



## Real Fur or Fake Fur? Animal Fur-Free Luxury Brands, Cognitive Dissonance, and Environmentally-Conscious Millennial Consumer Response

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*Background:* The fur trade is a lucrative business as indicated by its \$3.57 billion of global sales in mink pelts and another \$1.17 million from the fox pelts (Oaten, 2016). With 70% of designer fashion collections using fur in 2016 (Oaten, 2016), the fashion industry has heavily supported the fur industry. However with wild animals being treated inhumanely by being either trapped in the wild or farmed in cages, there has been a dramatic shift in the past years with luxury brands such as Michael Kors and Gucci taking a stance to become animal fur-free by banning animal fur products (Fisher, 2017; Shannon, 2017). As a result, designers have started to use faux fur to produce high-end fur-like designs in their collections (Fisher, 2017). Yet, faux fur lacks sustainable qualities and is non-biodegradable, made from plastics and petroleum that are destructive to the environment (Oaten, 2017; Ramchandani & Coste-Maniere, 2017). This has sparked a debate on whether animal or faux fur is more environmentally-friendly? Given the pitfalls for both positions, i.e., cruelty to animals and non-biodegradable faux furs, empirical research is critically needed to investigate the current acceptability of fashion fur trends among environmentally-conscious millennial consumers. To address a research gap in this area, the purpose of this study is to examine: a) the effects of the consumer's and luxury brand's fur stance, fur jacket use case (hedonic vs. utilitarian) on consumer dissonance; and b) the influence of consumer dissonance on luxury brand attitude and purchase intentions.

*Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses:* Festinger's (1957) Cognitive Dissonance Theory (CDT) emphasizes that individuals try to seek consistency in their beliefs. If an inconsistency (dissonance) occurs, individuals subsequently change their beliefs to avoid conflict. For instance, Lee (2014) states that pre-exposure to anti-animal fur debates and animal rights issues contribute to the consumer's predisposition to have less conflict towards faux fur compared to animal fur. Thus, this negative predisposition towards animal fur should create more internal conflict known as dissonance in consumers' minds making it hard to choose animal fur over other alternatives. In particular, environmentally conscious consumers may experience greater dissonance if the brand offers animal fur as compared to faux fur apparel products. Therefore, a luxury brand's position against the use of animal fur may reduce consumers' dissonance, which in turn may increase their brand attitudes and purchase intentions. Based on these proposals drawn from CDT, the present study tests the following hypotheses: *H1a*. Consumers with a pro-faux fur stance experience less dissonance compared to consumers with pro-animal fur stance; *H1b*. Consumers with neither an animal fur nor faux fur stance experience less dissonance compared to consumers with pro-animal or pro-faux fur stance; *H2*. Luxury brands with pro-animal fur

stance increase dissonance compared to luxury brands with pro-faux fur stance; *H3*. Hedonic fur apparel products increase dissonance compared to utilitarian fur apparel products; *H4*. Dissonance negatively influences brand attitudes, *H5*. Dissonance negatively influences purchase intentions.

*Method:* Hypotheses were tested through a 3 (Consumer Stance: Pro-animal fur/Pro-faux fur/Neither) x 2 (Brand Stance: Pro-animal fur/Pro-faux fur) x 2 (Use case: Hedonic/Utilitarian) quasi-experimental design with consumer stance, luxury brand fur stance and use case as between-subjects factors. Luxury brand fur stance and use case were manipulated through a narrative description depicting either a brand that uses animal fur or faux fur for a use case scenario of purchasing a jacket for either utilitarian (cold weather) or hedonic (fashion) reasons. An Internet experiment was conducted using Qualtrics with a nationwide sample of 300 environmentally-conscious Millennial consumers, who advocate for sustainable product purchasing. The sample was recruited through an online panel operated by market research company Amazon Mechanical Turk. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four manipulated conditions (pro-animal fur brand + hedonic jacket, pro-animal fur brand + utilitarian jacket, pro-faux fur brand + hedonic jacket, pro-faux fur brand + utilitarian jacket). Pre-existing reliable scales measuring cognitive dissonance (DV), purchase intentions (DV), brand attitudes (DV), and brand stance and use case attention (manipulation check) appeared after the manipulated narrative (Dodds et al., 1991; Spears and Singh, 2004; Sweeney, Hausknecht, & Soutar, 2000). All measures were rated on 5-point Likert scales.

*Results:* All scaled measures demonstrated adequate reliability and were confirmed to be unidimensional, except for dissonance which comprised of two factors: emotional and wisdom of purchase subscales of the Cognitive Dissonance after Purchase Multidimensional Scale (Sweeney, Hausknecht, & Soutar, 2000). Chi-square tests revealed that brand stance and use case manipulations were successful [ $X^2(1, N = 280) = 135.5, p < .001$ ;  $X^2(1, N = 280) = 129.12, p < .001$ , respectively]. *H1-H3* were tested through MANOVA with consumers' and brand's fur stance, and use case as fixed factors and emotional dissonance and wisdom of purchase dissonance as dependent variables. Consumer fur stance had a significant main effect on emotional dissonance [Wilk's  $\lambda = .96, F(2/273) = 5.51, p < .01$ ] but not on wisdom of purchase dissonance ( $p > .05$ ); with pro-faux fur stance consumers experiencing less emotional dissonance than consumers with a pro-animal fur stance [ $M_{FauxFur} = 2.5; M_{AnimalFur} = 3.1, SE = .17, MD = .57, p < .01$ ]; thus supporting *H1a*. Pairwise comparison revealed no significant differences between the 'neither' consumer stance and pro-faux fur stance [ $M_{FauxFur} = 2.5; M_{Neither} = 2.6, SE = .15, MD = .12, p > .05$ ]; hence, *H1b* was rejected. Similarly, brand fur stance had a significant main effect on emotional dissonance [Wilk's  $\lambda = .96, F(1/273) = 53.35, p < .001$ ] and wisdom of purchase dissonance [ $F(1/273) = 28.63, p < .001$ ]. Luxury brands with a pro-animal fur stance increase consumers' emotional dissonance [ $M_{FauxFur} = 2.2; M_{AnimalFur} = 3.2, SE = .14, MD = 1.02, p < .001$ ] and wisdom of purchase dissonance [ $M_{FauxFur} = 3.0; M_{AnimalFur} = 3.8, SE = .15, MD = .78, p < .001$ ] as compared to luxury brands with a faux fur stance. Hence, *H2* was supported. Further, significant main effects of use case on emotional dissonance [Wilk's  $\lambda = 1.0, F(1/273) = .02, p > .05$ ] and wisdom of purchase dissonance were not found [ $F(1/273) = .63, p >$

.05]; rejecting  $H3$ . Results of multiple linear regression to test  $H4$  and  $H5$  revealed that emotional and wisdom of purchase dissonance negatively influences brand attitudes [ $F(2/282) = 75.00, p < .001, R^2 = .59$ ] as well as purchase intentions [ $F(2/282) = 35.1, p < .001, R^2 = .45$ ]; hence, supporting  $H4$  and  $H5$ .

*Conclusions and Implications:* Findings of this study exhibit that consumers with a pro-faux fur stance or neither stance have less emotional dissonance than those with a pro-animal fur stance. Further, luxury brands with a pro-animal fur stance create more dissonance than those with a pro-faux fur stance, which subsequently negatively impacts consumers' brand attitudes and purchase intentions. Thus, luxury brands with a pro-faux fur stance create less conflict in consumers' minds than those with a pro-animal stance regardless of the product's hedonic or utilitarian purpose. Therefore, luxury brands that aim to incorporate sustainability into their business strategy may benefit offering faux fur alternatives in their product assortments, particularly to environmentally-conscious millennial consumers. Additionally, luxury brands that push sustainability initiatives could benefit by promoting their ethical and sustainable manufacturing practices to further trigger the snowball effect, which motivates other brands to go animal-fur free.

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