

Hick-Hack Uom the Higg-Index / Kirsten Reinhold - TextilWirtschaft 12/10/22

The dispute over the figures shows how big the industry's data problem is. Nature versus chemistry: Criticism of the Higg Index is especially moving in the first camp. Almost always, when it comes to misinformation about "sustainability", it is also about the Higg Index. Zalando has just won the first Greenwashing Award from the Norwegian Consumer Association. After H&M and Norwegian outdoor brand Norrøna, the Berlin-based online retailer is the third fashion retailer to be criticized for publishing data from these figures. And almost always the Norwegians are behind it, whose consumer organization diligently reprimands companies that advertise with the values.

But this is exactly what the initiator of the index, the Sustainable Apparel Coalition SAC, had warned. The CEO Amina Razvi emphasized several times that the Higg is not a certificate, but a self-assessment tool that clothing companies can use internally to identify environmental and social issues throughout their value chain.

"The index is not yet scheduled for publication – also because the SAC is currently still working on the system for verification of the data by independent experts," writes Higg user Vaude in the current sustainability report.

Meanwhile, the Norwegian Consumer Authority (NCA), which has warned H&M and Co, has announced that fashion companies will not be allowed to use data from the Higg Sustainability Index to support environmental claims for advertising purposes, as this is in violation of national law.

Apart from these legal issues, the debate shows once again how complex and difficult the interpretation, collection and use of sustainability data is. And that there are currently too few serious, objective figures for the industry. This means that an essential tool is missing, which in particular can consistently prevent unintentional greenwashing.

After the award ceremony from Zalando's headquarters, it said: "We are aware of the criticism of the Higg Index and we are working on long-term solutions to complex problems. The best possible outcome would be an industry-wide solution that addresses the criticism and serves as the basis for a more robust and comprehensive approach to providing data that can more accurately measure the environmental impact of clothing. "

But where does the hiccup around the Higg index come from? The idea was a good idea, ten years ago in the summer: How can sustainability be made as objectively measurable as possible? To that end, SAC, an industry-wide association of more than 250 companies and organizations committed to promoting social justice in the global value chain and reducing the environmental impact of products, wanted to introduce a toolbox. With the aim of enabling brands, retailers and institutions of all sizes to accurately measure and evaluate the performance of a company or product in terms of sustainability at every stage of their sustainability journey. The modular, web-based tool is intended to provide a holistic view.

There are three different tools – for the brand, the company and the product. The Brand Retail Module (BRM) therefore refers to the company and the brand itself. In the Facilities Environment Module (FEM), companies state how much water, energy and raw materials they consume and how much waste and emissions they cause.

Since 2016, there is also the Design and Development module, with which sustainable decisions can be made during the development process. The current criticism relates to the Materials Sustainability Index (MSI) for fibres and fabrics. Among other things, it is criticised that the evaluated data only take into account part of the production chain. Moreover, the environmental impact of individual products would not be specifically assessed, but average data on the effects of certain materials would be used.

In addition, the renewability of the raw materials used and the biodegradability of the end products are largely ignored. All this leads to sustainability claims about a product based on this index being misleading. According to experts, this greatly disrupts the sustainability benchmark of a product, especially in the field of natural textiles.

That is why the International Association of the Natural Textile Industry IVN speaks of a "certain greenwashing potential". The association sees it as "not holistic to measure sustainability only in terms of material flows".

The allegations are growing louder that SAC prefers fossil fuels over natural fibers like wool, cotton and leather, and is a proponent of recycled polyester, which many of the initiative members, such as H&M, use in their collections. For example, the online business portal Quartz found more than 10,000 well-reviewed items in a search in the Higg, which contained polyester or were made entirely of polyester. This is a thorn in the side of proponents of a polyester-free fashion industry.

Someone who has been working on this for a long time is Veronica Bates Kassatly, an independent analyst. In her nearly 30-page report "The Great Green Washing Machine," she devotes two chapters to the critique of the MSI tool. She focuses on the controversial Higg MSI, the Material Sustainability Index. "The biggest problem here is the underlying data. The MSI is not based on robust and representative LCAs, all of which are drafted with identical boundaries and methods," she summarizes her critique. Alleged effects, she said, were based "on a hodgepodge of different studies." Many of these life cycle assessments are outdated. "Most were not representative or should not represent global production at all, and in some cases — organic cotton is a typical example — the MSI provides information on water and CO2 savings that are not supported by the LCA itself." The general problem is that too little neutral testing and confirmation has been done. "Data just doesn't exist," Kassatly says. However, according to manufacturers such as Vaude and retailers such as Zalando, there is simply no alternative to the Higg index at the moment.

"A Life Cycle Assessment (LCA), because it would actually be necessary to obtain really meaningful data, is never complete. Boundaries are often not uniform and therefore not comparable," says Ina Budde. The circular expert has been working on the topic of data collection for the circular economy for ten years. A big problem: "Fashion waste is material without identity."

In order to prevent greenwashing and to make advertising transparent and well-founded, the EU rightly demands verifiable and product-specific sustainability characteristics.

One answer to the Higg hiccup and the restriction of LCAs could be the digital product passport Budde has developed with her Berlin-based company Circular.fashion. Standardized product data is stored directly on the garment Circularity.ID. And specifically for the production phases of all material components and finishes of a product and not related to average values. This makes it possible to check whether the criteria for a recyclable design are met and whether a product is therefore made from healthy, recycled or renewable materials. And whether it is recyclable and sustainable. This makes much more sense than an index based on generalized data and averages, Budde said.

However, work is also underway to improve the Higg Index. A few weeks ago, SAC CEO Amina Razvi met with Norwegian consumer lawyers "for a constructive discussion on the transparency program." This includes working with consumer protection authorities around the world to agree on key principles for a harmonised approach to environmental claims. In addition, Razvi has requested an independent external audit of the Higg-MSI methodology.