

The Dupe Effect: Exploring Consumer Motivations Behind Dupe Purchases

What drives consumers to choose legal dupes over luxury brands, and can ethical messaging shift those decisions?

Issra Mehdi's dissertation examines these questions by comparing consumer attitudes toward dupes and counterfeits and testing whether ethical nudges can reduce demand for dupes.

In the first study, U.S. women active on TikTok and Instagram were asked to evaluate handbags and perfumes presented as either dupes or counterfeits. Dupes were consistently favored, with consumers describing them as affordable, practical, and relatively safe options. Counterfeits, on the other hand, often prompted hesitation, with participants

pointing to concerns about authenticity, product quality, and ethical considerations. Analysis of the written responses confirmed this divide, showing that discussions of dupes carried a more positive tone while comments about counterfeits contained more negative emotion and moral reasoning.

The second study tested whether short ethical nudges could alter interest in dupes. Participants were exposed to messages emphasizing environmental impact, creative theft, or consumer responsibility before indicating their purchase likelihood. Only the environmental nudge reduced willingness to buy dupes, and this effect was explained by heightened perceptions that buying dupes is unethical. Appeals to creativity and consumer responsibility did not alter behavior.

Together, the studies reveal that consumers see dupes as acceptable and even smart alternatives to luxury goods, while counterfeits remain shadowed by doubts over authenticity and ethics. At the same time, environmental messaging emerges as the most effective lever for reducing demand for dupes, pointing to the power of sustainability narratives in shaping consumer behavior.

MAJOR TAKEAWAYS:

- Consumers view dupes as affordable, practical, and relatively safe options, while counterfeits are more often rejected due to authenticity, quality, and ethical concerns.
- Environmental nudges are the only approach that significantly reduce willingness to buy dupes, by increasing perceptions that dupe purchases are unethical.
- Creative theft and consumer responsibility nudges do not influence behavior, showing the limits of intellectual property and individual accountability appeals.

WHO NEEDS TO KNOW:

- Brand marketers
- Online retail platforms
- Sustainability advocates

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