

BEHIND THE LABEL: FACTORS INFLUENCING THE PURCHASE OF COUNTERFEIT SPORTSWEAR

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Abstract

Counterfeit products, especially in the sports apparel market, have become increasingly common due to rapid advancements in technology that make it easier to replicate logos, packaging, and overall product design. These imitations not only mislead consumers but also impact global economies, reduce investor confidence, and pose potential risks to public health and safety. This study explores what drives consumers to consider purchasing counterfeit sportswear by looking at five key factors: subjective norms, materialism, attitude, and price. Out of 200 surveys distributed, 191 responses were collected and analysed. Interestingly, the results show that price and perceived quality play a significant role in shaping consumers' buying decisions. On the other hand, factors such as social influence, personal values, and brand awareness were not found to have a strong impact. These findings offer useful insights for both marketers and policymakers who are working to address the growing issue of counterfeit goods. The study also reflects its limitations and offers suggestions for future research to build on these findings.

Keywords: Counterfeit, Sportswear, Purchase Intention

Introduction

Counterfeiting refers to the unauthorised reproduction of original goods, where trademarks, logos, and packaging are imitated to closely resemble genuine products (Xi et al., 2017). Over the years, counterfeiting has grown into one of the most serious economic crimes across the globe. It affects both developed and developing economies by disrupting fair competition, discouraging foreign investment, and, in many cases, posing risks to public health and safety. Advances in technology have only made it easier for counterfeiters to produce convincing imitations, blurring the line between fake and original goods.

A major reason why consumers turn to counterfeit items is their affordability. While consumers with greater purchasing power may prefer original products, research shows that those with limited income are more inclined to choose cheaper, imitation. Countries such as

China, Brazil, India, and Indonesia are widely recognised as hotspots for counterfeit production. Malaysia has also been flagged as a key location in the spread of imitation goods, especially in Southeast Asia (Xi, et al., 2017).

The scale of the counterfeit market is staggering. Estimates place the global value of counterfeit and pirated products at between USD 455 billion and USD 650 billion each year (ICCLi, 2011). This includes goods traded internationally, those produced and consumed domestically, and even digital piracy. Projections for 2015 showed a steep rise, estimating the total value could reach up to USD 1.77 trillion representing around 2% of global GDP at the time. These figures reflect the extent of the issue and its far-reaching economic impact.

With this growing trend, an important question arises: Why do some consumers willingly choose counterfeit sports apparel over genuine ones? What are the factors that influence their decision? Despite efforts from brand owners and authorities, counterfeit sports merchandise continues to thrive. In Malaysia, the market for fake goods including clothing, shoes, CDs, and even pharmaceuticals were estimated to be worth RM464 million (Havocscope Global Market Indexes, 2011).

Products that are high in demand and easy to replicate are often the most targeted by counterfeiters. For some consumers, purchasing branded items is tied to social image or status. Those who cannot afford authentic brands may still want to associate themselves with them, choosing imitation goods as a more affordable alternative. Consumer attitude is another important element to consider. Attitude refers to one's mental outlook towards an object or experience, influencing both feelings and actions (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). It consists of three components: affective (emotional response), cognitive (beliefs and thoughts), and conative (intent and action) (Clow & Baack, 2015).

Despite the popularity of sportswear, counterfeit products in this category have not been widely explored in academic research (Chiu & Leng., 2016). However, recent incidents suggest that this area is growing. For example, the National Football League (NFL) in the United States reported seizing nearly USD 40 million worth of counterfeit sports goods since 2012 (Umar, 2015). These developments highlight the need for a deeper understanding of consumer behaviour in this market. This study aims to explore the factors influencing consumer intention to purchase counterfeit sports apparel, an area that deserves more focused attention given its rising significance.

Literature Review

In Malaysia, the sportswear industry has grown noticeably, especially among the younger generation. What used to be clothing worn mainly for physical activities has now become a part of everyday fashion. Young Malaysians are increasingly embracing a more active and casual lifestyle, and this shift has made sports apparel a common sight even outside the gym or sports field (Riefaldo Akwila Lodjo & Tumewu, 2015).

Well-known international brands such as Nike, Adidas, Puma, Reebok, Under Armour, and Umbro are among the most recognised names in the local market. Among these, Nike and Adidas continue to lead the way, with both brands expanding aggressively across Asia to capture more of the regional market (Riefaldo Akwila Lodjo & Tumewu, 2015). Their popularity in Malaysia reflects not only brand strength but also changing consumer preferences toward stylish, comfortable, and performance-oriented clothing.

One key area that sportswear companies in Malaysia focus on is building brand loyalty. In a competitive market, it's no longer enough to attract first-time buyers; brands need to create

lasting relationships with their customers. Loyalty is often earned through trust, positive experiences, and consistent quality. Word-of-mouth recommendations and repeat purchases play a big part in this process (Riefaldo Akwila Lodjo & Tumewu, 2015). As a result, many sportswear brands are now investing more in strategies that build long-term trust, knowing that loyal customers are more likely to return and even advocate for the brand.

Purchase Intention

When it comes to buying sports apparel, especially counterfeit items, consumers often weigh several factors before making a decision. These factors may include price, brand reputation, personal values, attitude, and social influence. For some, choosing counterfeit sportswear over genuine brands is influenced by affordability, peer perception, or even a desire to align with popular trends without bearing the high cost. In this study, purchase intention refers to the consumer's willingness or readiness to buy counterfeit sports apparel serving as the key variable being measured. According to Ajzen (1991), intention reflects a person's desire and preparedness to perform a behaviour, and in this case, it helps predict potential buying behaviour. Researchers have found that intention often precedes actual purchasing decisions and is shaped by internal evaluations and external pressures (Xi, et al., 2017). The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) supports this by suggesting that a consumer's intention to buy is driven by attitude, subjective norms, and perceived control. Similarly, the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) highlights that decision-making is influenced by how one feels about a product and what others around them think. In the context of counterfeit goods, studies show that people who view fake products more positively are more likely to purchase them, while those with negative attitudes are less inclined to do so (Phau & Teah, 2009). This makes purchase intention a useful lens for understanding how consumers make ethical and practical trade-offs in today's marketplace.

Subjective Norm

Subjective norm refers to the social pressure a person feels from important people around them such as friends, family, or peers when making a decision, including whether to buy counterfeit sports apparel (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). According to Yeo, et al. (2021), social influence has a positive impact on consumer purchase decisions, as individuals often rely on the opinions and behaviours of those around them when making buying choices. These influences are especially strong when the product is visible and socially significant, like branded sportswear (Chiu & Leng, 2016). Teenagers, in particular, tend to follow peer opinions when choosing brands, and if their social group accepts counterfeits, their intention to buy such products increases (Lachance et al., 2003). However, when counterfeit items are of poor quality and easily recognised as fake, this may discourage purchases due to fear of judgment (Lan et al., 2012). On the other hand, high-quality counterfeits that closely resemble original products can reduce this social risk, making subjective norms less influential (Murphy et al., 2008). Overall, subjective norms can significantly affect whether someone decides to buy counterfeit sports apparel.

Attitude

Attitude refers to the way a person thinks or feels about something, and it plays a central role in shaping consumer choices especially when it comes to counterfeit products. If a consumer has a favourable view of counterfeits, they are more likely to consider buying them;

if their attitude is negative, they tend to avoid such purchases (Ting, et al., 2016). This mindset often develops through personal beliefs, past experiences, emotional responses, and social influences. Others may simply see them as affordable alternatives. Attitude is shaped by three elements: what we believe (cognitive), how we feel (affective), and what we intend to do (conative), and these can vary in influence depending on the situation (Xi et al., 2017). Moreover, personal traits like materialism or integrity, and external factors like peer pressure or cultural norms, can influence how one views counterfeit products (Phau & Teah, 2013). In the end, whether or not someone chooses to buy counterfeit sportswear often starts with how they internally evaluate the product and the meaning they attach to it.

Materialism

Materialism refers to the importance individuals place on owning possessions, often seeing material goods as a measure of success, happiness, or social status (Xi, et al., 2017). Materialistic consumers tend to value branded or luxury items as symbols of prestige and personal achievement (Chan, et al., 2015). While some see materialism as a set of personal values, others view it as a personality trait linked to possessiveness, envy, and the desire for social recognition. However, when financial limitations arise, these consumers may turn to counterfeit products as a more affordable way to maintain their desired image (Phau & Teah, 2013). Although they recognise these products aren't genuine, the lower cost allows them to fulfil their material desires without compromising too much on appearance. As a result, the more materialistic a person is, the more likely they are to consider buying counterfeits especially when they view such purchases as a way to project wealth or social standing without bearing the high cost of originals.

Price

Many consumers tend to judge a product's quality by looking at its price. It's a common belief that if something costs more, it must be better made while a lower price often suggests lower quality. This kind of thinking becomes especially important when it comes to counterfeit products, which usually mimic well-known brands but sell for a fraction of the price due to their cheaper materials and lack of authenticity (Hadiwijaya, 2015). People who strongly associate price with quality are generally less open to buying counterfeits because they assume the lower cost reflects poor performance or durability (Huang, 2004). Still, for some consumers particularly those on a budget the appeal of getting a similar look and basic function at a lower price outweighs concerns about quality (Phau & Teah, 2013). These buyers may not be seeking luxury or long-term use, but simply want a product that "looks the part" and meets basic needs. In such cases, the lower financial risk and affordability make counterfeits a tempting alternative to the real thing (Chiu & Leng, 2016). Even if the quality isn't on par, the sense of value gained from spending less can still leave consumers feeling satisfied.

Research Methodology

In this study, purposive sampling was adopted as the sampling method. This non-probability technique involves selecting participants based on specific characteristics that are relevant to the research objectives. In particular, the study focused on students who are familiar with or have experience purchasing sports apparel, as they are more likely to provide meaningful insights into the research topic. This approach is especially appropriate for quantitative research that aims to examine the influence of subjective norm, attitude,

materialism, price-quality inference, and brand and value consciousness on the intention to purchase counterfeit sports apparel. The questionnaire used in the study was structured into two parts. Section A collected demographic information including age, gender, race, nationality, and education level. Section C assessed the main study variables using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The Likert scale was selected for its clarity and ease of use, enabling respondents to effectively express their opinions on each statement presented.

Research Results

This study gathered responses from 191 individuals, with a fairly even split between male (51.3%) and female (48.7%) participants. Most respondents were Chinese (73.8%), followed by Indian (16.8%), Malay (8.4%), and a small number from other ethnic backgrounds (Portuguese). The majority were young adults aged between 18 and 24 years (73.3%), and nearly all were single (90.1%). Educationally, most held a degree (72.3%), with others having diplomas, secondary schooling, or postgraduate qualifications. Over half identified as students (55%), while the rest were employed or self-employed. In terms of income, most earned below RM2,000 per month (58.6%), with only a small fraction earning more than RM6,000. When it came to shopping habits, just under a third bought sports apparel monthly, while a few shopped more frequently. However, the majority (62.3%) indicated irregular or less frequent purchasing patterns, suggesting varied levels of engagement with sportswear.

Table 1: Frequency and percentage analysis of the respondents

		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	98	51.3%
	Female	93	48.7%
Ethnicity	Malay	16	8.4%
	Chinese	141	73.8%
	Indian	32	16.8%
	Other	2	1.0%
Age of Participant	18-24 Years Old	140	73.3%
	25-30 Years Old	40	20.9%
	31-35 Years Old	5	2.6%
	36-40 Years Old	2	1.0%
	41-45 Years Old	2	1.0%
	46 Years Old or older	2	1.0%
Marital Status	Single	172	90.1%
	Married	18	9.4%
	Widow/Divorce	1	0.5%
Education Level	Primary Education	1	0.5%
	Secondary Education	12	6.3%
	Diploma	32	16.8%
	Degree	138	72.3%
	Master	7	3.7%
	PhD	1	0.5%
Job Status	Employed	66	34.6%

	Self-Employed	16	8.4%
	Homemaker	2	1.0%
	Student	105	55.0%
	Other	2	1.0%
Monthly Income	Less than RM2,000	112	58.6%
	RM2,000-RM4,000	53	27.7%
	RM4,001-RM6,000	15	7.9%
	RM6,001-RM8,000	9	4.7%
	RM8,001-RM10,000	2	1.0%
Frequently Purchase of Sport Apparels	Every Week	8	4.2%
	Two Weeks Once	2	1.0%
	Three Weeks Once	5	2.6%
	Once in a Month	57	29.8%
	Others	119	62.3%

* *Sample size = 191*

* *Source: Analysis of data collected*

The measurement model in this study shows good reliability and validity overall. Most items had loadings above 0.70, which suggests they were strong indicators of the constructs they were meant to measure. Key constructs like attitude, subjective norms, materialism and price demonstrated solid internal consistency, with composite reliability values ranging from 0.769 to 0.868. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for each construct were also above 0.63, indicating good convergent validity. That said, a few adjustments were made during the analysis. One item from the price construct (P1) was removed due to a negative loading of -0.641, and one item from the materialism construct (VM4) was also dropped because its loading fell below the acceptable threshold, at 0.582. These refinements helped improve the overall quality of the model.

The analysis in Table 2 reveals how different factors influence consumers' intention to purchase counterfeit sports apparel. Among the variables tested, subjective norms stood out as having the most significant impact. With a standardised beta value of 0.501 and a t-value of 4.791, this result shows strong statistical significance, suggesting that social influence such as opinions from friends, family, or peers plays a major role in shaping a person's decision to buy counterfeit items. Materialism also showed a significant effect, with a beta value of 0.170 and a t-value of 2.032. This indicates that individuals who place high importance on owning material goods are more inclined to purchase counterfeit products, possibly because these items help them maintain a desired image or lifestyle at a lower cost.

In contrast, the results for attitude and price were not statistically significant. Attitude recorded a beta of 0.119 with a t-value of 1.003, while price had a slightly negative beta of -0.058 and a t-value of 1.009. These findings suggest that, within the context of this study, how someone feels about counterfeits or how much they cost did not strongly influence their intention to buy them. Overall, the findings highlight that social pressure and materialistic values are more influential in driving consumer behaviour towards counterfeit sportswear than personal beliefs or price considerations.

Table 2: Convergent Validity

	Std Beta	Std Error	t-value	Remarks
Attitude > Purchase Intention	0.119	0.119	1.003	Not Supported
Materialism > Purchase Intention	0.170	0.084	2.032*	Supported
Price > Purchase Intention	-0.058	0.057	1.009	Not Supported
Subjective Norms > Purchase Intention	0.501	0.104	4.791**	Supported

Notes: ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

Discussion

This study sets out to explore the factors that shape consumers' intention to purchase counterfeit sports apparel, and the findings offer some interesting insights. One of the most striking results was the strong influence of subjective norms. In simple terms, this means that people are highly affected by what those around them think and do. If someone's friends or family are comfortable with buying counterfeit goods, that person is more likely to follow suit. In a society like Malaysia, where social relationships and group approval are often important, it makes sense that peer influence can outweigh personal beliefs when it comes to making purchase decisions.

Materialism also showed a significant link to purchase intention. People who place high importance on owning branded or status-signalling items seem more open to buying counterfeits, especially if they can't afford the real thing. It's not necessarily about the quality—it's more about the image these items help them project. For many, counterfeits offer a more affordable way to achieve that sense of status or acceptance, even if they're fully aware that the product isn't genuine.

Interestingly, attitude towards counterfeits didn't have a major impact in this study. Even if someone disapproves of fakes or feels they're unethical, that doesn't always stop them from buying. This could be due to social pressure or simply because the desire to fit in or save money overrides personal values. Similarly, price was not found to significantly affect purchase decisions. Although price is often assumed to be a major factor in counterfeit purchases, the findings suggest that people might care more about how the product makes them feel or how it is perceived by others, rather than just how much it costs.

Taken together, these results show that social influence and the need to keep up with material standards may play a bigger role in consumer decisions than we might expect. It highlights the idea that purchasing counterfeits is not always just a financial decision, it can also reflect deeper social and personal motivations.

Implication of study

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on consumer behaviour by offering fresh insights into the psychological and social factors that influence the intention to purchase counterfeit sports apparel, particularly within a Malaysian context. One of the key theoretical contributions lies in the support it provides for the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). The results reaffirm the theory's emphasis on subjective norms as a strong predictor of behavioural intention. In this case, it highlights how social influence especially from friends, family, and peers can outweigh even personal attitudes or ethical concerns when it comes to purchasing decisions.

The findings from this study highlight a few key areas that businesses and policymakers should pay attention to when addressing the issue of counterfeit sports apparel. One of the most practical takeaways is the strong influence of social pressure on consumer behaviour. Since people are often guided by the opinions and actions of their peers, especially in younger or closely connected communities, efforts to discourage counterfeit purchases may be more effective if they focus on changing group perceptions rather than just targeting individuals. Campaigns that involve peer ambassadors, social influencers, or even community-led initiatives could play a meaningful role in shifting mindsets.

From a business perspective, brands might benefit from rethinking their pricing strategies. The study showed that materialistic values significantly influence consumer intention people want to be associated with high-status items, even if they can't afford the original. By offering more accessible product lines or limited-edition collections at a lower price point, brands can give consumers a legitimate alternative to counterfeits while still protecting their image.

For consumer protection bodies and policymakers, these results suggest that raising awareness about the risks of counterfeits might not be enough on its own. Instead, campaigns could explore deeper issues like how materialism and social expectations influence buying behaviour. Educational programmes that encourage critical thinking about consumerism and identity, particularly in schools and universities, could be a more sustainable way to reduce demand for fake products. Ultimately, the practical implication is clear: tackling counterfeit consumption requires more than just enforcing laws or lowering prices. It involves understanding what drives people to make these choices in the first place and finding creative, socially grounded ways to influence behaviour.

Limitations of the Study

As with most research, this study is not without its limitations, and these should be acknowledged to provide context for the findings and guide future research efforts. Firstly, there is a limited pool of local literature specifically addressing consumer purchase intention towards counterfeit sports apparel in Malaysia. Much of the existing research used for reference was drawn from international studies, which may not fully reflect the local context. As a result, the findings of this study might not capture the full picture of Malaysian consumer behaviour in relation to counterfeit products. The topic is still relatively underexplored in Malaysia and would benefit from greater academic and industry attention.

Secondly, the respondent profile was largely made up of university students, with only a small number of participants from other groups such as working adults, self-employed individuals, retirees, and homemakers. This demographic skew limits the scope of the study and may not represent the wider population's views and purchasing behaviours.

Additionally, the study was conducted exclusively with Malaysian citizens, which may limit the broader applicability of the findings. Cultural, economic, and social factors vary across countries, and consumer attitudes towards counterfeit goods may differ significantly in other regions. Therefore, while the results offer valuable insights, they are best interpreted within the context of Malaysia and may not be directly transferable to multinational or global settings

Future Research

Looking ahead, more studies should be carried out in Malaysia to better understand why consumers choose to buy counterfeit sports apparel, as current research on this topic is still quite limited. Future researchers can build on these findings to explore the issue more deeply, while companies may benefit from applying this knowledge to better connect with their customers and address the root causes behind such purchasing behaviour.

It would also be useful for future studies to include a more varied group of respondents. Since this study focused mainly on students, including people from other backgrounds such as working professionals, self-employed individuals, retirees, and homemakers could provide a more well-rounded view of what influences consumer decisions.

Beyond Malaysia, researchers could consider extending the study to countries like Indonesia or Thailand. Even when using the same research framework, results may differ across borders due to cultural or economic differences. For instance, while this study found a strong link between price and purchase intention, the influence of factors like attitude, social pressure and materialism might be more evident in other settings. Comparing these outcomes could offer valuable insight into how consumer behaviour varies across regions.

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