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A Qualitative Study on Counterfeit Consumption in Kuwait

Abstract

Purpose: This study explores the phenomenon of counterfeit luxury goods consumption in Kuwait, influenced by high disposable incomes, social status importance, and Islamic norms. The research aims to understand the socio-psychological motivations behind purchasing counterfeit luxury products.

Study design/methodology/approach: Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and netnography. Semi-structured interviews provided in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, while netnography captured real-time online interactions and discussions.

Sample and data: The study involved semi-structured interviews with 21 participants familiar with counterfeit luxury brands, predominantly under 30 years old. Additionally, 372 comments were collected from Instagram for the netnographic analysis to understand consumer behaviors and attitudes.

Results: The study reveals that socio-psychological factors significantly impact counterfeit product consumption. Social conformity and public image influence counterfeit luxury consumption in Kuwait. Fashion consciousness and financial considerations, prioritizing visual appeal and cost savings over authenticity, are also highlighted. The hedonic experience associated with buying and using counterfeit products emerged as a significant motivator.

Originality/value: This research provides a nuanced understanding of counterfeit consumption within a unique cultural and religious context, contributing to the limited literature on the subject in the Middle East. It offers insights for policymakers and brand managers to develop strategies addressing this issue.

Research limitations/implications: The qualitative nature and convenience sampling limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research could expand to include different socio-economic backgrounds for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Keywords: Marketing, Advertising, Retail and Wholesale Trade, Psychological and Cognitive Factors.

JEL classification: M31, M37, L81, G41

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الملخص

دراسة نوعية في استهلاك المنتجات المقلدة في الكويت

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هدف الدراسة: تستكشف هذه الدراسة ظاهرة استهلاك السلع الفاخرة المقلدة في الكويت، وهي سياق يتأثر بالدخول العالية، وأهمية المكانة الاجتماعية، والمعايير الإسلامية. الغرض من الدراسة فهم الدوافع النفسية والاجتماعية وراء شراء المنتجات الفاخرة المقلدة. **تصميم/ منهجية/ طريقة الدراسة:** استخدمت الدراسة نهجاً نوعياً، يجمع بين المقابلات شبه المنظمة والتحليل الصافي لجمع بيانات متعمقة.

عينة الدراسة وبياناتها: أجريت مقابلات مع 21 مشاركاً، اختيروا بناءً على معرفتهم بالعلامات التجارية الفاخرة المقلدة. كان المشاركون من الذكور والإناث، ومعظمهم أقل من 30 عاماً. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، جُمع 372 تعليقاً من إنستغرام لفهم سلوكيات المستهلكين ومواقفهم.

نتائج الدراسة: تكشف النتائج أن التوافق الاجتماعي، والصورة العامة، وتأثير وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي هي العوامل الرئيسية التي تدفع إلى الطلب على المنتجات الفاخرة المقلدة. يبرر المستهلكون مشترياتهم كوسيلة للحفاظ على المكانة الاجتماعية وحفظ ماء الوجه. تسلط الدراسة الضوء على الصراع الداخلي الذي يواجه المستهلكين بين الرغبة في الفخامة والمخاطر الأخلاقية والاجتماعية المرتبطة باستهلاك المنتجات المقلدة.

أصالة الدراسة: تقدم هذه الدراسة فهماً دقيقاً لاستهلاك المنتجات المقلدة في سياق ثقافي وديني فريد؛ مما يسهم في الأدبيات المحدودة حول الموضوع في الشرق الأوسط. كما تقدم رؤى قيمة لصناع السياسات ومديري العلامات التجارية لتطوير إستراتيجيات لمعالجة هذه القضية.

حدود الدراسة وتطبيقاتها: تقتصر إمكانية تعميم النتائج على الطبيعة النوعية للدراسة واستخدام العينة المريحة. يمكن للدراسات المستقبلية أن تتوسع لتشمل خلفيات اجتماعية واقتصادية مختلفة لتقديم فهم أكثر شمولاً للظاهرة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التسويق والإعلان، تجارة التجزئة والجملة، العوامل النفسية والمعرفية.

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Introduction

The global market for counterfeit goods has seen a significant increase in recent years, with an estimated \$509 billion lost annually in revenue (Mussanova, 2021). These counterfeited items range from clothing and technology to food, drugs, and cosmetics. This issue is particularly relevant in the luxury sector, where counterfeit goods attempt to meet the demand for high-status products at lower prices.

To reduce the demand for counterfeit goods, it is crucial to understand the real-world experiences of the consumers (Levy, 2005), including the motivations and desires that influence their purchasing behavior. Specifically, examining how consumers' psychological and social needs are met can offer important insights into the phenomenon of counterfeit consumption (Abdulrazak & Quoquab, 2018).

Most studies on the subject have been based on North American or South Asian consumers. This is an important factor for this study, as previous research found that counterfeit consumption is heavily influenced by cultural context (Khan et al., 2021; Li et al., 2020; Pusvikasari, 2021; Sharma et al., 2022; Singh, 2015). In addition, Norum and Cuno (2011) argued that the quantitative designs of such studies did not allow further insights into determinants that the researcher was hitherto unaware of or into underlying mechanisms which could explain consumers' intentions to purchase counterfeits.

Consumers in Kuwait can be understood through the lens of social identity theory, which emphasizes the significance of group membership in shaping individual behaviors and attitudes (Tajfel et al., 1984). Culturally, consumers in Kuwait are influenced by strong societal norms, religion, and traditions that place a high value on social status and public image (Riquelme et al., 2012; Souiden et al., 2018). Economically, these consumers are characterized by high disposable incomes, which allow for greater spending on luxury goods. This economic affluence, coupled with the societal emphasis on visible wealth, fuels the demand for both genuine and counterfeit luxury products. In addition, social status in Kuwait is closely tied to the ownership of luxury items, making them essential for social recognition and acceptance (Albloushy & Jafar, 2023; Elsantil & Bedair, 2022).

Kuwait, as being an Islamic nation with prevailing Islamic norms, prohibits the violation of both material and intellectual rights (Beekun & Badawi, 2005). Given its status as an oil-rich country with high per capita income and stringent

religious governance (Oxford, 2010), it is anticipated that there would be a stronger resistance to purchasing counterfeit goods. However, counterfeit product consumptions are still prevalent (Al-Enezi, 2019; Sherbini, 2023).

Islam places a high value on honesty and integrity, as evidenced by numerous teachings from the Prophet Muhammad, who emphasized the importance of honesty in trade and business and strictly prohibited deception (Beekun & Badawi, 2005). This principle directly opposes the act of purchasing or selling counterfeit goods, which inherently involves dishonesty and deception. Furthermore, Islamic teachings stress the importance of respecting others' property and intellectual rights, aligning with the prohibition against counterfeiting, which infringes on the intellectual property of original creators (Souiden et al., 2018).

In addition to these ethical guidelines, Islam encourages ethical consumption, urging followers to buy products that are produced and sold in a manner consistent with Islamic ethical standards. This discourages the purchase of counterfeit goods, often associated with unethical production practices (Riquelme et al., 2012). For many Muslims, adhering to these principles is not merely a personal choice but a moral and religious duty, creating a stronger internal resistance to purchasing counterfeit goods compared to consumers in cultures where such religious and moral imperatives might be less pronounced (Beekun & Badawi, 2005).

The social fabric of Islamic communities further reinforces this resistance. In tightly-knit Islamic communities, social image and community standing are significantly influenced by adherence to religious norms. Individuals may avoid purchasing counterfeit goods to maintain their reputation and avoid social ostracism (Albloushy & Jafar, 2023). In contrast, Western cultures often emphasize individualism and personal choice, leading to different attitudes towards counterfeit consumption. The absence of a strong religious or moral framework against counterfeiting in these cultures might result in a higher tolerance or justification for such behavior (Khan et al., 2021).

Empirical evidence from other Islamic countries can provide additional insights. Studies have shown that Islamic norms significantly influence consumer behavior regarding counterfeit goods. For example, in Saudi Arabia and Malaysia, strong religious and moral teachings against deception and intellectual property theft have resulted in lower instances of counterfeit consumption compared to some Western countries (Souiden et al., 2018). Conducting a comparative analy-

sis of counterfeit consumption behaviors between consumers in Islamic countries and those in Western countries can highlight differences in motivations, justifications, and social consequences (Pusvikasari, 2021).

By exploring these specific Islamic norms and their impact on consumer behavior, this research provides a more nuanced and culturally relevant understanding of counterfeit consumption in Kuwait. This approach not only strengthens the originality of the study but also offers valuable insights for policymakers and brand managers operating in Islamic markets.

By conceptualizing consumers in Kuwait as a distinct group with unique cultural, religious, and economic characteristics, this study provides a nuanced understanding of their counterfeit consumption behavior. Utilizing a qualitative approach, including in-depth interviews with netnography, this study explores the socio-psychological dimensions of counterfeit luxury consumption. It also contributes to the existing literature by providing a detailed understanding of the socio-psychological motivations behind counterfeit consumption in a unique cultural context. By examining these specific factors, this study offers valuable insights for luxury brand managers and policymakers to develop targeted strategies that address this issue.

Literature Review

Defining Counterfeit Products

Kay (1990) defined counterfeiting as the production of copies that are identically packaged, including trademark and labeling, copied so as to seem to a customer the genuine article. Cordell et al. (1996) described product counterfeiting as any production of commodities whose distinctive qualities are subject to legal protection as intellectual property. Eisend and Schuchert-Güler (2006) defined counterfeiting as replicating an original product that already possesses significant brand value in the market and noted that the act of counterfeiting “may not involve production at all, but it could be as simple as falsely labelling or packaging an item that otherwise does not violate Intellectual Property Rights (IPR).”

Classifications of Counterfeit Products

Eisend and Schuchert-Güler (2006) and Wilcox et al. (2009) noted that it is crucial to distinguish between deceptive and non-deceptive counterfeiting based on the customer’s understanding of the fact that the items he has bought are fake.

Any circumstance in which a customer is tricked into purchasing a counterfeit product falls under the category of misleading counterfeiting.

Non-deceptive counterfeiting occurs when buyers consciously choose to acquire an item even if they know it is not genuine, which can be due to factors such as cost, product structure, and location of purchase (Eisend & Schuchert-Güler, 2006). In explaining the second group, Okonkwo (2007) made the following distinctions: custom-made imitations (a variety of replicas meant to mimic genuine trademark products to the consumer's social circle); pirated items (copies of expensive goods, where the consumer knows that they are counterfeit); and mimicked products (goods that aren't the same to the original products, but are comparable in their structure, name, approach form, or meaning). This study will concentrate on non-deceptive counterfeits and buyers' desire to buy them (Grossman & Shapiro, 1988).

Factors Influencing Consumers' Demand for Counterfeit Products

Eisend and Schuchert-Güler (2006) and Khan et al. (2021) found that consumers' decisions to purchase counterfeit goods are primarily motivated by brand considerations. Cordell et al. (1996) noted that counterfeit luxury brands have to mimic already established, well-known trademarked brands. Bloch et al. (1993) have shown that in the case of non-deceptive counterfeiting, if customers are not drawn by the genuine brand, then the counterfeited products will not be a problem.

Product-related attributes are product types (Albers-Miller, 1999) and trends (Albloushy & Jafar, 2023). However, price has been shown to be the primary determinant of intentions to buy premium counterfeit items in the vast majority of research (Wiedmann et al., 2007). Since customers may save money by purchasing counterfeit items at a cheap price, these products are seen as having an elevated value in terms of cost to quality (Cordell et al., 1996). Budget-conscious consumers choose counterfeit goods to demonstrate their status as members of a certain social class, demonstrate their capacity to afford premium labels (Chaudhry & Stumpf, 2011; Khan et al., 2021; Yoo & Lee, 2009).

From a demographic perspective, consumers with lower socioeconomic status and more positive attitudes toward counterfeiting have been found to be more prone to buying counterfeit products (Bloch et al., 1993; Penz & Stottinger, 2005). However, studies have conflicting findings on the impact of demographic variables on buying habits related to counterfeit products, suggesting that there

is not a cohesive demographic information envision of consumers of counterfeit products (Bian & Moutinho, 2009; Eisend & Schuchert-Güler, 2006; Kay, 1990; Khan et al., 2021; Kozar, 2020; Turunen & Laaksonen, 2011).

From a socio-psychological perspective, novelty (Gentry et al., 2001), peer-group influence (Penz et al., 2008), the opportunity to trial before purchasing an expensive original (Gentry et al., 2006), attitudes toward luxury brands (Wilcox et al., 2009), and the availability of counterfeits (Commuri, 2009) can also motivate intentional counterfeit purchases.

Many studies on the socio-psychological perspective have found that cultural and social contexts also affect the counterfeit purchasing decisions (Lai & Zaichowsky, 1999; Wang et al., 2024). Consumers often buy counterfeit luxury brands to impress a self-relevant audience (Wilcox et al., 2009). Sense of integrity is another factor. Consumers with a stronger sense of morality are less likely to purchase counterfeit products (Steenhaut & Van Kenhove, 2006). Those with weaker moral standards are less likely to feel guilty about engaging in fraudulent purchases and tend to hold a negative view of counterfeit products, consequently displaying a reduced willingness to purchase them (Jiang & Cova, 2012; Singh, 2015).

Another factor influencing customer counterfeit preferences is status consumption. According to Eastman et al. (1999), status consumption is defined as the motivational process by which individuals strive to improve their social standing through the conspicuous consumption of consumer products that symbolize status both for the individual and surrounding significant others. Consumers' desire for status is amplified by conspicuous products, implying that they might not always purchase expensive goods to gain status, but may instead buy a larger quantity of cheaper goods to gain recognition. This suggests that consumers can obtain social status from affordable products as well (Jaramillo et al., 2001). Luxury brands often come with high price tags that are unaffordable for some consumers. This creates a cognitive conflict for consumers, leading them to go for counterfeit luxury brands that resemble the originals, allowing them to satisfy their status-seeking desires.

Counterfeiting Consumption in Kuwait

Kuwait's unique cultural context, deeply rooted in Islamic traditions, significantly influences consumer behavior. The collectivist nature of Kuwaiti society places a high value on social perception and status, driving individuals to seek

social recognition through the ownership of luxury goods. Islamic teachings on honesty, integrity, and respect for intellectual property further shape consumer attitudes, creating a moral framework that discourages the purchase of counterfeit goods (Beekun & Badawi, 2005; Souiden et al., 2018). However, the desire for social status and the influence of social media and influencers often lead consumers to rationalize the purchase of counterfeit luxury items as a means of achieving desired social standing without incurring the high costs associated with genuine products (Albloushy & Jafar, 2023).

Despite Kuwait's oil wealth, high per capita income, and strict religious governance (Oxford, 2010), which would typically suggest resistance to purchasing counterfeit products, counterfeit consumption is still prevalent in Kuwait (Al-Enzi, 2019; Sherbini, 2023). While oil wealth has rapidly improved living standards in Kuwait, not everyone can afford prestigious brands. Additionally, Kuwait's collectivist society places significant importance on social perception (Albloushy & Jafar, 2023; Wilcox et al., 2009).

Counterfeit consumption in Kuwait is a significant issue that continues to challenge authorities and the market. A notable example is a major raid in 2024, where the Ministry of Commerce and Industry confiscated over 623,000 counterfeit items, including fake accessories, bags, clothes, and shoes. These items, valued at over ten million Kuwaiti dinars, were being sold through social media auctions, indicating a sophisticated network for distributing counterfeit goods. This operation underscores the pervasive nature of counterfeit luxury goods in Kuwait and the substantial economic impact it has on legitimate businesses and brand owners (Rai, 2024; TimesKuwait, 2024).

Additionally, the prevalence of counterfeit goods in local markets is reflected in various consumer experiences. A survey by Al-Seyassah daily highlighted that many consumers, aware of the counterfeit nature of products, still opt for them due to their affordability. However, this trend poses serious risks, including the purchase of potentially dangerous goods such as counterfeit electrical appliances. The Ministry of Commerce and Industry reported 2,788 complaints related to counterfeit goods in 2019, more than double the number in 2018, showcasing a growing awareness and response to the issue. The Ministry's enhanced inspection and enforcement efforts are crucial in mitigating the spread of counterfeit goods, protecting consumers, and maintaining the integrity of the market (AbuMariam, 2013; ArabTimes, 2023; Rai, 2024).

Given the previous discussion on the important role of cultural context in counterfeit consumption, and the concentration of most studies on Western and Asian consumers, this study adds to this literature by investigating a religious, oil-rich, and high disposable income country. The main objectives are to explore the factors influencing attitudes towards counterfeits and the intention to purchase these illegal products, with a particular focus on socio-psychological factors.

Methodology

This study collects and analyzes data using two methods: semi-structured interviews and netnography. Employing multiple sources of data and analysis enhances the robustness of the findings, providing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Semi-structured interviews allow for in-depth exploration of participants' personal experiences and perspectives, offering rich qualitative data. Netnography, on the other hand, enables the observation of online interactions and discussions, capturing real-time, naturally occurring data. The combination of these methods ensures a more holistic view, incorporating both personal narratives and broader social dynamics, thereby increasing the validity and reliability of the research findings.

Eisend and Schuchert-Güler (2006) have conducted invaluable research that explains the procurement of counterfeit goods. They conducted a thorough comparative review of thirty papers pertaining to counterfeit decisions, enabling them to demonstrate the deficiencies in the bulk of earlier studies and the need for more research: Lack of an extensive structure that would allow for in-depth analysis and relatively limited geographic scope of prior research, and the preference for primarily quantitative research plans, which prevents broad insights into hitherto unidentified factors and processes that might help clarify the intention of buying counterfeits (Butt et al., 2023).

As a result, this study is set to identify the meanings associated with counterfeit luxury brands among consumers in Kuwait using a two qualitative research designs. To collect data, comprehensive interviews were conducted with 21 participants selected based on their familiarity with counterfeit luxury brands (Table 1). The participants were both males and females, with most of them being younger than 30 years old. Similar to Bupalan et al. (2019) and Toklu and Baran (2017), the respondents were selected using a convenience sampling method, which was chosen due to time and resource constraints. While this sampling method may

introduce certain biases and limit the generalizability of the findings, it allowed for richer, more detailed insights into consumer behavior.

The younger participants were college students or recently graduated professionals, while the older ones were businesspeople or employees. All participants had considerable disposable incomes and an interest in luxury and counterfeit brands.

Table 1
Participants' Profile

#	Name	Gender	Age	Occupation
1	Abdulhamid	male	51	Businessman
2	Dana	female	24	English Teacher
3	Fares	male	27	Lawyer
4	Sharifa	female	29	Auditor
5	Shaikha	female	48	Housewife
6	Jana	female	26	PR
7	Musaeb	male	26	Business Developer
8	Dalal	female	27	Auditor
9	Sara A	female	28	Accountant
10	Sara B	female	26	Auditor
11	Abrar	female	25	Accountant
12	Taiba	female	25	Auditor
13	Sara C	female	30	HR
14	Maryam	female	30	Housewife
15	Reem	female	27	Accountant
16	Amani	female	30	Social Adviser
17	Somaya	female	29	Businesswoman
18	Khalid	male	32	Engineer
19	Sara D	female	28	Information Technology
20	Badria	female	22	Student
21	Durra	female	33	PR

The first data collection method used is semi-structured interview, where some questions were formulated during the interviews based on participants' responses

and on existing literature (Engebø et al., 2016; Priporas et al., 2020). At the beginning of the interviews, a series of demographic questions were asked to warm up and then respondents were asked about their general views towards luxury products and their consumption of counterfeit luxury brands.

The questions explored their beliefs, feelings, expectations, and reasons for consuming these products. Specifically, the interviews included questions such as:

- “How did you feel when you purchased a counterfeit luxury good? Did you feel any sense of guilt or shame, or did you feel satisfied with your purchase?”
- “What factors influenced your decision to purchase a counterfeit luxury good?”
- “Do you think that owning counterfeit luxury goods can provide the same status or prestige as owning authentic luxury goods? Why or why not?”
- “Have you ever experienced any negative emotions or consequences because of purchasing a counterfeit luxury good, such as disappointment or legal issues?”
- “To what extent do you believe that social influence, such as peer pressure and celebrity endorsements, drives consumer demand for counterfeit luxury goods?”

The focus during the interviews was on the product attributes and shopping contexts described by the participants to gain insights into the interpersonal and personal meanings associated with the products. All interviews (except one) were conducted in Arabic, recorded, transcribed, and translated into English.

The second data collection method is netnography. Netnography is an ethnographic method. It is defined as “Doing Ethnographic Research Online”(Kozinets, 2002, 2015). The online nature of netnography allows researchers to observe interactions of online community members where they share common interests and allow their members to exchange information on online platforms.

According to Kozinets (2002), the researcher has the flexibility to “build his own vessel, stage his own show, and evaluate his own evaluations”. This flexibility is similar to the pragmatic interpretive framework; it provides researchers with a great degree of freedom to choose the data collection methods and analysis

that are most appropriate for their research. The data collected using netnography was from an Instagram post on April 19, 2024, discussing the issue of counterfeit consumption in Kuwait. A total of 372 comments were collected on April 20, 2024. To protect the identity of Instagram users, even though the Instagram post is public, only the first three letters of the user ID are used in this study.

The data collection and analysis for this study are based on the principles of qualitative data analysis and interpretation as recommended by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Spiggle (1994). Data were gathered through an iterative process where the initial method informed the selection of subsequent data, which in turn determined the next steps of data collection. One method for qualitative content analysis is inductive content analysis. This approach involves collecting and analyzing data without predefined categories or theories, allowing the data itself to guide the researcher in identifying emerging patterns, themes, and concepts (Mayring, 2004).

Results and Discussions

In this study, results were analyzed based on two dimensions that resulted from the main topics discussed in the individual interviews and netnographic data. The first dimension focuses on the interpersonal aspects of consuming counterfeit luxury goods, including social conformity and public image. The second dimension focuses on the personal aspects, including fashion and financial consciousness, and hedonic experiences.

Interpersonal Dimensions

a. Social Conformity

Conformity can be driven by various factors, including social norms, cultural values, and personal beliefs. Social conformity was defined as “the change in their product evaluations, attitudes, purchase intentions, or purchase behavior as a result of exposure to the evaluations, intentions, or purchase behaviors of referent others” (Lascu & Zinkhan, 1999). Individuals may also conform to fit in with their reference groups or to avoid social rejection or criticism (Khan et al., 2021).

“As soon as you admit to people that this is a counterfeit, they instantly judge you.” Maryam

Conformity can also be driven by a desire to maintain social harmony and avoid conflict (Lascu & Zinkhan, 1999). Kuwaiti consumers are very aware of

how others perceive them, and they pay close attention to how people react to what they buy. Kuwait is known for its love of fashion and luxurious style. Consumers in Kuwait often dress in high-end designer brands and pay attention to the latest fashion trends. Fashion is an essential part of the Kuwaiti lifestyle, and many people see it to showcase their wealth and status. Kuwait's fashion industry has been growing rapidly in recent years, with more and more international fashion brands opening stores in the country (Albloushy & Jafar, 2023).

"Especially in Kuwait, there are no levels - everyone looks in good financial shape and everyone has everything." Jana

Individuals gravitate towards brands endorsed by their social groups, fostering a sense of belonging and group identification. However, this selection process is often followed by a subsequent decision: the choice between acquiring a genuine product or a counterfeit alternative. Financial constraints may lead some consumers to forgo the authentic luxury brand item in favor of a counterfeit, prioritizing the preservation of their perceived social status and conformity to group expectations.

"It's all about perspective. The reason why people buy luxury products is either to be part of the trend, part of the group, or part of the crowd." Taiba

"They do it to maintain the level of luxury and lifestyle they want to project, and to show people that they can afford to buy whatever they want." @Pan

Taiba's observation underscores the social and psychological drivers behind luxury consumption, emphasizing the desire to conform to societal norms and signal status within a particular social group. This perspective suggests that for many consumers, the allure of luxury goods extends beyond mere material utility; it's about belonging and asserting one's identity within a community that values conspicuous consumption.

Pan's insight complements this notion by highlighting the aspirational aspect of luxury consumption. Beyond meeting functional needs, purchasing luxury items is often a deliberate display of wealth and prestige, allowing individuals to showcase their affluence and elevate their social standing. In Kuwait, where status and image hold considerable significance, owning luxury products serves as a means of projecting a desired lifestyle and reinforcing one's position within the social hierarchy. This aligns with the concept of conspicuous consumption,

coined by Veblen (2005), wherein individuals flaunt their wealth through lavish spending to gain social recognition and admiration.

It is undeniable that social media influencers have had a significant impact on the purchasing behavior of consumers, especially when it comes to high-end brands. They often feature and promote high-end products and brands in their posts, making these products appear more desirable to their followers. By associating themselves with these high-end brands, influencers create a sense of exclusivity and luxury, which appeals to many people (Černiková, 2019; Chan, 2022).

“Social media influencers are putting pressure on the people because they show a lifestyle everyone desires.” Khalid

“With social media and social influencers there’s a big impact on people because they feel that they are less and they start to compare their lives.” Reem

Khalid and Reem’s quotes highlight the influential role of social media influencers in shaping consumer aspirations and desires, particularly regarding lifestyle choices and consumption patterns. In Kuwait, as in many other parts of the world, social media platforms have become powerful vehicles for showcasing idealized lifestyles, often characterized by luxury, glamour, and abundance. This curated portrayal can cultivate feelings of inadequacy and social comparison among viewers (Lascu & Zinkhan, 1999). Secondly, marketing strategies often emphasize aspirational lifestyles associated with products or services, potentially leading to unrealistic expectations and dissatisfaction with one’s own life. These observations highlight the critical role that social conformity plays in counterfeit products consumption.

b. Public Image and Face Saving

Goffman (2017) referred to face-saving as “a social psychological framework of favorable self-worth that people expect others to respect in public.” Several studies have found that face-saving attitudes are a significant factor in influencing consumers’ purchase decision-making (Pusvikasari, 2021; Siu et al., 2016). In many cultures, face-saving is an important concept that involves maintaining one’s reputation and social status. People may feel pressured to present themselves as successful and wealthy, even if they are not. This pressure can lead some people to buy counterfeit luxury products as a way of maintaining their image without spending a lot of money. By buying counterfeit products, people can still

enjoy the perceived benefits of owning luxury goods without the high cost, and without the risk of losing face if they cannot afford the real thing (Kozar, 2020; Lin et al., 2013; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998).

"I feel like if they know I can afford the original, I wouldn't feel ashamed if they knew I bought a counterfeit product." Somaya

"Because they have expensive cars and money, they think no one will suspect they're wearing a replica watch." @Mar

Somaya's assertion suggests that the stigma associated with purchasing counterfeit goods may be mitigated by the belief that one's ability to afford the authentic version validates their status within their social circle. This mindset underscores the complex interplay between consumer behavior, social dynamics, and perceptions of authenticity in Kuwait's consumer landscape. Mar's comment further illustrates this phenomenon by highlighting the deceptive nature of counterfeit consumption among some individuals. The possession of luxury cars and disposable income may create an illusion of wealth and exclusivity, leading others to assume that they can only afford genuine luxury goods. This perception of invulnerability to suspicion reinforces the notion that counterfeit consumption is a means of maintaining the illusion of luxury without the associated financial burden and a way to save face.

Consumers with limited financial resources often resort to purchasing and using counterfeit luxury brands to maintain their social image. However, the use of counterfeits carries a significant social risk, as the discovery of counterfeit use by others can lead to a loss of face (Elsantil & Bedair, 2022; Veloutsou & Bian, 2008). This presents a challenge for consumers of counterfeit products as they attempt to balance their desire for luxury brands with the need to avoid social shame. As a result, face consciousness can be seen as a double-edged sword for consumers of counterfeit products, as it can both boost and harm their image in society.

"I bought it because I couldn't afford the original, but I couldn't wear it ever because I felt like I will get caught and people will know it's a counterfeit so I didn't wear it." Musaeb

Purchasing counterfeit products can have an unfavorable impact on an individual's image, as it is seen as a violation of societal norms and can lead to nega-

tive perceptions from others. While some participants enjoyed the experience of using luxury counterfeit products, others experienced feelings of insecurity and refrained from using the products for fear of being caught. When it comes to using counterfeit luxury products, individuals may face a dilemma between their aspiration for the brand experience and their realization that using counterfeit products may lead to getting caught. This conflict may create a sense of unease and insecurity, causing some individuals to hide the fact they are using counterfeit products.

“Nobody says they buy counterfeit because if one day they decided to buy the original they wouldn’t want people to think it’s Counterfeit.” Shaikha

“Look , when you ask someone direct about counterfeit luxury products, for sure they won’t say they like it, but they buy it anyway.” Reem

Research suggests that individuals who purchase counterfeit products are often perceived as lacking in moral values and as being dishonest. This negative perception can lead to social and psychological consequences such as loss of trust, social isolation, and damage to one’s self-esteem. It is important to note that the desire to maintain a positive image and avoid negative consequences are important drivers in the decision-making process of consumers who purchase counterfeit products (Hawkins, 2020; Razmus et al., 2024).

“I would feel I would lose my respect, because the counterfeit luxury products are deceiving. You’re showing people you have money, but you don’t have the capability to buy it.” Abdulhamid

“They buy it to match the overall appearance they are associated with. So they buy replicas because they don’t want to spend a lot of money on a watch, and at the same time, they want to maintain a certain image for themselves in front of others.” @Smi

Personal Dimensions

a. Fashion and Financial Consciousness

Fashion consciousness refers to “a person’s degree of involvement with the styles or fashion clothing” (Kautish & Sharma, 2018). Researchers have further referred to fashion-conscious consumers as those individuals who are characterized by a deeper interest in fashion brands and products as well as in their physical appearance. Individuals can attain a similar luxurious lifestyle at a lower cost through the purchase of counterfeit high-fashion products. Technological advancements

have allowed for counterfeit products to appear almost identical to the original, resulting in consumers placing a greater emphasis on the visual aspect of the product rather than its intrinsic features (Hassan & Harun, 2016; Parker et al., 2004).

“Personally, even if I could afford the real watch, by God, I wouldn’t buy it. With all due respect to people who buy authentic items, I can get the same steel caliber and design for a replica. Why should I buy the original? You might say, ‘You’ll embarrass yourself.’ I’m not going to lie and say it’s real. I’ll just say it’s a replica because I’m buying it for myself, not for others to see.” @4.ez

“If I buy a counterfeit product, it’s because I like the style of it and the way it looks, not to show it off.” Amani

Within the domain of counterfeit goods, consumer behavior deviates from the norm. While low-quality products might traditionally be seen as a deterrent, participants prioritized visual aesthetics, which highlights the importance of visual and financial appeals in consumer decision-making processes (Albloushy & Jafar, 2023). One participant, Maryam, expressed a positive perception of counterfeit products. She highlighted the indistinguishability of the copy from the original in terms of color, design, and perceived quality. She emphasized the cost savings associated with purchasing the counterfeit and suggested a belief that the copy offers the “same exact thing” as the authentic brand.

“I bought jewelry, the same copy of a brand, same color, and design, and I don’t feel it’s any different from the original. I saved money and I have the same exact thing.” Maryam

“But personally, if I had the money to buy a Rolex or any other luxury watch that costs hundreds of thousands, I would buy a replica. Why? Because at the end of the day, it’s just a watch, and most people wear them for showing off.” @Yaz

In a social media post, @3_a takes a more generalized approach. He suggests that replicas and authentic items might be manufactured in the same factories using identical materials. The perceived key differentiator, according to @3_a, is solely the brand name itself.

“Honestly, replicas and authentic items are often made in the same factory using the same materials. The only difference is the brand name.” @3_a

Hughes et al. (2021) found that “the main purpose of replica experiences is to protect the original.” Similar reasoning has been expressed by participants.

While counterfeiting demonstrably harms brand reputation and intellectual property rights, it may present an unforeseen benefit: theft deterrence. This aligns with the observation that counterfeit items, due to their lack of authenticity, are likely less desirable for resale on the secondary market. Consequently, this could potentially discourage theft, particularly for less noticeable items. In addition, some participants highlighted the practical considerations of owning an expensive luxury watch. They suggest that the constant fear of damage or loss can limit one's enjoyment of the authentic watch. Therefore, owning a replica for everyday use and preserving the original for special occasions can be a sensible approach.

"I've been seeing a trend lately where people buy replicas of their own clothes to wear when they travel. I'm not really for this, but I can see how security concerns might play a role." @Dr.a

"I expect that if it [counterfeit] gets stolen, they will not lose a significant amount of money." @92i

"For a simple reason, if a person owns a very expensive and precious watch, he will always be restricted in his movement and constantly worried about even the slightest impact or scratch that could cause even a minor dent in the watch. Therefore, he buys a replica watch even though he owns the original and wears it on all occasions, preserving the original for special events only. This ensures its complete protection, especially since some watches are more expensive than some cars." @Kha

Some have questioned the rationale behind purchasing a high-quality counterfeit product if the intended purpose is not for investment or resale. If the product is not being used to generate financial gain, then the justification for spending more money on a higher-quality imitation may not be as compelling (Kim-Vick & Joung, 2016).

"Okay, if my goal is not investment or sale, for example, why should I buy a high-quality imitation?" @Youn

"It's okay to own the original and keep it as an investment for the future, preserve its cleanliness, and wear the imitation and enjoy it without caring about it." @Vto

b. Hedonic Experience

Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) defined hedonic consumption as the "facets of consumer behavior that relate to the multisensory, fantasy, and emotive aspects of product usage experience". Yoo and Lee (2009) found that some luxury brands

consumers may choose counterfeit products due to their economic benefits and hedonic benefits. During the interviews, some participants smiled, and some even laughed when discussing their counterfeit product buying experiences. This suggests that discussing such experiences brought them enjoyment and fulfilled their hedonic needs. In addition to expressing amusement, participants also reported feeling a mix of nervousness and excitement. They described their experiences with counterfeit products as memorable stories.

“Back in 2006, I used to travel around with my friends, and one of the countries I’ve been to was Thailand. There was a big market where all the brands were available. I bought a Rolex with a green ring and a black one too. The seller was convincing us to buy it for \$80, and he would weigh it on a scale and compare it with the original one to show us how confident he was.” Khalid

Participants have also expressed both negative and positive emotions when buying counterfeit products. While pleasure and enjoyment are commonly associated with this experience, they are contingent on the counterfeit product not being discovered. This creates a sense of nervousness among consumers.

“I was anxious and hesitant because I paid for it and I thought maybe it’s not worth it, but when it arrived I was so happy about it and the quality was good compared to what I paid for. Another time, I went inside a boutique and I was wearing a counterfeit and the seller complimented me and he did not notice. I wore it with confidence.” Durra

“I don’t feel bad for the seller because they’re selling it way more than its value and it’s worth it.” Maryam

The aforementioned discussion reveals that cultural norms and social pressures play a crucial role in counterfeit consumption in Kuwait. The data highlight that the strong emphasis on social status and public image in Kuwaiti culture drives individuals to purchase counterfeit luxury goods despite religious and ethical prohibitions. Participants often expressed the need to conform to societal expectations and maintain a certain lifestyle, influenced by social media and influencers showcasing luxury lifestyles.

For instance, one participant noted, “Especially in Kuwait, there are no levels - everyone looks in good financial shape and everyone has everything” (Jana). This statement underscores the societal pressure to appear affluent, regardless of one’s actual financial situation. Another participant, Taiba, emphasized the importance

of social conformity, stating, “It’s all about perspective. The reason why people buy luxury products is either to be part of the trend, part of the group, or part of the crowd.” This highlights how social dynamics and the desire to belong influence consumer behavior.

The impact of social media influencers was also evident. Khalid mentioned, “Social media influencers are putting pressure on people because they show a lifestyle that everyone desires,” while Reem added, “With social media and influencers, there is a big impact on people because they feel that they are less and they start to compare their lives.” These quotes illustrate the significant role of influencers in shaping consumer aspirations and behaviors, often promoting a lifestyle that necessitates the ownership of luxury goods.

The concept of face-saving is another critical cultural factor influencing counterfeit consumption in Kuwait. Goffman’s (2017) framework of face-saving, where individuals strive to maintain a favorable self-image, is highly relevant in this context. Somaya noted, “I feel like if they know I can afford the original, I wouldn’t feel ashamed if they knew I bought a counterfeit product.” This suggests that the stigma associated with counterfeit goods can be mitigated by the perception of one’s ability to afford genuine items, thus preserving social status.

Additionally, the fear of social repercussions was evident in Musaeb’s experience: “I bought it because I couldn’t afford the original, but I couldn’t wear it ever because I felt like I will get caught and people will know it’s a counterfeit, so I didn’t wear it.” This highlights the internal conflict faced by consumers who desire the status associated with luxury goods but fear the social risks of being discovered using counterfeit items.

Overall, these insights underscore the importance of understanding the cultural context when examining consumer behavior. The motivations and justifications for purchasing counterfeit goods in Kuwait differ significantly from those in Western cultures, where individualism and personal choice may play a more prominent role (Riquelme et al., 2012). By emphasizing the interplay between Islamic norms, social identity, and the influence of social media, this study provides a nuanced understanding of counterfeit consumption in a unique cultural setting.

Conclusion and Implications

This study provides valuable cultural insights into the phenomenon of counterfeit consumption in Kuwait, highlighting the interplay between Islamic norms, social identity, and status consumption. These findings contribute to the existing literature by offering a nuanced understanding of how cultural factors shape consumer behavior in an Islamic context.

Practically, these insights provide valuable guidance for luxury brand managers and policymakers. To counter the appeal of counterfeit goods, luxury brands should develop targeted marketing strategies that emphasize the superior quality and authenticity of genuine products. Educating consumers about the risks and ethical issues associated with counterfeit goods can further discourage their purchase. Collaborations with local social media influencers can enhance the desirability of genuine products, leveraging their significant impact on consumer behavior in Kuwait.

From the interpersonal perspective, the same product design is what gives counterfeits of premium brands their significance and signaling impact (Jiang & Cova, 2012). Respondents felt the need to fit in and elevate their standing in society. Others buy counterfeits because they refuse to pay the cost of the genuine brand. Consumers with a low need for belonging and favorable moral beliefs toward counterfeits exhibit a higher propensity to purchase counterfeits, despite the inherent social risk associated with such consumption. This suggests that social pressure to conform to group consumption patterns may be less influential for these individuals. Consequently, social risk alone appears insufficient to deter counterfeit purchases among this specific consumer segment.

The personal meanings that customers ascribe to a counterfeit have far more to do with the nature of the counterfeit products themselves. Products that seem to be from prestigious brands but are really knockoffs tend to come off as more affordable and customer focused. Some consumers are less concerned with making a social statement and more focused on satisfying their own needs. Even if the experience of buying and using a product is a delight in and of itself, buyers might increase their hedonic experiences by opting for a cheaper counterfeit product.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study advances the understanding of luxury counterfeit consumption by positioning the concept of luxury itself as a key driver (antecedent) of this behav-

ior. The observed correlation between counterfeit and genuine luxury products highlights the interplay between social factors, such as the desire for status or belonging, and the pursuit of personal gratification. However, the generalizability of these findings is limited by the sample size, research methodology, and cultural factors. Future research exploring consumers with a different socio-economic background might yield contrasting results, given their potentially different motivations and economic ability to buy luxury brands.

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