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The Business of Fashion

A new perspective on the ‘sustainable’ clothing industry - changing the way companies look at impact.

The fashion industry is known for many things but being sustainable is most of the time not on the top of that list. Yet still an increasing amount of fashion brands claim the word ‘sustainability’. But what does it mean to be sustainable in the fashion industry? How are companies facing their supply chain polluting habits and how do they respond to the ongoing challenge of being sustainable?

Source: Waterval by M.C. Escher
Amsterdam, The Netherlands – Most fashion brands who are investing in sustainability are looking for solutions by measuring impact with existing systems. By example the E P&L tool; the Higg Index; the LCA method or planetary boundaries assessments. This seems to be an essential aspect in this relatively new area for the clothing industry.

After reading the book about The Hidden Impact from Babette Porcelijn, I got inspired to see how her content would relate to the fashion industry. As Porcelijn calculates in her book, in 2050 there will be 10 billion people living on earth, but we will be consuming as if we would be with 20 billion people on this planet (Porcelijn, 2017, p138). The book is about turning personal environment eco-positive by effectively tackling your impact in the key polluting factors. The book is written on a consumer level but needless to say, measurements need to be taken in the industry as well.

In fashion there is a relatively new phenomenon that has been taking the market by storm the past 15 years, ‘being - or going green’. The motives are different for every brand, established or newcomer. But brands don’t want all these good deeds to go unnoticed, a new marketing form called green labeling has appeared. This raises a lot of questions. For example a claim that states: “With this pants 400 liters of water was saved.” Or the recycling bins that are popping up in retail locations accompanied by the marvellous stories about their ‘green’ products.

I got inspired to write about sustainability in the fashion industry. A word that is used way too often and a lot of times out of context these days. I wanted to know what the truth was behind these kind of slogans. How are companies measuring this impact? Where are these numbers coming from? Is any of it true or is it just a way of greenwashing? Greenwashing is described by Kenton as “the use of marketing to portray an organization’s products, activities or policies as environmentally friendly when they are not” (Kenton, Investopedia 2018)

“Who wants to talk about this season’s colour or the next it bag? The sustainability conversation is really the only one I’m interested in having.” (Stella McCartney, 2018)
Companies that self-proclaim to be sustainable, measure their impact in one way or the other. While various forms of assessments can be used, the outcome of these measurements are the most important. Some companies are really trying to make a difference, while others might have ulterior motives. Findings from audits which companies conduct in for example factories, can be found on their website or in the CSR annual reports. Without this form of transparency, there is no traceability of possible misconducts. And without knowing who is accountable there is no incentive to change. Let’s see what is going on there.

Collections tend to go too fast to properly analyse sustainability. It causes errors in judgement from both the factory and clothing companies. Brands and suppliers are on a tight budget and a deadline. Things have to move fast before the hype is over, so the clock is literally ticking for the employees in production. This leads to unhealthy relationships between brands and factories and makes it impossible to execute proper assessments confirmed by Anne Manschot (Manschot, 2018, p21). In her research paper about factory assessments she says that “Relationships, not audits, influence supplier performance. Factories that are actively engaged with sourcing and production teams, not compliance staff, have better labour conditions at the factory level. This is because closer relationships (and not more control) leads to greater trust and better working conditions” (Manschot, 2018).

But the lack of partnership is not the only problem in the industry. “The past thirty years have seen significant structural changes in fashion supply chains, which have become increasingly globalized and complex “(Parry, Wood, 2019). Paul Dillinger head of global product innovation at Levi’s agrees and said to Stacey Dooley in a documentary on the BBC that:

“This is a big industry. It’s so broadly decentralized that affecting change is nearly impossible. Especially when the appetite doesn’t want change, there needs to be a regulatory solution.” (Sanghani, 2018).

Which makes doing assessments in an industry that is globalized really hard and very costly. Even more difficult to translate results to strategy. All these codes of conducts and goals can only be achieved if they are translated to day to day activities.
Measuring impact is not the same as understanding impact to its core. What can brands do without the usage of any form of assessment? Well creativity, efficiency and common sense could help some of the following issues. Tackling your impact starts with tackling structural problems in the supply chain, like minimum factory limits. Making what you can truly sell instead of the amount that makes it the cheapest. Finishing deadstock surpluses by urging upcycling the garments in to new collections. The most sustainable pieces are the ones that already exist. Optimizing your production process by using innovative technologie which leads to the use of less resources.

If together the industry wants to move towards a circular system, they do not only need to work together with the whole supply chain but also rethink the way we look at impact. My advice would be: don’t assess your impact if you are not willing to take the responsibility to make the necessary systematic changes. Maybe the industry doesn’t want to change or is it that they are they to stuck in the current system? Systematic changes are difficult to implement in a business. Let alone changing the economic system, states Cunningham in our interview. “The short-term outlook of the fashion industry is really working against us in that, because we don’t know what the collection is going to look like next month so how are you going to work backwards from the big ambitions in a climate accord, in to your everyday activity” (Cunningham, 2018, p11).

As Bob Crébas, investor in innovative solutions to cotton and synthetics states in his interview in the Correspondent with Emy Demkes. “We tried everything, but if you want to make the world a better place, you should not do it with fashion.” (De Correspondent, 2019). I disagree with Crébas, I think that if the full pulse of the industry changed their ways, fashion could become a force for good. Horrible things are still happening in the garment industry. Factories collapse, children are working instead of going to school, rivers are being declared dead because they are heavily polluted by garment factories, etc. Why are we waiting until the last minute to fix it? Is it really still that profitable to choose money over people and planet? An industry so dependent on natural resources and on human labour should be more innovative with solutions to sustain itself and secure its future endeavours. “The costs of the status quo keep rising; the costs of sustainable alternatives keep declining” (Roberts, 2018). Not truly going green is going to be more expensive in the long run so what are we waiting for? It is quite literally 10 to 12 for our industry. And luckily, I’m not the only one who is staying positive and believes this. “Fashion is a force for good. Sustainability and well-being are at the core of what we’re doing” (Holden, 2019).
So, are companies responsible in taking pre-emptive measures? Responsible maybe not but with the rise of awareness consumers are going to reward you for changing in the long run. Why would you want to be a follower when you could be a pioneer?

The views expressed in Op-Ed pieces are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Business of Fashion.

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