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### Public Relations Original Case Study: Shein Brand Trip Backlash

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## **Shein Brand Trip Backlash**

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Although notorious for its murky practices and questionable ethics, Shein is the world's largest online-only retailer. Founded in China in 2008, the e-shop operates in over 150 countries worldwide. Shein dominates the retail industry with a potent mix of absurdly low prices, fast production, and popularity on TikTok. To sell an extensive selection of products, Shein has developed a production model allowing the company to produce and push thousands of new designs daily. Shein began as a women's clothing store but quickly expanded its assortment to men's wear and children's, and now offers items such as furniture, cosmetics, and electronic accessories. Without the presence of physical stores, the brand markets products that can cost as little as \$3 an item and targets Gen Z consumers with social media influencers and online advertisements promoting their cheap and on-trend clothing. Shein states the brand's mission is "to serve as a leader in the industry and bring fashion into the modern era," with core values including, "customers, constant improvement, and transforming the industry."

In mid-June 2023, Shein took half a dozen American fashion influencers on a sponsored, all-expenses-paid trip to tour some of the company's Chinese warehouses in the megacity, Guangzhou. Over four days, they would see the company's "Innovation Center," working factories, and shipping center, all while enjoying luxury accommodations and fancy meals. The creators — Dani Carbonari, Destene Sudduth, Fernanda Stephany Campuzano, Kenya Freeman, Aujené, and Marina Saavedra — filmed the tours and shared multiple posts on TikTok and Instagram, hashtagging them #shein101 and #sheinbrandtrip. Each influencer produced several Instagram posts with eerily similar captions extolling Shein and its labor conditions. They showed brightly lit, clean facilities, spacious working areas, and smiling employees with automated bots assisting in packaging orders.

“It’s hard for me to even put into words how this trip has impacted me. I was really excited and impressed to see the working conditions,” Carbonari shared in an Instagram reel. She continued as the camera panned across a spacious, brightly lit factory. Shein is just such a developed and complex company, and it was so beautiful to see first hand.”

Sudduth posted to her 4 million followers: "Upon interviewing the workers, a lot of them were really confused and taken back with the child labor questions and the lead-in-the-clothing questions." She continued: "I expected this facility to be so filled with people just slaving away but I was actually pleasantly surprised. The workers weren't even sweating. We were the ones sweating!"

“The China trip has been one of the most life-changing trips of my life,” Carbonari wrote in the caption of a deleted Instagram post. “My biggest takeaway from this trip is to be an independent thinker, get the facts and see it with your own two eyes. There's a narrative fed to us in the U.S, and I'm one that always likes to be open-minded and seek the truth, so I'm grateful for that about myself, and I hope the same for you.”

Instead of swaying the public's perspective of the company, Shein's brand trip backfired, and the influencers faced swift negative backlash for posting glowing reviews despite Shein’s long history of labor violations. Followers and internet users were upset because the "Innovation Center" does not accurately portray what happens in Shein factories. The company has been the subject of numerous reports alleging labor abuses, poor working conditions, potential usage of hazardous materials, and environmental concerns. The company hoped this stunt would fight against its bad reputation. Still, internet users saw the collaboration as propaganda, and many began questioning the influencers' decision to collaborate with a brand facing such scrutiny.

After the repercussions, Shein defended the trip by stating, “Shein is committed to transparency and this trip reflects one way in which we are listening to feedback, providing an opportunity to show a group of influencers how Shein works through a visit to our innovation center and enabling them to share their own insights with their followers. Their social media videos and commentary are authentic, and we respect and stand by each influencer’s perspective and voice on their experience.”

In this case, public relations tactics are focused on how Shein addressed the scandal surrounding their factory brand trip. The case also delves into the impact of these strategies on Shein's brand reputation and identifies key lessons learned for future crisis management by both influencers and companies. Shein has been known for poor and plainly illegal business tactics that affect the consumer, the environment and the clothing industry. When the brand factory trip videos were released on both Shein’s platforms and individual accounts, the general public had comments like “They showed you what you wanted to see” or “I feel like they used you for damage control” referencing the influencers. The backlash online for one particular influencer Dani DMC, caused her to be thrown into the spotlight of the brand trip scandal. Her first response after getting hate for going on the trip, was to double down and say she will continue to support Shein and stated her evidence in a video that is now deleted. In a video after the incident, Dani stated ““I feel more confident than ever with my partnership with Shein. They are aware of every single rumor and instead of staying quiet they are fighting with all of their power to not only show us the truth but continue to improve and be the best they can possibly be.” The utilization of denial in her live streams and videos created to defend her actions ultimately backfired. The general public and her online audience continued to pressure the influencers who supported Shein into denouncing the company. After Dani DMC continued to get backlash

online, she deleted her videos supporting Shein on her own platforms, and then released a video statement saying she has cut ties with the company and will no longer work with them. Her immediate response to the criticism was met with most of the blame being placed on her for taking the brand trip, and the responsibility to remedy the incident, instead of Shein. While many influencers were at the forefront of this crisis, the company was at the root. Shein decided to hold a brand trip and when the trip was met with negative publicity, the influencers were left to fend for themselves. The company released a statement after the scandal, which is referenced above. The statement does not include accountability for the incident and also does not apologize. Shein does state they are committed to transparency, which is ironic considering the amount of false experiences had on the trip. Attempting to utilize transparency in business normally is a fantastic tactic used to strengthen company-consumer relations but in this case, Shein was being deceitful. They used tactics to create an aesthetically better factory with happy workers and then promoted the videos with influencers who were being paid to support the company. The general audience did not fall for the tricks and essentially influencer propaganda. The statement did not heal relations between Shein and its consumers, and dragged the online discourse about its poor business tactics even lower. The response and lack of accountability and apologetic action resulted in a worsened reputation for Shein, and negative impact on many influencer's careers. In the aftermath of the situation, a top exec at Shein did an interview with TIME and referenced the incident. Several months after this incident, Shein was placed in a lawsuit since many of their stakeholders were not happy. In the TIME interview, Donald Tang, the exec vice chairman states "It's (the brand trip) something that came about with the best intentions. In hindsight, it didn't go to the place we intended, which is that we're committed to more transparency. We want people to see all the different places that we make things from. The influencers got very unfair treatment,

which I very much regret.” (Semuels, 2023). The apology was far too late for a crisis that had now accumulated to a large lawsuit, with many different groups involved. In the aftermath of the Shein factory brand trip scandal, damage control measures were implemented to mitigate the negative impact on the company's reputation. The effectiveness of these situational crisis communication responses and their impact on the brand's reputation will be further analyzed in the stakeholder relationships.

The key stakeholders in this case are Shein, influencers, consumers and the factory workers. The main players who had an audience to address were the influencers and Shein. The backlash from the public after viewing the brand trip publicity set the crisis communication in motion. Shein did issue a short statement, which the consumers felt lacked accountability for the incident. Firstly, the main stakeholders in this scandal include Shein as a company, the influencers involved, their workers, consumers, and the general public. Shein is directly implicated as their response did not take accountability or work towards fixing their poor business tactics. This tarnished their reputation and raises questions about their ethical practices. The influencers involved also face backlash as they are seen as endorsing a brand with unethical manufacturing practices. Their credibility is at stake, potentially leading to loss of followers and future collaborations. The followers of these influencers and consumers of Shein are also stakeholders in this scandal. They trusted these individuals to promote brands that align with their values. Discovering that one of their favorite influencers supported a company with exploitative labor practices can lead to disappointment and loss of trust. The impact of this scandal on influencer's careers while being abandoned by Shein during the backlash should stand to be a reminder of being careful in the influencer industry. Lastly, the general public is affected by this incident as it highlights broader issues within the fashion industry regarding worker

exploitation. It brings attention to the need for stricter regulations and ethical sourcing practices. The responses done by each individual internal stakeholder were not impactful in remedying the issue. The TIME magazine article, for example, was done way too late for Shein's reputation to not diminish. Shein only sat down and had a responsible conversation about the impact of the trip when a lawsuit was brought to the table. The lawsuit involved copyright infringement and racketeering. When addressing the regret about influencer backlash, Tang states "It was a well-intentioned effort that didn't get to the right place at the end. We have a lot more to do on the journey of total transparency. So we must do more: Invite reporters to see the factories—whatever questions they have, we'll answer." (Semuels, 2023). The stakes for many involved in Shein have risen, both internal and external. The internal factory workers deserve better rights at work, such as pay and conditions. The labor rights and environmental activists are an external stakeholder, invested in both the rights and practices of the company. Consumers decide whether or not to buy as stakeholders and what the social and moral implication is to buy from Shein. The brand factory trip incident exacerbated these issues around Shein and brought their reputation to the forefront of online discourse. Influencers, in the most nuanced stakeholder position, were both internal as hired brand trip publicity and also external as potential customers and public. Influencers taking the heat online for a problem Shein has been creating for many years is a highlight of this case. As stakeholders, should they understand the moral complications of working with Shein and not go? The viewpoint of influencers from an internal stakeholder position could be that the company left them to take responsibility as expendable employees. Overall, the external stakeholders were not persuaded or positively influenced by the trip or the communication responses utilized by Shein and those on the brand trip.



From a public relations perspective, all stakeholders are negatively impacted by this scandal. Shein must address the issue and take immediate action to rectify its labor practices. The influencers immediate responses should publicly acknowledge their mistake and distance themselves from Shein until improvements are made. The consumer relations need reassurance that lessons have been learned, while the general public expects companies like Shein to be held accountable for unethical behavior.

When looking at this case in hindsight it seems as though both Shein and their brand trip influencers made obvious mistakes in their campaign and communication strategies. The purpose of this case study, though, is not to simply point out the subjects' mistakes, but to analyze their intentions and why they were received differently by the public than hoped. It is hard to say for sure whether or not Shein employees and executives believed they were being truthful in how they were representing their factory conditions for the brand trip content. The very first Page Principle for integrity in public communication is straightforward: tell the truth. On one hand, it is possible that, when organizing and executing this influencer brand trip to the "innovation center," Shein did not see it as a dishonest or manipulative operation. On another hand, it is likely that Shein intentionally constructed this diverse influencer brand trip to their shiny, model factory as a way to cover up, or at least subdue, the allegations made against them - primarily the ones regarding their unethical and unsafe working conditions. The murkiness of their intentions is a good enough reason to assume that Shein failed to meet the first Page Principle. Likewise, any attempt that Shein might have made to align with the second Page Principle, prove it with action, fell short. Instead of honestly making proactive changes to their practices and policies - if not for their victims, but at least for their own selfish purposes - Shein opted to sugarcoat. Then,

when the public saw through Shein's cover-up campaign, Shein chose, once again, to not respond with real action but with vague language and blame-shifting.

Based on the public relations systems theory, which suggests that public relations professionals should be aware of their organization's goals, intentions, actions, environment and two-way communication in order to make informed decisions, Shein misunderstood and/or underestimated their online audience and where they stood in their eyes. Shein-related content used to do immensely well on social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram, but as their primarily Gen-Z online public evolved socially and politically over the past three years, Shein lost favor and control of their narrative. Under the assumption that this brand trip was created by Shein with the purpose of repairing their bad reputation on social media, they were presumably too focused on their own goals to consider the full scope of just how critical their online environment would be.

Typically, when cognitive dissonance is discussed in the context of public relations, it is in reference to consumer behavior and not necessarily about the organizations themselves. However, in the case of Shein's brand trip, cognitive dissonance, or the psychological theory that one may behave in ways inconsistent with their own beliefs when it benefits them, can be found on all sides. If it is possible that the Shein employees behind the brand trip did have honest intentions, it can be assumed that they were engaging their cognitive dissonance within their own organization. More certainly, though, the influencers who participated in the brand trip were exhibiting cognitive dissonance. Dani, especially, seemed to have convinced herself that, by going on this Shein-sponsored trip to the "innovation center," she was doing something positive and constructive for the public. In reality, though, her decision to support Shein as a brand

influencer and content-creator was self-motivated and the public could see that, even if she couldn't.

So, what implications did this failed brand trip have on Shein's own business and on society as a whole? Because of Shein's unethical use of public relations and influencer marketing strategies, they not only failed to dispel any of their allegations, but they further hurt their online reputation. Additionally, in a way, Shein became a cautionary tale for influencers - especially micro-influencers. The way Shein's brand trip soured the reputation of the influencers involved is evidence that influencers take on the values and image of the brands they choose to work with. In terms of societal implications, this case highlights that many corporations do not know how to market to Gen Z anymore as they are becoming increasingly more politically, ethically, socially and environmentally conscious. Over the past three years, especially, Gen Z has begun sharing and promoting educational content on platforms like TikTok and the downfall of Shein's reputation online can be attributed to this shift towards awareness and ethical consumption. Knowing this, and learning from Shein's mistakes, other brands have begun to use their own ethical practices as marketing points.

More specifically, for public relations professionals, there are several important key lessons to take away from this case. First, while influencer marketing may seem straightforward and low stakes at times, it can be unpredictable. Whenever shared and paid media intersects, there is a certain level of risk to be considered. With influencers, though, the brand is taking on the image of the influencers they associate with and vice-versa. Having a deep understanding of who you agree to work with is crucial for a crisis-free career. This should be especially important for micro-influencers, like Dani, who might not receive as many enticing offers as bigger creators. Using this Shein brand trip as an example, influencers and micro-influencers should

recognize that who they work with could potentially tarnish their image, even long after the partnership ends. Additionally, with this case, TikTok played a very important role in how Gen Z was utilizing it to spread awareness of Shein's unethical practices and the absurdity of the brand trip. Public relations professionals should analyze this case as an illustration of how, in a way, TikTok has become a site of activism, media literacy and social awareness. Only just a couple years ago, TikTok was a hub for Shein influencer content and shopping haul videos and yet, now, it played a major role in the development of their crisis. Above all, this case highlights that public relations theories, strategies and tactics can be unethically utilized. Shein claimed honesty and transparency as a communication strategy but they did not have enough evidence to back up their hollow claims and they could not hide from the public. For organizations who are intentional with their ethics, public relations strategies like deny or diminish, for example, are okay to use. Public relations professionals should be cautious and conscious of their organization's intentions before strategization and implementation.

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