INTERVIEW

“FROM A CONSUMER PERSPECTIVE WE NEED A MORE COMMON DEFINITION OF FAIR FASHION”

Fair fashion is no longer a buzz word. Consumers are ready to share in – but they also raise their concerns. How can they retain overview over of myriad of certificates and labels? Which initiatives are long-term sustainable and which ones fall into the category of green washing? Tomas Vucurevic, founder of brand strategy consulting firm BRAIND, has specialized in ingredient branding. He pleads for a more holistic view on sustainability.

YOU HAVE RECENTLY PUBLISHED A WHITE PAPER “WHO MADE MY CLOTHES” READING THE TOPIC OF FAIR FASHION. WHAT IS THE INTENTION OF THIS PAPER?

The topic of sustainable or fair fashion has gained significant momentum over the past years. More and more non-profit organizations, fiber and fabric producers, fashion brands and retailers are introducing initiatives, labels, products and collections to promote fair fashion. Amongst them is Fashion Revolution; a UK based non-profit organization with their movement “Who made my clothes”. Our intention as a brand consultancy firm was to look at this development from a consumer perspective in the sense how consumers can potentially identify fair fashion products and which requirements these conscious consumers have towards the suppliers of such products. Furthermore, we believe that we must come to a more common definition of “what fair fashion actually is”.

Consumers do not want to learn hundreds of different labels or brand names indicating all possible contributions to fair fashion; be it fair to nature, resources, workforce or society. They are looking for more holistic, widely used and broadly accepted standards helping them to take the right purchase decision. Today it is still very difficult to identify fair fashion products and consumer behavior never changes on a larger scale, if a new proposition means extra efforts or extra money. If we compare the longing for fair fashion with the desire to buy bio food, it is far behind in terms of the available offering and a proper distribution.

Adidas Biofabric: Adidas

”*WE HAVE TO SEE, WHICH INITIATIVES BY BRANDS AND RETAILERS ARE LONG-TERM AND SUSTAINABLE AND WHICH ONES FALL INTO THE CATEGORY OF GREEN WASHING*”

WHAT STAGE HAS FAIR FASHION REACHED MEANWHILE? WHAT IS THE INFLUENCE OF FIBRES AND FABRICS IN THAT SENSE?

We have to accept that textile waste represents the second biggest single waste source globally, only topped by oil based products itself. An estimated 400 billion square meters of textiles are produced annually, of which 60 billion square meters are production waste.
Each year over 80 billion pieces of clothing are produced worldwide. We are just at the beginning of a growing feeling of responsibility within the textile supply chain and its distribution about who made our clothes as well as the environmental impact it has.

We need all the good initiatives of market participants including yarn, fiber and textile producers, but we can't make the equation without the fashion brands and especially without distribution. H&M, Zara, Uniqlo, Topshop or Benetton together own tens of thousands of shops worldwide and in addition, pure online players such as Amazon or Zalando are now serving millions of consumers. They are the ones who control the access to the consumer and unfortunately not the admirable small online shop for swimsuits made from recycled ocean plastic. We have to see, which initiatives by brands and retailers are long-term and sustainable and which ones fall into the category of green washing through self-branded collections or programs without proper control and 100% transparency. A brand like Patagonia demonstrates impressively, that you can be really sustainable, sell larger volumes, achieve significant price premiums, earn the trust of consumers and make a profit.

HOW CAN FAIR FASHION CONCEPTS ATTRACT CONSUMERS' ATTENTION AND MOTIVATE TO MAKE MORE INFORMED PURCHASING DECISIONS?

AT BRAIND® WE SEE TWO DEVELOPMENTS THAT ARE NECESSARY TO GROW THE FAIR FASHION SHARE:

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1. CONSUMER EDUCATION ABOUT THE IMPACT OF THEIR OWN BEHAVIOR:
Overconsumption is one of the negative effects of fashion, particularly fast fashion. There are too many stores and too much merchandise in the market. 2016 we saw the crisis of the luxury industry in Asia. You can find almost more luxury brand stores in Hong Kong than Dr. Watson or Seven Eleven convenience shops. As legendary fashion designer Vivienne Westwood says: 'Buy less, choose well, make it last.' Consumers have to learn and understand the role they play and the influence they have on the eco and social balance of the textile industry. They can stay away from impulse purchases from fast fashion retailers and better understand the concept of durability and lifecycle assessment. They can wash their garments less often and put less products to landfill. 95% of discarded clothing could be upcycled or recycled, but only a fraction does. But the industry must offer better solutions to do so and stimulate a higher return of post-consumer waste. Ideally, consumers vote more with their wallet and insist on products indicating fair fashion through well-known and accepted labels or brands.

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2. BROADER DEFINED AND UNIVERSALLY ACCEPTED STANDARDS:
It sounds maybe weird to fashion companies, but if we look, for example, at the consumer electronics market, we can say that none of the large milestones of the past 40 years have been achieved without universal standards. VHS, GSM, Bluetooth, WiFi, MP-3 or Android only succeeded once they have been globally accepted and supported by all relevant market players. Once consumers start to trust such standards and see their broad acceptance, they become a driver for purchasing. At the current early stage of fair fashion, I see too many labels or initiatives covering only a fraction of the fair fashion issue competing with each other around the attention of the consumer. More collaboration between the market participants will be needed.
But more than anything else, fair fashion products have to become cool to the socially conscious millennial consumers and by that become just the normal standard for fashion products, while the ones who will continue to produce unfair fashion will slowly get out of business.

Dont buy this Jacket“:„© Patagonia Inc.

”*WHAT WE ARE REALLY EXITED ABOUT IS TO SEE A NEW GENERATION OF MATERIAL COMPANIES ENTERING THE TEXTILE INDUSTRY.*”

FIVE YEARS AHEAD FROM NOW: WHAT WILL HAVE BEEN THE GROUNDBREAKING INNOVATIONS? WILL IT BE NEW PRODUCTS BASED ON SMART TEXTILES OR RATHER NEW APPROACHES FOR THE VALUE CHAIN SUCH AS SUSTAINABLE, AUTOMATED PROCESSES, FOR INSTANCE?

Definitely, we see more sustainable processes in place or in development. The entire supply chain is active here. Innovative dyeing concepts such as “Drydye” can lead to less consumption of water and color, and the denim industry for example is making progress offering more sustainable solutions. But all these initiatives represent improvements of the existing supply chain model.

What we are really exited about is to see a new generation of material companies entering the textile industry. The so-called biofabrication industry looks very promising and innovative technologies and production concepts could lead mid- to long-term to a significant step change. One of our clients, the Munich based start-up company AMSilk GmbH, introduced a bionic high-performance fiber called “Biosteel” a few months ago. It is made from synthetic spider silk, which has exceptional performance properties, while at the same time being 100% biodegradable. A first product has already been introduced together with their launch partner ADIDAS in a high-performance lightweight running shoe.

The fascinating potential of biofabricated materials lies not only in their very good sustainability properties, but more than that, these materials can increase or change the performance properties of the original material as well as their aesthetics. This will provide product designers and brands with a complete new level of creativity.

For more info on BRAIND visit H5 | 18 and check the portrait on page 90/91.