

The Hidden Costs of Fast Fashion: A DEI Analysis of SHEIN's Web Design, Labor Practices, and Cultural Insensitivity

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1. Description of the Case

SHEIN is an online fast-fashion retailer with a global presence, selling affordable clothing, accessories, and home decor to millions of users. While the company has achieved significant growth, it has also been involved in several controversies related to its failure in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). One prominent failure involves the user experience on its website, which lacks accessibility features, has cluttered design, and displays products without sufficient cultural sensitivity.

Notably, SHEIN's website lacks alternative text for images, making it challenging for visually impaired users to navigate with screen readers. Additionally, the site's overloaded design, with numerous pop-ups and promotions, creates barriers for users with cognitive impairments or limited digital literacy. Beyond the web design issues, SHEIN has also faced backlash for selling culturally insensitive products such as swastika necklaces and mislabeling Muslim prayer rugs as decorative mats. These examples reflect deeper issues with the company's product review and development processes, which fail to consider diverse perspectives or cultural sensitivities.

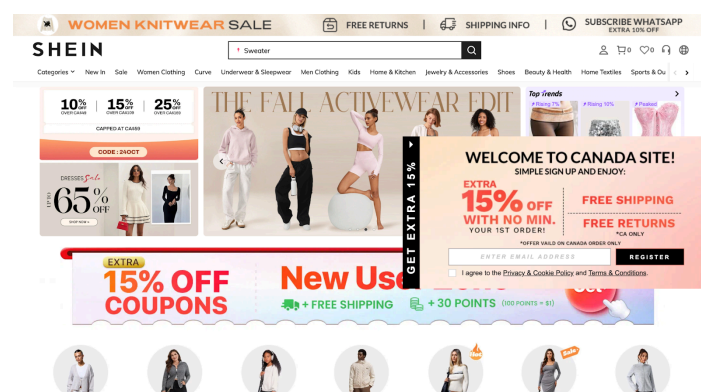


Figure 1: Overwhelming promotional elements and banners cluttering the SHEIN homepage

2. Cause of the Failure

SHEIN's DEI failures stem from a combination of factors, including a lack of diverse perspectives in its design and development processes, poor oversight of product listings, and an underemphasis on accessibility. These factors are explored in more detail below:

a. Lack of Alternative Text and Screen Reader Accessibility

One major accessibility issue with the SHEIN website is its lack of alternative text for images. For visually impaired users who rely on screen readers, this creates a frustrating experience where the screen reader repeatedly announces "photo" without providing context or descriptions. This oversight shows a failure to prioritize accessibility during the website's development. It reflects a lack of inclusivity for users with disabilities and violates web accessibility guidelines, such as the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), which mandate that all images should have meaningful alternative text.

b. Inconsistent Responsiveness Across Platforms

While SHEIN does offer a separate mobile version of its website, which users are redirected to when accessing it via a mobile device, the desktop version does not adhere to modern responsive design standards. When inspected on a laptop, the website does not scale or adjust well to different screen sizes. This can cause issues for users who resize their browser windows or use smaller laptop screens, leading to a poor user experience. This inconsistency between mobile and desktop platforms reveals a lack of cohesive design strategy, which could be improved by adopting a fully responsive design that works seamlessly across devices.

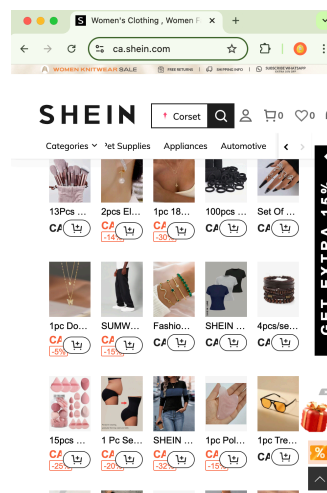


Figure 2: SHEIN's lack of responsive design for smaller screens leads to usability issues on devices like laptops with resized browser windows

c. Overloaded Design and Cognitive Barriers

The cluttered and disorganized nature of SHEIN's homepage—filled with promotional pop-ups, banners, and advertisements—contributes to a poor user experience. For users with cognitive disabilities, including those with ADHD or autism, this chaotic design creates cognitive overload, making it difficult to focus and navigate the site effectively. Furthermore, the lack of responsive design exacerbates the issue, particularly for users on mobile devices or those with slower internet connections.

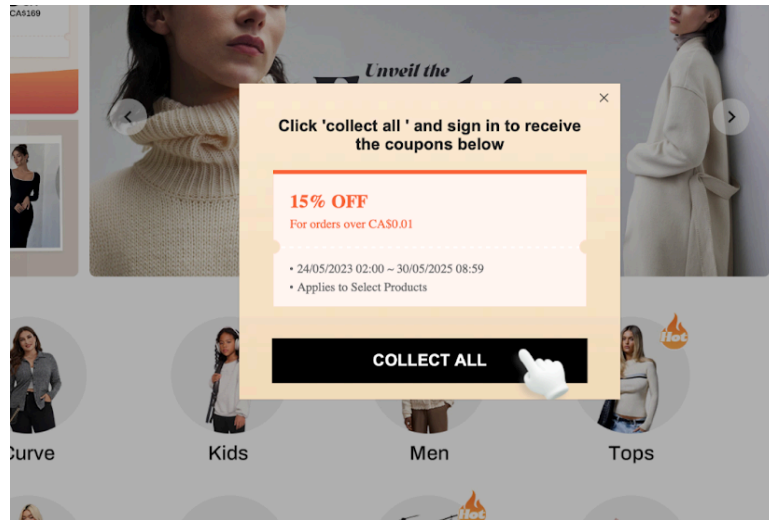


Figure 3: Excessive pop-ups on the SHEIN homepage disrupt user experience, particularly for users with cognitive impairments

d. Culturally Insensitive Products

SHEIN has also demonstrated a lack of cultural awareness and sensitivity in its product offerings. For example, the company faced backlash for selling a swastika necklace, which deeply offended the Jewish community due to its association with Nazi symbolism [1]. Additionally, the company was criticized for mislabeling Muslim prayer rugs as "Greek carpets" or decorative items [2]. These incidents show a failure to involve diverse voices in product development and approval processes, leading to culturally offensive and inappropriate items being sold on the platform.

e. Labor Violations and Supplier Exploitation

In addition to web design and cultural issues, SHEIN has been accused of unethical labor practices. Investigations revealed that suppliers in Guangzhou subjected workers to 75-hour work weeks, and accusations of depressing prices from suppliers persist [3]. Despite public promises to improve working conditions, these issues remain unresolved.

as of May 2024, according to ongoing reports [4]. This reflects a failure to prioritize ethical labor standards, exacerbating concerns over exploitation in their supply chain.

3. Impact of the Failure

a. Impact on Users with Disabilities

For users who rely on screen readers, SHEIN's website is nearly impossible to navigate effectively. The lack of alternative text for images means that these users cannot access important visual information about products. This creates an exclusionary experience that alienates a significant portion of the population, particularly those with visual impairments. Furthermore, the website's overall design, with excessive pop-ups and a lack of logical flow, poses significant challenges for users with cognitive disabilities.

b. Social and Cultural Impact

SHEIN's sale of culturally insensitive products, such as the swastika necklace and mislabeling of Muslim prayer rugs, had a profound social impact. These incidents caused public outrage, particularly within the Jewish and Muslim communities. In both cases, SHEIN issued public apologies and removed the products from its website. However, the damage to the company's reputation had already been done. Many consumers began to question SHEIN's commitment to diversity and cultural sensitivity, leading to calls for boycotts and heightened scrutiny of the company's practices.

c. Economic and Reputational Impact

Despite SHEIN's popularity and profitability, its DEI failures have significantly tarnished its image. The controversies over the swastika necklace and prayer rugs reached global headlines, leading to public apologies but also damaging consumer trust. Additionally, accusations of unethical labor practices—such as exploiting workers with 75-hour work weeks—have further harmed the company's reputation. These repeated missteps have eroded consumer trust not only among users with disabilities but also among those who care about ethics, diversity, and fair labor standards. This could drive many users toward more inclusive and ethically responsible platforms.

4. Conclusion

SHEIN's failure to consider DEI principles in both its web design and product offerings highlights the importance of integrating diverse perspectives into all stages of business development. The lack of alternative text for images and cluttered web design make the platform inaccessible to users with disabilities, violating basic accessibility guidelines. Meanwhile, culturally insensitive products like the swastika necklace and mislabeling of

Muslim prayer rugs show a disregard for the cultural implications of the items sold on the platform. Moving forward, SHEIN must prioritize inclusivity, accessibility, and cultural sensitivity to repair its reputation and avoid further exclusion of diverse groups.

References

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