PVH and Bestseller team up with Ecovative to explore fashion potential of mushrooms

By Olivier Guyot - 17 December 2021

Over the last few months, the fashion industry has witnessed the development of sneakers made using material derived from mushrooms. Adidas collaborated with California-based Bolt Threads to present a version of the Stan Smith manufactured in this way at the start of the year, while Stella McCartney called on the same partner in order to create apparel pieces using this material, which recreates the appearance of leather.

These initiatives could have just been a nod from the fashion industry towards an emerging technology, but mushrooms might well establish themselves as an important part of the sector over the next few years. Indeed, under the umbrella of sustainable innovation platform Fashion For Good, two other fashion giants – PVH, the New York-based parent company of Calvin Klein and Tommy Hilfiger, and Denmark's Bestseller – have just announced that they have created a cooperative in partnership with Ecovative, an American company specialized in the development of innovative mushroom-based materials, in order to accelerate the implementation of suitable applications of these materials in the fashion market.

An alternative to both leather and petroleum-derived substitutes, materials made using bio-sourced mycelium – the root structure of mushrooms – must be refined in order to be used on an industrial scale in the fashion sector. One of the objectives of the cooperative is therefore to facilitate collaboration between the specialist engineers of Ecovative, which began working with mushrooms in 2007, and designers and product specialists from brands. In this way, big conglomerates seem to be increasingly willing to adopt an approach shaped by the idea of "coopetition," through which competitors collaborate to address major challenges facing the sector in order to find solutions that each company can then develop and use to their own ends.

"At PVH we are excited to explore innovations that reduce the environmental impact of our products," said Rebecca England, VP of innovation at PVH Europe. "Mycelium provides us with an opportunity to respond to
growing consumer interest in lower impact products while supporting quality and design that meet the needs and expectations of our consumers – in this case, made with 100 percent bio-based resources. We look forward to testing and learning alongside our partners to create scalable, sustainable solutions."

Faced with the expectations of certain consumers in relation to animal welfare, the necessity to reduce the use of petroleum-based products and the rising price of materials such as cotton, brands are doubling down on their efforts to research alternatives for their historical sourcing methods. If these efforts can also lead to the adoption of a more responsible and sustainable approach, investment in this kind of research and material production appears all the more relevant.

By teaming up with Ecovative, which unveiled its Forager Hides material for the fashion industry in March, PVH and Bestseller are hoping to be able to develop shoes, accessories such as belts or small leather goods, and apparel with this material, which could be used in place of leather and pleather.

"Mycelium shows great potential in the fashion innovation sphere which extends far beyond our own industry. We are keen on diving into the product development phase and really understanding the aesthetics and actual performance of Ecovative’s materials in the lab," commented Anders Schorling Overgård, sustainable materials engineer at Bestseller. "This pilot enables us to gain more insight into mycelium as a leather alternative, which ultimately is both biodegradable and fully bio-based."

The rise of mycelium leather reflects a wider race occurring in this field. With companies exploring the potential of pineapples, apples, grapes and other plants, initiatives are multiplying and diversifying. The challenge for brands is to support the industrialization of these processes so that they can become viable on a large scale – all while finding the material that can bring them the best balance between quality and profitability, of course.

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