It’S Fake!? Consumers' Self Creation in a Market With Easy Access to Counterfeit Goods

Marcia Christina Ferreira, EBAPE / FGV, Brazil
Bill Pereira, EBAPE/FGV - RJ. FUCAPE Business School, Brazil

In everyday life consumption is a central practice providing meanings and value for the creation and maintenance of the consumer's personal and social world. In marketplaces with easy access to counterfeit goods researches have given evidence that consumers primarily look for symbolic consumptions responses. When creating meaning counterfeit consumers appear to arbitrate a dialog between object’s representation (counterfeit object) and signification (original object) through rituals of possession determined by distinct levels of self creation. Three levels of symbolic action emerged from qualitative analysis of fourteen interviews conducted with counterfeit consumers in a developing country.

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Consumption is a central practice in everyday life supplying meanings and value for the creation and maintenance of the consumer’s personal and social world (Wattabasuwan 2005). Symbolic value and meanings are important for consumers not only because they help retain their former sense, but also because they help them to be categorized in society, communicate cultural meanings, traditions and group identity, as well as to shape and communicate their identity through the meanings attributed to their possessions (McCracken 1981; Slater 1997; Belk 1998). Consumption meanings emerge in a dialectical process between its owner and the object as the symbolism assigned to this object reflects both, the image of the subject and the image of the object (Wattabasuwan 2005). An argument well illustrated by Belk (1988: p. 141): “the more we believe we possess or are possessed by an object, the more a part of self it becomes”. Therefore, the dialectical process would not be subject-object, but in fact subject-object-subject.

The present research chooses counterfeit consumption as base to explore the dynamic interaction between consumer actions, the marketplace and the cultural meanings (Arnould and Thompson 2005) and aim to better understand consumer’s self creations via possessions of counterfeit goods. In a marketplace with abundant supply and easy access to counterfeits consumers can alter their behaviour looking for products “with brand” instead of originals giving uncountable justifications for their actions resulting in a consumption “socially acceptable” (Gentry et al 2001). Therefore a market “plentiful” of counterfeits goods was chosen as context for the present research as it allows exploring the phenomenon as relations between an existent culture and social resources as well as relations between possessions and meanings. A perspective not yet explored in the literature.

The majority of existing literature concentrates in profiling counterfeit consumers as well as investigating their consumptions reasons (Penz and Stöttingner 2008) resulting in studies that search for rational answers driven by utilitarian principles. However, profound explanations need to be done beyond correlations between variables which would be better assessed by qualitative research (Eisend and Schuchert-Güler 2006). Counterfeit consumers present distinctive construction of meanings indicating they consider more personal and subjective value in choosing this product (Gentry, Putrevu and Shultz 2006). Since counterfeits are as closely related to the person’s self image and identity as regular products, consumers are capable of transferring part of the meanings from the original to themselves and build their identity, depending on the counterfeit likeness (Hoe, Hogg and Hart 2003).

Looking at the context in question, the literature gives evidence that individuals rate counterfeit consumption as pleasant as regular shopping (Matos Itaasu and Rossi 2007). During their decision making counterfeit consumers might prefer product’s meanings instead of quality or price, suggesting a choice based on product’s usage (Ferreira, Botelho and Almeida 2008). Moreover counterfeiters could contribute for consumer’s legitimacy working as symbolic capital and yet becoming socially acceptable (Strehlau, Vasconcelos and Huertas 2006). Finally counterfeit consumer value seems to be ruled by experiences with individuals reacting to meanings existing in original products and then acting through counterfeiters as a way to find authentic consumption value, since these goods where mostly consumed playfully and along with non aesthetic value (Ferreira, 2008).

The developing country Brazil was used as research context. In 2008 the turnover of counterfeit goods was between US$ 30 billion and US$ 40 billion, in a country where only 3 in 10 persons do not consume fake products (Bompan 2008). Additionally an anthropologic study shows an abrupt intensification of consumption as a result of economic expansion and political changes. To understand this new reality individuals developed conflicting views putting in one side desires and values and the frustration and political issues on the other (O’Dougherty 2002).

In this marketplace, counterfeit consumers were asked to reflect upon their lifetime experiences while shopping. Fourteen in-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire with male and females, aged between 20 e 54 years, living in Rio de Janeiro. The sample, selected by convenience, was collected mainly through face-to-face interviews during 45 minutes on average, in locations chosen by the informants (excluding five phone interviews). The data collected were recorded, transcribed and analyzed individually by the researchers (Miles and Huberman 1994). Additionally, the largest trade centre for counterfeits in the country was used for field observations. Researchers talked with dealers and consumers seeking to better understand the consumptions’ dynamics in that marketplace. As a working in progress, further investigations will be carried out.

When creating meaning counterfeit consumers appear to arbitrate a dialog between object’s representation (counterfeit object) and significiation (original object) through rituals of possession determined by distinct levels of self creation. Therefore it’s possible to address this phenomenon in the chosen context as a three-way conversation (subject-object-subject) but with the object divided in two: original and counterfeit. Three levels of symbolic action emerge from the analysis of counterfeit consumer’s self-extension: (a) controlling level; (b) creative level; (c) fulfilling level. On the first level the counterfeit object was possessed by consumers through strict control over their significance. In this case, such product was consumed mainly by their practical characteristics and justified by their utilitarian trade-off. Therefore, such practice has been allocated on the lowest level of self-extension with fewer presence of symbolic action.

On a second level, the consumers seek for symbolic actions that can be determined by their creativity with an objective to personify such possession. On this level the dialog between representation and significiation was permanent and led the consumers to reveal [or remember] incessantly their counterfeit consumption to get closer each time to significience inspired by the original good. Extremely knowledgeable of both objects consumers in the third level of self-extension were capable of divestment of most of the counterfeit.
representation in search for a fully significance prevailing through the idea of original product. And they did it believing that their personal features (such as beauty, success or wealth) work as a catalyst transferring to the counterfeit object most of the significance from the original item.

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Doing Qualitative Research with Archival Data: Making Secondary Data a Primary Resource

Eileen Fischer, York University, Canada
Marie-Agnès Parmentier, HEC Montréal, Canada

Since consumer researchers began to publish studies grounded in qualitative data, many have collected archival or secondary data as a matter of course. However archival data has played what can only be regarded as a secondary role in most qualitative consumer research studies. Archival data comprises a wide array of empirical materials created by individuals for their own purposes (e.g. diaries, letters, photographs, weblogs, fan art and discussion list postings) or behalf of organizations (e.g. corporate annual reports, press releases, advertisements, magazine articles, restaurant reviews, ratings websites etcetera). With rare exceptions (notably Belk’s (1992) study that relied on personal documents) common methodological practice has been to make use of interview and, less frequently, observational data as the main resource in developing interpretations and analyses of focal phenomena. Archival data has chiefly been used to help develop understandings of the research context, rather than to inform the development of concepts and theories. Evidence supporting this assertion is that virtually every scholar who has collected both interview or observational data also relied on personal documents) common methodological practice has been to make use of interview and, less frequently, observational data as the main resource in developing interpretations and analyses of focal phenomena. Archival data has chiefly been used to help develop understandings of the research context, rather than to inform the development of concepts and theories. Evidence supporting this assertion is that virtually every scholar who has collected both interview or observational data.

The claim that archival data is an increasingly viable resource stems from the fact that an ever greater amount of archival verbal and visual material is becoming nearly universally available owing to the internet. Just as the growth of online communities has led to ever growing opportunities for netnography (Kozinets 2002, 2008), so has the proliferation, online, of archives of materials ranging from periodicals to blogs to corporate annual reports to product complaint websites made possible an ever widening scope of systematic,