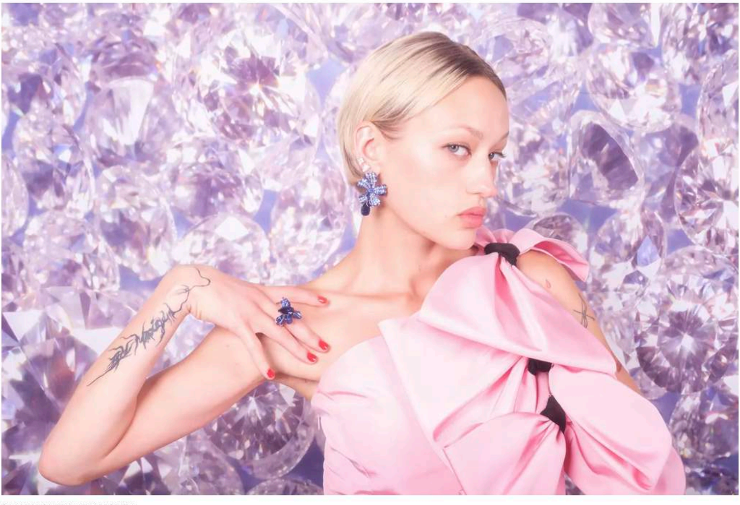
LAB-GROWN DIAMONDS ARE TRANSFORMING THE FACE OF LUXURY

2 MONTHS AGO IN CULTURE
WORDS BY MALAIKA CRAWFORD



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Let's play a game of word association. I say *diamond*, you think: engagement ring, red carpet, 47th St, Tiffany & Co., Lil Uzi's forehead? Diamonds are the world's most popular gemstone, a highly sought after luxury commodity that signifies extreme wealth and glamor. Historically, diamonds were status symbols for monarchs and adornments for the ultra rich, but today they are referenced in every corner of the pop culture hemisphere.

Our present day commodification of diamonds all stems from a DeBeers advertising campaign that changed the way the precious stones were consumed by the public. The campaign, probably one of the most successful PR stunts in history, gave rise to the engagement ring, and with it came an inextricable link between diamonds and romance: diamonds became a mass consumed product.

Top CHANEL, Ring on left thumb AETHER, Rings on left index finger, ring finger, and pinky ANABELA CHAN JOAILLERIE, Ring on left middle finger OSCAR MASSIN, Rings on right thumb, index finger, and middle finger ANABELA CHAN JOAILLERIE, Ring on right ring finger SHAHLA KARIMI, Necklace ANABELA CHAN JOAILLERIE

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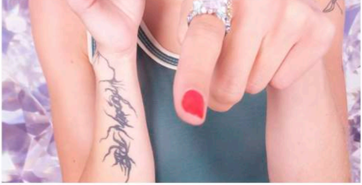

Top VINTAGE COURTESY OF CHERRY VINTAGE NYC, Sunglasses CELINE BY HEDI SLIMANE, Jewelry ANABELA CHAN JOAILLERIE

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Cue the jewelry industry's most polarizing divide and largest disruptor to the established order to date: Lab-Grown diamonds versus mined diamonds. Scientists can now make gemstones in a laboratory that are structurally identical to diamonds mined from the earth. First created by General Electric, using technology to replicate how mined diamonds form underground, it wasn't until 2016 that lab-growns became commercially viable. With technological advancements now facilitating the production of jewelry quality gemstones, the $84 billion dollar "natural" diamond industry has reacted with a backlash against what it sees as an emerging threat to mined stones.

Whichever side of the argument you choose, lab-grown gemstones are structurally, chemically, and physically identical to their "natural" counterpart; just like mined stones, they are certified by the Gemological Institute of America and are pretty much undetectable as lab grown unless specialized equipment is used to identify the minute differences. Why, then, does there seem to be a backlog of publicity claiming that the difference is obvious to the trained eye? T-Pain recently claimed he could spot the difference in a video for jewelry news platform Only Natural Diamonds, a bold claim considering 4th generation diamond dealer and co-founder of fine jewelry brand Minty, Amir Sidis-Simkhai, told me that it's virtually impossible for him to tell: "Lab-growns are anatomically identical to mined stones. Even as a diamond dealer, I can't tell the difference. There are some stones that I might question based on the type of impurities, but I definitely wouldn't be able to say for sure."

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If we can now create diamonds that have significantly less environmental impact – entirely traceable and conflict-free – what's stopping the evolution of lab-growns? LVMH luxury ventures recently invested $90 million in Lusix, an Israeli based lab-grown diamond company, who will use the funds to build a second solar-powered production facility. An interesting transaction when you consider the jewelry brands that come under the LVMH umbrella (Tiffany, Bulgari, Chaumet), are all heritage brands who are staunchly in favor of using "natural" stones. TAG Heuer CEO Frederic Arnault even launched a watch earlier this year where lab-growns featured prominently in the design of the $360,000 watch.

Another business venture that is helping pedal the transition of lab grown diamonds into the luxury category is company Luxe Impact. Set up by three ex-Cartier executives, they recently relaunched heritage brand Oscar Massin (often worn by the likes of Anna Wintour) using only lab-grown diamonds. Frank Ocean is also pioneering the use of lab growns with Homer, his jewelry brand that has recently been making waves in the fashion space. Drake was spotted earlier this year wearing a $1.9 million Homer necklace comprised entirely of lab-growns that are: "The real thing. Not a replica of a diamond, or a close approximation, or a sparkly stone of similar substances… graded by the International Gem Institute."

Dress CAROLINA HERRERA, Hoop earring MODEL'S OWN, Top earring AETHER, Middle earring VRAI, Bottom earrings and ring ANABELA CHAN JOAILLERIE
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Sunglasses CELINE BY HEDI SLIMANE, Hoop earring MODEL'S OWN, Top earring AETHER, Middle earring VRAI, Bottom earrings and ring ANABELA CHAN JOAILLERIE
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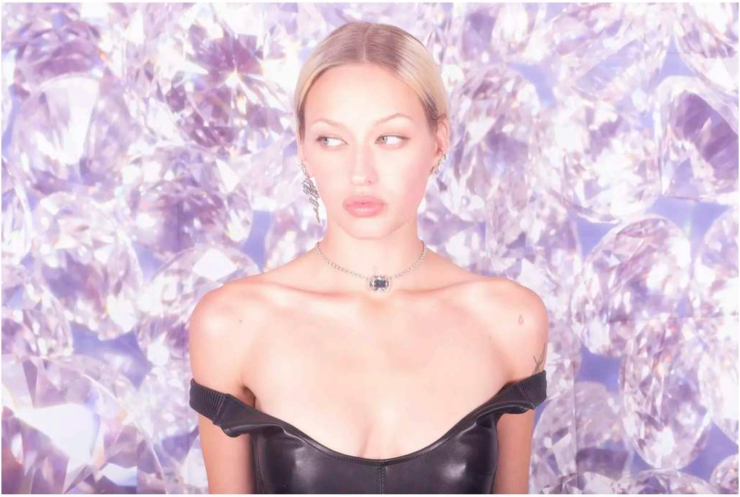
With Tiffany & Co. SVP of diamond and jewelry supply firmly stating the company's position on lab-grown diamonds as a non "luxury material" with "no role for [lab-growns] in a luxury brand," and organizations like the Natural Diamond Council communicating misleading claims about scarcity in the global supply of mined diamonds (as well as publishing inaccurate figures about the environmental impact of lab-growns), it's hard for the consumer to decipher the facts for themselves. The needs of the consumer are evolving, and tech has a huge part to play in the evolution of the industry; the lab-grown diamond sector is growing alongside trends that are already working, with many brands focusing on DTC Ecom models. NET-A-PORTER are also in on the action, with Kimai being the first lab-grown brand ever to be stocked on the retailing platform.

A diamond is a diamond whether it's grown in a lab or taken from the Earth, but the fear amongst many is that lab-grown diamonds may overtake the market place in the same way that cultured pearls tanked the price of pearls altogether and brought on the demise of the industry: it is virtually impossible to find natural pearls on the market today. But what makes diamonds such an expensive commodity? Diamonds, much like Birkin bags, can be categorized as "Veblen good," a luxury item whereby the demand for it increases the price. This logic feeds into the luxury mindset of the higher something is priced, the more value it holds and the more status it boasts. But this mindset feels somewhat antiquated, today's consumer self-educates; we are moving towards an appetite for awareness rather than desirability.



Dress HERMÈS, Hoop earring MODEL'S OWN, Top earrings AETHER, Middle earrings and bottom right earring VRAI, Bottom left earring AETHER, Necklace MINTY
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Conscious consumerism is growing rapidly, and while some argue that there is an element of greenwashing involved in the lab-grown industry, organizations such as the Natural Diamond Council releasing statements naysaying the use of lab-growns and platforms using public figures to undermine the technology, run the risk of pervading something that is an important step for the future of the jewelry industry and the environment. Sanctions in Russia are having a huge impact on diamond sourcing (Russian mining giant Alrosa supplies about a third of the world's raw gems) and many are looking to lab-growns to fill the void. Much like Frederic Arnault and the TAG Heuer Plasma watch, the key is to look to lab-growns for new found flexibility in design as well as a very necessary reduction in wastage. And much like their parent company LVMH, we need to create the space for both lab-grown and mined stones to co-exist.

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Diamonds Features Hx09 •••

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