

All that for a drop of positivity

ILM Comment

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Deputy Editor Tom Hogarth discusses the recent New York Times article which criticised the Higg Index, and the realities of generating positive press for leather.

By now, you've probably read the New York Times (NYT) article, *How Fashion Giants Recast Plastic as Good for the Planet*, on how the Higg Material Sustainability Index (MSI), a tool to measure material sustainability set up by the Sustainable Apparel Coalition (SAC), unfairly ranks plastic-based materials over natural options such as leather, wool, silk and cotton etc. While the NYT article maintains a commendable level of balance, it does a fantastic job of laying out the facts about fossil fuel-derived materials and leather's position in the public perception.

In the article, climate reporter Hiroko Tabuchi outlines how and why synthetic materials are strongly favoured in the Higg MSI, and the response from representatives in leather-using industries and independent experts.

Fashion industry analyst, and vocal critic of the Higg MSI, Veronica Bates Kassatly is quoted in the article saying: "The index is justifying the choices fashion companies are making by portraying these synthetics as the most sustainable choice. They're saying: You can still shop till you drop, because everything is now so sustainably sourced."

In response to claims that the Higg MSI is unbalanced, its senior executives and members have repeatedly fallen back on the idea that they're just collecting data, and that the data will tell the story. A remarkably ignorant position in a time when every layperson is keenly aware of how easily data can be manipulated or skewed through its collection and presentation, especially around corporate greenwashing.

Tabuchi notes that polyester, for example, is rated in the Higg MSI as one of the world's most sustainable fabrics. In a time when we have revolutionary materials in production and leather, cotton and wool are more sustainable than they have ever been, it's frankly laughable to call an extruded plastic fibre the most sustainable option. Of course, this result is only achieved by using data on European polyester production provided by a plastics-industry group when the majority of the material is produced in Asia. The Higg MSI is also often accused by groups representing natural materials of not taking end-of-life into consideration and often being "opaque" around how it collects and presents the data.

Objectivity and transparency

It's no surprise, as Bates Kassatly points out, that some of the key brands driving the use of fossil fuel-derived materials are the big backers behind the Higg MSI and the Sustainable Apparel Coalition which operates it. It's no more reasonable to expect the Higg MSI to be impartial and

objective while backed by the likes of Nike, Asics, asos and Amazon than it is to expect state-run media to show the full and honest picture of a nation's news.

The problem is when a tool like the Higg MSI finds itself front and centre of an industry with easily digestible statistics. It will come to represent that industry with those statistics to the layperson and consumers will settle on those facts without digging deeper. The validity of the research and conclusions behind the index become irrelevant when consumers will take what they see and run with it – they can be expected to do little else.

For silk, its rating in the Higg MSI was drawn from a 2014 study of 100 silk farmers who rely on irrigation in a single state in India. The lead researcher from this study, Miguel F. Astudillo, told the NYT that the study was not representative of the global industry and was unaware it was being used by the index. "If they read the article and the results, they'd know it's a stretch to use it for assessing silk in general," he told Tabuchi.

However, the most significant problem here is not that the research behind the Higg MSI is faulty, or that there is an inherent bias from the companies that support the ratings, but that the ratings becoming a defacto validation of materials across a series of industries can, has and will irrevocably affect the perception of natural materials and synthetics.

This article is the result of campaigning from the industry, not least thanks to the hard work of the Leather and Hide Council of America (LHCA), which has been working for more than a year to get the story told. Leather's fight against negative public perception is one that takes an extreme amount of effort for the smallest tip of the scales. and when fast-fashion giants can wave a hand to drastically change the balance, we have a problem.

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