

Rethinking Brand Contamination: Dynamic Symbolic Boundaries in Socially Embedded Consumption

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Abstract

The appropriation of brand equity, specifically the consumption of counterfeit imitations of luxury brands, provides fertile ground for analyzing how brands serve as dynamic symbols of social status boundaries. I will present two multi-method studies in order to examine symbolic boundary destruction and maintenance, using this consumption context.

For the first study, I employ a grounded-theory approach, utilizing data from a two-and-a-half year ethnography. I analyze consumer behavior in two types of counterfeit market structures: socially embedded “purse party” networks, and atomistic street booths. I find counterfeit consumers are able to develop relationships with the authentic brand, especially in the social network setting. By analyzing the meaning that these consumers attach to their behavior, I show that counterfeit consumption is more complicated than the imitative goals that are assumed by managers.

In the second study, I examine the impact of pervasive counterfeit imitations on consumers of the real brand. Respondents were exposed to images of counterfeit and authentic versions of luxury brands, and then given the judgment task of identifying which products were “real” and which were “fake.” The data show that, when consumers are asked to distinguish real from fake products, their confidence in their discernment ability and willingness to pay for the real product are adversely affected. This effect is attenuated when consumers are given contextual clues about the user. Follow-up interviews revealed that, in the face of brand adoption by dissociative groups, consumers redefine symbolic boundaries such that legitimate consumption is based upon specialized knowledge and usage style, regardless of whether the item is authentic or not. This research broadens our understanding of the circumstances under which imitation can validate, or contaminate, a brand, and how consumers define authenticity.