

# WAREHOUSE WORKERS AND OFFICE STAFF LOSING THE GAME IN ULTRA-FAST FASHION

Labour and Human Rights Risks at Shein and Temu in China



# ABOUT US

Globalworks Lund AB is an independent not-for-profit enterprise based in Sweden. Our mission is to shed light on labour rights and human rights violations by collecting workers' online voices and grievances. We assist corporations, organisations, and authorities to prevent rights violations and identify paths to remedy. For more information on our work and analytical approach visit us at: [www.globalworks.se](http://www.globalworks.se)

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

About us .....	2
Table of contents .....	3
Executive summary.....	4
Ultra-fast fashion’s sustainability problem .....	5
Employment relations without reciprocity .....	6
De-mystifying the rise of Shein and Temu .....	6
Data and method .....	8
Data sources.....	8
Method.....	9
Data privacy and integrity.....	10
Definition of frequently used terms .....	10
Limitations.....	11
Warehouse workers at Shein and Temu .....	12
Exploitation through wage manipulation at Temu.....	12
Data-driven exploitation at Shein warehouses.....	14
Trying to persevere, enduring pain .....	18
Micro-influencers as marketing and recruitment agents .....	21
Micro-influencer aided marketing and sales.....	21
Micro-influencers as recruitment agents in China .....	22
Office staff.....	26
”Hard-core struggle”, “super week” and “horse races” .....	26
Mental stress, physical exhaustion and sexual harassment .....	28
Wage repression and performance rankings for Shein office staff .....	29
Concluding remarks .....	31
References.....	32

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The grievances of warehouse and office staff at Shein and Temu have been absent from a burgeoning debate about human and labour rights violations at the two ultra-fast fashion platforms. With this report Globalworks hopes to direct attention to their working conditions and precarious lives. This is our second report on labour and human rights violations in the Chinese ultra-fast fashion industry.

Throughout 2024, we collected and analysed a large quantity of data on Shein and Temu in order to gain insight on the accelerating ultra-fast fashion revolution. We use social media posts, videos, online publications, and government documents that feature the voices, views, and actions of employees, managers, and recruitment agents. We connect the dots between thousands of posts and documents to create a comprehensive and systematic picture of how Chinese ultra-fast fashion giants operate and what this means for the rights and welfare of individuals who directly or indirectly work for them.

This study shows how a data-driven labour regime forces warehouse workers to compete against the clock and other workers. Not only does algorithmic management push many workers to their physical and mental limits, but it also obscures wage and working time records, making it impossible to detect unfair treatment or seek remedy through labour arbitration. Social media posts by employment agencies and micro influencers add to a lack of

rights awareness. Fake photos, movies, and stories portray perseverance in the face of impossible targets as a matter of character, while the option to give in is a free choice.

Shein and Temu's corporate cultures involve cut-throat competition and long working hours, which affect both floor workers and office staff. Employees suffer from both physical and mental hardship. Many of them work 300-380 hours per month, feel constantly stressed, and are required to be available even when off duty. Office staff compete with one another via individual performance rankings and team-based "horse races". In a toxic atmosphere, employees face a constant fear of punishment or dismissal as well as unreasonable performance expectations and power abuse. Office staff and their partners post on social media about their socially deprived lives and sometimes failed relationships.

The voices in this study demonstrate how 'datafication of employment relations' has replaced human interaction and reciprocity with algorithmically controlled performance metrics and rankings. Similar to our previous report "Suppliers and Workers Straightjacketed by Ultra-fast Fashion", we conclude that ultra-fast fashion is unsustainable in more ways than earlier thought. Regulators and policymakers must act to ensure that the 'datafication of employment' does not violate the rights of ultra-fast fashion employees in China and elsewhere.

# ULTRA-FAST FASHION'S SUSTAINABILITY PROBLEM

Datafication and platformisation are transforming the global garment sector. Chinese tech savvy businesses such as Temu and Shein have changed the way people buy and consume fashion. Shein's sales in 2023 exceeded USD 32 billion, while Zara and H&M's were USD 28 billion and USD 22 billion, respectively (Sato 2024). With its cross-border e-commerce spin-off Temu, the Chinese retail giant PDD Holdings is adding a novel social media backed sales channel to a thriving ultra-fast fashion market. Temu is projected to reach a sales volume of USD 30 billion by 2024 (Interior Daily 2024).

For Shein, business began to boom during the pandemic. When online shopping was the only way to reach fashion consumers, the company offered more than just the latest trends: it also made them. A large army of micro-influencers, mostly young women, present their monthly Shein hauls to their followers on Youtube, Instagram, or TikTok (Zhou et al. 2023). They use items from Shein's website to create outfits and styles that their audience loves. Micro-influencer marketing is not only effective; it is also cheap, as many of them hope for fame and, in the meantime, do not earn more than a voucher for their next haul (Amrani 2022).

Shein's clothes and accessories are made in thousands of small and medium-size factories in Guangzhou, in southern China. Styles are produced in small numbers first: 100–500 items. If sales pick up, larger batches are produced within a few days. Demand and supply are seamlessly integrated through Shein's platform, which collects and matches data from consumers and manufacturers. To increase speed and reduce costs, the company does not use intermediaries or ship goods to boutiques around the world. Instead, a rapidly expanding logistics network delivers items directly to the door (The Economist 2021; Deighton 2023).

Founded in 2022, Temu battles with Shein for global market share. The company is a spin-off from Pinduoduo (PDD) Holdings, a Chinese e-commerce giant that has revolutionised group buying through gamified shopping and referral systems. Temu, like its parent company, sources a wide range of consumer goods from independent manufacturers or vendors all over China. Temu emulates Shein's small-order, quick response strategy. The company introduces new items and continually assesses market response. If sales go up, the platform will list higher quantities. Temu offers sales leverage through smart marketing and logistics. This service, however, comes at a cost because there is no freedom for vendors to set prices or determine return policies. Different from Shein, Temu operates as an intermediary between manufacturers and customers but is not involved in production (Berkeley Economic Review 2024).

Academics, journalists, and civil society organisations have called out Shein and Temu for inflicting social and environmental harm. For instance, the production of Shein fashion involves workers who work up to 18 hours per day without employment contracts (Amrani 2022; Kollbrunner 2021). Both, Shein and Temu have been associated with the use of Uyghur forced labour (Bloomberg 2022; The Select Committee on the CCP 2023). A Greenpeace study discovered hazardous chemicals in Shein products and critiqued the brand's devastating environmental impact (Greenpeace International 2022). In another report, Greenpeace criticised Temu's business model's CO<sub>2</sub> intensity and the company's unwillingness to disclose information about greenhouse gas emissions (Greenpeace International 2024).

To become sustainable, fast fashion must slow down. The rise of Shein and Temu, however, suggests that the industry develops into the opposite

direction. This trend is deeply concerning and prompted us at Globalworks to research the two platforms' impact on labour and human rights. The popularity of Shein and Temu among consumers inevitably will inspire competitors to copy them. Fast fashion retailers are pressured into following their leads as market competition gets increasingly fierce. As a result, there is a risk that ultra-fast fashion's unsustainable practices will negatively impact the entire fashion industry's next phase. Undoubtedly, this would impede all governmental and social attempts to pave the way for a more sustainable future.

## Employment relations without reciprocity

Typically, generation Z consumers worldwide are familiar with Shein haul videos and Temu spin wheels. Yet little is known about the workers behind the companies' webshop fashion glamour and discount blingbling. In our previous study "Suppliers and Workers Straightjacketed by Ultra-fast Fashion", we looked at the experiences of garment manufacturers, vendors, and their employees. We showed how Temu's and Shein's data-driven business models rely on algorithmic management, which relentlessly presses prices and maximises corporate profits. Suppliers pass on price pressure to their own suppliers and employees. Workers typically lack a formal employment contract, a fixed wage, regulated working hours, and access to legal remedies when their rights are violated. Due to the drudgery of ultra low-cost garment manufacturing, workers suffer from chronic pains and the lack of formalised labour relations prevents them from receiving health insurance and the chance of retiring with a pension someday.

This study features the experiences of warehouse workers and office staff at Shein and Temu. These employees are critical to the commercial success of ultra-fast fashion. However, their contributions are

not recognised. We find that warehouse workers struggle to make a living. They must not only meet high targets, but also do so within narrow time intervals. Their final pay is determined by how their individual performance compares to that of other workers, a system that we labelled "The Warehouse Games". Office staff is experiencing hardships of its own. They are under enormous pressure, both individually and as teams, to accomplish inflated objectives. They work excessive hours and are expected to be available even outside working hours. Stress levels are exacerbated by a toxic work environment in which everyone is threatened with termination at any time.

Similar to supplier relations, which we investigated in our previous study, employees at Shein and Temu are subject to algorithmic management. The voices in this study demonstrate how 'datafication of employment relations' has replaced human interaction and reciprocity with performance metrics and rankings. Workers and recruiters identify endurance and perseverance as the most essential skills for warehouse jobs. Office workers and their partners express on social media how the stressful omnipresence of work destroys their spirits and relationships. The experiences of warehouse and office employees illustrate algorithmic management's ignorance to human needs.

## De-mystifying the rise of Shein and Temu

The lives and whereabouts of Shein and Temu's founders are surrounded by a veil of secrecy, which has puzzled and fascinated the world (Davidson 2022; Vogel 2024). Such mystification, however, can easily divert attention away from the main issue, which is a glaring lack of corporate transparency. How can Shein and Temu be so cheap and quick? Is this the result of smart technology and logistics? Our investigation shows that technology plays an important role. However, rather

than enhancing the efficiency of employees and suppliers, algorithms increase their workload and devalue their labour.

We need an informed public debate about the environmental and social impact of ultra-fast fashion. De-mystifying Shein and Temu is one step towards that goal. However, the two corporations operate in the shadows of political repression, surveillance, and censorship in China. With this study, we seek to provide new insights and contextualise prior findings.

Our research is based on social media posts, videos, online publications, and government documents

that feature the voices, views, and actions of employees, vendors, manufacturers, industry experts, journalists, and officials. We connect the dots between thousands of posts and documents to create a comprehensive and systematic picture of how Chinese ultra-fast fashion giants operate and what this means for the rights and welfare of individuals who directly or indirectly work for them. In addition to these primary sources, we incorporate the work of civil society organisations and journalists that researched the social and environmental impact of Shein and Temu.

# DATA AND METHOD

The insights in this report come from Chinese social media and web pages. We systematically collect information from different platforms and diverse user groups. The analysis concentrates on the period 2019 to 2024, which encompasses the global expansion phases of both companies (Sander 2023a; Gill 2024). We developed an approach that lays at the intersection of established digital methods. We use insights from quantitative social media research, which is often referred to as social media monitoring (SMM). SMM relies on automated techniques to capture topics, opinions, and sentiments (Branthwaite and Patterson 2011). We combine SMM tools with methods originating from four veins in digital ethnography: meta digital ethnography, social media ethnography, contextual digital ethnography, and cross-media ethnography (Paoli and D’Auria 2021). We combine methods from these different strands in an approach that could be characterised as information crowdsourcing. Our method consists of five analytical layers:

1. Systematic or targeted collection of information across different media platforms and data types.
2. Identification of material that is relevant to inform a pre-defined research objective.
3. Assessment of information credibility through triangulation and corroboration.
4. Deriving new insights by identifying relationships between data points.
5. Evaluating the significance and impact of these insights in a wider context.

The following paragraphs detail how we applied this approach in this study. We explain where our data comes from, how much data we collected, and how we analysed it.

## Data sources

Our research relies on posts related to Shein and Temu. Temu in China uses the same logistics infrastructure and organisation as its parent company Pinduoduo (PDD). Therefore, we also include PDD-related posts. Data and findings for PDD/ Temu are presented as insights into Temu unless the information clearly distinguishes between the two.

Data comes from social media, blog posts, articles, reports, and government documents. All sources are publicly available. Approximately 80 percent are Chinese language sources from five platforms:

- Zhihu: A Q&A forum similar to Quora.
- Tieba: China’s largest online bulletin board system.
- Xiaohongshu a.k.a. Little Red Book: A social media platform, which is particularly popular among Gen Z users.
- Douyin: A short-form video platform, which goes by the name TikTok outside China.
- Bilibili: A short-form video platform, which serves urban subcultures and is popular among migrant workers and students.

Data collection from these platforms was complemented with website searches through Baidu, China’s largest search engine, and Sogou, a competitor to Baidu, using an alternative search algorithm. In addition, this report includes references to English language sources. We used investigative reports, newspaper articles, government documents, civil society organisation reports, and academic research articles.



## Method

The report is informed by qualitative and quantitative text analysis. Due to the cross-platform research design of this study, we deployed different methods for examining the content from various platforms.

On Tieba, workers share information, write about grievances, and seek advice. Users can create forums dedicated to a specific topic. Other users interested in the issue can contribute to the forum topic by creating related discussion threads. Even though there is no formal limit, posts are quite short, usually consisting of 10-100 words.

We scraped data from a Shein warehouse worker forum with approximately 5000 posts. We examine *short-form posts* with our analytical platform, social@risk™.

We analysed the data in five steps:

1. We read posts indiscriminately, in chronological order, with the most recent post listed first.
2. We coded topics and related keywords that were relevant to our research objectives.
3. We created a list of all pertinent terms and paired it with a second keyword list on labour issues based on research we have done since 2016.
4. We automatically tagged all posts containing at least one of the keywords.
5. We analysed the entire data corpus through interactive keyword and time filters, which allowed us to flexibly structure the data, explore issues, and discover connections.

Some worker forums on Tieba have a long life span and are maintained by a relatively homogenous user group. Due to these features, Tieba short-form posts are useful to discern quantitative trends. For example, we can explore whether a topic attracts attention over time. We can also establish if a topic displays a cyclical pattern, i.e. if workers

mention it during specific seasons or periods. In this report, we gauge a topic's relative weight by counting the number of posts that mention at least one relevant keyword, expressed as a percentage of all published posts. In order to detect trends, we calculate the relative weights of a topic per month.

On Zhihu users can pose questions or contribute answers by invitation. Stakeholders engaging in a specific Q&A thread are more diverse compared to Tieba. We often find employees, former employees, industry experts, business owners, managers employed at suppliers, or users without any specific link contributing or commenting.

Posts on Zhihu regularly comprise 500–2500 words, which equals 1–5 pages, single-spaced. Comments on these *long-form posts* consist of approximately 10–100 words. A Q&A thread grows fastest during the first months after posting it. Few threads remain active for more than a year.

We conducted a keyword search on Zhihu to identify Q&A threads. We archived 28 threads that we considered relevant. These threads comprise approximately 350.000 words, or about 700 pages, single spaced.

Zhihu threads touch on a broad spectrum of issues related to Shein and Temu compared to Tieba worker forums, and because contributors are more diverse, it is difficult to generate a keyword list.

We analysed the data in three steps:

1. We read long-form posts and comments under each thread, chronologically ordered, starting with the most recent contribution.
2. We made notes of all information that appeared relevant, surprising, or requiring further investigation.
3. We added codes to each note. These codes linked a note to a topic, such as business model, warehouse workers, vendors, suppliers, etc.

We collected data from Xiaohongshu, Douyin, and Bilibili more selectively compared to Tieba and Zhihu. Recruitment agents create social media posts related to Shein and Temu on Xiaohongshu and short-form videos on Douyin and Bilibili. We collected these clips with the objective of exemplifying communication strategies and user responses. A large-scale collection of such posts and videos would not offer additional insights within the scope of this research. We searched for relevant information with keywords and #s. On Xiaohongshu, we read about 300 posts and related comments. We selected and archived about 30 posts. These posts contain up to 200 comments. In addition, we watched about 100 short videos on Douyin and Bilibili and included six in this report to illustrate the use of visual information.

## Data privacy and integrity

If a post does not trigger politically unwanted reactions, refrains from criticising the CCP or the Central Leadership, steers clear of politically sensitive topics, and refrains from calling for collective action, social media users in China can write critical posts without facing censorship or punishment. The data we collect from Chinese social media usually fulfils these requirements. However, the risk of tracing, questioning, or even punishing social media users arises when we combine them in our analysis to provide broader, systematic, and potentially politically sensitive or unwanted insights. Therefore, we remove sources from the reference list that would make it possible to identify an individual user. Similarly, we translate citations accurately to reflect the statement, while also allowing for some literary freedom to prevent traceability through backward machine translation and online search.

We include references to all primary and secondary sources in the text, but we anonymize social media posts from individuals to protect their identity and privacy. References include a document code, the year the document was published, and, in the case

of long-form posts, a note number (n) indicating the specific section or paragraph in question.

## Definition of frequently used terms

**Platform** represents the core of Shein's and Temu's algorithmic, data-driven approach to organise and manage relationships with workers, suppliers, and consumers. We therefore refer to Shein and Temu as platforms.

**Supplier** refers to independent businesses that work directly or indirectly with Shein or Temu to manufacture goods or offer finished goods to Shein/Temu for sale on their respective platforms.

**Vendor** refers to suppliers that sell finished goods on the Shein or Temu platform, without involving Shein or Temu in the production process.

**Buyer** refers to employees at Shein or Temu who procure products and negotiate with suppliers on behalf of Shein/Temu.

**PDD (Pinduoduo)** –the company name– refers to Temu's parent company. Under the brand name Temu, PDD provides the platform and warehouses used for cross-border trade.

**Worker** refers to warehouse floor staff or staff involved in workshop/factory production. Workers can be employed directly by the company or indirectly by labour agencies or labour outsourcing firms. In the context of China, most workers are internal migrants. Migrant workers move between different regions and/or cities in search of employment. They are registered as rural citizens. The location of registration in China determines access to social rights such as healthcare, education for children, unemployment benefits, and so on. In the cities where they work and live, migrant workers often have limited social rights. They typically live apart from registered urban residents, experience social marginalisation, and face harassment from the police and other authorities.

## Limitations

Publicly available data on the Chinese internet is censored. Consequently, we should not be surprised if sensitive topics are either omitted or kept from our view. Furthermore, potentially stigmatising issues might be subject to self-censorship. To ensure that insights are comprehensive, we collect data from different platforms representing diverse user groups and communication styles.

A second limitation relates to the methods used. We construct new insights by connecting social media data published on different platforms, at different times, and by different users with different knowledge levels. However, there is a risk that we misunderstand information or its context. In line with methods in digital ethnography, we use triangulation and corroboration to enhance our results' reliability and validity.

# WAREHOUSE WORKERS AT SHEIN AND TEMU

In this chapter we analyse workers' working conditions at Shein's and Temu's warehouses in China. The first part looks at how work and payment is organised. Temu uses a complex wage system that provides possibilities to control labour costs through wage manipulation. In the case of Shein, we see a data-driven, exploitative system that forces workers to compete with one another over a fixed amount of money and thereby reduce labour costs. The second part of this chapter captures workers' social media posts describing the challenges and hardship they encounter in this exploitative environment.

## Exploitation through wage manipulation at Temu

Temu warehouse employees can choose between hourly and piece rates. The approach allows managers to distinguish between highly motivated, risk-taking candidates and the rest. In theory, piece rates allow workers to earn a higher wage than hourly compensation. However, the numbers required to surpass wages based on hourly rates is very high and for most workers out of reach. A worker states that she must handle 2000 items per day in order to earn RMB 300 (about € 40). She couldn't manage more than 400 items at first, earning only RMB 60 (about € 7.6) per day (XHS 2024i, n. 1). Furthermore, if piece-rate workers are fined three times, they will be ordered to work at an hourly wage instead. The work accomplished under the piece rate calculation within the current month will not be paid (XHS 2024c, n. 2).

Hourly wages are divided into two components: a RMB 3000 (about € 380) base wage and a RMB 3000 performance wage. The performance payment is multiplied by a factor ranging from 0.6

to 1.2 at the manager's discretion (XHS 2024l). Initially in 2023, the base wage was RMB 4200 (about € 530) plus an additional RMB 1800 (about € 230) for performance (XHS 2024l, n. 2).

The shift to a larger performance component in the wage scheme indicates that Temu is attempting to gain more leverage in labour cost control. But even the base wage of RMB 3000 is not truly fixed as it is linked to a quota. Workers must execute a minimum number of tasks per hour, regardless of whether they are paid on an hourly or piece rate basis. If they do not meet the quota, they will have to pay a 'timeout fine' (XHS 2023a, n. 1). Thus, if a worker fails to meet an hourly benchmark quota, both base wage and performance pay are impacted negatively.

The hourly and piece rate systems can be applied in a variety of ways. Managers can change the quota, the amount of the 'timeout fine', or the performance bonus at their discretion. Workers report receiving 'timeout fines' without being told, and they have no idea how the fines are calculated and decided (XHS 2024m, nn. 1, 2). A worker complains:

When wages are finally paid, there will be endless fines. But no one tells the temporary workers in advance what the fines are and why they are fined. For example, I am a picker and I usually take orders. The team leader did not care about timeouts. He told us that we are only responsible for taking orders and timeout did not matter. However, in the end, I was fined for timeout and he just told me that this is according to the rules. (XHS 2024b, n. 1)

The performance multiplication factor is used to enforce discipline and obedience:

As for the performance score, I was given a 0.8 because I often disobey the team leader's arrangements, and I often talk bad about the team leader to my colleagues, saying how the work is not good. (XHS 2024d, n. 1)

The multiplication factor can also be matched with the warehouse's overall labour cost management. Workers at a Temu warehouse were notified by their team leader that the multiplication factors would be divided based on percentage shares of the workforce, with 10% at the bottom (0.6), 20% at the top (1.2), and the remainder in between (XHS 2024c, n. 3).

Wages may be lowered further due to a variety of deductions:

This month, RMB 400 (about € 50) will be deducted for dormitory water and electricity. After water and electricity are deducted, the wage is RMB 5900 (about € 750). Performance pay is RMB 3000 but if the production capacity cannot be achieved, there will be deductions. If the production capacity is achieved but your performance is ranked low, there will be deductions as well. If you survive, you will get RMB 5500 (about € 700). I have to pay RMB 1600 (about € 203) a month for food. (XHS 2024c, n. 1)

Temu warehouses have 'loss prevention officers' who oversee labour discipline and reprimand workers for breaking rules. A worker explains:

You are not allowed to squat or sit down to rest when you are doing heavy lifting or pulling trucks. If you are photographed squatting or sitting down, you will be charged RMB 200 (about € 25). The loss prevention officers are just second-rate idiots. If you don't listen to their orders, you will be fined. You earn only 250, and if you mess with them, you'll work for nothing for a whole day. (ZHHU 2023b, n. 2)

A lot of rules make little sense from a business point of view. Rather, they appear to serve the purpose of establishing hierarchies, invoking uncertainty and demonstrating power. A worker explains:

The fine for boxes outside the warehouse was increased from RMB 5 to 10 (about € 0.6-1.2). The items must be arranged neatly. If they are not, we will be fined. The distance between boxes must not be more than the length of a PDA, but now the length has changed again. (XHS 2024l, n. 1) (PDA=personal digital assistant)

Disobedience can also be punished by not being scheduled for work:

I often pack and sort aeroplane boxes. If you don't obey, you will be exempted from work. (XHS 2023i, n. 1)

Interns from vocational schools, known as student workers in China, who were employed by the hour as temporary workers during Chinese New Year experienced another type of wage manipulation at Temu warehouses. They learned that they would earn RMB 24 (about € 3) per hour if they completed 54 or more hours and RMB 17 (about € 2,15) if they worked less (Chinese New Year holidays are 7-8 days). The warehouse then reduced labour costs by recruiting a large number of students to make sure that tasks could be assigned without any of the workers reaching the threshold of 54 hours (XHS 2024o, n. 1).

## Data-driven exploitation at Shein warehouses

Workers at Shein warehouses are paid according to a 100-point rating system (TIBA 2023g). The efficiency of a worker determines the ranking. The quantity of objects a worker gathers in an hour is used to gauge their efficiency (TIBA 2023f). Workers' written accounts suggest that payments are set by a data-driven system that adjusts warehouse payrolls to pre-established costs. The essential component of this model is the ranking system (TIBA 2023p). Workers discuss monthly, daily, and hourly item benchmarks among themselves in peer

conversations (TIBA 2023j; 2023k; 2023l; 2023n; 2023o; 2023t). The number of items to be collected within an hour, differ significantly because they are modified to account for warehouse, department, team, item, and/or task characteristics. Eventually, performance is translated into a score between 0 and 100 and the score will be linked to a pay grade. The wage calculation lacks accountability. Worker writes:

No one knows how Shein's salary is calculated. I can only say that if you work for a month and feel the salary is suitable, then do it. If it doesn't work, then leave. (TIBA 2023u, n. 1)

It's all about ranking positions. I can't figure out how they calculate the wages; if it were calculated per item, I could work it out myself. (XHS 2024h, n. 1)

Workers (or any other external party) are not given an explanation by Shein as to how the different items per hour benchmarks are converted into a ranking score. Social media accounts of workers' experiences, however, suggest that high pay is an uncommon occurrence (XHS 2023f, n. 1). A monthly pay of RMB 10,000 (about € 1,270), a figure that is frequently advertised in recruitment posts, may only be attained with ranks of 98 or higher (TIBA 2023d).

Few people who enter the warehouse will remain for long. For those that stay, their compensation may progressively grow. Workers report significant levels of work pressure and turnover (XHS 2023g, nn. 1, 6, 9).

The warehouse was my nightmare. [...] The people inside kept urging me to hurry up. At that time, I gritted my teeth and persisted for a 17-yuan salary. After finishing work, I went home and slept for more than a week. (XHS 2023g, n. 7)

I had to report every time I went to the bathroom. I stood for eight or nine hours a day and changed shifts every half month. I have been scanning and classifying, and there was only the sound but no wind from a large ceiling fan above my head. (XHS 2023g, n. 8)

I saw that other people's 12-hour shifts were always 11.5 hours on the job. It's so cruel, and the unit price of the goods is still low. It all depends on hard work. (XHS 2023f, n. 3)

wordings as a struggle to make it and succeed in life, we label workers who stay on as “survivors”. To reap the benefits of high earnings, survivors must become high performers. Workers' posts state that this calls for the ability to compete against the clock and other workers simultaneously. A worker has fifteen minutes between fetching an order and placing the box with the ordered items at the appropriate belt (TIBA 2023v, n. 2). If failing to complete the order in time, a timeout will be registered. A timeout has a negative impact on the performance rating. Workers can only claim as many orders as they are able to handle within the given time slot (TIBA 2023v, n. 3).

Managers overstaff the warehouses to induce competition between workers. Consequently, workers must outrun other workers to obtain more orders (TIBA 2021; 2023b; 2023e). Shein collaborates with labour service agencies to ensure a steady supply of new recruits replacing the many workers who give up and leave (TIBA 2023a; 2023m; 2023q).

Competition for orders is not only fierce but also unfair. Workers write about the need to fetch big orders, which allows them to collect many

Figure 1 systematises workers' experiences with the Shein performance ranking. Because they often describe their working conditions in quite dramatic

Figure 1: Systematisation of incentive structures for Shein warehouse workers (Source: Globalworks Research).

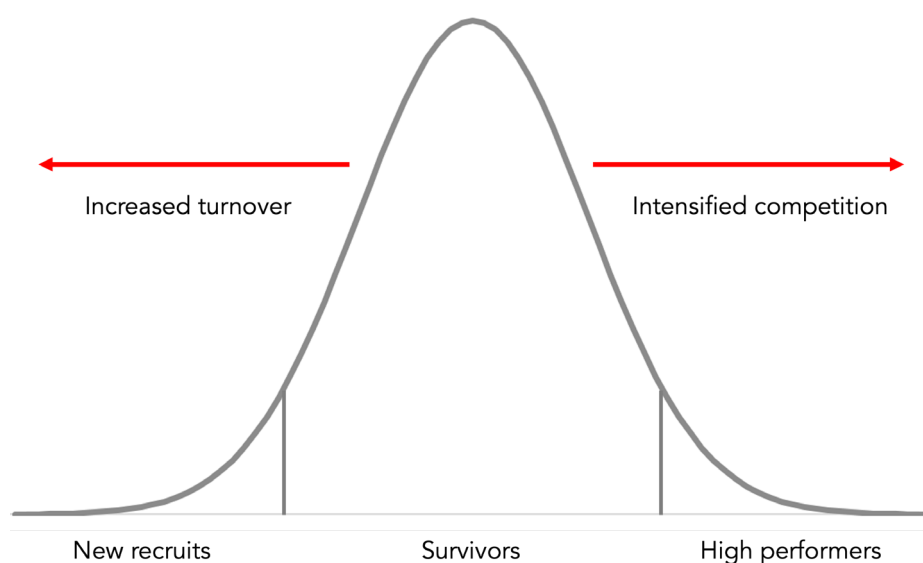




Figure 2: The Warehouse Games. Workers compete for a higher ranking. Many workers can't cope for more than a few days.



items with fewer steps compared to small orders. Without big orders it is difficult to make a living:

My legs hurt from running every day, and I only make a little over a thousand [items]; all because I cannot get any big orders. (XHS 2024g, n. 1)

As long as you're lucky enough to land a big order, making two to three thousand [items] a day is no problem, but it's very tiring. (XHS 2024g, n. 2)

Obtaining big orders, however, seems not only to be a matter of luck but it may also be a means to discriminate between incumbent workers and new recruits:

Just like me, I can't get any big orders. Today I took 70 orders, but our group had the lowest productivity. Looking at the top of the list, someone had 30 orders, but they got big ones. It's really strange, I just can't seem to get any big orders. (XHS 2024g, n. 3)

It all depends on grabbing opportunities. As a new employee, I can only honestly pick up what's left by others. (XHS 2024g, n. 4)

They say new employees aren't allowed to take big orders, only small ones. (XHS 2024g, n. 5)

To prevent the competition for orders from inflating the error rate, workers who make mistakes risk fines. Shein calls their list of fines sent to each worker an "incentive sheet" (TIBA 2023v, n. 1). For

collecting too many or too few items or not having any item in the collection box, RMB 5 (about € 0,6) are deducted. An operations manager will investigate when a worker reports that an item is missing from its assigned shelf. If the item is discovered at its specified location or in one of the nine boxes that are closest to the designated location, RMB 30 (about € 3,8) will be deducted from the reporting worker's pay and the wage ranking will be lowered (TIBA 2023h). Selecting the incorrect item costs 0.5 points, and placing it in the incorrect position costs three points and will be deducted from the overall workers' ranking (TIBA 2023s).

The Shine wage structure for warehouse workers is difficult to categorise as it is neither a typical time-based system nor a regular piece rate system (TIBA 2023c; 2023i; 2023r). Rather, it is set up as a competition for portions of a fixed pool of money.

Many recruits become disillusioned about their prospects to win a high ranking and soon decide to leave (XHS 2023g, n. 5). When workers leave within two weeks, their wages are withheld. While this is an illegal practice and considered bonded labour, dispatch agents claim that the initial days are training (ZHHU 2023c, n. 3). There are additional practices in use that are typically associated with bonded labour. A worker writes that his id-card was confiscated. He also had to pay a deposit for transfers between the dorm and the warehouse. The deposit would not be returned if a worker wanted to resign prematurely (ZHHU 2023b, n. 1).

The Shine "Warehouse Games" elevate worker exploitation to a new level. Like traditional piece rate systems, the Shein system uses low rates and ex-post rate manipulation to control labour costs. However, in the Shein system, rate adaptation is not an occasional, ad-hoc measure that is visible and contestable. Instead, it is applied continually through a data-driven appraisal to each worker on an individual basis or collectively in the case of sorters. Workers' discussions indicate that it seems impossible to dispute wages because it is unclear how the algorithm converts performance into points, and

how rankings determine earnings. Hence, there are no reliable benchmarks to assess wages' accuracy or fairness. The system is also uncompromising in its quest to enhance economic efficiency. Constantly competing against the clock and other workers is highly stressful and exhausting.

## Trying to persevere, enduring pain

The experiences that workers share on social media indicate that the harsh working conditions stretch beyond what many can endure, even for short periods. The following paragraphs present workers' voices, describing the tasks they must complete and the difficulties they face.

(1) Picking items: A worker describes the task as follows:

My position is picking goods. It is a space of about a few hundred square meters. It is divided into 3 floors, with 3 areas on each floor, a total of 9 areas. There are about 70 shelves in one area, and 54 boxes on each shelf. [...] What you have to do is to pick up an order on a code scanning gun similar to a mobile phone (it's called a PDA), then fetch the goods one by one from the thousands of boxes in your area, and then place them on the corresponding country line. (TIBA 2023w, n. 3)

The above citation reveals that the picker is collecting items from more than 34,000 different collection points. Pickers are under constant stress due to the time limit to complete an order and compete against other workers for orders. As they have to walk long distances when collecting, walking often turns into running:

I am either walking or running or walking and running. I have to walk tens of thousands of steps a day. (XHS 2023a, n. 2)

I challenged myself here for a month. Then I just left. I was really tired. I ran around in the warehouse all night and finally broke down. My salary was not much. (XHS 2023g, n. 5)

(2) Sorting: Workers who sort incoming goods operate on a belt, which can be stressful because they cannot control the speed and number of items passing. During the sorting process, they also receive additional tasks such as packing or attaching barcodes. Sorters' workload is assigned collectively. If the group cannot meet the specified quota at the end of the day, they are all required to stay and work overtime (XHS 2023b, n. 4).

(3) Box switching: Workers that perform this task replace filled boxes with empty ones. Boxes arrive on the belt, and the belt determines the speed. Due to the speed, there is no time to drink water, which is particularly troublesome at this workstation because box switching is a physically demanding task. Work intensity is raised further because box switchers must run to get new empty boxes (XHS 2023b, n. 5).

(4) Box coding: This seems to be the heaviest task. Workers on the assembly line must lift boxes weighing up to 40kg to see the numbers and affix the correct codes. An employee wrote:

It's like running for more than 10 hours with dozens of kilograms of stuff while continuously coding boxes. The faces of several boys are swollen with blood, let alone girls. (XHS 2023b, n. 6)

Workers perform physically taxing tasks. Their work wears them out and makes them feel exhausted:

My feet hurt on my first day at work. I had to scan the QR code and pack the goods. The goods were heavy, high, and difficult to take down. (XHS 2023e, n. 2)

I had to go to the courier station for sorting and then do other things at the end of the day. I worked all night and lay in bed for three days with pain in my back and legs. (XHS 2024m, n. 6)

The first day felt like dying. The second day was even worse. While I worked my nipples exploded. I don't know what happened. They were very swollen at first, and later I found that my clothes were red (can somebody explain that?) and the soles of my feet went numb. Although the pain is very uncomfortable, I still persevere. (XHS 2023e, n. 1)

Social media posts frequently depict blisters and dry, broken fingernails to initiate conversations on physical hardships and pain (XHS 2023j; 2024n; 2024f). Recruiters (acting as micro-influencers) try to normalise mundane pains as a rite de passage into a better life:

Today's assessment: I made just over two thousand in the past five days, and my feet don't hurt as much now. (XHS 2024n)

The operation is quite simple, but piecework is exhausting. You have to work fast to earn more, eat well, rest well, and continue working. (XHS 2024f)

Warehouse workers, in turn, focus their attention on how to ease or overcome pain because the only way to make money is to work hard and fast:

Wuu wuu wuu, I've already got blisters, the skin on my feet is almost rubbed raw, no wonder my feet hurt so much today. I don't want to take leave because I won't get paid. My team leader even told me to take a break, but I really need the money. Can someone suggest how to alleviate it a bit? (XHS 2023j, n. 1)

I've been here for 15 days. The six blisters on my feet are treated by soaking them at night, then breaking them open to squeeze out the water, and finally applying a band-aid. This way, it doesn't hurt as much. (XHS 2023j, n. 2)

When I first started, I got five blisters. Now, after working for over ten days, the blisters are still there, but they no longer hurt. (XHS 2023j, n. 3)

As long as you keep moving without resting, you'll get used to it and it won't hurt anymore. (XHS 2023j, n. 4)

Work at ultra-fast fashion warehouses is out of the ordinary even for experienced workers and many of them give up and leave:

I have worked in a factory for two years and could manage. But I really can't do this job. You have to keep going all the time and you have to be very fast. (XHS 2024m, n. 4)

There are quite a lot of people leaving. Of the 100 people we recruited just now, 80 have left. (XHS 2024m, n. 3)

Figure 3 shows the number of posts referring to resignations (leaving) as a percentage of all posts by month. Mentions spiked in January 2022 and 2024. The peaks are consistent with resignation trends in other industries dominated by migrant workers

who return to their hometowns and villages to celebrate Chinese New Year around the end of January. In the same vein, an increase of resignations during the summer months 2023 is typical for industries with high turnover rates as the dropout rates soar after warehouses are filled with new recruits after Chinese New Year’s seasonal resignations. A big proportion of new recruits resign within a few months. The posting pattern during 2022 until January 2023 lacks typical seasonal spikes potentially due to China’s harsh Covid-19 restrictions, which were lifted in December 2022.

Figure 3: Posts mentioning resigning/leaving at a forum for Shein warehouse workers (Source: Globalworks research).



# MICRO-INFLUENCERS AS MARKETING AND RECRUITMENT AGENTS

Temu and Shein are both recognised for using micro-influencers to sell their products to consumers in the EU, the United States, and the United Kingdom. This section shows how micro-influencer marketing is deployed to recruit warehouse workers in China. In this case, the micro-influencers are not teens showcasing their hauls on Tiktok. Instead, behind what seems to be young micro-influencers are HR agencies tailoring posts and videos to appear like posts from actual warehouse workers discussing their experiences on social media. Our findings bring to the fore that Shein and Temu use two types of micro-influencers; on the one hand there are highly visible marketing and sales representatives in consumer markets, on the other, there are recruiters of warehouse workers in China operating as ‘backend marketers’.

## Micro-influencer aided marketing and sales

Typically, micro-influencers are not mere sales agents but also brand creators. The official Temu Wiki states that they are “pivotal in enhancing Temu’s brand visibility and engagement with authentic and compelling narratives” (Kononenko 2024). In exchange for the service of branding Shein or Temu among their followers, micro-influencers receive free products from the platforms each month. In addition, some influencers can earn 10-20% commission from referral sales (Daxue 2024).

Most micro-influencers will earn no or very little money from their collaborations with Shein or Temu. Many of them, however, might hope that such a partnership can become the springboard for a social media or influencer career (Amrani 2022).

Research in psychology shows that micro-influencers are primarily motivated by the creation and enactment of their identities. Their drive entails mental health risks as public exposure amplifies social expectations and sentiments of inauthenticity, which can lead to psychological distress (Bergs et al. 2023).

The number of products micro-influencers receive depends on how successful they are at engaging their followers and how well they perform in comparison to other influencers. Temu, for example, outlines the benefits for influencers as:

The more you create and the better your content performs, the more balance you will achieve! Your account balance is like Temu credit; use it to get campaign-specific stuff! (TEMU 2024)

The firm chooses influencers according to their number of followers and engagement metrics. Thus, micro-influencers fight for customer attention and, by extension, rewards. Earning rewards, in turn, is a prerequisite for creating more content and, by extension, increasing followership and engagement.

In the following section, we turn our attention to the recruitment agencies working for Shein and Temu in China. Here micro-influencers do not appear in front of the camera. Instead, they recruit models, photograph them in authentic workplace settings, and then upload the photos or videos along with captivating stories that entice young

people and may persuade them to work in Shein's or Temu's warehouse.

## Micro-influencers as recruitment agents in China

In China, it is common for workers to discuss working conditions and employment opportunities in social media. A job seeker who considers working at a Shein or Temu warehouse will find abundant posts on video platforms such as Douyin (China's TikTok), Bilibili (a video platform for urban sub-cultures), and other social media platforms that are popular among Gen Z users such as Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book).

At first look, the magnitude of posts and videos give the impression that there is a large community of workers sharing experiences. The images and clips appear to be authentic documentations of everyday life at the warehouse. The comments also appear to be genuine, as they regularly refer to hardships, physical discomfort, exhaustion, the difficulty of prevailing, and the desire to give up and leave.

However, these stories also contain a twist in that they present these indicators of exploitation as obstacles that everyone must overcome. Shein and Temu are not presumed to be the cause of dire working conditions. Instead, perseverance is portrayed as an embodiment of self-improvement, allowing workers to direct their own destiny. An overarching topic on all platforms is work at the warehouse as a pathway to a better life. Messages emphasize the life transforming power of working in a warehouse:

Accept your own ordinariness, and then use all your strength to stick out from the crowd. Keep it up. (DOYI 2024b, n. 2)

The screenshot of a Douyin clip in figure 4 represents this genre of social media posts. The comment posted beside the video reads: "[user name] was wet with tears. I desperately picked up goods at Shein, to live a better life." (DOYI 2024c) The clip belongs to a category of posts that address young people's hopes for a better life. It presents work at Shein as an opportunity to achieve material security.



Figure 4: Screenshots of a recruitment short-form video (DOYI 2024c). Micro-influencers posing as workers. The video is hashtagged: #Shein #factorygirl #use Douyin to record the real work life #factory real shot #Heshan.

Besides signalling opportunities for a better life, the video shows girls in different kinds of clothing and postures. The video, with the special hashtags #factorygirl and #factory genuine shot, is probably aimed at young male migrant workers looking for girlfriends. Male migrant workers typically struggle to find spouses due to their low social status, poor salary, and segregated living conditions in urban regions. Meeting young, hardworking, and attractive women at work is a strong motivator that aids recruitment. The promise of finding a partner has become another enticement, as has the prospect of eventually 'living-the-good-life' with the money earned at the warehouse.

Videos and comments depict Shein's warehouse as a place where attractive, lonely women look for comfort and safety:

It's been 80 days since I took on the challenge to work at Shein... Several young and beautiful girls came today. I hope they can persevere. (DOYI 2024d, n. 5)

I'm just a weak girl. If you see me while working in the warehouse. Please don't walk too fast; I wouldn't know what to do if you ran me down. (DOYI 2024a, n. 1)

I am a girl who is alone in Jiangmen taking on the challenge to earn a monthly salary of over 10,000 yuan. (DOYI 2024a, n. 3)

When picking goods at #Shein, I can work hard and be full of energy for 14,000 per month. But when I accidentally cut my hand when I got home, I would cry heartbrokenly because I am also a woman with hopes and feelings. (DOYI 2024d, n. 4)

Apart from going to work every day, I don't have a single friend around me. When I'm tired, I really want to find someone to talk to or care about, but I don't know how long I can hold on. (DOYI 2024a, n. 7)

Fellow female compatriots, girls can really do logistics. We are not afraid of being tired, but we are afraid that our husbands will look down on us if we cannot make it.

There are hundreds of videos showing young girls in different settings, outfits, and from different camera angles. To enhance authenticity, the images of featured girls are blended with footage of warehouse work, the canteen, people going to work, or workers having a break. All posts have in common that they portrait women through the male gaze, i.e. they depict women from a masculine, heterosexual perspective presenting them as sexual objects, on one hand, and as smart and/or as timid girls, on the other. Recruitment posts also cater to a wide range of interests, associating warehouse work with sex, friendship, fun, money, and a sense of accomplishment.



Figure 5: Screenshots of from a recruitment video (DOYI 2024d).

The screenshot in figure 5 further illustrates this point. The girl in the footage asks: “Can the experienced workers tell me whether the Shein warehouse is playing music the loudest or is PDD’s DJ the noisiest?” (DOYI 2024e)

Another video shows a young woman half-dressed, her mouth open, and pearls of sweat dripping down her chest. She comments:

Every day in Foshan, I walk tens of thousands of steps for work. I labour hard for a month, earning only RMB 7000 or 8,000. Sometimes I can make five figures. (DOYI 2024d) (about € 890-1,015)

Many clips convey the message that “you can do it” and, if you do not, it is your decision and your responsibility:

As long as you are not lazy, as long as you are diligent enough, and as long as you work hard enough, you can get this salary with your skills. Can’t get it? Then you can find the reason from the three ‘as long as’ I mentioned earlier. (DOYI 2024b, n. 1)

Micro-influencer recruitment uses moralising pep talks to obscure exploitation. Young workers are taught not to oppose corporate management or labour law violations, but to see their desire to leave in the face of hardship as a sign of their own weakness. Self-discipline is required to overcome this weakness:

My sister enlightened me with a few words, which gave me the courage to come to Shein and get used to it. She said: ‘You give up before you have tried?’ I have so many excuses, but you must understand that there is no way out. (XHS 2023c, n. 2)

Why do some people say it is only six or seven thousand, and some people say it can be tens of thousands? In fact, dear friends, Shein’s salary is piece-rate, and the basic salary is not high. If you are not good at fishing, why should I give you a salary of over 10,000 yuan? It all depends on if your ability matches this salary! (XHS 2023d, n. 1)

Others can work hard with their own hands and earn a good pay; why can’t you? Don’t complain about the work being difficult and exhausting, or about the low pay. It’s because you can’t take the suffering. (XHS 2023h, n. 1)

The harsh working conditions in Shein’s and Temu’s warehouses are twisted and turned to reflect the dreams and aspirations of young people at the bottom of China’s social ladder. Young women, for example, can read that working at a Shein warehouse is a step towards gender equality, freedom, and sisterhood:

Who says women can’t do logistics? There are more women than men who have persisted at Shein. (DOYI 2024d, n. 1)



Girls in logistics can also be cool and endure hardships. Do you like this? (DOYI 2024d, n. 2)

As a 20-year-old girl at #Shein, few guys can match my abilities. Do you think my 12,000 salary is unheard of? (DOYI 2024d, n. 3)

Not only did I make money at Shein, I also met a group of lovely sisters. (DOYI 2024d, n. 6)

Working in the warehouse is not exploitation, social media users are taught, but a way to self-improvement and development. People with debts are told that they can become debt free and start all over again quickly:

I came to Shein with a debt of 20,000 yuan and stood for 10 hours every day. After two months of hard work, I finally paid off the debt. I am grateful to Shein for giving me a chance to be reborn. (DOYI 2024f, n. 3)

Goodbye, Shein. I've paid off my debts and will never work in logistics again. (DOYI 2024f, n. 1)

Shein allows people who owe debts to pay off their debts in one year. (DOYI 2024f, n. 2)

And people with weight problems are made believe that working at the warehouse is a smart way to get in shape, and look good:

Doing logistics is very hard. When I first started working, I weighed 110 pounds and now I weigh only 90. (DOYI 2024a, n. 2)

I have never been successful in losing weight. I didn't expect that this time I could. I'm so happy. I was also given a salary, so happy. Although the work of a picker is indeed tiring and painful, it feels great to be able to get through it. (XHS 2024a)

Yes, it feels like a good workout. My arms and thighs are getting stronger. I want to build muscles. (XHS 2023c, n. 1)

Because there are many of these posts and videos, workers who can't bear the work and resign may do so with a sense of shame or failure.

I wanted to do it during the summer vacation, but I failed and went home. Now I feel like I didn't pass. It was too hard. (XHS 2023g, n. 3)

Those who understand that the treatment is unfair have little faith in getting justice:

Trying to apply for labour arbitration is of no use, because the amount is only a few thousand. So I can't protect my rights and can only post and complain. (XHS 2024m, n. 5)

## OFFICE STAFF

Many vendors know that buyers often reply to messages at 11:00 or 12:00 in the evening. This working model is also an important driving force for Temu's rapid development in recent months! (ZHHU 2023a, n. 1)

I have never been successful in losing weight. I didn't expect that this time I could. I'm so happy. I was also given a salary, so happy. Although the work of a picker is indeed tiring and painful, it feels great to be able to get through it. (XHS 2024a)

Not only warehouse workers but also office staff at Shein and Temu face harsh working conditions with targets impossible to reach. Office staff is exposed to a toxic work culture with excessive and unpaid overtime hours. Similar to wage systems for workers, office staff is subjected to systematic and unfair wage manipulation. Employees write in social media that they feel miserable suffering physically and mentally. Office staff and their partners also experience a socially deprived life and failed relationships.

"High pressure is always present: if the monthly working hours reach 300 hours, you will be classified as a 'duty employee', and if you are late for one minute, you will be deducted 3 hours of wages." (ZHHU 2021f, n. 5)

### "Hard-core struggle", "super week" and "horse races"

E-commerce giants such as Alibaba and PDD have been in the spotlight for the harsh working conditions driving employees into suicide or death caused by exhaustion. Alibaba became infamous for the 996 model, which meant that staff had to work from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. six days a week. In the wake of fierce competition, PDD pushed this boundary further. In 2020 with the company management announcing a "hard-core struggle for all employees." (ZHHU 2021f, n. 1) The strategy required all staff to reach at least 300 working hours per month. An employee shares her experience:

Social media posts indicate that many Temu office staff work even 380 hours (ZHHU 2021g). Others write about the introduction of the "super week", which implied 13 days of work and one day of rest where each day contains 12 hours of work (ZHHU 2021f, n. 1). But there are also voices stating that the "super week" has developed into what is labelled as the "007 model" (24 hours, seven days a week):

The company requires workers to clock in before 10 a.m. and clock out after 10 p.m., and work six days a week. This is already a serious violation of labour laws. I still have to work from home on Saturdays, the day the stores are closed. So, in fact, we work every day of the month. (ZHHU 2022b, n. 1)

In China, Shein is not as well known as Temu. As a result, the public has paid less attention to Shein's overtime policies and practices. Nevertheless, we find that also their office staff have to perform excessive overtime hours (ZHHU 2021b, n. 3). Social media posts suggest that conditions at Shein are comparable to Temu:

The company demands you to work overtime. It is common to work until the early morning on release days, often until four or five in the morning. I also have to work overtime on weekdays. My bosses feel that I leave early when I work until eight o'clock. (ZHHU 2021b, n. 11)

I arrive at the company early at 6 or 7 o'clock, and I usually get off work after 11.30 in the evening. (ZHHU 2021c, n. 1)

I work overtime until 9:30 every day on average. (ZHHU 2021c, n. 8)

I don't know how many tears I shed for this company to persevere. Working overtime is extremely serious. (XHS 2022, n. 3)

To enhance work intensity even more, Temu encourages competition between teams who are assigned with the same goals. The team winning this so-called "horse race" will be promoted. The managers of the lowest-performing teams are demoted, and their teams are merged with those that perform better (Sander 2023b).

Managers at Temu and Shein have monitoring measures in place to enforce overtime and put pressure on office staff who do not comply with the corporation's working time expectations. At Temu, reaching work time benchmarks constitutes a key

performance indicator for monthly staff appraisals (ZHHU 2021f, n. 3). Temu's human resources department monitors when office staff login to the system after lunch, and managers remind them daily to keep breaks short (ZHHU 2021f, n. 6). Rules are enforced harshly. An employee states that her colleague is allowed to take one day of sick leave every week, but she is not exempt from meeting the work time benchmark of 300 hours per month (ZHHU 2021f, n. 2). The consequences of missing KPIs, and in particular working time, are serious:

Although performance-based pay does not account for a large proportion, if the performance is not good, employees will be immediately interviewed and asked to quit. There are 25 people in the entire team, and 11 people left actively or passively in just two months. It is very cruel, and the work intensity is extremely intense. You need to aim at leaving at 23 o'clock. Basically, you can't go to bed before 1 o'clock in the morning. (ZHHU 2022b, n. 4)

At Shein, an employee writes that the department leader requested a list of all office staff who showed up first at work and those who left latest. Thus those who would not be among these lists for several days in a row were summoned by the management (ZHHU 2022a).

Office staff are not paid for overtime hours. They may get a RMB 50 (about € 6,3) voucher if they work until after 8.00 pm and the company pays a taxi home if they stay longer than 10.00 pm (ZHHU 2021b, n. 4). An employee writes that the management often states that they "discourage overtime" but at the same time they check attendance records daily. The worst time to leave is directly after work at 6.00 – 6.30 pm. Managers get

also angered if people leave between 8.00 – 8.30 pm, i.e. immediately after they are entitled to a voucher of RMB 50 (ZHHU 2021b, n. 3).

High work intensity and long working hours extend beyond regular staff. An intern or a student worker writes that she is paid RMB 13 (about € 1,6) per hour. However, after too many interns left, Shein increased the hourly rate to RMB 18 (about € 2,3). Yet, because supervisors set goals that are impossible to achieve within regular working hours, student workers are forced to work unpaid overtime (ZHHU 2021b, n. 10).

Freelancers are another category of office workers, who are forced to labour for long hours. A freelance photographer writes:

Ever since I started doing this job I had no life of my own! It's shooting every day - from morning to night. After shooting at night, I have to pack up the outfits for the next day! (ZHHU 2021e, n. 6)

## Mental stress, physical exhaustion and sexual harassment

Office staff at Shein and Temu feel miserable due to high work intensity, stress, and anger about unfair treatment:

The management is brainwashing, oppressive and inhumane. They often issue rules and regulations that have no legal basis and they do this in the name of Shein. (ZHHU 2021a, n. 2)

A student intern at Temu complains:

Many employees are very angry and mentally depressed, showing a sense of withering. There are also good colleagues, but they are relatively few. (ZHHU 2022b, n. 2).

An office staff member writes that many women at Temu suffer from endocrinal disorders as a result of mental stress and physical exhaustion (ZHHU 2021f, n. 4). Long working hours and stress impact employees' social relations and personality. The partner of a Temu office staff states:

Actually, if it wasn't for money, who would be willing to live such a life?' he told me. His daily life consisted of sleeping and working. I watched helplessly as the little boy inside him [...] disappeared in just six months. (ZHHU 2021d, n. 2)

The wife of another staff member writes:

When he worked 11 11 6, I reluctantly adjusted my biological clock, and I could wait until he came home in the middle of the night. Now he is working continuously, 12 12 7? ? ? 1 1 7? ? When I go to work, he is sleeping and when I go to bed he still hasn't come home. Oh my God, there is no day off for a month. I don't know how long these kinds of days will last. (ZHHU 2021d, n. 3)

In the same vein, Shein requires its employees to be available at any time. Fast response is part of the company culture and reflected in performance evaluations:

From time to time, I recall details of when I felt stressed at Shein to remind myself for future work. One aspect of Shein's corporate culture is rapid response, which is deeply integrated into many activities. My performance evaluation included a criterion based on this, such as responding quickly to colleagues' requests and business needs. My people-pleasing personality was perfectly exploited by this demand for rapid response. Whenever the notification on my company WeChat flashed, I couldn't help but stop whatever I was doing to check the new messages immediately. Then I would go back to what I was working on. Even after leaving work, pop-up notifications on my phone would torment me. I had no choice but to turn off app notifications and put my phone on complete silence. Even with my phone on silent, I couldn't stop thinking about unresolved issues, wondering if anyone was waiting for my reply or if I had received a response to my inquiries, periodically lighting up my phone screen. Then I would either stop what I was doing again or feel a slight disappointment if there were no new messages. Eventually, I realized that my life had become completely fragmented. (XHS 2024j)

Office staff at Shein write about sexual harassment and managers ignoring their complaints (ZHHU 2023c, n. 2; 2021a, n. 3). According to an online article about Shein, staff have faced sexual

harassment and threats of violence. An employee responds to this claim:

I agree! I saw an employee expose that key personnel sexually harassed female employees, with senior management covering it up internally, fostering a harmful culture.” (ZHHU 2023c, n. 2) In another thread, a male employee complains about his direct superior's repeated approaches and jealous demands not to socialise with other colleagues. The employee states.: “She told me that she would be responsible for my full-time job evaluation and asked me to be nice to her. I never dared to offend her because I knew this. (ZHHU 2021a, n. 3)

The employee eventually reported her to senior management. However, after six months, nobody was heard, and no response had been initiated (ZHHU 2021a, n. 4). Sexual harassment is stigmatising, and the victims frequently blame themselves, with no or little opportunity to get their suffering acknowledged or seek redress. Finding complaints about sexual harassment in social media is unusual and could suggest that the situation at Shein is worse than what employees expect or are used to.

## Wage repression and performance rankings for Shein office staff

We found discussion threads in which Shein office staff and applicants for such jobs write about pay and wage setting practices. The posts suggest that Shein uses data-driven strategies to keep wages low. Job candidates who pass the interviews successfully will receive an oral offer. This, however, does not mean that they will be employed (ZHHU

2021b, nn. 1, 3). They are first asked to submit pay slips from previous employment and receipts for social insurance contributions and housing provident fund payments. They then must provide their expected salary range (ZHHU 2021b, n. 2). Shein uses the collected data to profile incomes and determine a wage benchmark at the lowest possible level. The method allows to minimise a job candidate's negotiating power.

Office staff at Shein claim that very small wage rises are practiced throughout their careers at the company due to the systematic undervaluation of employees' qualifications and skills (ZHHU 2021b, n. 2) Promotions are divided into P-level ranks (expert ranks) and M-level (management ranks). Each level has three sub-levels. Wages increase only in small steps between sub-levels. To be promoted to the next higher rank, an employee needs to fulfil the criteria for the ranks one or two levels above the targeted rank (ZHHU 2021b, n. 4).

Performance rankings are used to control labour costs. Office staff's posts indicate that they compete for performance rewards. These rewards are determined via individual rankings and. Apparently departments are given a set amount of money to incentivise performance (ZHHU 2021b, n. 11).

Performance is ranked into categories a, b, c, and d. It is up to the manager to decide how performance is rewarded (ZHHU 2021b, n. 5). A former employee writes:

Performance appraisal mechanism: Up until I resigned, it was always a one-way top-down evaluation, which made it easy for superiors to manipulate. There were no anonymous peer reviews or 360-degree evaluations. (XHS 2024k)

Employees who resign are ranked 0 during their last working month and therefore do not receive performance pay (ZHHU 2021b, n. 12; 2021d, n. 4).

To further reduce operational costs, Shein replaces regular employees with staff hired from labour dispatch agencies. Office staff report that many of them are sent by outsourcing companies. Prospective applicants applying for positions at Shein frequently are asked to fill in application forms provided by labour agents instead of Shein (XHS 2024e, nn. 1, 2, 3).

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Shein and Temu combine social media with online shopping and a novel, data-driven approach to sourcing and manufacturing (The Economist 2021). An opinion editorial in the Harvard Business School’s “Working Knowledge” series lauded the companies’ entrepreneurial creativity and noted a “remarkable sensitivity to its consumers’ fashion tastes” (Deighton 2023). In contrast to their commitment to customer wants, our research finds that Shein and Temu show little care for their employees’ labour rights and interests.

We relied on publicly available social media posts, videos, and articles to examine working conditions for warehouse workers and office staff. Our report reveals a data-driven labour regime that forces warehouse workers to compete against the clock and other workers in what we have named “The Warehouse Games”. Not only does algorithmic management push many workers to their physical and mental limits, but it also obscures wage and working time records, making it impossible to detect unfair treatment or seek remedy through labour arbitration.

Social media posts tailored by employment agencies showcasing supposedly micro-influencers add to a lack of rights awareness among warehouse workers. Fake photos, videos, and stories portray perseverance in the face of impossible targets as a matter of character. Failure to reach targets,

enduring physical pain, and overcoming mental stress are all portrayed as the result of a weak mind and a lack of will, removing them from exploitative and unfair working conditions.

Shein and Temu’s corporate cultures involve cut-throat competition and long working hours, which affect office staff as well. Employees suffer from both physical and mental hardship. Many of them work 300-380 hours per month, feel constantly stressed, and are required to be available even when off duty. Office staff compete with one another via individual performance rankings and team-based “horse races”. In a toxic work environment, employees face a constant fear of punishment or dismissal as well as unreasonable performance expectations and power abuse. Office employees and their partners post on social media about their socially deprived existence and failed relationships.

The findings on working conditions for warehouse and office staff confirm the overall results of our first report on Temu and Shein concerned with supplier and workers. Ultra-fast fashion will move us further away from a sustainable future. If Shein and Temu can maintain their expansion path, many more businesses will want to follow suit in order not to lose market shares. A better future for workers and the planet demands regulators’ intervention.

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