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## **Fast Fashion, Performativity, & Corporate Social Responsibility**

Analyzing SHEIN's Statements on Initiatives against

Labour Exploitation in their Supply Chains

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# Abstract

In recent years, there has been an increased amount of attention to issues related to the garment sector along with the rise of fast fashion. With an increased demand for clothes, it begs the question: how is this impacting those making the garments? The practice of externalization of labour in the garment industry leads to sub-contracts made by suppliers, making the corporation potentially unaware of where their supply is made, and who is involved in their production. As an aftermath of the Rana Plaza factory collapse in 2013, there has been an increased attention to ensuring that there is responsibility on the employers regarding workers' rights such as safety issues, working hours and wages, ensuring that modern slavery does not take place. Efforts have been made to ensure that there are principles in place in handling workers' rights in the global economy, leading to the rise of corporate social responsibility – a initiative-based system used by businesses with the purpose of ensuring a transparent and efficient system to detect and remedy potential human rights abuses. In the time of fast fashion, brands such as SHEIN have been subject to allegations of misconduct in their supply chains. This study uses a document analysis and a critical theoretical framework focused on the concept of performativity to analyze SHEIN's statements on sustainability and supply chain transparency. The central question in this research is how corporate social responsibility is used to create an identity that is socially acceptable, with the intention of seeing if corporate social responsibility can be used as a performative tool for corporations such as SHEIN to build an image to consumers of being responsible.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility, garment industry, labour rights, performativity, sustainability, SHEIN, workers' rights

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# Foreword

This thesis assumes some knowledge on international law and globalization, such as an understanding of the UN systems and documents. It also assumes some knowledge on the topic of social media and popular culture. A list of relevant abbreviations is included for an easier reading of the thesis.

Drammen, 15.05.2024

Tuva Oksnes



# List of Abbreviations

CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
ILO	International Labour Organization
MNC	Multinational Corporation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OECD	The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
TNC	Transnational Corporation
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN	United Nations
UNGP	United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights; I will also be referring to these as the ‘guiding principles’

# 1 Introduction

Our clothes are a part of our identity. It is a way for one to express oneself. And it is a way for us to show off our social class. Clothing has become a signifying factor into the social status of others. Either you fit in, or you do not. With the last few years being focused on what has been dubbed “micro trends”, this issue has become more prevalent. Micro trends are trends that last for a short period of time, before being considered un-trendy. The pace of specific clothing styles and colours being in high demand for a short period of time has caused the industry to mass produce trendy items on scales that we have not yet seen. In recent years, there has been an increased amount of attention to issues related to the garment sector along with the rise of fast- and ultra-fast fashion. Labour exploitation is inherent in the global economy and is widespread in various sectors such as the garment industry (LeBaron, 2020). The main concerns being its contribution to climate change as well as the real cost of cheaply and quickly produced clothing – the conditions of those making them. Workers’ rights have been an area of interest of mine since I took a sociology of work and technology course in my bachelor's and with the increased number of reports of unsafe and unhealthy working conditions along with the concern over quality of living for workers, I knew I wanted to focus on this for my thesis. The issues regarding working conditions related to the garment industry have existed for a long time. I remember being made aware of it in middle school, when the Rana Plaza building collapse made headlines and people advocated for boycotts of brands connected to the factory. As I am writing this thesis, I am painfully aware of the lack of real progress in ensuring that workers have safe spaces to work in and are compensated fairly for their work.

With the historical backdrop of the labour movement in the textile and garment industries and the heightened consumption we are currently witnessing with the rise of fast fashion, this study is highly relevant to discuss current societal issues. In July 2022, the Norwegian Transparency Act was adopted by the Norwegian government with the intention of improving the relationship consumers have with businesses by providing them with information on the business’ practice in order to make an informed decision (Forbrukertilsynet, 2024). This clearly marks a shift in the consumer-corporate relationship in my local context of Norway, as it demonstrates the pressure that is currently rising on brands to have information available for consumers. In this thesis I am writing on issues related to working conditions in the global sector, focusing on industry-led initiatives falling under the umbrella category of corporate social responsibility (CSR). Much of the work that has been done to make changes within the

industry can be traced to the concept of CSR, however, my argument in this text will be that the concept of responsibility is not enough – we need accountability to actually make changes that are beneficial to workers. This thesis is using a theoretical framework based on critical theory and social constructionism to analyze the role of CSR and its effects on workers' rights in the global economy. My main theory is that of performativity, which helps highlight the ways in which organizations are able to not take accountability but focus on how they appear to consumers. To see how this works in practice, I am employing the example of the fast-fashion giant SHEIN (pronounced she-in). Looking at documents from their retail website stating their intentions regarding business practice and CSR along with data showing concerns of exploitation in practice, I will analyze how these principles are reflected in reality.

## 1.1 Choice of terminology

I want to address two choices of terminology. Firstly, to get into the issue of labour exploitation in the fashion industry, I will start by laying some groundwork on what this industry is and what issues it has faced over the years. I first want to start with the term 'garment industry' which is my preferred term when discussing this industry. While I do mention and work with sources that use terms such as 'textile industry' and 'fashion industry,' I find garment industry to be a more accurate term for what I am discussing. The word 'textile' is a broad term, as it refers to textiles used in furniture, accessories and other goods that are made of or with fabric. The term 'fashion' is a word that is often associated with mass consumerism, as well as conspicuous consumption, while what I am discussing in clothing in general. Fashion can be used to describe styles and trends, and, similar to the word textile, can describe different items of clothing, footwear, and accessories. This is why this term is used, particularly as it relates to 'fast fashion' which is a central concept to my thesis, as this is the system in which the conditions that I am discussing are present. I will still be using these terms interchangeably to some degree, however, as the sources I am using differ in their use of terms, and because I am discussing the garment industry in the context of 'fast fashion', which are parts of why the industry leads to worker exploitation. I will discuss this connection further in my literature review, as I will be discussing the rise of fast fashion in terms of its effects on workers' rights.

Secondly, I want to address the term 'modern slavery'. This is a contested term in its use for exploitation and other significant labour issues, as using incorrect or insufficient terminology can be harmful to the discussion on these issues (LeBaron2020). LeBaron argues

that the wide usage of the term ‘modern slavery’ is incorrect when discussing labour issues, both because modern slavery covers many issues other than labour and because labour exploitation needs to be named in the process of eradicating it as one may otherwise make progress that can be argued to not apply to labour exploitation (LeBaron, 2020). The fear is that this term can be understood as a ‘catch-all’ phrase that does not signify the deep injustices that workers face with issues related to labour exploitation, which in itself is a term that covers many forms of exploitations. LeBaron argues that the use of the term modern slavery sells into the imaginary idea that forced is labour being promoted by criminals, rather than it being a systemic issue. Therefore, she further argues that the use of the term modern slavery can be counterproductive as businesses claim they are combating modern slavery instead of specifying the labour exploitation that is relevant to them, making them appear as if they are doing important work in promoting human rights while, in actuality, not adequately addressing pressing issues of exploitation in their supply chains (LeBaron, 2020). Based on these points, I will be addressing labour exploitation as such, and will refrain from using the term modern slavery.

### **1.3 Positionality, intersectionality & nuance**

I want to acknowledge the many other issues that intersect with labour rights issues in the garment sector. Firstly, because there are many other factors for why workers, particularly in the Global South, are exploited, and secondly because the exploitation of workers is intertwined with the exploitation of the planet. I cannot delve into these and other pressing issues in this study, however, I want to briefly discuss them as they are deserving of a great amount of attention and should be considered when discussing the garment industry. Given these broad issues and the fact that these centre people in situations where they are exploited and living and working under poor conditions, it is important for me to acknowledge my position as a researcher on this matter. First, I want to acknowledge the privilege I have to be able to study and write about socio-economic issues. I strive to ensure that this privilege does not obstruct my views as a researcher, and that I am using information that includes the perspectives of workers.

Another important note on here is on the topic of class. It is “important to demonize the system of consumption rather than the people who have less” as this is particularly pertinent in the discussion on exploitation, as buying garments in itself is not what causes the human rights

abuses that are happening in various supply chains (Barber, 2021, p. 157). I therefore want to focus on the corporation and not the consumers, as I want to emphasize that they are the ones with the responsibility to ensure that workers are protected. It is also important for me to point out the fact that the problems I am discussing in this text is not limited to a ‘class’ divide but is a culmination of social factors such as class and race, which has a historic background in imperialism and colonialism. Critical scholarship on globalization such as studies on the global economy, has a long tradition in the social sciences and humanities (Frezzo, 2010). It is important to note that there is a distinction between the Global North and the Global South. Most of the production of clothing is done in the Global South while most consumers, by which I mean those who frequently purchase new clothes, are in the Global North (Hoskins, 2022). This divide is tied to colonialism (Barber, 2021). As Hoskins writes, however, there is nuance to this statement, as what we normally think of as the Global North/South divide is more complex than this, with an increase in poverty in the Global North and with people living well in the Global South (Hoskins, 2022). It is important to not erase any of this nuance, while still using the widely accepted terms for Global North and Global South, as these are helpful categories in explaining the effects of colonialism and globalization. Barber also warns against the use of the terms ‘third world countries’ and ‘developing countries’, arguing that these terms do not adequately represent the reason why there is a distinction, that they are offensive, and that they are “wrapped up in the narrative of white saviourism” (2021, p. 39).

While I am not explicitly studying the gender aspect of this topic, it is important to note that an estimated 80% of the workers within the garment/textile industry are women (Labour Behind the Label, 2024). The working conditions in the garment industry is therefore also a feminist issue. I want to acknowledge the fact that women have historically been doing informal work and that the exploitation that I am writing about in this thesis are of an intersectional character, and I want to acknowledge this relationship. Women make up the majority of workers in the sectors that are rapidly growing, and due to the historical gender discrimination as well as the number of women available to work, women are subjected to lower pay scales than men (Braverman, 1998). While studying workers’ rights, particularly in the garment industry with majority of the production taking place in the Global South, I want to acknowledge that this is a feminist issue. However, due to the limitations of my study, I will not directly look into the experiences of women in this text. Instead, I will be presenting the situation as it presents itself for all workers as a group.

Another issue that aligns with the garment industry is climate change. While workers are struggling to make ends meet, the impact of the industry on the climate is also an issue I want to address in this section. Not only is the climate affected by the overconsumption, due to issues such as exploitation of materials, but chemicals used to make clothes are also damaging the surrounding nature of factories. Toxic wastewater, specifically tied to the process of dyeing textiles is causing an extreme stress on the environment, destroying river ecosystems and other natural water sources which in turn also affects the agricultural industry, affecting people in surrounding areas (Hoskins, 2022). Additionally, the amount of waste produced by the garment industry is rising. Masses of clothing are discarded as fashion trends come and go, and an estimated 85% of textiles are thrown away each year (Maiti, 2024). Much of this ends up in the Global South, with places like Ghana having to clean up their beaches which are overfilled with pieces of clothing (Barber, 2021). The fashion industry is also an animal rights issue. While natural fibers such as wool are collected from animals that are selectively bred to be sheared due to a long tradition of animal husbandry, there are ethical dilemmas concerning leather and fur (Maiti, 2024). Before moving on to discuss the issue of labour rights in the garment industry, it is important to me to note that if we are to fix any of these issues, we need to look at the whole picture. As Audrey Lorde once said: “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives” (as cited in Hoskins, 2022, p. 12). The list that I have provided is not exclusive, yet it sheds light on the complexity of the ethical questions surrounding the garment industry. One cannot expect to fix labour rights issues without looking at all other aspects as these are intertwined. However, for the sake of this study, I am limited in what I am able to write about. I therefore want to first acknowledge the intricate parts of the larger issue, before going into one of the many parts of this system: workers’ rights in the garment industry.

## **1.4 Structure of thesis**

In this thesis, there are seven chapters. Chapter 1 is the introduction, in which I am situating my thesis as well as provide information useful for the reader both logistically but also in terms of the topic overall. Chapter 2 is my background and literature review, which I have chosen to write as a primer on the subject as well as provide some insights to previous research. It therefore deals with not only previous literature on the topic but is meant to incorporate many of the main themes that are relevant to, and in many ways constitute, the underlying issues related to my topic, such as fast fashion and workers’ rights and how these are relevant to

SHEIN, which is the brand that I will analyze. The next chapter, chapter 3, is my theoretical framework. In this section, I am discussing relevant theoretical foundations for my analysis, as well as presenting my main theoretical framework: performativity. This is also where I present the concept of CSR, as this is the main underlying idea of my thesis and is part of how I will evaluate the documents in my analysis. In chapter 4, I am discussing my research method and relevant issues that informs how I do my analysis and discussion. This includes defining document analysis, discussing my choice of documents, and looking at limitations and challenges with how I have chosen to conduct this research. In chapter 5, I am conducting my analysis. I have structured this section based thematically, with an overall view at the end. In chapter 6, I am discussing my findings and bringing these into a bigger debate on the topic in general using my theoretical framework and other relevant information previously laid out. I will then be concluding my thesis in chapter 7.

## **1.5 Objective & research questions**

To understand how and why workers in the garment industry are exploited it is crucial that I look into the concept of corporate social responsibility and how this translates to reality. To further understand the scope of responsibility for corporations within the garment industry when it comes to their workers, I want to explore how corporations can claim responsibility and how this translates to their supply chains. I will be conducting my case study on SHEIN, looking at documents stating their CSR claims and looking at data concerning how SHEIN operates. I will be conducting my research keeping in mind the following questions:

1. How are SHEIN's intentions related to corporate social responsibility communicated to their customers and to what degree do these provide customers with adequate information on the circumstances surrounding the making of their garments?
2. Does SHEIN's intentions of corporate social responsibility turn into accountability, or do these initiatives as they are described in their documents fail to be translated into action and thereby become performative?

# 2 Background & Literature Review

In this section of my thesis, I will go through the main points that apply to the understanding of how human rights, labour rights, and the realization of these are connected and what may hinder this. To do this, I will be discussing relevant literature on the sociological, legal, and historic perspective on labour issues and how these tie in with the textile industry. I will explore the existing work that discusses the relevant themes for my thesis, laying down the background for the study and explaining relevant concepts such as systemic issues in the garment industry and fast fashion. I will discuss the garment industry and the issues that are relevant, including situating fast fashion and the brand SHEIN. I will also briefly discuss the background for the main theme of this study, which is corporate social responsibility.

## 2.1 International law and its shortcomings

Because this study deals with corporate social responsibility (CSR), I want to go through the foundation of how this policy framework came to be. To do that, I need to discuss international law as it pertains to my topic. International law is a socially constructed concept, as it is human made and serves as the main and unquestioned framework in which global cooperation is being done. It is therefore a framework that is essential in looking into human rights and potential abuses. It serves a purpose, for a reason. It is therefore imperative to get an understanding of what legal obligations corporations such as SHEIN have. Most applicable for this is to look at the concepts of the UN Guiding Principles of Business and Human Rights (UNGPR), and CSR as these are central to understanding how the industry is working in solving its history of worker exploitation. These concepts lay the foundation of the rhetoric being used, and the stages within the industry that I am concerned about in this study. To get an understanding of international law that helps explain the concepts that I will be analyzing in this research, such as workers' rights, I will be going over the basic components of international law, such as their enforceability. After this, I will briefly discuss the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and The OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business Conduct.

With a focus on labour related issues, the International Labour Organization is the UN body that is most applicable to look at, as they are the overarching UN organization looking at labour rights and working on issues related to the workplace. With attention to social and



economic rights, individuals are expected to have an adequate living, and in situations of work are expected to work in just and favorable conditions, according to the Universal Declaration of Human rights (United Nations, 1948). Further, international human rights law “codifies the expectation that it is the duty of states to co-operate internationally in order” for everyone to realize their rights in practice (Nash, 2015, p. 90). After much pressure to ensure safe and healthy working conditions (OHCHR, 2019), this inclusion was added to ILO’s framework during the 110th session of the International Labour Conference in June 2022 (ILO, n.d.). The fashion industry is not new to claims of illegal and unsafe working conditions and has for years been criticized for the lack of protection of its workers, as the structure of apparel making is based on making use of sweatshops in order to produce garments in a cheap way, leaving workers underpaid and often working in unsafe conditions (Powell, 2014). This is why it is important to look at how human rights interact with labour rights, and how these relate to the garment industry.

### **2.1.1 The human rights system & its criticisms**

Long before the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was written, and human rights as we know them today were constructed, social rights have been a highly discussed issue, specifically concerning topics regarding equality such as economic and social rights (Moyn, 2019). There are many critiques and questions surrounding human rights, its inception, universality and its applicability and peoples’ possibility to realize their human rights. Many of these are interesting when discussing business initiatives such as CSR. Human rights are hard to enforce, as there are no instruments that ensure that states who violate them are held accountable as decisions are not legally binding. Human rights are considered to be “moral claims to justice” and “are not the same as legal rights,” as the UN has no practical ability of enforcing them other than bureaucratic procedures (Nash, 2015, p. 5). This is one of the main concerns regarding human rights, the fact that they are not enforceable and therefore hard to claim, despite the declaration itself stating that “[a]ll human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” (United Nations, 1948). It is important to note in the discussion of human rights and international law is the notion of ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ law. This is significant as it refers to how states, and thereby corporations operating within these, operate according to international law. The idea of CSR is tied to what is considered ‘soft law’, understood as law that is not legally binding (Nash, 2015). This is similar to other systems, such as principles set

down by the UN ‘Global Compact’, which purpose is to ensure that human rights are upheld by corporations (Nash, 2015). The lack of legally binding instruments has been heavily criticized, as guidelines for corporations therefore are not, in a practical sense, mandatory and corporations can therefore argue that they are complying to certain guidelines to their best ability without having any enforcement mechanism checking how this translates to reality (Nash, 2015). Similarly, the UN Guiding Principles of Business and Human Rights, as well as the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business Conduct have faced criticism for their lack of enforceability.

As this study relates to SHEIN, which is a multinational corporation, it is important to emphasize the challenges that come with both private companies and labour in general across state borders. The reason why it is important to address trans- and multinational corporations is due to the importance of statehood regarding international law. There is a colonial backdrop for the current systemic issues relating to the treatment of workers in the Global South (Barber, 2021). And while there are systems in place that binds a corporation to a nationality (Clapham, 2013), Nash argues that transnational corporations are a part of this systemic injustice, as they “are designed to take advantage of inequalities that they also produce” (2015, p. 91). For a long time, there has been a growing concern over big trans- and multinational corporations accumulating mass amounts of wealth and power while not being subject to national and international regulations (Donnelly & Whelan, 2020). In other words, the systems in place do not adequately ensure equality across borders, which often disproportionately affects people in the Global South. How these structures exist is inherently oppressive and allows for human rights violations to happen. Clapham (2013) argues that the way that international corporations are designed, with for example a headquarters in one state, with their operations in other states, needs to be further examined as this makes it hard to adequately address human rights violations that happen outside of where a corporation operates due to all the different legal systems. In fact, the corporation may not be affected in cases regarding labour exploitation, although a local facility may be (Clapham, 2013). LeBaron further argues that the existence of labour exploitation is a well-known issue, and that it is a direct result of how the global supply chains are designed (2020). Therefore, these systems need to be addressed in order for corporations to properly be responsible for their business practices, and for local exploitations to be treated as a symptom of a greater systemic issue.

There is a consensus that historically and geographically, human rights are not accessible to all (Frezzo, 2015). Many critics state that human rights is a Eurocentric concept

that does not effectively address different circumstances and does not represent the multitude of cultures and social systems in the world and their differences. Merry (2006) writes that while the criticism of human rights is not to be dismissed, “they are some of the only tools available to struggle for rights of the disenfranchised” (Merry, 2006, p. 49). It is therefore important to note that while the origin and scope of the human rights system may be imperfect, it lays out ways that do make a difference. It is worth noting, however, that there is a difference in who is and who is not able to realize their human rights. Efforts have been made to ensure that there are mechanisms in place to help in respecting human rights. The standard for the creation of duties falls on states, which is why organizations such as the ILO focus on governments in upholding them (Ratner, 2001). However, critics claim that if a corporation can accept duties and rights to some degree in some areas, there should not be any difference in how they approach duties and rights overall (Ratner, 2001). In thinking this, it can be further argued that CSR can be effective if it is properly stated as duties and it follows an accountability framework. I will address this issue further later in this chapter. Due to the many obstacles in realizing human rights, there are tactics that are considered to be effective tools when a state is not adhering to international law, such as sanctions and what is known as ‘naming and shaming’ which puts external pressure on states to conform with human rights (Joseph & McBeth, 2014). They are admittedly, weak, as they do not directly ensure that human rights violations are remedied, but they can be powerful tools for NGOs in addressing issues and spread awareness, making the public aware of relevant concerns. A condemnation by a UN body would essentially put pressure on a state and give them a bad reputation, which could be a political tool in pressuring them to comply (Joseph & McBeth, 2014). This tactic is interesting as it focuses on how corporate neglect falls under a state’s responsibility. It speaks to the problem that there needs to be further insurance that there is involvement on a state level to ensure that human rights violations are remediated.

### **2.1.2 Sustainable Development Goals**

As part of the efforts to highlight issues in the global economy, I want to briefly discuss how the UN’s sustainable development goals (SDGs) are relevant. This is mostly to situate the issue, as this is a framework that is often part of campaigns and used to symbolize a common goal for the future. Sustainability is also an important topic within labour rights, as it refers to how a work situation and everything that relates to it affects the everyday lives of people and

must sustain their living. This section will also be referred to specifically in my analysis, as SDGs are part of what is drawn on in the documents I am analyzing.

The 2030 Agenda for the sustainable development goals was adopted in 2015, and the intent is to “transform our world for the better” by taking steps to address challenges regarding issues such as poverty, climate change and gender equality (United Nations, n.d.). Out of the overall 17 goals included, most relevant for this study is the SDG goal 8, which promotes “sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all” (United Nations, n.d.). As part of this goal, the direct targets are to eradicate forced labour, child labour, and trafficking, change the structures surrounding work to ensure safety, and bridge the gaps between different classes, genders, and geographical locations (United Nations, n.d.). It is important to note, however, just as I did in my introduction, that these goals do not stand alone and that making changes to these specific elements does not change the system. The SDGs are often discussed in relation to corporations when it comes to workers’ rights and are therefore a part of the conversation on CSR. I will discuss this more in the next section.

### **2.1.3 Backdrop to CSR**

There is a question of both responsibility and accountability when it comes to how corporations facilitate their workers’ abilities to claim rights. Within a legal perspective, this duty is not clear, however, the potential failure to do so can have an influence on people and inform them in their habits which is why NGOs for a long time have highlighted failures to respect human rights (Clapham, 2013). In other words, there is an incentive on a corporation to respect and protect human rights, as the effects of not doing so may impact their business as consumers are influenced by reports on ethical and moral grounds. This is the backdrop to corporate initiatives such as CSR. To explain the norms and standards for respecting human rights, I will briefly discuss two main frameworks: The United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGP) and The OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business Conduct. The UNGP is a central document in relation to CSR, as it sets the parameters for these initiatives (Venkatesan, 2019). The guiding principles is a UN document that was published in 2011. It is a document that is widely regarded as a general basis for CSR, it being the UN framework for CSR which has been setting the standard for how businesses are to ensure that every worker in their production line is treated fairly and not

exploited (OHCHR, 2011). The OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business Conduct is a document that outlines recommendations and guidelines for businesses. It was originally introduced in 1976 and has for that reason been instrumental in establishing norms for business conduct in relation to questions on ethical practices and human rights (OECD, 2023). The norms that are set in this document refers directly to duties laid out in the guidelines and constitute a way for businesses to respect human rights in an effort to protect workers. These are important documents in understanding the effort to achieve industry standards that secure workers' their rights in accordance with human rights. However, as I will discuss in the next section, this falls short due to the way that international law functions. With long standing principles and incentives for having CSR policies, it is understandable that, according to the OECD, there is an increased interest for businesses to establish voluntary initiatives on CSR (Carroll, 2008). With the interest from businesses in CSR initiatives, and with knowing that these initiatives are not a recent invention, there is a need to understand how and why these work and what challenges they bring, which is why it is important to look further into criticisms of how these structures are.

## **2.2 The garment industry**

The garment industry is part of the larger umbrella term 'textile industry' which includes all industries using textile materials, such as for making clothes and furniture. The garment industry has for a long time been under scrutiny for their lack of commitment to fair wages and decent working conditions for workers in their supply chains. In fact, according to the Fashion Transparency Index of 2023, 99% of major fashion brands are not transparent about the number of workers that are a part of their supply chains (Fashion Revolution, 2023). In order to investigate labour related issues within the garment industry, I want to contextualize how human rights and workers' rights are connected within the garment sector. I want to start with a historical background of how the garment industry has been portrayed and what major event has shaped it in later years, before covering what legal governance covers it and how it is managed, leading to the concept of CSR. To begin, I want to discuss the Rana Plaza collapse and the ramifications happening in its aftermath, as this is one of the more significant cases of entrenchment on workers' rights in the garment industry that has garnered a lot of attention and that has set precedent for the industry on a national and international level (Prentice, 2021).

### **2.2.1 The precedence set by the Rana Plaza incident**

The Rana Plaza was a factory building in Dhaka, Bangladesh, that produced items of clothing for brands such as Walmart, Primark, Benetton (Prentice, 2021). In April of 2013, after inspections and reports stating that the building was unsafe, it collapsed, killing 1134 people and injuring hundreds (Prentice, 2021). This disaster was the deadliest in history and has become an example of how devastating consequences may be when workers' rights and safety are not taken seriously. It has become an example of the problems associated with the labour standards in the global economy, particularly in terms of safety at work for factory workers in the garment industry (Prentice, 2021). Due to a lack of transparency and enforcement in the social audit process that is part of a corporation's social responsibility and due diligence process, in which auditors do checks on facilities and working conditions to see whether or not they comply with laws and regulations, there are, even 10 years after the fact, lawsuits focused on the liability of social auditors as these have gotten much criticism for failing to notice and report issues with the Rana Plaza building prior to the collapse (LeBaron, 2020). The Rana Plaza building had been inspected on the morning of the day of the collapse but was kept open due to the wishes of the owner of the building. However, that the building was not safe was common knowledge among locals (Hoskins, 2022). Reportedly, the building had a long history of issues, such as reports on poor and sub-standard construction, in addition to poor working conditions (Prentice, 2021). Currently, no such liability exists for auditors, making the legal battle for accountability hard (LeBaron, 2020). This, in part, because the multinational corporations operating in the building have no legal responsibility due to the externalization of labour (Merk, 2009). In fact, LeBaron, when interviewing a company manager involved, was told that the brands that were found to have operated in the factory did not know of this practice and were, in fact, "as surprised as the next person" that their brand's products were found to have been produced in the factory (2020, p. 134). The practice of externalization of labour leads to sub-contracts made by suppliers, making the outsourcer, the corporation, potentially unaware of where their supply is made (Merk, 2009; LeBaron, 2020). In the aftermath of the collapse, unions pushed for compensation to be given to survivors and those left behind after the loss of their loved ones. In the end, they managed to ensure compensation aligning with the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Employment Injury Benefits Convention No. 121 (1964/1980), however, the compensation was made without the employers nor the building owner taking any accountability for the collapse (Prentice, 2021). The case of the Rana Plaza

building collapse and the consequences that came and questions it raised are central to the discussion on workers' rights, and by extension, human rights in the garment industry. With the further exacerbation of the fashion industry, past examples of neglect in the industry are important to keep in mind in discussions on workers' rights and fashion.

### **2.2.2 The rise of fast fashion**

Since the Rana Plaza factory collapse, many have had their eyes on safety regulations within the garment industry (Prentice, 2021). With time, however, the underlying issues have only grown, as the demand has risen due to the rise of what is known as 'fast fashion'. Fast fashion is a denotation of the garment industry's turn to "high levels of production quality and speed at extremely low prices" (Prentice, 2021, p. 1770). In order to understand the changes in the way we consume garments, and how this has impacted workers, I will start by a short overview on the history of the garment industry and how it has become what it is today, and then link this to modern day issues of overconsumption, with the intent of making the case of how the rapid growth of demand in the supply chain contributes to conditions under which workers are exposed to situations where they are likely exploited.

To understand why there is an increase in garment production, we need to understand first the concept of 'fashion'. Fashion has turned into a continuous cycle of creating false 'needs' beyond the essential clothes we own, and that sense of need is created for consumers to consume more (Hoskins, 2022). Corporations' wealth depends on the amount of product they sell, and as Hoskins argues: if consumers only bought "the clothes they needed it would spell disaster for corporations" (2022, p. 88). Therefore, as she argues, 'false needs' are created so that corporations can sell more garments (Hoskins, 2022). Due to "the high-volume, low-cost business model of retail production that powers the global economy," this allows for labour exploitation to take place (LeBaron, 2020, p. 30). It is a systemic issue. These false needs are a part of the heightened consumerism that we are seeing. Understanding this as the structure of how we understand consumerism within the garment industry, through fashion cycles that are increasingly creating a demand for clothes that are trending (Hoskins, 2022), we have what is called 'fast fashion'. Fast fashion is a term that describes how fashion trends go in and out of style at an incredibly fast speed, which, with the addition of sales techniques leaning on a sense of urgency to buy now or miss out, has created a system in which fashion is a \$2.5 trillion dollar industry (Hoskins, 2022). The growing demand for garments has shaped the garment industry

into one that, perhaps more than ever, allows for the obfuscation of workers' rights. The growing concerns on how workers are able to survive on their wages, given the low cost of garments in stores, raises questions on how well CSR mechanisms work to ensure that workers have the protections needed and are able to achieve their human rights.

An important aspect to the problem of exploitation in the garment industry is the increase in consumerism and the many incentives for consumers to buy more. Within the garment industry, "scale is leverage" (Barber, 2021, p. 113). This is a central component of fast fashion, which is often dubbed a 'race to the bottom' due to its business structure of production targets, big orders, and price reductions, which leads to factories competing on business, making the already cheap labour even cheaper as the factories have less to pay workers with (Barber, 2021). While the topic of my thesis is the labour conditions and the regulation and lack of accountability on corporations, there is no way to look at this without understanding what drives these businesses. Hoskins argues that fashion has become possessive rather than enjoyable due to the 'race to the bottom' structure of the industry (Hoskins, 2022). As the demands grow, so does the need for labour to meet that demand. Therefore, consumer culture must be mentioned when writing on this topic. It is an essential part of what drives the industry. As the demand for fashionable garments increases, so does the exploitation of workers, whose conditions remain unchanged other than the fact that there is an increased demand for their work. The increase in consumption of fast fashion in the Global North has, according to this theory, a direct impact on the working conditions of those in the supply chain, as the increase in demand leads to the commodity that is the labour itself decreasing in value. Capitalism is a system Marx and Engels argued that "the condition for capital is wage-labor" and that this "rests exclusively on competition between the laborers" (Marx & Engels, 1848, as cited in Garner & Hancock, 2014, p. 45).

### **2.2.3 Workers' rights & exploitation in the garment industry**

As discussed above, workers' rights are an intrinsic part of human rights, which makes it an important topic to discuss in terms of how people can achieve their human rights. Workers' rights are part of the Universal Declarations of Human Rights (UDHR) and are mostly understood as a subset of human rights and are part of the system of social and economic rights (Ratner, 2001). Corporations often refer to the UDHR as part of their claim to responsibility through human rights policies and statements (Clapham, 2013). However, although human



rights are often referred to by corporations and may be part of their policies, “in practice they may be ignored or overruled with states’ complicity” (Nash, 2015, p. 103). The human rights abuse that workers face are often directly related to the principles laid out in the UDHR (Clapham, 2013). Labour exploitation is known to be a major problem in the global economy, with the garment industry being a long-known contributor (LeBaron, 2020).

Colonial ideas within the garment industry, and specifically relevant to my study, are linked with not just consumption, but how we are able to look past the fact that garment workers in the Global South are significantly underpaid. The way that some are able to become rich and accumulate wealth rests on the way that others are forced to stay poor and instead accumulate misery (Braverman, 1998). When “marginalized people are constantly looked at as resources and afterthoughts, there will always be loopholes for exploitation” (Barber, 2021, p. 71). When the prices for garments are low, it can therefore normally be understood as a cheapening of the labour power itself - of the payment of the workers producing these garments. Braverman writes that there are many ways in which this process takes place, with the most important being the modernization of production leaving work to be unskilled, with tasks broken down from their complexity. This makes the criteria for workers low, as the working tasks require no form of formal knowledge but is instead a simple process that ‘anyone’ can do (Braverman, 1998). This also renders workers easily replaceable (Braverman, 1998). And as humans have to meet their basic needs such as food and shelter, people live in inequality because they cannot afford to resist the options they have so long as they are able to work (Nash, 2015). Karl Marx writes in ‘Capital’ that capitalism starts with the need for commodities (Garner & Hancock, 2014). He argues that “the market economy is a human creation, a product of social relations, but we mystify it into a fixed, natural, uncontrollable force that is external to our actions” (Garner & Hancock, 2014, p. 55). The ability to create then, is to turn one's labour into a commodity which is, at the same rate as actual commodities, valued and sold (Garner & Hancock, 2014). In other words, the ability to work is itself a ‘thing’ one can sell. Workers can therefore be exploited on the basis that they are not indeed working people, rather they are products in the supply chain. As Marx explains, we have to understand the difference between an increase in production “due to the development of the social process of production, and that due to the capitalist exploitation of that process” (Marx, 1867, as cited in Garner & Hancock, 2014, p. 57). Marx argues that the workers are themselves a commodity, writing that the “worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth [they produce]” and that they eventually “[become] an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities [they create]” (Marx, 1932 (1844), as cited in Garner & Hancock, 2014, p.

50). The ways in which the system of capitalism has influenced the working conditions of today is well established is therefore worth exploring. The connection between the labour rights issue and colonial ideas here is central (Hoskins, 2022). Nash (2015) writes that in the sense that we see material, we are ourselves, as humans, a material, and a resource. In this sense, our capacity to produce is itself a material, which is a central theme in many critiques on capitalism. In short, labor is an essential part of what makes capital, and “(...) the working class is first of all raw material for exploitation” (Braverman, 1998, p. 261). In writing this, Braverman uses what he calls “the formal definition of the working class” and writes that it is “that class which, possessing nothing but its power to labor, sells that power to capital in return for its subsistence” (Braverman, 1998, p. 261). A historical backdrop to the current state of the garment industry must include the way that ideas rooted in capitalism, neoliberalism and globalization are impacting the current situation of work in the global economy. The garment industry is part of the global markets, which with an increase in the idea of ‘free markets’ produce, by design, “gross economic inequalities” (Donnelly & Whelan, 2020, p. 281). LeBaron argues that precarious wages, whether it be unpaid or low wages, are not only crucial to work against, but that it is an issue that is a lot more common than literature indicates (2021). Further, she states the importance of ensuring a livable wage for workers, as being financially safe is an important tool in being able to leave potentially exploitative work conditions (LeBaron, 2021). LeBaron argues that the issue of wages has been left out of conversations on ensuring human rights in the labour section and writes that ways to ensure workers are paid minimum wage law and that suppliers are able to cover these “rarely feature within tools and initiatives to advance human rights in supply chains” (LeBaron, 2021, p. 3). There needs to be a system in which the supply chain is managed responsibly, especially as the rise of fast fashion pushes workers to produce more garments than before. It is, in this context important to note that there is a difference in the sense that a worker sells their labour power to the employer, and the sense that a worker has no autonomy in making that decision (LeBaron, 2020).

#### **2.2.4 The fast fashion giant SHEIN**

SHEIN has around 6,000 factories in China that produce clothes for their online retail store (Rajvanshi, et.al., 2023). They became a go-to online retail store through social media, with trending ‘haul’ videos where people show off what they have bought, and with SHEIN’s low prices such as prices between USD \$2.50 and \$8 for dresses and shirts under \$10, these

videos became popular on TikTok (Vara, 2022). On SHEIN's website, they have an "About us" page which states who they are and their mission. On this website, SHEIN writes that they are "a global fashion and lifestyle online retailer committed to making the beauty of fashion accessible to all" (SHEIN, n.d.a, para 1). They state that their mission is "to serve as a leader in the industry and bring fashion into the modern era (SHEIN, n.d.a, para 5) and "that the beauty of fashion should be accessible to everyone, not just the privileged few" (SHEIN, n.d.a, para 2). They state that they "have become one of the most popular shopping apps" and that they wish to provide their customers with "the best online shopping experience" (SHEIN, n.d.a, para 3). As SHEIN is an online-only store, they do not have to cover costs for operating physical stores, which allows them to compete with big brands such as H&M and Zara (Vara, 2022). In the case of their production, SHEIN states that they "employ cutting-edge technologies and processes in our design and sourcing to stay well-informed of what is in-demand by consumers, produce goods in a timely manner and deliver the products quickly to anywhere in the world" and claims that they "are disrupting the fashion space and improving outcomes for manufacturers, suppliers and consumers" (SHEIN, n.d.a, para 5). Further, they write that:

To meet demand, we have built a fully digital supply chain that seamlessly and quickly delivers products to our customers worldwide. We use proprietary software to track sales and communicate with our factories in real time to order in small batches. Our digital supply chain is the core of our business model and empowers us to offer a wide range of on-trend styles without creating excessive inventory waste or making customers wait weeks for their orders to be fulfilled (SHEIN, n.d.a, para 6).

While SHEIN claim to make advanced systems to meet consumer demands, with 6,000 new styles being added to their website daily on average and selling for US \$100 billion in 2022 (Rajvanshi, et.al., 2023). As covered in previous section, this amount of consumerism leads to a 'race to the bottom' as the demands need to be met. SHEIN has been under scrutiny for breaching Chinese labour law, with reviews being done as a consequence finding many informal factories (Rajvanshi, et.al., 2023). Reports have come out of workers at SHEIN's factories regularly working overtime, such as 17-hour shifts in order to meet demands and being docked  $\frac{3}{4}$  of their daily paycheck if the garments they produce have mistakes (Channel 4, 2022; Rajvanshi, et.al., 2023). A documentary that is often cited on SHEIN's business practice had an undercover investigation, where the journalist acted as a worker and talked with other workers about their experiences. In addition to the information above, they also claimed that

they do not get paid for their first month of work until after they have worked a second month (Channel 4, 2022). Overall, SHEIN has been scrutinized for poor working conditions and a lack of accountability when it comes to accusations of labour exploitation.

## **2.4 Chapter summary**

In this chapter, I have given a background to the issues of the garment industry, related to systemic issues that mirrors the issues persistent in the labour sector overall, with international law and UN initiatives providing a framework that does not provide sufficient security. Initiatives such as the guiding principles and CSR are made with the purpose of ending labour exploitation. However, this issue is rampant in the garment industry, and has grown due to the nature of fast fashion, as workers have to complete demands in fast turnarounds. The company SHEIN, which my analysis will focus on, has been subject to allegations of labour exploitation in their supply chains, which I will get back to in my discussion. In the next chapter I will be discussing my theoretical framework and discuss CSR more in depth.

# 3 Theoretical Framework

As a basis for my study, I am using critical theory for my analysis. Within the field of sociology, theory has always been critical (Turner, 2006). Theory is supposed to be a tool in understanding how and why a social phenomenon is as it is (Landman, 2006). In other words, the theoretical framework is the tool that I will be using in my analysis, by basing my interpretation on established grounds. A theoretical framework that works with the concepts that I am studying includes looking at the different ways of understanding corporate governance, global production line, and workers' rights. Looking at human rights within the global supply chain in the textile industry, the theoretical perspective is key in defining the why and how that I am interested in. Central to these is the notion of exploitation under capitalism, which are often understood to be linked within a critical theoretical framework (Turner, 2006). In addition, it is important that my analysis is based on a critical lens, given the severity of the conditions I am studying. To investigate the systemic issues in the garment industry, I need to study the underlying power relations that affect this. Although the master program I am writing this thesis as a part of is interdisciplinary, my background is in sociology. As I am coming from a sociological standpoint, this affects the theoretical choices I have made in order to do my study. Knowledge is a social project (Turner, 2006), and in my search for understanding the ways in which human rights and workers' rights interact in practice, the social aspect is the central theme, that is, the social aspect is the core of what this interaction is about. How human rights work in the everyday lives of workers is, inherently, a social issue, because it deals with people's livelihood and ability to partake in society. The theoretical framework is a critical part of my analysis, as it informs my analysis on how social structures form and are formed by the human rights perspective. Overall, sociology more generally "can elucidate what is at stake (...) in a given rights struggle" (Frezzo, 2015, p. xix). To look at the social structures that uphold labour exploitation as a consequence of capitalism as it expands globally and affects the global supply chain, is an essential part of this.

As the foundation of my analysis, theory is central, and involves understanding and combining relevant literature within my interest area (Bryman, 2016). In this chapter, I will present the concepts that will form the theoretical framework that will guide my analysis. I will present my theoretical foundation in critical theory and discuss how social constructionism is a useful concept in my understanding of how human rights are realized. I will then discuss my

main theory, which is performativity. I will discuss multiple ways to apply this and how it will be applied in my analysis. This leads me to incorporate social responsibility (CSR).

### **3.1 Critical theory**

In the field of sociology, critiquing social structures has a long history, and has been foundational to the field during its emergence. Critique is an important tool when it comes to “establishing a better, more adequate understanding of the social world” (Turner, 2006, p. 88). In discussing social conditions and oppressive structures in society, theorists such as Karl Marx have been influential and the further adoption by the Frankfurt school made critical theory an emancipatory and the realistic tool to look at “the power of rational-legal authority to dominate individuals” (Turner, 2006, p. 8). A common theme historically within critical theory is to reject “generalization from surface appearances” and to analyze the underlying structures that form reality, gaining a broader understanding based on not only what is observable, but also scientific knowledge and historical perspective (Turner, 2006, p. 86). When doing sociological research, there is a need to study social conditions, knowledge, and ideology, as well as how they interact with peoples’ everyday life. In doing so, there needs to be a critical awareness and a lens to question existing social structures (Turner, 2006, p. 85). Critical theory lays out the foundations for understanding how the social world works, and how we observe social reality and how it is constructed (Turner, 2006). Critical theory is part of what is called ‘middle-range theories’, which is a way to understand a limited area of social life (Bryman, 2016). In writing this thesis, critical theory is an essential part of my analysis, as this is a foundational framework that allows me to question social structures and look at the dimensions between the Global North and Global South to see how workers in the garment industry are unable to realize their human rights.

### **3.2 Social constructionism**

One concept that is central to my analysis is the concept of social constructionism. To argue that something is ‘socially constructed’ means that it is a made-up thing, that it does not exist naturally, that it is unquestioned, taken for granted, and to be the norm within a social context (Nash, 2015). Frezzo argues that “sociologists conceptualize human rights as highly contested claims that vary across historical time and geographic space” (Frezzo, 2015, p. 2). As

human rights are not accessible to all, the claim that they are made for all must be critiqued, as I have argued in chapter 2. Therefore, the idea that human rights are socially constructed is relevant. “The fact that human rights violations occur on a regular and daily basis all around the world means that we cannot explain them away as an unfortunate irrational feature of the world” (Landman, 2006, p. 57). This can be applied to almost anything and is a concept that is often used to analyze social categories such as race and gender. For my study, I find this to be a fitting concept to use when analyzing human rights and workers’ rights, as these are concepts that are not inevitable, or natural, but are human made and serve a certain purpose. According to Karl Marx, this is an important lens for “seeing the market economy as a set of social relations, a process of social construction” rather than “[mystifying] it into a thing that exists independently of human actions and relationships” (Garner & Hancock, 2014, p. 55). Social constructionism is a concept that is helpful when looking at and analyzing social structures, such as capitalism and human rights. Nash writes that human rights can be understood as constructions “created through the cultural politics of ‘human’ and ‘rights’” and analyzing them as such leads to an understanding of the social aspect to human rights as well as injustices people face globally (2015, p. 15). When human rights are analyzed as being socially constructed, and there is an understanding of the social positioning of the ‘human’ as well as the ‘rights’ perspective, it is possible to look at how human rights may be ineffective in solving deep rooted problems. For my study, then, understanding human rights as socially constructed gives me the opportunity to look at how workers’ rights, which are a pivotal part of human rights, may be unsuccessful in protecting all workers globally. As Nash argues, international law can be effective because it is socially constructed. Human rights have been naturalized as part of our understanding of rights due to its successful social construction (Nash, 2015). When we look at systems that do not work, it is important to bear in mind that there is a possibility to change it, due to its social construction (Nash, 2015). Therefore, understanding how and why something is socially constructed can be helpful in deconstructing and changing the way things are thought to be. In the context of my study, this idea is essential, as it impacts the understanding of a system, the garment industry, that is not working. The ways in which we work to deconstruct it, then, are a crucial part of the process of making changes to the system, the social reality, and to, effectively, the lives of those involved. As part of the critical approach I will have in my analysis, the questioning of how structures come to be and why these are the way they are is the reason why I have chosen to do my analysis using the link between critical theory and social constructionism.

In my analysis, I will be extending this already existing understanding of human rights as socially constructed and apply it to CSR to understand how these policies work. Frezzo (2015) argues that there are interests that one can analyze when it comes to the realization of human rights: the rights conditions, claims, and effects. For my study, the underlying structures that affect rights conditions are essential, and I argue that CSR is a part of what makes up these conditions, whether they be economic, political, or social, as the impact on workers' rights spills over into their everyday lives and overall conditions. If we can understand that the reality of workers in the garment industry relies on social constructs of systems that are supposed to ensure their safety, the question is how these are constructed and for what purpose. With the understanding that the idea of human rights, and following that, CSR is a social construction, it is important to question their purpose and their effect. How is the responsibility part of CSR a social construct, and what does that affect when it comes to accountability for the rights and safety of workers? The way that CSR is constructed and the social effects of this will be an essential part of my analysis.

### **3.3 Performativity**

One aspect of the issue that I am discussing is the ways in which corporations use CSR for branding and publicity. For while CSR has objectives and is meant to limit exploitative and dangerous working conditions, in reality it falls short of doing this (Carroll, 2008; LeBaron, 2020). Corporations do, however, proudly announce their practices in using CSR, and this is a talking point that, in many ways, allows them to, at least in a public relations aspect, escape the accountability that falls on them when working conditions in their production chain does not align with international standards (LeBaron, 2020). This leads to the main theoretical concept that I will be using in my analysis – performativity.

To understand how corporations make use of CSR, and what it can do for them, I am interested in the concept of performativity. The concept of performativity is well established within the field of gender studies. Established by Judith Butler, it is a framework that, in broad terms, allows for seeing how identity is shaped by the ways in which people present themselves, making one's gender an act that we put on in order to fit into a social category. Butler has written extensively on the concept of performativity, which is her most influential theory. At its core, it is a gender theory, and it argues that gender is not natural nor biological. It is, instead, accomplished through daily acts that constitute what is socially understood to be true.



Therefore, gender is performative, meaning it is a constant act, or a performance, of gender, through which gender comes into existence. Gender is thus “neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex”, it is socially and culturally constructed (Butler, 2000, p. 10). Further, this relates to how identity as a category is something that is not pre-existing. Through specific acts, it is accomplished, based on socially constructed norms and ideas. In other words, gender is “neither true nor false” (Butler, 2000, p. 180). While corporate and gender identity can be thought to be two different forms of identity, the concept of identity and how it is expressed should be considered for both. Butler writes that identity can be understood through acts, gestures that produce the internal core on a surface level, which transforms the internal into the external (Butler, 2000). The acts through which this is produced externally are considered to be performative, as “the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (Butler, 2000, p. 173). Crucially, Butler discusses here that this in particular related to the relationship between the internal and external, whether these correspond or if they are inherently different, and why this is. For corporations, this form of performativity may then present itself in the way that a corporate identity is formed through constructions presented through discursive methods such as statements, which is what I am looking at in my analysis. The way that a corporation is able to construct their image through the messages they produce, and through the use of CSR in those is what I am interested in, and seeing what these messages express through their construction of the identity of the brand. A similar theory, established by Erving Goffman, talks about how we present ourselves in order to be perceived in a specific way. Authors such as Perkiss et al., (2021) and Lauwo et al., (2020) discuss how Goffman’s theories on impression management and face-to-face work can apply to a brand or corporation in instances where they wish to portray themselves in a specific way to an audience. Within the space of organizational performativity, there is a concept that is fitting in covering this specifically, which is called ‘critical performativity’. This concept has a strong emphasis on the discourse that is being enacted by organizations, with different goals both internally and externally (Cabantous et al., 2016). Cabantous et al., argues that the concept of critical performativity has lost its roots in the original theories of performativity, as it is inadequate in its reading of the materiality that is part of the original, influential theory coined by thinkers such as Judith Butler. They have therefore established a reformed approach, which they call a ‘political theory of organizational performativity’ (Cabantous, et al., 2016). However, this concept is very much focused on the organizational effects of CSR on an internal level, not always in the way that it engages the

consumer. It is, though, worth noting that the concept of performativity reaches far beyond the scope of gender, and that it is discussed in terms of CSR and other corporate initiatives.

Butler argues that an “utterance alone does not bring about the day, and yet it can set into motion a set of actions that can, under certain felicitous circumstances, bring the day around” (Butler, 2010, p. 148). According to Butler, it is important to see the underlying structures of processes, as we are often dealing with issues that are presented as pre-given, and we need to see how exactly they were constructed to be understood as such (Butler, 2010). When discussing the reasons for the use of performative actions, one issue that ties these theories together is that of the corporate image, or the intent to not face stigma for being perceived as not taking responsibility. A corporation may enact CSR initiatives as a strategy in order to conceal or transform any potential stigma based on their action or inaction on issues such as workers’ rights, and ultimately, the goal is social acceptance (Lauwo, et.al, 2020). For my research, this entails the following framework: If a corporation claims to do well on human rights, this claim is not enough. If the claim is not followed up by action, this claim is simply a performance. It is therefore a performative claim, in that it seeks to validate an action that is claimed to be but is not in actuality shaping action. According to Butler, performativity, such as through discursive means, is an act that needs to be acted out continuously because when it is based on ideas that do not reflect reality, it fails and needs to be re-established (Butler, 2010). It therefore falls short of materializing the statement. There are many reasons for corporations to have CSR guidelines and to claim they are taking responsibility. Among others, financial performance and institutional mechanisms have for a long time been theorized to be affecting and affected by whether a corporation engages with CSR (Campbell, 2007). A corporation’s claim to responsibility is a part of their identity building, with the goal of social acceptance and financial gain. The question is, then, why are corporations incentivized to behave responsibly? Why is CSR such an important tool for corporations?

To look at the concept of CSR and how it is used by corporations, I will be using the concept of performativity as it pertains to how corporations present themselves in a specific way in order to elicit a specific response from consumers. I will do this in two parts; firstly, to look at the way in which SHEIN’s identity is shaped through statements by understanding these as giving an impression of the corporation to the reader, and secondly in that statements without any substance fail to adequately represent reality and therefore act as a performance for financial gain rather than to represent reality. In other words, how does industry led efforts fall

into the concept of being performative in the sense that they do not adequately cover potential human rights violations yet is part of a corporation's good renown.

### **3.4 Corporate Social Responsibility**

The concept of CSR is something that has, to some degree, been around since the 1950s, when talk of consumer consciousness and the social responsibility of companies started to take shape (Carroll, 2008). At first it was mostly something that was discussed as a concept, however, over the years, not only have corporations made CSR a part of their policies and directives, but CSR initiatives have also influenced local policies in different countries (Carroll, 2008). While it may at first have been industry-driven and based on voluntary initiatives alone, processes such as regulation, changes in industry standards, and introduction of certification systems have in turn affected how CSR is shaped today (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012). Carroll theorized a three-domain approach to CSR, where the three categories are economic, legal, and ethical. These categories, or domains, represent the many ways in which corporations do CSR, and offer a way of analyzing them based on initiatives in each category (Carroll, 2008). Nowadays, CSR is thought to have an ethical, moral and a business component, that each shape the way we look at CSR (Carroll, 2008). However, there is also a long history on economic side of CSR, with initiatives such as philanthropy being a known practice that businesses have used in order to engage corporate interests with being beneficial to society (Carroll, 2008). Carroll describes CSR as a global phenomenon; however, he also points out the fact that the initiatives that CSR promotes are adopted with a varying degree among companies, and that there seems to be “divergences of commitment and management practice, even in narrow areas of application such as labor standards, environment, human rights, and fighting bribery” (Carroll, 2008, p. 41).

There are many reasons for corporations to have CSR guidelines and to claim they are taking responsibility. Among others, financial performance and institutional mechanisms have for a long time been theorized to be affecting and affected by whether a corporation engages with CSR (Campbell, 2007). Another reason is the potential effect on consumers, as research shows that both customer satisfaction and trust are essential and makes a corporation favourable to consumers as well as establishing loyalty through a positive reputation (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012). As mentioned previously, CSR is based on different systems such as the UN Guiding Principles and the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business

Conduct, making this framework aligned with more official structures, although it is not in itself a specific form of business structure. As I am discussing CSR in this study, I am referring to it as a framework that businesses use to inform themselves and the public on their ethical missions and social impact. It is important to note that there is no consensus on how a corporation is supposed to adopt a CSR framework, as this is a framework that is based on initiative. This also means that there is no specific way to ensure an industry standard when it comes to the actual responsibility and accountability a corporation takes, nor the applicability to human rights (Venkatesan, 2019).

CSR has garnered a lot of criticism (Clapham, 2013; Nash, 2015; LeBaron, 2020). There is a need for a system that promotes *accountability*, as many NGOs are suggesting law needs to be emphasized (Clapham, 2013). Carroll (2008) describes that CSR seems to be affected by corporate trends, arguing that with the competition in the global world, initiatives that are supposed to benefit those in need now are based on how sustainable they can be as corporations, after all, work to create value. With the UN not being able to enforce human rights in practice, the onus is on the corporations to ensure that their practice adheres with international law (Nash, 2015). However, given the varying legal systems and the lack of a global safety system, and because there is no legal responsibility tied with CSR, it has been criticized for being likened to a substitute for international law (Nash, 2015). In practice, this means that CSR allow corporations to regulate themselves (Nash, 2015). While corporations can self-regulate their business and CSR initiatives, another way in which corporations and their relationship with CSR is monitored is through NGOs, who use media as a tool to expose any wrongdoings (Nash, 2015). LeBaron argues, therefore, that there needs to be a change in the ways in which industry-led efforts are being regarded, as the way in which initiatives such as CSR works today is not solving the problems they are thought to address, such as labour exploitation (LeBaron, 2020). Similarly, Tamvada (2020), in her analysis of CSR and accountability, argues that there is a need for CSR to be regulated through law. This is one of the main critiques of CSR: that it is not properly regulated and is mostly based on initiatives either by a corporation by itself or by encouragement of the industry at large.

CSR has a long history both in terms of what he calls ‘distributional conflicts’ such as labour issues, and in ‘environmental conflicts’ such as climate change (Heal, 2005). The role of CSR in these struggles is then to remedy the relation that corporations have with the public in relation to these issues, which leads them to lay out policies and follow these up (Heal, 2005). Heal (2005) lists six major benefits to CSR: reducing risk, reducing waste, improving relations

with regulators, improving human relations and employee productivity, lowering the cost of capital, and, in my opinion perhaps the most important, generating brand equity. Most of these are concerned with a corporation's economic and social renown, however, discussions of equity are of utmost importance from a human rights perspective. This is an idea that Heal himself argues is 'elusive', as it centers the branding of a corporation (2005). However, I argue that the underlying idea that a brand promotes equity should also mean that they are, in fact, practicing this. The branding as such, if it is indeed practiced and is not left as a vague statement of intent, may signal that a brand has ethical practices and therefore align with morals of, and appeal to consumers. If that is the end goal, although perhaps not as virtuous of an agenda, the human rights of the workers would indeed be of concern and improvements would be made. However, Heal points out that this is often done through initiatives such as Fair Trade, which shows how initiatives taken to ensure workers' rights are being met and that a brand's practices align with ethical and moral standards, are not always the outcome, as Fair Trade has a reputation of not fulfilling its promises of fairness across the supply chains (Heal, 2005). Product certification can indeed be a part of a corporation's stance on responsibility, as this is a system that functions as "a method of enhancing and channelling this consumer awareness by associating a certification brand with products that meet appropriate standards" (Heal, 2005, p. 396). The way that initiatives such as ethical certifications affect the image of a brand is a notable advantage to corporations who engage in initiatives such as CSR.

One argument that is much agreed upon is that there needs to be a greater emphasis on the aspect of accountability (Clapham, 2013). There is concern that there has been drawn a line between what is a corporations' own initiative of responsibility and what consequences and accountability they must face for favoring voluntary initiatives and for not adequately ensuring that the rights of their workers are upheld (Clapham, 2013). Among other developments, critics are concerned about the increase in business on CSR. There are many services that businesses can buy, where companies do consultations and risk assessments on their behalf, and these services have sparked conversations on how effective CSR policies are in their process of being enacted (Clapham, 2013; LeBaron, 2020). This practice, which has become increasingly common, particularly in the garment sector, means that corporations outsource a crucial part of their assurance system when it comes to ensuring that workers are treated fairly and are not exposed to bad working conditions and exploitative practices (LeBaron, 2020). Social auditing, as well as certificates that inform consumers that a business is 'ethical' are misleading, as not only imply that systemic issues can be untangled by random inspections and stamps of approval

by employers at either a corporate or factory level, but they also lead consumers to think that they are buying sustainably even though there is usually evidence that the information produced through these processes is inaccurate (LeBaron, 2020). When using these services, whose credibility varies, corporations are essentially paying for their image and for making the impression “to consumers and policymakers that labour standards are being upheld” (LeBaron, 2020, p. 150). It is important to note that when it comes to these initiatives, businesses favour the voluntary ones, as there are no legal requirements that needs to be met when it comes to CSR initiatives such as codes of conduct and other business guidelines (Clapham, 2013).

### **3.6 Chapter summary**

In this chapter, I have laid out the theoretical framework that I am basing my analysis off to study how the issues of workers’ rights and human rights are dealt with in SHEIN’s documents, which I will detail in the next chapter. Theory tends to be very abstract, however, for the purpose of my thesis, I am looking for specific elements: First, the foundation to my framework is in critical theory, where I am focusing on looking critically at the social structures surrounding the realization of human rights. Secondly, my study is based on the idea of social constructionism, where I am looking at human rights, social and economic differences, and the idea of corporate social responsibility and how it is presented. This framework allows me to study these as socially constructed, allowing me to question their narratives and how they are meant to be rather than how they ‘naturally’ are. Lastly, the main theory that I will be using for my analysis is performativity. I am applying this concept to understand how corporations engage with initiatives such as CSR. The framework of performativity gives me the tools to gain an understanding of how SHEIN presents themselves through their statements, while looking at the social reality. I am interested in how the identity that SHEIN shaped through their statements as part of how they wish to be perceived in order to be socially accepted and the performance put on as they externalize this identity to the reader is key to understanding how SHEIN construct their image, and how their CSR initiatives helps in this process. The initiative is not enough if there is no action following, and if there is not action, then the initiative is performative. This is what I will be investigating in my analysis. In the next chapter, I will be discussing my methodology and how I will be conducting my analysis.

## 4 Methodology

In this chapter, I will be presenting my method of choice for this study. I will be discussing my case study and its implications and limitations. I will also be discussing the use of document analysis as part of my case study, its many applications and how I have chosen to use my sources, along with the challenges that this choice of method brings. This study rests on the case of the brand and online fashion retailer SHEIN and does so by analyzing main documents on their retail website in order to effectively look at how SHEIN's claims regarding CSR respond to the reality of how the conditions are in their supply chains. The research method that I am using in this thesis is within the qualitative method, as I am using a qualitative content analysis in the form of a case study and document analysis. I am doing a document analysis on two documents that are produced by SHEIN and distributed through SHEIN's online retail website. I am analyzing these and using other sources as tools for my analysis, such as giving context to claims being made in these documents to see if the claims hold true. I am analyzing this in relation to the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) to figure out how SHEIN presents themselves. Further, in my discussion, I am looking to see if CSR responsibility actively works to ensure the upholding of human rights within the garment industry. As the case study is based on SHEIN, I am using this brand as an example of the industry, although I do not claim that they represent every other fashion retailer. I will discuss this further in the section on sampling.

Although there are many good reasons for doing either qualitative and quantitative research on this topic, I purposefully wanted to see what already exists in literature on the topic and do an analysis using this and other relevant reports, as well as look at the ways in which people are advocating for change. If I were to do quantitative research, the scope of my research would be significantly smaller in its scope, such as if I were to do interviews or collect data in a field setting. There are also ethical concerns regarding collecting such data that I would have to take into consideration if I were to collect any primary data. If I were to focus on the numerical aspect, I am afraid that this would have the potential to remove some of the humanity of the people involved, and as my focus is on how people are exploited, this would lead to further ethical concerns. I have also considered what doing quantitative research would imply in terms of ensuring that any participants are able to speak freely, and who I would consider interviewing or observing. Overall, I find that analyzing secondary sources in the form of journal articles and books on the field of human rights fits better to the research and analysis

that I want to do, which is why I am doing my research within a qualitative method. Using existing sources may limit the relevancy of my research, as there is always a risk that a source may be outdated (Bryman, 2016), however, I find that having a rich collection of data as grounds for my analysis allows me to do a deeper look into the complex relationship with international law and social reality of workers.

To do the document analysis, I have selected relevant documents that I will be using for my analysis. I will be analyzing the following documents: the SHEIN documents ‘SHEIN Supply Chain Transparency Statement’ and ‘Sustainability & Social Impact’. These documents, which are all found online, represent the corporate side of the use of CSR initiatives, through the example of SHEIN. I will get more into my choice of documents further in this chapter, under the section on sampling. The goal of my choice of method is to be able to research the trust that is established between SHEIN and their consumers through the documents that are available on their website based on how they are perceived based on what they present themselves to be. Analyzing documents that are available to the public allows me to establish what consumers can see as they are engaging with SHEIN. I will discuss this further in the section on how I have selected my documents.

## **4.1 Method & research design**

This thesis is a case study, but also uses document analysis as part of the analysis of the case. As the choice of my case, I have chosen to look at the brand and online retailer SHEIN, as I find this brand to exemplify the recent surge in fast fashion, and because it has been the center of many concerns regarding their supply chains (Channel 4, 2022; Rajvanshi, et.al., 2023). I have chosen to look at the company more broadly, as this is a practice that a case study allows for (Bryman, 2016). In other words, while looking at a specific instance within SHEIN’s practice could be done, I am looking at the brand more generally, specifically analyzing their statements on responsible business practice and reports on exploitation in their supply chain. While this scope may be big, I will explain this choice and its limitations further in this chapter.

In choosing a method for this study, I have emphasized the need to analyze an example of CSR as I consider this to be not only a way to contribute to the field, but also an effective way of finding out how the reality of workers is presented to consumers. Working with documents can take many forms, however, overall, document analysis is a way of looking at text and considering the many underlying signifiers that it represents. Document analysis allows



for interpretation of chosen data, by analyzing it and interpreting it in a wider scope, such as in the context of social reality. Silverman argues that documents should be regarded as data because they “often enshrine a distinctive documentary version of social reality” (Silverman, 2011, p. 80). As it related to my theoretical framework, this is highly relevant and something I will be looking into in my analysis, which is why I have chosen to work with documents. In researching if there is a gap between garment workers’ everyday life and how it is presented in data by a brand, I argue that looking at documents produced by the brand itself is an essential part. The social reality that the brand creates through making and distributing this data is a crucial aspect to understanding the implications of CSR in the garment industry and what consumers need to navigate.

#### **4.1.1 Case study**

A case study is a research design that allows for an intensive analysis of a specific case, where the researcher looks at the case’s complexity and particularity (Bryman, 2016). For my choice of using a case study in this thesis, it is exactly the possibility of analyzing the complexity of the labour rights within the garment industry that I intend to do. Looking specifically at a case, with my choice being to analyze a brand, allows me to look at an example of the garment industry, which is very complex and filled with nuance. While there are many forms that a case study may take, I have chosen to do my case study in the form of what Bryman calls an ‘exemplifying’ case study, as my reason for choosing SHEIN is due to the brand being an example of the current norm of fast fashion retailers (2016). It is therefore not unusual in the context of the garment industry, but rather it exemplifies it. This allows me to “examine key social processes” (Bryman, 2016, p. 62). As this is what the intention of my research is, I find that using the example of SHEIN works in allowing me to analyze the use of CSR in the garment industry and how this applies to the actual practice of corporations.

#### **4.1.2 Document analysis**

As part of my case study, I will be going through statements made by SHEIN through documents available on their website. SHEIN represents their mission through documents that are available on their website, and I will base my analysis on these. In order to do a document analysis, I will discuss what this entails and how this fits into my research design.

Document analysis, as it is applied in this study, falls under the umbrella of qualitative content analysis (Bryman, 2016). A document analysis is fitting, as it means to look deeper at the meaning of documents. Documents are not neutral, and organizational documents, such as the reports and statements that are produced by a brand such as SHEIN, whose purpose is to represent a corporate idea, are constructed in a particular way in order to signal the messages the corporation wants consumers to receive (Silverman, 2011). In fact, as Silverman points out, documents are used as means for organizations to “publicise themselves, compete with others in the same marketplace or justify themselves to clients, shareholders, boards of governors or employers” (Silverman, 2011, p. 78).

A document analysis consists of many steps and questions to ask during the analysis. These include questions on what the text is doing, which is deeply connected to my theoretical framework. If a text refers to actions that do not align with what other sources claim, the text may function as a form of performance (Silverman, 2011). A document is always rhetorical, and this is important to remember in an analysis, as the rhetoric of a document’s “persuasion, or reality-construction, depends on rhetorical devices” (Silverman, 2011, p. 84). Documents are understood as social facts, and are used to describe, justify, and explain what the writer intends. They may therefore present the distributor in a certain way in order to convince the reader of an achievement they have made or responsibility they have taken. Documents that are produced by an organization are inherently linked to their self-representation and are designed for a certain recipient, as they are not inherently transparent or representational, and the effectiveness of these depend on the way in which this is written (Bryman, 2016; Silverman, 2011). This also means that documents take part “in constructing and perpetuating power inequities and oppression” (Sankofa, 2023, p. 747). In analyzing the documents for my study, I therefore must be aware of the power relations at play, such as that the documents are produced by a corporation and describe contested working conditions. Silverman argues that we need “to approach documents for what they are and what they are used to accomplish” (Silverman, 2011, p. 79). As part of this, I will engage with material that describes and is in conversation with the people involved.

Important questions within the scope of document analysis include understanding what the text is trying to produce. This is what I am interested in. I want to look at how SHEIN has produced these statements in terms of what they want to say. *How do these statements translate to action?* It is important to note who the receivers, or readers, of this document possibly are. Indeed, such documents hold a legal responsible value, but it is also for the consumers, who

may seek reassurance that what they are paying for is to some extent ethical. The text included in the documents I am analyzing must therefore be examined for indication of the social reality, with a broad understanding based on social and cultural understandings of the issue (Silverman, 2011). In other words, the documents do not alone represent the social reality, and therefore it must be analyzed along with other sources to understand the broader social and cultural context in which they exist and how they are effectively trying to construct social reality. This means that there is a need to understand the intertextuality of the documents being analyzed, as the documents produced by SHEIN only make sense in their context and in conversation with other sources. Establishing this relationship and intertextualities are part of the analysis (Silverman, 2011). The textual clues in the documents that I am analyzing are all part of establishing and constructing a form of social reality, and analyzing this is part of understanding how SHEIN is able to signal what they want to their customers. The language used in these documents allow me “to track and analyze how language builds and sustains social reality” (Silverman, 2011, p. 121). I argue that the language used in these documents is an important factor when considering how it constitutes a social reality created, as is the argument I am making, in order to relay information to consumers with the end goal of selling a product.

## **4.2 Selection of documents**

In order to do my analysis, I am using many sources on human rights, workers’ rights, and CSR. I believe that a broad overview of facts and challenges is helpful in bringing these themes together. In doing my analysis, the main documents that I am working on are chosen because they are useful and applicable for looking at the case that I have decided on. My choice of SHEIN as a case is based on it being a well-known brand, that has been under scrutiny for violations of workers’ rights and trying to cover this up with propaganda by inviting influencers to visit their factories and showcase SHEIN from their ‘best side’ (Han, 2023). I have decided to use two documents from SHEIN: their ‘Supply Chain Transparency Statement’ and their ‘Sustainability and Social Impact’ document, both available on their website. SHEIN shares their documents on two different websites. Their corporate website [sheingroup.com](https://sheingroup.com) and their retail website [shein.com](https://shein.com). As it related to who the intended audience are, it is of my interest that the documents I am analyzing are on their retail site, indicating who the recipient is understood to be. This gives us an indication of for whom this document is written, which further elucidates the purpose of the document and the incentive to write and publish it. When we then look at the

language, it is notable that it sheds the brand in a positive light, given the previous stated information. If the end goal is to sell a product, such a document may be interpreted by consumers to answer concerns and help put worries on unethical business and industry practices at rest. In a highly discussed documentary produced by the British YouTube channel ‘Channel 4’, an inside investigation showed evidence of systemic worker exploitation at two separate factories among the thousands that SHEIN operated in Guangzhou, China (Channel 4, 2022). SHEIN, who launched their brand in 2015 and soared in sales during the pandemic, much thanks to their use of social media platforms such as TikTok, supplies their garments to over 200 countries worldwide and have come under scrutiny multiple times due to investigations on worker exploitation and terrible working conditions (Channel 4). While they are not transparent on how much they are selling, it is estimated that their business amasses more than \$30 billion USD annually (Fonrouge, 2024). The contrast between what SHEIN reports in their documents and what is being reported to happen in their supply chains makes this a case that is worth studying in order to see the underlying problem that is, I argue, the lack of systems of accountability for corporations. This is the case of my analysis. According to Bryman (2016), an evaluation of documents chosen for an analysis can be split into four parts: 1) authenticity: whether the evidence comes from a valid source; 2) credibility: whether the evidence is free from or suspected of error and distortion; 3) representativeness: whether the evidence can exemplify and represent a typical form of its type; and 4) meaning: whether the evidence is clear and if it is comprehensible. Based on these, I wish to explain the process of choosing the documents that I have chosen for this study. When it comes to authenticity, the documents that I have chosen are published on the retail website of SHEIN, which is a choice I have to be in direct conversation with the company that I am analyzing. As it relates to credibility, I must have faith in the fact that these are posted on SHEIN’s website and that they are credible for that reason. However, in looking at these documents, I have noticed some technical errors, which I will be discussing further in my ‘results’ section. For the criteria of representativeness, I want to point out that, as I have discussed in chapter 2, many companies and brands choose to have documents on their websites describing how they are aligning their business model with regards to human rights and due diligence. Therefore, this is representative for the greater garment sector. Whether the documents do represent a broader common practice or not, they are still part of how SHEIN represents itself to consumers and are therefore an important part of this analysis. However, some links included on their pages that are supposed to bring the user to pages on further information are faulty and therefore this further limits accessibility to

their documents and information that is supposedly available to the public. For the fourth point, on meaning, the evidence is clear as it documents SHEIN's practice and discusses specific points of this, such as giving evidence on wages for workers. The information is therefore understandable and will not be a problem in the process of analysis.

I have chosen to conduct a document analysis of key documents regarding the issue of CSR as well as my case on the implementation of these within the industry, using SHEIN as an example. There are many questions to ask as I am analyzing these documents. What is language without action? Is it simply performative? And what consequences can this have, when a brand like SHEIN reportedly does not follow up on the initiatives that they themselves claim to be doing in their statements? According to LeBaron (2020), worker exploitation within the garment sector is, in general, rampant, and, more importantly, it is a well-known issue. In recent years, SHEIN has been under fire for inviting influencers, people who have a substantial following on social media, on a trip to look at their factories and film and share content of the trip (Han, 2023).

In the discussion of my findings, I will be making use of other sources along with the chosen documents. For this purpose, I have focused on finding existing literature that relates to my topic. That includes literature on human rights, workers' rights, and CSR, as well as literature that specifically looks at SHEIN. I have also specifically read up on sociological texts regarding these. I have also looked into specific journals where the overall theme is relevant for my research and have looked specifically for articles related to human rights and workers' rights. These themes have also been the main part of my general searches in the search engine 'Oria' which is provided by my institution, as well as Google Scholar. I have also looked into literature by experts in relevant fields and have looked into non-fiction books and textbooks within the relevant fields of human rights and workers' rights. While most of my data has been collected through means of peer reviewed or otherwise professional sources, I want to acknowledge the importance of ensuring that my research does not have a top-bottom approach. As the topic I am working with is sensitive as it relates to the everyday lives and exploitation of people, I want to ensure I am also incorporating journalist articles that relay information more directly from workers, such as unions or other non-unionized workers critiquing their working conditions.

As mentioned, these are the main documents that I am using for my analysis: the SHEIN documents 'SHEIN Supply Chain Transparency Statement' and 'Sustainability & Social Impact'. These documents are documents from the fast fashion brand SHEIN, who, as I will

discuss further, has become immensely popular over the past few years. There are other documents that SHEIN have on similar issues, however, these exist on another website, seemingly one that is more focused on the corporate side of SHEIN, called sheingroup.com. The reason why I have chosen to not look at these documents, although they may overall be relevant to my analysis, is because they are not posted on SHEIN's main website. The documents I have chosen are available on SHEIN's retail website, meaning that they are accessible for consumers who are already on the website. If SHEIN wants to reach consumers, then the documents that are available on their retail website are the most likely for consumers to find. These documents will then be a part of the image that the brand is trying to construct, which is an essential part of my analysis. Documents that are available to consumers directly from the same website they may buy the clothing from shapes the image of the brand to consumers. This makes these documents relevant.

As tools for my discussion, I am using other available information, such as reports and journalism, and specifically evidence of misconduct brought through the Channel 4 documentary as it juxtaposes many of SHEIN's claims. I will also be using information on CSR as well as my theoretical framework to conduct an analysis and discussion on the use of CSR by SHEIN.

### **4.3 Epistemological and ontological foundation**

When doing qualitative research, there are epistemological and ontological questions that are, in many ways, tied to the researcher's choice of method (Bryman, 2016). I will therefore discuss these research strategies as they apply to this study. Within the qualitative research methods, the general norm is that the epistemological position of the research is interpretivist. This means that there is a focus on understanding the social world. This is done by interpretation and studying social interactions (Bryman, 2016). As a researcher, it is important that I am vary of my own background and how it informs how I view my research. I am therefore grounding my research in an epistemological standpoint, as this is a part of the general understanding that I am basing my analysis on. As the foundation of this study is questioning the stated reality, as it relates to analyzing the reality behind SHEIN's claims, the epistemological framework is mostly based on a critical realist understanding of the social world, focusing on analyzing the structures that are upheld in society (Bryman, 2016). In a practical sense, this means that I am observing the social reality presented through the

documents I am analyzing, and looking for further explanations as a means to see what is not observable in these documents. With a critical outlook, as is further explained in chapter 3, this allows me to look at the constructed reality and analyze whether it is indeed performative. Bryman (2016) argues that the imperative of this outlook is to challenge the status quo, and with the garment industry growing the way it is, this is a crucial part of my analysis.

The ontological position associated with qualitative research is constructionist. This implies that there is a worldview based on the understanding that social categories are created, or constructed (Bryman, 2016). This, I have previously described, as it is a major position within sociological thought. As I am using a social constructivist approach to this study, the ontological considerations I am making are based on this. Ontology is an understanding of the social, such as structures and other factors that influence our everyday lives (Bryman, 2016). For the purpose of this research, the aspect of ontology is central, as it is a very present aspect of my analysis. I will be basing my ontological standpoint on constructionism. Constructionism is an ontological position, which argues that the social world and social phenomena are continuously influenced by humans as social actors (Bryman, 2016). As opposed to objectivism, which is an ontological standpoint based on understanding social phenomena as independent of the social world and actors which allows for the understanding that phenomena are fixed and untethered by social influence, the purpose of constructionism is to challenge the notion of social categories and organization being natural, and to see the factors that influence these (Bryman, 2016). The main difference then is the question of whether we as social actors are able to influence the social structures that we interact with. These structures are to be understood as constructed and not natural or innate, and having an ontological standpoint in constructionism allows me to have an understanding that everything we interact with in our everyday lives, such as the social structures that apply to workers' rights and human rights, are socially constructed phenomena. The reason for why I am choosing to look at my research from a constructivist standpoint is that I want to consider social phenomena as constructed in the sense that the systems we interact with are made by humans and can in turn be changed by humans. I believe that thinking of the social world as constructed leaves room for change, and when discussing exploitation, this is a framework that allows for hope for change. As mentioned in the section on theoretical framework, I am using the concept and framework of social constructionism as part of my analysis. Therefore, the ontological standpoint in this study is very clearly based in constructionism, and this is a concept that permeates my research process and is at the forefront of my analysis.

## 4.4 Limitations

As there are some limitations to this thesis, I wish to go through these. In this section, I will discuss my study's relevance, validity and applicability, and my potential biases going into this research.

### 4.4.1 Relevance & limitations

For this text I am writing on the issues concerning workers' rights in the global garment sector, specifically the impact of CSR. While, as mentioned, there are other concerns in this sector such as lack of ensuring workers' health and safety, my focus is on their compensation for the work that they do, considering the low cost of the end product that is sold to consumers. While I do think all these issues exist simultaneously and one cannot necessarily be fully understood without the other, I find that there has been more information and attention on the health and safety aspect. This does not mean that health and safety issues have been solved, rather I want to focus on wages as it has not been given as much attention. I believe that in order to make changes to the industry, and others who have similar problems, there needs to be made changes ensuring workers' conditions on all aspects are significantly improved. Therefore, while health and safety issues are a prominent factor in what I am discussing, my focus will be on wages.

As there are limits to how much I am able to cover in 30 000 words, I am unable to write about all the challenges that people working in the garment sector face. Among these are environmental challenges as well as health and safety concerns. Additionally, there are consequences of the fast fashion industry that I am unable to go into detail about in this text, such as the growing concern on garment waste and the people affected by the discarding of fast fashion items; the effect on local, natural environments due to waste and disposal of chemicals used in the making of garments; and the effect of climate change. All of these issues are tightly intertwined and deeply connected to what I am writing on, however, I am unable to cover these links within the scope of my thesis. While the garment industry at large has issues beyond the problem that I argue concerns wages, and these issues are connected as they all concern workers' rights, it is important to focus on these issues individually as well, which is what I am doing in this thesis. I am focusing on the issue of wages.



As I am writing this master thesis within the humanities and my background is in social sciences, my focus will be on the social conditions in which this problem arises. There are social conditions that underlie and uphold human rights (Frezzo, 2010), and I wish to explore these specifically in the example of the garment industry.

#### **4.4.2 Validity and applicability**

Replicability is an important part of social research, and as such I want to ensure that how I am doing my analysis is thoroughly explained and that I am not misrepresenting data. According to Bryman, validity is an important criterion for quality, which “is concerned with the integrity of the conclusions that are generated from a piece of research” (2016, p. 41). To ensure the applicability and validity of my research, I am making sure that my research method is well documented in order to limit any bias in the process and result. One central question that comes up in terms of using an exemplifying case study is how it can be proportionately representative of the industry at broad. Such concerns are valid, as the answer is that it cannot. Bryman argues that while we can appreciate what case studies do, which allows us an example of how a social issue can present itself, there will always be differences from case to case (2016). This is a reason why validity is a concern in case studies, as this does not always apply to different social settings and contexts (Bryman, 2016). Therefore, it is important to note that while I argue that SHEIN is a good example of how the fast fashion industry works today, it is only a sample of a much bigger industry and can therefore not represent the industry at whole.

#### **4.4.3 Bias**

I want to acknowledge that there is a bias in my research. The reason why this topic is of interest to me is because I have been interested in justice for workers in the garment industry for many years. My bias is then that I am apprehensive and cautious with taking what is being stated by any garment company for being true. This is because, as I have established in chapter 2, the garment industry is subject to industry wide issues that concern the exploitation of workers. As a brand on the scale of SHEIN makes statements on their labour supply chain, I therefore am wary about being optimistic that these statements translate to reality. This is one of the reasons why this particular approach to my research is a good fit: I want to look at how SHEIN’s statements translate to real action. If the result is that SHEIN is making considerable actions to ensure that their workers are treated well and able to achieve their human rights, then

that is an outcome that I welcome. My hypothesis, however, is informed by the many activists I am following on social media who are continuously calling for action due to exploitation by brands such as SHEIN. Within the framework of critical theory, the idea of a researcher having a bias and thus diluting the points that are being made is questioned, especially through what is called the 'ideology critique' (Turner, 2006). This is also a way in which one questions the neutrality of knowledge in itself, and as it applies to this research, the idea that there is bias does not translate to the research being questionable. While a bias is important to disclose, it can also be embedded in a practical way as one questions social reality (Turner, 2006). To sum up, I do have a bias as I am conducting this research, however, my bias concerns ensuring that workers in SHEIN are treated fairly, and therefore I am questioning the idea of corporations doing their due diligence. For the sake of transparency, I have no ties to SHEIN.

## **4.5 Methodological challenges**

One challenge that will impact this study is the fact that historically, there has been a lack of factual and official information regarding forced and exploitative labour, as well as slavery (LeBaron, 2020). There are many ways in which I could have chosen to conduct this research. While discussing and analyzing the discourse in documents is highly relevant in understanding the power relations at play in the industry, I wish to explore the content in light of its social impact and look at it in relation to reports on how its purpose is playing out in the everyday lives of those impacted. This is the reason why I have chosen to work with a form of analysis that looks at how documents represent a constructed reality, and applying this to a case that is controversial and widely discussed, especially on social media.

## **4.6 Chapter summary**

In this chapter, I have laid out the ways in which this study will be conducted, including method and various issues that arise with it and with the theme at hand. In order to look at the relationship between CSR as a corporation's policy and a corporation's actual practice, I have chosen to look into the example of the online fast fashion retailer SHEIN. I will be conducting a case study, looking at SHEIN's practice and their own statements, by using a document analysis to see how these correlate. In the next chapter, I will be conducting my analysis of the documents, as I have laid out in this chapter.

# 5 Analysis

In this section, I will be discussing the two chosen documents from SHEIN's website, their 'Supply Chain Transparency Statement' and 'Sustainability & Social Impact' document. As I have laid out in chapters 2, there are issues in the garment industry, specifically as they relate to this study there is a widespread and well-known issue of exploitation in supply chains. In looking at SHEIN's documents, I am specifically interested in understanding how they state their intent in ensuring safety in the production line. In this chapter, I have chosen to go through the documents based on a thematic order. The main themes that I found in the two documents I am analyzing are sustainability, workers' rights, community, and SHEIN's transparency as a part of CSR. I will be going through these as such and will finish this chapter with an overall analysis of the documents as a whole, relating to how SHEIN is doing CSR.

## 5.1 Sustainability

Sustainability is a big part of SHEIN's business model, according to their website. In SHEIN's document 'Sustainability & Social Impact', they detail their initiatives considering these issues. They do so by discussing three different subsections: "Empowering Entrepreneurs", "Supporting the Community" and "Protecting the Environment". These sections are considerably short but are visually interesting. They are sectioned out in the document using different boxes and colours and are accompanied by pictures. The first lines of 'Sustainability & Social Impact', and the first thing one sees when opening this webpage, is a picture of the UN SDG logo, with a link to SHEIN's "2021 Sustainability & Social Impact Report". I will discuss this next.

### 5.1.1 How SHEIN uses the SDGs

In SHEIN's section linking them with the SDGs, which stands on its own visually as this text is put on a gray background on the otherwise white page, the following text is included alongside the picture:

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a framework for our environmental sustainability and social impact strategy. We

support all 17 SDGs, which help guide our priorities and programs, and which will guide our future goal setting and reporting.

We are a signatory to the United Nations Global Compact (UNGC) and support the ten principles focused on human rights, labor, environment, and anti-corruption. (SHEIN, n.d.c, paras 1-2).



(SHEIN, n.d.b)

It is clear that SHEIN is claiming their commitment to sustainability in this text. The aligning with the SDGs as well as the UNGC shows that SHEIN are trying to ensure their business is focused on sustainability and human rights compliance. While this statement is good, there is no further evidence supporting these claims in this section. In the last section of ‘Sustainability & Social Impact’, which is called “Protecting the Environment” they discuss their environmental responsibility, and sustainability, writing:

We have invested in costlier thermal digital transfer and digital direct printing technologies in an effort to reduce water use throughout the production process of SHEIN-branded items. (SHEIN, n.d.c, para 13).

Although the environmental impact is not part of my analysis, the way that it is presented is part of the bigger picture in this analysis. SHEIN makes claims that they are taking initiatives, however, provides no details on this.

## 5.2 Workers’ rights

In section two of the document ‘Supply Chain Transparency Statement’, “Our structure, Operations and Supply Chains,” SHEIN discusses their business structure, such as what products they sell and inform the reader that their distribution is based in California, USA. They also disclose that their suppliers, manufacturers, and distributors primarily are in China, but

also in the United States, Australia, Turkey, and Brazil. They further discuss their production facilities, writing:

While we do not have direct ownership of production facilities, we recognize that our responsibilities extend throughout our supply chains. We strive to work with suppliers who share our commitment to ethical practices and respect for human rights. (SHEIN, n.d.b, p. 1).

In this quote, SHEIN are claiming that they strive to uphold human rights and that they are committed to respect human rights. However, this is stated right after they say that they have not direct ownership over their factories, where allegations of illegal labour practices and exploitation are known to come from. Situating themselves as distant from the production allows the reader to see the gap between SHEIN as a brand and the factories in which their clothes are made and may be a way for SHEIN to distance themselves from any allegations of misconduct and exploitation in their supply chain. As far as intentions go, it is important to keep in mind that as they are not providing any further information, this phrasing allows for some separation between SHEIN and their workers, although SHEIN claims to take responsibility and have ethical practices.

### **5.2.1 Addressing worker exploitation & human rights**

In the third section of their ‘Supply Chain Transparency Statement’, ‘Our Policies and Commitments’, they discuss their commitment to international and regional standards when it comes to upholding workers’ rights and ensuring that there is no misconduct in their supply chain.

At SHEIN, we are committed to combating modern slavery and human trafficking in all its forms. This Modern Slavery Statement outlines our approach to addressing these issues within our operations and supply chains. We are dedicated to upholding the principles of the California Transparency in Supply Chains Act of 2010, the International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions, and the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGP) (SHEIN, n.d.b, pp. 1-2).

Here, SHEIN uses the term ‘modern slavery’ which, as I have discussed previously, is a broad term that does not go into specifics on what forms of modern slavery are meant by its use. The term, as argued in chapter 1, misconstrues reality in making issues such as labour exploitation

seem like it occurs through criminal networks and is not a systemic issue within the industry itself. This is a choice that allows them to essentially choose whichever definition fits depending on what they may apply it to, and I argue that using this term removes some responsibility from SHEIN as the corporation overseeing the supply chain. Ultimately, it is their responsibility to ensure that their workers are safe. Further, SHEIN states their intent to uphold local and global standards. Here, they vaguely state ILO ‘conventions’, and do not specify applicable conventions. Further in this section, SHEIN states that they “work to improve working and living conditions across [their] global value chain and in each community” (SHEIN, n.d.b, p. 2). This is, again, not specified any further, although they go on to state that their “community includes not only employees and the customers [they] serve, but also all the stakeholders along [their] value chain” (SHEIN, n.d.b, p. 2). This definition does not align with their stated intent to improve conditions in each community, as having this definition right after this allows for a broad definition of community which includes their customers and all their high earning employees such as top positions. This general intent does not, it would seem, align with this definition, and as such it is a strange choice to include in the same section. This is coupled with the overall vagueness of their statements. In the last part of this section, SHEIN writes that they “source products and materials from an extensive network of third-party suppliers across the globe and invest in [their] collaboration with these supply chain partners” (SHEIN, n.d.b, p. 2). This leads to my next section, where I will be discussing SHEIN’s statements on these partnerships further.

### **5.2.2 Partnerships**

In the section of ‘Supply Chain Transparency Statement’, “SHEIN’s Code of Ethics and Human Rights Policy”, they briefly explain that they have documents related to ethics and human rights and link to their SHEIN Group website, where these documents are supposedly listed. They explain that their code of ethics state that they partner with “suppliers who uphold the highest labor standards and actively prevent forced labor in their supply chain” (SHEIN, n.d.b, p. 2). For the description given on their human rights policy, which as discussed before is a standard for corporations to have in order to address human rights as part of their policies, they state their commitment to ensuring that workers are protected and writing that they “reject forced labor, discrimination, and unsafe conditions” (SHEIN, n.d.b, p. 2). While they link to a document that describes this in some more detail, the statements made in this document are

general and do not point to any action to prevent or remedy human rights violations. The following section, “SHEIN’s Supplier Code of Conduct” has more text than the previous ones, and covers their “expectations regarding labor practices, human rights, and ethical conduct for [their] suppliers and manufacturers” (SHEIN, n.d.b, p. 2). This, they state, applies to all third-party suppliers, agents, and brokers, and they write that new contracts “must also undergo a vetting process before starting to work with SHEIN” (SHEIN, n.d.b, p. 2). They also state that they have processes such as audits, where suppliers are assessed, and that these also must adhere to their code of conduct as well as their ‘SHEIN Responsible Sourcing’ which they explain further in the next section. Overall, this section has more substance, but falls short of providing any specifics on their practices and is written in rather general terms. In the next section, “SHEIN’s Responsible Sourcing Program”, they detail their efforts to ensure that their sourcing practices are in line with their “commitment to ethical sourcing” and their sourcing program, which “establishes clear definitions and criteria for violations” (SHEIN, n.d.b, p. 3). They explain what actions they take to ensure that this is upheld, such as using third party verification agencies, auditors, and employing a working group of experts to look into potential risks. It is worth noting that SHEIN has internal auditors, which, although they state that they work with third-party agencies, allows for an understanding of their auditing system as less reliable.

**5.2.3 Wages**

In Section 8 of ‘Supply Chain Transparency Statement’, “SHEIN’s Commitment to Pay Fair Wages”, SHEIN gives the reader information on their standard wages, including the following table to illustrate their wages compared to other local standards:

Comparison of Monthly Salaries by City:

City	Guangzhou		Dongguan		Foshan		Shantou		Zhongshan		Huizhou		Ganzhou		Jinhua	
	USD	CNY	USD	CNY	USD	CNY	USD	CNY	USD	CNY	USD	CNY	USD	CNY	USD	CNY
Local Minimum Wage	322	2,300	266	1,900	266	1,900	241	1,720	266	1,900	241	1,720	233	1,610	290	2,070
Average pay for private employees in the city	869	6,204	880	6,287	824	5,887	646	4,616	691	4,939	1,060	7,570	616	4,401	707	5,053
Average at SHEIN's Supplier Factories	1,227	9,068	1,088	7,906	1,037	7,608	839	6,517	1,160	8,647	1,175	8,361	957	7,049	1,119	8,006

(SHEIN, n.d.b)

SHEIN writes that their wages, like in “any other industry (...) are based on different roles and the skills required” (SHEIN, n.d.b, p. 5). They write that they work in “accordance with local laws and regulations, as well as international labor standards” to ensure “a safe and

fair workplace” (SHEIN, n.d.b, p. 5). It is a good sign that SHEIN is providing a list of their wages, and even more that they have established a relationship between the average and minimum pay that readers can compare to those of SHEIN. In all provided categories, the average pay at SHEIN’s supplier factories is higher than local standards. This is information that is public, which is an important factor into SHEIN’s transparency and image. However, information that is up to date is not available, as this data is from a process taking place between April and June 2022.

When it comes to working hours, SHEIN’s ‘Supply Chain Transparency Statement’ does not detail what this entails. In the section “Working Hours and Voluntary Overtime” SHEIN claims that they “are committed to promoting reasonable working hours” and outlines two principles: “Compliance with Legal Requirements” and “Reasonable Working Hours” where they refer to policy regarding maximum working hour limits and rest (SHEIN, n.d.b, p. 5). There are no numbers given in this section, although SHEIN writes that they require compliance with local regulations.

#### **5.2.4 Who are SHEIN’s workers?**

In the section of ‘Sustainability & Social Impact’ called “Empowering Entrepreneurs,” SHEIN writes:

As a large, global business, we have the opportunity to create transformational change in the fashion industry and open the door for others. SHEIN invests in technology, training and financial resources to support the business development and growth of manufacturers, small and medium businesses, illustrators and designers. (SHEIN, n.d.c, para 3).

They further expand on a program they have launched, which focuses on supporting emerging artists and designers. This is coupled with a logo of two hands presented in a handshake and forming a heart, as well as a picture of what appears to be a designer sitting in an open office space, working on a computer and a drawing tablet to design clothes.



(SHEIN, n.d.c)

In this section, they write:



SHEIN X allows designers to focus on what they love – creating fashion – while SHEIN helps them turn their designs into a business. In 2021, nearly 1,500 independent designers launched their brands and businesses through SHEIN X. We expect this number to grow another 3,000 in 2022. (SHEIN, n.d.c, para 4).

Situating the ability to design for their brand as a way for artists to “focus on what they love” (SHEIN, n.d.c, para 3), allows SHEIN to present themselves as an opportunity for artists, who are workers for the brand as they sell their labour in return for compensation. This further makes SHEIN seem like a brand that allow their workers to express themselves, and value their workers. The expected rise in number of designers working for them highlights one of the main issues that I have highlighted when it comes to fast fashion: the intense overproduction of garments.

### **5.2.5 Due Diligence**

In section 7 of their ‘Supply Chain Transparency Statement, “Our Supply Chain Due Diligence”, they write:

Supply chain due diligence plays a crucial role in eradicating modern slavery withing our operations. It serves as a comprehensive and proactive approach to identify, prevent, and mitigate the risks of modern slavery throughout our supply chains (SHEIN, n.d.b, p. 3).

They further explain that due diligence gives them an understanding of the conditions and practices in their supply chain which allows them to “identify high-risk areas, engage with manufacturing partners to address these risks” and implement measures to ensure that they are able to detect any instances of modern slavery (SHEIN, n.d.b, p. 3). In this section, they include a table on their auditing efforts from 2022, where they state that there were 2425 conducted audits covering 1941 manufacturers, as well as 387 audits of textile and packaging suppliers. They also state that they have “built a multi-channel feedback system” for workers on all levels to be able to “anonymously submit complaints, feedback and suggestions via email, phone or a commonly used local chat app” (SHEIN, n.d.b, p. 4). Overall, this table gives the impression that SHEIN is taking their responsibility over their workers seriously. It mentions many assurance systems, although these are not detailed.

## 5.3 Community & SHEIN's CSR initiatives

In both of the analyzed documents, SHEIN mentions their community many times. The community is often connected to their CSR initiatives, which is why I will be discussing these together.

### 5.3.1 What is 'community' to SHEIN

SHEIN has a section in their 'Supply Chain Transparency Statement' dedicated to their efforts to 'give back' to communities, called "Giving Back to Our Global Community". They claim that the act of giving back, along with their social responsibility, "are powerful tools in tackling the risk of modern slavery" (SHEIN, n.d.b, p. 7). Their argument is that if they engage with local communities, the risk of exploitation is lowered, as they "create opportunities for vulnerable individuals" (SHEIN, n.d.b, p. 7). This is part of their SHEIN Cares initiative. In the section "Supporting the Community" of their 'Sustainability & Social Impact' SHEIN describes their outreach and philanthropic efforts. In this section, they do not define who the supposed community they are supporting is, but they list charities they donate to. Here they write:

Given SHEIN's global reach and diverse customer base, we understand our responsibility to impact change, and we partner with organizations advancing some of the world's most urgent causes. We have supported a number of charitable causes in the communities in which we live and work. We know this is just a start, and there is much more to be done (SHEIN, n.d.c, para 5).

In this section, SHEIN starts by describing their customer base as 'diverse'. This word is not chosen at random, as it allows for the reader to understand that there are many different people buying their products. In other words, this brand does not present themselves as exclusive, high-end, and out of reach to the normal consumer. Instead, they situate themselves as an inclusive brand. They further discuss their "responsibility to impact change" which directly addresses the importance of responsibility to a brand (SHEIN, n.d.c). While they list different causes they have donated to later on in this section, the lack of descriptors on what change they want to impact and, further, which causes they find to be 'urgent' makes this statement underwhelming. If they are not directly addressing the issues they want to address, how does the reader understand their supposed social impact? The last sentence included in this quote also fails at

being specific about what exactly SHEIN is doing in order to be a responsible business, as it only states their intent to continue working on their responsibility in the future.

### **5.3.2 SHEIN's Philanthropy**

When it comes to philanthropy, as states earlier, this is a big part of SHEIN's image as they present themselves in their documents. In section 11 of 'Supply Chain Transparency Statement', "Supplier Community Empowerment Program" they further discuss their stance on donations and shows that this is an important part of their public image. SHEIN has established a supplier community empowerment program, an initiative which they claim can contribute to a "more resilient supply chain that upholds human rights and ensures the well-being of workers" through "factory enhancement, technology innovation, training support and community engagement" (SHEIN, n.d.b, pp. 6-7). SHEIN details how much money they have spent on upgrading workspaces, which allows for what at a first glance seems like transparency, though they do not detail where these workspaces are, what upgrades they needed or what was done. The workspaces are essential for their workers, so these upgrades, and the fact that SHEIN is transparent on using \$1.3 million USD in 2022 on this is positive.

SHEIN also discusses their Spotlight Program, writing that this is a program where workers can apply for grants. The program is supposed to "[offer] financial support and help communities through life's biggest moments, and families in need due to financial hardship caused by major illnesses" (SHEIN, n.d.b, p. 7). Regarding this, they state how many they helped since 2021. These numbers are, however, undated. The document itself is signed in August 2023, so the reader can assume that this is the date these numbers refer to.

SHEIN Cares, the philanthropic arm of the company's greater social impact agenda, makes monetary and in-kind contributions to organizations aligned with the company's mission: empowering entrepreneurs, helping communities thrive and protecting the environment. Through activations, monetary grants and product donations, SHEIN has raised over \$1M for important philanthropic causes (SHEIN, n.d.c, para 6).

In this section, SHEIN describes their philanthropy. Following this quote, they list various philanthropic contributions. Here, SHEIN portrays themselves as a responsible brand as they refer to what has been a staple instrument in the CSR framework over the years. The idea of giving back to communities is positive and shapes an image of SHEIN as a responsible business

who uses their profits for good. SHEIN also has an initiative called ‘SHEIN’s Light-A-Wish’, which they in their supply chain transparency statement disclose that this campaign has contributed almost USD \$1 million towards charitable causes. Additionally, they list donations going to organizations dealing with support for LGBTQ communities, women leaders, racial justice, and cancer. They do not specify when these donations were given.

While the list of donations includes important efforts such as for addressing the covid-19 pandemic, I want to address these as well. The philanthropic efforts are not elaborated on, rather they are briefly described, which does not give the reader any extensive understanding of exactly how these donations are contributing to social impact. The very first point that SHEIN describes is an event they held in order “to celebrate the SHEIN community’s awareness-raising efforts” (SHEIN, n.d.c, para 7). With the lack of information on what this event did, other than earning “over 4 million impressions to date” we are left with little information on how this is part of SHEIN’s efforts as social impact (SHEIN, n.d.c, para 7). There are multiple issues with this point, as it does not describe what type of event this was, other than that it was a virtual event. It also shows that SHEIN’s top point on their philanthropic list is an event for SHEIN. While describing good deeds, this does not underlie an argument of SHEIN doing anything of significance, although it seems as if this is what they attempt to do. I find it strange that, in an effort to tell their consumers of their philanthropic efforts, SHEIN decides to start their list with an event that seemingly has no impact on their aforementioned goals to “[empower] entrepreneurs, [help] communities thrive and [protect] the environment” (SHEIN, n.d.c, para 6). The next point in their list on their philanthropic causes is the covid-19 pandemic, where they state that they donated an undisclosed amount to the ‘UN COVID-19 solidarity response fund’ as well as donating “over 1 million masks and other PPE to medical and frontline workers around the world” (SHEIN, n.d.c, para 8). Again, SHEIN is vague about what they are actually doing with these donations. In the same point that addresses their donations towards helping during the pandemic, they also describe their donations to those affected by a flood in the Henan Province in 2021. SHEIN states here that they donated “nearly one million dollars” and that this area is a place where “many of [their] partners call home” (SHEIN, n.d.c, para 8). While the list generally consists of one cause per bullet point, it is interesting that SHEIN decided to add these together. It is also peculiar that they again fail to be descriptive. The word ‘partner’ does not entail what relationship they have with SHEIN. It would be interesting to learn if these are workers for SHEIN, such as if this flooded area was home to a SHEIN factory or office space, or if it is other brands or companies that SHEIN is

partnered with. Conflating the issues of the pandemic and of a flooding impacting SHEIN's partners should, at any point, not be done, considering that this conflation is not happening elsewhere in the document. SHEIN's next bullet points is:

SHEIN's Light-a-Wish campaign called upon customers to make their voices heard and vote for which organizations would receive a significant donation; they chose to direct that funding to organizations supporting racial justice, at-risk children and the environment, such as the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, Together We Rise, Ecologi and multiple animal welfare groups (SHEIN, n.d.c, para 9).

This point directly addresses SHEIN's customers and is therefore a crucial part in how they wish to present themselves to their customers. This also puts the responsibility for the donations on the customers, with SHEIN acting as a helping hand for the customers' interests. It is interesting to see that the customers chose organizations that work with issues which work against what the fast fashion industry, of which SHEIN is a contributor to, such as the climate crisis and issues related to the use of animal furs and skin. Again, SHEIN is vague in their statements, with wording such as 'significant' donations and donations to 'multiple' organizations. This does not assure the reader of the legitimacy of the claims.

## **5.4 Transparency**

Transparency is essential in CSR, and is something that SHEIN has a focus on, as they have a specific document on the issue. In SHEIN's 'Supply Chain Transparency Statement' they have listed 13 points that they detail in allocated sections. The document itself is posted to the website as pictures, and not as text or as a downloadable pdf or other file. It is therefore not an easy document to work with. The way that it is posted means that there are page numbers in the middle of a webpage that one is supposed to scroll through. The pictures themselves are not of complete pages, but instead of smaller parts of pages and sometimes of the bottom of a page, including the page number, and the top of the next page. The way that this is presented makes one wonder why these pictures were uploaded as they were.

In the section "Supplier Performance Evaluation and Continuous Improvement" in their 'Supply Chain Transparency Statement', SHEIN writes that evaluating the performance of their suppliers "is crucial in addressing modern slavery and human trafficking" (SHEIN, n.d.b, p. 5). SHEIN details their grading scale for evaluations of manufacturing facilities and state that the grades that these receive affect their partnership. They refer to numbers from 2022 on conducted

audits, where they reiterate information, they have referred to previously in the same document, adding no more context for these numbers. As part of their transparency, they write that they “have chosen to disclose further details on Zero Tolerance Violations” that are discovered during audits (SHEIN, n.d.b, p. 6). While this is a positive statement, there is no further disclosing of any details regarding their treatment of zero tolerance violations, other than that all these that have been found have either “been remediated within the required timelines” according to their guidelines or have caused termination of partnerships. There is no information given on how many of these violations they have found, and therefore no information on how many terminations they have caused. This could be useful information when looking at how SHEIN manages their supply chains, and given the wording of their document, it would be expected that they would provide some details.

Overall, SHEIN’s document concerning transparency does not go into enough detail on the issues they discuss. It is not explicitly said, however, it seems as if the document is directed to legal submission at the state level in California, USA, and not towards their consumer base. The document reads as a legal document and not as a statement that is meant for their customers to read. This placement signals that this is something customers should be able to look at, but the document itself does not appear to be directed at customers. This accessibility is a positive step to ensure transparency and trust.

#### **5.4.1 What messages do SHEIN’s documents send?**

As I was reading these documents, there are some overall issues that I found, such as how SHEIN does not provide any updated information in these, and they provide no date of upload. In SHEIN’s ‘Sustainability & Social Impact’ document, the messaging on sustainability seems at a first glance to be a good look, as SHEIN uses a well-known logo, as pictured below for reference, and the placement and use of visual effects make this seem like a legitimate commitment. The first thing on their ‘Sustainability and Social Impact’ webpage is to their ‘2021 Sustainability and Social Impact Report’. However, the first thing that I noticed was that the link to the report does not work. It sent me to a website that said “OOPS... There is something wrong with our server. We are trying to fix it. Please try again later.”. As I have been doing this research, I have tried to open this link multiple times, over the span of a few months, and the link is still faulty. This seems, at best, a mistake, but can also signal that 1) there is no report, or 2) the report is taken down for reasons unknown. The documents overall make access

to information available to consumers, but the information given lacks depth and evidence to back up the claims being made. While they both have a visual profile that makes them seem serious, with one being visually interesting and the other being a well-structured legal document, these have the effect of legitimizing the claims that the brand is making.

# 6 Discussion

In this part of my thesis, I will be discussing my findings more generally, with the help of my theoretical framework as well as other information that helps entangle what I found in my analysis. I will first go through the main claims that SHEIN makes and how SHEIN uses CSR in their documents. I will be discussing these using my theoretical framework. After this, I will discuss these findings more generally in terms of their significance as well as discuss the limitations of my analysis.

## 6.1 Main findings & critiques

In their documents, SHEIN establishes an image of themselves as giving and responsible, with statements on philanthropy and building community. They make many claims on how they work to give back to their community. As previously discussed, their community is described as not only workers and others affiliated with the brand, but also their customers. SHEIN discusses their commitment to human rights and ethical practice, stating that these are an essential part of their business structure. While their claim to international legal instruments such as conventions is vague, as they mention no specifics rather than referring to these in general, they refer to practices such as auditing to ensure that workers are treated well and compensated fairly according to their own guidelines. This work is not described in detail. However, they do discuss it in enough detail that the readers are left with an impression of genuine commitment. This includes the transparency displayed in providing a table of standard wages that shows that, in audited factories, SHEIN's workers are paid better than local standards. However, with lack of further information on the numbers given as well as the information given not being updated since 2022, this lacks substance and does not adequately decedent their role as responsible, nor respond to allegations of misconduct, which I will discuss further in the next section. As the numbers presented are from an auditing process took place two years ago as I am writing this, this is critique worthy. If they claim to be transparent about their business practice, there should be updated information available on their website. Additionally, if the lack of updated information is due to a lack of auditing, this is concerning and raises questions as to why their commitment does not continue. Overall, not having updated numbers is concerning as it entails that either the data is not made available, which disputes SHEIN's claim to transparency, or audits have not been conducted, which undermines SHEIN's



responsibility as it puts workers at risk for exploitation. Therefore, while at first glance this gives the impression that SHEIN cares, it falls apart upon further inspection. Further, as SHEIN discusses their commitment to due diligence in their supply chains, there are further concerns regarding their transparency. It is part of the overall issue with SHEIN's transparency that they do not provide any details into the specifics of what they claim. Although the initiatives described in the table describing their due diligence commitments and initiatives are positive and provides an image of SHEIN being a responsible business, they do not follow up on this with details on how this works in practice and if they have any prominent effect. The table and its contents lack information on what they do, there are no details on the outcome of the audits, nor are there any details on their feedback system. It is also worth noting that they do not disclose which 'local chat app' they are using. Knowing which one could allow the reader to check if this is a secure way to communicate. The anonymity that SHEIN states that their feedback systems provide is therefore questionable. It is also unsure if workers are at risk if using this service. This is another point of apparent transparency where at a second look there is none. We have to take their claim as it is, which is vague and lack evidence.

This problem is also present in the information given on SHEIN's philanthropy. Overwhelmingly, this list of supposed good deeds is vague and oddly prioritized. If SHEIN wants to ensure consumers that their business is doing good deeds, and taking responsibility through actions such as philanthropy, then this list should be more extensive. The fact that the first 'cause' on their list is an online SHEIN event makes me wonder how they perceive their priorities to be. If the corporation's priority is to promote themselves and their "awareness-raising efforts" rather than addressing reported labour exploitation in their supply chains, this is not a good look. However, as this is framed as a way for SHEIN to 'give back' and is listed together with other donations that affect people, this becomes a way for SHEIN to claim that they are being responsible. As this is part of what shapes SHEIN's identity, it seems as if they are trying to construct an understanding of their brand as 'good'. This list comes off as performative, as it states many things but does not provide any evidence, nor any comprehensive information. When SHEIN intends to form an identity without any relationship between what is stated on paper and what is the internal reality, this is conflicting, and it relates to Butler's (2010) idea that performativity needs to be reiterated as it is due to fail. Without seeing any real meaning in this list, it does therefore perform the image that SHEIN wants to craft, which is that they 'care'. Philanthropy has a long history in the voluntary economic aspect of CSR (Carroll, 2008) and shows that SHEIN is careful in crafting their public image. While

their donations are valuable, it stands in contrast to the lack of information on workers' rights in their own system, which leads to argue that this is a performance that is intended to shape trust with their customers – an important part of CSR. It is, in other words, a part of the identity that SHEIN attempts to shape through their statements and a central part of how they wish to be perceived. This perception is shaped through the identity that SHEIN constructs, and the goal is always to be understood as socially acceptable (Lauwo et al., 2020). The act of constructing this identity shapes the identity of SHEIN as a brand as giving and charitable. As Heal (2005) argues, the practise of CSR may be beneficial to a brand's social renown, helping establish an image of the corporation that aligns with specific values. Based on what SHEIN claims in their documents, I argue that they are trying to shape a socially acceptable identity as a brand that cares, yet this falls short due to the lack of information and what reads as a lack of commitment to the standards they set for themselves.

As it pertains to SHEIN's commitment to sustainability, it is to be understood that this topic would have been part of the report they referred to in the beginning of this document, but as of right now we cannot know due to this being unavailable. The fact that their webpage shows a faulty link does not do well in crafting the image of SHEIN as responsible, as the lack of information and that this problem has not been picked up on may be interpreted as SHEIN not show adequate care for the information they want the reader to access. Showcasing their intent and commitment without providing any evidence backing their claims is the issue that is at hand, this is a part of what I claim is performative about the ways in which they present their business to consumers. The intent seems to be to showcase the greatness of their business in order to show themselves from their best side to customers, however, this falls short in the action that needs to be a part of the utterance. Overall, SHEIN' document on sustainability is vague and does not refer to any evidence of the claims that SHEIN make. It suffers from not being updated, and for not having a stated date on it. This means that readers can, at a first glance, see that SHEIN is making efforts and taking responsibility, however, on further inspection one can see that there is not much substance in the claims that SHEIN is making. This goes back to Butler's (2010) argument that a statement is performative if it is only a statement and not taken into action. Based on the vagueness and lack of evidence provided in this document, it fails to show that there is action behind SHEIN's statements. This is therefore a document that serves a purpose in that SHEIN can claim that they are taking their responsibility seriously, however, the document itself does not provide any legitimacy to this. Therefore, I argue that it is only performative.

On the issue of workers' rights, SHEIN gives the reader more information. On the issue of wages, they provide a table comparing their wages to other local standards and minimum wages, where it shows that they pay their workers better across the board. However, while providing a chart that describes wages, the information surrounding this data does not elaborate on exactly how this is ensured. When dealing with an average pay, it is not stated what the absolute minimum of these wages were. These are also numbers collected during audits, and therefore they do not represent all of SHEIN's factories. While it is generally good that SHEIN conducts these audits and provide information on their findings, they do not provide any further information on how they will continue ensuring that workers are fairly compensated, nor what they do to ensure this where audits have not been conducted. Connected to wages are the actual hours that workers are expected to work. SHEIN states that they are committed to ensuring reasonable working hours for their workers but does not define what this entails. While their statement on ensuring that working hours are regulated is positive, the lack of details undermines it and gives it less credibility. It is important to discuss the power relation that are at play when discussing how a corporation claims to treat their workers. SHEIN, in discussing how they treat workers, are in part constructing a social reality for the reader. With this, it is important to look beyond the generalization that is set through this construction (Turner, 2006). With a lack of further information, the reality that SHEIN constructs through their claims, which is based on that they treat workers fairly are questionable.

## **6.2 SHEIN's claims**

As I have written in my analysis, the general issue with SHEIN's documents is the lack of evidence to back their claims. This makes the documents, and by extension SHEIN, unreliable. The major claims in SHEIN's documents are that they are responsible and follow both human rights and ethical standards, that they care about their community and donate to give back to their community, and that they take worker's rights seriously by having guidelines and conducting audits. When it comes to CSR, there are many of these that fall within this category. I will discuss these briefly.

SHEIN overall argues that they are committed to ensure that workers in their supply chains are compensated fairly and have regulations in place to ensure a cap on working hours. They strive to ensure human rights in their supply chains, and claims that they work with ethical practices, do their due diligence, and have audits on their facilities. Overall, they claim to be

transparent about these. They claim that they care for their community, and they list their philanthropic endeavours to prove this. They claim to be sustainable, however, they argue that they are committed to this without giving any evidence to support this claim.

### **6.2.1 Sustainability**

As argued, SHEIN states their intent to be sustainable, and gives a vague mention to the SDGs. They fail to mention any in specific, but as outlined in chapter 2, a relevant one for them to discuss would be SDG goal 8, as this promotes a “sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all” (United Nations, n.d). This is relevant, because as mentioned, it seeks the eradication of forced labour, child labour, and trafficking, as well as making work safer for everyone (United Nations, n.d.). The lack of specifics in discussing the SDGs, other than linking to a report that either does not exist or is made unavailable on their website, makes SHEIN appear to attempt shaping their image to be of caring for sustainability, yet not addressing it adequately. Additionally, for consumers, it would be preferable if the report that was included in SHEIN’s ‘Sustainability and Social Impact’ document was more recent, even though this report is not actually available as the link does not work. As I am writing this in the spring of 2024, a report from 2021, especially considering the context of sustainability and social impact, can be understood as SHEIN not actively caring enough about these issues to update their website. This reads as performative, as the lack of updates provides no evidence for the claims that they are trying to make that they are responsible and take sustainability seriously. ‘Sustainability & Social Impact’: Additionally, as I am writing this in the spring of 2024, the dates listed here stand out. In this section, SHEIN refers to numbers from 2021, while discussing numbers for 2022 as they have not yet been confirmed. This tells me that this section of this document has not been updated for a few years. Not having updated numbers in the documents makes it seem as if they are not consistently updating it, and therefore it is not possible to see if SHEIN’s claims are factual, based on the information they provide in the document itself. Having outdated information is therefore not contributing to a positive image for their brand.

There is also an argument to be made on the idea of sustainability with a business model that is based on overconsumption. This business model is unsustainable, as it relies on the factories to produce mass quantities of clothing quickly, leading to workers spending 17-hour shifts making sure that they meet demand, and being reprimanded by being docked over half of

their daily compensation if they make mistakes with the clothes they make (Rajvanshi et.al., 2023; Channel 4, 2022). While SHEIN claims that they ensure workers are compensated fairly and work reasonable hours, they fail to mention previous violations and the statements they make on this therefore falls short. Instead of taking responsibility and writing on their intent to ensure that these violations do not happen again, the reader will not know of previous issues based on their website. When SHEIN explains that their code of ethics state that they partner with “suppliers who uphold the highest labor standards and actively prevent forced labor in their supply chain” (SHEIN, n.d.b, p. 2), this is again not given evidence to. This brings me back to workers’ rights more generally, which I will be discussing in the next section.

### **6.2.2 Workers’ rights**

When it comes to the relationship between the corporation and the workers, there is a clear power imbalance. It is therefore crucial to investigate how SHEIN write about their workers, and what has been reported to be the everyday reality of the workers. SHEIN provides extensive information on their commitment to ensuring decent wages as part of their way of ensuring that workers’ rights are being upheld in their supply chains. Crucially, this information lacks context and updates. Their use of internal auditors is also problematic. Auditing as a process can vary a lot, and depending on who is doing it and what guidelines they have gotten, this process may not be accurate in its portrayal of the actual conditions they are assessing (LeBaron, 2020). The information that SHEIN gives on their working hours needs to be looked at with some scrutiny, as the undercover investigation in the Channel 4 documentary showed that workers stay overtime to finish their workload for the day. As mentioned above, some claim to be working 17 hours a day (Channel 4, 2022). Further, SHEIN has responded to allegations that they are breaking Chinese labour law, admitting breaches claiming they launched investigations to look further into this (Rajvanshi, et.al., 2023). Discussing their auditing process is an important step towards upholding workers’ rights, however, when dealing with serious allegations of misconduct, it is a missed opportunity for SHEIN to address this and entail how they wish to move forward in order to ensure their workers’ safety. As it is presented in their documents, with not acknowledgement of any potential misconduct, this reads as a form of certification rather than transparency. It is therefore important to note that this relates directly to consumer awareness, where SHEIN makes no attempt to make potential customers aware of any issues nor how they wish to remedy these. This is problematic, and I argue that this may be

a tactic used to construct their brand as ‘good’. This use of auditing is a way that SHEIN presents themselves as socially acceptable (Lauwo et al, 2020) by associating their brand with responsibility which is essential to CSR (Heal, 2005). By using their retail website to craft an external identity that is based on SHEIN being socially acceptable and responsible, the reader is left with an impression of SHEIN as such, with no information on the allegations that SHEIN has been subject to. With this in mind, there is an economic incentive to not state any wrongdoings, as their use of CSR, and how the brand appear to the consumer, is directly linked to sales performance (Campbell, 2007). As the end goal for SHEIN as an online retail store is to sell, it is important that they portray themselves as ‘good’ to the reader (Lauwo et al., 2020), which in this case is the consumer. It is not a good case for their claim that they are transparent when they are not admitting and owning up to such violations when discussing these issues on their retail website directed at consumers. This leads me to the case of transparency in general, which I will discuss in the next section.

### **6.2.3 CSR, philanthropy and transparency**

The last two points on the list of SHEIN’ philanthropic endeavours include gift giving. Firstly, they write that they celebrate the Chinese New Year every spring by giving their workers gifts. They also claim that their “ongoing “Spotlight” program allocates CNY ¥1 million per year to support the education of frontline workers’ children and SHEIN sponsors summer camps to provide summertime childcare” (SHEIN, n.d.c, para 10). While these intentions are good, I cannot help but wonder why they are needed. If SHEIN paid their workers a living wage, would they still need help covering their children’s education? While SHEIN may signal with this that they are helping their workers, it can also be read as their workers needing help because SHEIN is not a responsible employer. The second point on the list states that SHEIN has an in-kind donation program, and they list the non-profit organizations that they donate “clothing and accessories” to (SHEIN, n.d.c, para 11). These organizations are listed via pictures of their logos without these pictures linking to their websites. This is not consistent with an earlier point in the list where organizations were listed by names without a logo. Two times in this list, SHEIN uses the term ‘frontline workers’. This term is used twice, with two different connotations. Firstly, it is used in the context of the covid-19 pandemic, signaling that it is supposed to refer to workers in healthcare and other professions directly dealing with the pandemic outbreak. In the second use of this term, it is in the context of

SHEIN's own workers, working in their supply chains. Using this term for two different things is confusing, and an unnecessary way to use word to highlight the significance of their workers, if that is their intention. The phrase may also create an image of factory workers being prone to exposure of illness, when it is used interchangeably with healthcare workers fighting the covid-19 pandemic.

As SHEIN discusses their philanthropy, there is no data given to show how their donations have improved lives. When they discuss providing help to marginalized communities and directly to their workers, they had the opportunity to brag about their efforts. This could have given the reader more incentive to purchase from SHEIN. Instead, SHEIN makes statements on donations and charitable actions, while not providing any visual cues for the reader to relate to, and without any details on how their donations are used. Further, there are no pictures to show the enhancements that SHEIN claim to have done to their factories. As they have been subject to criticism for their working conditions, this could have been an opportunity to show how their factories look, which they suggest to being recently upgraded. If SHEIN were to take the opportunity to use their website to show how they are responsible, this could have had an impact on the reader and created a good image for the brand. Instead, SHEIN have chosen to make vague statements, where they claim to be responsible but do not provide any further information to prove this. While the statements given are vague, the message of philanthropy is still strong, and helps SHEIN construct themselves as a responsible business. This is a well-known tactic within the realm of CSR (Carroll, 2008), and one that intends to shape SHEIN's identity. As my theoretical framework suggests, the way that this is constructed leaves questions but is still a way that SHEIN externalizes their identity as a responsible brand, although this is a fabricated one. As such, this is a performative action as it uses discursive methods to claim an external identity without the internal identity, or what is happening within their supply chains, mirroring this (Butler, 2000).

## **Chapter summary**

SHEIN's documents make bold claims on their responsibility, while not providing sufficient support for their statements. This is shown in the way they discuss sustainability while being a part of fast fashion, how they have not updated their data on important issues such as wages, and how they vaguely refer to human rights while not showing how they are committed to upholding them. Overall, SHEIN provides no information on what they are stating, which

undermines their claim to be a responsible corporation. While they seem to want to send a message to the reader that they are a responsible business, this does not adequately represent the reality of their supply chains, with serious allegations of misconduct not being addressed by SHEIN. I argue that the use of CSR in these documents is used to shape or externalize the identity that SHEIN as a brand wants to have, which is responsibility and connected to their community. These traits are socially acceptable and reassuring to customers. As there are conflicting information on the accuracy of this identity, however, the I argue that the vagueness of the statements and the lack of mention to any previous misconduct is a part of the way SHEIN wishes to construct the idea that their brand respects human rights. By not discussing the problematic aspects of their business, they leave the reader with the perception of them as responsibility, which is performative as it is based on the identity being shaped through these statements rather than through evidence of their supposed responsibility. Objectives set through CSR initiatives have the purpose of preventing and eliminating labour exploitation (Carroll, 2008), however, it is well-known that they fail to do so (LeBaron, 2020). Based on what information SHEIN provides for their customers, and with the reports of violation of labour law and exploitative working conditions, it is clear that SHEIN's CSR initiatives fail. The social reality that SHEIN refers to on paper, and the identity that they construct, is not substantiated. Other sources suggest that SHEIN are in fact not responsible and that there is labour exploitation in their supply chains. Therefore, by Butler's (2010) argument that there needs to be more that discursive arguments to establish an identity, Lauwo et al.'s (2020) argument that a corporation wishes to present themselves in a specific way to their audience in order to be understood as socially acceptable, and by understanding how SHEIN is constructing an image of itself to their potential customers as being a responsible practice, I argue that SHEIN's CSR claims are performative.



# 7 Conclusion

In this thesis I have analyzed how SHEIN presents themselves to their customers, and how they represent their corporate social responsibility initiatives with an emphasis on workers' rights in their supply chains. The violation of human rights of workers through exploitation is rampant in the garment industry, and brands such as SHEIN have had multiple allegations of misconduct. Looking at what corporate social responsibility (CSR) is intended to do, and what reasons are based on its necessity, there is a gap between what CSR should help a corporation to do and what it does in reality. I argue that CSR is a tool for corporations such as SHEIN to uphold their social standing. When CSR is not properly enacted, it leads to workers being exploited. However, the brands still benefit from stating their intent, without having to show action. While this is a rather small study, only using some of SHEIN's documents, it shows that there is a disconnect between the claims being made on SHEIN's retail website and the actuality of the situation, such as a lack of evidence to claim that workers' rights are respected. This shows that it is important to look critically at the information that corporations are presenting to customers and look beyond the social reality that they construct their identity in. At the end of the day, they want to sell their products, and statements that align them with ethical business practice can mitigate some of the anxiety regarding the production of their products. As I have argued in chapter 2, this is a symptom of a systemic issue of labour rights not being respected in the garment industry. With the rise of fast fashion and overconsumption, the sustainability of how workers are treated when consumers are able purchase cheap clothes en masse needs to be questioned. To reiterate an important point, the responsibility here lies with the corporations, not the consumers. However, when brands such as SHEIN uses their retail website to make vague claims that make them seem responsible, the onus is on the consumer to make informed choices. This is not an easy task if they are unaware of how these systemic issues present themselves and what questions to ask themselves when looking into a brand. As SHEIN uses their reach on their retail website to ensure customers of their ethical practice, while not addressing serious allegations of misconduct, they are constructing an identity of themselves as ethical and responsible, and it is not easy for customers to critically question this. With vague and general claims of responsibility, SHEIN is making money off of their performative statements. The ones paying the price are the workers making the garments.

To answer my research questions, it is clear that SHEIN tries to communicate their identity directly to their customers, as these two documents are available on their retail website.

When it comes to adequate information, there are two main points that I will argue: 1) the information provided for SHEIN is outdated, and 2) the information provided by SHEIN lacks evidential support. While they do give more substantial information such as on wages, the information overall lacks proper context, and is often vague with no following data specifying the claims that they make. Overall, SHEIN communicated their constructed identity of being an ethical and sustainable brand directly to their customers, without acknowledging allegations of misconduct such as breaching Chinese labour law, withholding wages, and overworking in their supply chains. The information that SHEIN therefore gives the reader is not adequate as it lacks updated and sufficient information on how the garments that SHEIN sells are being made. As it refers to their intentions, the documents themselves do not adequately form an understanding of the CSR initiatives doing what they are intended to. Connected to the previous answer, the intentions that SHEIN writes about lack credible, up to date information. Additionally, the lack of updated information on the audits that SHEIN have conducted in their supply chain can be interpreted as these not being continued, which would entail that the initiatives are not followed through and not continuously monitored. This may lead to further misconduct. As SHEIN is not addressing previous misconduct in their documents, SHEIN constructs an identity aligned with their CSR intentions, without providing any information that would suggest that this translates into accountability. With this understanding, SHEIN's lack of actions based on their claims are performative, and the identity that they have constructed fails.

Because this study covers an important topic, it is equally important to discuss some of the limitations with my findings. As discussed in chapter 4, I have only covered the documents that are available on SHEIN's retail website, and further information may be available on their corporate website. This makes my analysis only a small sample of possible statements on SHEIN's CSR. My findings are also based on a general idea of worker exploitation and could be more extensive if it investigated specific claims on issues such as working hours, wages, or the social auditing system. All of these topics could be scrutinized further.

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