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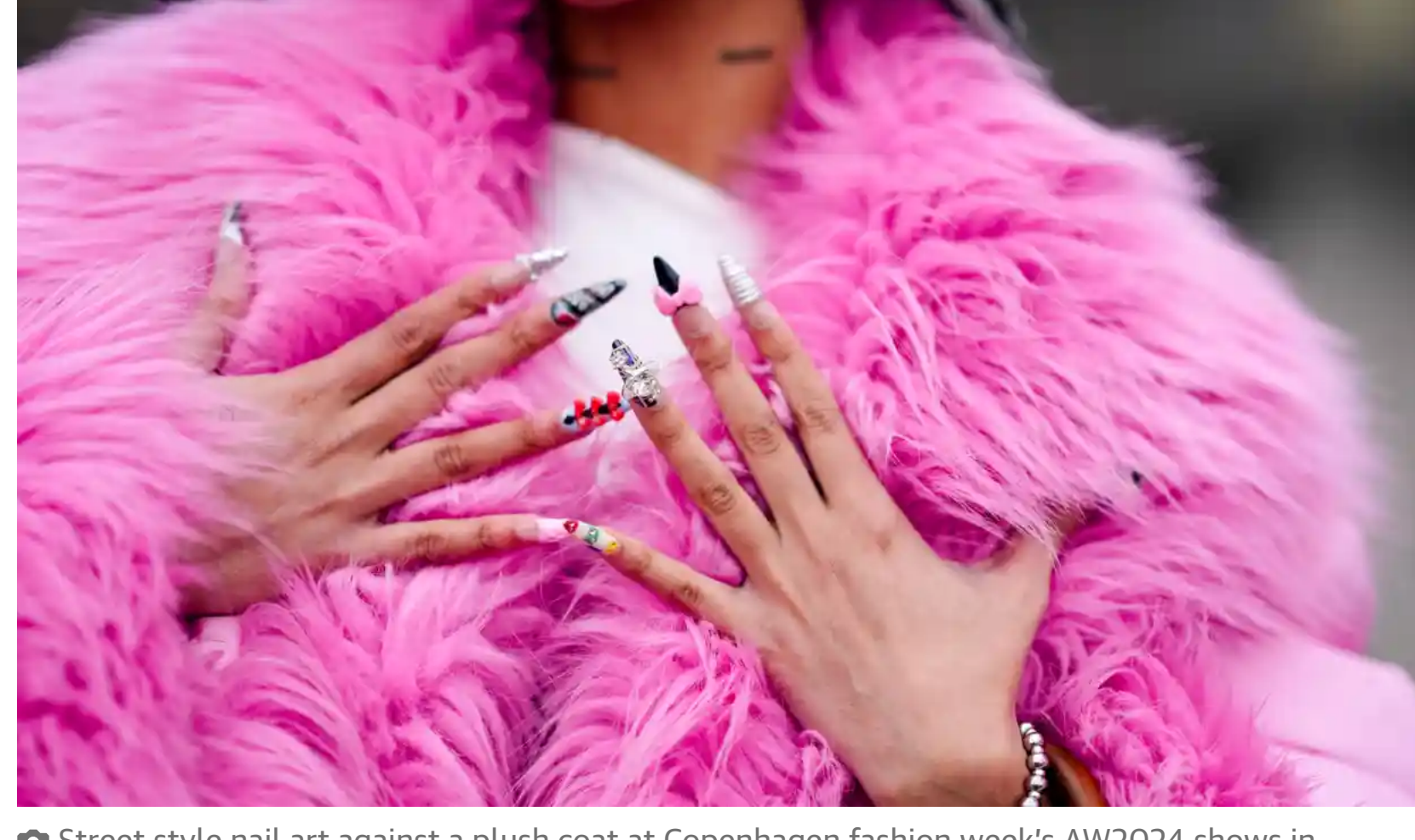
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The Observer Fashion

Skins and feathers are as cruel as fur, the fashion industry is told

Copenhagen fashion week is hailed for raising the bar on animal rights. But will the organisers of other fashion weeks follow?



Street style nail art against a plush coat at Copenhagen fashion week's AW2024 shows in January. Photograph: Edward Berthelot/Getty Images

Copenhagen fashion week has just announced that it will ban exotic skins and feathers from its catwalks next year, becoming the biggest industry event yet to do so.

“Skål to Copenhagen fashion week for raising the bar for other events,” says the vice-president of corporate projects at People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (Peta), Yvonne Taylor. “Now all eyes are on other fashion week organisers, who must follow suit.”

Fair fashion campaigner Venetia La Manna agrees: “It really does prove to me that these organisation - fashion weeks, potential brands - can take these big steps when pushed.”

But there is still a long way to go. While the prohibition similar moves from smaller fashion weeks, such as Stockholm and Melbourne, as well as brands such as Burberry and Chanel, it will be a while until exotic skins, including crocodile, snake, alligator and ostrich, as well as ostrich and peacock feathers, are considered cruel in the same way as fur.

The catwalks of New York, London, Paris and Milan were only last month home to an aviary’s worth of feathers. They were abundant on the red carpets this awards season, too.

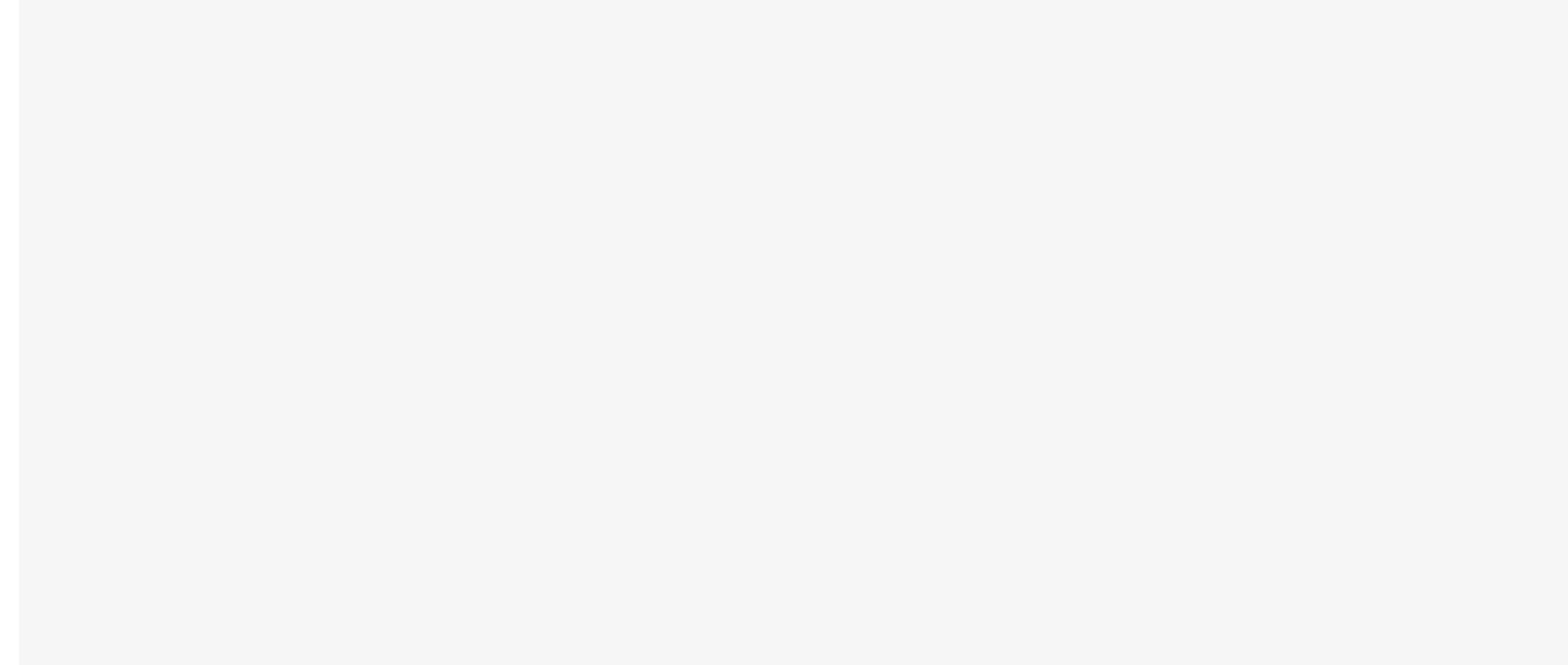
While there has been no marked spike in the use of exotic animal skins, one of the most high-profile designs of the last year was the so-called Millionaire Speedy bag. Made out of crocodile skin, the Pharrell Williams design for Louis Vuitton lived up to its names with a price tag of \$1m. Saltwater crocodiles have one of the most lusted-after skins in the industry, according to a report from the ethical fashion advocacy group Collective Fashion Justice, and “luxury brands such as Hermès and Louis Vuitton not only source these skins but now own factory farms themselves.”

The case against fur has taken hold after many years of work by animal rights campaigners. It has now been banned by most of the luxury sector’s biggest brands, and in December the British Fashion Council also formally banned fur from London fashion week, although the ban has been tacit since 2018.



Pharrell Williams carrying his Millionaire Speedy bag, made of crocodile skin, at Paris fashion week last year. Photograph: Jacopo Raule/Getty Images

But Emma Håkansson, the founding director of Collective Fashion Justice, says that while the industry has by and large “decided it’s unacceptable to kill an animal specifically for fashion”, she thinks it is yet to conceive of the cruelty involved in the feather supply chains, which most commonly involve ostriches, in the same way.



There is a lack of education. “The mainstream consumer does not put two and two together and think there’s any cruelty involved in feathers,” she says.

But there is abhorrent cruelty involved in both feathers and exotic skins, according to Peta’s Yvonne Taylor: “Snakes are pumped up with air or water while they’re still alive, and lizards are crudely decapitated. Workers ram metal rods down crocodiles’ spines and into alligators’ brains in an attempt to kill them.”

Part of the issue is “the way that fashion separates the animal from the final product”, says Håkansson, whose organisation consulted with Copenhagen fashion week alongside World Animal Protection to persuade them to enact this policy. While researching feathers recently, she showed people a photo of a dress that had trimming made from ostrich feathers. The vast majority didn’t identify them correctly. The same is also true for brands. Last year, her investigation found that retailers including Asos, Boohoo and Selfridges had mislabelled real feathers as “faux”.

Putting cruelty to one side, even if consumers do recognise feathers as animal-derived, or exotic skins as coming from crocodiles, La Manna highlights a cognitive dissonance: “We constantly withdraw ourselves from the realities of what goes into our clothes, whether that’s workers’ rights abuses, whether that’s gender-based violence, and of course animal cruelty.”

She also thinks that people in the west are conditioned to be less likely to have a problem with cruelty towards a cold-blooded reptile than a furry mammal.

Håkansson agrees that there’s an emotional barrier: “It’s really difficult for people to connect with the reality that a crocodile or a snake is absolutely sentient in the same way that a fox or a mink is,” she says.

But for all the progress in the case of fur, even in that area there has been a backslide. “I think it’s honestly because the cool girls have started wearing it again,” says Le Manna.

Not least to blame is the mob wife trend, which has seen massive fur coats and *Sopranos*-chic in vogue. “TikTok is all over this recycling your grandma’s fur,” said Hillary Taymour, the designer of the ethically minded brand Collina Strada. “This is jumpstarting a resurgence in the use of fur and faux fur in the industry. The trend is spreading like wildfire, and we saw it all over the fall collections.”

While there is emphasis on reworking vintage furs and upcycling materials, Taymour believes that it is the glamorisation that is “ultimately harmful. By creating and standing behind the trend, you are welcoming fast-fashion houses to run with [it].”

Håkansson also believes that there has been a push by the industry to say that these materials, such as fur and leather, are natural as opposed to fossil fuel-derived synthetic materials. But, she points out, they are no longer biodegradable once they have been processed.

The regression on fur may be linked to a broader trend of sustainability issues, so dominant in the fashion industry a few years ago, moving into the background. Håkansson suspects fatigue. “There was that early pandemic era, where there were dolphins in Venice, and everyone was excited about what the world could be. And then we just got a bit tired and went back into hyper-capitalist mode.”

Taymour agrees that the conversation has quieted, citing increases in costs to produce garments, particularly sustainable ones, since the pandemic. “Large companies have fizzled out the conversation to continue to make margins,” she says.

Håkansson hopes that people become more patient. “There’s a feeling that solutions, if they don’t happen overnight, won’t work.” But, she said, “people need to be willing to play a longer game.”

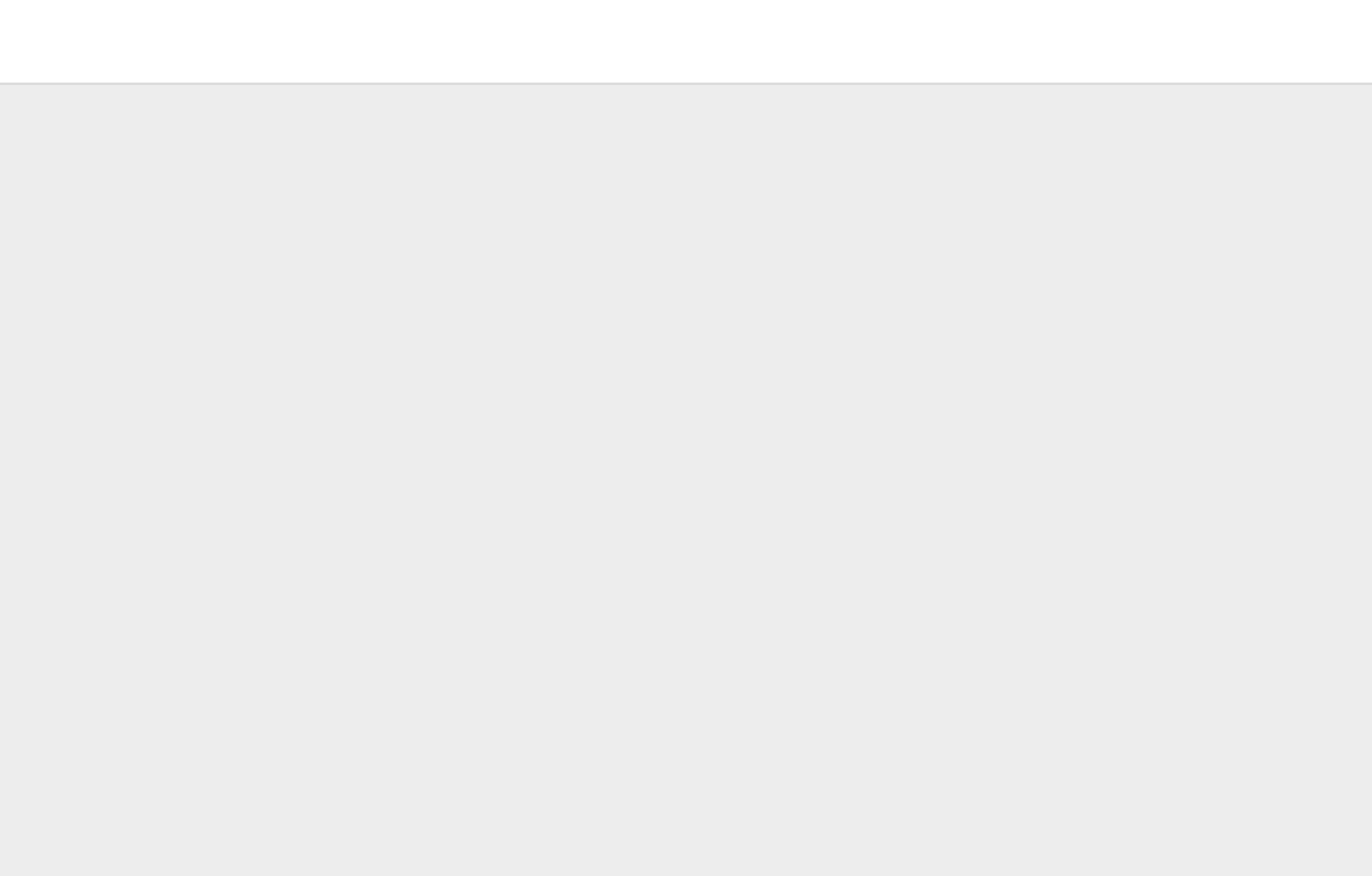
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