

From Status to Sustainability? Counterfeit Luxury Consumption and Strategic Business Implications for Emerging Markets

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Keywords

consumer behaviour, counterfeit, emerging markets, luxury

Abstract

As global economic shifts intensify, the proliferation of counterfeit luxury goods poses unique challenges to sustainable market growth and brand legitimacy in emerging economies. This study investigates the psychological drivers influencing the intention to purchase counterfeit luxury brands, focusing on the role of price-quality inference and economic attitudes. Using the Theory of Planned Behaviour and Price-Quality Inference Theory, the research examines three key relationships: (1) the effect of price-quality inference on attitudes toward economic benefits, (2) the link between attitudes and purchase intention, and (3) the direct influence of price-quality inference on purchase intention. Data were collected from 380 consumers in Johannesburg, South Africa. Structural equation modeling revealed that price-quality inference was the strongest predictor of purchase intention, suggesting that consumers are more likely to buy counterfeits if they perceive the price to be fair, regardless of authenticity or quality. The findings offer critical insights for brand managers and retailers on countering counterfeit demand while promoting ethical and sustainable consumption practices in the Global South.

Introduction

In an era marked by economic disruption and global restructuring, counterfeit luxury consumption has become a pressing concern for businesses, policymakers, and society at large (Islam, Hair Jr, Murshed, Howard, Gillis, & Istiak, 2025). The rapid growth of counterfeit markets, particularly in emerging economies, undermines intellectual property rights, erodes consumer trust, and impairs sustainable economic development (Amankwah-Amoah, Boso & Kutsoati, 2022). In South Africa and other developing nations, this phenomenon is driven not only by affordability but also by aspirational consumption, digital exposure, and market accessibility (Ngobeni, 2024). The luxury sector is especially vulnerable to counterfeiting due to the symbolic nature of its products (Khan, Fazili & Bashir, 2021). Counterfeits offer status appeal at a fraction of the cost, often resembling original items closely enough to mislead consumers, or at least to satisfy those knowingly opting for cheaper alternatives (Evans, Starr & Brodie, 2019). Research shows that consumers frequently rely on cognitive shortcuts, such as price-quality inference, to justify the purchase of counterfeit goods (Wiedmann, Hennigs, & Klarmann, 2017; Lavin, Valle & Magner 2019). If a product looks luxurious and carries a high perceived value, even at a low price, its economic benefits can outweigh ethical considerations in consumers' minds (Rahimnia & Arian, 2021). Understanding these cognitive and attitudinal drivers is vital for designing strategies that encourage ethical consumption, safeguard brands, and foster economic sustainability in emerging markets. This study investigates the role of price-quality inference in shaping consumer attitudes and intentions towards counterfeit luxury brands in Johannesburg, South Africa. The study aims to answer the following research questions (RQs):

- **RQ1:** Does price-quality inference of counterfeit luxury goods influence the attitude toward economic benefits of purchasing counterfeit luxury goods?
- **RQ2:** Do attitudes towards economic benefits of purchasing counterfeit goods influence the purchase intention of counterfeit luxury goods?
- **RQ3:** Does price-quality inference of counterfeit luxury goods influence the purchase intention of counterfeit luxury goods?

As for contextual justification, Johannesburg was chosen as the research site due to its position as South Africa's commercial capital, characterised by diverse consumer segments, socio-economic inequality and the coexistence of formal and informal markets. The theoretical framework which grounds the study is presented in the following section followed by the development of hypotheses.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two theoretical pillars: the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and the Price-Quality Inference Theory.

Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)

Originally developed by Ajzen (1991), TPB posits that behavioural intention is influenced by three factors: attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. In this study, attitude toward economic benefits serves as the central attitudinal component, shaping a consumer's inclination to purchase counterfeit luxury items. The decision to purchase a fake brand is seen as a rational response to perceived value and affordability.

Theoretical Contribution to the TPB

This study extends the TPB by applying it to the morally unclear context of counterfeit luxury consumption, a departure from its traditional use in legal, everyday purchases. It also situates the model in South Africa, offering unique insights into how behavioural intentions are shaped in emerging market settings with distinct socio-economic and cultural dynamics.

Price-Quality Inference Theory

Lavin et al. (2019) refers to price-quality inference as the price-quality heuristic which assumes that the quality of a product is positively associated with the price, suggesting that a higher price implies higher quality. According to this theory, consumers often use price as a heuristic to assess product quality (Jeong et al., 2019). Even in the context of counterfeit goods, consumers may infer that products closely mimicking luxury items offer a high value at a low cost, thus enhancing their attitude toward the economic benefits of buying fakes. This inference also has a direct influence on purchase intention, especially among price-sensitive consumers who prioritise value over authenticity.

Theoretical Contribution to the Price-Quality Inference Theory

The study contributes to price-quality inference theory by demonstrating that consumers may apply price-quality heuristics even to counterfeit goods, inferring value from imitation rather than authenticity. This challenges the assumption that the theory applies only to legitimate products, particularly in price-sensitive markets.

Literature and Hypotheses Development

Price-quality inference of counterfeit luxury goods and attitude toward economic benefits of purchasing counterfeit luxury goods

Consumers often rely on price as a cue to infer the quality of a product, a phenomenon known as price-quality inference (Rahimnia & Arian, 2021). In the context of counterfeit luxury goods, consumers may perceive counterfeit items as offering high value due to their similarity in appearance to genuine products but at a significantly lower price (Wiedmann et al., 2017). This perception enhances the economic attractiveness of counterfeits, especially for consumers who are price-sensitive but still desire the symbolic or aesthetic appeal of luxury brands (Kassim, Zain, Bogari & Sharif, 2021). As a result, a stronger belief in the price-quality link of counterfeits may lead to a more favorable attitude toward their economic benefits, such as cost savings and affordability (Miranda, 2024; Rahimnia & Arian, 2021). Based on the literature presented above, the following hypothesis is thus proposed:

H1: *Price-Quality Inference of counterfeit luxury goods is related to the attitude toward economic benefits of purchasing counterfeit luxury goods*

Attitude toward economic benefits of counterfeit luxury goods and the purchase intention of counterfeit luxury goods

Attitude towards economic benefits of purchasing counterfeit luxury goods positively and directly influence the intention to purchase fake brands (Katyal, Dawra & Soni, 2022) with Tunçel (2022) proposing the same relationship dynamic focusing on luxury brands and the legalities associated with such brands. Intention to adopt is a consequent of attitude and this has been evident in numerous contexts for instance the banking (Chawla & Joshi, 2019), education (Hatane, Setiono, Setiawan, Semuel & Mangoting, 2021), retail (Kasilingam, 2020) and green technology (Nash & Wakefield, 2022). As far as potential benefits of counterfeits are concerned, numerous research over the years established that economic benefits obtained from purchasing counterfeit brands serve as a key driver of the actual intention to purchase them (Islam, Pitafi, Akhtar & Xiaobei, 2021; Katyal, Dawra & Soni, 2022; Kaufmann, Petrovici, Gonçalves Filho & Ayres, 2016; Song, Meng, Chang, Li & Tan, 2021). It is safe to consider that attitude toward economic benefits of purchasing non-genuine luxury brands are related to the intention to purchase non-genuine luxury brands (Rahimnia & Arian, 2021). Stemming from the abovementioned literature, the following hypothesis is proposed.

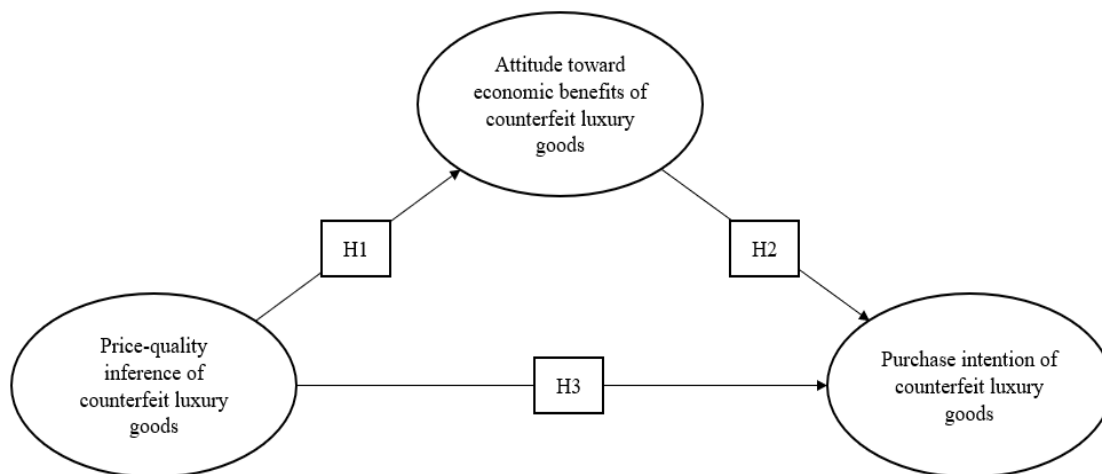
H2: *Attitude towards economic benefits of purchasing counterfeit luxury goods is related to the purchase intention of counterfeit luxury goods.*

Price-quality inference of counterfeit luxury goods and purchase intention of counterfeit luxury goods

Price-quality inference theory also posits that consumers often associate higher prices with better quality (Jeong et al., 2019; Zhou, Song, Sun, Kelobonye, Chi & Norman, 2023). It suggested that even though price and quality have a positive relation, they tend to have a low correlation (Valle, Lavin, Magner & Geldes, 2017). Furthermore, the higher the quality, with disregard to the product features, consumers tend to rely on price to infer quality, and consequently to purchase based on that line of thinking (Valle et al. 2023). Price-quality inference also referred to as price quality heuristic Lavin et al. (2019), is a cognitive process which acts as short-cut in supporting consumers' decision-making to purchase based on quality. Consumers that are more risk averse tend to have lower purchase intention as compared to those who are less risk averse, all this being based on the consumer's ethical values (Sharma, Chan, Davcik & Ueno, A. 2022). Based on the literature presented the following hypothesis is thus proposed.

H3: *Price-quality inference of counterfeit luxury goods is related to the purchase intention of counterfeit luxury goods.*

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



Research Methodology and Design

The study utilised a quantitative approach founded in the positivist philosophy as it was imperative to obtain objective findings on what drives consumers to purchase counterfeit goods. In order to select suitable participants, non-probability sampling, a form of convenience sampling was utilised. This was due to the impossibility of obtaining a sampling frame of all possible consumers of retail goods. A total of 380 willing

respondents returned completed usable questionnaires that were later processed for findings. Data collected was cleaned and organised for analysis in SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) 29 and AMOS (Analysis of Moment Structures) 29 respectively. In SPSS 29 the sample profile was generated which presented demographics characteristics of the respondents and through the use of AMOS 29, structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted. SEM was conducted through a two-step process proposed which involves conducting confirmatory factor analysis and later on testing the proposed hypotheses of the study. The measurement instrument collected data on gender, age, frequency and amount of money spent on purchases of goods including luxury items.

Results

Customer Profile

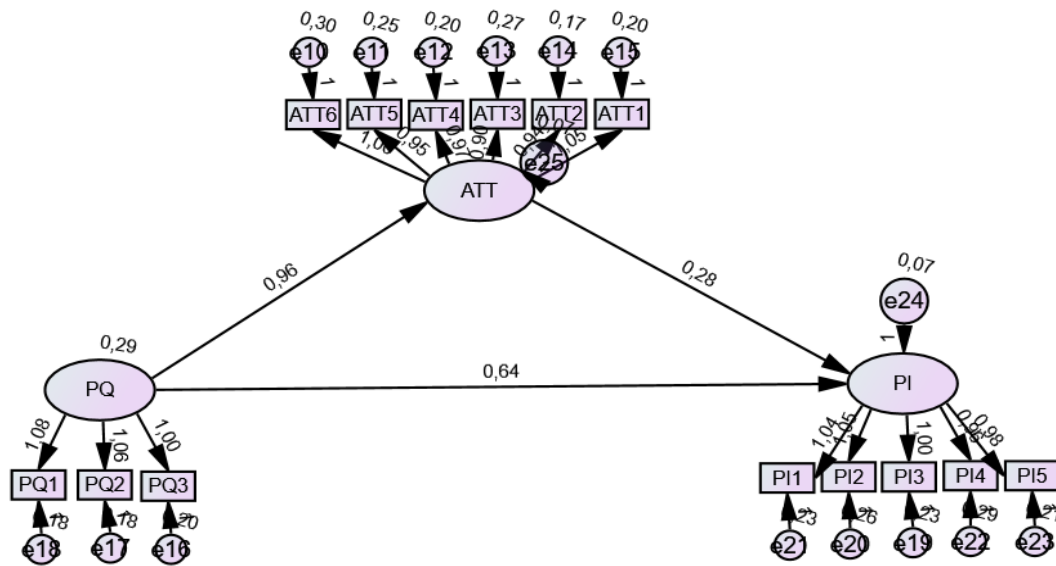
The respondents were 380 in total with males representing just under 50% of the sample and females accounting for just over 50%. There were three age groups, with the largest being the 18 to 19 representing about 41%, the 20- to 25-year-olds accounting for almost 32% while the 26 and older group accounting for just over 26%. Over 60% of the sample stated that they were frequent purchasers of luxury goods more than half stated that they spend more than 500 South African Rand (ZAR) on goods and any given point. The following table presents the accuracy analysis statistics of the data.

Table 1: Accuracy Analysis Statistics

| Research Construct | Descriptive Statistics | | | | Item -total | Cronbach's Alpha (α) | C.R. Value | |
|--------------------|------------------------|--------------------|-------|-------|-------------|-------------------------------|------------|-------|
| | Mean | Standard Deviation | | | | | | |
| ATT | ATT1 | 4.070 | 0.755 | | 0.733 | 0.889 | 0.924 | |
| | ATT2 | 4.020 | 0.683 | | 0.731 | | | |
| | ATT3 | 3.990 | 3.987 | 0.737 | 0.740 | | | 0.663 |
| | ATT4 | 4.020 | 0.722 | | 0.730 | | | |
| | ATT5 | 3.960 | 0.747 | | 0.702 | | | |
| | ATT6 | 3.860 | 0.797 | | 0.686 | | | |
| PQ | PQ1 | 3.980 | 0.721 | | 0.706 | 0.838 | 0.841 | |
| | PQ2 | 4.030 | 4.017 | 0.713 | 0.712 | | | 0.740 |
| | PQ3 | 4.040 | 0.701 | | 0.657 | | | |
| PI | PI1 | 3.890 | 0.762 | | 0.713 | 0.869 | 0.871 | |
| | PI2 | 3.860 | 0.782 | | 0.707 | | | |
| | PI3 | 3.990 | 3.962 | 0.739 | 0.752 | | | 0.710 |
| | PI4 | 3.990 | 0.764 | | 0.648 | | | |
| | PI5 | 4.080 | 0.715 | | 0.691 | | | |

It is observed in table 1 that the data is normally distributed since the mean values are all within a close range, ranging from 3.860 to 4.080 while standard deviation values are all between -2 to +2 further confirming normal distribution. The item to total values which measure the correlation between an item and the total score of the construct show high correlation. The Cronbach's alpha (α) and Composite reliability (CR) values are all above acceptable levels with the former exceeding 0.7 and the latter exceeding 0.6 respectively. The structural model (hypothesis testing) is presenting in figure 2 in the section that follows.

Figure 2: Structural Model



Key: PQ: Price-quality inference of counterfeit luxury goods and attitude toward economic benefits of purchasing counterfeit luxury goods, ATT: Attitude toward economic benefits of purchasing counterfeit luxury goods, PI: Intention to purchase counterfeit luxury goods, β : Estimate value

Table 2: Hypotheses Outcomes

| Hypothesis (Direct Relationships) | Estimate | P-Value | Outcome |
|-----------------------------------|----------|---------|-------------------------------|
| H1 PQ → ATT | 0.96 | *** | Supported and significant |
| H2 ATT → PI | 0.28 | 0.17 | Supported but not significant |
| H3 PQ → PI | 0.64 | *** | Supported and significant |

Key: PQ: Price-quality inference of counterfeit luxury goods and attitude toward economic benefits of purchasing counterfeit luxury goods, ATT: Attitude toward economic benefits of purchasing counterfeit luxury goods, PI: Intention to purchase counterfeit luxury goods, β : Estimate value

The study tested three hypotheses aligned with the theoretical model and research questions:

H1: Price-quality inference to Attitude toward economic benefits of purchasing counterfeit luxury goods.

This relationship was both supported and significant at the $p < 0.01$ level ($\beta = 0.96$). The findings suggest that favourable attitudes toward counterfeit goods are largely driven by consumers' belief in a fair trade-off between price and perceived quality. This aligns with findings by Souiden, Ladhari, and Zarrouk Amri (2018), who noted that perceived improvements in the quality of counterfeit goods have increased their appeal among value-conscious consumers.

H2: Attitude toward economic benefits to Purchase intention of counterfeit luxury goods.

This relationship was supported but not statistically significant at the $p < 0.01$ level ($\beta = 0.28$; $p = 0.17$). Although a positive trend exists, it implies that attitude alone may not fully explain purchase intention. This is consistent with Marticotte and Arcand (2017), who argue that understanding the emotional and psychological underpinnings of consumers' motivations is essential to reducing counterfeit consumption.

H3: Price-quality inference to Purchase intention of counterfeit luxury goods

This hypothesis was both supported and statistically significant at the $p < 0.01$ level ($\beta = 0.64$), confirming

that consumers are more likely to purchase counterfeit luxury products when they perceive the price to fairly reflect the perceived quality. This corroborates Singh et al. (2021), who found that fairness in pricing is a key cognitive shortcut influencing consumer intention.

Contribution of the Study

Theoretical Contribution

This study extends the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) by incorporating price-quality inference as a cognitive heuristic influencing both attitudes and behavioural intention in the context of counterfeit consumption. While previous applications of TPB focused primarily on attitude, subjective norms, and perceived control, this study highlights how economic perceptions (e.g., fairness and affordability) can override ethical concerns and drive consumer behaviour. Moreover, the model explored the moderating role of perceived behavioural control between attitude and intention, and although this moderation was not significant, it opens up future lines of inquiry into behavioural autonomy in ethically ambivalent decisions.

Practical Contribution

From a managerial standpoint, the study provides key insights for retailers, luxury brand managers, and policymakers. The finding that price-quality inference was the most influential factor suggests that many consumers rationalize their purchases of counterfeit goods based on perceived value rather than product legitimacy. This underscores the need for strategic consumer education campaigns, better enforcement of IP laws, and innovation in value-driven branding that emphasizes ethical and sustainable consumption. Retailers must also recognise that the prevalence of counterfeit goods may impact brand loyalty, customer retention, and overall market trust, especially in digitally connected emerging economies like South Africa.

Limitations and direction for future research

While this study provides a foundational understanding of the key drivers behind counterfeit luxury consumption, several avenues remain unexplored:

- **Unexplored Moderation:** The role of perceived behavioural control as a moderator between attitude and intention was introduced but not found to be significant. Future studies could examine this interaction more deeply to assess how a consumer's belief in their own decision-making autonomy influences their rationalisations for unethical consumption.
- **Removing Price-Quality Inference:** An experimental design that removes the price-quality inference variable could provide valuable insight into how consumers behave when the price and quality shortcut is unavailable. Would other psychological or social motivations (e.g., peer influence, identity expression, or anti-establishment sentiment) emerge as stronger predictors?
- **Cross-Cultural Comparison:** Expanding this research into other emerging markets or comparing results across BRICS or MINT nations could help determine whether the observed dynamics are culturally specific or globally applicable.
- **Emotional and Ethical Dimensions:** Finally, future research should incorporate emotions (e.g., envy, shame) and moral rationalisations to enrich our understanding of counterfeit consumption from both psychological and ethical standpoints.

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