It Feels Good and Bad to Be Fake: the Mixed Emotional Experience and Consequence of Using Counterfeits

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This research explores the emotions elicited by counterfeit consumption and examines how these emotions impact counterfeit users. We find that counterfeit users experience mixed emotions, particularly when they use counterfeits in public settings. Moreover, these mixed emotions are mentally taxing and thereby deplete counterfeit users’ self-regulatory resources.

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The Mixed Emotional Experience and Consequence of Using Counterfeits
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT  
Over the past two decades, the market for counterfeit products – products that use a brand logo without a company’s permission – has grown over 10,000% (International AntiCounterfeiting Coalition 2014). To understand this tremendous growth, a burgeoning literature has investigated the psychology of counterfeit consumption and has identified several psychological antecedents (Wilcox et al. 2009) and consequences (Gino et al. 2010) of counterfeit consumption. Little research, however, has focused on understanding consumers’ experience when using counterfeit products. Counterfeit consumption is unique, particularly in the emotions it elicits. Thus, the current research seeks to examine the emotional experience of counterfeit consumption and the behavioral consequences of such emotional experience.

We hypothesize that counterfeit consumption elicits mixed emotions. Moreover, we conjecture that publically-consumed counterfeits (e.g. bags, shoes) elicit more mixed emotions than privately-consumed counterfeits (e.g. books, DVDs). While both public and private counterfeit consumption can elicit emotions associated with affordability and quality, only public counterfeits can additionally elicit emotions associated with social factors. For example, users of public counterfeit products may experience positive emotions arising from a product’s signaling value and negative emotions arising from the fear of social judgment.

Furthermore, we hypothesize that the mixed emotions arising from using counterfeits are mentally taxing. Experiencing mixed emotions may entail vacillating between different emotional states. Since witching mental states requires executive control and consumes regulatory resources (Hamilton et al. 2011), it is possible that experiencing mixed emotions also consumes regulatory resources. Moreover, experiencing mixed emotions is often associated with feeling psychological discomfort (Williams and Aaker 2002). People may attempt to reduce the psychological discomfort and such emotion regulation would lead to depletion of regulatory resources (Baumeister et al. 1998).

Three studies were conducted to test these hypotheses. Study 1 surveyed 54 pre-screened, self-reported counterfeit users. First, participants listed the types of counterfeits they have used and described how using each counterfeit typically makes them feel. Then, they rated the extent to which counterfeit consumption makes them feel mixed (mixed: feel both good and bad) on a five-point scale (1=not at all, 5=extremely). Research suggests that people experience different levels of discomfort when having mixed emotions (Williams and Aaker 2002). Thus, we also measured the extent to which participants feel discomfort (conflicted, bothered, aprivate =0.869, apublic =0.774) on a five-point scale (1=not at all, 5=extremely).

Open ended responses show that more users reported feeling mixed when using public (e.g. bags, shoes, 16%) compared to private (e.g. books, DVDs; 4%) counterfeits. The mixed emotions associated with public counterfeit consumption arose from people feeling positive about having saved money but negative about the risk of social judgment. Results from the scale measures show that participants reported feeling more mixed (Mprivate =2.55, Mpublic =1.76, p=0.001) and more discomfort (Mprivate =1.76, Mpublic =1.76, p=0.001) when using public counterfeiters than private counterfeiters. Thus, results across measures support that public, compared to private, counterfeit consumption elicits more mixed emotions.

Study 2 was an experiment in which participants imagined using a counterfeit, branded or non-branded product in a public setting. Participants reported the extent to which they feel “mixed” on a five-point scale (1=very slightly mixed or not at all mixed, 5=extremely mixed), and discomfort (conflicted and discomfort) on a seven-point scale (1=strongly disagree, 7=strong agree). Finally, they reported their general moral belief about using counterfeits on a seven-point morality scale (Wilcox et al. 2009).

Results show that counterfeit consumption elicited more mixed emotions (Mcounterfeit =2.93) than branded (Mbranded =2.35, p=0.008) and non-branded consumption (Mnon-branded =2.56, p=0.09). The latter two conditions did not differ (F(1). Interaction between product condition and moral beliefs was nonsignificant (p=0.31), suggesting that counterfeit consumption elicited mixed emotions irrespective of individual differences in moral beliefs about using counterfeits. Participants also reported feeling more comfort in the counterfeit condition (Mcounterfeit =4.04) than the branded (Mbranded =3.51, p=0.009) and non-branded (Mnon-branded =3.43, p=0.049) conditions. The latter two conditions did not differ (F<1). Consistent with our prediction, counterfeit consumption indeed elicits mixed emotions.

Study 3 tested our hypothesis that counterfeit consumption is mentally taxing and leads to regulatory resource depletion. Participants were assigned to either the branded or counterfeit condition from study 2. After imagining the scenario, participants reported the extent to which they feel mixed on a five-point scale (mixed, ambivalent, feeling good and bad at the same time, a=0.75; 1=not at all, 5=extremely). Then they performed a word-generation task to measure resource depletion. Previous research has used persistence at tasks to measure resource depletion (e.g. Baumeister et al. 1998). However, due to logistic reasons we limited the maximum time participants could spend on the task to five minutes. Consequently, time spent was not an accurate measure of resource depletion because performance on the task may be confounded with the amount of time spent on the task. Thus, as a dependent measure, we calculated participants’ efficiency in correctly solving the task by dividing the number of correctly generated words by the number of minutes participants spent on the task (see Finkel et al. 2006 for a similar measure).

Results show that compared to branded consumption, counterfeit consumption elicited more mixed emotions (Mcounterfeit =2.74 vs. Mbranded =2.63, p<0.001). Moreover, participants’ efficiency was lower in counterfeit consumption than branded consumption (Mcounterfeit =5.7, p=0.053). The mediating role of mixed emotions was tested by bootstrapping procedures (Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes 2007). The procedures generated a 90% confidence interval around the indirect effect with zero falling outside of the confidence interval (-0.0740, -0.0015), indicating that the mediating pathway was marginally significant. Thus, results provide evidence that counterfeit consumption elicits mixed emotions, which in turns leads to self-regulatory resource depletion.

The present studies contribute to the extent literature on counterfeit consumption by exploring the emotional impact of using counterfeits. We find that (1) using counterfeits elicits mixed emo-
tions; (2) this effect is pronounced for counterfeits used in public, which carry higher risk of social judgment; and (3) the mixed emotions elicited by counterfeit consumption is mentally taxing, which depletes self-regulatory resources. Our findings highlight the emotional cost and behavioral consequences of counterfeit consumption, and can potentially increase consumer welfare and provide managerial implications on reducing consumer demands on counterfeits.

REFERENCES


