

Counterfeit Luxury Goods – Effects on the Brand Image and Exclusivity Perception

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ABSTRACT

As counterfeits of luxury brands threaten the authenticity of genuine brands, this study considers, in the context of a quantitative analysis, the impact exposure to good and bad counterfeits has on the perception of the exclusivity and the brand image of genuine luxury brands. The monolithic concept of brand image is split into the four dimensions of quality, price, aesthetics, and tradition, which are key aspects of any luxury brand. This study contributes to the existing literature by offering a current look at the post-Covid situation regarding the impacts of counterfeiting in the luxury market in Central Europe, i.e., Germany, from a multi-faceted perspective. It establishes that for quality and aesthetics perceptions, counterfeits do not harm the brand image of genuine luxury items. In contrast, they strengthen the consumer-brand relationship. For brands, these results imply that while counterfeits decrease their profits, they also could increase brand loyalty.

1. Introduction

Increased sales in the luxury industry, with a growth rate of 4.13% from 2022 to 2023 and an estimated annual growth rate of 4.73% from 2023 to 2030 (Fortune Business Insights, 2024), show an increasing interest in luxury goods, an increasing perceived need to acquire goods that signify social status (Ho & Wong, 2023, Wang & Griskevicius, 2014), and allow access to more prestigious circles of society. These results are backed by a preliminary study on the demand for luxury items, showing that 58.12% quoted the higher quality of luxury items, and 23.25% directly refer to reasons of prestige and status. Three-quarters of the participants (76.46%) quote self-gratification as the reason behind the purchase of luxury items, which at least indirectly supports the quality aspect (Lawry, 2022, Mundorf, 2020).

On the other hand, developments like high inflation rates, in particular in Central Europe, over more than two years, result in lower purchasing power in the population (Meynhert, 2023). A representative study indicated that almost half of the participants had already purchased counterfeit luxury goods intentionally (49.7%) or unintentionally (14.7%), i.e., they retained doubts whether the purchased items were genuine (Mundorf, 2020). Asked about the main

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reason behind their purchase, 73.91% of those who have already purchased counterfeit luxury products quote the reduced price, and 19.41% refer in one way or another to the sufficient price-quality relationship (Kassim et al., 2021, Mundorf, 2020, Singh et al., 2021).

Combining these conflicting development trends, the currently observed increasingly high level of detected and estimated sales of counterfeited luxury goods estimated between two and four trillion US dollars (Inside Luxury, 2023, TFL, 2023) comes as no surprise.

The counterfeit product benefits from the good reputation of the original manufacturer. ‘The price of an original product also includes considerable development costs that have to be invested to guarantee the quality and safe use of the products,’ explains Volker Bartels (APM, 2024). It is no longer just luxury watches or handbags that are affected. Until now, counterfeit products have been socially acceptable in Germany, and consumers have regarded them as a trivial offence, disregarding that product and brand piracy also impacts employees. The increasing activities jeopardize existing jobs in the long term, starting a vicious circle.

While the motivation of consumers to purchase counterfeit luxury items is already well researched (Butt et al., 2023, Khan et al., 2021, Wilcox et al., 2009), the effects resulting from the presence of an increasing number of counterfeit products on the perception of the affected brands remain distinctly under-researched. Since the business model of a luxury brand necessitates an image of exclusivity, high quality, and, in general, a positive perception of the brand (Dubois et al., 2001, Thieme, 2017, 17) with legitimately high prices, this topic bears a strong potential for research. Especially within Germany, where the issue has not yet gained societal acknowledgment, understanding consumers’ perceptions and the effects their actions cause are of utmost relevance.

Since generations Y and Z, with birth years ranging from 1979 to 2010, started to enter the labour markets and increasingly acquired the monetary means to consume luxury items, this study picks up on the introduced problem. It implements the results from a preliminary study to consider whether the mere presence of counterfeit items has an effect on the perception of genuine items.

Since not all sectors of the luxury industry are affected equally strongly by the increase in counterfeit goods, and in some sectors, counterfeiting is very hard, e.g., cars or beverages, or almost impossible, e.g., tourism, this study will restrict itself mainly to the sector of personal luxury items. In this sector, counterfeit products will still fulfil the signalling function of high status and prestige, even if they are qualitatively inferior.

Thus, in the next section, a review of the existing literature is presented, establishing the link between counterfeit consumption and the presence of counterfeit items on the one hand and brand perception on the other. The third section motivates the underlying research design, including the studied hypotheses, as well as introduces the implemented data sources and their original conception.

The fourth section presents the research results and discusses them in light of the background of the existing literature. The fifth and final section concludes and thereby presents recommendations for brands on how to approach the increase in counterfeit items while stabilizing their brand’s perception.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Counterfeiting and Luxury Brands – A Literature Review

Khan et al. (2021) provide a current review of the literature on the consumption of counterfeit luxury goods. They report, that many studies have considered key perspectives on the micro-, meso- and macro-level (Bian & Moutinho, 2009, Eisend & Schuchert-Güler, 2006, Phau & Teah, 2009) and theories (Wilcox et al., 2009) of counterfeit consumption. They focused on psychographic (Phau & Teah, 2009), demographic (Bian & Moutinho, 2009), micro- and macro-social factors (Phau & Teah, 2009), as well as marketing (Bian & Moutinho, 2011), behavioural (Bian & Moutinho, 2011), and situational factors (Davidson et al., 2017). All of these studies address, however, the intention and willingness to purchase counterfeit items.

Hardly any studies, i.e., those detailed in Table 1, address consumer outcomes. These studies can furthermore be divided into those studies considering outcomes resulting from consumers' consumption of counterfeit items (Amaral & Loken, 2016) and those resulting from the mere presence of counterfeit products on the market (Alves de Barros, 2023). Aside from the studies summarized in Table 1, the issue currently remains under-researched, even considering the increase in the consumption of counterfeit luxury goods and the potential economic consequences resulting from this trend.

Table 1.

Articles addressing Consumer Outcomes - A Synopsis

Authors	Title	Insights
Amaral and Loken (2016)	Viewing usage of counterfeit luxury goods - Social identity and social hierarchy effects on dilution and enhancement of genuine luxury brands	Consumption of counterfeit products only impacts brand perception if the counterfeits are consumed by consumers from lower social classes.
Commuri (2009)	The impact of counterfeiting on original-item consumers' brand relationships	Exposure to counterfeits can lead to brand abandonment or stronger brand support.
Nia and Zaichkowsky (2000)	Do counterfeits devalue the ownership of luxury brands?	Exposure to counterfeits does not impact the value, satisfaction, or status perception of genuine products. Ownership of counterfeits does not impact the valuation of original items.
Hieke (2010)	Effects of counterfeits on the image of luxury brands - An empirical study from the customer perspective	Exposure to counterfeits does not affect attitudes toward genuine luxury brands and does not decrease their luxuriousness.
Alves de Barros (2023)	The influence of counterfeit products on the performance of luxury brands	The presence of counterfeits does not affect perceptions of the exclusivity, prestige, and trustworthiness of genuine brands.

Amaral and Loken (2016), while addressing the issue of this study, focus primarily on the social background of the people displaying counterfeit items and those who are exposed to the displays. Furthermore, they implemented the affection resulting from counterfeit exposure via changes in brand prestige and overall attitude towards the brand.

The study by Commuri (2009), while excellent in its execution, focuses not on luxury brands per se but on premium brands, and they put the focus of their study on Thailand and India and thus on South and East Asia.

The focus of the study by Nia and Zaichkowsky (2000) lies on the ownership of counterfeit and genuine items. Furthermore, they measure impacts on brand perception via the dimensions of value, satisfaction, and status, which only cover part of the spectrum of luxury characteristics. Finally, their sample, conveniently drawn from among Canadian luxury consumers, represents primarily the Northern American cultural region.

The study by Hieke (2010) is closest to the perceived objective of this article, however, in this study, the brand image is considered a monolithic block that is not split up further into disjunct dimensions of luxury, it asks about the level of luxury in general. The sample for this study is drawn from the German population.

The downside of the study by Alves de Barros (2023), while being a well-executed graduate thesis focusing on European consumers, only queries participants with a yes-or-no question about whether their perception of counterfeits has impacted their perception of luxury brands.

The literature review that summarizes the current state of the research, indicates that while studies on European consumers exist, they suffer from a one-dimensional perception of the brand image. The only study to take a more detailed view (Nia & Zaichkowsky, 2000) does not consider the common characteristics of luxury brands, as introduced in summarized form by Dubois et al. (2001) and used in most current luxury research.

Thus, to expand on these studies and detail their findings, in this article, brand perception is divided into the five aspects of the perception of a brand's exclusivity, quality, price, aesthetics, and tradition. As compared to the study by Hieke (2010), the added advantage of the present study lies in offering updated results that reflect on the situation in Germany post-Covid and implement data two decades (2007 vs. 2024) more recent.

2.2. Methodology

2.2.1. Research Design and Hypotheses

The main research question from the previous section, that confrontation with counterfeit items impacts the perception of the original brand, needs to be disassembled before distinct research hypotheses can be postulated.

Brand perception is a multidimensional construct, thus, to operationalize it, and since the particular focus lies on luxury items, it is split into the perception of exclusivity and brand image. According to Dubois et al. (2001), brand image can be deconstructed into disjunct dimensions of luxury aside from exclusivity. In particular, in the context of this study, the construct of brand image will be split into the four dimensions of quality, price, aesthetics, and tradition following the division by Dubois et al. (2001).

As the object of this study, a handbag by Louis Vuitton has been selected. Considering the tiering of luxury brands introduced by Rambourg (2014), Louis Vuitton can be considered an entry-level luxury brand. Thus, even though an initial filtering has been applied to assure that only participants interested in luxury products take part in the study, high-level luxury brands might be beyond the scope of the average luxury-oriented consumer, in particular those who are part of generation Z and do not yet possess the required financial means to acquire high-priced luxury items. Therefore, Louis Vuitton is considered the luxury brand best known to consumers with an interest in luxury brands, which they will also be able to relate to. For comparable reasons, Amaral and Loken (2016) also select Louis Vuitton, aside from Prada, as an example brand.

To study the underlying research question, a four-step paired sample research design is implemented. First, participants are shown the object of study, the handbag by Louis Vuitton, and then they are asked to rate the item on a five-point Likert scale regarding the five dimensions of brand perception, including exclusivity. This situation is labelled “Original 1”.

Second, the participants are shown an image of a high-quality counterfeit of the item, and third, they are shown an image of a bad quality counterfeit. In both cases, they are asked to rate the item regarding the same five dimensions. These situations are labelled “Counterfeit 1” and “Counterfeit 2”.

Finally, participants are again shown the original item and asked to rate it for a second time. This situation is labelled “Original 2”.

Assuming that participants are aware of the shortcomings of counterfeits, hypotheses H1 and H2 and their respective sub-hypotheses for four of the five dimensions of brand perception (exclusivity, quality, aesthetics, and tradition) result.

H1a: Counterfeit 1 is rated worse than Original 1.

H2a: Counterfeit 2 is rated worse than Original 1.

In a preliminary study (Mundorf, 2020) 73.91% who purchased counterfeit luxury items, cite the lower prices of counterfeits as the main driver of their purchase. Thus, for the price, the hypotheses would be reversed:

H1b: Counterfeit 1 is rated better than Original 1.

H2b: Counterfeit 2 is rated better than Original 1.

Since counterfeit 2 is presented to the participants as the inferior counterfeit, it should be rated worse than counterfeit 1. Thus, hypothesis H3 can be postulated for all five dimensions of brand perception:

H3: Counterfeit 2 is rated better than Counterfeit 1.

Finally, following the argumentation for the main research question, allows for the postulation of hypothesis H4 as well:

H4: Original 1 and Original 2 differ in their ratings from each other.

The hypothesis is intentionally formulated as a two-sided version, since two outcomes seem plausible for participants. One, participants, being confronted with the presence of counterfeits in the market, become sceptical of the original brands. Two, if participants can rest assured that the item they purchased is a genuine original, they might gain more trust in the brand and value the item even more since they can be sure of its authenticity. Testing hypothesis H4 will thus allow to determine which of the two directions will hold.

2.2.2. Data Sources and Sampling

The dataset implemented in the context of this study is sourced from an unpublished graduate thesis. In the course of the original sampling process, convenience sampling has been applied, which, considering the focus of the study, is not viewed as restrictive. Data collection took place in early 2024 through the dissemination of the survey via social media channels related to the topic of personal luxury. The survey was conducted online and in German.

Since the survey requires a certain degree of familiarity with the luxury market, i.e., luxury brands, participants were queried regarding their interest in luxury items. Those participants who stated not to share an interest in the luxury market were excluded from the outset. Thus,

an automatic filtering was applied to assure that, even if the participants did not yet own luxury items, they at least share an interest in the topic and can thus be assumed to provide more reliable and valid answers. With an ownership rate of 60.8% of participants who already possess luxury items as well, the data can be considered reliable.

This restrictive sampling led to only 211 participants. Subjecting the results additionally to rigorous pre-processing to clear them of data points with missing data or unrealistic answering times, further reduces the number of participants to 155.

3. Results

3.1. Description of the Sample

Of the 155 participants in the study, 60.6% stated their gender as female and 38.1% as male, with two cases of diverse participants. While this distribution does not represent the German population, the focus of the study and the study object being a woman's handbag would rather imply an even stronger presence of women in the sample. Considering that men may purchase luxury handbags as well, be it as a present or for other reasons, the gender split of the sample is deemed sufficiently representative.

The median participant was 26.76 years old and earned a net yearly income of €22,613.24. While the sample age-wise is skewed downwards, this is due to a high share of participants from generation Z and an under-representation of baby boomers and older generations. The survey thus primarily reflects on the perceptions of younger generations. Recalculating the median income on a monthly basis yields €1,884.44, which lies slightly above the German median household income. Considering the young age of the participants and that the stated income reflects individual incomes, the sample reports predominantly higher than average incomes. This in turn coincides with a population interested in luxury items and an ownership ratio regarding luxury items of 60.5% of the participants, which is also distinctly higher than the luxury ownership ratio among the German population.

Summarizing, the implemented sample reflects well on the expected consumer base of Louis Vuitton as an entry-level luxury brand, even though the younger generation, i.e., generation Z, is slightly overrepresented in the sample.

3.2. Hypotheses Tests

To test the proposed hypotheses for each of the five aspects and each situation, a Wilcoxon test has been conducted. The Wilcoxon test is preferred to the t-test for dependent samples since Shapiro-Wilk-tests revealed that the variables are not normally distributed, and even though enough observations were present, it cannot be assumed that the variables are normally distributed in the population. Table 2 summarizes the results of the Wilcoxon tests, adding Cohen's d statistics as an approximation of the effect sizes.

Table 2
Results Wilcoxon Test

Attributes	Original 1 – Counterfeit 1	Original 1 – Counterfeit 2	Counterfeit 1 – Counterfeit 2	Original 1 – Original 2
Exclusivity	-7.359*** (-0.690)	-9.640*** (-1.208)	-7.305*** (-0.722)	-0.341 (0.031)
Quality	-9.181*** (-1.053)	-10.565*** (-1.727)	-8.583*** (-0.917)	-2.361** (0.176)
Price Perception	-4.651*** (0.392)	-3.646*** (0.292)	-0.854 (-0.061)	-1.505 (0.111)
Aesthetics	-2.503** (-0.211)	-6.442*** (-0.572)	-6.091*** (-0.544)	-3.026*** (0.251)
Tradition	-7.610*** (-0.729)	-8.882*** (-0.991)	-4.628*** (-0.381)	-0.739 (0.071)

The values in the first row report the test statistic of the Wilcoxon test, and the asterisks indicate the respective significance level (***) $\alpha < 10\%$, (**) $\alpha < 5\%$, (*) $\alpha < 1\%$. The values in parentheses in the second row report Cohen's d from a paired-sample t-test. Even though the t-test may not be fully suitable here due to the absence of normality, Cohen's d with the Hedges correction, is the best reliable approximation of the effect size for this type of analysis ($|d| < 0.15$ no effect, $0.15 < |d| < 0.36$ weak effect, $0.36 < |d| < 0.65$ moderate effect, $|d| > 0.65$ strong effect (Lovakov & Agadullina, 2021)). The sign of Cohen's d also indicates the direction of the comparison. A negative sign indicates that the first product is considered superior to the second item, and vice versa.

Using an ordinal regression approach to test the robustness of the results shows that even though age and income impact the evaluation of originals and the counterfeits, the size of the treatment effects emitted by situational differences remains stable in the presence of controls for gender, age, and income.

4. Discussion

Regarding the hypotheses postulated in Section 3.1 and the results summarized in Table 1, columns 2 and 3 indicate that hypotheses H1 and H2 and all their sub-hypotheses can be accepted. In all regards, except for the pricing of the original, the genuine product performs better than either the good or the bad counterfeit.

Comparing the two counterfeits, the first good counterfeit can be considered superior to the second bad counterfeit. Even though it does not become significant, the price perception of the bad counterfeit is still better than that of the good counterfeit. Price sensitivity thus appears to be dependent on the participants' available funds. Consequently, the third hypothesis, H3 can also be accepted.

Turning to the fourth and final hypothesis, the results indicate first that all signs of Cohen's d are positive, which indicates that the genuine original is viewed better after being confronted with counterfeits. Thus, the fourth hypothesis can only hold in the direction that counterfeits can be seen to bolster the belief of owners of genuine items in the respective brands because they are convinced that their items are genuine. The significance levels, however, indicate that only regarding the quality and the aesthetic aspects are the effects also significant. Thus, being confronted with the presence of counterfeits can have an impact on the perception of the involved goods, but these effects will be marginal at best. In particular, this conclusion holds for the perception of exclusivity. The necessary scarcity of luxury goods is therefore not threatened by the presence of increasingly more counterfeit products on the market. The fourth hypothesis can therefore only in part be rejected, i.e., for the aspects of quality and aesthetic perception.

Concluding this section, the effect sizes measured via Cohen's *d* are considered. In the first three columns, excluding price perception, the tests report at least a moderately strong effect.

When comparing the original item before and after exposure to information about counterfeits (last column), the two significant variables, quality and aesthetics, are also the only variables that report a non-negligible, although weak, effect.

Exposure to counterfeits thus only leads to weak, measurable effects. At this point, it needs to be stressed that while the research design mirrors the participants' exposure to counterfeits, it does not do so in a natural environment with them seeing actual people regularly using or wearing counterfeit items. It can therefore be assumed that the effects detected in the context of this study provide only a lower bound to the actual effects.

Comparing the results of this study with those summarized in Section 2, two insights emerge.

Similar to Commuri (2009), the impact of the brands' exclusivity cannot be established. Contrary to Nia and Zaichkowsky (2000) and Hieke (2010), there is, however, some partial impact to record if the monolithic brand image is disassembled into multiple aspects of luxury.

Thus, a comparison with Hieke (2010) for German consumers and Alves de Barros (2023), for more recent results on European consumers, hints at the presence of effects on brand perception on a general scale but less so for each individual luxury characteristic. Thus, the presence of counterfeit products is not necessarily purely harmful to luxury brands, but may strengthen the bond of existing customers with the brand even more. It thus mirrors in part the results of the studies by Commuri (2009), or more generally, van der Ende et al. (2015) for the European Commission, which also hinted at the positive effects of product piracy.

5. Conclusions

5.1. Recommendations for Practitioners

If exposure to counterfeits of a brand might strengthen the bond between customer and brand, one way brands can profit from it lies in advertisements that stress the advantages of owning an original from the respective brand.

Since the study indicated that mainly the perception of the products' quality and the aesthetics are affected by exposure to counterfeits, brands need to assure that these two aspects are placed at the centre of their value proposition. While several consumers share the opinion that counterfeits are worth acquiring if the price-quality relation holds (Mundorf, 2020), luxury brands always have the advantage that they can offer higher quality products than counterfeiters. This aspect should be expanded upon, and brands should advertise even more strongly the quality aspects of their products and the dangers posed by cheap counterfeits.

Finally, the aesthetics are easier to copy in cases where brands offer the same product with only slight or no variations over time. Thus, new products and collections automatically assure that the aesthetics become harder to copy by counterfeiters, since they will not be able to profit from the experience of past production runs.

While new technologies like implanted chips using blockchain technologies (Thanasi-Boce et al., 2022) could be used to combat counterfeiting in general, they would do so without touching on the consumer-brand relationship and would thus be beyond the scope of this study's frame of reference.

Digitalization and the increasing relevance of e-commerce platforms, even regarding luxury retail, present increasingly complex challenges. On online marketplaces, in particular,

infringements of property rights are becoming more frequent. Often, users who, consciously or unknowingly, order counterfeit products are unaware of the risks to their health and the consequences for the economy and society.

Since counterfeit products are also a serious threat to fair competition, innovation, and the rights of consumers in the European Union, the Digital Services Act (fully applicable since February 2024) has been an important step to counteract these dangers and create a more secure environment for digital commerce across Europe. It obliges platform operators to fulfil comprehensive transparency and compliance requirements and provides for specific cancellation obligations for offers of products that infringe products.

However, the challenges of online commerce cannot be overcome by regulation alone. Rather, society's and companies' awareness of the value of intellectual property must be raised. The action group against product and brand piracy provides valuable educational work in this regard. It sensitizes the public and encourages online retail platforms to take measures to prevent the sale of counterfeits. The digital transformation must be shaped in such a way that innovations are protected, and product piracy is pushed back, which can only work by limiting the channels retailers of counterfeits operate on and by educating consumers about the risks involved in the purchase of counterfeit products.

5.2. Limitations and Outlook

The study's two major shortcomings have already been mentioned in the course of the preceding sections. The participants of the study originate from Germany and thus reflect a Central European perspective on the topic. Currently, about 40% of sales in the luxury sector, however, originate from collectivistic Eastern Asia, which reports distinctly different consumption patterns and behaviours than individualistic Western-Central Europe or Northern America (Souiden et al., 2011). Thus, future studies should pick up on this issue and try to replicate this study design or a more sophisticated and realistic version for East Asian countries, of which foremost China would be of interest. It could thus expand the study by Commuri (2009) into the luxury sector.

Second, this study tried the most suitable design possible to be realized in the context of an online survey. As argued above, the problem, however, persists: the exposure to counterfeit goods and the consumers' reactions to them do not happen instantly and in the course of a few minutes, but are a process that builds up gradually over time.

Thus, a long-term panel-style design would be more suitable for the collected participants' exposure levels to counterfeits as well as their potentially changing attitudes towards distinct brands.

Finally, the study used a Louis Vuitton handbag as an example in the context of the survey. Louis Vuitton has been selected since it is a well-known entry-level luxury brand that most participants could relate to. Additionally, Louis Vuitton is also a brand for which many counterfeits already exist on the market. Thus, it could be that even regarding the first initial perception of the handbag "Original 1", participants' perceptions have been biased through exposure to Louis Vuitton counterfeits before the study.

Additionally, it cannot be assured that the results established in this study will hold for luxury brands from higher tiers, who depend even more on the exclusivity of their products.

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