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What to Watch: Fashion Looks to Forge Closer Ties With Activists

Brands are looking to align themselves with more activists and socially or environmentally minded content creators in a bid to stay relevant in the current climate.

By **NATALIE THEODOSI**  JANUARY 5, 2022, 9:00AM



The Stella McCartney guerrilla gathering at Times Square on July 06, 2021 in New York City.

COURTESY STELLA MCCARTNEY

f **LONDON** — In the face of an ongoing global pandemic,
t climate crisis and social unrest, fashion labels today are not
+ only encouraged, but expected, to respond to global issues
and use their platforms to promote more than product.

p To do that — and ensure they stay relevant — brands have
+ begun rubbing shoulders with green, humanitarian and
gender activist groups.

Shows, events, retail and big business operations might still be interrupted by the guerrilla tactics of climate campaigners, but those same activists are being welcomed into luxury houses — to walk the runways, feature in campaigns and shout about the causes on the brands' widely followed platforms.

Greta Thunberg featured on the debut cover of Vogue Scandinavia in August; **Stella McCartney** (<https://wwd.com/tag/stella-mccartney/>) invited members of Extinction Rebellion to take part in her fall 2019 campaign, and the poet and activist Kai-Isaiah Jamal narrated a poem for Vivienne Westwood's recent film about Earth Day.

The social activist and Black Lives Matter campaigner Janaya Khan walked Gucci's Love Parade in Los Angeles while a new crop of content creators, who use their platforms to educate about climate change, human rights, or gender fluidity, are striking increasing numbers of brand deals.

This marriage of fashion and activism is set to reach new heights in 2022 as consumers, investors and policy makers

pay increasing attention to how companies plan to deliver on all the sustainability and equity pledges they've been making throughout the pandemic.

“2021 was the year when many fashion brands talked about making changes, and 2022 needs to be the year when they deliver on those promises and pledges. They'll need to be taking stock of how they deliver to investors, and looking at the robustness and speed of their road map. It's a moment when brands should be saying: 'Let's rewrite the rulebook,'" said Anita Balchandani of McKinsey & Co.

For brands, there's a clear advantage in rewriting the rulebook and letting the activists who would usually boycott – or demonstrate outside – their shows into their world. It keeps brands relevant in the current climate, allows them to keep up with the expectations of the younger generation of consumers – and gain new perspectives.

“I think that 2022 will be the year where cross-industry dialogue will accelerate. There are sectors and industries that are light years ahead of fashion, and that the fashion industry can learn a lot from. True collaboration and learning will not come from creating another coalition, or pact, or manifesto – but from active working groups that invest in innovation pilots together,” said Diana Verde Nieto, co-founder and chief executive officer at Positive Luxury.

However, if a brand isn't also doing its due diligence, then working with celebrity ambassadors, activists or sustainably minded content creators could lead to accusations of greenwashing.

This already began happening in 2021 with “The Activist” TV show, which was due to air on CBS in the U.S. in the fall. In

the show, six activists were meant to compete against each other in drawing attention to various causes on social media and be judged by celebrities Julianne Hough, Usher and Priyanka Chopra Jonas.

It was met with much backlash for being “performative” and its format is now set to be “reimagined.”

In addition, asking an activist to take part in a campaign or cover shoot doesn’t automatically make brands or media outlets more eco-conscious, or absolve them from greenwashing.

Revealing her much-talked-about Vogue cover, Thunberg also criticized the fashion industry, highlighting the fine line these figures need to walk when participating in the fashion industry while acknowledging its wrongdoings.

“The fashion industry is a huge contributor to the climate and ecological emergency, not to mention its impact on the countless workers and communities who are being exploited around the world in order for some to enjoy fast fashion that many treat as disposables,” wrote Thunberg on her Twitter account, while sharing images of her Vogue cover.

Venetia La Manna, a content creator who uses her Instagram platform of 148,000 followers and popular podcast to talk about garment workers’ rights and sustainable consumption, believes the onus needs to be on brands to make honest changes with regard to how they work, “and we need laws in place to ensure they’re not greenwashing.”

In the last year La Manna has worked with the likes of Ren Skincare, Vestiaire Collective, the lingerie label Stripe and Stare, and eyewear label Jimmy Fairly — and she said there is

always a vetting process when choosing her partners.

“From a creator standpoint, you just really have to do your due diligence and research. If it feels icky, it probably is,” she said.

“When it comes to working with sustainable fashion brands, they have to tick a variety of boxes: the people making their clothes need to be paid fair living wages and allowed to unionize, the brand itself needs to demonstrate inclusivity, both in terms of sizing and the models that they use.

“They also need to have a diversity policy, both in-house and in terms of the influencers they work with, and they need to produce their clothing in small batches with a focus on the kinds of materials that they use. If they’re a big brand with a billionaire chief executive officer producing hundreds of thousands of items of clothing a year, it’s a hard ‘no,’” she said.

Livia Firth, founder of the sustainability consultancy Eco-Age, added that “it’s imperative” that fashion brands welcome activist voices into their worlds, but they can no longer try to control the full narrative.

“The old testimonial thing is gone, and it’s often so insincere. It’s more about [brands] asking ‘Can you help me out?’ and less about ‘Can I pay you to wear this?’ Inclusivity has to be about hearing these voices and learning from them,” she said.

“It’s also completely possible to work together. If I think of the work we have been doing with Eco-Age throughout the years, we have always stayed true to pointing out wrongdoings, but at the same time taking brands by the

hands and working with them. Change has to be a two-way street – but honesty has to be at the center of it from both sides.”

Verde Nieto added that in 2022 brand activism should also take the form of more individual brand initiatives that go beyond tapping the right faces.

“Sometimes when we talk about brand activism, we default to thinking that brands need to work with activists. But in 2022 brand activism is about using the power behind a brand to benefit the communities – or audiences – affected by the brand. For example, they can choose to work towards not using plastic and raise awareness of why they make that decision, or not using palm oil and committing to raise awareness of why it’s important to protect the rainforest. When a brand decides to put their power behind a topic that matters to them, then they can look for people or organisations that have the same goals as they do,” she explained.

“Brand activism is a powerful marketing tool as more consumers expect brands to do it, but it needs to be a brand activism strategy: an action plan couple with long term investment, not just a statement of commitment.”

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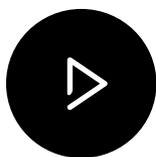
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