



The pursuit of counterfeited luxury: An examination of the negative side effects of close consumer–brand connections



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ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, the counterfeiting industry has cost U.S. manufacturers over \$200 billion. In this study, we extend current research on consumers' willingness to purchase counterfeit products by demonstrating that consumers' need to build their self-concept via selfbrand connection directly impact consumers' willingness to purchase counterfeits and these effects are moderated by value consciousness and openness to experience. As a result, our findings move beyond simple assessments of the impact of demographics and social norms to provide a deeper understanding of why and when consumers purchase counterfeit goods. The findings provide new insights that luxury brand managers could leverage to proactively combat counterfeiting and begin curtailing their losses due to the sale of fake goods.

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1. Introduction

Counterfeiting of brand name goods has increased by more than 10,000% in the past two decades and costs U.S. manufacturers over \$200 billion annually (International AntiCounterfeiting Coalition, 2012). Counterfeit goods, comprising any illegal impersonation of branded goods, are growing in popularity (particularly for luxury brands) due to the relative ease of manufacturing and the spike in consumer demand. Initial investigations of counterfeit purchase have demonstrated that luxury brands' engender counterfeiting (Cordell, Wongtada, & Kieschnick, 1996) that consumers' buy to fulfill their need for social assimilation (see Han, Nunes, & Drèze, 2010; Wilcox, Hyeong, & Sen, 2009). While these studies provide a good starting point for developing our understanding of the role of luxury brands in counterfeiting, more research is needed to understand how luxury brands engender counterfeiting. Luxury brand counterfeit (LBC) purchase not only represents the aspects of the product and the brand (Bian & Moutinho, 2009; Eisend & Schuchert-Güler, 2006), but also the consumer. Understanding the connection between a consumer and a brand is vital for improving our understanding of the proliferation of LBC.

The luxury consumption literature shows that consumers buy luxury products to shape or reflect their self-concept (Puntoni, 2001; Wiedmann, Hennigs, & Siebels, 2009). Counterfeit literature, on the other hand, shows that consumers buy counterfeit products to send a

positive signal to others including themselves (Bodner & Prelec, 2002; Wilcox, Hyeong, & Sen, 2009). While research in both these respective areas provides some solid insight into how consumers view luxury goods and counterfeits, there are still certain questions that are left unanswered to truly integrate these streams. To address this issue, we first integrate and extend recent research in both areas by first exploring if consumers buy LBC products to fulfill certain psychological needs such as the ability to construct and/or reflect their self-concept (or image) to others. Moreover, we examine the role that situational personality traits play in altering the relationship between a consumers' connection to a brand and willingness to purchase LBC products.

By focusing on both consumer–brand relationships and consumer personality traits, we provide an improved understanding into this complex purchase process. In doing so, we offer three unique contributions to the literature. First, our results demonstrate that it is not only a consumer's desire to build their self-concept that attracts them toward LBC, but there are also certain personality traits that impact such an attraction. Second, we empirically demonstrate that consumer–brand relationships have a direct impact on consumer's willingness to buy LBC, hence highlighting the dark side of consumer–brand connections. Third, we take a step further to demonstrate that value-consciousness and impulsiveness personality factors positively influence consumers' LBC purchase process, while openness to experience has a negative impact. The results of this study provide a fresh perspective on the complex mechanisms associated with LBC product purchase.

In the following section, we review the literature, and develop hypotheses.

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2. Conceptual background and hypothesis development

From a consumer's perspective, counterfeiting can be either deceptive or non-deceptive (Grossman & Shapiro, 1988). Non-deceptive counterfeiting, the focus of this study, occurs when consumers knowingly buy a product that they recognize is an imitation of a highly valued brand. Non-deceptive counterfeiting is mainly prevalent in the luxury goods market (Nia & Zaichkowsky, 2000), and largely argued to be driven by consumer demand (Bloch, Bush, & Campbell, 1993; Cordell et al., 1996). Research on non-deceptive counterfeiting has attributed counterfeit consumption proliferation to the following three reasons (Eisend & Schuchert-Güler, 2006): price affordability and/or product feature preferences (e.g., Albers-Miller, 1999; Penz & Stottinger, 2005; Poddar, Foreman, Banerjee, & Ellen, 2012), social and cultural influence (e.g., Chakraborty, Allred, & Bristol, 1996; Han et al., 2010; Hoe, Hogg, & Hart, 2003; Lai & Zaichkowsky, 1999; Leisen & Nill, 2001; Wilcox, Hyeong, & Sen, 2009), and consumer socioeconomic status (e.g., Bloch et al., 1993; Cheung & Prendergast, 2006; Chuchinprakarn, 2003). Recent research has started exploring the role of luxury brand in the demand of counterfeit products (e.g., Bian & Moutinho, 2009; Turunen & Laaksonen, 2011). These studies in general argue that ignoring the role of a luxury brand limits the understanding of counterfeit product proliferation because the brand plays an integral role in consumers' demand for luxury brand counterfeit products. Turunen and Laaksonen's (2011) qualitative study shows that consumers consider LBCs as embodiment of real luxury brands. Bian and Moutinho (2009) also found that the match between consumer- and brand-personalities has a positive influence on consumer's tendency to buy LBC. While these studies establish the importance of luxury brands in LBC, they do not explore the psychology behind consumers' attraction to LBC. We posit that luxury brands play a critical role in shaping consumers' preference for LBC because they fulfill their psychological desire to achieve the symbolic meaning associated with the particular luxury brand such as the desire to construct or reflect their self-concept to others. The conceptual model and expected directionality are presented in Fig. 1. Each of these directional effects is elaborated on in the following section.

2.1. The effect of self-brand connection

Brands have the ability to both influence customer purchase decisions and shape consumer identities (Aaker, 1997; Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Richins, 1994). According to Escalas and Bettman (2005, p. 378), "when brand associations are used to construct the self or to communicate the self-concept to others, a connection is formed with the brand." The authors label this connection with the brand as self-

brand connection (SBC). Material possessions in the form of luxury brands help consumers satisfy different psychological needs such as creating and communicating their self-concept (Belk, 1988; Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Sirgy, 1982). We define self-concept as the "totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object" (Rosenberg, 1979, p. 7).

Consumers adopt different techniques, such as conforming to social norms, flattery, self-promotion (Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Fiske & Taylor, 1991), or acting dishonestly (Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008) to accomplish the objective of signaling or shaping identities. Among the different techniques used by the customers, acting dishonestly for signaling identities is an intriguing consumer behavior phenomenon with strong implications for counterfeit consumer behavior. Mazar et al. (2008, p. 633) argue that customers "behave dishonestly enough to profit but honestly enough to delude themselves of their own integrity. A little bit of dishonesty gives a taste of profit without spoiling a positive self-view." This suggests that some customers deliberately carry out dishonest acts with the aim of maximizing their return while reducing the investment cost, and in the process do not question their self-concept. Deliberate dishonest acts in retailing, such as wardrobing (the act of purchasing, using and then returning the used clothing or accessories), cost U.S. retailers \$16 billion annually (Speights & Hilinski, 2005), and consumers do not consider acts to be unethical or immoral (Rosenbaum, Ronald, & Wooldridge, 2011). Similarly, it can be argued that many consumers are tempted to buy counterfeit products because, according to them, the act of buying counterfeit products falls within the boundaries of acceptable dishonesty and allows them to unbundle the status and quality attributes of a high status brand without paying the high price (Bian & Moutinho, 2009; Grossman & Shapiro, 1988). Therefore, the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. SBC has a direct positive effect on the willingness to buy LBC.

2.2. The effects of value consciousness, impulsive buying, and openness to experience

Value consciousness (VC) is defined as a concern for price keeping in mind the quality received (Lichtenstein, Ridgway, & Netemeyer, 1993). A consumer's perceived value of a product is considered to be an influential driver of their purchase decision. Research shows that when consumers find better value in a product compared to other product options, their intention to buy that product increases (Dodds, Monroe, & Grewal, 1991). This experience provides them with a

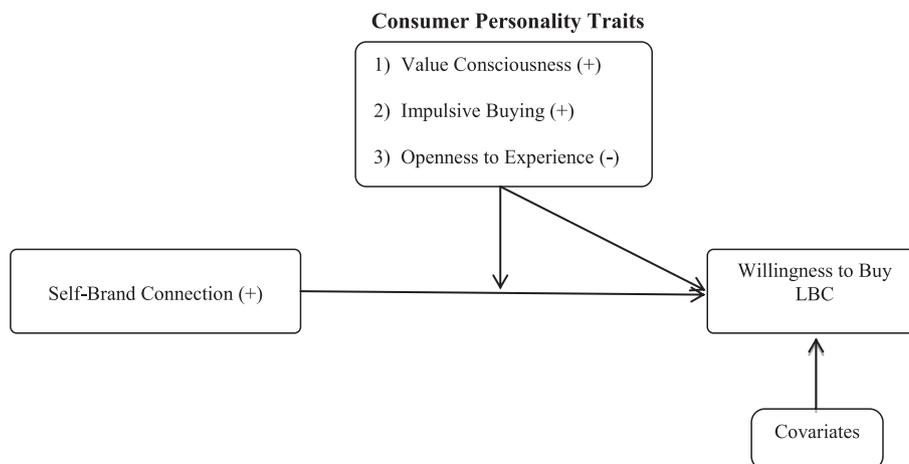


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

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