Amid protests, can the fur industry survive and be sustainable?

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Figure 1: Will an economic slowdown, a growing anti-fur movement and COVID-19, finally break the fur industry, or can it change with the times? Image credit: StandStudio

By Wenzhuo Wu

Due to the impact of COVID-19, the first quarter of 2020 has been wintry for fashion, including the fur industry. Although it is still early summer, the industry has been preparing for the next winter season since the year's first fur auction in March, hoping to compensate for the loss of the spring season and return to profitability.

As one of the biggest fur garment manufacturers and consumers in the world, China has become an indispensable segment of the global fur market, hitting annual sales of $13.5 billion (95.7 billion RMB) at its peak in 2016. Just like the luxury sector as a whole, the development of the fur industry is bound up in China's rapid economic growth and consumption upgrades.

Over time, the perception of fur products in China has evolved from pure functionality into a symbol of privilege and elegant taste. But local consumer stereotypes about fur garments have faced challenges as the fur farming industry continues to elevate its supply chains, product development and design.

Confronted with an economic slowdown, a spreading anti-fur movement and an international COVID-19 pandemic, is it possible for the fur industry to survive today's hyper-politicized climate and rapidly changing markets? Jing Daily talks to industry leaders and local consumers to explore where China's fur market is headed.

How big is the fur business in China?

According to a survey on China’s fur market sponsored by the world’s largest fur auction house, Kopenhagen Fur conducted between October 2019 and January 2020 most northern residents wear fur coats during the winter.

Eighty-eight percent and 96 percent of respondents from the Changchun and Tangshan regions respectively stated that they had previously bought fur.

Given their extreme cold periods, consumers living in the northern frontier and Northeast China have more buying motivations for fur products and a more flexible acceptance of price changes.
In Central China, the market is as promising as it is in the northern area, despite the relatively warmer climate, and consumers from emerging markets such as Chengdu, Wuhan, and Xi’an have shown a growing demand for fur products.

Meanwhile, East China contains many high-net-worth individuals in higher-tier cities like Shanghai, Hangzhou, and Nanjing. But the region’s fur consumption is also driven by its proximity to the fur and leather manufacturing zone inside Zhejiang Province.

However, southern respondents appear to be more aware of design and fashion elements, whereas northern respondents pay more attention to the functionality.

As the survey proves, Chinese consumers’ primary impression of fur garments is that they are "luxury," as opposed to other characteristics such as "warm" and "fashion."

Given this, fur still represents privilege, and its high-end market status has remained safe. But with a booming new middle class in China, fur products are no longer exclusive to top-tier consumers.

Meanwhile, the consumers who have purchased fur show positive attitudes about fur products and high buyer retention and consumer loyalty rates.

Candy Li, a senior fashion public relations professional and a fur consumer, told us that her behavior of purchasing fur was cultivated from a very young age in her native northeast region of China.

"Fur is part of our collective memories and can be passed down for generations," she said. "A fur coat is not only for the sake of keeping warm but is also a container of regional culture and a family bond."

As the fur market expanded in China, the anti-fur movement started spreading from Western countries to the mainland. Allegations about fur industry cruelty and global brand statements about going "fur-free" get distributed to China on social media, and the battle between animal rights activists and the fur industry has continuously aggravated consumers.

Is faux fur the right solution for sustainability?
Controversies over fur have emerged in the fashion industry since the 1990s, having been initiated by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and its anti-fur movement, titled "I’d Rather Go Naked Than Wear Fur," has continued for over three decades.

In recent years, the organization has also condemned products made of wool, leather, and exotic animal skins in addition to fur.

Brands such as Stella McCartney have initiated fur-free, and luxury houses including Giorgio Armani, Gucci, Burberry and Chanel have joined the movement.

Even online retailers such as Farfetch and Net-A-Porter have weighed in by pulling fur products off shelves, pushing the movement to new heights.

However, PETA’s ambition goes far beyond banning fox and mink products, as it has also accused extreme weather outerwear producer Canada Goose of cruelly slaughtering ducks and geese.

As one of the largest fur manufacturing and consuming countries, China has become PETA’s primary target.
Mark Oaten, CEO of the International Fur Federation (IFF), disclosed to Jing Daily that "PETA has been trying to bring animal rights activism to China for years, but they haven’t made it because Chinese officials are cautious about overseas non-governmental organizations entering the country."

But content with titles using words like "cruelty" and "slaughter" has spread to many social media and video platforms.

As a response to on-going controversies, the fur farming industry initiated FurMark a world-class, comprehensive certification and traceability program.

By tackling issues like sustainability and animal welfare, the program provides consumers with the reassurance they need to purchase fur products with confidence.

There is also the WelFur project, which was established and funded by the fur industry and claims to ensure a high level of animal welfare on fur farms across European countries.

Certified by independent scientists, the project takes animals’ feeding, housing, health and behavior into account as a way to build up a transparent fur supply chain.

Besides an ethical commitment, sustainability is another issue that is become prominent in the fashion industry.

Despite a growing anti-fur movement, fur is still an indispensable fabric for many fashion brands. Therefore, various fake furs also known as faux fur have blown up as substitutions. But is it really a more sustainable option?

The fabric of faux fur, which includes acrylic and polyester or blend wool, is mostly extracted and processed from non-renewable resources such as petroleum. Then it is dyed and sewn to simulate the textures and patterns of the natural furs.

Therefore, do sustainable fashion practitioners who opt for artificial fabrics made from non-renewable resources contradict themselves?

As the late creative director of Fendi, Karl Lagerfeld told the New York Times in 2015 that "for me, as long as people eat meat and wear leather, I don’t get the message [about the problem with fur]."

Though his namesake fashion label announced it would go fur-free after the legend passed away, the ban does not mark a win for PETA or a compromise for the brand but raises the question: Will consumers have the freedom to choose?

Yet going fur-free has become a politically correct and cost-effective choice for fashion brands. This decision has undoubtedly troubled the fur industry, especially its supply chain. But the fur industry has chosen to tackle this challenge with social responsibility and practical solutions.

As Mr. Oaten added, the mission of fur farmers aligns with the concepts behind "slow fashion," which have become popular in the wake of COVID-19.

As a leading provider of fur skins and the owner of the largest fur auction house, Kopenhagen Fur strives to convey comprehensive business facts with total transparency.

In considering its consumers, the animals, and the planet, the company collaborates with many luxury houses and manufacturers by supplying raw materials and providing technological support.

The initiative Part of the Solution proposes natural fur as a solution to fashion sustainability since the natural fabric is durable (with a lifetime up to three decades) and degradable (making it environmentally-friendly).

In 2017, the firm won Elle's corporate social responsibility (CSR) award thanks to a series of sustainable method cards co-developed by Design School Kolding.

Chris Cui, president of Kopenhagen Fur China, shared with Jing Daily that the fur industry is developing and expanding despite controversies.

"It is because the industry is under the spotlight that we are motivated to be more responsible for consumers and the market, and continuously improve our techniques and craftsmanship," Mr. Cui said.

It is all up to consumers.

In addition to animal activism, the outbreak of COVID-19 has brought new challenges for the fur industry.
Due to the global travel restrictions, February's planned offline fur auction had to be amalgamated into the April one. However, the pandemic did not show a favorable turn by then. This gave birth to the first-ever digital online fur auction a monumental milestone for the house.

"Online auctions make it convenient for smaller buyers and save them travel expenses," Mr. Cui said. "They can trade anywhere in the world."

While the uncertainty of COVID-19 and the prolonged global economic slump have impacted fur sales and prices, Kopenhagen Fur has responded to buyers' demands for smaller sizes and classical qualities. This adaptation will be seen in the winter as will the rising trend of light fur products.

Unlike other markets shrouded by the pandemic and regional turbulence, China will become one of the most significant markets for fur's rebound.

The demographic of fur consumers in China shows diversity. In addition to its mature market of middle-aged and elderly consumers, domestic fur consumers also include younger buyers, thanks to creative collaborations between fur suppliers and fashion brands and the country's rapidly developing ecommerce market.

Colored fur coats from Copenhagen-based fashion brand Saks Potts, one of the brand partners of Kopenhagen Fur, have been popular with young Chinese generations.

The new star Esther Yu posted the brand’s blue shearling coat on Little Red Book and received over 8,000 likes and netizen comments, specifically about how the fluffy collar and baby blue color is fairy-like.

Esther Yu's endorsement introduced the Danish niche brand and its signature fur coats to more Chinese shoppers. Image credit: Little Red Book

But consumers have also shown radical sentimentality in the post-COVID-19 era, meaning they prefer investing in durable, high-quality products.

The second-hand market and the vintage hype in China right now indicate that the younger generations are embracing eco-friendly lifestyles.

"Whether buying a new fur product or selecting a second-hand fur coat in a vintage shop, I hope there will be more room for consumers to learn about the fur industry and what consumers can contribute to fashion sustainability," Ms. Li said.

Though the fur industry will live with constant reproach, controversies are not its most crucial challenge. That would
be limitations of consumer choices, brought on by increasingly politicized statements from the fashion world.
The fashion industry's humanism must move beyond the binary of natural fur versus faux fur, as a one-sided approach with consumers won't accelerate the process of fashion sustainability.

As Mr. Cui concluded, he said, "what we are striving for is hoping another perspective can be heard by more people. At the end of the day, the decision is all up to consumers."

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