ۆ **Fashion and Textiles**

Do fur coats symbolize status or stigma? Examining the effect of perceived stigma on female consumers' purchase intentions toward fur coats

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Abstract

Animal fur garments have historically served as a status symbol. However, the fur fashion market has recently undergone two noteworthy transformations. Firstly, the anti-fur consumption movements have heavily stigmatized wearing fur for fashion. Secondly, due to technological advancements, fake alternatives made from synthetic fibers, referred to as faux fur, can be now made to look authentic. Through a survey, this study examined the effects of growing stigma around wearing fur on consumer behaviors. It investigated the moderating effects of perceived stigma on the relationship between the need for status and purchase intentions toward genuine fur coats as well as faux fur coats that look real. Two-hundred and twenty usable data were collected from 353 female participants recruited from an online panel. Results revealed that status-seeking consumers had higher purchase intentions toward both genuine fur coats and faux fur alternatives that look real. The moderating effects of perceived stigma were found only for genuine fur coats, indicating that perceived stigma can hurt the demand for genuine fur coats, but not necessarily for faux fur coats that look real. By incorporating stigma theory, this study goes beyond previous focus on the determinants of status consumption by demonstrating the transformation of a status symbol through perceived stigma's effects on consumer purchasing decisions.

Keywords: Stigma, Status symbol, Faux fur, Animal fur garments

Introduction

Clothing made from scarce thus expensive materials, such as animal fur, has historically served as a status symbol, sought after by those who seek to signal their membership to a high social class through a public display (O'Cass and Frost 2002). By the 1970s, however, the status-signaling value of fur garments was challenged by animal rights organizations like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). According to PETA, animals farmed for their pelts are cramped in small, poorly maintained cages and suffer tremendously, only to be brutally killed for their pelts (PETA, n.d.a). PETA's campaigns include uncensored pictures and video clips that document animal cruelty (PETA,

n.d.b). By highlighting the malpractices in the fur farming industry, PETA has branded fur consumption as unethical, heavily stigmatizing those who patronize the fur farming industry by consuming fur fashion products.

In response to these developments, a number of luxury fashion brands stopped using animal fur for their collections (O'Connor 2018). The activism has prompted actions from not only fashion brands but also policy makers. In the state of California, some local governments banned the sale of animal fur products (Friedman 2019). These anti-fur movements have attracted substantial media coverage (PETAUK, n.d.). Based on prior findings that showed the media portrayal's influence on individuals' perception of public opinions, we hypothesize that the heavy media coverage has led people to think that the society highly stigmatizes wearing animal fur (Gunther 1998). This perceived stigma around wearing fur is defined as the extent to which individuals believe that most people in the community devalue or socially reject a person who wears genuine fur (Link 1987; Wang et al. 2018). We hypothesize that the perceived stigma around wearing fur undermines the historically demonstrated status-signaling value of fur garments. We base our rationale for the negative effects of perceived stigma on stigma theory which posits that stigma results in negative social consequences (Goffman 1963), as well as the conceptualization of status symbols that requires social desirability as a prerequisite (Blumberg 1974). We focus on an individual consumer trait previously identified as a significant determinant of status consumption: Need for status, defined as a strong desire for social recognition and admiration from others (Eastman et al. 2018). For status-seeking consumers with high perceived stigma, we reason that the anticipation of negative social consequences would undermine the social desirability of products, which is the driver of status consumption (Han et al. 2010). Thus, we identify perceived stigma as a variable that moderates consumer demands for genuine fur garments.

The effect of anti-fur movements may extend beyond real animal fur, spilling over to its synthetic alternatives made from synthetic fibers such as polyesters, often referred to as faux fur (Magsaysay 2011). These faux alternatives are growing in popularity. In the U.S., between 2018 and 2019, the number of faux-fur fashion products grew 24%, with the outerwear category showing a growth rate of 22% (Larson 2019). In line with the growing demand, fashion brands that specialize in faux fur products such as Shrimps (2013) and House of Fluff (2017) have sprung up. Although faux fur was initially considered an inferior alternative, due to technological advancements, it can be now made to look like genuine fur. The resemblance is so striking that it is difficult to detect when animal fur products are mislabeled as faux fur (Creswell 2013). For example, a number of major retailers such as Neiman Marcus and Nordstrom were accused of selling genuine fur products mislabeled as synthetic (O'Connor 2017). Because their visual resemblance to genuine products allow the faux alternatives to be perceived as genuine, we expect consumers to treat them as a status product akin to genuine fur products (Wilcox et al. 2009). Simultaneously, we expect the high resemblance to increase the possibility of being mistaken as real, potentially subjecting the wearer to stigmatization.

The stigmatizing effects of the anti-fur consumption movements are supported by the notion that status symbols are socially constructed and that societal changes can alter their meaning (Eknoyan 2006). Yet, there is scant research on the transformation process (change in the value of status symbols) and its effects on consumer purchase

decisions. Previous studies have been limited to identifying the determinants of status consumption, such as socio-economic status, (e.g., Han et al. 2010) or mediators and moderators, such as culture (e.g., Eastman et al. 2018). In addition, prior research on whether the status-signaling value can be conferred to inauthentic alternatives is limited to branded luxury products whose status-signaling value is conveyed primarily through brand logos (e.g., Wilcox et al. 2009), as opposed to raw materials, such as animal fur. Worth $145 million dollars in the U.S. alone, the size of fur apparel market is considerable (U.S. Census Bureau 2019). The lack of insights into the effects of cultural and market shifts on consumer behaviors is problematic, given the importance of determining consumer behavioral intentions in developing marketing strategies, particularly for controversial products (Xu et al. 2004).

The goal of this study is twofold. The first is examining how the status-seeking tendency affects the purchase intentions toward fur coats (both genuine and faux alternatives that look real). The second is testing the moderating effects of perceived stigma on the purchase intentions toward the two types of fur coats. Based on prior research on status consumption, we predict status-seeking consumers to have higher purchase intentions toward genuine fur coats (Bian and Forsythe 2012). Based on prior findings that consumers imbue a status-signaling value to counterfeit status products, such as luxury counterfeits (Wilcox et al. 2009), we predict that status-seeking consumers will likewise treat faux fur coats that look real as status products and thus display higher purchase intentions. Based on stigma theory, we predict that consumers with high perceived stigma will have lower purchase intentions toward genuine coats as well as faux alternatives that look real because both have a salient product attribute (i.e., fur) associated with a stigma. We identify perceived stigma as a potential mechanism of status symbols' transformation, and offer managerial implications for fashion brands.

Theoretical background and hypotheses

Animal fur coats as a status symbol

Status symbols have a signaling value that elicits preferential treatments from the perceivers (Goffman 1951; Nelissen and Meijers 2011). Status symbols must satisfy two conditions: they must be both socially desirable and scarce (Blumberg 1974). Something that is scarce yet not desirable cannot be a status symbol because what is undesirable is antithetical to what status represents. Something that is highly desirable but not scarce also cannot be a status symbol because what is plentiful does not have to be sought after. Because the precondition of status symbols is other people's recognition, status products are typically luxury goods which fall under highly conspicuous product categories, such as cars, clothing, and jewelry (Charles et al. 2009). Indeed, status and conspicuousness are two of the most salient aspects of luxury goods (Vigneron and Johnson 1999, 2004). As such, for its scarcity and high price tag, clothing made with animal fur has been deemed a luxury item and served as a status symbol throughout history (Emberley 1997; Summers et al. 2006).

Need for status and animal fur coats

Need for status refers to a strong desire to signal membership to a high social class (Eastman et al. 1999). Consistent with the human tendency to choose particular products to

communicate desired identities (Belk 1988), status-seeking individuals have a tendency to "surround themselves with visible evidence of the superior rank" (Packard 1959, p. 7). Prior studies showed that if individuals believed that luxury brands help communicate their desired self-identity and social-status, they had higher purchase intention toward luxury brands (Bian and Forsythe 2012; Park et al. 2008). Furthermore, they tend to seek luxury products with prominent brand logos because the conspicuousness ensures that others recognize the brand and consequently make desired inferences about them (Han et al. 2010). That is, individuals with a higher need for status have higher purchase intention toward luxury goods because of their symbolic value (Chan et al. 2015; Eastman et al. 2018). Following this logic, we expect the status-signaling value of animal fur coats to elicit a high demand from status-seeking consumers. Thus,

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

Status-seeking individuals also prize luxury counterfeits because their visual resemblance and prominent brand logos help maintain the semblance of belonging to a high social class (Hussain et al. 2017). Previous studies showed that consumers were more likely to purchase luxury counterfeits if the status-signaling value was the primary source of their positive attitudes toward luxury brands (Wilcox et al. 2009). A meta-analysis of studies on the determinants of purchase intentions toward luxury counterfeits showed that the status-seeking tendency increased not only the positive attitudes but also actual shopping behaviors related to counterfeit products (Eisend et al. 2017). As such, we expect status-seeking individuals to have higher purchase intentions toward synthetic alternatives of genuine fur coats as long as they look real enough to be perceived as genuine by others. Therefore,

H2   There will be a positive relationship between the need for status and the purchase intention toward faux fur coats that look real.

Stigma theory

Stigmatization occurs when an individual displays an attribute or behavior that is devalued or perceived negatively in a particular social context (Crocker et al. 1998; Jones 1984). Stigmatization includes both a cognitive and a behavioral process where the stigmatizer use labels and negative associations to mark the stigmatized (cognitive) and socially reject them (behavioral) (Link et al. 1997). Prior research has shown that being stigmatized has negative social consequences in the forms of social devaluation, rejection, and discrimination (e.g., Link et al. 1999). This was demonstrated in a wide range of consumer settings, such as the negative perceptions regarding smokers (Graham 2012), discount coupon users (Argo and Main 2008), plus size consumers (Lee and Hodges 2019), and Islamic veiling (Sandikci and Ger 2010).

One defining characteristic of stigma is that it is socially constructed. Stigma arises from social interactions and varies across time and cultures. Through past life experiences and an exposure to the mainstream culture, virtually all members of a culture

develop a shared awareness and understanding of which attributes are stigmatized and what the consequences are for the stigmatized (Crocker et al. 1998). Therefore, status symbol is not a static concept because what is considered a status symbol is determined by the society, which is constantly in flux (Eknoyan 2006). What was once considered a status symbol can lose its title and what was once considered ordinary can gain the title. An example is Islamic veiling in Turkey where the stigmatized practice transformed into a fashionable consumption choice for many, as a result of an increasing power of the Islamist celebrities and an emergent hybrid of Islamic and secular/Western aesthetics (Sandikci and Ger 2010). Similarly, we hypothesize that the shifting cultural attitudes toward wearing fur have transformed the once celebrated consumption choice into a socially deviant behavior, heightening consumers' perceived stigma around wearing fur.

Moderating role of perceived stigma

As stigma accompanies negative social consequences, antithetical to the notion of status (Veblen 1899), we expect stigma around wearing fur to undermine the appeal of animal fur coats, particularly for status-seeking individuals. Stigmatization has made wearing fur a high-stake decision because clothing is an identity-relevant domain where most people express their identity and infer identity about others. People indeed make conscious consumption choices to avoid sending undesired identity signals to others. For example, people often diverge from dissimilar outgroups to avoid the cost of misidentification (Berger and Heath 2008). While aspirational consumers prefer explicit signals such as conspicuous logos, consumers with more cultural capital prefer subtle signals such as a distinct pattern under a collar to avoid being perceived as or treated like a member of lower status groups (i.e., aspirational consumers) (Berger and Ward 2010). Similarly, consumers are likely to be hesitant to consume animal fur coats in fear of being associated with negative labels, such as being an unethical consumer.

We expect the negative effect of stigma on the consumer demand for fur coats to vary, depending on individual consumer's perceived severity of stigma. Those who do not think that animal fur consumption is highly stigmatized are not likely to anticipate negative social consequences. On the other hand, for those who think that fur consumption is highly stigmatized, genuine fur coats may no longer represent status but something to be avoided. This would particularly hold true for status-seeking individuals because their desire for fur garments is primarily driven by the status-signaling value (Eastman and Eastman 2015). Conversely, these consumers are likely to lose interest in status products if they lose their signaling value. Consistent with this notion, prior studies on similarly controversial fashion products (American alligator leather accessories) showed that perceived social acceptance of consuming alligator leather goods significantly predicted consumer's purchase intentions (Summers et al. 2006). Consumers showed lower purchase intentions toward alligator leather accessories if they perceived consuming alligator leather goods as socially unacceptable and indicated social acceptance as an important criterion in their consumption decisions (Xu et al. 2004). Therefore,

H3   Perceived stigma will moderate the relationship between the need for status and the purchase intention toward genuine fur coats, such that a negative relationship will exist for consumers with high perceived stigma around wearing animal fur.

Due to the visual resemblance, wearing faux fur coats that look real also poses a high social risk. Previous research has shown that a high perceived risk can decrease purchase intentions (Chang and Chen 2008). Furthermore, status-seeking consumers' high purchase intentions toward luxury counterfeits attest to their primary concerns for appearing to possess wealth and status, as opposed to the objective reality (Hussain et al. 2017). Accordingly, even though a faux fur coat is objectively not made from genuine fur, however authentic it appears, the possibility of misidentification can deter those with higher perceived stigma from consuming faux fur coats that look real. Thus,

H4   Perceived stigma will moderate the relationship between the need for status and the purchase intention toward faux fur coats that look real, such that a negative relationship will exist for consumers with high perceived stigma around wearing animal fur.

Figure 1 summarizes the proposed hypotheses. As a control variable, individuals' *actual* opinions about the same stigma (Corrigan 2004), as opposed to individuals' *perceptions* of public opinions (i.e., perceived stigma) was included. In this study, this variable is termed individual stigmatization. It was included to control for the confounding effects of individuals' personal stance on wearing fur on their purchase intentions. For example, people with a high need for status may not want to purchase genuine fur coats if they are personally opposed to animal fur consumption on moral grounds (Achabou et al. 2020; Lee et al. 2019; Stringer et al. 2020).

Methods

Pre-test

The purpose of the pre-test was to discover the factor structure and establish internal consistency of a perceived stigma scale. The scale that measures perceived stigma around wearing animal fur was developed by modifying the following three scales that were developed in the context of other stigmas (mental illness and drug addiction). These include an 11-item Devaluation-Discrimination scale ($\alpha = 0.78$) (Link 1987), a 15-item perceived devaluation/discrimination scale ($\alpha = 0.78$) (Link et al. 1997), and a 12-item

Fig. 1 Research framework
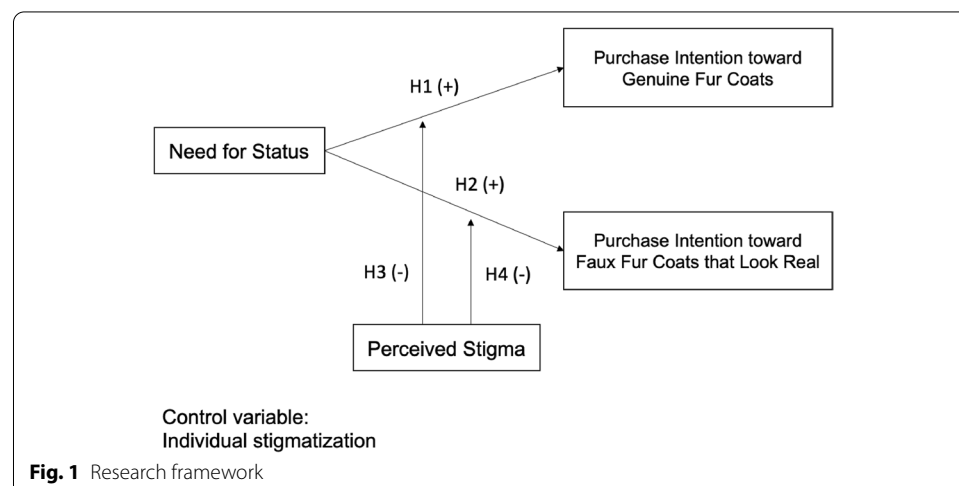
rejection experience scale ($\alpha = 0.80$) (Link et al. 1997). From these scales, eleven items that measure the two dimensions of the construct (devaluation and social rejection) were selected. To reflect the research context of this study, items that describe unlikely situations (i.e., employment discrimination) were not considered (e.g., "Most employers will pass over the application of a person who wears animal fur in favor of another applicant"). These items were excluded because whether a job applicant wears animal fur is not a common job application question (Abbot et al. 2017). The first five items measure devaluation and the remaining six, social rejection (Table 1).

Since the primary consumers of fur coats are females, only female participants were invited to take the survey. This is a common practice in research involving fashion products (e.g., Berger and Ward 2010). Data were collected from 50 U.S. consumers, aged 18 years and older ($M = 44$, $SD = 13$), via Amazon's Mechanical Turk. The sample size exceeded a recommended threshold of 40, appropriate for a pilot study aimed to develop an instrument (Hertzog 2008). The majority of the participants identified themselves as Caucasian (80%), followed by Asian (18%). The sample represented all annual household income brackets, with the highest number of participants indicating their income as between $20,000 and $29,999 (25%), followed by $50,000–$59,999 (18%). The majority reported finishing 4 years of college or higher (52%), and there were more participants

Table 1 Results of EFA: perceived stigma scale

Item (11)	Factor loadings	Eigen value	Variance explained	Cronbach α
1. Most people think that it is unethical to wear real animal fur	.61	7.33	66.7%	.94
2. Most people think less of a person who wears real animal fur	.85			
3. Most people look down on a person who wears real animal fur	.86			
4. Once they know that a person wears real animal fur, most people will take his or her opinions less seriously	.85			
5. Most people think that a person who wears real animal fur is insensitive	.69			
6. Most people think that a person who wears real animal fur is less educated	.75			
7. Most people would be reluctant to become close friends with a person who wears real animal fur	.92			
8. Most people in my community would treat a person who wears real animal fur differently	.65			
9. Most people would be reluctant to date a person who wears real animal fur	.80			
10. Most people would be reluctant to accept a person who wears real animal fur as a close neighbor	.86			
11. Most people would be reluctant to socialize with a person who wears real animal fur	.87			

who reported finishing some years of college (24%) than those who reported high school as their highest level of education they completed (8%). In the survey, participants rated the extent to which they agreed with the 11 perceived stigma items (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

To discover the factor structure of the scale, an exploratory factor analysis with varimax rotation was performed, using SPSS 25. Only factors with eigenvalues greater than one were extracted. Results revealed a single factor with total variance explained as 66.7% (Table 1). All 11 items were retained because all factor loadings exceeded a recommended threshold of 0.50 (Hair et al. 2010). With the Cronbach alpha value of 0.94, the scale was deemed internally consistent (Hair et al. 2010).

Main test
Measurements
To measure need for status, a five-item scale anchored on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) was adopted from Eastman et al. (1999). To measure purchase intentions toward genuine fur coats and faux fur coats that look real, a three-item purchase intention scale anchored on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = extremely unlikely, 7 = extremely likely) was adopted from Jang et al. (2015) (i.e., "I am likely to purchase an animal fur coat/a faux fur coat that looks like it is made from real animal fur"). To avoid confusion, the following definition of faux fur coats was provided: "Fur coats made from synthetic materials like polyester". Perceived stigma was measured with the scale developed in the pretest. To measure individual stigmatization (control variable), the perceived stigma scale was modified by changing "Most people" to "I" in all 11 items because the only difference between individual stigmatization and perceived stigma is the doer of stigmatization (most people vs. I). For example, a statement "*Most people* think that it is unethical to wear real animal fur" was modified to "*I* think that it is unethical to wear real animal fur."

Data collection
Data were collected from 353 U.S. female consumers, aged 18 years and older, via a professional online survey company. To ensure data quality, three attention check questions were inserted (e.g., "To demonstrate your attention, please select 'agree' for this item") (Meade and Craig 2012). Survey was terminated if a participant failed to pass one of the three attention check questions. Among the 353 participants, 133 failed to pass an attention check question. Their responses were excluded from data analysis. The remaining 220 participants' demographic information is provided in Table 2.

Results
Common method variance (CMV)
To minimize CMV, the order of all measurement questions and items within each question was randomized, reducing the possibility of introducing a systematic bias to responses (Podsakoff et al. 2012). In addition, a statistical diagnostic test (i.e., Harman's one-factor test) was conducted to check for potential CMV (Podsakoff and Organ 1986). Results revealed that the variance explained by one general factor (45%) was far below

Table 2 Sample demographics: main study

Variable	N	%
Age		
18–25	50	22.7
26–35	31	14.1
36–45	27	12.3
46–55	36	16.4
56–65	35	15.9
>65	41	18.6
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	180	81.8
Black/African	22	10
Native American	2	0.9
Asian	10	4.5
Hispanic/Latino	6	2.7
Education		
Highschool or less	44	20
Some College	64	29.1
College or Professional degree	112	50.9
Annual Household Income		
< $20,000	42	19.1
$20,001–$40,000	49	22.3
$40,001–$60,000	42	19.1
$60,001–$80,000	28	12.7
$80,001–$100,000	23	10.5
>$100,001	36	16.4

the recommended cutoff point (70%) (Fueller et al. 2016). Therefore, the evidence demonstrated that CMV is unlikely to be a concern in this study.

Evaluation of the measurements

Prior to hypothesis testing, internal consistency of each multi-item scale was evaluated. Cronbach's alpha values of the scales ranged from 0.87 to 0.97, and therefore all the measurements were deemed reliable (Hair et al. 2010). To test the quality of the perceived stigma and individual stigmatization scales, an exploratory factor analysis with varimax rotation was performed. Only factors with eigenvalues greater than one were extracted. Results revealed a single factor for both scales. Each single factor explained 69.6% and 79.6% of the variance, respectively. Factor loadings of all items for both scales exceeded a recommended threshold of 0.50 (Hair et al. 2010).

Hypotheses testing

To test the hypotheses, a series of hierarchical regression analysis was conducted. Results showed that the need for status significantly and positively predicted the purchase intention toward genuine fur coats (Table 3), controlling for individual stigmatization ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, H1 was supported. The moderation effect of perceived stigma was also significant ($\beta = -0.46$, $p < 0.05$; Table 3). As hypothesized, participants with higher perceived stigma showed lower purchase intention toward

Table 3 Hierarchical moderated regression analysis results: testing H1 and H3

Independent variable	ß	t-value	VIF
Model 1			
Need for status	.31	5.31***	1.00
Individual stigmatization	−.41	−7.01***	1.00
$R^2 = .31$, F-value $= 47.69$, p-value $= .00$			
Model 2			
Need for status	.31	5.43***	1.00
Individual stigmatization	−.31	−3.98***	1.91
Perceived stigma	−.14	−1.83	1.85
$R^2 = .32$, F-value $= 33.25$, p-value $= .00$, F change $= 3.34$			
Model 3			
Need for status	.70	3.95***	10.22
Individual stigmatization	−.32	−4.14***	1.91
Perceived stigma	.11	.81	5.44
Need for status × Perceived stigma	−.46	−2.32*	12.65
$R^2 = .33$, F-value $= 26.79$, p-value $= .00$, F change $= 5.40*$			

Dependent variable: Purchase intention toward genuine fur coats

Control variable: Individual stigmatization

*** p < .001, *p < .05

genuine fur coats, controlling for individual stigmatization (Fig. 2). Therefore, H3 was supported. The need for status also significantly and positively predicted the purchase intention toward faux fur coats that look real (Table 4), controlling for individual stigmatization ($ß = 0.30$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, H2 was supported. Perceived stigma did not significantly moderate the positive relationship between the need for status and the purchase intention toward faux fur coats that look real ($ß = -0.18$, $p = 0.43$; Table 4). Therefore, H4 was not supported. Although VIF values of the independent variables and the interaction terms exceeded 10, there was no need for a statistical remedy because a high correlation between the interaction term and the independent variable does not imply a multicollinearity problem (Disatnik and Sivan 2016).

Discussion

The finding that status-seeking consumers have higher purchase intention toward genuine fur coats is consistent with previous findings that people who aspire to belong to a high social class tend to desire status products (Goffman 1951; Han et al. 2010; Packard 1959). The finding that consumers with heightened perceived stigma around wearing animal fur desire genuine fur coats less is consistent with the notion that status symbols are social constructs and that their symbolic meanings can change in response to social and cultural shifts (Puhl and Heuer 2010). The result supports the theoretical conceptualization of status symbols which requires social desirability as a prerequisite (Blumberg 1974). Theoretically, heightened stigma would make wearing fur socially undesirable, weakening the long-held association between genuine fur coats and high status. This, in turn, is expected to decrease the purchase intention toward genuine fur garments, particularly for consumers with a high need for status.

The finding that status-seeking consumers have higher purchase intentions toward faux fur coats that look real is consistent with previous findings that the status-seeking
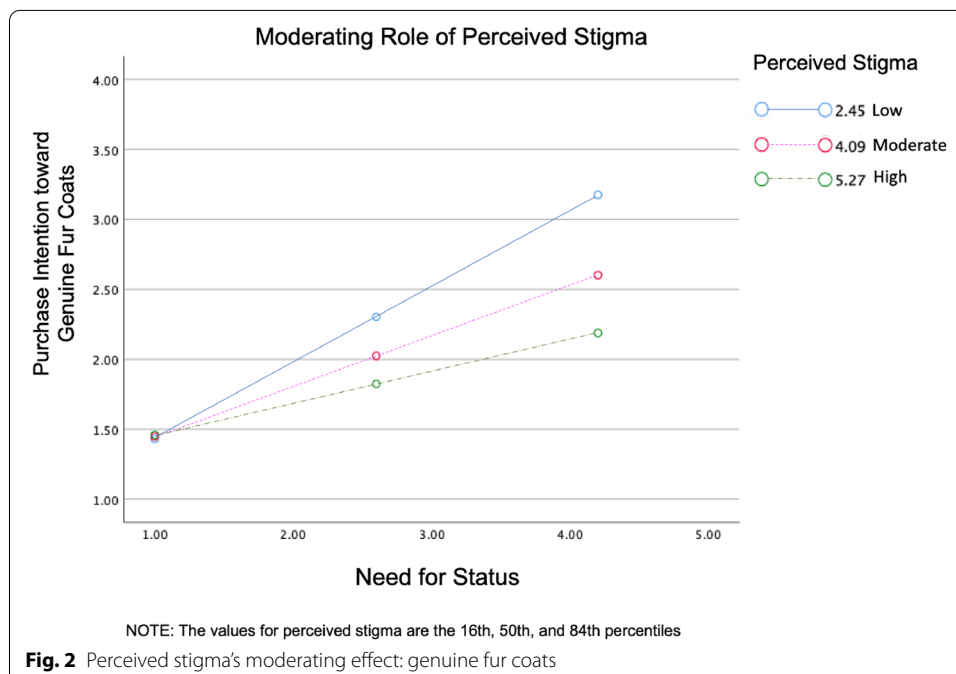

Fig. 2 Perceived stigma's moderating effect: genuine fur coats

Table 4 Hierarchical moderated regression analysis results: testing H2 and H4

Independent variable	ß	t-value	VIF
Model 1			
Need for status	.30	4.74***	1.00
Individual stigmatization	−.20	−3.06***	1.00
$R^2 = .15$, F-value $= 19.46$, p-value $= .00$			
Model 2			
Need for status	.30	4.76***	1.00
Individual stigmatization	−.16	−1.90	1.91
Perceived stigma	−.04	−.52	1.85
$R^2 = .15$, F-value $= 13.02$, p-value $= .00$, F change $= .60$			
Model 3			
Need for status	.45	.26*	10.22
Individual stigmatization	−.17	−1.94	1.91
Perceived stigma	.05	.33	5.44
Need for status x Perceived stigma	−.18	−.78	12.65
$R^2 = .16$, F-value $= 9.90$, p-value $= .00$, F change $= .43$			

Dependent variable: Purchase intention toward faux fur coats that look real

Control variable: Individual stigmatization

*** p < .001, *p < .05

tendency increased shopping behaviors related to faux alternatives, such as luxury counterfeits (Eisend et al. 2017). The result supports the hypothesis that status-seeking consumers would perceive faux fur coats that look real as viable alternatives because they can still signal to others status and wealth associated with genuine products, due to their visual resemblance. The rationale is akin to how consumers consume luxury counterfeits to satisfy their need for status as the look-alike products with prominent brand logos can be perceived as authentic by unsuspecting onlookers (Hussain et al. 2017; Wilcox et al. 2009).

The finding that perceived stigma did not moderate the relationship between the need for status and purchase intention toward real-looking faux fur coats indicates that the social risk of consuming faux alternatives is low, however genuine they appear. This may be because people can easily reverse stigmatization by disclosing the fact that the coat is in fact not made from genuine fur. Such assurances can influence one of the two components that determine the level of perceived risk: the probability that negative consequences would occur (Peter and Ryan 1976). While the other component, the magnitude of the negative consequences, would remain the same for consumers with high perceived stigma, the overall perceived risk can be reduced by the lower possibility. As a result, high perceived stigma would not deter consumers from purchasing faux fur coats that look real.

Conclusions

The findings of this study have theoretical implications for scholars and practical implications for fashion brands. In terms of scholarship, the current study extends the literature on status consumption by investigating the understudied topics: the transformation of status symbols and its effects on consumer behaviors. For marketers and brand managers, the findings serve as a guideline for product development and merchandising provide further support for the importance of continuously being attuned to the zeitgeist, which shapes consumer demands.

The findings have important implications for the status consumption literature, which has primarily focused on the determinants of status consumption (e.g., Han et al. 2010). The current study incorporated stigma theory to provide a theoretical framework for understanding status symbols, namely the mechanism of the change in their symbolic meaning and the market consequences of the transformation. In particular, by identifying stigma as a potential driver of the change and empirically examining its effects, this study provided further support for the fluid nature of status symbols. It showed that stigma is one possible mechanism by which the symbolic value of status products can be tainted. In addition, the findings showed that the status-signaling value can be also conferred to faux luxury alternatives for product categories that derive the value from raw materials, as opposed to prominent luxury brand logos (Wilcox et al. 2009) or the imitation of signature designs, such as the red soles on Christian Louboutin's shoes (Eastman et al. 2018).

The finding that genuine fur coats are still sought after by those with a strong need for status (i.e., aspirational shoppers) implies that the symbolic value of real animal fur coats still drives the demand. However, perceived stigma was shown to weaken the demand for real animal fur coats—a finding that supports the notion that the value of status

products is contingent on the current era's cultural and social forces. One implication is that brands need to consider any developments in society that can influence the demand for their products and make informed decisions. In line with the industry practice of distributing merchandise tailored to the local demands, brands may want to analyze the regional level of stigma around wearing animal fur and send an appropriate product assortment to local stores. For example, they may choose not to send faux fur coats with high resemblance to genuine fur to regions where stigma around wearing animal fur is more salient.

The finding that the status-seeking consumers also desire faux alternatives that look real suggests that the assumption about fake alternatives—the more a fake alternative looks genuine, the better—holds true for faux fur coats. Given these consumers' higher purchase intention toward fur garments, fashion brands are recommended to maintain a collection of faux fur garments that look genuine. If fashion brands want to consider other avenues for creating in-demand designs, they are recommended to take full advantage of the relative easiness and flexibility in designing with and dyeing synthetic fibers, due to their uniformity and versatility (Choudhury 2011). One possibility is producing products unique in silhouettes, colors or color combinations, and patterns.

The finding that perceived stigma did not decrease the purchase intention toward faux alternatives that look real suggests that they are relatively immune to the negative effects of the growing anti-fur movements. Moreover, unlike another type of faux alternatives of status symbols (i.e., luxury counterfeits), faux fur is celebrated as an example of ethical consumption, along with other synthetic animal products like faux leather, as it does not require animal sacrifice (Bian et al. 2016; Keech et al. 2020). Therefore, fashion brands may consider shifting the entire production to faux fur, especially given the rising trend of vegan fashion, which uses alternative materials instead of animal products, such as leather, fur, and feathers (Hughes 2020). The higher demand is attested by a higher supply of vegan products. For example, between 2018 and 2019, the US showed 64% growth in the number of vegan products in the market; the UK, 43%; and Germany 95% (Marci 2020). The recommendation is bolstered by a recent global survey by Accenture, which showed that this consumption pattern toward sustainability is expected to continue, with 45% of the respondents indicating they are making more sustainable consumption choices and will likely continue to do so (Accenture 2020).

Limitations and suggestions for future research

This study has limitations that can serve as the springboard for future research. First, while this study identified the exposure to the media coverage on the anti-animal fur consumption movements as a possible antecedent of perceived stigma (Gunther 1998), it did not empirically test what drives the variance in perceived stigma. Investigating the antecedents would help identify important criteria that can guide consumer segmentation. For example, if the exposure to media coverage is indeed shown to determine perceived stigma, brands may choose to analyze the volume of media coverage at the regional level and segment the market by this criterion.

Second, this study did not examine whether the negative effects of perceived stigma vary, depending on the proportion of animal fur used for a garment. The amount of fur used for a garment would influence the conspicuousness, thereby decreasing the

perceived chance that other people would notice the fur, just as the size of brand logos determine the conspicuousness of luxury products (Han et al. 2010). The lower chance of being noticed indicates a lower possibility of facing stigmatization. Therefore, perceived stigma may not decrease the purchase intention toward garments with minimal fur, including ones with lined pockets or collars. Such findings can offer finer guidelines for product development and merchandising.

Another avenue for research pertaining to synthetic alternatives includes examining another type of synthetic luxury products that has become newly available to consumers, such as lab-grown diamonds. They are made in a lab with advanced technologies that replicate the formation of mined diamonds. Similar to the case of faux fur garments, lab-grown diamonds and their mined counterparts look indistinguishable to the naked eye (Keech et al. 2020). While a previous study showed that they are considered less prestigious than mined diamonds (Keech et al. 2020), a question of whether consumers would imbue the status-signaling value to the synthetic alternatives remains to be answered. Findings can generate insights into the consumer adoption of the novel synthetic alternatives and offer guidelines for market positioning.

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