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How fast fashion giant SHEIN uses dark patterns to push **overconsumption**: evidence from BEUC members

The fast fashion industry uses dark patterns (manipulative techniques) to prompt consumers into buying more and more clothing. This costs them money, exposes them to harmful chemicals, and has a major environmental and societal impact. SHEIN has rapidly emerged as the most egregious example of the use of dark patterns. The following research from BEUC members highlights how consumers are being deceived by these practices into overconsumption.

DARK PATTERNS



SHEIN uses the most dark patterns according to a **Fédération Romande des Consommateurs** (Switzerland) study (Sept. 2022). Out of 15 online retailers studied for 20 manipulative practices, SHEIN was on top of the list, with 18. SHEIN was ahead of ASOS (six), H&M (six), Zalando (six) and Zara (four).



SHEIN among most memorable source of dark patterns in Norway according to a **Forbrukerrådet** survey (Dec. 2022), together with other fast fashion companies like H&M, Wish, Aliexpress and Alibaba. 78% experienced negative consequences: irritation was the most common, followed by thinking negatively about or losing trust in the trader. 26% felt manipulated or tricked.



16 types of discounts were offered to consumers on SHEIN's homepage according to an **Arbeiterkammer** (Austria) study (Mar. 2023). These appeared with classic dark patterns like countdown timers and phrases like "Almost sold out!", creating a sense of urgency, and the cookie banner only has a button to accept.



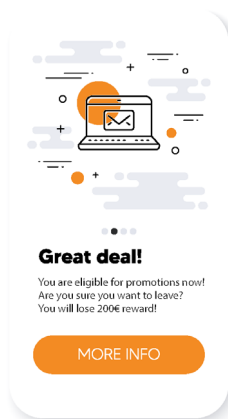
Many dark patterns were found in a **UFC-Que Choisir** (France) study (June 2024), including pop-ups blocking big parts of the screen, misleading discounts, and different types of visual design interference, e.g. highlighting a specific button the trader wants the consumer to press – while hiding the option less favourable for the trader.



vzbv (Germany) found 'hyper-engaging dark patterns' (HEDPs) in its study (Jan. 2025). In contrast to classic dark patterns, HEDPs try to maximise consumer engagement to make them stay on the platform for longer to maximise the possibility of a sale. According to vzbv, SHEIN's use of HEDPs combines gamification with 'FOMO' (fear of missing out) techniques.



OCU in Spain has a dedicated webpage for consumer complaints about SHEIN. OCU also provides information on its website concerning SHEIN and the dark side of the ultra-fast fashion industry.



It's not just fast fashion though, e-commerce is rife with dark patterns according to BEUC members' research:

Sveriges Konsumenter analysed (2024) deceptive design patterns in the cancellation processes of 20 digital services in Sweden and found such patterns in all cases.

Which? research (conducted in Aug. 2021) found consumers in the UK are widely exposed to dark patterns. Out of 2,000 participants, half or more reported experiencing them online.

A study (July 2023) by **Citizens Advice** on deceptive design revealed that 8.5 million consumers in the UK had recently spent money on something they didn't want, need or regretted – because of dark patterns.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT OF (ULTRA) FAST FASHION

Brands used to present new collections seasonally. Fashion is becoming ultra-fast. An analysis revealed SHEIN delivered 315,000 collections in 2022, compared to 6,850 for Zara and 4,400 for H&M. This creates a growing clothes waste issue: **Forbrugerrådet Tænk** found that 40% of clothes that Danish consumers between the ages of 25-50 have in their wardrobes are not used. This goes against consumers' intentions, according to a **vzbv study** (Nov. 2022) showing 94% of consumers in Germany would like longer-lasting clothes and 75% are willing to wear clothes longer to contribute to climate protection. BEUC's Spanish member **CECU** shows in its report (Nov. 2024) on greenwashing in the textile industry that low-priced fashion platforms have become more popular, with SHEIN being one of them.

Tudatos Vásárlók Egyesülete in Hungary highlighted (Mar. 2021) the environmental issues with fast fashion, referring to a Changing Markets Foundation study. This shows the extensive use of cheap synthetic fibres (e.g. polyester) in over half of all textiles produced, and that if the industry

continues producing textiles as it does today, nearly 3/4 of all textiles will be made from fossil fuels within the next decade. The fashion industry is already one of the world's most polluting sectors.

In their quest to source cheap materials, fast fashion producers commonly use hazardous chemicals posing significant health risks to both workers and consumers. According to the Swedish Chemical Agency (June 2018), around 3,500 chemicals are used in textile production.

Federacja Konsumentow examined (in 2024) 16 products on SHEIN, including clothing, underwear and jewellery. Overall, more than half of the products tested contained non-safe heavy metals. **Testachats/Testaankoop** tested (May 2024) the chemical composition of 25 children's clothing and shoes from SHEIN: 10/25 contained hazardous chemicals, with one containing so many that it exceeded legal standards. A **Forbrugerrådet Tænk** study tested jackets (May 2025) from Amazon, Shein and Temu: 13/17 contained PFAS chemicals.

GROWING SOCIETAL CONCERNS

Reports about alleged exploitative labour conditions faced by workers in the fast fashion industry, particularly in Bangladesh, China, and India, are alarming.

In February 2025, the European Commission also announced its own investigation into SHEIN's compliance with EU consumer law. The complaint filed by BEUC is in addition to, and complements, the Commission's own investigation.

