EXAMINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CONSUMPTION OF COUNTERFEIT APPAREL AND CONSTRUCTION OF SELF-IDENTITY: A STUDY OF PAKISTANI WOMEN

Atif Bilal
SZABIST, Islamabad,
Wisal Ahmad
Kohat University of Science & Technology, Kohat,
&
Shumaila Zeb
SZABIST, Islamabad

Abstract

The production, sale, and purchase of counterfeit apparel are illegal and unethical and in most cases are secret activities. Despite a number of campaigns to discourage piracy of various merchandise, the fashion industry in Pakistan is unable to weed out this bug from the markets. This study intends to examine the association between the consumption of counterfeit goods and the construction of self-identity. The paper, drawing upon thirty-six detailed interviews with female participants who owned both branded apparel and their copies, argues that the purchase and consumption of counterfeit apparel provides real and symbolic benefits to consumers, which contributes to the creation of their identity and projection of their desired social self-image. Participants described three important benefits that can be enjoyed through the consumption of counterfeit apparel: to be efficient by utilizing limited resources to the fullest; to have fun by going through risk, enjoyment and adventure; and to mislead others by hiding the reality of their clothes. Research findings indicate that in addition, when consumers of counterfeit apparel successfully accomplish these goals, they are able to construct a confident self-identity through which they portray themselves as savvy consumers to others. The present study can enrich and update the existing
body of knowledge regarding the consumption of counterfeit products. It can also enable apparel manufacturers to tap into the psyche and motivations of consumers who purchase counterfeit apparel and too can provide them with guidelines to attract and retain consumers.

**Keywords**
Counterfeit consumption, Pakistan, counterfeit apparel, self-identity, social self-image

**Introduction**

“Consumers do not choose brands, they choose lives” said Susan Fournier (1998, p. 367) aptly explaining the relationship between branded products and consumers. The consumption of high-end products is not confined to wealthy people alone; it is popular with other segments of the society as well. Irrespective of their economic level, people often show interest in buying and boasting about products that provide them with a status symbol and an image of wealth (Freedman, 1991). People who desire to be associated with the aura of glory surrounding high-end products and their users may purchase such products for social elevation (Husic and Cicic, 2009). Momentous growth in the consumption of luxury products or desire for them has resulted in a dramatic rise in the sale of counterfeits in recent years (Gabrielli et al., 2012). At the same time, legal manufacturers, marketers, and consumers of prestige brands are facing a serious threat from the rapidly growing market of counterfeit luxury goods (Ahuvia, Gistri, Romani and Pace, 2013).

Counterfeiting – the practice of fraudulently reproducing an original product – is increasingly becoming a major issue internationally, taking place in developed and developing countries alike. The Counterfeiting Intelligence Bureau (CIB), United Kingdom reveals that in 2013 counterfeit products constituted roughly around 5 to 7 per cent of the entire international trade (Chen et al., 2014). Every year, countless jobs and billions of dollars in sales revenue and taxes are lost to counterfeit markets (Furnham and Valgeirsson, 2007). Over the past decade, the counterfeit industry has grown at an exponential rate of 1,700 per cent and has a current market value of about $500 billion (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2008). According to the assessment of the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), the combined value of global trade of all merchandise in pirated and counterfeit products is nearly $250 billion (OECD, 2007).

Research studies have examined the issue of production of counterfeit consumer goods mainly from three perspectives: ethical considerations (Belk et al., 2005; Fukukawa, 2002; Gupta et al., 2004; Hilton et al., 2004; Tan, 2002); consumers' demographic
attributes affecting counterfeiting (Gentry et al., 2006; Pendergast et al., 2002; Nia and Zaichkowsky, 2000), and approaches for restricting counterfeiting (Green and Smith, 2002; Krechevsky, 2000; Myles and Nusser, 2006). In addition, there is a steady rise in research focusing on the factors motivating consumers to consume counterfeits deliberately (Gentry et al., 2001; Nia and Zaichkowsky, 2000; Wilcox, Kim and Sen, 2009; Wilke and Zaichkowsky, 1999).

For the last two decades, subsequent to market expansion and awareness about branded items, there has also been growth of research studies on consumption of counterfeit products in Pakistan. The intent of this study is to expand this particular area of literature by qualitatively studying the linkage between the concepts of counterfeit consumption, self-identity and self-image. Earlier research has mostly revolved around either the consumers of genuine products or the owners of fake counterfeits (Abid and Abbasi, 2014; Rizwan et al., 2013; Chaudary et al., 2014; Saeed, Nazim, and Abbas 2016). In contrast, this study focuses on the consumers who, despite having the financial means to purchase and consume original apparel, intentionally buy and publically exhibit their counterfeit purchases.

This study is organized in three main sections. The first section comprehensively reviews the relevant literature on counterfeit consumption and self-identity construction. The second section discusses the qualitative techniques employed for the study. The last section, the crux of the present research, examines the themes emerging from respondents' interviews, highlights the main findings and presents conclusions and avenues for further research.

Building Identity through Consumption

The needs, wants, and practices of humans can be understood better if their consumption ideologies and patterns are studied. From the perspective of a postmodern society, Penaloza (2000) noted, “there is a shift from labor to consumption as the site of identity and political agency” (p. 106). Contemporary literature on marketing processes regards consumers as distinct and multifaceted individuals who can produce cultural meanings by means of their own experiences (Kozinets, 2001; Holt, 2002). Through their consumption, consumers can select any kind of identity from a set of social identities and can do or discard it anytime without any apprehension (Belk and Costa, 1998; Firatand Venkatesh, 1995).

People’s belongings comprise an essential part of their identity. The objects possessed by someone “act as clues for definition to be used by that person and by others through interaction” (Perez, Castaño, and Quintanilla, 2010, p. 220). Belongings enable
individuals to manifest their extended personality and allow them to construct their desired self-identity and create a certain culture of consumption (Kozinets, 2001; Celsi, Rose and Leigh, 1993; Belk, 1988). This is especially pertinent to the belongings that are hedonic in nature – such as fashion products and gadgets – whose purchase decision process is significantly shaped by their hidden symbolic meanings (Perez et al., 2010).

Sociological studies acknowledge the multidimensionality of identity, affirming it as an array of diverse but closely associated self-perceptions (Stryker, 1989). Human identity takes account of a collection of images that manifest how people see themselves and others (Arnould, Price and Zinkham, 2004). Individuals are motivated by these self-images to consume goods with images related in a meaningful manner to that of their own self-images (Commuri, 2009).

Consumers always have openly and creatively rebelled against socio-cultural principles by consuming, altering, or refusing products in an attempt to exhibit their self-identify; these days this consumer reaction has turned into a mass phenomenon (Perez et al., 2010). The unrestricted and more self-governing characteristics of consumerism have gradually led to an increase in the recognition of consumption as a source of expression (Smith, Fisher and Cole, 2007). However, building the desired self-identity does not follow a straight path; the contradictory goals of consumers may perhaps convert into oppositional, paradoxical, and ambivalent behaviours (Arnould and Thompson, 2005).

There are certain images linked with luxury goods, and those individuals who wish to identify themselves with these images might actually consume them (Tang, Tian and Zaichkowsky, 2014). The question that arises here is what about those individuals who do not have the financial prowess or who do not wish to pay the costs of high-end luxury goods? Surely, consumption of counterfeits of luxury goods may appear to be a better alternative for such people (Bian and Moutinho, 2009; Wong and Ahuvia, 1998).

**Motivations for Seeking Counterfeits**

To explore the consumption experiences of consumers, social scientists have adopted the metaphor of “theater” (Goffman, 1959; Arnould and Price, 1993; Celsi et al., 1993; Kim and Karpova, 2010; Moisio and Arnould, 2005; Zavattaro, 2013). These studies argue that life is a theater where individuals use dress and objects to create a social setting in which they perform as actors before an audience of significant others (Zavattaro, 2013). There is an exchange of meanings that takes place between a person’s inner self-identity and social self-identity; luxury goods are often used as symbols in this exchange (Belk, 1988; Commuri, 2009; Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967; McCracken, 1986).
The theater metaphor can contribute significantly in comprehending human motivations for consumption of counterfeit luxury goods. It suggests that the actors (consumers) may reject the use of original props and switch to counterfeits if their consumption allows individuals to perform before a valued audience more convincingly (Perez et al., 2010). By using deceptive means of actively projecting their preferred social self-image, consumers may also construct and reinforce their own identity (Tang et al., 2014). These studies, however, raise some questions: for instance, does the consumption of counterfeits assist people in constructing a confident self-identity? Can ethically dubious behaviour result in a positive outcome?

The Self Theory emphasizes the “set of perceptions an individual has for himself and the perceptions of relationships he has with others and other aspects of life” (Goffman, 1959). Researchers claim that the purchase and consumption experience of counterfeit luxury products enables consumers to construct a self-image in which they visualize themselves as pleasure-seeking people who have a love for fun, and also as savvy consumers who try to make the most of their limited resources (Kozinets, 2001; Penaloza, 2000). In accordance with the Self Theory (Newcomb, 1956; Strauss, 1959), it is implied that counterfeit luxury goods’ consumption allows the consumer to construct a social self-identity by fooling their valued others (Perez et al., 2010). By purchasing low-priced counterfeits and acting as if they are using genuine articles, consumers aspire to get themselves associated with the aura of luxury goods, take advantage of their esteemed image, and refuse to pay the high costs of originals (Tang et al., 2014). Thus, consumption of counterfeit luxury goods provides consumers with an opportunity to express their self-concepts in a desired manner and reap the benefits of social approval (Wilcox et al., 2009).

When consumers purchase counterfeit luxury goods, they are presented with two apparently opposing rewards. On one hand, they are externally able to project an appearance of a well-to-do person who belongs to the higher social strata; while on the other hand, they internally experience the joy of adventure by fooling others (non-fashion people) into thinking that they are using original brands (Celsi et al., 1993; Tang et al., 2014; Wilcox et al., 2009). Though the inner self-concept and the projected social self-image may not be in agreement with each other, their merger contributes to the construction of a person’s own identity (Perez et al., 2010). Self-image, personality, and values are nothing but abstract ideas that transpire and take a concrete shape through people’s interests, behaviour and the commodities they own and use (Belk, 1988). The choice of an appropriate research context has a strong influence on the capacity of a study to affect consumer theory.

Research in the Context of Pakistan

The present research was carried out in the Rawalpindi-Islamabad metropolitan area of Pakistan, which as of May 2012 had a population of around 3.1 million (Pakistan
Economic Survey, 2013). The per capita income of this area is $1,641 (in 2018), and the percentage of the population of this region that belongs to the higher class of the social hierarchy is 8.8 percent as opposed to 7.8 percent for Pakistan as a whole (Tahir et al., 2014).

All over the country, and especially in Rawalpindi and Islamabad, the consumption of branded apparel and their cheap counterfeits is a common practice (Mir, Rizwan, and Saboor, 2012). Exclusive stores in these two cities sell local and international branded apparel. At the same time, counterfeits of these apparels are easily available at flea markets, small shops, street markets and even in large shopping malls. Neither governmental or private organizations have ever published any official figures that estimate what amount of total displayed branded apparel is counterfeit in reality. However, in view of the asymmetric distribution of wealth and low levels of per capita income, it can be assumed that a substantial percentage of apparel are unlawful duplicates. As a nation, Pakistan ranks high (with 51 points) on Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimension of power distance, which explains how the people of a nation deal with the uneven distribution of power, prestige and wealth. Hofstede characterized Pakistan as an elitist society in which only a certain group of people has access to all material resources and where people try to gain power and exploit others as much as they can. The values of such a society can be a reason behind the willingness of its members to purchase both genuine high-end products and their illegal copies.

Methodology

Prior research has mostly revolved around either the consumers of genuine products or the owners of fake counterfeits (Ahuvia, Gistri, Romani, and Pace, 2013). In contrast, this study focuses on consumers who, despite having the financial means to purchase and consume original apparel, intentionally buy and publicly exhibit their illegal counterfeits. Since this study intends to control effects of the obvious price advantage, those consumers who did not have access to the financial resources for buying original apparel were eliminated from the sample.

Research in the domain of consumer behaviour has not yet identified factors that can precisely identify motivations for counterfeit luxury goods' consumption using a survey approach (Wilcox et al., 2009). Considering this limitation, the present study used in-depth interviews as a qualitative technique to obtain data and explore this area in light of consumers' narratives. Interviews were conducted only with women because findings of prior research show that contrary to men, women tend to develop stronger relationships with fashion and fashion products (Thompson and Haykto, 1997; Sparke, 1995).
Moreover, it seems that women are more brand-conscious than men usually are (Sparke, 1995).

This project was carried out within a two-year time-period, from May 2015 to June 2017. The sampling process started by identifying consumers that meet all demands (regular buyers of counterfeit apparel) of the study and whom the researcher also knew personally. The snowball sampling technique was then applied through which these consumers were asked to suggest other potential respondents that have purchasing habits similar to theirs – buying of counterfeit apparel. Regardless of repeated assurances about respondents’ anonymity, it was challenging to recruit them in the sample due to the sensitive topic of the study. On various occasions, candidates believed to possess all attributes of an ideal participant, turned down the request for an interview, claiming that they only purchase original apparel.

Thirty-six female consumers, varying from 21 to 58 years of age, were extensively interviewed. Each interview was about 20 to 50 minutes long and was audio-recorded on a mobile phone. The mobile phone was used as a recorder only and not for taking pictures. The pattern of interviews was as follows: first, the interviewer generally discussed fashion trends, then talked about branded apparel, and finally shifted the focus towards the consumption of counterfeit apparel. The interviewer inquired about the motivations, expectations, attitudes, and perceptions of consumers before, during, and after the process of the purchase and consumption of counterfeit apparel.

**Respondents' Narratives**

Table 1 below provides an overview of women interviewed for this study. Fourteen of the younger women (less than 30 years old) were either studying in a university or had recently started working somewhere. Twenty-two women (more than 30 years old) were married; nineteen had children, and were either housewives, employees, or entrepreneurs.

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Family Status</th>
<th>No. of children</th>
<th>Monthly Household income (Rs.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aliya</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Air hostess</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>120000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambreen</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>100000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amtul</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Dentist</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>135000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anwa</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>University student</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>65000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arifa</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Banker</td>
<td>Engaged</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>80000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Asma 49 Beauty parlor owner Married 4 200000
Bina 47 Housewife Widowed 4 65000
Farhana 24 University student Single 0 85000
Hajira 30 Engineer Married 0 60000
Humay 24 Nurse Single 0 45000
Humay 24 University student Single 0 90000
Iqra 28 Fashion designer Single 0 100000
Jamila 42 Housewife Married 2 90000
Kirn 51 Banker Married 2 160000
Mariam 27 Real estate agent Single 0 150000
Mehr 22 University student Single 0 90000
Mehreen 43 Housewife Married 1 100000
Munazza 21 University student Single 0 60000
Nadia 26 Call center agent Single 0 80000
Naheed 56 Housewife Married 4 140000
Naila 58 Housewife Married 4 150000
Nida 42 Architect Married 1 180000
Nusrat 49 College lecturer Married 4 70000
Qudsia 33 Real estate agent Married 1 130000
Qurat 38 Housewife Married 2 120000
Rehana 51 Hand Embroider Married 3 100000
Sadia 41 Housewife Married 3 120000
Safia 24 University student Single 0 160000
Saher 45 Professor Married 2 220000
Sameena 32 Marketing Manager Married 1 80000
Sandila 36 Housewife Married 4 80000
Shazia 40 Housewife Married 5 150000
Tayyaba 42 Housewife Married 0 90000
Zahra 36 Librarian Widowed 0 80000
Zaina 24 Student and Banker Single 0 120000

The interviews were carried out during a period of 11 weeks (February 2016 to April 2016) in the homes of the respondents. To allow for a holistic perspective, the interviewer took help from experts in qualitative methodology before and after the interview process. The direction of analysis was defined and redefined through the help of memoing or the discussion and interchange of interpretations. The study followed a cyclical process as proposed by Thompson et al. (1994) according to which the qualitative text is divided into
certain parts, each of which was first construed individually and then re-construed in connection with the developing sense of the whole. In order to identify emerging themes, the data were classified into certain groups and comparisons made between the accounts of different respondents. In the end, the linkage between these accounts was analyzed so that it could be determined what goals respondents tried to pursue through the consumption of counterfeit apparel.

Themes Emerging from the Interviews

Pertaining to the subject of counterfeit apparel’s consumption and creation of a self-image and social self-identity, three main themes have come to light through data analysis. The first one is ‘to be efficient by utilizing limited resources to the fullest’, the second is ‘feeling of excitement and to have fun by going through enjoyment and adventure’, and the third is ‘to mislead others by making it believe that they (respondents) are wearing originals’. Each of these three themes is discussed in detail in this section.

(1) To be efficient in utilizing limited resources to the fullest

Irrespective of the age or occupation of respondents, an attribute commonly shared by most of them was their interest, know-how, and involvement in fashion. These respondents described themselves as clever, highly proficient shoppers, while at the same time they were ready to expend large sums of money to purchase branded apparel. It seems like these two characteristics, when combined together, are a source of great pride for them. The respondents provided various examples to show how efficiently and rationally they make decisions and what specific goals they try to achieve through owning counterfeit apparel:

“What’s the need of buying the over-priced originals when you can easily get the fake ones from the Rabi Center or China Market? Yes, sometimes I do buy the classic originals which always remain in fashion, like Sana Safinaz and Omer Saeed’s prints; but mostly I prefer to save money and buy their replicas.”

A number of the participants, especially those in their 40s, stated that when the original apparel is viewed as expensive and popular, and purchasing it is therefore regarded as a “bad investment”, people tend to buy their counterfeits. Some others stated that counterfeits give one an opportunity to try different price apparel brands in a less financially risky manner; unlike the originals, they do not demand any special care or attention while travelling or doing household chores.

The participants had a lot of expertise in counterfeit shopping as they frequently mentioned how counterfeit apparel comes in different types of quality and detailed what
set of characteristics each type has. This was also evident from the below mentioned statement:

“The copied apparel [. . .] are available [. . .] at three prices – Rs. 4,500, Rs. 2,500, and Rs. 1,500. The quality of the Rs. 4,500 suit is the best as it gives the impression of being the original. The fabric of the other two prices’ suits is not good; it is see-through and nondurable.”

A few respondents who bought copied apparel more often than others labelled themselves as shopping experts, and also reported that they get great pleasure from being considered as such by their family and close friends. The appreciation which these regular buyers receive, plays a major role in the creation of their desired social self-image. They proudly claimed that only expert shoppers like them have the skills to purchase really good counterfeit apparel:

“My friends often take me for shopping or they give me money to buy replica apparel for them. They say, “no one knows them as much as you [. . .] and you are very good at picking them”.

2. Feeling of excitement and to have fun

The desire to act against the norms, to have enjoyment, adventure, and craziness, emerged as major themes in the domain of the consumption of counterfeit apparel. The majority of the respondents, irrespective of their frequency of purchase or age group, frequently stated that they derive enjoyment and adventure from the process of buying counterfeit apparel.

“Like James Bond movies [. . .] shopkeepers in Rawalpindi’s bazaars smartly move a sliding wall and at its back they have stored all the copied apparel. They show you the copies and then put them behind the wall again. Frankly saying, [. . .] it’s really exciting”. 

The counterfeit apparel purchase experience becomes more memorable when there is a sense of adventure associated with it. In Pakistan, there is no stigma attached to the use of counterfeits; the law also does not punish people for buying them, yet many participants stated that the presence of police or people belonging to the elite class added a thrill to their shopping experience:

“I got very nervous when those (apparently affluent) ladies entered the shop. I felt as if I was doing something prohibited or classless. As they went away, I was like –
be quick, show me the copied apparel before they come back. It was indeed a mixture of nervousness and adventure that time”. 

While recalling certain instances when respondents went for counterfeit apparel shopping, often with their friends or family, most of them smiled and some even laughed during the interviews. A bond, it seems, is created between them through sharing of this mischief. These experiences also translate into memorable tales for some participants, which they can share with those in their social circle:

“Once I along with all my class fellows, went to Sarafa Bazar for buying replicas. Just imagine it! It was one of the craziest day of my life – full-on enjoyment and madness”.

“I have everything – from expensive originals to cheaper copies. [. . .] I went to a branded outlet wearing a copied suit and asked the salesman to show the same like mine. No one there noted that my suit was a counterfeit. I was like wow! – Memorable experience.”

These consumers were keen to experience the counterfeit shopping process again because it helped them to realize their aspirations and consequently generate positive feelings. The study participants narrated how they had purchased counterfeit apparel on different occasions in both the Rawalpindi-Islamabad region and other cities. When questioned whether they would like to purchase them again in the future, some of them replied emphatically, while all of them answered affirmatively:

“I don’t tell my daughters about my visits to flea markets anymore. Last time they got very angry after learning that I went there for buying counterfeits. They said I will bring shame to the family. [. . .] They will never understand my love and excitement for it”.

Thus, emotions resulting from the repeated shopping process of counterfeit apparel play a key role in helping consumers to construct and enhance their self-identity. Participants bring this process to a close by imagining themselves as people who love fun.

3. To mislead others

Consumers obtain a range of benefits – tangible, emblematic, and sometimes self-conflicting – through the ownership of counterfeit apparel. They are able to mislead others whom they want to impress and at the same time get acceptance from the group they aspire to belong to. This point was voiced very well by one of the respondents when she stated:
“And to a certain extent everyone wants to make a fool out of somebody. Tell me one who does not like to do this”.

The younger participants more frequently mentioned the desire to get accepted by a reference group. They viewed counterfeit apparel as an instrument which could be used to achieve the desired membership. The need for belongingness was not only important for the younger generation; many of the older respondents – often mothers – also recognized it:

“Our society dictates what kinds of brands people having a certain status should buy [. . .]. And if they buy the opposites, they will lose their status. [. . .] So there is a constant pressure on us”.

Regardless of coming from different socioeconomic backgrounds, all respondents shared a common objective: to wear counterfeit apparel while making others believe they are originals. They hoped to hide from their valued audience the legitimacy of the dresses they wore. Some of them took advantage of their material possessions, social status, and physical characteristics to signal their financial capacity to buy original apparel, and thus they expected that people would not doubt them:

“I wanted a certain print of Nishat and it was out of stock everywhere in Islamabad. [. . .] and my sister-in-law said, “Why not buy its copy instead? When you step out of your Prado, no one will ever think you are wearing a copy (laughs). Come on, you can easily fool anybody”.

For consumers of counterfeit apparel, there is a constant trade-off between the risk of being caught as owners of counterfeits and the risk of not belonging to a certain group, both of which can harm their coveted social self-identity. A highly undesirable outcome mentioned, especially by the younger participants, was the fear of being embarrassed in public. The participants mostly chose to take the risk of being discovered because the desire of associating with the group was important to them. However, they expected to minimize this risk by ensuring that the acquired counterfeit apparel is apparently of high quality:

“I’ve tried many cheap counterfeit outfits in the past and they made me look really clumsy. [. . .] so now I only buy the super well-made ones” (Kiran, age 43).

The respondents discussed examples of certain people whom they personally knew that were made fun of and labelled as frauds just because the goods they were flaunting as genuine articles were discovered to be counterfeits. During the interviews, one of the respondents shared an interesting urban myth:
“Nadia is my friend and she is crazy about handbags. Someone stole Nadia’s purse while she was having dinner. She got furious, threatened to sue the hotel; and left without paying the bill. Nadia had a big laugh. Later, the hotel recovered the purse and learnt that it was a replica [ . . . ] such a humiliation.”

A question which arises here is whether the counterfeit consumers actually believe that the meanings of the originals can be transferred to counterfeits or whether they carry counterfeit apparel just to impress their significant others? Mixed responses were obtained for this question from most of the respondents:

“A fake remains a fake even if no one catches it. You can’t compare the feeling of wearing originals with that of counterfeits. You can pretend [ . . . ] but subconsciously you know it’s a fake”.

“Especially when it’s a well-made replica, I get exactly the same feeling. As if I have purchased it from a branded outlet. I enjoy fooling my own self (smiles)”.

It seems that the ability of consumers to agree genuinely to the role they carry out in society, greatly determines their responses towards counterfeits. For many participants, the purchase of counterfeit apparel acted as an opportunity to fulfill the utilitarian objective of building and projecting a much loved social self-concept. They endeavoured to transfer the images of genuine apparel to their copies and made them a part of their extended personality.

In conclusion, the three themes discussed here described how the consumption of counterfeit apparel allows consumers to derive different types of gains which serve as building blocks in the creation and projection of a self-identity.

The savvy consumer: Connecting the themes

The general impression received during the interviews and their analysis was that most of the study participants are “savvy consumers”. That is, they are knowledgeable individuals who wisely purchase counterfeit apparel to build and boast their desired identity; enjoy themselves during the course of this process; develop feelings of self-satisfaction towards its end; and most importantly, have deeper understandings of the norms and order of their society:

“The fashion industry creates an illusion, a certain image, in the minds of people and pushes them to go after it. When we buy counterfeits, basically we are playing their game, but in an economical manner”.
It is suggested that these well-informed consumers may go for deception by acquiring alternate inexpensive apparel produced by the counterfeit industry. They mislead others and at the same time try to achieve the images projected by branded apparel and benefit by incorporating them within their ‘self’.

“I doubt the counterfeit business will ever stop. Smart people purchase and will keep on purchasing them. [. . .] why would they buy the same thing at exorbitant prices?”

These savvy consumers make their own rules by deciding to wear both lower-priced counterfeit apparel and prestigious originals. They achieve their socialization goals through the aura of branded apparel and enjoy the experience of something unusual, as well as being labelled expert and efficient through counterfeits.

Discussion

In line with the prior studies that stressed the role of material belongings in the creation of self-concept, stories narrated by participants revealed that this same process also takes place when people purposely acquire and carry luxury counterfeits. Just like the Confucian consumers examined by Chan (2008), this study’s participants have publicly used the counterfeits of original branded apparel as symbolic goods with the aim of expressing their position within the social hierarchy.

In accordance with mainstream economics literature, consumers constantly struggle to utilize their limited resources to the fullest level. Furthermore, by realizing that a maximum level has been achieved, they derive emotional gain and benefit from it. They enhance their self-esteem by viewing themselves as efficient decision makers. The findings find support in prior research, which emphasized that by getting the best deal for their money, counterfeit consumers act wisely (Gentry et al., 2001). The results predominantly suggest that internalization of these actions contributes to the construction of a confident self-identity for consumers.

By purchasing and consuming branded apparel counterfeits, the study participants go against the norms of the social and economic game and experience positive emotions. The desire for forbidden products the “contraband factor” (Cox et al., 1990), was evident among the participants when they frequently cited the words “adventure” and “enjoyment” to describe their experiences with counterfeits. Similar to Wilke and Zaichkowsky’s (1999) conclusions, the current findings indicate that to consumers who will not pay for genuine apparel, counterfeits provide elevated positive feelings. Besides, findings suggest that not just the end product of counterfeit consumption experience, but also that each of the four
stages involved in the process - pre-consumption, purchase, consumption, and recalled consumption - is pleasurable (Arnould et al., 2002). That is, apart from enjoying the social self-identity constructed through counterfeit apparel consumption, consumers also take pleasure in experiencing the thrill and risk associated with counterfeit shopping and the feeling of being wiser than those they want to impress.

When participants decide to wear publicly counterfeit apparel, they agree to take the inherent risk of losing face in the desire of gaining social acceptance. If risk is defined as the magnitude of gains and losses an event will entail, combined with its probability of occurrence (Douglas, 1994), it seems that participants were willing to make a high-risk decision because achieving social approval is considered as an important gain. Moreover, because of their self-concept of being counterfeit apparel experts, participants perceived less chance of being caught.

In the Asian context, self-definition and behaviour are greatly influenced by the concept of ‘face’ (Earley, 1997), which signifies an individual’s feeling of prestige and reputation within multiple social circles (Wong and Ahuvia, 1998). Consumers are afraid of facing peer ridicule or social ostracism if caught using counterfeit apparel, and it is especially true when they belong to the middle and higher classes of the social hierarchy (Ram and Sheth, 1989; Gentry et al., 2006). This study noted that well-off participants agreed to take the risk despite the fear of losing social face because they believed that by purchasing and sporting the best quality counterfeit apparel, they will be able to deceive others easily.

Even though participants did not know each other personally, they shared similar kinds of feelings and stories that gave meaning to their consumption experiences and mentioned discussions with family and friends regarding the issue of counterfeit apparel consumption. In this sense, through using the images of original apparel along with their fake counterfeits to create meanings for others and for themselves, participants may be seen as exercising communal consumption and belonging to a culture of consumption (Algesheimer and Gurau, 2008; Kozinets, 2001).

The results emphasize that branded apparel counterfeits enable their consumers to achieve three fundamental goals: first, to get recognized as efficient shoppers who make the most of their resources and are knowledgeable about both, originals and their copies; second, to take pleasure in experiencing the unusual process of counterfeit shopping while bearing the risk of being caught and losing face; third, to mislead others into believing that the apparel they are showing off is original and hope not to get caught as counterfeit product users. The satisfaction of these goals seems to help the consumers of counterfeit apparel in creating a positive self-concept through which they are able to view themselves as
savvy individuals. By expressing these goals, participants gave the impression that they deeply understand their association with a materialistic society and the market factors that affect it, and use this knowledge in search of a self-identity.

The purchase and consumption process of counterfeit apparel results in strong and pleasing emotions for consumers, and therefore they like to experience it repeatedly. By repeating this process, they try to satisfy their goals, reinforce their identity, and present themselves to others.

The findings show that apart from people of low-income group social strata, the owners of the original apparel buy counterfeit apparel as well. Moreover, the purchase and consumption of counterfeit apparel provide real and symbolic benefits to these individuals, which contribute to the creation of their identity and projection of their desired social self-images.

The Anti-Counterfeit and Infringement Forum (ACIF), established in the year 2005, is a national organization in Pakistan bringing together stakeholders to combat Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs) violations. The problem of counterfeit apparel is a virus on the fashion industry plaguing markets around the world, and inflicting losses on consumers, legitimate business and national exchequers. There have been a number of campaigns to discourage piracy of different merchandise in Pakistan, yet the fashion industry is unable to weed out this bug from the markets.

Conclusions

Although the production and sale of counterfeit apparel are illegal and their purchase is ethically dubious, and in most cases secret, study participants described certain important benefits that can be enjoyed through their ownership: first, to be efficient by utilizing limited resources to the fullest; second, to have fun by going through risk, enjoyment and adventure; and third, to mislead others by hiding the reality of their clothes. However, most importantly, when consumers of counterfeit branded apparel successfully accomplish these inner goals, there are able to construct a confident self-identity through which they portray themselves as savvy consumers to others.

From a practical standpoint, this study can enhance the understanding of the reasons that encourage consumers to purchase and publicly exhibit counterfeit apparel. The insights generated through interviews can facilitate the apparel manufacturers to tap into the psyche and motivations of consumers who purchase counterfeit apparel and can provide them with guidelines to attract and retain consumers. From a theoretical
standpoint, the present study can enrich and update the existing body of knowledge regarding the consumption of counterfeit luxury products.

The findings of this study present some practical implications relevant to the marketing context. Companies around the globe are increasingly recognizing the need to make shopping experiences more rewarding for consumers. Results suggest that consumers go through a lot of enjoyment and adventure while buying branded apparel counterfeits which makes their shopping experience unique and memorable. Manufacturers and retailers of branded apparel should learn from this and strive to create more rewarding and singular experiences. Furthermore, retailers should educate consumers by running advertising campaigns to highlight the potential social, ethical, and legal hazards associated with counterfeiting and consumption of counterfeit apparel (Ha and Lennon, 2006).

Limitations and Recommendations

Even though it was expected that convincing counterfeit apparel’s consumers interviewed would be challenging, the researcher faced a lot more difficulty in reality. While making lists of potential interviewees, it was ensured that all of them had purchased counterfeit apparel at some occasion; yet when contacted, a lot of them claimed that they buy only originals and refused to participate. It looks as if either these consumers were afraid of losing face before the researcher or they lacked the confidence to defend their counterfeit purchases. Many younger individuals who refused to participate were more open; they agreed to purchase counterfeit apparel but expressed their discomfort in being interviewed on this topic. Future researchers are advised to avoid this limitation by employing alternate ethnographic techniques – such as blog analysis – which would allow them to question those counterfeit consumers who are difficult to reach individually. It is very possible that those who did not want to participate in the study would have different responses from those who were willing to participate, which may be a significant limitation of the study. The results of this study show only the responses of the consumers who were willing to let others know that they purchased counterfeits.

With respect to the consumption of counterfeit apparel, is it possible to propose that consumers feel and behave in the same way despite coming from different cultures and socio-economic strata. Belk et al. (2005) found that both cultural and socio-economic backgrounds affect consumers’ perceptions of consumption ethics – although to a lesser degree than what they had originally expected. Future researchers should therefore replicate this study with participants from different countries and layers of the socio-economic hierarchy in the hope of achieving new evidence.
In addition, it would be significant to examine the longitudinal effects on current findings for extension of the counterfeit consumption theory. Algesheimer and Gurau (2008) argued in their study that consumption of goods is a dynamic process, characterized by repeated interactions between individuals and their community at large. Assuming the instability of consumers’ behaviour, it would be interesting to examine how changes in respondents’ behaviours, attitudes, and perceptions over a period of time might affect their consumption practices.

References


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Dr. Atif Bilal is an Assistant Professor at SZABIST, Islamabad campus. He has a PhD in Management Sciences from Bahria University, Islamabad. His research interests focus on organizational behavior, consumer behavior, creativity and innovation.

Dr. Wisal Ahmed is an Assistant Professor of Marketing at Institute of Business Studies, Kohat University of Science and Technology. Dr Wisal has a PhD from SZABIST and has a post-doc from the University of Kentucky, USA. Dr. Wisal has interests in using both quantitative and qualitative research methods and is currently supervising students who are working on complex phenomenon employing quantitative and qualitative techniques.

Dr. Shumaila Zeb is an Assistant Professor at Shaheed Zulfikar Ali Bhutto Institute of Science and Technology, Islamabad. Her research interests focus on financial risk management, women empowerment, and workplace harassment.