

Psychological factors on adolescents' purchase of luxury brand counterfeits: a research in HaNoi, VietNam

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Abstract: This study explores the psychological factors influencing adolescents' purchase of counterfeit luxury goods in Hanoi, Vietnam, focusing on self-concept, self-esteem, and idealism within a collectivist cultural framework. Using a mixed-methods approach, it combines a review of global adolescent consumption trends with semi-structured interviews involving four high school students (16–18 years) and two young adults (20–24 years). The findings reveal age-related differences in motivations. Adolescents aged 16–18 are driven by peer pressure, social conformity, and beauty standards, underpinned by low self-esteem and interdependent self-concepts. For these individuals, counterfeit goods serve as tools for social acceptance and status signaling. Conversely, young adults prioritize affordability and practicality over image, reflecting a shift toward financial responsibility. Participants also exhibit limited awareness of intellectual property issues, often justifying counterfeit purchases through ethical relativism common in collectivist societies. The study emphasizes the need for educational campaigns on intellectual property and targeted marketing strategies addressing adolescents' psychological needs, alongside stronger collaborations to curb counterfeit availability.

Keywords: Psychological factors, adolescents' purchase of counterfeits, luxury brand, Hanoi introduction

According to Cordell et al. (1996), counterfeiting refers to “any unauthorized manufacturing of goods whose special characteristics are protected as intellectual property (IP) rights, such as trademarks, patents, and copyrights.” Recent data suggests that counterfeit luxury goods account for approximately 3.3% of global trade, with projections indicating that this figure could rise to 5% by 2030, reaching a market value of \$1.79 billion (Corsearch, 2024). Vietnam generally is defined as a collective culture (Ho et al., 2021), therefore teen consumers are more interdependent than their counterparts in an individualistic culture. After a thorough process, we divide factors into two main categories that apply specifically to Vietnam: Interpersonal & intrapersonal and quality of products.

Intrapersonal & interpersonal Culture

Triandis (1994, p. 42) sparked the current view of the theory of individualism-collectivism is that, “All of us carry both individualist and collectivist tendencies; the difference is that in some cultures the probability that individualist selves, attitudes, norms, values, and behaviours will be sampled or used is

higher than in others.” He divided self-concept into independent (Individualism) and interdependent (Collectivism). Moreover, collectivists value communal goals, while individualists value personal goals (Travis, 1994).

Self-concept

Self-concept is often defined as the “totality of individuals' thoughts and feelings about themselves as an object” (Rosenberg, 1979, p. 7). Self-concept is positively correlated with self-esteem (Campbell et al., 1996; Wu et al., 2010). Luxury consumption (especially with high prestige) is known to boost self-esteem, express one's identity, and signal status (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014). Paradoxically, this enhances the need for counterfeit purchase (Khan et al., 2020). Aghaeiet et al. (2014) have validated that interdependent self-concept consumers are more likely to purchase luxury goods. Their self-concept is based on social harmony, i.e. peers, and avoid social conflicts (Elena Millan, Jonathan Reynolds, 2014), especially the popular luxury goods (Bakir et al., 2020a) Interdependent self-concept teenagers often influenced by their group affiliation, and lesser extent of uniqueness (Lee & Kacen, 2000).

In contrast, independent self-concept values uniqueness, competitiveness and social status (Bakir *et al.*, 2020, Markus and Kitamaya, 1991).

Self-esteem

This is clear in adolescents, when they are in the progress of developing their own identity but still deeply want to connect to their groups of peers (Gulland, 2006). According to social identity theory, one bases their positive self-esteem on their ingroup (mostly people who they find important), and they discriminate against the outgroup to maintain their self-esteem (Marticotte and Arcand, 2017). Generally, females are more predisposed to group discrimination and seeking other's approval, while males are more predisposed to individual competitiveness and a sense of superiority to boost their self-esteem (Wieland and Sarin, 2012, Niederle *et al.*, 2009, Crocker *et al.*, 2003).

Idealism

There are two types of fundamental idealism: relativism and idealism (Forsyth, 1980). Forsyth (1980), depicts idealists as people who "cares about others' welfare". Studies show ambivalent results in which idealists are more likely to purchase counterfeit goods, as it depends on cultural perspectives (Niray T, 2021). These differences in national contexts lead to distinct views among consumers from different regions regarding the legality of counterfeit goods (Green & Smith, 2002). For instance, collectivist cultures follow the beliefs of sharing the mutual property of a nation or society, and that the originators need not acquire the sole rights (McDonald & Roberts, 1994). Collectivist citizens believe in mutually enjoying the advantages of intellectual property, rather than restrict ownership to an organisation or individual (Green & Smith, 2002b). Thus, consumers in collectivistic cultures regard counterfeiting as a meaningful way of sharing material objects for the collective benefit of the society (Ang *et al.*, 2001; Teah *et al.*, 2015). Khan *et al.* (2020) suggest that luxury brands should develop more inclusive and accessible luxury products in collectivistic cultures.

Ethical perspectives

Ethical perspectives believe that buying counterfeit goods is due to poor morality, from individual-level to culture-level, and the reason behind is mostly from education. People who believe in morality in context (relativist) are more likely to purchase counterparts compared to people believing

in absolute morality (idealist) (Jiang, Xiao, Jalees, Naqvi & Zaman, 2018). Poor levels of morality result in rationalising the willing consumption of counterfeits (Ang *et al.*, 2001).

Quality of products

Quality is a critical factor influencing consumer behaviour, particularly in luxury consumption. The perception of product quality significantly shapes attitudes and purchase intentions, especially among adolescents who are drawn to status symbols and the prestige associated with luxury brands (Mustafa & Salindo, 2021) Adolescents' desire for high-quality products is driven by various psychological factors such as self-esteem, social status, and peer influence, making them more vulnerable to the allure of luxury brands and, consequently, to counterfeit products that mimic these brands. Counterfeit products are often marketed to appear identical to luxury brands, offering a similar aesthetic at a fraction of the price, which makes them particularly appealing to younger consumers who may prioritize appearance over authenticity. The short-term benefits of owning a product that closely resembles a luxury brand outweigh the potential drawbacks, such as lower quality or shorter lifespan, in the minds of many young consumers (Mustafa & Salindo, 2021). For instance, counterfeit handbags or accessories may serve the same social function as their authentic counterparts, even if they are of inferior quality in terms of materials or craftsmanship.

In conclusion, the perceived quality of counterfeit goods plays a significant role in shaping adolescents' consumption behaviour. While adolescents are aware of the potential downsides of counterfeit products, including lower quality and shorter lifespan, the social benefits of owning a product that resembles a luxury brand often outweigh these concerns. This trend highlights the importance of quality perception in adolescent luxury consumption and suggests that efforts to combat counterfeit consumption among this demographic must address both the psychological and material dimensions of product quality.

Method

We employed semi-structured interviews with six participants, comprising two young adults (aged 19-24) and four adolescents (aged 16-18), all of whom had prior experience purchasing counterfeit luxury goods. The participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the study's focus on age-specific psychological drivers.

The questions were designed to delve into participants' self-concept, self-esteem, peer influence, and ethical perspectives, all of which are recognized as psychological constructs pertinent to behaviors of consumption. The constructs were measured qualitatively by analyzing the participants' responses, which were coded and categorized according to themes related to personal identity, social conformity, and moral relativism.

Results

Compared to teenagers, 20-22 years old mark the transition of becoming a young adult, and the characteristics of an adult consumer is that they have the higher responsibilities to pay living costs, i.e. medical insurances, tax, rents, and groceries bills (Zollo, 1999). In our interview, two young adults (n=2) not only show their concern about price tag, but also prioritised their basic, materialistic needs, rather than boost their social status needs or conform to social beauty standards: "Recently, Thai Cong plum tea has been trending, priced at 150K VND, and while it's still within my budget, I don't really feel like I need it" (T, male, age 24).

Teenagers, on the other hand, prioritize the aesthetic appeal of fashion, but due to its high cost, they opt for an alternative—counterfeit products. Most of our participants stated being influenced by those around them, particularly their peers: "Actually, I used to hold some prejudice against counterfeit products before. But I once bought a fake Dior handbag and wore it in front of my friends. They had no idea it was fake and complimented me on how luxurious and fashionable I looked. After that experience, I couldn't help but buy countless more counterfeit goods" (A 18 year-old female student). Most importantly, consumers of counterfeit products find these products harmless and need not pay consequence for their action: "Since it doesn't cause me any health issues, I'm fine with buying counterfeit products" (D.A, 17 years old female student). An adolescent who comes from a wealthy family was interviewed, and her reason for buying counterfeit products is quite different from that of the other participants who come from middle class: "I bought a counterfeit iPhone case because the quality of the real one didn't meet my expectations. It's not just me—my mom's friend also found a luxury handbag that didn't live up to her expectations, so she decided to have a high-quality replica made that suited her better" (N.L, 17 years old female student). Some

teenagers also face low self-esteem and are aware of other's judgement and criticism, especially their peers. They don't want others to notice that they are wearing counterfeit products: "I've never bought any counterfeit items with fake logos because they're too obvious, and I don't want anyone to realize they're fake" (D.A & B.H, 17 year-old female student)

The findings from this study reveal that Vietnamese adolescents exhibit consumption behaviours consistent with those found in other collectivist cultures, such as a strong inclination towards interdependent self-concept, lower self-esteem, and heightened susceptibility to peer influence. These psychological factors collectively contribute to a significant level of counterfeit consumption among adolescents, aligning with the studies of Bakir et al. (2020) and Kim and Ko (2012). Adolescents, particularly those aged 16-18, are heavily influenced by normative pressures and the desire for social conformity, making them a prime demographic for counterfeit luxury consumption. This phenomenon, described as normative susceptibility, underscores the influence of peers and social expectations on adolescents' behaviour, supporting the findings of Ting et al. (2016) to luxury products, including counterfeit. While the 20-24 age group are similarly susceptible to such pressures, they are not as financially constrained, and can still support luxury brands by purchasing discounted or second-hand products. Conversely, young adults (aged 20-24) demonstrate a marked shift in their consumption motivations, prioritizing basic material needs and financial responsibility over social status. As they transition into adulthood, they begin to place less importance on counterfeit luxury goods, a finding that corroborates the research of Millan and Reynolds (2014). These young adults represent a group that, while less prone to counterfeit consumption, still engage in luxury consumption.

Finally, the study introduces a new dimension to counterfeit consumption: unintentional purchasing. Several participants reported unknowingly purchasing counterfeit goods, particularly online. This unintentional consumption poses risks not only to luxury brands, potentially damaging their reputation, but also to consumers, who may be exposed to harmful products. Thus, both luxury brands and policymakers need to consider strategies that mitigate the inadvertent consumption of counterfeit goods, particularly through stricter regulations and

more transparent marketing practices.

Recommendation

Educational strategies targeting both schools and families are essential to curb counterfeit consumption among Hanoi adolescents, especially those aged 16-18, who are highly influenced by peers and social trends. Schools should implement programs that emphasize the ethical implications of purchasing counterfeit goods and the significance of intellectual property rights, referencing Decree 22/2018/ND-CP. Open discussions and critical thinking should be encouraged to deepen understanding. Simultaneously, family-based education must address the long-term societal and individual consequences of counterfeit purchases. Luxury brands should adopt marketing strategies tailored to adolescents' psychological needs, focusing on campaigns that foster self-esteem, confidence, and social belonging. Collaborations with key opinion leaders (KOLs) and influencers promoting ethical consumption can enhance brand visibility and appeal. Policymakers must enforce stricter regulations on online platforms, where counterfeit goods are prevalent, while collaborating with e-commerce platforms to detect and remove such listings. Combined efforts in education, marketing, and policy can guide Vietnamese adolescents toward ethical purchasing behaviors.

CONCLUSION

The study underscores the profound impact of psychological factors—such as self-concept, self-esteem, and peer influence—on Vietnamese adolescents' engagement with counterfeit luxury goods. Adolescents aged 16-18 are particularly influenced by social conformity and peer approval, often prioritizing social acceptance over ethical considerations. In contrast, young adults aged 20-24 adopt a more practical mindset, focusing on material needs. The findings highlight a critical lack of awareness regarding intellectual property violations and ethics, compounded by the collectivist nature of Vietnamese culture, which values social harmony and peer validation. Addressing this issue requires collaborative efforts from luxury brands, government bodies, and educational institutions. Inclusive marketing strategies, along with targeted educational programs, can promote ethical consumption and intellectual property respect. While these findings provide valuable insights, the study's small sample size necessitates future large-scale research to further explore the dynamics of counterfeit consumption

and inform impactful intervention strategies

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