity's brand posts perceive the source to be more trustworthy, with the depiction of higher levels of favorability towards the endorsed brand, feeling the stronger social presence and portraying a high level of envy of the source than those consumers exposed to traditional celebrity's brand posts [23]. This effectively justified Shein's concentrated collaboration with popular figures on social media instead of launching massive celebrity endorsement, with the former evoking high arousal emotions, such as envy towards the immaculate appearance of influencers constructed by Photoshop, therefore inducing anxiety among typical consumers of the content, leading to actual-ideal self-discrepancy yet potently stimulating sharing of information about the brand [24]. Moreover, according to the theory of social influence, defined as the case when individuals change their behaviors under the influence of others [25], the widespread demonstrations of purchases of Shein's apparel by its existing consumers could effectively influence perspectives of potential consumers browsing over the contents towards Shein, possibly regarding the brand as attractively practical and popular, therefore imitating the purchasing behavior of the micro-influencers and increasing sales of Shein. This is proven by the research of Peng et al., ascribing viral marketing, online recommendation, or advertising as all benefit from social influence by qual-

itatively and quantitatively measuring the influence of individuals on others, with their utilization of an evaluation model on social influence by using information entropy to reveal the relationship between social interactions and the strength of social influence, discovering a positive correlation between the two variables, which can be related to the fact phenomenon that the more Shein's existing and potential customers interact with each other, either directly or indirectly, the more susceptible they're towards each others' purchasing decision, which facilitates the establishment of Shein's credibility.

In order to maintain positive publicity and consistent propagation of its brand, Shein is endeavoring to maintain a healthy collaboration relationship with micro-influencers. To achieve this, Shein empowers them to identify as affiliates of the brand, with commission on sales directed to Shein.com. In return, by telling stories and narratives promoting Shein's vast array of trendy apparel and accessories, the micro-influencers will reach a virtuous cycle with Shein by mutually contributing to the interests of one another. These affiliated micro-influencers are then provided with unique tracking links that allow Shein to withhold the transparency of the traffic and sales originating from their promotional activities, ensuring that rewards given to the affiliates are justly endowed and correspond to their level of performance. Furthermore, this tracking link enables Shein to optimize marketing strategies by aiding the affiliates with seasonal campaigns and eye-catching advertisements, which maximizes potential sales for the brand [26]. Moreover, in order to backlash the negative reputation of Shein as "exploitative and careless" for its unethical factory operation - forcing the employees to work 75 hours per week with wages being less than $20 per week, Shein organized a factory trip for 6 influencers [27]. By presenting Shein's factories as comfortably well-supplied with various equipment and workers telling their working hours to be only 6-8 hours per day, Shein successfully reversed the public opinion, even with the authenticity of this trip being questionable [28].

In this way, Shein successfully captured the high ground of social media marketing, modeling persistent collaboration relationships with major influencers. However, only 44% and 37% of Shein's collaborations on Instagram and TikTok, respectively, were transitory one-offs [21].

3.2 Data-driver Products Offerings

Apart from its ingeniously cunning exploitation of online influencer marketing, Shein's marketing success could also be attributed to its trend-driven product offering strategy, which largely aligns with its digital presence and e-commerce business model.

Firstly, Shein achieves a timely response to customers' altering tastes and anticipates market changes by leveraging its data-science sophistication. Through a Large Scale Automated Testing and Reordering (LATR) System, Shein is able to track customer engagement with its new products, assess performance across its thousands of new products, automatically reorder products gaining the highest level of satisfaction while also spot overarching fashion trends [29]. By analyzing consumer behavior, preferences, and consumption patterns, Shein optimizes its product offerings and marketing tactics to align with evolving market trends. This effectively enhanced the relevance of its product offerings and promotional activities, including discounts, flash sales, and limited-time discounts, which, as claimed by Cialdni [30], would powerfully motivate consumers to make instant purchasing decisions after identifying the underlying scarcity and urgency, hence increasing the sales volume.

This effectiveness is further strengthened by Shein's application of a diverse range of Search Engine Optimization techniques. For example, Shein optimizes its product titles, descriptions, meta tags, and headers with relevant keywords that potential customers are likely to search for, including specific clothing items and popular brands, such as long-tail keywords like "affordable summer dresses for women", capturing more specific search queries and drive targeted traffic through Keyword Optimization; technical SEO ensuring speedy loading of its website and seamless website interface fitting all screen sizes, which ensures optimization of user experiences [31]. Acquiring high-quality backlinks from authoritative sources such as well-known fashion blogs, industry websites, and influencers to help improve domain authority and search engine rankings; localized SEO creating localized content suiting regional fashion trends and preferences; clear site navigation and a user-friendly interface making it easy for visitors to find products and information, with "Google My Business" being integrated to improve local search visibility in regions where physical stores or distribution centers are located, localized marketing is especially powerful in entrenching a deep connection between the brand and its consumers on a more personal level, which helps with improving its penetration in the global market [32, 33]. As a result of elevated awareness towards the brand Shein with encouraged purchases, Shein successfully gained abundant User-Generated Content (UGC), including reviews and testimonials, organic UGC (real-life customer share of their own accord), social media content including blog posts, photos and videos to raise its credibility and trustworthiness in front of the wider potential customer population. This could be viewed as Shein's nimble capitalization of the social-proof phenomenon,

which, argued by Goh, Heng, & Lin to be a verification of UGC's ability to foster a sense of community, enhancing brand credibility and drive consumer engagement [34]. Furthermore, the artificial intelligence algorithms utilized by Shein also allow it to deliver highly tailored onsite experiences for each visitor, with its website interface being highly engaging and encouraging visitors to play a prize draw and get bigger discounts, which could incentivize purchasing behavior. By stimulating consumers "treasure hunt" engagement towards the compellingly trendy new products, Shein successfully retained a large group of loyal customers who are empowered with a sense of discovery, excitement, and even a sense of expectation towards the brand's release of new product range, from which the percentage of its loyal customer has reached around 86% in the US [35]. As a result, Shein's engaging content creation not only maintained consumers' interest but further, The promotional effect of Shein's interactive digital platform could be exemplified by Lemon and Verhoef, whose claim proves interactive features to be effective in improving customer satisfaction and increasing engagement by providing personalized shopping experiences [36].

Therefore, from the data-driven customized product offering process, in which customer loyalty is maintained through precise anticipation of market changes and timely response to consumers' changing tastes and demands, SEO increases exposure and visibility of the brand, thus spurring UGC and engaging content induced by interactive figures on the digital platform, Shein successfully stood out from its competitors including apparel giant like ZARA, whose inflexibly centralized design and production cycle, accompanied by its strong reliance on in-store feedback and sales data to adjust its collections, is greatly outpaced by Shein's decentralized model supported by global suppliers and real-time algorithmic analytics and UGCs from social media to respond swiftly to consumer trends and demands.

4. Conclusion

Overall, Shein's exponential growth rate could be viewed as a product of its flexible and adept leverage of various marketing strategies that evolve around social influence theory and the phenomenon of social proof, with technology being the core component assisting the fulfillment of the brand's vision and purposes. Even though Shein has become the dominating leader in the global fashion industry and apparel market, there are still risks and problems awaiting its aboveboard and forthright resolution. For example, with advocating sustainable development being the main goals and topics of GenZ nowadays, it is urgently essential for Shein to integrate an environmentally friend-

ly production method and efficient disposal of raw material into its operation process, with possible compromise needed to prioritize the future development of social and public welfare beyond its private benefit. Also, it is necessary for Shein to act in accordance with corporate ethics in strict compliance with labor legislation and regulations not only to keep a positive image with reduced scandals but also to avoid legal issues, penalties, lawsuits, and demoralization following high labor turnover. Apart from profit maximization, Shein should also align its operational theme with corporate social responsibility to ensure a long-term value creation and virtuous development cycle for the business.

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