Do Animal Fur Coats Symbolize Status or Stigma?: Examining the Effect of Perceived Stigma and the Label of “Faux Fur”

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Background and Research Purpose: Garments made from animal fur have historically served as a status symbol because of their high price tag (O’Cass & Frost, 2002). Recently, however, the status-signaling value of fur garments has been challenged by animal rights organizations like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). By highlighting the malpractices in the fur farming industry, PETA has heavily stigmatized the consumption of fur fashion products. The effect of animal rights activism may spill over to its synthetic alternatives, often referred to as faux fur, because of their genuine appearance. To avoid being misidentified as real fur, the brand Stella McCartney attaches a label that says “Fur-Free-Fur” to its real-looking synthetic fur products. Despite such shifts in the fur apparel market and its considerable size (\$1.57 billion), there is scant research on the effect of the changing consumer perception of fur garments on their purchase decisions.

Built on stigma theory, through a survey and an experiment, this study examines whether perceived stigma has changed the status-signaling value of fur coats. Specifically, it investigates the relationship between the need for status and purchase intention toward real animal fur coats. Further, it tests whether the industry practice of affixing a “faux fur” label to real-looking faux fur coats can increase the purchase intention toward the coats.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development: Individuals with high need for status tend to seek status symbols that can signify their membership to high social class (Packard, 1959). Thus, individuals with high need for status were expected to have higher purchase intention toward animal fur coats. The meaning of status symbol, however, is subject to change because what qualifies as a status symbol is determined by society, which is in flux (Eknayan, 2006). A prime example is corpulence, which once symbolized affluence in ancient societies where food shortage persisted. It is now recognized as a serious public health problem (Visscher & Seidell, 2001) and stigmatized as a symbol of negative traits like laziness (Puhl & Heuer, 2010). Based on this notion of the fluid nature of status symbols, it was reasoned that cultural shifts such as growing anti-fur consumption movements would tarnish the value of fur garments by stigmatizing them. Stigma is an “attribute that is deeply discrediting” (Goffman, 1963, p. 3). It associates individuals with a host of negative characteristics, all of which often culminate in negative social consequences like devaluation and social rejection (Link et al., 1997). This indicates that there is a high social risk of being stigmatized. As high social risk decreases the purchase intention (Chang & Chen, 2008), consumers who perceive stigma around wearing fur are expected to have less desire for animal fur coats. Thus,

H1. There will be a positive relationship between the need for status and purchase intention toward fur coats.

H2. Perceived stigma will moderate the relationship between the need for status and purchase intention such that the purchase intention will be lower for consumers with higher perceived stigma.

Even though real-looking faux fur coats are, in fact, fake, they can be misidentified as genuine, which makes the wearer the target of stigmatization. The anticipation of this stigmatization can erode purchase intention. However, consumers may think that a conspicuous “Faux Fur” label can reduce the likelihood of misidentification and be more willing to buy a real-looking faux fur coat with that label. The label would play a critical role in the buying decision only for those who think that wearing fur is highly stigmatized. Those who do not think that wearing fur is highly stigmatized will not worry about the misidentification as much, since they would believe that the likelihood of facing negative consequences is low. Consequently, they would not find the label reassuring, unlike those with high perceived stigma. Therefore,

H3. Explicit faux fur labeling will increase purchase intention toward real-looking faux fur coats.

H4. Perceived stigma will moderate the relationship between explicit faux fur labeling and purchase intention such that the purchase intention will be higher for consumers with higher perceived stigma.

Methods: The survey and the experiment were distributed online, and 200 females aged 18 and above recruited on MTurk participated. All measurements were adapted from previous studies. The survey measured need for status, perceived stigma, and purchase intention toward animal fur coats, and individual stigmatization. The experiment had a one-way between-subjects design with two conditions: explicit labeling and no explicit labeling. Participants were presented with a coat either with a label or without a label. Then they reported their perceived stigma, purchase intention toward the presented coat, and belief about whether the coat will be perceived as fake by others. The stimuli were pre-tested. Among 20 fur coat images taken from a luxury e-tailer, two fur coats perceived to look most genuine (with ratings of 6.42 and 6.26 out of 7, respectively) were selected. With Adobe Photoshop, the two images were photoshopped to affix a label to the right cuff of each coat. A life-size image of the label that said “Faux Fur” was also created. Cronbach’s alpha values of the scales used in this study ranged from .92 to .97; thus, all were deemed reliable.

Results: Need for status significantly and positively predicted purchase intention toward real animal fur coats, controlling for individual stigmatization and income ($\beta = .25, p < .001$). The moderation effect of perceived stigma was also significant ($\beta = -.56, p < .05$). Thus, both H1 and H2 were supported. The manipulation was effective as the coats with the label ($M = 4.77, SD = 1.43$) were believed to appear more fake to others than the coats without the label ($M = 3.60, SD = 1.48$). There was no significant difference ($\beta = .07, p = .30$) in purchase intention between participants presented with the coat with the label ($M = 2.80, SD = 1.82$) and those without the

label ($M = 2.54$, $SD = 1.71$). Further, no significant moderation effect of perceived stigma was shown ($\beta = -.30$, $p = .26$). Thus, both H3 and H4 were not supported.

Discussion and Implication: The findings of the survey are consistent with the notion that status symbol is a social construct and that its meaning can change in response to social and cultural shifts such as growing animal rights activism. The finding that perceived stigma weakened the desire for animal fur coats suggests that the assumption about fake alternatives—the more a fake alternative looks genuine, the better—may not hold true for faux fur coats. Therefore, in designing faux fur coats, fashion brands may want to consider creating in-demand designs. One avenue is to design products unique in silhouettes, colors, and patterns.

The non-significant results of the experiment can be explained by the confounding effects of another variable that can also influence the perceived social risk, that is, consumption context. For example, while it was reasoned that high perceived stigma would lead to high perceived social risk, the perceived risk could have actually been low if the consumption context involved family or close friends because it is easy to prevent stigmatization by verbally disclosing that the coat is not real. Therefore, in future studies, the consumption context (i.e., when the fur coat will be worn) needs to be incorporated. An alternative explanation for the non-significant results is that participants may have thought the label was not conspicuous enough to ensure accurate identification, despite the significant group difference in the belief about whether the coat would look fake to others. The label may have failed to exceed the requisite threshold of mitigating the fear of misidentification, to a degree that would have instilled confidence in participants that the coat would not be misidentified.

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