

## **Just as real as it seems: managing the undesirable consequences of unethical consumption behaviour**

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### **EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Although considerable research has been devoted to ethical consumption (Belk, Devinney, and Eckhardt 2006; Bray, Johns, and Kilburn 2011; Hiller 2019; McDonagh and Prothero 2014), rather less attention has been paid to what happens when consumers misbehave. Counterfeit goods are seen by many as a questionable consumption choice so people engaging in this practice must deal with the consequences of their behaviour, like physical hazards, financial losses, and social embarrassment to name a few. Hence this is a risky consumption practice whose products materiality can promptly denounce the consumer's misbehaviour. Therefore further investigation is needed in order to understand how materiality and risk converge shaping consumers' experiences around counterfeit goods. To address this gap this article draws on literature from the fields of risk and materiality to conduct an interpretive study that investigates how consumers avert the materialization of their risky behaviour to enjoy the consumption of counterfeits whilst protecting their integrity. In doing so, it contributes to a growing number of consumer studies (Crockett 2017; Luedicke 2015; Saatcioglu and Ozanne 2013; Veresiu and Giesler 2018) examining macro-social contexts beyond celebratory self-actualization narratives (Askegaard and Linnet 2011).

**Literature.** Early on, consumer behaviour studies framed the consumption of counterfeits as 'risky' behaviour (Bloch, Bush, and Campbell 1993). However risk judgements cannot be isolated from the context in which they arise (Lupton 1999b), especially in plentiful markets of counterfeits (Gentry et al. 2001) where the consumption of these products is somehow seen as socially acceptable across social classes (Kravets and Sandikci 2014; Kuever 2014; Pinheiro-Machado 2010). Thus, rather than simply measuring consumers' ethical attitude towards counterfeit goods (Latif, Yiğit, and Kirezli 2018; Staake, Thiesse, and Fleisch 2009) it is important to consider that risk works as a cultural strategy that is employed by social groups—like consumers of counterfeits—to make sense of the uncertainties in society (Douglas 1982; 1992); such as actual hazards, the transgression of social norms (Tansey and O'Riordan 1999), issues of trust (Lupton 1999a) and judgements made with regard to objects and behaviours that are deemed improper, impure or just 'wrong' (Douglas 1966).

Knowledge of materiality is also of great importance, especially when considering that clothing consumption is the largest and most visible of the counterfeiting businesses (Hardy 2014). However, apart from a few studies that discussed the consumption of counterfeits as vehicles for self-expression (Ahuvia et al. 2012; Hoe, Hogg, and Hart 2003; Perez, Castaño, and Quintanilla 2010; Strehlau 2005) previous studies have not fully addressed the importance of fashion in the consumption of counterfeits, thereby neglecting consumers who may see counterfeits as fashion products that are used in combination with many others. It is worth exploring then, the importance of material aspects of fashion products to consumers, including counterfeits, in creating their outfits (Barthes 1967). This will help to understand how consumers blend counterfeits and genuine goods (Kravets and Sandikci 2014), and without risking their social identity.

Theoretical approaches to materiality investigate the ways in which objects are situated in people's lives (Tilley 2006) thus they are frequently understood through the lens of material embeddedness (Schatzki 2010; Woodward 2007) and can be studied as the process of

objectification (Miller 1987; 2005). Latest advances in the field updated the concept of material embodiment from the materialisation of cultural ideas (Tilley 2006) towards the notion of productive material interaction (Borgerson 2013; Dant 2008; Ingold 2007; Woodward 2011); an unfolding chain of interactions not only between the subject and the finished object but also between the subject and the object's material components (as seen in Ferreira and Scaraboto 2016). Therefore productive material interaction is an useful concept to explore the meanings that arise when consumers interact with products that are similar in their fashion design but materially distinct.

**Methodology.** This interpretive research adopts *grounded theory* as a research strategy (Glaser and Strauss 1967), leveraging the fact that this approach allows for a 'detailed investigation of patterns of behaviour that is both relevant and problematic to those being studied' (Goulding 2002, 85). Principles of theoretical sampling were applied to the selection of the informants in this study; in total 42 consumers of counterfeits were interviewed.

**Findings.** The study offers three contributions to the literature. Firstly, it resorts to the literature on materiality to demonstrate that it is only through productive material interactions that counterfeits become meaningful to consumers. This happens because consumers need to rework their counterfeits not only symbolically but also physically, whilst in the consumption of genuine products meanings are reworked only symbolically. They re-contextualise the use of their counterfeits taking fashion as a blueprint to communicate the desired meaning. But the novelty presented here is that other objects and materials are strategically incorporated into their fashion ensemble and so consumers materialise their entire outfit. This leads to an sophisticated process of materialisation in which counterfeits become very interesting, and even alluring to many consumers.

Secondly the analysis within the risk theme has shown that although consumers do not feel ashamed of their choice, they do take the implications of their actions seriously. To avoid having their social identity challenged by others they need to manage the risk beyond common situations. Therefore they not only look for (dis)similarities, but also seek the purest counterfeits they can find, as evidenced during fieldwork the practice of thoroughly examining these products internally such as the scrutiny of handbags linings, trainers insole and clothes interior seams. Further, risk management is an endless practice with consumers caring for their products over their lifespan. They seek to prevent *symbolic pollution* (Douglas 1966) and thus worn, dingy and torn counterfeits have no place in their lives.

Lastly, as it can be fairly easy to find not only counterfeits but also 'inspired' imitations in emerging markets, consumers must deal with an abundance of similar products sold alongside non-branded and mundane products in popular marketplaces. Thus they employ four consumption strategies where materiality and risk intersect allowing consumers to avert the materialization of their risky behaviour hence managing the undesirable consequences of their unethical behaviour. Nevertheless counterfeits will never be risk free. Some consumers may have fun and even joke about them but this does not change the fact that for a meaningful consumption experience they must implement at least one of these four strategies to protect their social identity whilst enjoying their consumption experiences around counterfeit goods.

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