

Shein Reliance Union - An Inspiration Unlocking Endless Possibilities for Chinese Fashion Labels in India

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Abstract:- A great way to expand business , whether in fashion or otherwise, adopting strategies like collaborating with the leading brands turns out to be fruitful for many labels across the world. The study investigates brand collaborations between India and China over the years and delves deeper into the fashion industry. The purpose is to measure the importance of these collaborations and learn as to how they can prove to be important confidence building measures for the new startups emerging in the industry .The case study centres around one such brand namely - Shein- a brand who has gained immense popularity in the Indian market. It also dives down into the performance of famous Chinese fashion labels - Bosideng and Anta in the Chinese market and what potential they can hold if they enter the Indian market.

Keywords:- Fashion , Brands , Collaboration , Consumer , India , China.

I. INTRODUCTION

China and India have emerged as one of the greatest civilisations on this planet. The rapid growth of these two countries - economically , socially and technologically is commendable .

With China leading as the larger economy out of the two , India is also catching up with it. This all goes back to history where India started it's economic reforms in 1991 whereas China started much earlier in 1978.(1) One of the most significant times in the history was the opening of the Silk Trade Route , which is legendary for both the nations equally.(1) Both the nations have gained their positions as one of the leading economies however only one gets to win the title , and both of them are tirelessly working to reach that level.

In ancient history, when the Roman empire was at it's peak , draped garments were the only way of clothing people knew.(1) Indian painted cottons and Chinese silks were traded the most during pre pre-15th century. American and European style of clothing became a symbol of western fashion as the royalty started wearing it during the 17th century . (1)

This soon spread to the western part making America and Western Europe accountable for more than half of the world's production.(1) This furthermore established western fashion as the dominant style of clothing or what we now call as ' contemporary fashion'.(1) Soon after this period, fashion runway shows came into picture In London , Milan , Paris and New York spreading awareness about the current fashion trends during that time to the masses .(1) In the current times , this western fashion has become a universal reality for all the fashion industries of the respective nations .China has observed tremendous economic growth since it's inception of economic reforms in 1978, with the annual growth rate and GDP increasing continuously for the first 25 years. (Wadhva, Charan D. "Management of rising power by China and India in the 21st century: Scope for strategic partnership." *Vikalpa* 31.3 (2006): 1-12.) In 2003, China had surpassed Japan as the sixth largest global trader of merchandise according to The Economist (London) ,Pocket World in Figures, 2006, Edition. (Wadhva, Charan D. "Management of rising power by China and India in the 21st century: Scope for strategic partnership." *Vikalpa* 31.3 (2006): 1-12.) Being the most populous country and on the verge of becoming the next largest economy , China is equipped with advantages that can help it reach it's destiny. Larger market for imports , a disciplined and active workforce and technological brilliance are some of the strengths of China.(Wadhva, Charan D. "Management of rising power by China and India in the 21st century: Scope for strategic partnership." *Vikalpa* 31.3 (2006): 1-12.) In these days wherein China and India are emerging as competitors for becoming the next greatest power, it can be ideal for both the nations to mutually collaborate and form a strategic partnership between their businesses in the future .India has also witnessed great economic performance , owing all of this to factors like it's competent workforce and IT sector , English proficiency and much more. (3) Keeping aside the strengths, both the countries are facing challenges on their respective parts . Both the countries have become abreast with the fact that collaborating with each other and compensating for each other's weaknesses is a fruitful way for economic expansion. A great example of this has already been witnessed in the IT sector with major software companies of India like Tata Consultancy services and Infosys expected to open up their operations in major cities of China like Shanghai and Beijing . (3)

Both the countries will receive their share of benefits through this move as India will gain access to the domestic market as well as regions of Japan and South Korea whereas China will be benefitted by the traditional skills of Indian companies like their management and ability. (3)

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Concept of Fashion Collaboration

Collaboration is a concept where people work together which involves work habits, thought process, goals, management and culture. It also means that it requires a team effort and people unanimously working towards the same goals. (4) Collaboration has been praised as one of the best strategies for business expansion since its introduction (4). Similar or different companies collaborate with each other with the agenda of maximising their profits by reaching out to a larger audience. (4) It has been implemented by various businesses belonging to different industries, however fashion industry collaborations have taken a wider space. One of the reasons is that the fashion industry is very dynamic and ever evolving.

Brands collaborate with fashion labels to add that element of newness and creativity to their products so that potential customers resonate more with their brand in these changing times. (4) Collaborations can play a vital role in changing people's perceptions about a certain brand in their mind and all together create a fresh image about the brand. (8) This in simple terms is captivating the consumer's mind in such a way that they begin to think highly about the brand and its product. Collaboration works best when it's a highly admired brand partnering up with a brand that has just started. In this case the startup brand gains a leverage of gaining a wider customer base and might witness increased sales because of the reputation of the admired brand.

Collaborations can also occur within different industries which are known as inter-industry collaborations. (5) Till the 1990s collaborations done abroad by companies was done within same industries, however 2000s has seen more of distinct industries coming together. (4) For eg: a drinks or a chocolate brand playing its ad at a movie theatre is a form of collaboration between the F&B brand and the movie theatre company. It is a very creative way to reach out to the audience by luring them to take food or drink breaks in between movies by playing such ads. One more example can be collaboration between an interior design company and a showpiece or wall art making company. In both the cases the primary agenda of the companies is to acquire the market of the other company and hence gain a wider audience through marketing or advertising their products together. Also collaborations are done with the purpose of building and increasing brand equity. Brand equity simply refers to a brand's intangible value which is separate from the products and services it offers.

It includes brand value that it offers, its market standing or even the overall perception of the consumers. (9) However, building brand equity is not that easy. For a brand looking for collaborations, it involves undergoing rigorous market research and finding a suitable brand which can actually match up to its values. (9) Following this, the brand needs to make its collaboration strategy clear and what is the bare minimum that it is expecting from that collaboration. Thereafter comes the execution part wherein it is publicly announced and displayed to the potential buyers in the form of advertising. Lastly, the impact of this collaboration is evaluated and its measure of success is calculated. (9)

Brands with different numbers of product categories can collaborate with brands to increase or diversify their product categories. This is an example of co-branding. (6) This concept involves existing brands collaborating with a newer brand with the same product category to add a new product to their current brand dimension. For the newer brand it's a whole new market and space whereas for the former it is just product diversification. Collaboration has been recognised as a key feature of the fashion industry in the 21st century. (4) Business collaborations can be seen in various forms like B2B to B2C, offline to online market, large enterprises to small enterprises. (4) This concept best received attention when the leading shoe giant, Adidas partnered up with one of the most famous designers Yoji Yamamoto to create a clothing brand, Y3. (4)

Collaboration of fashion companies proves to be beneficial for building brand and customer relationship as the customer relates more to the brand when they collaborate with a known or a brand people admire a lot. Puma, a sporting goods company, also launched new products with a Japanese fashion designer Mihara Yasuhiro and has collaborated with many more since then. This clearly shows that collaboration has a lot of power when it comes to the fashion industry. (4) However, it can have its pros and cons. Collaboration if not implemented with the correct strategy can lead to brand confusion or loss of image. (7) It can become difficult for the customers to get a clarity on the products or services the brand is offering and might confuse it with the other brand it has collaborated with. This can prove to be a detrimental way for successful partnership.

Almost all of the fashion brands positioned in the market today have a uniqueness in the products and services they offer or what we call as USP. It is one of the most important elements to have while building a brand. In this century, everyone in the world is looking for something original and something very personal, especially when it comes to fashion. On the contrary, fashion is one of such industries which consists of many local brands selling fake copies of famous brands and originality of designs is put at risk. To eradicate this, rarity and exception is a must that a fashion clothing brand should have to be able to reach the pinnacle of success.

This rarity and exception should be crystal clear when it comes to collaboration as well. (9) This rarity and exception is an intangible value and can be delivered through well planned and strategic marketing (9). This message can be delivered by indulging into sensitive marketing tactics to create brand awareness and brand image. (9) This kind of collaboration is also a way to emphasise the fact that a brand is capable of maintaining and retaining its original image, values and aesthetics even after being partners with another brand and being constantly seen with another fashion label.

B. Story of Shein- A Prominent Feature of Indo-China Relations

Fast fashion is the ultimate reality the fashion industry is facing today. With the influx of uncountable trends every hour and every day, it is impossible for designers and brands to come up with something that can withstand the test of time. That is where fast fashion comes into picture. Understanding the consumer needs, following the trends and delivering on that is what all brands are trying to do. However, consistency is very important when it comes to creating fashion choices according to your consumer's changing mindset. It is important to continuously keep evolving as and whenever a trend arrives which has the potential to stay for a longer time. This contributes the most customer satisfaction as the consumers start believing that they have been shopping from a reliable brand and no longer feel the 'fear of missing out' or what we call 'FOMO'.

Having trendy clothes, accessories in a wardrobe boosts the confidence level of consumers thus increasing their loyalty towards the brand. One such brand which has won hearts of the Indian consumers since it started its journey here was Shein. Shein, an online retail giant, selling apparel and fashion accessories had created a vigorous impact on the youth of India. Shein, started in 2012, by a Chinese graduate - Chris Xu, targets the GenZ or the youth of today by producing low priced clothes in accordance with the latest trends.(10) The company size grew bigger and bigger with more than 10,000 employees within 10 years of its birth.(10) The brand saw unexpected success at the pandemic time. When its competitor brands were forced to shut down their stores and operations, its online availability became a great advantage. (10)

The brand witnessed a rapid surge in its sales with all the consumers turning to online shopping. By this time, the company's valuation had reached in billions making it the top shopping app in Apple Android stores surpassing Amazon in May 2021.(10) This historic achievement stirred the fashion industry and everybody knew that this player is here to stay for longer. The brand offers clothes in men and women category, accessories, bags, shoes and fashion for kids as well. An additional key feature of Shein is home fashion as well.(11) Shein has local websites available in America, Europe and Middle Eastern countries. It had consistently been at the top when it comes to maximum store downloads and user generated content with the help of its AI influenced model which dictates fashion trends through internet data.(11)

Shein offers a huge variety of products at the lowest prices which makes it the best possible reason to enter the Indian market. Beginning its journey in India in 2017, it had thoroughly researched and studied the market, demographics and consumer perceptions of India as part of its business strategy. (11) Shein's primary targets were the metropolitan cities which were executed with the help of Rs250 crore marketing investment. Its popularity saw a surge on Instagram as a result of which, it was catering to 20,000 orders on a daily basis. (11) Witnessing so much acceptance by the Indian consumers, it started to devise strategies to tap into the non-metro cities. It held strategic partnerships with Indian designers like Manish Malhotra and Abu Jani and Sandeep Khosla.(11) In addition to this, its fashion show in Mumbai, SheinXMe was a huge success and its fame had peaked. (11) Every wardrobe in India had a place for Shein in some way or the other and it became the talk of the town. Globally, Shein had collaborated with a lot of famous celebrities which made communicating its brand easier to the world. However, in India it was a short-lived success. In 2020, India entered into a border dispute with China which led to the government banning 59 Chinese apps including Shein to protect sovereignty and integrity of the country.(12)

This came as a huge shockwave as everyone wished for it to stay longer in the Indian market. However, this decision holds true till today. Although Shein had a keen eye for entering Indian market and didn't want to lose the recognition it had worked so hard for too easily.(11) As a result of this, it listed itself on one of the leading e-commerce sites of India, Amazon and launched a Prime Day sale in July 2021.(11) This move eradicated all the legal barriers Shein would have faced had it entered with no support.(11) With this move, people could still buy Shein's products, just not from its website, meaning limited options. This led to many brands like Zudio and Urbanic trying to find a way to replace Shein and offer the same or something better than what Shein did.

➤ The Comeback

3 years of Shein's absence in India, so many brands have tried to take up its space in the market. However the brand's still not completely gone yet. 2023 has been a delightful year for Shein lovers as it announced its comeback to India through leading Indian mass brand, Reliance. The brands are reportedly entering into a partnership with each other and benefitting from each other's strengths. Reliance's vast database, connections, warehousing and logistics makes it one of the best options for Shein to join hands with. (12)

Reliance Retail Ventures Limited (RRVL) and Shein's partnership includes some key features. Shein's platform would be managed by RRVL's subsidiary company, a 100 percent Indian company(13). Thus this will establish a domestic market catering to only and only Indian consumers with a separate app of Shein's products for people to order from.(13)

➤ *Key-Points*

- Shein's revival story is a story each brand must know and learn from. Creating a brand in the Chinese market and then expanding it globally with numerous strategies is a great method for creating your own space in the fashion industry.
- Executing a low pricing strategy is one of the major reasons why Shein gained success in India. However, one must keep in mind to clearly communicate the difference between inferior quality products and low-priced products. Since Chinese clothing labels have faced these challenges in the past, it is important to act smartly on this.
- First impression is certainly the last impression. Shein has proved this with time and set the belief that no matter how many competitors a brand may have, creating a unique image about your brand in the beginning can go a long way. No matter the ban on its app, Shein has managed to find its way back to India because it was so sure about Indian consumers awaiting its comeback from a very long time.
- Lastly, collaborating with globally famous artists, influencers, actors helps to communicate your brand language better and reach a wider market which is exactly what Shein did.

After Shein's exit, two major brands in India tried to fill in the gap which Shein had created-Urbanc and Zudio. Urbanc benefited the most after Shein's exit in the year 2020 and became the top ranked direct to consumer online platform in the nation. The sales of the brand also massively increased to INR1000 crores in the year 2023. (14) The brand had spontaneously ruled the market and became every consumer's first choice for shopping clothes. Urbanc's vision of capturing the emerging economies like India instead of global domination led to the brand being hyped by the Indian consumers as an alternative for Shein.(15) Like Shein, the brand offers a large variety of trendy apparel and accessories at affordable pricing. In November 2023, the brand successfully secured an investment of 150 million and has claimed that the objective of this investment money is to create more environmentally friendly and socially ethical forms of clothing. (15)

According to an official statement released by an Urbanc executive, the brand didn't see Shein as its competitor anytime due to the differences in brand ideology and brand goals as Shein wants to create a marketplace for consumers where they can find anything and everything under one roof.(16) However Urbanc's brand ideology is to create a stylish yet friendly brand for all. The brand believes that it has already created an impactful image in the minds of GenZs due to intensive social media marketing and wishes to tap into the 18-35 age group.(16)

C. *Chinese Fashion Labels*

With China being one of the world's largest producers and manufacturers of goods, its fashion industry has touched its peak. The increasing spending power of the consumers has led to a direct increase in affordable, trendy and high-end clothing. Let's look at some very established and famous Chinese fashion brands which can make their way in the Indian market.

➤ *Bosideng*

Bosideng is one of the largest clothing brands in China. Established in 1976, it has been a leading enterprise devoted to down jacket research, design and production. (17) It has created an indispensable image in the clothing industry of China. Bosideng has expanded its operations in 72 countries including Italy, US, France and UK. (17) According to Euromonitor International's Systematic Research, the brand fetched No1. position globally in both sales and sales volume in the down jacket market. (18) The brand has been able to maintain a successful image for the past 48 years due to its powerful management of supply chain and strong production capacity. (19) However, with time, the brand had undergone transformations to keep its position intact due to the inflow of the emerging new brands structured in a way to attract the GenZs. It moulded and twisted its strategies so that it conformed to the expectations of people in today's time and thought about innovating boldly. (19)

In October 2018, the brand joined hands with three international designers - ex- Ralph Lauren design Director - TIM COPPENS, former Balenciaga and LV designer - ANTONIN TRON and Yohji Yamamoto collaborator - ENNIO CAPASA to launch an international designer co-branded series of apparel products which drove the industry crazy and the products were sold out within 5 minutes of its launch during the shopping festival. (19)

The three designers showcases their levels of expertise and experience in the show as each of their collaborated designs depicted a story and used different colour palettes. (20)

The brand is known to have been invited to NY, Milan and London Fashion week consecutively from the years 2018 to 2020 as an independent brand. Many fashion celebrities, Oscar winning actresses, supermodels adorned Bosideng's designs to the fashion weeks which appealed the fashion media company Vogue.(18)

In the year 2019, the brand collaborated with the famous French designer Jean Paul Gaultier, in the defined goal of increasing sales and to compete with global players like Canada Goose and Moncler. (21) The result of this partnership announcement was a glamorous show in Shanghai graced by A-listed celebrities. (21)

The brand has moved to non-down apparel business including categories of ladies wear brand -Bosideng Ricci , casual wear brand -Mogao , children's wear brand - D.D Cat and menswear brand - Vetallo.(according to Bosideng International Holdings Limited 2010-11 Annual Sales Presentation) .This variety which it offers can appeal to the Indian consumers and can prove as a one stop shop to minimise their inconvenience of shopping at different brands for ladies , men's and children's wear. The brand's fabric mainly caters to winter clothing and winter conditions . Due to the cold weather in certain regions of India during the winters, the brand can make it's place in this niche segment and be one of the major winter clothing brands in India.

➤ *Anta*

ANTA is a leading sportswear brand , headquartered at Jinjiang , China. ANTA Sports Products Limited is headed by the parent company ANTA , established in the year 1991. (22) The brand currently serves products which can be listed into 3 categories- footwear , apparel and accessories. The company's staple operations include design , development , manufacturing and marketing of sporting goods and holds major stake in Amer Sports Inc. , a Finnish MNC. (22)

The brand has constantly made efforts to build the image of "Going Beyond Oneself" into everyone's daily life before the consumers. (23) The brand's unique designs are crafted to appeal to the sports geeks population. The brand's agenda is to be the top homegrown sportswear brand in China and the leading top 10 in the world. (23) Anta aspires to become a competitor in the sportswear community globally. The company believes itself to be a significant sportswear brand in the Chinese market due to it's continuous efforts to expand globally.(24)

In 2009 , Anta acquired Fila's trademarks , a South-Korean athleisure brand , in China , Hong Kong and Macau (24) in the hope of increasing it's brand image and tap into the consumer market of first-tier cities. (25) Currently , Anta's major customers reside in the second and third tier cities of China , whereas Nike and Adidas are the prominent players in the first-tier cities. (25) Anta , already successful in the Chinese market and surpassing Adidas and Nike in 2019 as the largest pure sports equipment brand ,(24) idesired to achieve global recognition and become one of the toughest and unbeatable players in the sportswear equipment industry.

The sportswear industry in India has transformed into a consumer market from a niche sector in recent times.(26) In the early days , the sportswear category targeted the sportspersons particularly and seemed attractive to them the most. However , now sports are followed like any other

religion in India. Be it cricket , hockey , or football , sports has created a massive impact and helped in the evolution of sportswear-driven consumers. The increased income levels , everyday changing lifestyles , increasing awareness and the influx of international brands has made sportswear one of the biggest consumer markets.(26) The sportswear market includes sports apparel , footwear and accessories where footwear accounts for approximately 60% of the market. (26) The industry was valued at INR365.8 billion in 2014 , INR 440 billion in 2015 and INR 550 billion in 2018.(26)(27)

A relevant sub-industry under sportswear , athleisure , is currently rising as a trend as consumers end use of the product has changed over the years. Rather than just using it for sports or physical activities , wearing athleisure products in casual day-to-day life has become a work culture which increases the sales for any sportswear brand. (27) Nowadays , many sportswear brands are bridging the gap between functionality and fashion in sportswear by introducing another line of clothing. This has grown as a big trend among the youth in India in the form of sneaker shows and has lots of potential in the upcoming years. Celebrity brands like HRX BY Hrithik Roshan and Wrogn by Virat Kohli have helped gain a wider audience for this market. (27)

➤ *Analysis*

India and China , emerging as one of the largest developing nations , can turn out to be the best choices for partnership in the fashion industry for each other. The future of the two economies is expected to be in one's favour and therefore building new relationships with each other would be easier. With China offering a plethora of products to the Indian market , and a generous population of India interested in Chinese fashion , the two will surely set benchmarks in the collaborative fashion industry. Shein 's arrival in the Indian market has definitely set standards for the Chinese startups to not lose faith in times of distress and proper planning and strategizing are the only keys to success in the fashion industry. The brand has communicated a message to the Chinese labels like Bosideng and Anta which hold great potential due to the growing affordable clothing and sportswear industries respectively and inspired them to dream of a successful business in India and take their brands to the global level.

D. *Primary Research*

➤ *Shoppers' Take on Chinese Labels and Reliance's Reintroduction of Shein in India: A Survey Analysis*

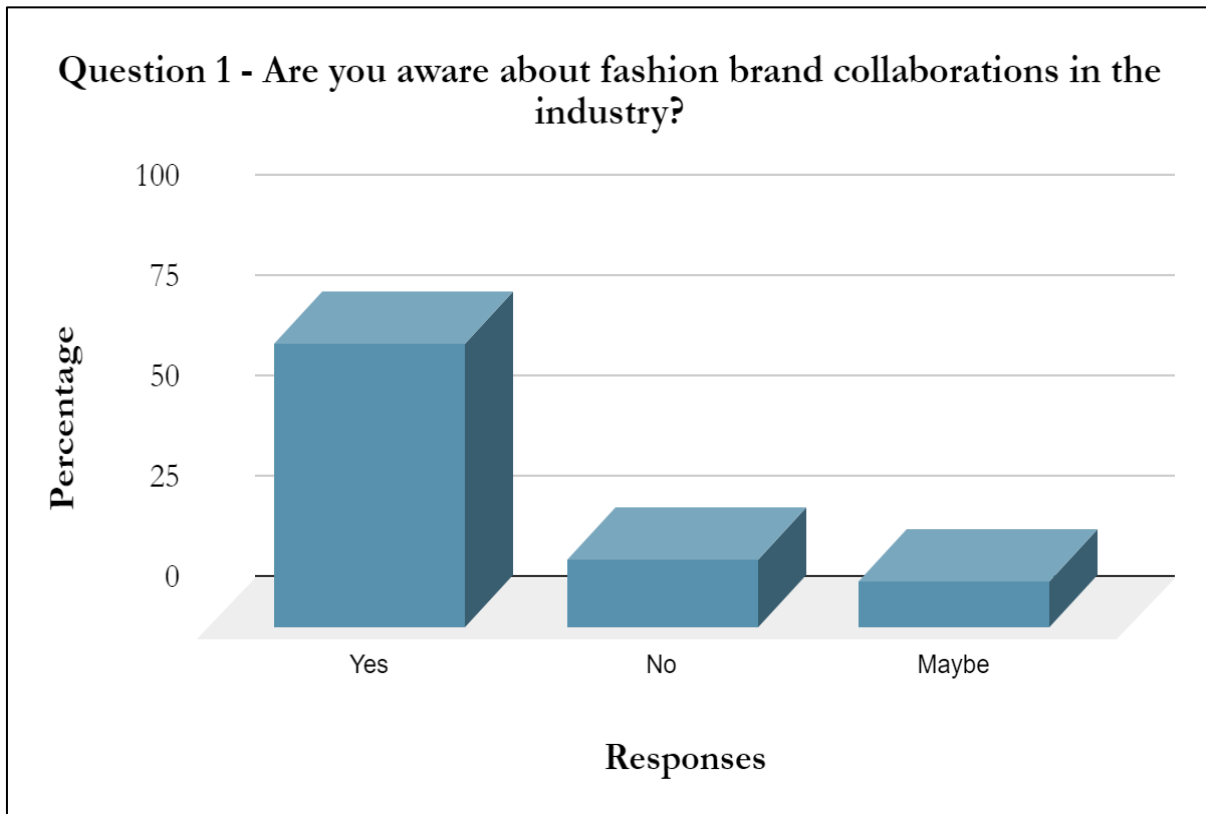


Fig 1

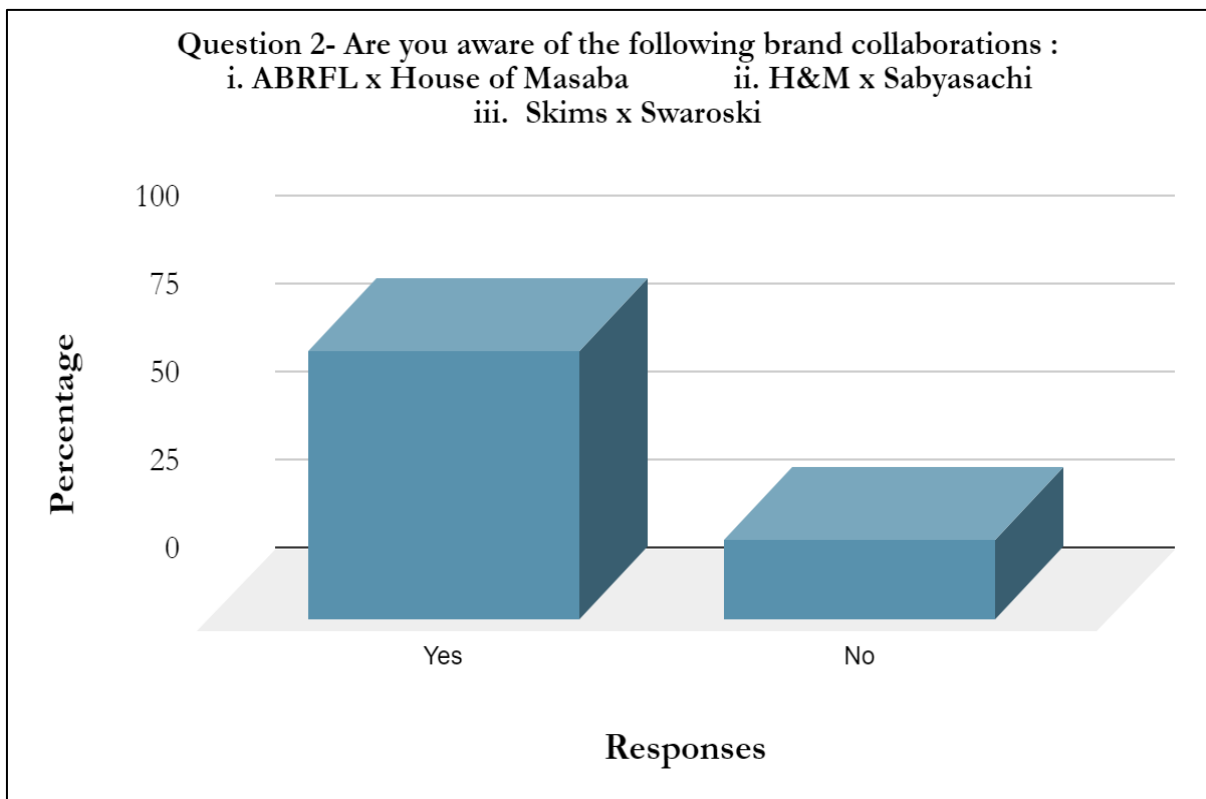


Fig 2

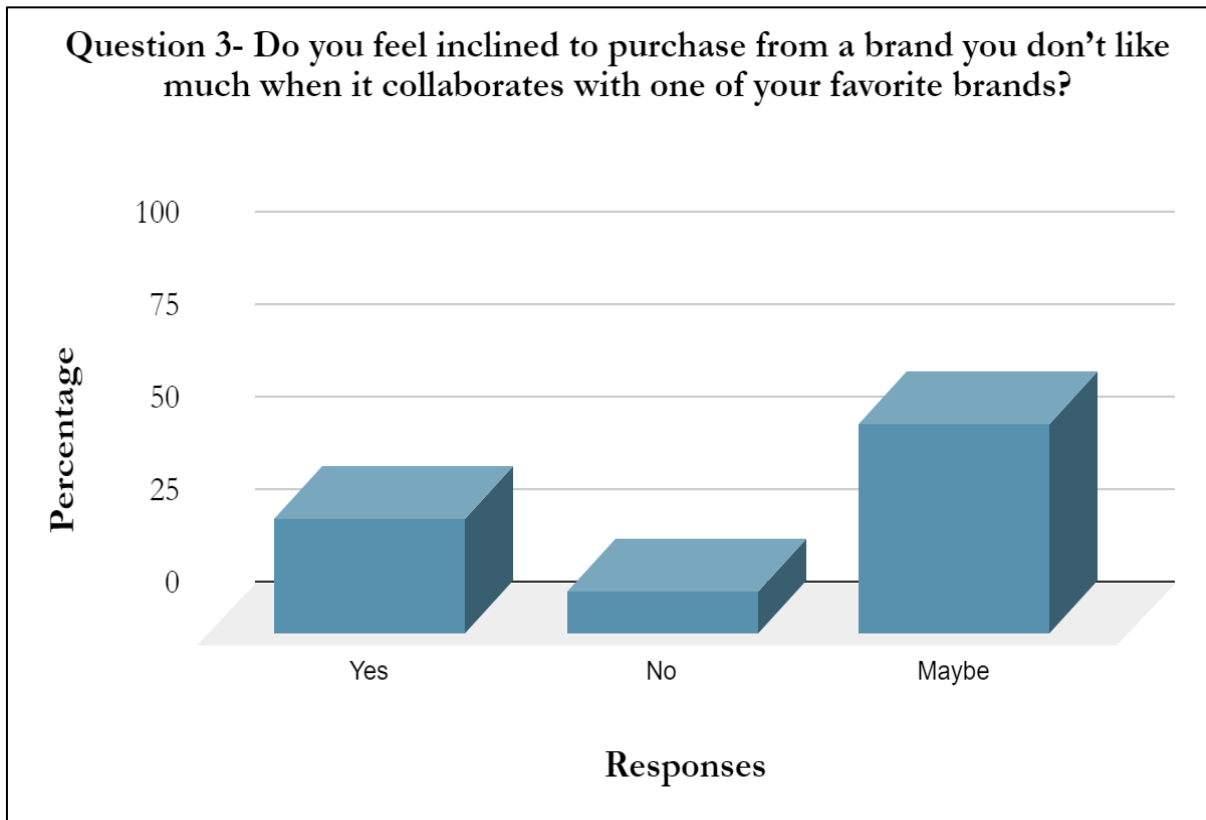


Fig 3

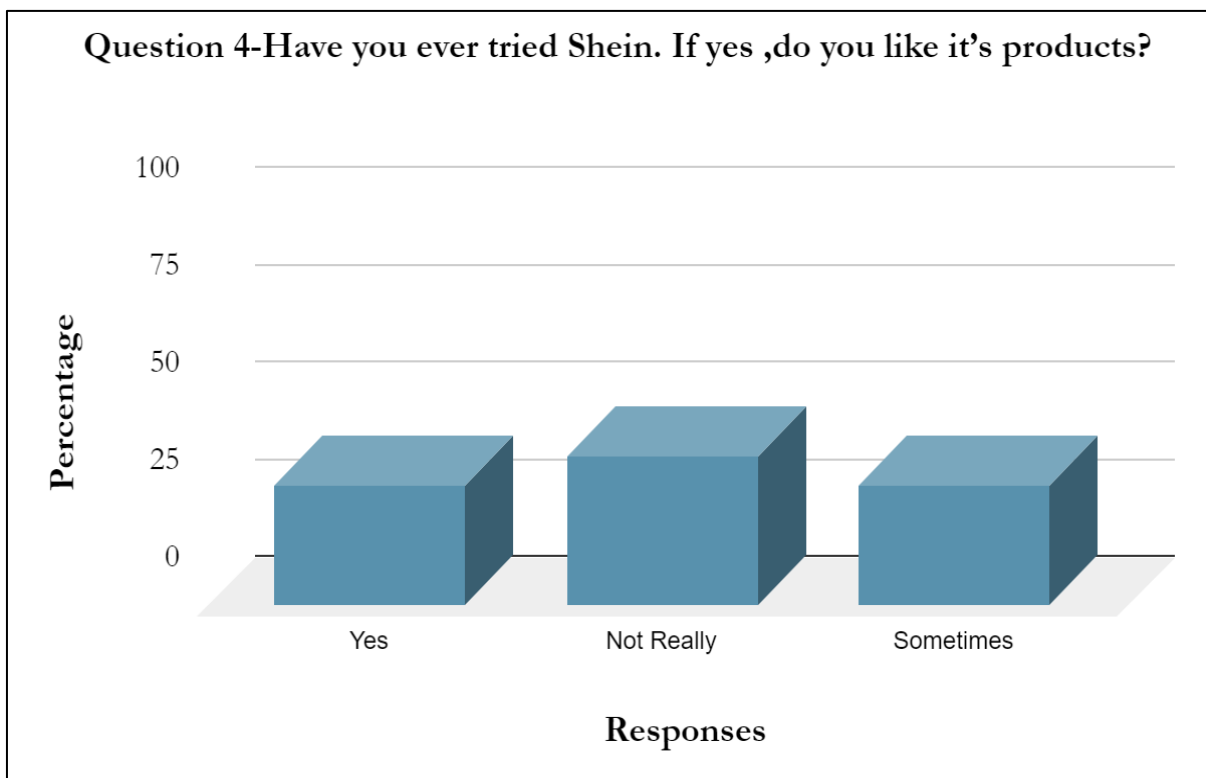


Fig 4

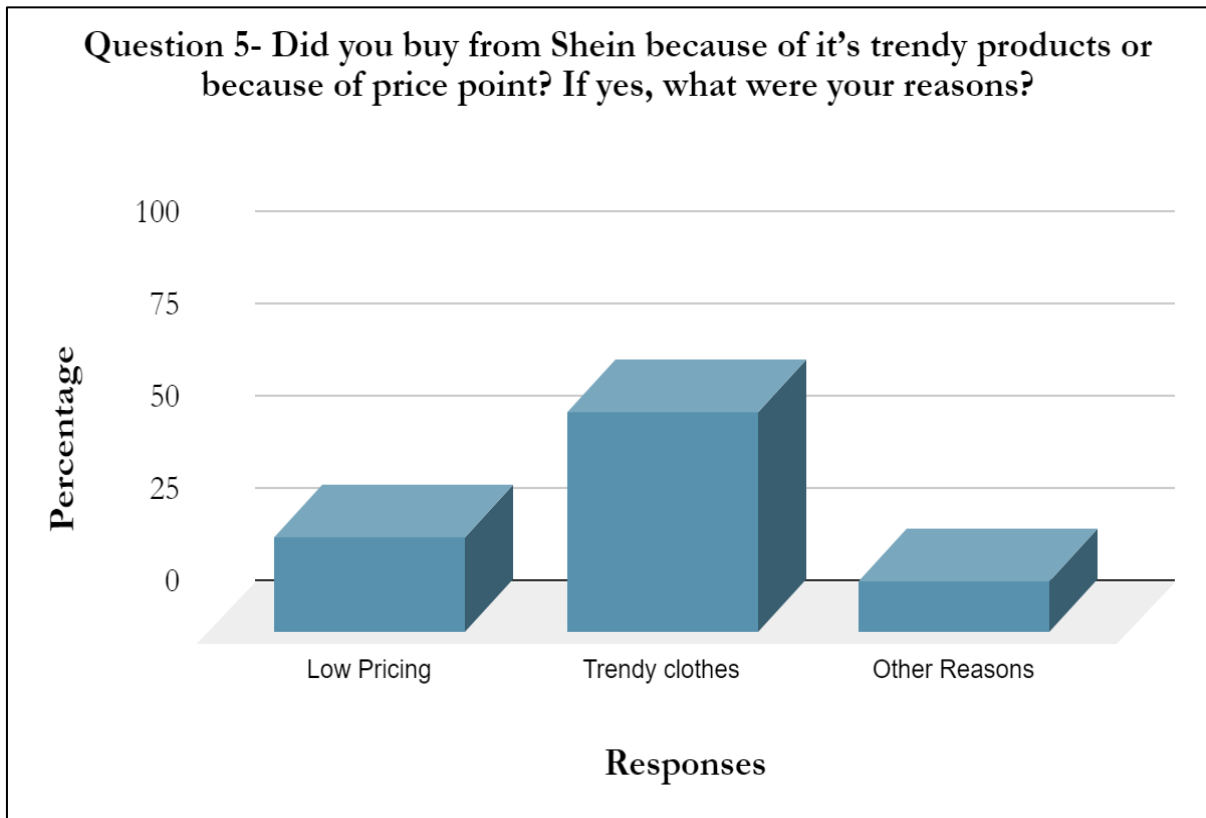


Fig 5

* Other Reasons included both pricing and trendy clothes and never shopped from Shein.

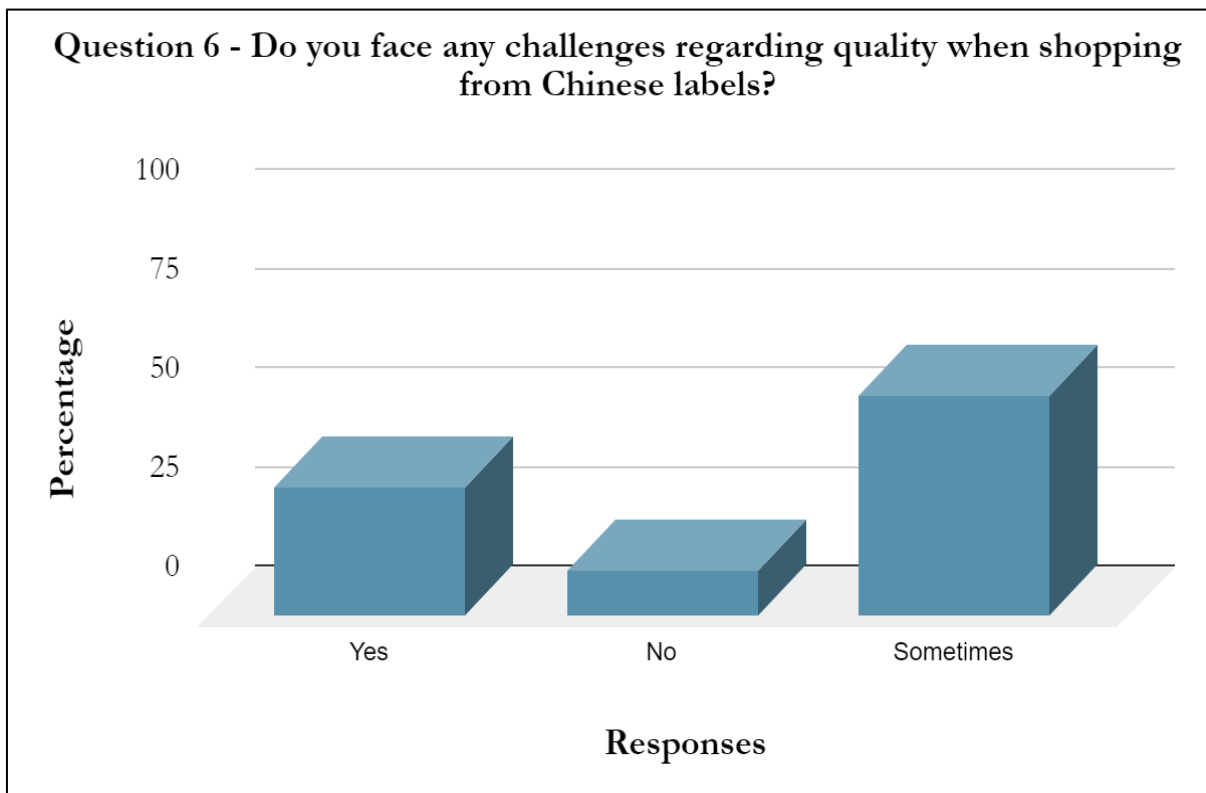


Fig 6

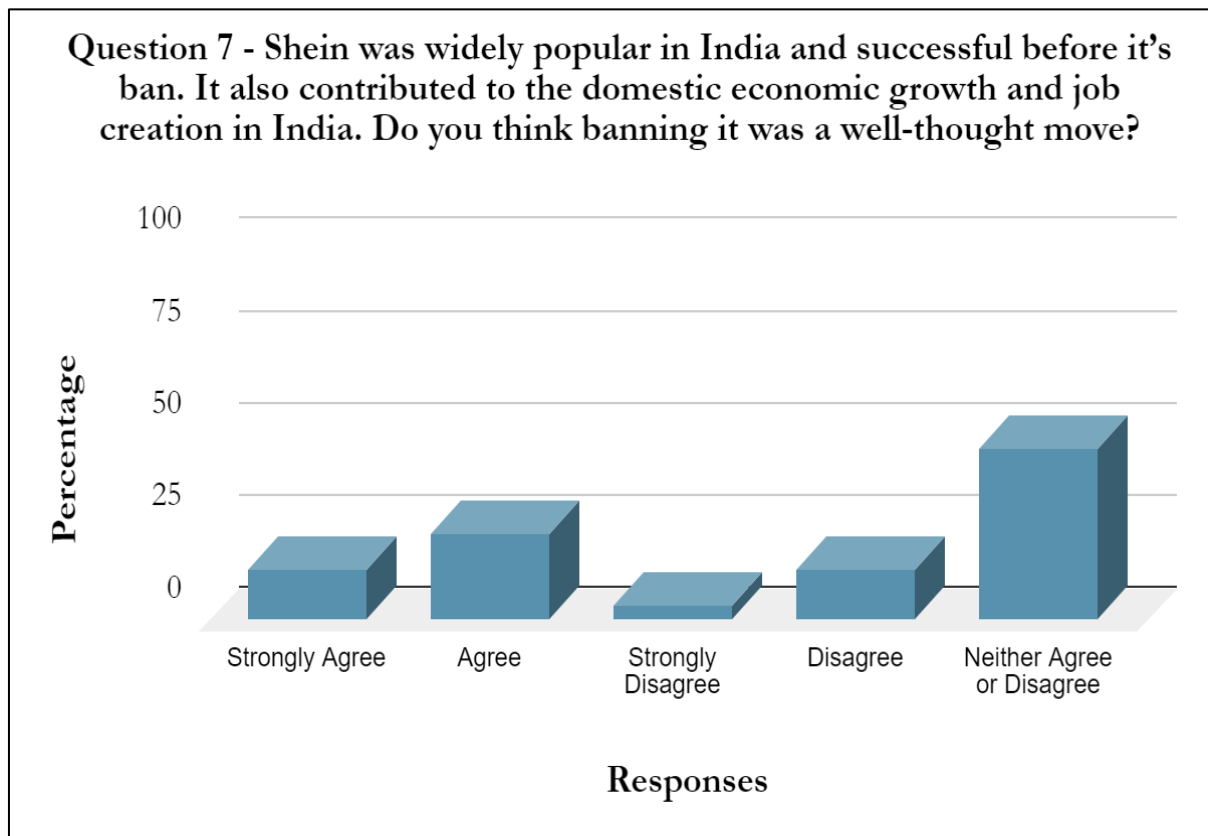


Fig 7

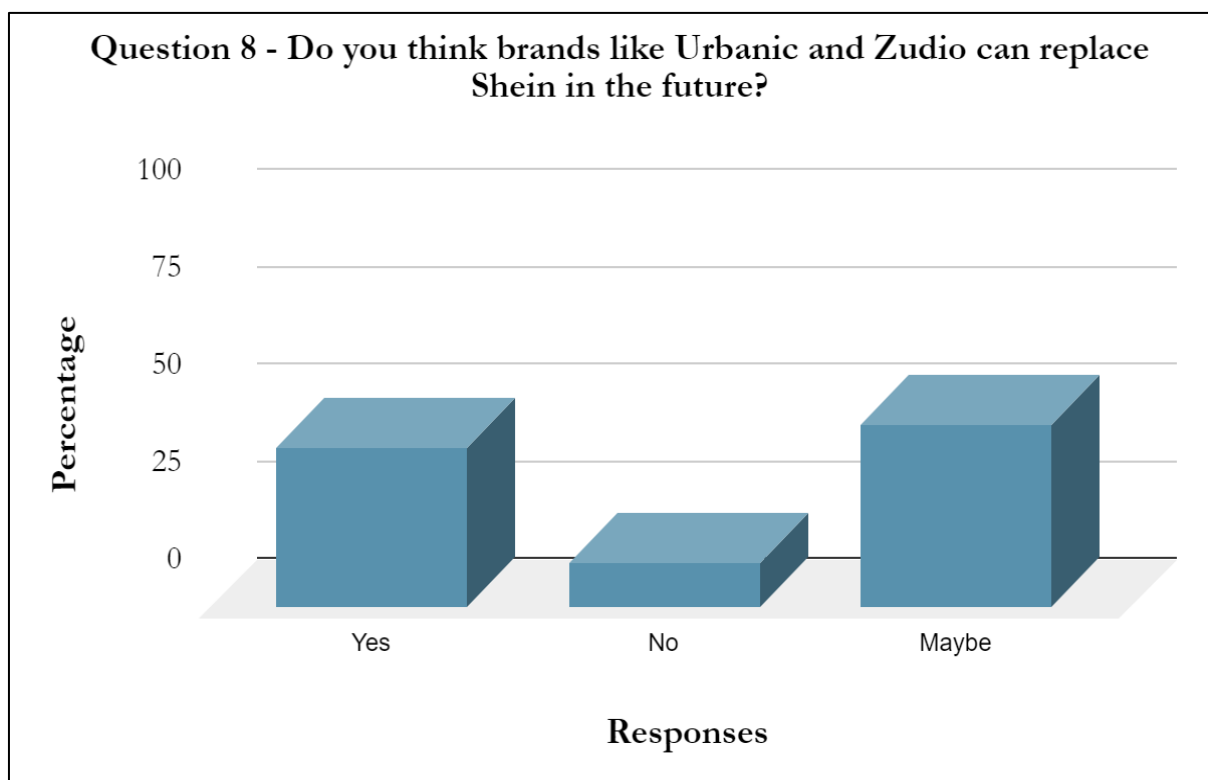


Fig 8

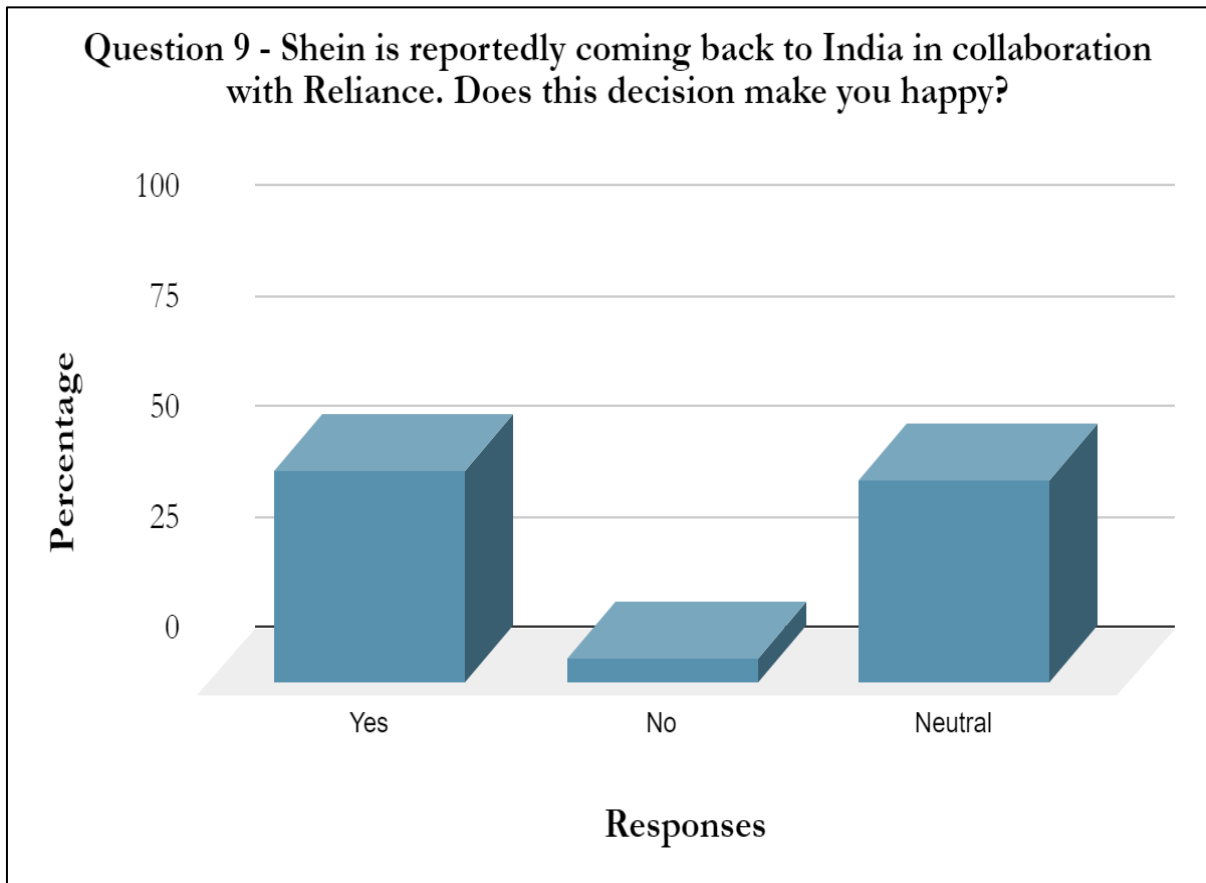


Fig 9

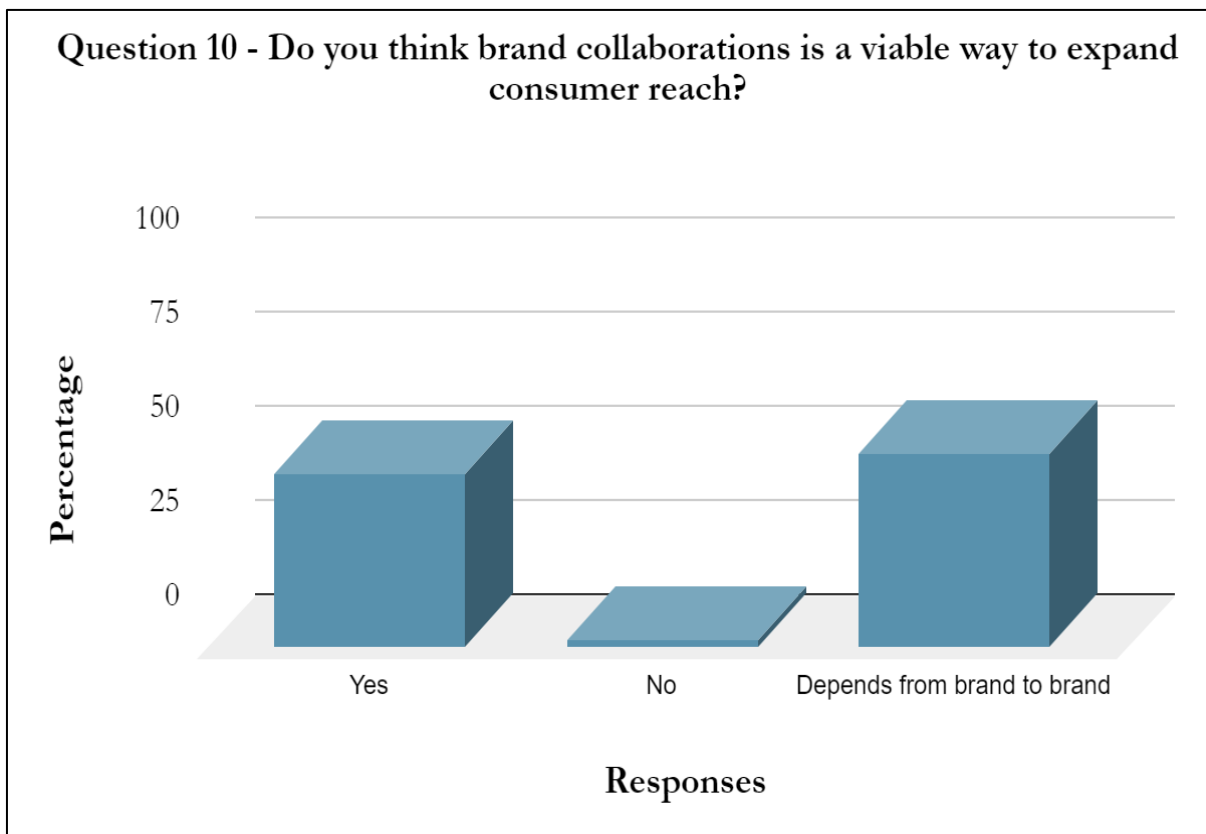


Fig 10

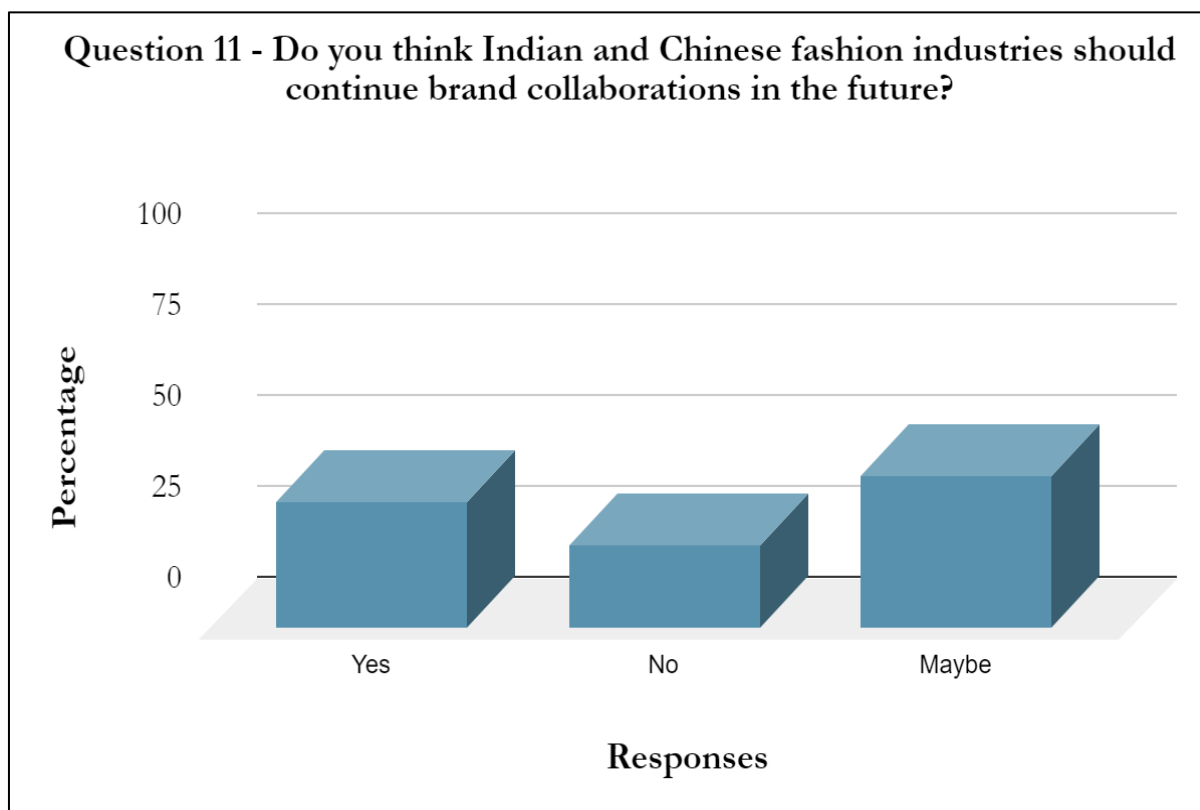


Fig 11

Almost 70% of the **respondents** were aware about fashion brand collaborations , **in fact the** most famous ones which shows that people **nowadays** follow fashion brands closely. Approximately 1/3rd of the **respondents haven't shopped from Shein ever with low quality being one of the primary reasons** . **On the other hand , more than half the percentage of people shopped from Shein due to the availability of trendy clothes with the brand. A significant proportion of people believed it was not an appropriate decision to ban Shein in India which was indicative of the observation that 48% of the respondents were happy about Shein coming back to India. In addition to this , almost half the percentage had an impartial response towards it. More than half of the percentage felt brand collaborations as a feasible way to expand consumer reach while a considerable percentage want India and China to continue brand collaborations in the future.**

III. DISCUSSION

Fashion brands, collaborations , industry - all these terms seem to be pretty vast and extensive only when you begin researching. So many facets , so many parameters still remain untouched even after vigorous research. This is mainly because the industry is so rapidly growing that keeping pace with it seems to be a tough job. There's so much to learn from the past examples as well as the present. Fashion holds different meanings for each brand and every brand follows a marketing strategy which best suits their business. Every fashion brand holds a definite and distinct position in the industry and aims for a common vision - to be the best and only one to do what they do. This makes it not fair to

believe that collaborations are the only or the best way to reach your goal. It might act as a sales booster or a popularity increase for some brands while for some it might not. For some brands it might actually steal the spotlight from them and dwindle with their brand identity. For eg: , a small startup collaborating with a famous and bigger brand in the hope of surging their fame might actually lead to the spotlight shifting to the latter and people starting to think highly of the brand which ultimately adds to it's already existing prestige. On the contrary, it can act well for other brands like the example given above. It all depends on how well brands undergo the market research required to know their customer and execute it with optimum utilisation of resources which makes collaborations a achievable prospect.

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