



The Importance of Gatekeepers in Impacting Real Change

How a social movement and an influential magazine successfully challenged the morally problematic use of fur in fashion.

Luxury fashion houses have long considered their use of fur in runway collections as an expression of "artistic freedom", aesthetic autonomy and refined craftsmanship. High-end designers believed their creativity knew, and should know, no limits.

For years, designers dismissed the anti-fur movement and growing ethical backlash. Some, like French couturier Jean Paul Gaultier, unashamedly defended the use of fur. After protesters targeted his Fall 2009 fashion show, Gaultier declared, "Frankly I don't give a damn. I will continue to do fur, I love doing fur."

It stayed that way until ten years ago, when we started to see a significant decrease in the use of fur by high-end fashion houses. While luxury houses are moving away from the material, it is worth noting that global consumption and sales have plateaued. This is because fur is still being used by mass market fashion brands.

However, anti-fur activism did not single-handedly force high-end producers to quit fur. In a study on the use of **contested practices in creative industries**, our findings suggest that it took an influential gatekeeper – in this case global fashion magazine *Vogue* – to change its perception and portrayal of fur before designers followed suit.

We expected luxury houses to continue to defend the status quo and resist external pressure and threats to their perceived authenticity, creativity and artistic vision. Instead, we observed a clear response when *Vogue*, which had positioned fur as an expression of luxury and craft emblematic of fashion for decades, acknowledged moral concerns surrounding the use of fur in fashion.

Forcing fur off the runway

In our study published in *Organization Science*, we examined the use of fur in runway shows from Spring 2000 to Fall 2018 in the major fashion capitals of Paris, Milan, London and New York. We determined whether a fashion house used fur in each collection based on *Vogue's* runway reports. Our data set includes 670 fashion houses with at least two fashion shows in this period, with a focus on women's ready-to-wear collections.

We then analysed the tone and commentary related to the aesthetics and ethics of fur in these reports over time. We based our analysis on *Vogue* as it is arguably the most important publication in the fashion world and the only one that is truly global. The magazine's runway reviews not only describe the collections, but provide opinions and critiques.

From around 2009, we found an increase in

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references to moral and social concerns surrounding the use of fur, with a marked increase in 2014. Around the same time, we also noticed a fairly steady decline in the use of fur in runway collections, after a peak in 2011. These findings suggest that *Vogue's* evolving view of fur had a direct influence on fashion designers' decisions.

In the world of fashion, *Vogue* has a unique position and influence as both an insider and an outsider. Its editors are well connected with industry leaders and are adept at translating the arcane world of fashion into something more palatable for the wider public. For this reason, fashion houses only began to respond to external pressures when these voices were amplified by such a powerful publication.

In addition, we collected data on anti-fur events targeting fashion houses as reported in newspapers in France, Italy, the UK and the US – the four countries where the fashion capitals are located. Interestingly, *Vogue's* commentary around fur was not strongly connected to anti-fur events, suggesting that the magazine did not simply reflect these movements, but was a distinct factor that influenced fashion houses.

This observation does not undermine the role of the anti-fur activists. We found that specific forms of activism, such as advertising campaigns and legal manoeuvres, were most effective in helping steer the conversation. The anti-fur movement has been successfully changing the discourse for decades, which in turn helped *Vogue* change its tune.

The right side of change

We are seeing similar trends in other big social movements like climate change. As activists begin to change the way people think, there is initially a lot of scepticism. But when key stakeholders eventually come around to the idea, the whole system changes.

It is clear from the example of the use of fur in fashion that creative industries and companies in general need to address external challenges before they are forced into uncomfortable positions. They need to recognise that social movements emerge for a reason and be aware of what is going on around them. Firms should not be waiting for gatekeepers, or other industry experts, to pile on the pressure before they take action.

By identifying and working with gatekeepers, industry leaders can keep their finger on the pulse and understand social movements before they become the target of these movements. With this understanding, they can decide how to respond or work with activists instead of resisting them. On the other hand, social movements that seek to

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accelerate social change may need to approach gatekeepers before targeting producers.

Responding to social movements is an opportunity to set an example. It took luxury fashion houses far too long to even consider quitting fur. And, for an industry historically obsessed with pushing boundaries, it could be argued that any designer still using fur in the 21st century is not inventing anything new at all. The message is clear: creative industries need to adapt to changing societal values, or risk being forced to change.

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