

The Construction of Responsibility in British and American Media Coverage of Shein's Environmental Controversies from the Perspective of Appraisal Theory

Jing Jin *

School of Foreign Language Studies, Zhejiang Sci-Tech University, Hangzhou 310018, China

* Corresponding Author Email: 13588839053@163.com

Abstract. Against the backdrop of deepening global climate governance, the environmental controversies arising from the rapid expansion of the fast-fashion brand Shein have remained a focus of mainstream media attention in the UK and the US. Of particular interest is how the media employ evaluative language resources to present and assign environmental responsibility. Drawing on Martin and White's Appraisal Theory, this study examines eleven news reports from mainstream British and American media and conducts a comparative analysis of the discursive construction of responsibility attribution along three dimensions: attitude, engagement and graduation. The findings show that the British media tend to rely on the upscaled force of the graduation system, combined with the heteroglossic expansion strategies of the engagement system, directing responsibility toward government regulation and policy institutions, whereas the American media make greater use of propriety judgements within the attitude system, attributing responsibility to corporate business practices and the structure of consumer culture. These differences reflect distinct orientations of responsibility attribution in the two countries' environmental coverage: the British media favor institutional attribution, while the American media favor corporate and market-based attribution. The analysis offers theoretical and practical implications for understanding how media discourse shapes public perception of environmental issues.

Keywords: Appraisal theory; Shein; construction of responsibility; British and American media; discourse analysis.

1. Introduction

As global climate governance continues to deepen, corporate environmental conduct is subject to growing public scrutiny, and the gap between companies' environmental commitments and their actual performance has frequently become a focus of public controversy. Notably, rather than simply restating facts, media reports construct the attribution of responsibility through specific language resources. In covering the same event, the media can deploy different evaluative resources to direct responsibility toward different agents, such as corporations, governments, consumers or industrial institutions, thereby shaping public understanding of environmental issues. Shein, a cross-border fast-fashion e-commerce company founded in Guangzhou, China in 2008, has rapidly opened up international markets with its small-order quick-response production model and extremely low pricing. However, it has been repeatedly embroiled in controversies over supply-chain environmental risks, waste disposal and the authenticity of its environmental claims. The coverage of Shein by mainstream British and American media, which focuses on the attribution of corporate responsibility, provides a typical case for examining the construction of responsibility in media language.

Existing research has examined media environmental coverage and related discursive practices from two perspectives: responsibility attribution and evaluative discourse analysis. In terms of responsibility attribution, Liu and Huang compared the responsibility frames in climate change coverage between Chinese and American newspapers, analyzing the differences between the two countries' media in the attribution of causal and treatment responsibilities [9]. Li examined the attribution mechanisms of The New York Times in reporting China's ecological and environmental issues, revealing its tendency to attribute environmental problems to China's development model [8]. In terms of analytical method, Appraisal Theory has been widely applied to media discourse analysis:

Ma employed the attitude system to reveal how American mainstream media construct China's economic image [10], and Qiu combined the attitude system with graduation resources to compare the ideological differences between Chinese and South Korean media in covering breaking news events [14].

Nevertheless, in terms of research objects, existing studies have largely focused on macro-level issues such as climate change, national image or breaking news events, paying insufficient attention to the specific issue of environmental controversies surrounding fast-fashion companies. In terms of media scope, most analyses have been confined to the media of a single country, lacking a systematic comparison of mainstream media in the UK and the US on the same event. In terms of analytical framework, most studies have applied only one or two dimensions of Appraisal Theory, and analyses integrating attitude, engagement and graduation into a single framework remain rare.

In view of this, the present study takes Martin and White's Appraisal Theory as its analytical framework, focuses on Shein's environmental controversies, and systematically compares the construction of responsibility in British and American mainstream media coverage. The theory defines "appraisal" as being concerned with "the types of attitudes negotiated in a text, the strength of the feelings involved, the sources of value and the ways in which readers are aligned" [12]. The theory divides evaluative language resources into three dimensions—attitude, engagement and graduation—enabling the systematic identification of the types, sources and intensity of evaluative meanings in discourse, and thus turning the relatively abstract process of responsibility attribution in media reports into identifiable and comparable linguistic features.

This study selects eleven reports on Shein's environmental controversies from mainstream British and American media as the corpus (see Table 1), and compares the discursive strategies of responsibility construction in the two countries' media along the three dimensions of attitude, engagement and graduation, with the aim of revealing their different orientations of responsibility attribution and providing a reference for research on media discourse in the construction of transnational corporate environmental responsibility.

Table 1. Basic Information of the Corpus.

No.	Country	Media	Date	Words
1	UK	The Guardian	2022-04-10	1087
2	UK	The Guardian	2023-09-11	909
3	UK	The Guardian	2023-12-11	1139
4	UK	Reuters	2024-06-19	1164
5	UK	Reuters	2024-09-25	447
6	UK	The Independent	2024-09-25	408
7	US	Time	2023-01-18	1562
8	US	The Washington Post	2023-06-28	2694
9	US	NPR	2023-10-13	1187
10	US	ABC News	2023-10-27	868
11	US	CNN	2026-05-20	1606
Total				13071

2. The Construction of Responsibility in the Attitude System

The attitude system constitutes the principal language resource for the construction of responsibility [12]. Evaluation can be directly inscribed or indirectly invoked through metaphor, statistics and other means; the latter leaves the value judgement to be completed by the reader and is often more persuasive [3, 12]. This study annotated and counted the attitude resources in the corpus item by item (see Table 2). The results show that both countries' media are dominated by judgement and appreciation resources, while affect resources occur relatively infrequently and are mostly carried by reported speech. The difference lies mainly in the internal composition of judgement resources: the British media foreground veracity judgements, whereas the American media foreground propriety judgements.

The high-frequency attitude items (see Table 3) further reflect this divergence.

Table 2. Distribution of Attitude Resources.

System	Subtype	US Freq.	US (%)	UK Freq.	UK (%)
Affect	—	21	27.2	13	15.5
Judgement	Social sanction: veracity	5	6.5	33	39.3
	Social sanction: propriety	7	9.1	5	5.9
	Social esteem	13	16.9	9	10.7
	Subtotal	25	32.5	47	55.9
Appreciation	Reaction	8	10.4	2	2.4
	Composition	16	20.8	11	13.1
	Valuation	7	9.1	11	13.1
	Subtotal	31	40.3	24	28.6
Total		77	100.0	84	100.0

Table 3. High-frequency Attitude Items in the Two Corpora

Subtype	Item	US	UK
Judgement: veracity	greenwash*	1	13
	mislead*	0	8
	vague/confus*	0	6
	hypocritical	0	2
	halfhearted	0	2
	deceptive	0	2
Judgement: propriety	exploit*	2	1
	unacceptable	1	1
	unethical	1	1
Appreciation: composition	cheap*	10	5
	unsustainable	3	0
	overconsumption	0	2
Appreciation: reaction	backlash	7	1
Appreciation: valuation	risk*	0	7
	damag*	2	1
Affect	concern*	5	6
	guilt	3	0
	shock*	1	2
	outrag*	1	1

Note: marks stem truncation, i.e., the count covers all inflected and derived forms of the root (e.g., *greenwash* includes greenwashing, greenwashed, etc.). Where an item serves more than one evaluative function, it is classified according to its primary evaluative function in context and is not counted repeatedly across systems.

2.1. The Construction of Responsibility in the British Media's Attitude Resources

In the British coverage, veracity judgements are mostly used to question the authenticity of the company's environmental statements, characterizing them as “greenwashing”; meanwhile, judgement and appreciation resources are more often directed at the business model, the government and regulators, tracing the root of the environmental problem to the institutional level. A commentary in *The Guardian* offers the most representative evaluation of Shein's business model [20]:

Example 1: supercharged “test and repeat” model

The phrase directs its evaluation squarely at Shein's business model. The “test and repeat” model refers to the production strategy pioneered by Inditex and H&M, in which a small first order is placed and reorders follow only when a style sells well. The article immediately illustrates how this model operates at Shein with a set of figures: a first order of only 50 to 100 pieces per style, a production

cycle of ten days, and up to ten thousand new styles released per day. These figures contain no explicit evaluative wording, yet they serve to invoke a negative appreciation. The environmental pressure implied by the sheer scale and speed is left for the reader to infer, which is more persuasive than a direct assertion [3,12]. Lexically, “supercharged” originally refers to fitting an engine with a turbocharger. Through this metaphor, the author describes the business model in terms of an engine spinning out of control after being boosted, creating an association of accelerating loss of control. On this basis, the author further asserts that Shein is driving fast fashion, “an already resource-depleting model”, toward fresh depths, while the phrase “raking in the profits” in the same sentence identifies where the gains go. All these evaluations target the business model rather than any single act and are therefore classified as appreciation resources. Their attributive effect is that the causal responsibility for the controversy is assigned to the model itself: the problem is not that the company has done any particular thing wrong, but that this way of operating is in itself a source of environmental burden [7].

The commentary then moves from the model to the absence of regulation: the phrase “lack of regulation” identifies the problem, and “absurdity” directly negates the rationality of the existing system through an appreciation resource. Once causal responsibility is assigned to the model, treatment responsibility naturally falls on those agents capable of changing it [7]. The obligation to act is thus assigned to the government and regulators, and Shein’s environmental problems are constructed not merely as a business controversy but as an institutional issue.

Other attitude resources in the British media are listed in Table 4.

Table 4. Other Attitude Resources in the British Media.

Report	Example	Type	Orientation of Responsibility Construction
Reuters	possibly misleading environmental claims (quoting the Italian antitrust authority)	Judgement: veracity	Corporate environmental statements alleged to be untrue
The Independent	apparent contradiction (between decarbonization pledges and emissions data)	Judgement: veracity	Corporate statements contradict the company’s own data
The Guardian	the student battling fast fashion’s ‘hypocritical’ scholarships (headline)	Judgement: veracity	University–company partnership characterized as hypocritical
The Guardian	It’s a PR move. (quoting the student Silverstein)	Judgement: veracity	Scholarship characterized as a public relations move
The Guardian	halfhearted eco initiatives	Judgement: veracity	Environmental initiatives judged as perfunctory gestures
The Guardian	Governments continue to offer a licence to do harm	Judgement: propriety	Government accused of condoning harm
The Guardian	the unacceptable face (headline)	Judgement: propriety	Company judged unacceptable
Reuters	the market of last resort (quoting the investment institution CCLA)	Appreciation: valuation	Regulation satirized as a market of last resort for problematic companies
The Guardian	throwaway fast fashion	Appreciation: composition	Products defined as disposable consumables
Reuters	encouraging overconsumption via its ultra-low prices	Appreciation: composition	Low-price model induces overconsumption

As Table 4 shows, veracity judgements concentrate on fact-checking corporate statements: items such as misleading and hypocritical characterize corporate conduct as a form of “greenwashing”, while judgement and appreciation resources point to regulation and the business model. Affect resources are extremely rare and are carried by quotations. For example, *The Guardian* quotes the student Silverstein, who, upon learning of the university–company partnership, said “A part of me didn’t want to believe it”, and describes her emotion with shocked and outraged [4]. The moral shock

of the person directly involved enters the report through quotation, and the journalist need not take a position herself—this is a typical configuration of affect in hard news[19].

2.2. The Construction of Responsibility in the American Media’s Attitude Resources

In the American coverage, judgement resources are directed mainly at corporate conduct, with an extension to consumers. The headline of Time epitomizes this orientation of attribution [15]:

Example 2: Shein Is the World’s Most Popular Fashion Brand—at a Huge Cost to Us All

The headline first offers an affirmation with “most popular” and then takes an abrupt turn with “at a Huge Cost”. This collision of praise and criticism points up the contradiction between the brand’s popular appearance and its enormous cost. The body of the report sums up the controversies with “shocking track record of human rights violations” and “A damning record on workers’ rights”, holding that the company has developed a documentable and systemic set of labor problems. These two judgements are direct inscriptions that set the tone for the severity of the controversy at the very beginning of the report, establishing the seriousness of the problem as the premise of the discussion. Unlike Example 1, which lets the reader infer responsibility through figures and metaphor, this strategy completes the judgement on the reader’s behalf, indicating that the American media take a more assertive stance in assigning responsibility. The report further cites a report by the Swiss monitoring organization Public Eye and notes that the company eventually “admitted to the breaches”, lending the moral judgement the support of external facts. Causal responsibility thus focuses on corporate conduct itself [7], in sharp contrast to the British media’s attribution to the model.

While pointing to the company, the American media also extend responsibility to consumer culture, though the ultimate target is not the personal morality of consumers. The NPR report describes how the consumer Delaye gradually realized that there were “other reasons” behind the low prices and then exculpates ordinary consumers by saying that “We don’t know what we don’t know” [16]. Causal responsibility is accordingly assigned to the opacity of the pricing mechanism, and treatment responsibility falls on the improvement of information disclosure [7]. The American media’s concern with “opacity” is most evident in the quoting of experts and scholars: ABC and NPR respectively note that Shein provides virtually no information about its contract factories and that the true cost of a five-dollar garment is far higher than its price [13,16]. It can be seen that the American media’s veracity judgements focus on information transparency, a more fundamental issue than the greenwashing on which the British media concentrate.

Other attitude resources in the American media are listed in Table 5.

Table 5. Other Attitude Resources in the American Media.

Report	Example	Type	Orientation of Responsibility Construction
CNN	Fast fashion is the antithesis of sustainability. (quoting an expert)[2]	Judgement: propriety	Company placed at the opposite pole of sustainability ethics
The Washington Post	abhorrent working condition [17]	Judgement: propriety	Working conditions judged as abhorrent
NPR	tailor-made for our age of social media and microtrends[16]	Appreciation: composition	Company actively caters to social-media consumer culture
ABC	Shein has repeatedly declined requests for an interview[13]	Judgement: propriety	Company constructed as evading accountability
NPR	We have zero tolerance for forced labor. (quoting the company spokesperson)[16]	Judgement: propriety	Corporate self-defense presented verbatim and held in check
CNN	news of the sale made her cry (quoting the small business owner Wang)[2]	Affect	Consumers’ loss expressed through quotation
NPR	Worried about the environment (describing the consumer group)[16]	Affect	Environmental anxiety placed on the consumer side

In addition, positive attitude resources are rare in both corpora and are invariably attached to reported speech. Reuters quotes an investor acknowledging that Shein’s disclosure “is positive, and disclosure is improving”, a positive judgement embedded in quotation [1]; statements concerning the company’s environmental initiatives in NPR likewise appear in the form of spokesperson declarations rather than the journalist’s own direct evaluation. The scarcity of such positive resources inversely confirms the overall negative evaluative tone of the two countries’ media in the Shein environmental controversy.

3. The Construction of Responsibility in the Engagement System

The engagement system concerns the sources of voices in a text and the degree to which the dialogic space is opened up. It distinguishes monogloss from heterogloss, the latter being further divided into dialogic expansion and dialogic contraction[12, 18]. The statistics (see Table 6) show that expansion resources account for about sixty percent in both corpora, with attribution consistently the largest subtype by a wide margin, while contraction resources concentrate on denial and countering, with pronouncement and concur occurring only rarely—an indication that the media seldom assert a position directly in the authorial voice. The main difference between the two countries lies in the sources of the voices and in the positions where contraction resources occur, which are examined in turn below.

Table 6. Distribution of Engagement Resources.

System	Subtype	US Freq.	US (%)	UK Freq.	UK (%)
Expansion	Attribution	129	44.6	76	38.2
	Entertain	45	15.6	40	20.1
	Subtotal	174	60.2	116	58.3
Contraction	Denial	44	15.2	34	17.1
	Countering	52	18.0	39	19.6
	Pronouncement	2	0.7	1	0.5
	Concur	1	0.3	2	1.0
	Endorsement	17	5.9	9	4.5
	Subtotal	116	39.8	85	41.7
Total		290	100.0	201	100.0

3.1. The Construction of Responsibility in the British Media’s Engagement Resources

The British media display a clear division of labor in their engagement strategies: hard news mostly quotes regulatory authorities and professional investors, suspending the certainty of the accusations within legal procedures through epistemic modality (entertain resources in the engagement system), whereas in commentary the author steps forward directly and completes the assignment of responsibility through contraction resources.

In British hard news, attribution concentrates first of all on institutional voices. In September 2024, when the Italian antitrust authority announced an investigation into greenwashing on Shein’s website, both Reuters and The Independent relayed the accusation, but with markedly different degrees of certainty [5, 6]. Reuters attributes the content of the accusation entirely to the authority’s statement in the form of a direct quotation:

Example 3: The investigation accuses Shein’s website of trying “to convey an image of production and commercial sustainability of its garments through generic, vague, confusing and/or misleading environmental claims,” the antitrust agency said in a statement.

The sequence of generic, vague, confusing and misleading implies gradation: generic, vague and confusing describe the ambiguity of the statement itself, while misleading enters the realm of legal evaluation, since misleading commercial practices are themselves actionable and punishable under EU consumer protection law. The four words escalate semantically step by step, allowing the accusation to be upgraded within the authority’s statement while the journalist stays behind the

quotation. Subsequently, in describing the contradiction between the website’s decarbonization pledges and its actual performance, Reuters writes “appeared to emphasise... seems to be contradicted”. The two consecutive entertainment resources indicate that the journalist has reached no final judgement on the contradiction, leaving it temporarily open pending the conclusion of the investigation. The Independent, by contrast, directly quotes the phrase “apparent contradiction” from the authority’s original statement, retaining the most evaluatively charged wording and letting the institutional voice confirm the accusation by itself [5]. The two reports differ in strategy, but the power of judgement rests with the journalist in neither. Both then state, in monoglossic assertions, the EU anti-greenwashing regulations and the possible amount of the fine, using the regulations themselves as the yardstick against which the controversy is measured. Through this configuration of voices, the question of whether causal responsibility is established is handed over to legal procedures, while treatment responsibility falls on the regulators and the EU regulations. This exemplifies the typical strategy of the hard-news journalist voice [7, 19].

In addition to regulatory authorities, British hard news also negotiates responsibility through professional investors. In the report on Shein’s planned London listing, Reuters lets named investors speak almost throughout: the quotations move from the Aviva investor’s cautious “approach this cautiously” to the call for “high standards”, indicating that the market’s attitude toward Shein has shifted from watchful caution to active accountability and forming an implicit gradient of stance [1,19]. At the same time, the British media also convey through concessive attributions such as “too high a number, but at least we can now monitor progress” that the information disclosure brought about by the listing makes external oversight possible, while the problems reflected in the number of suppliers remain serious—thus preventing the attribution of responsibility to Shein from becoming absolute.

Contraction resources are concentrated in commentary, where the author directly assumes the role of the one who assigns responsibility. The Guardian commentary, with “We need to take away the licence to do harm”, holds that the government has long acquiesced in corporate profit-making at the expense of the environment and argues that society should withdraw this acquiescence [20]. This statement directs treatment responsibility squarely at the government. Hard news suspends judgement through institutional voices, while commentary completes the assignment of responsibility through contraction resources: the division of labor between the two genres is clear [19].

Other engagement resources in the British media are listed in Table 7.

Table 7. Other Engagement Resources in the British Media.

Report	Example	Type	Orientation of Responsibility Construction
Reuters	possibly / potentially misleading claims[6]	Entertain	Certainty of the accusation suspended pending investigation
The Independent	the greenwashing probe would focus on... (quoting the regulator’s statement)[5]	Attribution	Accusation attributed to the institutional voice
Reuters	we would approach this cautiously (quoting an Aviva investor)[1]	Attribution	Cautious stance voiced by the investor
Reuters	too high a number, but at least we can now monitor progress (quoting CCLA)[1]	Concur	Improvement in disclosure acknowledged; responsibility not absolutized
The Guardian	We need to take away the licence to do harm[20]	Pronouncement	Obligation to act assigned directly to the government
The Guardian	A brand like Tala is undoubtedly better... that[11]	Concur + denial	Responsibility not diluted by relative comparison

3.2. The Construction of Responsibility in the American Media’s Engagement Resources

Engagement resources in the American media are likewise dominated by expansion, but the dialogic space is opened to different parties: the voices of the company, consumers and experts all enter the reports, and responsibility is negotiated and shared out among multiple parties. On the one

hand, the media spread the burden of assertion by attributing accusations to different sources. NPR assigns the various accusations to an artist, a congressional report and legislators respectively, so that every criticism has a specific source and the journalist does not bear the responsibility for the assertion [16]. ABC introduces criticism with “some critics say” while quoting the company’s statement “We 100% believe in ethical practices” in full [13], which shows that the American media keep criticism and self-defense simultaneously present in assigning responsibility, leaving the statements of both sides to the reader’s own judgement and thereby granting the corporate voice significant space. On the other hand, the media delimit this heteroglossic negotiation with monoglossic assertions at key junctures. In the NPR report, after presenting the company’s position in full, the journalist immediately intervenes with the monoglossic assertion “Shein does not deny that it benefits from an exemption in import tax law”, pointing to a clear gap between its ethical claims and its actual business practices, so that the corporate self-defense is not accepted as the final word [16]. The report closes with the consumer’s “We don’t know what we don’t know”, and the attribution of responsibility remains suspended in heteroglossic negotiation throughout.

Contraction resources are not numerous in the American corpus, but they all occur at turning points of the reports. The Washington Post, after listing the positive impressions from the influencers’ visit to Shein’s headquarters, writes [17]:

Example 4: But the accusations are far from rumors.

This countering intervenes directly in the authorial voice and negates the foregoing heteroglossic content: the Shein in the influencers’ footage may look glamorous, but the accusations are not groundless. The “accusations” here refer to the labor rights issues mentioned earlier. The report then cites the exposure of labor problems in a Channel 4 documentary and the questioning by legislators as evidence, extending the countering from the author’s personal stance to publicly verifiable facts. The report then adds, with an entertain resource, “The influencers... might be unfairly taking the blame”, suggesting that the influencers’ promotional activities may be excessively blamed and that the real problem lies in the industry itself. This judgement reopens the dialogic space and leads responsibility back from individual consumers to the industrial structure. Contraction and expansion work in alternation, so that responsibility attribution is confirmed in the heteroglossic negotiation without being absolutized. Time, for its part, treats the labor accusations as established facts through the endorsing attribution “Shein admitted to the breaches”, drawing a non-negotiable bottom line for the heteroglossic negotiation [15]. Other engagement resources in the American media are listed in Table 8.

Table 8. Other Engagement Resources in the American Media.

Report	Example	Type	Orientation of Responsibility Construction
ABC	some critics say[13]	Attribution	Criticism introduced through an unnamed voice
ABC	We 100% believe in ethical practices. (company statement)[13]	Attribution	Corporate voice granted significant space
ABC	Shein has repeatedly declined requests for an interview[13]	Denial	Corporate silence recorded as evading accountability
NPR	Shein does not deny that it benefits from an exemption in import tax law[16]	Denial	Journalist holds the corporate narrative in check with facts
Time	Shein admitted to the breaches[15]	Endorsement	Labor accusations treated as established facts
The Washington Post	The influencers... might be unfairly taking the blame[17]	Entertain	Responsibility led back from individuals to the industry

4. The Construction of Responsibility in the Graduation System

The graduation system regulates the strength and sharpness of attitude resources and comprises two subsystems: force, which scales intensity up or down into upscaling and downscaling, and focus, which adjusts the sharpness of category boundaries into sharpening and softening[12]. Graduation resources do not express attitudes directly, but they determine with how much force and how clear a boundary an attitude enters the text, and thus directly affect the weight and scope of responsibility attribution. The statistics (see Table 9) show that 140 graduation resources were identified in the American corpus and 102 in the British corpus, the former being larger in total. Both countries are dominated by force resources (72.1% for the US and 73.5% for the UK), with upscaling markers clearly outnumbering downscaling ones. In terms of focus, the American proportion (27.9%) is slightly higher than the British (26.5%), and both countries are fairly active and evenly distributed in the adjustment of category boundaries. This section compares, along the two dimensions of force and focus, how the two countries' media configure graduation resources to calibrate the force and scope of responsibility attribution.

Table 9. Distribution of Graduation Resources.

System	Subtype	US Freq.	US (%)	UK Freq.	UK (%)
Force	Upscaling	74	52.9	52	51.0
	Downscaling	27	19.3	23	22.5
	Subtotal	101	72.1	75	73.5
Focus	Sharpening	19	13.6	11	10.8
	Softening	20	14.3	16	15.7
	Subtotal	39	27.9	27	26.5
Total		140	100.0	102	100.0

4.1. The Construction of Responsibility in the British Media's Graduation Resources

Graduation resources in the British corpus are concentrated mainly in commentary. Upscaling resources aggravate the attribution of responsibility by raising evaluative intensity, while softening resources expand the coverage of environmental costs through open-ended expressions.

Example 5: Fast fashion is far from cheap – someone, somewhere is paying the real price.

In criticizing the price logic of fast fashion, The Guardian uses the upscaling resource far from to negate the superficial impression that fast fashion is “cheap”, strengthening the critique of its price logic [20]. As a focus resource, real price shifts the focus of discussion from commodity prices to environmental and social costs, emphasizing that what truly deserves attention is the concealed environmental cost. Meanwhile, someone and somewhere blur the specific boundaries of those who bear the cost through softening resources, so that the coverage of environmental costs is no longer confined to the individuals enumerated. The commentary goes on to cite concrete cases such as garment workers and cotton farmers, giving concrete form to the abstract environmental cost, and finally converges on we are all paying, extending the bearers of the cost from the listed victims to the wider public. The three types of graduation resources work together: they not only keep intensifying the evaluation of environmental costs, but also gradually expand the scope of the responsibility discussion, extending environmental responsibility from corporate business conduct to the entire fast-fashion supply chain and consumption system.

Other graduation resources in the British media are listed in Table 10.

Table 10. Other Graduation Resources in the British Media.

Report	Example	Type	Orientation of Responsibility Construction
The Guardian	meteoric rise[20]	Force: upscaling	Speed of expansion magnified
The Guardian	staggering 10,000 new products a day[20]	Force: upscaling	Scale of new releases pushed to the extreme
The Guardian	Nothing less than radical change is required[20]	Force: upscaling	Demand for action raised to the highest magnitude
The Guardian	undoubtedly better... truly green[11]	Upscaling + sharpening	Concur followed by recapture, preventing exoneration
The Guardian	halfhearted eco initiatives[11]	Force: downscaling	Corporate commitments deliberately downplayed
Reuters	too high a number[1]	Force: upscaling	Supplier risk quantified and magnified

4.2. The Construction of Responsibility in the American Media's Graduation Resources

Graduation resources in the American corpus run through both hard news and feature stories, raising evaluative intensity through superlatives and intensifiers, so that the consumption phenomenon and its environmental consequences are presented with greater social impact. The headline of Time exemplifies this feature [15]:

Example 6: Shein Is the World's Most Popular Fashion Brand—at a Huge Cost to Us All

In the headline, most popular uses the superlative to present Shein as the most influential fashion brand worldwide, while huge further intensifies the environmental cost it brings. The two upscaling resources form a sharp contrast, establishing a close link between the brand's popularity and its environmental cost and foregrounding the discursive logic of “the more popular, the higher the environmental cost”. At the same time, us all extend the environmental cost from the corporate level to society as a whole, emphasizing that the negative impact of fast-fashion consumption is not confined to the company itself but affects all members of society. Through this series of graduation resources, the American media keep expanding the sphere of influence of the environmental problem, laying the groundwork for the subsequent discussion of the role of consumer culture and market demand in the environmental controversy, and gradually extending environmental responsibility from corporate business conduct to the consumption system.

Other graduation resources in the American media are listed in Table 11.

Table 11. Other Graduation Resources in the American Media.

Report	Example	Type	Orientation of Responsibility Construction
The Washington Post	shockingly low prices[17]	Force: upscaling	Low prices pushed to an alarming magnitude
Time	wildly successful[15]	Force: upscaling	Success described as out of control
ABC	never really seen one grow this quickly (quoting an expert)[13]	Force: upscaling	Growth rate presented as unprecedented
NPR	much higher than these \$5 (quoting a scholar)[16]	Force: upscaling	True cost amplified
NPR	only 0.6% of women named Shein[16]	Force: downscaling	Cognitive starting point lowered, setting off the growth rate
CNN	radical transparency (Everlane's self-proclaimed label)[2]	Focus: sharpening	Extremized commitment set off against its collapse

5. Conclusion

In summary, drawing on Martin and White's Appraisal Theory, this study has conducted a comparative analysis of eleven reports on Shein's environmental controversies in mainstream British

and American media. The findings show that the same controversy is constructed as two different responsibility narratives in the media of the two countries. The British media make extensive use of veracity judgements, constructing the environmental controversy as a structural problem that calls for an institutional response: causal responsibility is assigned to the business model, while treatment responsibility is directed at the government and regulatory bodies. The American media, by contrast, make greater use of propriety judgements, constructing the same controversy as an ethical problem caused jointly by corporate misconduct and consumer culture: causal responsibility is assigned to corporate conduct, while treatment responsibility extends to consumer culture. These differences reveal that “responsibility” in media coverage is not a simple restatement of facts but is constructed through the systematic configuration of evaluative resources across attitude, engagement and graduation.

This finding carries practical implications for understanding how media discourse shapes public perception of environmental issues. As the concept of global sustainable development continues to deepen, the media not only transmit environmental information, but also participate in shaping public awareness of corporate environmental responsibility through evaluative language. For the public, the fact that the same controversy is given entirely different directions of responsibility attribution in British and American media means that the “who should be responsible” presented in news reports is not the only possible conclusion. For this reason, understanding this constructive process can help the public more clearly identify the responsibility-attribution discourse in environmental coverage and maintain an independent judgement amid diverse media voices.

References

- [1] Analysis: Rumoured Shein listing could damage London Stock Exchange’s ESG reputation, say investors. (2024, June 19). *Reuters*. Retrieved August 14, 2026, from <https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/sustainable-finance-reporting/analysis-rumoured-shein-listing-could-damage-london-stock-exchanges-esg-2024-06-19/>.
- [2] Andrew, S. (2026, May 20). Everlane shoppers come unraveled over sale to Shein. *CNN*. Retrieved August 14, 2026, from <https://www.cnn.com/2026/05/20/style/everlane-shein-sustainable-fashion-cec>
- [3] Bednarek, M. (2006). *Evaluation in Media Discourse: Analysis of a Newspaper Corpus*. Continuum.
- [4] Demopoulos, A. (2023, September 11). ‘Shein is targeting colleges’: The student battling fast fashion’s ‘hypocritical’ scholarships. *The Guardian*. Retrieved August 14, 2026, from <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2023/sep/11/shein-fdm-fashion-scholarship-greenwashing-sustainability>.
- [5] Hadero, H. (2024, September 25). Shein faces scrutiny in Italy over possible greenwashing. *The Independent*. Retrieved August 14, 2026, from <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/ap-italian-italy-dublin-china-b2618989.html>
- [6] Italy opens greenwashing probe into Shein website. (2024, September 25). *Reuters*. Retrieved August 14, 2026, from <https://www.reuters.com/business/retail-consumer/italys-antitrust-opens-probe-into-shein-over-environmental-claims-2024-09-25/>
- [7] Iyengar, S. (1991). *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues*. University of Chicago Press.
- [8] Li, Y. (2025). The Discourse Construction Mechanism of China’s Ecological and Environmental Issues in Western Mainstream Media: An Analysis Based on *The New York Times* Corpus. *Journal of Beijing Forestry University(Social Sciences)*, 24(4), 44–52.
- [9] Liu, M., & Huang, J. (2024). Framing responsibilities for climate change in Chinese and American newspapers: A corpus-assisted discourse study. *Journalism*, 25(8), 1792–1811. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849231187453>.
- [10] Ma, Y. (2015). The construction of China’s economic image in American mainstream media from the perspective of the attitude system: A corpus-based critical discourse analysis. *Journal of Zhejiang Normal University(Social Sciences)*, 40(3), 101–107.

- [11] Manavis, S. (2023, December 11). Preaching sustainability while hawking fast fashion—meet the greenwashing influencers. *The Guardian*. Retrieved August 14, 2026, from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/dec/11/sustainability-fast-fashion-greenwashing-influencer-trend->.
- [12] Martin, J. R., & White, P. R. R. (2005). *The Language of Evaluation: Appraisal in English*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [13] Online retailer Shein has catapulted to the top of fast fashion—but not without controversy. (2023, October 27). ABC News. Retrieved August 14, 2026, from <https://abcnews.go.com/US/online-retailer-shein-catapulted-top-fast-fashion-controversy/story?id=104247391>
- [14] Qiu, Q. (2015). The construction, presupposition and positioning of news discourse: News reports from the perspective of the appraisal system. *Jiangxi Social Sciences*, (4), 236–241.
- [15] Rajvanshi, A. (2023, January 18). Shein is the world’s most popular fashion brand—at a huge cost to us all. *Time*. Retrieved August 14, 2026, from <https://time.com/6247732/shein-climate-change-labor-fashion/>
- [16] Selyukh, A. (2023, October 13). America can’t resist fast fashion. Shein, with all its issues, is tailored for it. *NPR*. Retrieved August 14, 2026, from <https://www.npr.org/2023/10/13/1204983212/shein-america-fast-fashion-legal-issues>
- [17] Tashjian, R. (2023, June 28). Shein, the fast-fashion giant, hits roadblocks. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved August 14, 2026, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2023/06/28/shein-influencers-trip/>
- [18] White, P. R. R. (2003). Beyond modality and hedging: A dialogic view of the language of intersubjective stance. *Text*, 23(2), 259–284.
- [19] White, P. R. R. (2006). Evaluative semantics and ideological positioning in journalistic discourse: A new framework for analysis. In I. Lassen, J. Strunck, & T. Vestergaard (Eds.), *Mediating Ideology in Text and Image: Ten Critical Studies* (pp. 37–67). John Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/dapsac.18.05whi>
- [20] Williams, D. (2022, April 10). Shein: The unacceptable face of throwaway fast fashion. *The Guardian*. Retrieved August 14, 2026, from <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2022/apr/10/shein-the-unacceptable-face-of-throwaway-fast-fashion>