

The Role of Social Media in Normalizing Counterfeit Luxury Consumption : A Theoretical Exploration

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Abstract

The proliferation of social media has reshaped consumer culture globally, exerting a profound influence on purchasing behaviours, identity construction, and aspirational desires. In parallel, the counterfeit luxury industry has expanded into a multi-billion-dollar phenomenon, undermining legitimate markets and raising ethical, economic, and social concerns. While extant research has explored economic and demographic factors in counterfeit consumption, limited scholarly attention has been paid to the role of social media in normalizing counterfeit luxury purchases. This paper offers a theoretical exploration of how social media exposure — via influencers, aspirational content, and peer comparisons — contributes to counterfeit luxury consumption. Drawing on Cognitive Dissonance Theory, Neutralization Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Aspirational Consumption perspectives, this study proposes a conceptual framework linking social media exposure, consumer attitudes, and counterfeit purchase intentions, with moderators such as age, culture, and perceived risk. The paper contributes to theoretical development by integrating digital media studies with counterfeit luxury research and provides implications for brand managers, policymakers, and academics.

Key Words

Counterfeit Luxury, Social Media, Consumer Behaviour, Aspirational Consumption, Theoretical Framework, Neutralization Theory

INTRODUCTION

The global counterfeit luxury goods industry is estimated to exceed

\$500 billion annually, making it one of the most pressing challenges for luxury brands, policymakers, and global trade organizations (OECD, 2023). Counterfeits not only erode brand equity and legitimate revenues but also exacerbate ethical and legal concerns, including intellectual property theft, exploitation of labor, and links to organized crime. For consumers, counterfeit luxury products offer the symbolic prestige of luxury ownership at a fraction of the cost, thereby democratizing access to luxury status markers while simultaneously reinforcing illicit markets (Wilcox *et al.*, 2021).

Concurrently, the rise of social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and Facebook has transformed the consumption landscape. Unlike traditional advertising channels, social media thrives on peer-driven validation, user-generated content, and influencer endorsements. Luxury consumption has increasingly become performative, shaped by visual cues, digital displays, and the need for social recognition. Particularly for young consumers between the ages of 18 and 25, social media is a central space where aspirational lifestyles are constructed, displayed, and imitated (Kumar and Gupta, 2022).

This convergence of counterfeit luxury availability and social media's aspirational culture raises critical questions: How does social media shape consumer attitudes toward counterfeit luxury goods? Why are young consumers particularly vulnerable to counterfeit normalization in digital spaces? And how can theoretical perspectives explain this intersection? While research on counterfeit consumption has largely examined economic and ethical determinants, the specific role of social media remains under-theorized, especially in the context of emerging economies like India.

Counterfeit goods are not just an economic issue but also a cultural and psychological one. In collectivist societies, luxury items often function as markers of social status and identity, making consumers more susceptible to the symbolic appeal of counterfeits (Singh & Kaur, 2025). At the same time, social media's algorithm-driven environment continuously exposes users to curated lifestyles that emphasize luxury, thereby intensifying aspirations. As consumers scroll through endless luxury endorsements, the boundary between authentic and counterfeit consumption blurs.

OBJECTIVES

- To examine the role of social media in shaping consumer perceptions and attitudes toward counterfeit luxury consumption.
- To integrate multiple theoretical perspectives—Cognitive

Dissonance, Neutralization, Social Learning, and Aspirational Consumption theories — to explain how consumers rationalize and justify counterfeit purchases.

- To propose a conceptual framework to guide future empirical investigations.

By focusing on theoretical integration, this paper contributes to academic debates on consumer ethics, digital media influence, and luxury consumption.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Counterfeit Luxury Consumption

Counterfeit luxury goods replicate the design, packaging, and branding of authentic luxury items but are produced and sold illegally. Motivations for purchasing such products are complex, spanning affordability, accessibility, identity signalling, and status-seeking behaviours. Prior research has documented that consumers often pursue counterfeit luxury goods to achieve symbolic value, particularly when genuine luxury is financially unattainable (Zhang & Zhao, 2024). In emerging economies like India, where income inequality is stark, counterfeit markets provide an accessible pathway to luxury lifestyles. This symbolic consumption allows consumers to align themselves with desired social groups, reinforcing aspirational identity construction.

Counterfeit luxury consumption is not confined to economically constrained consumers. Even affluent individuals sometimes purchase counterfeits for experimentation, to avoid financial risk, or as a form of rebellion against luxury brand pricing (Wilcox *et al.*, 2021). This demonstrates that counterfeit demand is driven not only by affordability but also by symbolic, psychological, and cultural motivations.

2. Social Media and Consumer Behaviour

Social media has transformed how consumers interact with brands, peers, and cultural symbols. Influencers, often positioned as aspirational figures, showcase luxury lifestyles that blur the line between authentic and aspirational content. Peer comparisons on platforms like Instagram and TikTok intensify the desire to emulate luxury consumption. Studies suggest that social media users exposed to luxury brand promotions are more likely to express aspirational desires, even if they cannot afford genuine products (Kumar & Gupta, 2022). Crucially, social media also reduces stigma associated with counterfeit

consumption. Online communities often normalize counterfeits by framing them as practical alternatives or as markers of creativity and resistance against elitist branding. This discursive environment provides cognitive and social reinforcement that makes counterfeit purchases appear acceptable. Moreover, anonymity in online spaces reduces the perceived risk of judgment, further lowering barriers to counterfeit consumption.

3. Theoretical Perspectives

Cognitive Dissonance Theory. Festinger's (1957) Cognitive Dissonance Theory posits that individuals experience discomfort when their behaviours conflict with personal values. In the context of counterfeits, consumers may recognize that purchasing fake goods conflicts with ethical norms but resolve dissonance by justifying their actions through social narratives available on social media.

Neutralization Theory. Derived from criminology, Neutralization Theory (Sykes & Matza, 1957) suggests that individuals rationalize deviant behaviours through techniques such as denial of injury, appeal to higher loyalties, or condemnation of condemners. For counterfeit consumers, justifications often include beliefs like "big brands make excessive profits" or "everyone buys counterfeits." Social media amplifies these rationalizations by offering collective validation.

Social Learning Theory. Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory emphasizes learning through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. Social media, saturated with influencers and peer behaviour, serves as a fertile ground where counterfeit consumption is modelled and legitimized. Consumers learn not only the desirability of luxury goods but also the acceptability of obtaining them through counterfeits.

Aspirational Consumption and Self-Concept. Luxury consumption is often linked to aspirational identity construction and self-expression (Zhang & Zhao, 2024). Counterfeits allow consumers to align their self-concept with aspirational lifestyles showcased online. Social media intensifies this dynamic by making luxury consumption hyper-visible and central to identity performance.

Moral Disengagement Theory, proposed by Bandura (1999), explains how individuals deactivate self-regulatory moral standards to engage in unethical behaviour without experiencing guilt. In the context of counterfeit luxury consumption, moral disengagement mechanisms such as moral justification, diffusion of responsibility, and minimization of harm allow consumers to rationalize

illicit purchases. Social media environments amplify these mechanisms by providing collective validation and normalization narratives, thereby reducing individual accountability. When counterfeit consumption is framed as harmless, commonplace, or even socially savvy, moral disengagement becomes socially reinforced rather than privately negotiated. Recent studies suggest that online communities and influencer discourse play a critical role in facilitating moral disengagement in consumption-related ethics, making this theory particularly relevant for understanding counterfeit normalization in digital contexts.

Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) posits that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their status, achievements, and possessions with those of others. Social media platforms intensify upward social comparisons by continuously exposing users to idealized lifestyles and luxury consumption displays. Such comparisons heighten status anxiety and aspirational desire, particularly among younger consumers. When authentic luxury consumption is economically unattainable, counterfeit products provide a means to reduce comparison-based self-discrepancies. Prior research indicates that social comparison processes on social media significantly influence luxury brand desire and counterfeit purchase intention, underscoring the role of digital visibility in shaping aspirational and compensatory consumption behaviors.

Signalling Theory explains how individuals use observable consumption symbols to communicate social status, identity, and group membership. Luxury brands function as powerful status signals due to their high visibility and symbolic value. Counterfeit luxury products mimic these signals, enabling consumers to project desired social identities without incurring the full economic cost of authentic ownership. In social media environments where visibility and impression management are paramount, the signalling function of luxury goods often outweighs concerns regarding authenticity. This shift reinforces counterfeit consumption as a functional substitute for genuine luxury signalling in digital social spaces.

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) has been widely applied to explain intentions to purchase counterfeit goods through attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. While TPB-based models offer predictive insights, they largely conceptualize counterfeit consumption as a rational and static decision-making process. Such models insufficiently capture the dynamic and socially constructed nature of normalization within social media environments. Consequently, while TPB informs intention formation, it must be complemented with theories addressing moral justification and social

learning to explain counterfeit luxury consumption in digital contexts fully.

Platform affordance theory suggests that technological features shape user behaviour by enabling or constraining specific actions. In the context of social media, affordances such as algorithmic amplification, anonymity, visual emphasis, and peer endorsement mechanisms influence how counterfeit content is produced, circulated, and legitimized. These affordances reduce perceived risk while increasing social visibility and validation, thereby accelerating normalization processes. Understanding counterfeit luxury consumption thus requires attention not only to user psychology but also to the structural properties of digital platforms.

Theoretical Foundations Explaining Counterfeit Luxury Consumption in Social Media Contexts

Theory	Core Proposition	Relevance to Counterfeit Luxury Consumption	Role of Social Media	Key References
Aspirational Consumption Theory	Consumers purchase products to align with desired identities and future selves.	Counterfeits serve as symbolic substitutes enabling aspirational identity performance when authentic luxury is unattainable.	Curated luxury imagery and influencer content amplify aspirational desires and lifestyle aspirations.	Zhang & Zhao (2024); Kumar & Gupta (2022)
Social Comparison Theory	Individuals evaluate themselves through comparison with others, particularly upward comparisons.	Upward comparison increases status anxiety and desire for luxury symbols, enhancing counterfeit appeal.	Continuous exposure to idealized luxury lifestyles intensifies comparison processes and self-discrepancies.	Festinger (1954); Yadav & Rai (2020); Vogel <i>et al.</i> (2014)
Signaling Theory	Consumption symbols communicate social status and group membership.	Counterfeit luxury products mimic authentic luxury signals at a lower cost.	Digital visibility prioritizes appearance and impression management over authenticity.	Spence (1973); Han <i>et al.</i> (2010); Wilcox <i>et al.</i> (2021)
Cognitive Dissonance Theory	Individuals experience psychological discomfort when behavior conflicts with personal values and beliefs.	Consumers justify counterfeit purchases to reduce ethical and psychological tension.	Social media narratives reframe counterfeits as acceptable alternatives, reducing dissonance.	Festinger (1957); Wilcox <i>et al.</i> (2021)

Moral Disengagement Theory	Moral self-regulation can be deactivated to justify unethical behavior without guilt.	Consumers rationalize counterfeit purchases by minimizing harm and diffusing responsibility.	Collective validation and normalization narratives strengthen moral disengagement mechanisms.	Bandura (1999); Moore (2015); Lee & Workman (2022)
Neutralization Theory	Individuals rationalize deviant behavior through socially accepted justifications.	Counterfeit consumption is justified through denial of injury, denial of responsibility, and condemnation of luxury brands.	Peer discourse and online communities reinforce rationalization narratives.	Sykes & Matza (1957); Singh & Kaur (2025)
Social Learning Theory	Behavior is learned through observation, imitation, and reinforcement.	Observing peers and influencers legitimizes counterfeit luxury consumption.	Likes, comments, shares, and influencer endorsements reinforce counterfeit-related behaviors.	Bandura (1977); (Chen & Xie (2021)
Platform Affordance Theory	Technological features of platforms enable or constrain user behavior.	Platform characteristics increase counterfeit visibility and reduce perceived risk.	Algorithmic amplification, anonymity, and visual emphasis accelerate normalization processes.	Evans <i>et al.</i> (2017); Zhou & Wong (2021)
Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)	Behavior is driven by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control.	Explains the formation of counterfeit purchase intentions.	Social norms and peer approval on digital platforms shape consumer intentions.	Ajzen (1991); Park & Lin (2020)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a conceptual and theoretical approach rather than an empirical one. The methodology is based on an extensive review of secondary literature from 2020 to 2025, supplemented by foundational theoretical works.

Research articles, policy reports, and industry data were synthesized to identify patterns in counterfeit luxury consumption and the influence of social media. Classic theories such as Cognitive Dissonance Theory, Neutralization Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Aspirational Consumption were integrated to construct a comprehensive framework.

The process involved mapping how social media mechanisms—such

as influencer marketing, peer comparison, and aspirational content—interact with consumer psychology and sociocultural norms. The scope of the study emphasizes young consumers aged 18–25 in emerging markets, with specific attention to the Indian context. This theoretical synthesis enables the development of hypotheses and a conceptual framework that future empirical studies can test.

Limitations of this methodology include the absence of primary data collection and potential cultural bias due to regional focus. However, the conceptual orientation provides a solid foundation for subsequent quantitative and qualitative investigations.

Research Gaps in Counterfeit Luxury Consumption and Social Media Literature

Theme	Dominant Focus in Existing Literature	Contribution of the Identified Gap Present Study
Nature of Counterfeit Consumption	Reconceptualises Counterfeit purchase counterfeit consumption as a socially individual ethical or or as a <i>socially normalized</i> economic decision <i>process</i>	Limited understanding of counterfeit luxury viewed as an legitimized behavior shaped by digital environments
Role of Social Media	Under-theorization of Social media treated social media as a <i>moral</i> as a promotional or <i>cultural</i> informational channel <i>infrastructure</i>	Positions social media as a normalization mechanism influencing ethical boundaries
Influencer and Peer Influence	Neglects influencers as Focus on persuasion, <i>moral reference groups</i> credibility, and legitimizing deviant intention formation consumption	Highlights implicit legitimation through aspirational and "dupe" narratives
Theoretical Approaches	Reliance on a single-theory or intention-based models Lack of integrative, process-oriented frameworks	Develops a multi-theoretical synthesis explaining aspiration, justification and imitation
Contextual Focus	Emphasis on Western Limited theorization of or China-centric emerging markets markets	Extends theory to the Indian context, emphasizing collectivism and aspirational culture

4. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

Based on the literature, we propose the following conceptual model :
Social Media Exposure → Consumer Attitudes → Counterfeit Purchase

Intention

Moderators :

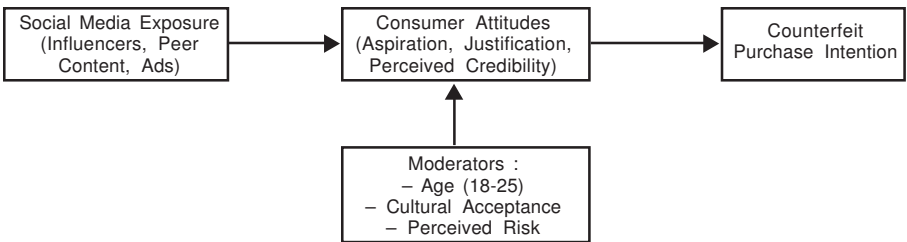
- Age group (18–25 most influenced)
- Cultural acceptance (regional norms in India)
- Perceived risk (ethical and legal concerns)

Hypotheses :

- **H1 :** Increased exposure to luxury-related content on social media positively influences attitudes toward counterfeit luxury products.
- **H2 :** Favourable attitudes toward counterfeit goods increase purchase intentions.
- **H3 :** Cognitive dissonance reduction and neutralization strategies mediate the relationship between social media exposure and purchase intention.
- **H4 :** Age and cultural factors moderate the effect of social media exposure on counterfeit consumption.

Conceptual Framework Diagram

Conceptual Framework : Social Media and Counterfeit Luxury Consumption



DISCUSSION

This study advances the understanding of counterfeit luxury consumption by demonstrating how social media enables the *normalization* of illicit consumption through interconnected psychological, moral, and social mechanisms. Rather than treating counterfeit purchasing as a purely economic or ethical decision, the discussion positions it as an outcome of ongoing digital socialization shaped by aspirational exposure, moral rationalization, and observational learning.

From the perspective of **Aspirational Consumption Theory**, social media platforms function as powerful arenas for identity construction. Continuous exposure to curated luxury lifestyles intensifies aspirational desires, particularly among young consumers who seek symbolic affiliation with higher social status groups. When access to authentic luxury goods is constrained by economic realities, counterfeit products emerge as symbolic substitutes that allow consumers to perform aspirational identities online. This finding aligns with the argument that luxury consumption in digital spaces is less about ownership and more about visibility, recognition, and self-presentation.

However, aspirational desire alone cannot explain counterfeit consumption due to the ethical and legal implications associated with such behavior. **Cognitive Dissonance Theory** provides insight into how consumers manage the psychological discomfort arising from this conflict. Consumers who value authenticity and legality experience dissonance when considering counterfeit purchases. Social media environments help reduce this discomfort by normalizing counterfeit narratives—such as framing counterfeits as “smart choices” or “temporary alternatives”—thereby allowing consumers to maintain a positive self-concept while engaging in ethically questionable consumption.

The role of **Neutralization Theory** further explains how moral boundaries are reshaped in digital contexts. Social media discourse frequently enables techniques of neutralization, including denial of injury (“luxury brands are not harmed”), appeal to higher loyalties (“everyone wants to look good”), and condemnation of condemners (“brands overprice their products”). These rationalizations are not developed in isolation but are socially reinforced through peer interactions, influencer commentary, and online communities. As such, neutralization becomes a collective rather than an individual process, accelerating the normalization of counterfeit luxury consumption.

In parallel, **Social Learning Theory** highlights the importance of observational learning and reinforcement within social media environments. Consumers repeatedly observe peers and influencers engaging with counterfeit or “dupe” products without facing social sanctions. Positive reinforcement through likes, comments, and shares further legitimizes such behaviour. Over time, these observed patterns shape consumer norms, signalling that counterfeit consumption is acceptable, common place, and even socially rewarded. This extends social learning theory into the domain of digital consumer ethics, where behavioural legitimacy is constructed algorithmically and socially.

Crucially, social media acts as the **integrative infrastructure** that connects these theoretical mechanisms. Aspirational content generates desire,

cognitive dissonance creates moral tension, neutralization narratives resolve ethical conflict, and social learning reinforces acceptable behaviour. Together, these processes explain how counterfeit luxury consumption transitions from a deviant act to a normalized practice within online communities. This integrated theoretical explanation moves beyond static intention-based models and captures the dynamic, process-oriented nature of counterfeit normalization.

In the context of emerging markets such as India, these dynamics are further intensified by collectivist cultural norms and heightened aspirations for social mobility. Social approval and peer recognition play a central role in consumption decisions, making social media-driven normalization particularly influential. Counterfeit luxury products thus function not only as economic substitutes but also as culturally embedded tools for social inclusion and identity performance.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This theoretical exploration highlights the central role of social media in shaping counterfeit luxury consumption. The study demonstrates that counterfeit behaviour is influenced not only by affordability but also by the normalization of aspirational lifestyles on digital platforms. By integrating Cognitive Dissonance Theory, Neutralization Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Aspirational Consumption perspectives, this paper offers a multidimensional understanding of how consumers rationalize, justify, and learn counterfeit consumption behaviours in online contexts.

The findings underscore that counterfeit consumption is deeply embedded in cultural, psychological, and technological processes. Social media amplifies these dynamics by offering aspirational cues, collective justifications, and opportunities for identity construction that make counterfeit consumption appear acceptable. For brand managers, the challenge lies in reclaiming the narrative of authenticity and reshaping consumer perceptions of value. Policymakers, on the other hand, need to establish stricter guidelines for online counterfeit promotion and collaborate with platforms to detect and remove counterfeit endorsements.

This paper is conceptual, therefore, limited by the absence of empirical validation. Future research should test the proposed framework using quantitative surveys or experimental designs, especially focusing on the 18–25 demographic in emerging economies like India. Cross-cultural comparisons could examine how cultural norms shape counterfeit normalization, while

longitudinal studies could assess how social media algorithms influence evolving consumer attitudes toward counterfeits. Researchers may also explore intersections with sustainability and ethical consumption, investigating whether environmental and social concerns affect counterfeit acceptance in digital spaces. In conclusion, this paper contributes to the ongoing debate on counterfeit luxury consumption by positioning social media as both a driver and legitimizer of consumer behavior. It opens avenues for empirical testing and policy interventions while encouraging luxury brands to engage more proactively in digital spaces to safeguard authenticity and long-term brand equity.

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