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An Analysis of Management Strategies in Emerging Startups

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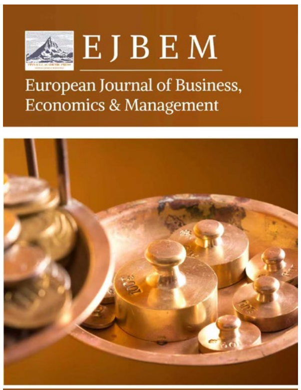

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Abstract: Emerging Asian startups have become influential actors in the global economy, yet existing research has primarily emphasized Western firms, leaving gaps in understanding their unique strategies. This study addresses that gap by examining SHEIN, a China-founded digital-first fast-fashion company that has rapidly expanded to more than 150 countries. Using a qualitative case study method supported by comparative analysis with ByteDance and Grab, the research draws on secondary data, industry reports, and sustainability disclosures from 2021 to 2025. The findings show that SHEIN's growth is driven by an agile supply chain capable of releasing over 1.5 million new items annually, a platform-based model with more than 250 million monthly active users by 2024, and a flexible workforce exceeding 10,000 employees worldwide. Revenue increased from USD 15.7 billion in 2021 to an estimated USD 56 billion in 2025, while its U.S. market share peaked at 50 percent in 2022 before stabilizing above 40 percent in 2025. These results illustrate how digital integration, small-batch production, and global-local balance allow emerging startups to sustain international competitiveness. The study contributes to scholarship on entrepreneurship and offers practical lessons for managing agility, digital platforms, and global expansion in resource-constrained contexts.

Keywords: SHEIN; agile supply chain; platform-based model; international competitiveness; emerging startups

1. Introduction

In recent years, emerging startups from Asia have become important players in the global business landscape. Companies such as ByteDance, Grab, and SHEIN have shown how innovative management and rapid international expansion can create competitive advantages in highly dynamic markets. Unlike traditional multinational corporations, these startups rely on digital technologies, data-driven operations, and flexible supply chains to compete in diverse regions [1]. Their success reflects broader trends in globalization and digital transformation, where new firms can rise quickly to global prominence.

Despite their visibility, existing academic research has often focused more on Western startups and large technology firms, leaving a gap in the understanding of how Asian startups manage growth, build organizational resilience, and expand into international markets [2]. SHEIN, in particular, offers a valuable case. Founded in China and now operating in more than 150 countries, it represents a new type of digital-first enterprise [3]. Its business model combines fast-fashion with real-time consumer data, global supply networks, and aggressive market entry strategies [4]. However, little systematic research has examined how its internal management practices and external strategies align to sustain rapid expansion.

The purpose of this study is to analyze SHEIN's management and expansion strategies in detail, situating the company within the wider context of emerging Asian startups. The study employs a case study method, drawing on secondary data, industry reports, and comparative analysis with other firms such as ByteDance and Grab. By focusing on both internal organizational practices and external market strategies, the analysis aims to show how startups can leverage agility, digitalization, and global-local balance to achieve sustainable growth.

This paper contributes to the growing literature on entrepreneurship and international business in three ways. First, it provides insights into the specific management strategies that support fast-growing Asian startups. Second, it highlights the role of digital platforms and supply chain innovation in global expansion. Third, it offers lessons for both scholars and practitioners on how emerging firms can compete internationally despite resource constraints.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Chapter 2 reviews relevant literature on startup management, expansion, and digital strategies. Chapter 3 introduces the research method and case background. Chapter 4 analyzes SHEIN's strategies in supply chain management, digitalization, organizational culture, and international expansion, with comparisons to other startups. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes with findings, implications, and directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Research on Startup Management Models

Management strategies are central to the survival and growth of startups. Classical theories emphasize resource-based views, where firms compete by acquiring and protecting valuable resources [5]. In contrast, more recent research highlights dynamic capabilities, such as rapid learning and market responsiveness. Startups often lack financial stability and brand reputation, so management models prioritize agility, innovation, and flexible organizational structures [6]. Asian startups such as SHEIN show how lean operations and real-time data use can substitute for heavy capital investment.

Recent data confirm that Asia has emerged as one of the fastest-growing startup regions worldwide. According to OECD's Start-up Asia (2025), Asia accounted for 23% of global venture capital investment between 2021 and 2023, surpassing Europe in certain measures of ecosystem value [7]. Similarly, Startup Genome's GSER 2025 highlights that Asia and Africa are the only regions with sustained growth, while Europe shows signs of decline [8]. Figure 1 illustrates these trends, comparing regional ecosystem shares from 2021 to 2025. As shown, Asia's share increases steadily, reflecting its rapid expansion in digital commerce and platform-based enterprises such as SHEIN.

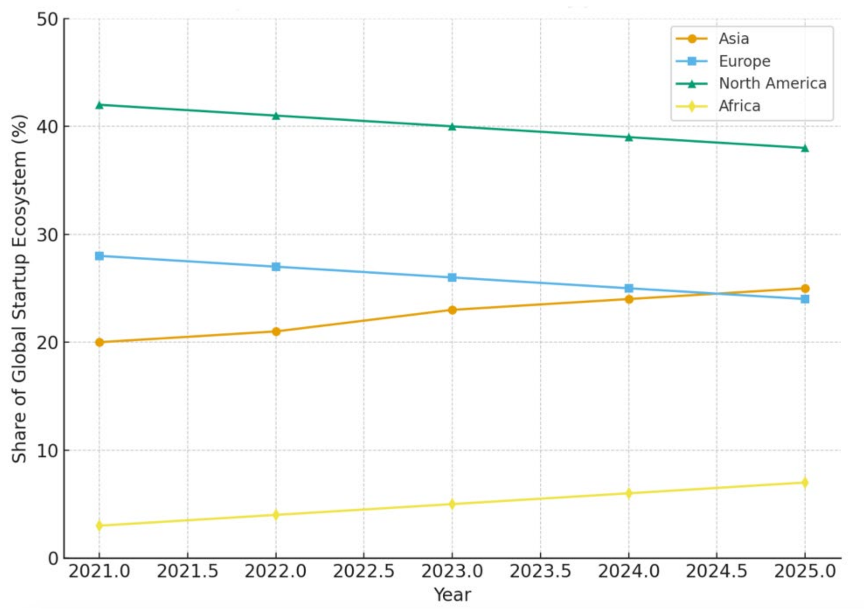

Figure 1. Regional Startup Ecosystem Share (2021-2025, Indicative Trend).

This trend indicates that Asia has experienced faster growth than Europe and is steadily narrowing the gap with North America. It highlights the growing importance of analyzing firms like SHEIN within both local and global contexts.

2.2. Internationalization and Expansion Pathways of Startups

Startups face significant challenges when entering foreign markets. Recent research suggests that "born global" firms often expand internationally at an early stage, supported by resources and networks that accelerate global entry [9]. However, digital-native firms often skip this gradual process, expanding globally in a "born global" fashion. Asian startups provide strong evidence for this shift. ByteDance launched TikTok in multiple countries simultaneously, while Grab expanded across Southeast Asia within a few years. SHEIN follows a similar trajectory, entering North America and Europe early, supported by its online-only model.

This rapid internationalization requires management strategies that integrate global efficiency with local adaptation. Recent studies highlight the balance between standardization (efficiency, economies of scale) and localization (consumer trust, cultural fit) as critical to success [10]. SHEIN demonstrates this balance by keeping its design and production centralized in China while tailoring marketing strategies to local fashion preferences..

2.3. Digital Platforms and Supply Chain Management in Startups

Digital platforms have transformed how startups manage resources and scale globally. Recent studies on digital platform economics emphasize network effects, where value increases as more users join, and highlight how platforms reduce entry barriers, enabling startups to connect suppliers, customers, and designers in real time [11].

SHEIN's supply chain illustrates this transformation. Unlike traditional fast-fashion companies such as Zara that operate on seasonal cycles, SHEIN leverages big data and AI-driven analytics to update designs weekly and produce small batches (as few as 100 pieces) through its "test and repeat" model, dramatically reducing waste and increasing responsiveness [12].

Table 1 compares SHEIN's supply chain with those of established fast-fashion players, showing how digital integration creates a competitive advantage.

Table 1. Comparison of Supply Chain Models in Fast-Fashion Firms.

Company	Design-to-Store Cycle	Typical Batch Size	Data Integration	Global Reach (Countries)
Zara	3-4 weeks	5,000+	Moderate	~95
H&M	4-6 weeks	10,000+	Moderate	~75
SHEIN	1-2 weeks	100-300	High (AI-driven)	~150

As shown in Table 1, SHEIN's cycle is the shortest, and its reliance on small batches allows it to test consumer demand before scaling. This practice not only reduces financial risk but also accelerates international expansion.

3. Research Method and Case Background

3.1. Research Method: Case Study and Comparative Analysis

This research is based on a qualitative case study method. Case studies are widely used in business and management research because they allow scholars to examine a firm's strategies in depth and to connect theory with practice. In this study, SHEIN is chosen as the central case because it represents one of the most significant examples of an Asian startup that has successfully expanded into global markets. The company's fast growth, unique digital-first business model, and extensive global reach make it an appropriate subject for understanding how emerging startups compete internationally.

The case study method relies on the careful collection and interpretation of secondary data. Sources include company reports, sustainability disclosures, press releases, and widely cited industry analyses from 2021 to 2024. In addition, academic literature and independent research reports are used to provide a theoretical framework for evaluating management models, supply chain strategies, and internationalization. For example, Startup Genome's annual Global Startup Ecosystem Reports and OECD's recent publications on Asian entrepreneurship give valuable context for understanding regional growth trends.

To strengthen the validity of the findings, the study also uses a form of comparative analysis. By comparing SHEIN's strategies with those of other well-known Asian startups such as ByteDance and Grab, it becomes possible to identify what is unique to SHEIN and what is common to other high-growth firms in the region. ByteDance demonstrates how a Chinese company can create global influence through digital platforms, while Grab illustrates the role of localized services in Southeast Asia. These comparisons help to situate SHEIN within the broader landscape of emerging Asian startups.

The use of multiple sources and comparative insights ensures that the study does not rely on a single perspective. Instead, it creates a triangulated approach, where findings are cross-checked against different forms of evidence. This makes the analysis more credible and more useful for both academic researchers and business practitioners who are interested in the strategies of fast-growing startups.

3.2. Company Overview and Revenue Growth

SHEIN began as a small online retailer in Nanjing, China, in 2008, originally focusing on wedding dresses and women's clothing. Over time, it developed into a global fast-fashion powerhouse by combining a digital-first model with a highly flexible supply chain [13]. Unlike traditional fast-fashion companies such as Zara or H&M, which rely on large seasonal collections, SHEIN releases thousands of new products every week. This business model is made possible by the company's heavy use of consumer data, rapid supplier coordination, and technology-driven decision-making.

The company's revenue growth over the past five years demonstrates the effectiveness of this model. In 2021, SHEIN's revenue was estimated at around 15.7 billion US dollars. By 2022, revenue increased to 22.7 billion, and in 2023 it reached 32.2 billion. In 2024, the figure surged to 50 billion, and the most recent estimates for 2025 suggest revenue has grown further to 56 billion. Figure 2 shows this trend clearly, illustrating the rapid acceleration of SHEIN's financial performance in a relatively short period of time.

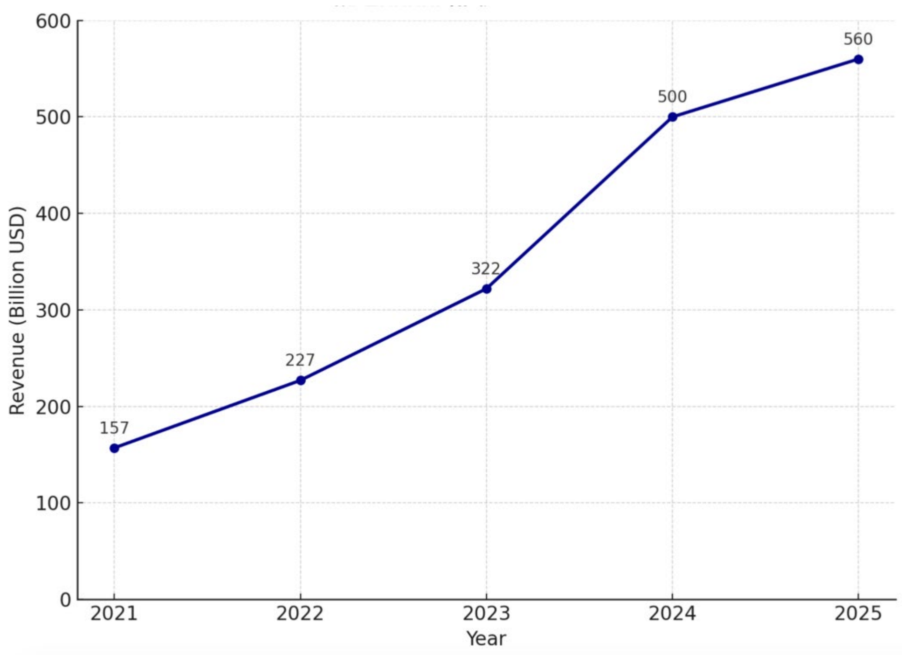

Figure 2. SHEIN Annual Revenue, 2021-2025 (in billion USD). Data sources: Backlinko (2025) for 2021-2024; Priori Data & Simicart (2025) for 2025 estimate.

The speed of revenue growth is not only a reflection of consumer demand but also of organizational efficiency. SHEIN's reliance on small-batch testing allows it to avoid the risks of overproduction, while its digital marketing campaigns help it reach young consumers around the world. The ability to maintain high growth during a period marked by global supply chain disruptions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, further demonstrates the resilience of its model [14]. For scholars, SHEIN offers a rare example of how a startup can grow from a niche company to a global leader within little more than a decade.

3.3. Organizational Scale and Employee Growth

Financial growth is often accompanied by organizational expansion, and this has also been the case for SHEIN, although available data on its workforce are not fully consistent [15]. Public disclosures and independent reports show that the company has developed a sizable employee base to support its global operations, but the exact numbers vary depending on the source and year.

According to records from the World Benchmarking Alliance, SHEIN employed approximately 10,382 staff in mainland China in 2022. This figure, however, reflects only regional employees and does not capture the company's global workforce. By 2023, Backlinko reported that SHEIN had more than 16,000 employees worldwide, which is widely cited as the most reliable global estimate. In contrast, a 2024 entry on Wikipedia suggested that the global workforce was around 11,000, and a 2025 market report from Mobiloud stated that "Shein employs nearly 10,000 workers worldwide." These latter figures appear inconsistent with the company's continued expansion and may reflect narrower definitions of formal employees, excluding contractors or outsourced labor.

Figure 3. illustrates the available estimates from 2022 to 2025, highlighting both the overall magnitude of SHEIN's workforce and the discrepancies among sources. While the chart shows apparent fluctuations, it is more reasonable to interpret the data as evidence of reporting differences rather than a genuine reduction in employees. What remains clear

is that SHEIN consistently relies on a workforce exceeding 10,000 staff members, distributed across multiple operational centers, to coordinate logistics, digital marketing, data analytics, and customer service in more than 150 countries.

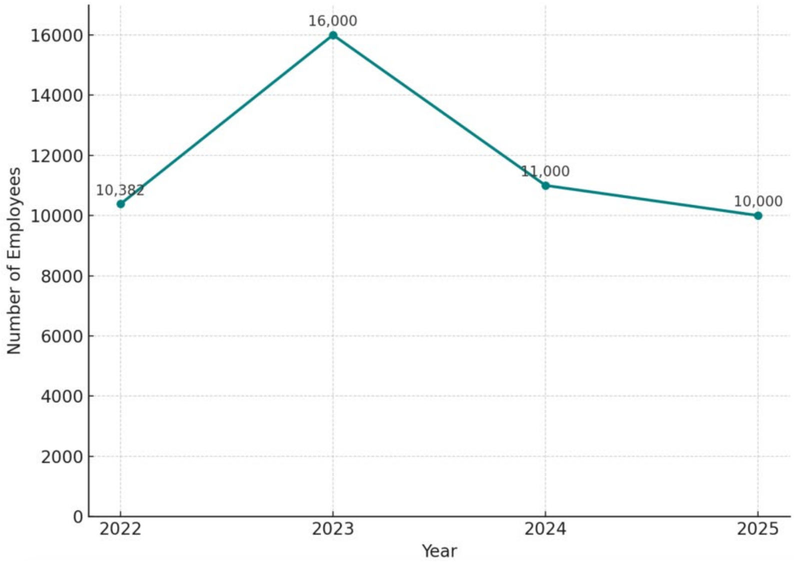

Figure 3. SHEIN Estimated Number of Employees, 2022-2025. Data compiled from World Benchmarking Alliance (2022), Backlinko (2023), Wikipedia (2024), and Mobiloud (2025). Figures vary across sources, likely due to differences in scope (regional vs. global, or inclusion of contractors).

3.4. Chapter Summary

The evidence presented in this chapter demonstrates that SHEIN has achieved remarkable growth in recent years. Its annual revenue rose from approximately USD 15.7 billion in 2021 to an estimated USD 56 billion in 2025, reflecting more than a threefold increase within five years. Meanwhile, employee data, though varied across sources, consistently indicate a global workforce exceeding 10,000. The most widely cited figure is over 16,000 employees in 2023, even though later reports for 2024 and 2025 suggest lower counts; these discrepancies likely arise from differing definitions and regional coverage. Together, these indicators confirm that SHEIN has evolved into a digital-driven global startup with substantial organizational capacity.

4. Management and Expansion Strategies Analysis

4.1. Supply Chain and Production Management

SHEIN's supply chain has become one of the most important drivers of its global success. Unlike traditional fast-fashion brands such as Zara and H&M, which typically operate on production cycles of several weeks, SHEIN can design, test, and release new products within a matter of days. This agility is made possible by the company's "small-batch first" model, where new designs are produced in initial runs of as few as 100 to 300 units. Based on consumer response, successful designs are rapidly scaled up for global distribution. Industry data suggest that in 2023, SHEIN released over 1.5 million new items online, compared to fewer than 50,000 for Zara, showing the efficiency gap between SHEIN and established players. Such an operational model reduces waste, minimizes inventory risk, and allows the company to align closely with fast-changing fashion trends.

4.2. Digitalization and Platform-Driven Strategy

SHEIN has built its management strategy around a digital-first approach. Its mobile app is central to its business, attracting over 250 million monthly active users worldwide by 2024. The app integrates personalized recommendations, gamified shopping experiences, and social media-style interfaces that encourage repeat visits. This platform-driven model not only generates sales but also produces valuable consumer data. By analyzing browsing patterns and purchase histories, SHEIN is able to predict demand and inform its supply chain operations in real time. The synergy between digital platforms and supply chain agility ensures that the company can release thousands of new designs weekly while keeping marketing and logistics aligned with consumer behavior.

4.3. Talent Management and Organizational Culture

The growth of SHEIN's workforce reflects its global ambitions. By 2023, the company employed more than 16,000 staff members worldwide, although later reports for 2024 and 2025 indicate varying figures, possibly due to different definitions of formal and contract employees. What remains clear is that SHEIN's organizational structure emphasizes flexibility and responsiveness. Employees are distributed across multiple operational hubs that specialize in logistics, customer service, and data analysis. This distributed structure supports rapid adaptation to market changes. The company also places strong emphasis on digital skills, recruiting talent in areas such as artificial intelligence, marketing analytics, and cross-border e-commerce. This combination of human and technological resources sustains the company's culture of speed, experimentation, and responsiveness. Despite discrepancies in reported numbers, most sources agree that SHEIN has consistently maintained a global workforce exceeding 10,000 employees since 2023, underscoring its capacity to sustain large-scale international operations.

4.4. International Expansion and Market Entry Strategies

SHEIN's international expansion has been rapid and highly successful. The United States has emerged as one of its most important markets. In 2020, SHEIN accounted for less than 20 percent of the U.S. fast-fashion segment, but by 2022 its share had surged to 50 percent, placing the company ahead of all competitors. Since then, its market share has shown a slight decline, reaching about 45 percent in 2024 and 43.6 percent in early 2025. Figure 4 illustrates this trajectory, showing that although SHEIN's U.S. share has fallen modestly from its 2022 peak, it continues to dominate the market with a level of penetration far above rivals such as Zara, H&M, and Forever 21.

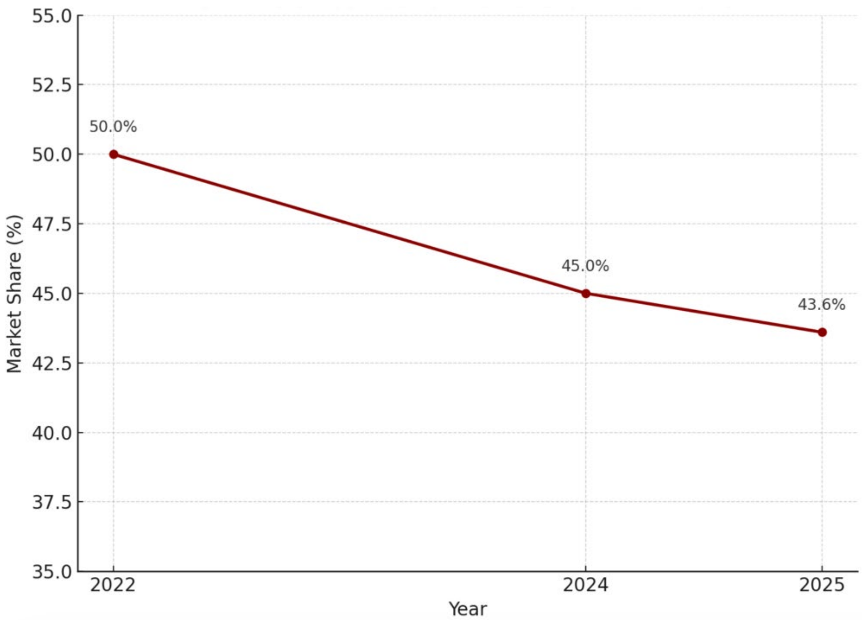

Figure 4. SHEIN U.S. Fast-Fashion Market Share, 2022-2025. Data sources: Analyzify (2024) and Earnest Analytics (2025).

This expansion has been supported by aggressive digital marketing campaigns, partnerships with social media influencers, and localized product offerings that reflect the tastes of American consumers. Beyond the United States, SHEIN has also expanded into Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East, adapting its strategies to align with cultural and regional preferences. The ability to combine global efficiency with local adaptation has been key to sustaining its international presence.

4.5. Comparison with Other Asian Startups

When compared with other successful Asian startups such as ByteDance and Grab, SHEIN demonstrates both similarities and differences in its management strategies. Like ByteDance, SHEIN relies heavily on data-driven decision-making and rapid content or product updates to capture user attention. Both companies have mastered the use of algorithms to personalize experiences and drive engagement on a global scale. In contrast, Grab represents a service-based startup with a strong regional focus in Southeast Asia. While Grab's expansion is tied to localized transport and financial services, SHEIN has adopted a more globally uniform model supported by centralized production and digital distribution. These comparisons show that while the core principle of agility unites Asian startups, the specific strategies they employ are shaped by their industries and target markets.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study has examined the management and expansion strategies of SHEIN as one of the most prominent emerging startups in Asia. The analysis demonstrates that the company's rapid rise is rooted in a highly agile supply chain, a strong digital platform strategy, and an organizational culture that emphasizes speed and adaptability. By integrating real-time consumer data with flexible production, SHEIN has been able to release millions of new items each year, far outpacing traditional fast-fashion rivals. Its digital-first approach, supported by a mobile app with hundreds of millions of active users, has created both global visibility and a steady flow of consumer insights. The company's international expansion, especially its rise to market dominance in the United States, further shows that digital platforms and supply chain agility can combine to overcome traditional barriers of brand recognition and retail infrastructure.

The findings also provide broader implications for other emerging startups. First, SHEIN's success highlights the importance of agility as a management principle. Startups that lack large financial reserves or established reputations can still compete effectively if they are able to react quickly to consumer trends and market signals. Second, the integration of digital tools into every aspect of management, from product design to customer engagement. Illustrates that platform-driven strategies can be as crucial for manufacturing firms as they are for social media or service companies. Third, the balance between global efficiency and local adaptation is critical. SHEIN's ability to tailor product offerings and marketing campaigns to specific cultural contexts has allowed it to expand far beyond its home market while retaining cost advantages from centralized production. These lessons are relevant not only to fashion startups but also to other digital-first enterprises in Asia and beyond.

Despite these contributions, the study has certain limitations. Much of the analysis is based on secondary data, which can vary across sources and sometimes present inconsistencies, as seen in the reporting of employee numbers. In addition, while the case study method allows for an in-depth exploration of one company, it limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research could expand the scope by comparing SHEIN with other global fast-fashion players over longer time periods, or by conducting interviews with industry insiders to gain more direct insights into decision-making processes. There is also room for further work on sustainability and ethical challenges, as these issues are becoming increasingly central to both consumers and regulators.

In conclusion, SHEIN exemplifies how an emerging startup can combine digital platforms, agile supply chains, and international market adaptation to achieve extraordinary growth within a short period of time. Its case shows that even in highly competitive industries, innovative management strategies can create a path from niche beginnings to global leadership. For scholars, this study contributes to a better understanding of how Asian startups expand beyond their local markets. For practitioners, it offers practical lessons in agility, digital integration, and global strategy that may guide the next generation of high-growth firms.

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