By Elizabeth O’Keefe

Shein is currently one of the world’s most popular fast fashion chains. Consumers can purchase their goods at extremely affordable prices, which is incredibly attractive, especially for consumers that may not want to spend the extra money on more expensive clothing items.

However, Shein’s cheap deals come at an ethical price. Not only does their goods' production affect the environment, but they also affect their workers. People consuming these products online do not consider the physical and mental tortures these people face daily. According to Public Eye a Swiss advocacy group who discovered in 2021 that many of Shein’s workers in some factories are forced to work 75-hour weeks producing garments for the public. Many of these workers are working in unsafe workshops which lack the proper safety protocols and in many cases windows! I cannot comprehend what it must be like to work in these conditions all while trying to make the latest fashion trends.

Shein is not only exploiting their workers, but they are also exploiting the Environment. Fast fashion brands have been known for creating excessive amounts of textile waste, as many consumers want to purchase the latest fashion trends and when they are no more, they toss them away sending the garments to their inevitable future in a land fill or gracing the charity shop shelves! It is estimated that around 85% of textiles end up in landfills each year. Shein plays a significant role contributing to this disaster, which is a debt that will take a long time to pay off, as it is estimated that it takes up to 200+ years for the materials to decompose.

The chemical dyes used to turn these discardable items into consumer worthy goods come at a price as well. They not only pollute our water sources but also have a long-term effect on aquatic life. For instance, a test that was carried out by Greenpeace in Germany discovered that there are many hazardous chemicals that break EU regularity limits which have been found in many of Shein’s garments. Some of these items include clothing and shoes for men, women, and children! We as consumers should not have to worry about wearing hazardous chemicals on our bodies. According to an investigation carried out by the University of Toronto, scientists found that a jacket from Shein for toddlers contained almost 20 times the amount of lead that Health Canada states is safe for children. These cheap garments unfortunately come at a possible life-threatening price.

Even though Shein decimates the Environment in so many unmanageable ways, people continue to purchase their goods from the shady company. The question is do these consumers know about the controversies and simply choose to ignore them or do people simply have no other cheaper options to buy their clothing? While fast fashion can be a cheaper option for many people with lower incomes, the ever-growing industry keeps these consumers trapped in a vicious cycle known as the Boots theory. This theory states that when people purchase a lot of cheaper clothing items, they end up spending more money than they intend to overtime as these goods will not last in the long run.

There are many ways for people to shop sustainably that do not cost a fortune. For instance, consumers can shop around for their clothing in their local charity shops where they can find high quality clothes for such low prices. Dermot McGilloway retail development manager with the St. Vincent de Paul said, “All kinds of people are coming through the front doors of our shops at the moment.” Many young consumers want to find trendy items for less that they may not find online. There is a very individualistic appeal towards the new charity shopping ‘trend.’ However, many consumers are not shopping in charity shops for fashion, they simply have no other financial options. As Dermot stated “Shops are reporting the return of many low-income families trying to meet their basic and essential needs.” Charity shops not only provide affordable prices, but they also help to restore items that may have been sent to land fields and the profits go to charity instead of a massive corporation like Shein.

To conclude consumers, have a responsibility to find other ways to shop around for their goods ethically, this gives us power over the major Fast Fashion chains such as Shein.