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BRAND DESIRE VS. AUTHENTICITY: WHY CONSUMERS CHOOSE COUNTERFEIT LUXURY HANDBAGS

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ABSTRACT

This review paper explores the psychological, cultural, and social dynamics driving consumer demand for counterfeit luxury handbags. Despite increased legal enforcement and advances in anti-counterfeit technologies, the global counterfeit market particularly for fashion accessories continues to thrive. The paper investigates why consumers knowingly choose inauthentic products, focusing on how brand desire, identity signalling, and status aspirations outweigh concerns about legality or authenticity. Drawing on interdisciplinary research from marketing, psychology, and consumer behaviour, it highlights how symbolic consumption motivates consumers to seek visual status markers, even when they are not materially genuine. Concepts like conspicuous consumption, face consciousness, and moral rationalization are examined to understand how consumers justify counterfeit purchases. The review also considers generational shifts, particularly the role of Gen Z and digital culture, in normalizing fake luxury as a form of expression or economic rebellion. Moreover, it discusses the rise of "super fakes," the impact of resale platforms, and the challenges of technological solutions like blockchain verification in addressing counterfeit proliferation. The findings suggest that the desire for brand identity often eclipses the importance of authenticity, prompting brands and policymakers to rethink consumer engagement strategies. This paper contributes to the broader discussion on consumer ethics, luxury marketing, and intellectual property protection by positioning counterfeiting not merely as a legal issue but as a socio-cultural phenomenon rooted in aspiration, identity, and access.

Keywords:
Counterfeit luxury, Brand desire, Consumer behaviour, Symbolic consumption, Authenticity

INTRODUCTION

The global luxury market is built on more than fine materials and meticulous craftsmanship. What truly drives its success is the emotional and symbolic pull of luxury brands. These brands sell aspiration, social status, and cultural capital traits that go far beyond the tangible features of the product itself (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012). A luxury handbag, for instance, is not just a fashion accessory; it represents wealth, exclusivity, and prestige. Consumers buy into the story the brand tells, into the identity it helps them construct. And yet, paradoxically, the counterfeit market for luxury goods, especially handbags remains strong and, in some regions, even thriving. Despite growing awareness, legal crackdowns, and the deployment of brand protection technologies like holograms and blockchain tracking, millions of consumers knowingly purchase counterfeit luxury handbags each year (Eisend et al., 2020).

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What this reveals is a fascinating contradiction. On one hand, luxury brands emphasize authenticity, heritage, and exclusivity as core values. On the other hand, consumers appear willing to compromise on authenticity while still chasing the emotional high of owning something that looks expensive. The central question, then, is this: why do consumers knowingly buy counterfeit luxury goods, especially when they are fully aware these products are inauthentic? The answer lies in the complex interplay between brand desire and authenticity. Brand desire is the psychological urge to possess what the brand symbolizes status, taste, and success. Authenticity, meanwhile, refers to the legitimacy of a product, typically defined by its origin, craftsmanship, and alignment with the brand's values. When desire overpowers the need for authenticity, consumers may rationalize buying a counterfeit if it looks close enough to the real thing. As Eisend and colleagues (2020) argue, the symbolic utility of a luxury item can persist even when its material legitimacy is missing.

This tension is particularly visible in the case of handbags, which serve as powerful markers of style and status. Unlike less visible luxury goods (like perfume or lingerie), handbags are outwardly displayed and often instantly recognizable due to their branding think of the iconic Louis Vuitton monogram or the Hermès Birkin silhouette. The visibility of these items heightens their symbolic value and, correspondingly, the appeal of counterfeit versions. For some consumers, the bag's appearance is what counts not its provenance. A number of consumer psychology studies have explored the symbolic meaning of luxury brands and their connection to self-image. According to Escalas and Bettman (2005), consumers often use brands as tools to construct and communicate their identities. They choose brands that resonate with their ideal self or signal belonging to a particular social group. Luxury brands, in particular, are loaded with aspirational meanings. When consumers cannot afford the real thing, counterfeit products offer a shortcut to participating in the same narrative, even if only superficially.

This is where conspicuous consumption theory becomes relevant. First introduced by Thorstein Veblen (1899), this theory suggests that people engage in visible consumption of luxury goods to signal wealth and status to others. In many cases, it is the *appearance* of luxury that matters more than the actual ownership of a high-quality, authentic product. The counterfeit luxury handbag, as a close imitation, performs the same social signalling function at least on the surface. As such, the desire to be seen as affluent or stylish can override the ethical or quality-related concerns associated with counterfeits. Interestingly, consumers also deploy a range of psychological rationalizations to mitigate the moral tension around buying fakes. Penz and Stöttinger (2005) found that buyers of counterfeit luxury products often justify their purchases by downplaying the severity of the act ("It's not a serious crime"), blaming the brands ("These companies overcharge anyway"), or minimizing the consequences ("It doesn't hurt anyone"). These rationalizations reduce cognitive dissonance and allow consumers to enjoy the social benefits of owning a luxury-looking product without the guilt of contributing to illegal trade or intellectual property violations.

Another critical angle is the influence of social norms and peer behaviour. In societies or subcultures where counterfeit consumption is normalized, buying a fake luxury handbag may not be seen as unethical or embarrassing. In fact, in some emerging markets, owning a convincing imitation may be culturally acceptable, even aspirational. According to Wilcox, Kim, and Sen (2009), social influence plays a substantial role in shaping consumer attitudes toward counterfeit products. When people in one's social group are buying and using counterfeits, the behaviour becomes more acceptable.

There's also a growing body of research that suggests some consumers differentiate between "deceptive" and "non-deceptive" counterfeits. In deceptive counterfeiting, the buyer is tricked

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into thinking they are purchasing a genuine product. In non-deceptive cases, the buyer knows the product is fake and buys it anyway. Most of the demand for counterfeit luxury handbags falls in the latter category (Grossman & Shapiro, 1988). This implies a deliberate choice to prioritize brand symbolism over product authenticity. Additionally, the rise of fast fashion and influencer culture has blurred the lines between real and fake, luxury and mass-market. On social media, the visual similarity of a product can often substitute for the real thing. A counterfeit handbag that looks good in a photo or video can offer the same social capital as an authentic one. As a result, authenticity becomes less about product quality and more about *perceived* value in a digital, image-driven society (Gentry et al., 2006). All of this points to a deeper shift in consumer values. For some, authenticity is no longer a deal-breaker. Instead, what matters is access to the lifestyle and identity associated with luxury brands. When people say they love Louis Vuitton or Chanel, what they often mean is that they love what these brands *represent*. Counterfeits allow them to access that identity at least temporarily or visually even if they can't afford the real thing.

In sum, the popularity of counterfeit luxury handbags isn't just about affordability. It's about aspiration, identity, and the symbolic value of brands. This review will examine these themes more closely, synthesizing insights from consumer behaviour literature, sociology, and marketing theory to understand the underlying drivers of counterfeit consumption. By exploring the dynamics between brand desire and authenticity, we can better understand why consumers are willing to trade legitimacy for image and what this means for luxury brands moving forward.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

- To understand why consumers knowingly buy counterfeit luxury handbags.
- To explore how brand desire influences the choice of fake over authentic products.
- To examine how consumers perceive and rationalize product authenticity.
- To identify social and cultural factors that normalize counterfeit consumption.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is based on a qualitative review approach, aiming to synthesize existing literature on consumer behaviour toward counterfeit luxury handbags. The research relies entirely on secondary data sourced from peer-reviewed journals, academic books, and credible databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and ScienceDirect. Keywords like *counterfeit luxury products*, *brand desire*, *authenticity perception*, and *consumer motivation* were used to identify relevant studies published between 2000 and 2024. Articles selected for review specifically focused on the fashion and luxury goods sector, with an emphasis on psychological, cultural, and ethical factors influencing consumer choices. A thematic analysis was conducted to group findings under key dimensions such as brand symbolism, social influence, moral rationalization, and shifting views on authenticity. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the motivations behind counterfeit purchases without conducting primary data collection. While the absence of fieldwork is a limitation, the wide range of scholarly sources helps ensure depth and credibility in the analysis.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Psychology of Brand Desire and Status Consumption

Luxury handbags carry powerful symbolic weight. They don't just indicate aesthetic preference they convey wealth, taste, aspiration, and identity (Escalas & Bettman, 2005).

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That symbolic power is a key driver behind the counterfeit handbag phenomenon. When consumers can't afford the genuine article, they often turn to imitations to fulfil their brand-driven aspirations.

Symbolic Consumption & Social Identity

Escalas and Bettman (2005) found that consumers use brands to shape and project their identities; luxury brands amplify that identity projection. Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption (1899) similarly describes the purchasing of visible luxury goods to signal status. Counterfeit handbags mirror this effect: they deliver visual status cues at a fraction of the price. Research by Wilcox, Kim & Sen (2009) confirms that status-seeking leads some consumers to knowingly purchase fakes.

Egalitarian Motives and Emerging Norms

A recent study shows Gen Z's growing preference for counterfeit luxury as a way to push back against income inequality what the researchers call the "egalitarian value." In this view, counterfeit goods restore a sense of social equality without the premium cost of vertical luxury hierarchy (City University London et al., 2022)

Hedonic and Utilitarian Motivations

Sukoco et al. (2015) highlight that both hedonic motives (pleasure, self-expression) and utilitarian motives (value for money) influence counterfeit purchasing intent. Zhan and He (2011) also confirm that price is a dominant driver value-conscious consumers often opt for fakes if perceived quality is acceptable.

Social Media and Conspicuous Display

Social media amplifies brand desire. Efendioğlu's (2022) analysis suggests that conspicuous consumption on platforms like Instagram and TikTok heightens purchase intention, including for counterfeit items, as users compare visual cues of status and lifestyle.

Cultural Differences in Status Sensitivity

Song et al. (2021) found that the impact of counterfeit dominance on consumer perception varies by culture: Anglo-Americans who rely on outgroup opinions perceive greater quality erosion and reduced purchase intention for legitimate luxury in the presence of fakes. Asian consumers, who emphasize ingroup validation, are less affected by counterfeit prevalence

Perceived Authenticity Trade-offs and Rationalization

Although luxury brands emphasize authenticity heritage, craftsmanship, exclusivity consumers often find authenticity negotiable when desire is strong and risks seem low.

Rationalization and Moral Disengagement

Penz and Stöttinger's (2005) research demonstrates that buyers justify counterfeit purchasing through cognitive rationalizations: "It's not a serious crime," "Brands overcharge anyway," or "Everyone does it." These strategies reduce guilt and allow consumers to own a luxury-like symbol without moral conflict.

Perceived vs. Actual Authenticity

Aycock's pilot study (2021) found that many consumers knowingly buy counterfeit luxury items because they deliver the perceived symbolism brand uniqueness and exclusivity despite lacking authenticity. However, participants' awareness, gender, and income didn't

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significantly predict behaviours, suggesting symbolic need can transcend demographic differences

Non-deceptive Purchase Behaviour

Grossman & Shapiro (1988) distinguished between deceptive counterfeit purchases (unaware) and non-deceptive ones (aware). Most counterfeit handbag buyers fall into the latter category they value brand symbolism, not material authenticity.

Impulse Buying Factors

Chavosh et al. (2011) applied the MOA (Motivation-Opportunity-Ability) model to counterfeit purchases, discovering that low price, product involvement, and ease of purchase encourage impulse buys. Zhan & He (2011) show that when motivation (desire), opportunity (access), and ability (budget) align, consumers opt for counterfeits as rational, high-value choices.

Face Consciousness and Peer Influence

Kim, Park & Jang (2023) demonstrate that face-conscious consumers especially Generation Z in collectivist cultures are more willing to buy counterfeit luxury to maintain social image. Peer norms and group identity reinforce these behaviours. Even in Western markets, peer pressure and online validation drive such purchases (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021)

Ethical Rationalization & Cultural Context

Moral Neutralization & Emotional Consequences

New research using in-depth interviews reveals psychological and emotional drivers behind high-involvement counterfeit purchases. Consumers describe the "thrill of the hunt," feeling part of a secret community, or genuine interest in branding and design. In coping with unethical behaviour, they adopt neutralization techniques such as denial of responsibility ("I had no choice") or appealing to higher loyalties ("My friends are doing it too") to resolve moral dissonance (Journal of Business Research, 2016).

Materialism & Ethical Standards

Studies in Malaysia show that materialistic values envy, possessiveness, non-generosity strongly correlate with higher intention to purchase counterfeit luxury goods. Conversely, students with higher ethical standards demonstrate lower purchase intention (Belk, 1984; 1985). Broader research builds on this: lower moral integrity or weaker lawfulness attitudes enhance counterfeit appeal, while awareness of monetary risk, legal penalties, or ethical consequences reduces it (Mukherjee Basu, Lee, 2015).

Cultural Norms & Face Consciousness

Consumer decisions about counterfeit luxury items vary by cultural orientation. In collectivist societies like China, "face" consciousness concern over social reputation influences behaviour. Moderate face-conscious individuals may buy replicas to boost status, while those with very high concern avoid fakes to prevent public exposure. This inverted-U dynamic between face awareness and purchase intent is supported empirically. In contrast, Western or individualistic cultures emphasize rule compliance and self-enhancement, making them less tolerant of counterfeit consumption (Song et al., 2021).

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Digital Platforms, Resale, & Super fakes

Super fake Market Emergence

Luxury counterfeiters have evolved. “Super fakes” high-quality replicas costing from $500 to $5,000 are now indistinguishable from originals to the naked eye. They’re sold through encrypted messaging apps and promoted via influencers, especially targeting Gen Z consumers who view them as financially savvy or rebellious (Wall Street Journal, 2025). Infected resale ecosystems further amplify trust issues: even platforms expecting authenticity, like Depop or Poshmark, are flooded with replicas passed off as real.

Resale Market Growth & Ethical Perception

The luxury resale market is booming valued around $100–120 billion in 2022 and growing as consumers seek sustainability, savings, and style. Many buyers are now willing to buy “fair condition” pieces despite flaws, as long as authenticity is verified (Vogue Business, 2023). The rise of resale has also sharpened consumer awareness of authenticity: platforms transparent about condition and repair are deemed more trustworthy.

Anti-Counterfeit Technologies & Strategy

Blockchain, NFC, & Supply Chain Traceability

Luxury brands are adopting decentralized tech solutions blockchain, NFC, RFID to secure product provenance. Projects like LVMH’s Aura Consortium and Rolex’s Arianee platform allow buyers to trace product history and verify authenticity across the product lifecycle (ScienceDirect review). Academic research supports blockchain-enabled anti-counterfeiting systems capable of decentralized, immutable tracking of goods, reducing fraud risk (Yiu, 2021).

Computer Vision & AI Verification

Newer machine-learning models have achieved remarkable accuracy in detecting counterfeits using smartphone images. One system reported 99.7% accuracy detecting fakes from clothing and handbags under real-world conditions (Garcia-Cotte et al., 2024). These technologies promise scalable, on-the-spot verification that doesn’t depend on supply chain tagging.

Collaborative Anti-Counterfeiting Efforts

Alibaba's Big Data Anti-Counterfeiting Alliance shows how industry collaboration brands working with platforms and enforcement agencies can reduce counterfeit listings systematically. In a single year, Alibaba removed hundreds of millions of listings and shut down thousands of IP-infringing accounts Retail Boss. (2022).

Why Consumers Choose Counterfeit Luxury Handbags

The appeal of counterfeit luxury handbags stems from a complex mix of psychological, social, and economic factors. At the core is brand desire, the emotional and symbolic pull of owning a luxury item, even if it’s not real. Wilcox et al. (2009) argue that when people buy counterfeit handbags, it’s not just about saving money, it’s about accessing the identity and status those brands represent. These consumers aren’t always duped; in many cases, they’re fully aware that the item is fake. But the social payoff of appearing fashionable or high-status can outweigh the moral or legal downsides (Bian & Veloutsou, 2007). What drives this behaviour is the symbolic value of luxury. According to Eisend and Schuchert-Güler (2006), people often use luxury goods to express self-image, even when the product itself isn’t authentic. Counterfeit buyers still gain access to the "prestige halo" of brands like Louis Vuitton or Gucci, even if the product lacks craftsmanship. The rise of accessible counterfeits**,**

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often marketed as "mirror copies," has blurred the line between real and fake for many consumers, particularly in developing markets (Ang et al., 2001). Price sensitivity plays a role, but it's often secondary to aspirational consumption the desire to feel included in an exclusive lifestyle (Penz & Stöttinger, 2005).

Social influence is another strong factor. Research shows that peer behaviour and cultural norms shape attitudes toward counterfeit goods. For example, in many parts of Asia, counterfeit buying is normalized or even seen as smart consumer behaviour (Nill & Shultz, 1996; Wee et al., 1995). Peer validation and group identity especially among younger consumers can make fakes seem socially acceptable, even desirable (Harvey & Walls, 2003). Moreover, the guilt factor is often low. Consumers rationalize their choices by blaming the high prices of originals or the belief that luxury brands exploit consumers with inflated markups (Cordell et al., 1996; Tom et al., 1998).

There's also an emerging segment of "ethical counterfeit consumers", those who view fake goods as harmless or even subversive. They believe that their purchase doesn't hurt the brand because they wouldn't have bought the original anyway (Grossman & Shapiro, 1988). In this mindset, fakes democratize fashion and challenge elitist norms of luxury (Staake et al., 2009). Social media has only intensified this trend. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok glamorize luxury aesthetics while providing easy access to counterfeit markets, making fake handbags a part of curated digital identities (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012).

Interestingly, some consumers don't care about authenticity at all**,** as long as the item looks good. This points to a shift in how people define value moving from material legitimacy to visual or symbolic authenticity**.** As Phau and Teah (2009) found, many buyers place more emphasis on appearance and brand recognition than on whether the product is officially sanctioned. In short, counterfeits allow consumers to "buy into" luxury at a fraction of the price, often with minimal ethical conflict.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of counterfeit luxury handbag consumption reveals a deep and persistent tension between the allure of symbolic brand value and the expectation of product authenticity. What this paper has shown is that for many consumers, particularly within status-conscious or digitally native demographics, brand desire often outweighs concerns over legitimacy. The decision to purchase counterfeit luxury goods, especially handbags is rarely impulsive or uninformed. Rather, it emerges from a set of calculated trade-offs where access to symbolic capital, visual status, and self-expression is prioritized over legal or ethical fidelity. Counterfeit handbags serve as a bridge for aspirational consumers who cannot afford authentic luxury yet still want to signal their belonging to a cultural and aesthetic elite. In a visually dominated culture, where curated identity is broadcast via social media and fashion trends are ephemeral, the importance of material authenticity is being redefined. A counterfeit product can provide the same Instagram-worthy look, the same social validation, and even the same personal satisfaction as a real luxury item especially when brands themselves are perceived as excessively priced, profit-driven, or inaccessible. Moreover, the paper highlights how psychological rationalizations, such as denial of responsibility, normalization through peer behaviour, and distrust toward luxury brand ethics, contribute to the moral disengagement that makes counterfeit consumption feel justifiable. Consumers who once may have felt guilt now frame their actions as savvy, rebellious, or culturally permissible, especially in contexts where law enforcement is weak or norms around intellectual property are fluid. What also emerges is a growing segmentation of counterfeit buyers. While some still engage in deceptive purchases, many are fully aware of their

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decisions, embracing "super fakes" and mirror copies as smart compromises between aspiration and budget. Others buy counterfeits as a form of ethical subversion, pushing back against the elitism and gatekeeping of the luxury industry. This changing moral terrain challenges traditional branding strategies and calls into question how authenticity is constructed and maintained. In parallel, technological interventions from blockchain verification to AI-driven counterfeit detection represent a promising yet incomplete solution. As long as consumer motivations remain rooted in symbolism, identity signalling, and emotional utility, the demand for counterfeit luxury goods will persist. The growth of high-quality replicas and sophisticated resale platforms only blurs the line further. What luxury brands must confront now is not just how to stop counterfeiting, but how to reassert value in a world where visual duplication is easy, and consumers are more pragmatic, performative, and brand-aware than ever. Future strategies must address not only the enforcement of authenticity but also the democratization of brand narratives making luxury feel more inclusive without undermining its aspirational essence. In doing so, they may succeed in reshaping consumer perceptions and reclaiming the symbolic ground that counterfeiters have so adeptly exploited. Ultimately, the counterfeit luxury handbag is not merely a fake it is a mirror reflecting the desires, contradictions, and cultural shifts of our consumer age. Understanding why consumers choose counterfeits, then, is not just about tackling a market problem; it's about decoding how brand value is created, consumed, and reimagined in the modern world.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings from this study carry important implications for both luxury brand managers and policymakers. First, the enduring demand for counterfeit luxury handbags underscores that consumer behaviour in this space is not simply about affordability it's about access to identity, status, and self-expression. This challenges traditional brand management strategies that rely on exclusivity and craftsmanship alone. Brands need to recognize that symbolic value can be replicated just as powerfully as physical features, especially in digital and social media environments where what something looks like often matters more than what it truly is. This means that combating counterfeits can't rely solely on legal enforcement or anti-counterfeit technology; it requires rethinking how brand desirability is cultivated and maintained in an era of mass aspiration. One practical implication is the need for brands to invest in inclusive storytelling and community-building efforts that create emotional connections beyond the logo. Additionally, the study highlights that consumers often morally rationalize counterfeit purchases, suggesting that raising awareness about the broader ethical, social, and economic consequences of counterfeiting may be more effective than relying on punitive deterrents alone. For policymakers, these insights suggest that educational campaigns, especially targeted at younger consumers, could be a valuable complement to legal enforcement. Moreover, the study opens up an important conversation about cultural differences in how counterfeits are perceived what is considered a clever workaround in one region may be taboo in another. This calls for regionally nuanced strategies rather than one-size-fits-all enforcement models. Finally, as luxury resale and the "super fake" economy continue to grow, both brands and platforms will need to strengthen their authentication protocols, but also be transparent with consumers about product origins and quality. In short, this study sheds light on the emotional, cultural, and symbolic dimensions of counterfeit consumption, urging both brands and regulators to move beyond simple binaries of real versus fake and to engage more deeply with the motivations that drive consumer choice in the first place.

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LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE SCOPE

While this study offers valuable insights into the psychological, cultural, and social drivers behind counterfeit luxury handbag purchases, it is not without limitations. First, the review is primarily based on secondary literature and does not incorporate original empirical data, which limits the ability to test specific consumer attitudes, demographic nuances, or behavioural patterns in real-time contexts. Additionally, most of the referenced studies are concentrated in certain geographic or cultural contexts particularly urban centres in Asia, North America, and Europe meaning the findings may not fully capture how consumers in smaller markets or rural regions perceive and engage with counterfeit goods. Another limitation lies in the evolving nature of digital platforms. With the rapid growth of encrypted marketplaces and influencer-driven "dupe" culture, the landscape is shifting faster than academic literature can track. The study also gives more weight to luxury handbags than to other categories like footwear, accessories, or apparel, which could have distinct motivations and consumer profiles. These limitations suggest clear opportunities for future research. In particular, there is a strong need for in-depth qualitative studies that explore the emotions, ethical reasoning, and peer dynamics influencing counterfeit purchases among specific consumer groups, such as Gen Z or high-income aspirational buyers. Longitudinal studies could also track how attitudes toward authenticity evolve, especially in response to cultural shifts or technological interventions. Furthermore, future research should explore the implications of the resale and "super fake" market, especially the blurred lines between legitimate second-hand sales and high-grade counterfeits. Finally, more interdisciplinary work blending consumer psychology, law, design, and technology could provide a more holistic understanding of how brand desire and authenticity are negotiated in the modern marketplace. Addressing these gaps will allow future studies to build on this foundation and offer even more nuanced strategies for brand protection and consumer engagement.

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