



New Rules of Fashion: “We Must Forget Everything That We Know about the Industry”

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Emerging Fashion Capitals, Sustainability, and Female Leadership: A Roundtable Discussion was presented in collaboration with the Hungarian Fashion & Design Agency at the Expo 2020 Dubai, in the Women’s Pavilion. Participants Zsófia Bata-Jakab, CEO of the Hungarian Fashion & Design Agency, Camille Boyer, co-founder & creative mind of Austrian Fashion Association, Daria Marusyk, former Head of Communications and Sustainability at Ukrainian Fashion Week and co-founder of the Be Sustainable! Fashion Summit besides Lama Jouni, founder and creative director of Lama Jouni and Emese Dobos as a moderator joined the discussion about the current development within technology, sustainability, regional and gender disruption in fashion. In the following, a short presentation of the event and its main approaches are presented.

Roots of Design – And Success

Historically, the fashion industry is dominated by four “fashion capitals”: New York, London, Milan, and Paris. Power and creativity have been concentrated around the “Big 4” since the second half of the 20th century, even if we have witnessed an intensified globalization not just in production but in consumption and the emergence – and proliferation – of numerous fashion weeks around the whole world. But are the Western European and American cities still the cornerstones in the contemporary fashion scene? This question was debated, and one of the conclusions was that “The Big Four” are there and playing an important role. It is a big question for a smaller country as to which direction we should choose. Communication-wise, it is important to have your own fashion week because fashion weeks are part of the country’s image making and you invite buyers, influencers, and the media to the country. There are a lot of tourists searching for experiences not just in built heritage but in creative sectors as well. Otherwise,

“from the point of view of sale, it is important for designers to be at the biggest events” – said Zsófia Bata-Jakab, CEO of the Hungarian Fashion & Design Agency, about their strategy, regarding what is better to help designers to get into the biggest fashion capitals or to channel an own event into the fashion weeks’ calendar.

Lama Jouni, founder and creative director of Lama Jouni, was born in Lebanon, educated in Paris, and with her brand she is based in Dubai. She acknowledged the role of Dubai in her brand’s development. She emphasized that:

Approximately four years ago, several initiatives stated to support young designers from Syria, Lebanon, and the Emirates. Dubai is all about growth and progress. [Being based in Dubai] Helped me a lot to reach out to an international audience. Dubai is a hub and invites people from all over the world. It makes it easier being located here, it is a very diverse city, and you can introduce your brand to people from all over the world.



Source: HFDA

Picture 1. *Participants of the event*

Thus, according to the participants, today’s fashion arena is still defined by the “Big 4”, but at the same time it is characterized by more diversity and openness towards fashion designers’ rich cultural backgrounds. According to Camille Boyer, co-founder and creative mind of the Austrian Fashion Association:

Traditional craftsmanship and heritage started to be shown in the work of Austrian designers a few years ago. It became even stronger during the pandemic, as people started to be more interested in regional design and locally produced goods. There are a lot of ways for designers how to be inspired by traditions: it can come from the fabrics for example. The

raw material loden was part of peasants' clothing: they used it to protect themselves from the cold weather. Now it is presented as a high-end piece. The folklore costume, tracht – which is similar across German-speaking countries –, became also revisited and newly contextualized by a lot of designers (...) We also have graphic design and styles like the Wiener Werkstätte artisan movement that was established at the beginning of the 20th century and was influential in Bauhaus and Art Nouveau. It keeps designers inspired today as well. Designers are repurposing leather pants, the Lederhosen, which is really strong. There are not just tangible goods, but an intangible, conceptual, intellectual approach to fashion. That is the case of Helmut Lang, and there are a lot of young designers who are questioning what ugliness and beauty is. They are the frontiers between art and fashion.

She also added that sustainability in our time is mandatory, and it is a natural desire for designers to know the heritage and contextualize it in a modern way.

Ingredients of International Success in Contemporary Fashion

According to Lama Jouni, fashion schools teach designers patternmaking but not how to run a business. Daria Marusyk, former head of communications and sustainability at Ukrainian Fashion Week and co-founder of Be Sustainable! Fashion Summit, emphasized that the actual context shaped by the pandemic, the global socio-economic insecurity, climate crisis, etc. puts fashion brands in front of new challenges:

I had to figure it out on my own how to make my brand relevant whatever happens in the world. Sustainability is very important. 2020 made things slow down and gave time to designers to reflect and reinvent their brands to be more sustainable. If you pay attention to what is going on in the world, you can get a global exposure. In this way, it does not matter where you are from. (...) We are in a state when economic and political situation in general, the social agenda in each country and on a global level effects the direct interest of people. Even if the political situation is not the best, the creative industry has a chance to showcase the creative DNA of a country through collections.

The fashion industry undeniably seems to have a regional interest from time to time. Japanese designers enjoyed the buzz during the 1970s in Paris, there was special attention given to post-Soviet aesthetics during the 2010s, and the industry currently turned its attention in the direction of Africa.

There was hype in fashion around the former Soviet Union states. It turned the spotlight on the situation in those countries in general and that interest can be used as a tool. But designers have to work together with different institutions whose aim is to promote them outside of the country. Let's be honest: marketing and PR are key. A hype around talent without any kind of support is an exception, not a rule. Every talent needs to be supported, and business support needs to be used in a good way. Every designer and brand must bring a new sense to society. Even local context can be understood globally. It must be meaningful.

– told the expert on how to sustain the fashion industry's interest in a certain region. According to her, Ukrainian fashion designers are quite popular on the international fashion scene, and the hype around the post-Soviet states is just one reason. "They are using the tools of PR in a good way. They are super-effective in influencer marketing, but this has been a long way for them. The Ukrainian Fashion Week also played its part in bringing [international] media to Ukraine. Connections are key in the fashion industry."

Zsófia Bata-Jakab also emphasized the role of support. The HFDA offers different levels of mentoring for fashion designers, from fresh students to well-established brands with a special focus on export. "Hungary has so many talents [showcasing, mentoring]. Acting separately is not easy. We believe that collective support is more effective. The Budapest Central European Fashion Week welcomes not just Hungarian designers but is open for the whole region. We have to share our efforts and options" – she claimed.

The Role of Women and Technology in Fashion

Turning to a different aspect within contemporary fashion and society, the participants shared their thoughts on the gender equality and the role of women within the fashion industry. According to several statistics and surveys, most of the customers of fashion are female. Most of the fashion workers are female, and even if there are more and more successful female fashion designers, most of the truly influential executive positions at the top of the industry are held by men. Lama Jouni agrees in that most of the upcoming designers are female, and she does not see any rivalry between them. "I genuinely believe that women now are stronger, and they are taking more chances. They are pushing each other. It is not a competition. We all want to see each other succeed. We hold the future and the industry." Camille Boyer reflected on that and raised the role of motherhood in this case. "In Austria, most of the women in positions don't have children. I am an exception. Austria is a conservative country; women are still supposed to stay

[at home] with their children, and they may work part-time when their children get bigger.” According to her, executive positions are connected to stressful work and long working hours – that is also a reason why men have them. “There is still a long way to go till equality and equal pay. We are going in the right direction, but we are still not there” – she continued. Daria Marusyk added that the situation in Ukraine is similar to and different from Austria at the same time. “The country has patriarchal family traditions. But women have children in their early 20s mostly, and after that, they can have a career later. But it is also seen as a good choice if you want to grow up within your family.”

Switching to different aspects around the latest issues and developments within fashion, the question as to “how technology is changing the fashion industry now” was raised. Lama Jouni immediately emphasized the role of social media:

It is a very important aspect of a brand. The right people help the brand grow. Most of our clients are acquired from social media. Most of our retailers reached out to us through our social media channels. During the pandemic, online presence helped the brands to stay alive. The virtual Premiere Vision helped us to find the right supplier for textiles. New technology helps to create sustainable fabrics. And COVID-19 pushed people to reach out to each other virtually.

Camille Boyer has also added that digital transformation is present and done at different levels and agreed with the designer that its role is important in a more sustainable fashion: “Prototyping and sampling fashion pieces and accessories help to reduce waste. There are a lot of ways how to use technology. But it has to be embedded in the whole supply chain, not just in communication. But while the old systems are working, it needs a lot of investment” – she added. Daria Marusyk also sees a huge opportunity in augmented reality collections. “It is about developing our digital, social avatars. My humble opinion is that within some time, half of the fashion industry will be transformed into the Metaverse. Early adopters can be seen now for digital fashion. Digital technology will bring a more sustainable approach to the fashion industry. We need to buy less [physical products]” – she claimed.

Then Zsófia Bata-Jakab pointed out the importance of physical reality besides the virtual world. “As far as I have experienced, physical context is still very important for newcomer designers. It is very hard to see and judge their products for buyers without a real touch. I think business-to-consumers is easier through the Internet, but business-to-business is more difficult online” – she emphasized. She also shared that the pandemic was a critical moment for Hungarian, young designers, as they did not really have a proper web shop, which is the basis of online sales. “We were searching for new options, and we created the Budapest Select Store, with 70

designers. It is not enough to have a web shop. We have also created the alternative reality of the Budapest Select Store where people had the opportunity to check the collection and the latest fashion shows of the designers virtually” – told Zsófia, who also thinks that Metaverse will be a “thing” and a new alternative to us.

Towards Greener Paths?

According to Daria Marusyk, transferring change in the fashion industry lies in the hands of small and medium-sized fashion brands.

I heard a quote that we have to forget everything what we know about the industry. It should be a blank page. We are overproducing, and the customers are overconsuming. I do not think that it will change within 5, or even 15 years’ time. Local designers produce little, for financial reasons or even with a conscious decision, and involve craftsmen and produce locally. They mostly sell directly to clients, and in this way they can promote the idea of sustainability. Sometimes customers have to wait a little bit for a product. We do not wait for anything nowadays. And there is also a new generation of customers who need different things.

Zsófia Bata-Jakab also believes that locality plays a crucial part in sustainability.

It is also our purpose to bring the information to local consumers that they really have an alternative to fast-fashion brands, and they can choose from local designers. But the media and magazines are playing a big part in spreading the news. We have seen that the pandemic changed customers’ attitudes in a good way: people now are searching for local foods and local products. They are searching for more information about what they are buying and try to consciously choose the local options. We know that people are willing to pay for a product if it is made locally and ethically. It is a good start, and the whole industry should follow that approach.

The event *Emerging Fashion Capitals, Sustainability, and Female Leadership: A Roundtable Discussion* thus showed that designers of the contemporary fashion scene around the world have different cultural backgrounds, heritage in fashion, and economic opportunities, which all affect the success of their connection to the mainstream of fashion world. They are also facing similar challenges regarding sustainability, digitalization, and female empowerment. That is why the participants agreed that sharing their efforts, knowledge, and resources is the only way towards the future of fashion design.