

RETAIL

Retailers raising sustainability stakes with material bans

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Selfridges will phase out sales of exotic skin goods, such as this lizard leather wallet from Mulberry. Image credit: Selfridges

By SARAH RAMIREZ

Hinting at a larger sustainability push within luxury retail and fashion, British department store chain Selfridges has announced its plans to stop selling items made with exotic skins within the next year.

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As more luxury brands commit to going fur-free, exotic leathers such as crocodile, alligator, lizard and python appear to be the next materials to be evaluated. Other companies are biding time and becoming more transparent about their sustainability practices while continuing the use of such materials.

"We should not confuse the new standards in the treatment of exotic skin with the ban on fur," said Thoma Serdari, brand strategist and professor of luxury marketing at New York University and coeditor of "[Luxury: History Culture Consumption](#)," New York. "Retailers will have to be educated to ensure that consumers' standards are met and that they don't inadvertently stock inventory of questionable origin."

"They will also need to transfer their knowledge to the end consumer, which means we may begin to see a different type of storytelling online," she said. "We have already moved from the era of heritage' through the era of craftsmanship' to finally enter that of transparency.'"

Sustainable steps

While the use of fur in high fashion has been a contentious topic for years, exotic leathers are now drawing increased scrutiny. Consumers are becoming increasingly aware of sustainability issues, and are expecting more transparency and initiatives from luxury retailers and brands.

Selfridges is currently phasing out materials such as crocodile, alligator, lizard and python, and plans to only sell agricultural leather by February 2020. The retailer banned the sale of real fur in 2005 and is again becoming an early adopter in moving away from exotic skins.

This latest announcement is part of Selfridges' broader sustainability push, as it seeks to offer eco-friendly products that align with consumers' ethical values ([see story](#)).



Selfridges exclusively sells faux fur after it banned the sale of real fur almost 15 years ago. Image credit: Selfridges

Fashion brands currently selling exotic leather goods through Selfridges include Mulberry, Saint Laurent and Smythson, as well as watchmakers such as Longines and Hublot.

The retailer's decision would prevent these luxury brands from selling exotic skin items, even as companies work to introduce more stringent oversight of their supply chains.

Earlier this month, luxury goods conglomerate LVMH Mot Hennessy Louis Vuitton introduced new requirements for its crocodilian leather sourcing, as the group continues its quest to be more transparent about animal welfare and other sustainability issues.

LVMH is pushing a more conscientious strategy for its crocodilian leather sourcing without eliminating its production entirely ([see story](#)).

Retailers besides Selfridges have also made strides towards sustainable fashion and circumvented fashion labels with their own requirements regarding animal products.

In 2017, online retail company Yoox Net-A-Porter Group ceased the sale of all merchandise containing animal fur on its multi-brand sites. As part of its promise, YNAP signed onto the Fur Free Alliance's Fur Free Retailer Program ([see story](#)).

To appease retailers and eco-conscious consumers alike, some brands are turning to alternative products to maintain the appearance of luxe materials.

Technical advances in faux fur have rendered the use of real fur unnecessary, according to Italian handbag label Furla. The brand's cruise 2019 collection was its first produced entirely with eco-fur ([see story](#)).

French fashion label Chanel publicly announced that it would discontinue use of exotic skins, as well as furs, and shift resources towards the development of alternative materials.



Luxury labels, including Bottega Veneta, have begun experimenting with alternative materials. Image credit: Bottega Veneta

Italian fashion house Bottega Veneta has long emphasized responsible sourcing and has even begun working with chrome-free leather.

Chrome-free leather is a new eco-friendly material that provides alternatives to the traditional but yet extremely harmful tanning system that uses damaging chromium ([see story](#)).

This material makeover extends beyond fashion. British automaker Land Rover used alternatives to leather in its

redesigned Evoque, including Kvadrat, which is made with recycled plastic bottles, and plant-based fiber eucalyptus melange ([see story](#)).

Pushing back

Despite pressure from retailers, consumers and activist groups, some luxury brands continue their use of controversial materials.

For instance, in 2017, LVMH-owned Italian fashion house Fendi put its roots as a furrier on full display at its year-long pop-up in Omotesando and its new Ginza Six flagship through displays, decor and services. Roman-style arches in the pop-up's facade featured fur-filled bricks in the colors of the rainbow ([see story](#)).

Italian fashion label Prada's continued use of fur draws constant criticism from animal rights groups, such as Fur Free Alliance and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. In response, Prada reiterated its commitment to reducing use of fur and focusing on more sustainable materials, but it has not committed to a fur-free future ([see story](#)).

According to a recent report from Clutch, 65 percent of shoppers believe fashion companies should embrace corporate social responsibility.

Fifty-eight percent of respondents feel that fashion brands should commit to using ethically-sourced materials. Companies should also aim for recycled or locally-sourced products, according to a respective 48 and 42 percent of respondents ([see story](#)).

"Consumers' ethical standards have consistently shifted away from products of questionable origins, whether this pertains to how they were made, of which material or by whom," Ms. Serdari said. "Additionally, as technology advances in terms of identifying the correct provenance of sources or in terms of tracing every manufacturing part to its origin, consumers have heightened the intensity of their concerns because they feel more empowered by technology to do so."

"This is a positive development in which case technology amplifies transparency in the field of luxury goods," she said. "Luxury brands that have already been engaged in these practices because they have always worked to meet the highest of standards have nothing to fear."

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