Analysis of Global Expansion, Sustainability Challenges, and Strategic Responses on Shein's strategies

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Abstract:

This study examines Shein's ultra-fast fashion model and its global expansion strategy. The research focuses on how Shein competes with traditional well-established brands like Zara and H&M in the fast fashion industry through digital marketing and cost-effective operations. At the same time, Shein also faces risks related to sustainable development, policy regulations, and brand reputation. This article employs the PESTEL and SWOT frameworks to conduct a systematic analysis of the external environment, internal strengths and weaknesses, and deeper social environmental impacts from different perspectives and disciplinary viewpoints. The final research structure indicates that Shein's rapid growth has significant advantages in terms of efficiency and market penetration. However, its low-cost production and manufacturing model, as well as its lack of originality, have led to insufficient long-term competitiveness. The research has put forward many strategic suggestions targeting Shein's weaknesses, including accelerating the transformation towards sustainability, ensuring transparency in the supply chain, diversifying the brand, and deepening digital applications. Overall, this article provides a useful reference for ultra-fast fashion e-commerce to achieve sustainable growth under the global environmental, social, governance (ESG) expectations.

Keywords: Shein; cross-border e-commerce; fast fashion; sustainable, labor

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, the global fashion industry has been experiencing rapid growth while undergoing profound changes. The fast fashion sector has

successfully transformed itself into one of the most influential business models by following the trends of the times. Retailers like Zara and H&M have accelerated the process from design to availability to provide consumers with trendy and affordable products, thus

completely reshaping the industry landscape and future trends. However, the fast fashion model cannot eliminate the negative consequences it brings and is also criticized by all sectors of society, including environmental damage, exploitation of labor, and excessive consumption. Scholars point out that while fast fashion offers accessibility, it inevitably also raises concerns and worries about sustainability and ethics [1].

Concurrent with this development, cross-border e-commerce has emerged with significant advantages and has further accelerated the globalization of the fashion industry. Chinese fast-fashion retailers have adopted a digital-first strategy, leveraging advancements in logistics, digital platforms and mobile payment to rapidly enter the international market at an astonishing pace. This has led to the fact that the influence of China's cross-border e-commerce platforms on consumers is constantly increasing, and they can significantly affect consumers' purchasing intentions and brand preferences, especially in Western countries such as the United States [2]. Therefore, fast fashion is attempting to reshape the global retail landscape and redefine competition by integrating with cross-border digital trade.

In this context, Shein has become a representative case of ultra-fast fashion and global digitalization. Since its establishment in 2008, Shein has undergone years of development and has expanded its business scope to over 150 countries. It has also rapidly surpassed traditional fast-fashion brands in the online market share. Its most representative consumer-to-manufacturer (C2M) business model and the mutually reinforcing effect of social media-driven marketing have demonstrated the new market landscape resulting from the combination of digitalization and low costs, generating huge profits and efficiency.

However, Shein has also faced controversies in many aspects, such as its environmental, social, governance (ESG) performance, labor issues, and the decline in brand reputation due to regulatory scrutiny.

This research therefore seeks to investigate Shein's strategy and challenges through multiple analytical lenses. This article systematically analyzes Shein's competitive advantages, disadvantages, and potential risks in its rapid development by integrating the PESTEL framework and the SWOT framework, and by adopting a cross-disciplinary perspective. The core objective of this study is to provide references and insights for ultra-fast fashion e-commerce on how to achieve sustainable development while coping with policy, environmental, and reputation pressures.

2. Brand Introduction

Shein's first headquarters company was established in Nanjing, China in 2008. In the early stage of brand establishment, Shein focused on developing small online retailers of women's clothing. In the initial phase of the cross-border e-commerce development, they seized the opportunity in this new online sales sector and formulated a comprehensive social media-driven marketing strategy including multi-platform presence, influencer collaboration and data-driven personalization. This enabled them to rapidly grow into one of the top ultra-fast fashion cross-border e-commerce platforms worldwide. Unlike other cross-border e-commerce platforms, Shein mainly targets the Generation-Z (Gen-Z) and young millennials, who grew up with the internet and are proficient in using high-tech products. They prefer trendy products of the new era that are inexpensive and innovative [3]. C2M is the core strategy of their business model, which has the advantages of efficiency and accuracy. It can precisely identify future fashion trends through online big data and make corresponding judgments, thereby transforming into production. This model has significantly accelerated Shein's innovative production capacity and enabled it to adds 2,000 to 10,000 new items per day, far exceeding the product introduction speed of top brands in traditional fast fashion like Zara and H&M, thus winning the favor of consumers and capturing a larger market share [4].

Although Shein has gained popularity among many young people, it still faces criticism from various sectors of society in terms of its environmental and social governance practices. The most important reason is that its low cost and extremely high efficiency of output do not align with the current social concept of sustainable development and some ethical issues. Although this production method can bring a certain increase in market penetration for the brand, it still cannot offset the negative impacts brought about by other issues [5]. In contrast, the controversies regarding sustainable development do not overshadow Shein's status as one of the leading players in the global fashion industry. The young consumer culture and digital transformation, as the core strategies of the brand, continue to generate substantial revenue at the sales end. However, the increasing demands from some consumers regarding transparency and the responsibility of protecting the environment through sustainable development have led to a decline in the brand's valuation. Shein can still maintain its leading position in the global market by adjusting its countermeasures such as supply chain management and environmental emission reduction in the future.

3. Problem Analysis

Before applying analytical models, it is important to outline Shein's current situation. In recent years, Shein has been able to rapidly increase its market share in the fiercely competitive e-commerce market mainly due to the C2M model and social media-driven digital marketing. The increase in market share also indicates that it will face many

inevitable challenges. External research reports indicate that due to Shein's continuous expansion and factory construction, there are serious problems in terms of sustainability, including carbon emissions, waste prevention, and labor conditions in the supply chain. In comparison, it also faces legal scrutiny in terms of original design and copyright disputes, and is affected by policy risks brought about by the Sino-US trade friction and tariff escalation. What deserves the most attention is that Shein's low-price advantage has been directly undermined by the increase in tariffs, forcing it to shift production to Southeast Asia or Latin America and restructure the global supply chain. Additionally, the United States has strengthened its supervision of supply chain transparency and simultaneously introduced relevant laws and regulations. Overall, although Shein can bring strong market competitiveness to its business through its low-cost and digital strategies, the decline in brand reputation and regulatory pressure also force it to continuously make strategic adjustments. The next part will analyze it using two different models, PES-TEL and SWOT, from different dimensions.

3.1 PESTEL

The PESTEL framework is regarded as a frequently used strategic analysis tool, mainly employed to analyze the macro-level potential factors that may affect the performance of an enterprise. Unlike the earlier PEST model, in the current business environment, consumers' attention to sustainable development and market regulation is increasing significantly. Therefore, it further added two dimensions - environment and law - to the basic model. Through analysis and research in six aspects including politics, economy, society, technology, environment and law, this model can assist researchers in accurately identifying the advantages and risks in different business environments, and the viewpoints analyzed can provide detailed and profound suggestions for the optimization of brand strategies. For a company like Shein, which is a cross-border e-commerce platform, the PESTEL analysis can systematically assess the challenges and brand opportunities it faces in this field, especially in the global market.

3.1.1 Political factor

From a political standpoint, as the global tensions continue to escalate, Shein's main task is to find a stable balance between cross-border e-commerce regulation and geopolitics. This is related to whether it can successfully expand the market from the initial country to another country, and it is particularly important especially between the two largest economies in the world, China and the United States. For instance, the US Congress has repeatedly discussed various measures to curb Shein's expansion in its largest overseas market. These measures include abolishing the low-value duty-free policy and imposing require-

ments for supply chain transparency, among others. This will increase its operating costs, disrupting its ultra-fast fashion operation rhythm and thereby limiting Shein's competitiveness in the US market. In order to ensure that the domestic e-commerce platforms in the United States will not be severely impacted by overseas cross-border e-commerce platforms, the government has implemented a series of protective measures, allowing them to still maintain a certain market share in the United States [6].

3.1.2 Economic factor

Economically, the key factor that has driven Shein's rapid growth in the global market is its focus on producing affordable fashion products. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the global economy, including the traditional clothing retail industry, suffered a significant impact, resulting in a continuous decline in sales. However, Shein, with its unique pure online sales model, successfully achieved revenue growth, enabling it to seize the opportunities during economic downturns and successfully expand its scale. Moreover, this extremely low-price-demand-dependent model has also been constantly impacted as COVID-19 recovery progresses, especially in situations like inflation and rising labor costs, which are inevitable during the economic recovery period [7].

3.1.3 Social factor

Social factors are increasingly important, especially as an increasing number of young people in Europe and America demand sustainability and inclusiveness. This means that young and socially responsible customers will not feel burdened when purchasing products, as some negative content related to Shein, such as opaque supply chains and alleged labor issues, has been exposed on social media. This has led many consumers to launch boycott campaigns against Shein, such as "#BoycottShein" [8]. For example, Lexy Silverstein, an academic from Fashion Institute of Design & Merchandising (FIDM), launched the "Drop Shein" campaign on platforms like TikTok and Instagram to urge students and people from all walks of life to stop purchasing and supporting Shein's products. This campaign received over 4,700 signatures within a short period of time and attracted significant media attention and coverage. This clearly indicates that consumers sense of social responsibility is constantly increasing, and their influence on brand image plays a decisive role [9]. Once the brand image is negatively affected or even collapses, it will be extremely difficult to re-establish a good relationship and trust with the target consumers [8]. It is weakening consumers' trust and loyalty towards the brand, and at the same time, it makes it easy for them to switch to competitors like Zara and H&M. If this continues, it will gradually damage the brand's sales volume and market share, as customers will reduce their repeated pur-

chases of the products, and this will be a devastating blow to the ultra-fast fashion model.

3.1.4 Technological factor

In terms of technology, the C2M model, which is a decentralized model that bypasses brand owners, distributors, and consumer distribution channels, can help enterprises formulate future plans and enhance production efficiency through the analysis of big data by artificial intelligence. For instance, Shein's advantage lies in its ability to produce a large number of new products in a short period of time. In the initial stage of production, it can determine whether to continue large-scale production based on the feedback and sales analysis from the target group regarding the new products in the near future. Compared to the two to three weeks production cycle of traditional brands like Zara, this rapid production and trial-and-error mechanism gives Shein a significant technological advantage in fashion trends and innovation, such as personalized recommendation system, gamified shopping experiences and AR-based virtual fitting rooms which not only enhanced user retention but also reduced the return rate.

3.1.5 Environmental factor

Additionally, environmental issues are not merely about discussions at the ecological level; rather, at a deeper level, they have become a key determinant of a company's competitiveness. The relationship between a brand's corporate image and the protection of the ecological environment has become increasingly close. With the development of the fast fashion industry, it has been proven to be one of the most polluting industries. The environmental challenge has now become one of the most difficult problems that Shein needs to address. The factories in the fast fashion industry are facing problems such as excessive carbon emissions and serious textile waste, and there are no effective and cost-saving solutions to these issues. As early as 2023, Reuters had reported that the carbon emissions related to the brand's transportation had increased by nearly 14%. This made Shein's global logistics system's environmental costs a key area of focus for public scrutiny and observation, and raised concerns about its future development and the potential pollution and damage it might cause to the environment [10]. In response to the criticism from various sectors regarding Shein's carbon emissions issue, the company released a greenhouse gas inventory in 2022 and committed to reducing its carbon emissions by 25% by 2030. However, as Reuters (2024) reported that the carbon emissions related to Shein Yushu still increased by 13.7%, this raised doubts among the public about the effectiveness of their measures.

Furthermore, the continuous improvement of consumers' quality has also led them to pay greater attention to sustainability. More and more consumers are willing to

purchase green products to contribute to environmental protection and sustainable development. Even some consumers will actively boycott brands whose negative image is caused by environmental pollution and resource waste. This clearly demonstrates the purchasing decisions and market trends that prioritize environmental protection for sustainable development, as well as their deep-rooted influence.

At the same time, environmental sustainability is also inextricably linked to legal compliance. Nowadays, all countries around the world are continuously strengthening environmental supervision and have implemented many effective measures, such as the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism of the European Union, China's dual-carbon goals, and the extremely strict laws and regulations promulgated by the United States. Governments of various countries will no longer tolerate enterprises that do not meet the standards. These enterprises will not only face severe legal penalties but also be prohibited from entering the international market. This means that global competitiveness will be directly affected by environmental performance.

Therefore, environmental factors, which integrate aspects such as brand reputation, legal compliance and consumer preferences, are of vital importance in balancing profitability and long-term sustainable development in the increasingly competitive global market.

3.1.6 Legal factor

Finally, the law is also regarded as one of the risks that cannot be ignored. The main reason for Shein being sued multiple times is related to infringement. The independent designers under her brand have been accused of copying original designs. In 2021, Levi Strauss filed a lawsuit against Shein over the trademark issue of the stitching on their jeans. This demonstrates that while Shein is innovating rapidly, there are still many issues to be resolved regarding how to avoid infringing on past intellectual property rights. As the brand that most attracts the younger generation and leads the fashion trend, how to avoid copying past designs and infringing on intellectual property rights while maintaining rapid innovation is the key to ensuring that Shein can continue to hold a significant share of the young consumers' market in the future.

3.2 SWOT Analysis

Compared with the PESTEL model, SWOT is more like a strategic management tool. Its purpose is to assess the internal strengths and weaknesses of an enterprise, as well as the external opportunities and threats. Two distinct perspectives, from the inside to the outside, can clearly demonstrate an overall understanding of the current state of the enterprise and its future potential.

In this model analysis, Shein demonstrated its two unique

advantages, namely digital innovation and global expansion. At the same time, it also faces a reputation crisis within the company due to environmental pollution. This means that it has negative impacts resulting from its own actions, strategies or management issues, such as product quality problems, labor rights scandals, corporate values not aligning with consumers' perceptions, etc., as well as sustainable challenges and intense competition from external competing companies. SWOT analysis can not only reveal the internal strengths of Shein's supply chain and low-cost production model centered on digitalization. It also clearly identified the weaknesses that issues related to labor and environmental impacts might pose to the brand image and trigger a reputation crisis. At the external level, Shein mainly focuses on the growing demand for low-priced fashion products in the global market and the huge potential that lies ahead. The threats in this area mainly come from competitors like Zara and H&M, who are traditional fast-fashion giants. By directly applying the SWOT analysis to Shein, it is possible to clearly integrate the theoretical model with the actual strategic challenges in the real world, making it more reliable and concrete.

3.2.1 Strengths

The disruptive business model that Shein possesses on its own is its greatest strength. The C2M system can significantly reduce the risk of inventory and enable the brand to produce over 6,000 new products every day. This ability to carry out numerous innovations, combined with frequent and efficient social media marketing, has enabled it to secure a significantly larger online market share in the United States than traditional fast-fashion brands like H&M and Zara. According to the combined statistics of data from various platforms in the United States in 2022, Shein emerged as the most popular brand among global consumers, ranking first in the shopping app category of major app stores by download volume [11].

3.2.2 Weaknesses

On the contrary, Shein's weaknesses are also continuously affecting the brand's reputation. It has long been accused of plagiarizing in product design and has received widespread criticism from all sectors of society. Even some media conducted secret undercover investigations into Shein's labor practices, causing the brand's image to plummet in the minds of consumers. In 2002, Channel 4 in the UK secretly filmed various factories and presented the problem of excessive work hours for Shein's assembly line workers through a documentary format. The workers work for 16 to 18 hours every day and have very little time for rest (with only one day off per month or no break at all). Such a huge workload did not result in corresponding reasonable salaries for the workers. Each product was valued at approximately 0.03 pounds [12]. This demon-

strates that its extremely negative performance in ESG aspects will lead to a decline in the brand's reputation and make it difficult to gain the trust of consumers. This has led to a decline in customers' loyalty towards the brand, and the good relationship previously established between Shein and its consumers cannot be restored in the short term.

3.2.3 Opportunities

Moreover, opportunities also exist. With the development of society and the gradual recovery of the economy, the Western market has placed greater emphasis on inclusiveness and sustainability. In order to enhance its brand image, Shein can integrate sustainable development with a diverse range of fashionable products and increase investment in sustainable production to protect the environment. For instance, Shein launched the "evoluSHEIN" collection in 2022 with the aim of using eco-friendly fabrics such as recycled polyester. This series quickly gained remarkable popularity in the market. On the one hand, young consumers attach great importance to the concept of environmental protection, which leads to their strong interest in products made from such environmentally friendly materials. Fashion bloggers and environmental experts on TikTok and Instagram have also actively opened the boxes to promote it and highly praised it, believing that it has significantly enhanced Shein's ESG image. On the other hand, environmental organizations like Remake believe that Shein's attempt to whitewash this issue is merely a publicity stunt. Because its products account for a very small proportion of Shein's total output, it is actually impossible to change its overly production-oriented model that is inherent in its ultra-fast fashion business model, rather than a genuine measure for transformation. Furthermore, in order to shorten the transportation time, it has established logistics centers in Mexico and Brazil in an effort to open up the Latin American market. This sustainable development strategy and measures not only reduced transportation costs and carbon emissions, but also laid a solid foundation for the subsequent entry into the Latin American market.

3.2.4 Threats

The threats it faces are also worthy of attention. Besides competing for market share with traditional fast-fashion giants like Zara and H&M, she also needs to keep an eye on the rapid rise of emerging ultra-fast fashion competitors like Temu in the US and global markets. Moreover, the United States is increasingly paying attention to supply chain workers, and legislators are also pushing for the enactment of laws and regulations that require enterprises to disclose relevant information. This not only significantly reduces Shein's flexibility, but also leads to a series of chain reactions that damage the brand's reputation, as

consumer activism amplifies on platforms such as social media and TikTok, YouTube [13].

3.3 Problems and Influence

According to the foregoing statement that Shein's ultra-fast fashion model demonstrates extremely high efficiency, but it also brings about serious externalities at macro-economic and societal level. On the one hand, its superiority over competitors like Zara and H&M is due to its low manufacturing costs and digital marketing. Moreover, Shein is still continuously facing criticism from all sectors of society due to its reputation crisis caused by sustainability flaws and labor disputes. However, from a business perspective, it is impossible to fully capture the scope of these issues. Therefore, it is necessary to combine the perspectives of sociology and environmental science.

3.3.1 Sociological analysis

From a sociological perspective, legitimacy theory can serve as a very important framework for explaining Shein's predicament. Most enterprises' Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) deficiencies are merely symbolic compensations aimed at supporting the positive image of the enterprises, with the ultimate goal of winning the recognition and favor of all sectors of society as well as the respect of consumers. However, this does not constitute a substantive measure to address the negative issues that enterprises encounter in their actual production and operation. This has led to the situation where these enterprises will face consumer boycotts and criticism from all sectors of society once any negative publicity related to them is disclosed. For instance, the evoluSHEIN series of Shein has been regarded as a kind of green whitewash after being exposed by multiple media regarding labor and sustainability issues [14]. Although it has a superficial sense of responsibility on the surface, once the cover-up was removed, the inherent structural contradictions of Shein as an ultra-fast fashion brand would still be exposed and unable to be resolved when brought to the public. Therefore, in an era that increasingly emphasizes social responsibility, consumers still consider the legitimacy of Shein to be very fragile.

3.3.2 Environmental analysis

From an environmental science standpoint, Shein's ultra-fast fashion model produces considerable negative externalities. To be specific, the consumption of fast fashion has led to carbon emissions, water pollution and textile waste due to its inherent model. This environmental damage has exacerbated the ecological costs, including biodiversity loss and resource depletion. This suggests, albeit indirectly, that Shein's large-scale production actually shifts the environmental costs onto society and the natural

ecosystem. Although Shein has implemented measures such as the evoluSHEIN collection and a €200 million circularity fund, the fact that these measures only account for a marginal of the total volume makes it impossible to fundamentally address the waste cycle in the fast fashion business model. In fact, Shein's environmental protection measures still have a significant problem of merely addressing the symptoms rather than the root cause. Although these measures seem to be able to help it improve its sustainability predicament in the short term from a theoretical perspective, the long-term environmental impact still maintains a negative trend and has been widely criticized by all sectors of society [15].

3.3.3 Summary

In summary, the interdisciplinary analysis indicates that Shein is confronted with multiple challenges, and from the operational or marketing aspects, but also at a deeper level in terms of designing social legitimacy and environmental sustainability. From a sociological perspective, its approach centered on CSR fails to address the core issues within the enterprise, resulting in a highly vulnerable nature of the enterprise's legitimacy. Most consumers can easily discern the deficiencies of Shein in terms of various environmental and social issues. This greatly weakens the direct connection and trust between consumers and the company, while increasing the risks of boycott campaigns, reputational crises and market withdrawal. Furthermore, in terms of environmental science, the large-scale and rapid production model has resulted in serious negative externalities, including carbon emissions, textile waste, and water pollution, which continue to reduce the production scale's potential for future development. These findings provide strong evidence that although Shein's ultra-fast fashion model has effectively driven the company's rapid growth, it inevitably has caused significant and detrimental impacts on society and the environment. If these impacts cannot be effectively and substantially alleviated within a certain period of time, Shein will undoubtedly suffer a decline in its brand reputation, an increase in consumer resistance, and even a decline in its global competitiveness due to the government's strict regulatory intervention.

4. Recommendations

Based on the aforementioned analysis, in order to address its structural weaknesses and ensure long-term sustainable development, fast fashion brands must implement a series of strategic measures. First and foremost, because the severe ecological costs brought about by fast fashion will have a significant impact on the direction of consumers' perceptions. The most crucial task should be focused on the aspect of sustainable transformation. For example, in order to reduce negative externalities such as carbon emissions, water pollution and textile waste, Shein should accelerate the expansion of the proportion and scale of the use of environmentally friendly materials and establish a corresponding recycling system to achieve the secondary utilization of resources, and strive to expand the scale of the Green Series within a short period of time beyond evoluSHEIN.

Furthermore, fast fashion brands should also not overlook the significant role that supply chain transparency and traceability play in restoring the relationship between the brand and consumers, as well as in avoiding reputation crises. Such important supply chain transparency mechanisms as third-party audits, supplier evaluations, and independent certifications can ensure that responsibilities are properly assigned after each incident and that the confidence of stakeholders is enhanced [8]. If a reasonable and efficient strategy can be developed for the implementation of these measures, it will play a significant role in reducing labor exploitation and enhancing the legitimacy of labor in the global market.

Finally, as an industry that will remain highly competitive in the future, fast fashion should promote the diversification of the brand and simultaneously enhance digital applications, and strengthen the originality of the design to attempt to invest in the development of high-end subbrands, reduce reliance on low prices resulting from low costs, thereby expanding the target consumer group and entering the new high-end market. In particular, personalized products can be recommended for different target customers, and AI big data can be applied to achieve more precise classification and customer positioning, as well as timely adjustment of product types to avoid overproduction and waste. In the future, Shein could consider conducting further research on how fast-fashion e-commerce platforms can disclose the amount of environmental, social, and governance (ESG) impact within their framework, and how they can maintain the existing balance while achieving a direct equilibrium between rapid innovation and production and environmental and social responsibility.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined Shein's ultra-fast fashion model and its implications for global competitiveness. The study focused on how Shein formulated its core strategies in the areas of digital marketing and low-cost production to challenge traditional fast-fashion brands such as Zara and H&M and to seize market share in their global markets. At the same time, Shein is facing significant risks in terms of ESG performance, policy pressure, and brand reputation. The research results clearly demonstrate that Shein's advantages in rapid expansion lie in production efficiency

and market penetration. However, it has obvious deficiencies in terms of design originality, sustainable development and enterprise management, which pose significant uncertainties for its future development.

To address these challenges, this article puts forward many suggestions, including accelerating the sustainable transformation, enhancing supply chain transparency, diversifying brand positioning, and deepening digital application to reduce waste. These strategies not only provide Shein with corresponding solutions to deal with the risks arising from its own shortcomings in the future, but also help it develop in a way that better meets the expectations of all sectors of society regarding responsibility and sustainability. The corresponding solutions proposed to address Shein's shortcomings not only help the company better align with the expectations of society for responsibility and sustainability in the future, but also provide strategic references for other industries and fields that are similar to the fast fashion and e-commerce sectors. By conducting a study on Shein's challenges and response measures in the area of sustainability, other enterprises can draw on the relevant experiences to avoid potential risks and adjust their strategies, especially in aspects such as supply chain transparency, the launch of eco-friendly products, and the establishment of consumer trust. In conclusion, this study emphasizes that the core of the future development trend of ultra-fast fashion lies in finding a balance between rapid innovation and social responsibility. The case of Shein offers valuable insights into how digital fashion retailers can maintain their legitimacy in an increasingly strict global market and successfully achieve sustainable growth.

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