

Advancing myself at others' expense? The impact of social comparison on counterfeit luxury purchasing

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Abstract

Purpose – Protecting intellectual property and curbing counterfeit goods are vital strategies for safeguarding corporate uniqueness. Despite anti-counterfeiting efforts in recent years, counterfeit luxury goods, continue to occupy a significant share of the consumer market. The purpose of this paper is to: explore the factor influencing counterfeit luxury purchase and identify the underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions in this purchasing behavior.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of practice, this paper develops a theoretical framework and empirically tests it using data from 885 participants in China, recruited through the online platform Credamo.

Findings – Study 1 revealed that upward social comparison (vs downward social comparison) is more likely to stimulate individuals' willingness to purchase luxury counterfeits. Study 2 examined the mediating role of moral perception in the proposed research model. The results of Studies 3 and 4 demonstrated that when individuals experience heightened moral salience or learn about luxury brand transgressions, their purchasing behavior is no longer influenced by social comparison, thereby attenuating the main effect.

Originality/value – To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is the first study to explore the effect of the core factor in counterfeit research – social comparison. It suggests that social comparison can effectively alter consumers' moral perceptions of counterfeit luxury consumption, while this effect is eliminated in the conditions of high moral salience or present brand transgression. These findings enhance the existing research on social comparison and counterfeit luxury consumption, explaining the mechanism behind it and provides managerial insights on strategies to inhibit counterfeit luxury consumption.

Keywords Luxury counterfeits, Social comparison, Moral perception, Moral salience, Brand transgression

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Intellectual property is a vital asset for businesses, particularly for high-end and high-tech firms, as it enhances their competitiveness and brand value (Evans *et al.*, 2019; Wuebker *et al.*, 2023). However, the continued rise in counterfeit products poses a significant challenge to intellectual property protection – particularly for luxury brands (Hawkins, 2020). Counterfeit luxury consumption can be either *deceptive*, when consumers unknowingly purchase counterfeit goods or *nondeceptive*, when consumers intentionally buy counterfeit products (Razmus *et al.*, 2024).

Counterfeiting has caused substantial global economic losses. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and

Development (OECD) and the European Union Intellectual Property Office (EUIPO), counterfeit trade resulted in \$1.1tn in losses in 2022, including \$174bn in foregone tax revenue. By 2023, counterfeit trade volume reached an estimated \$1.023tn (Corsearch, 2024). The rise of social media marketing, improved logo imitation and heightened materialistic values among millennials have further fueled demand for counterfeit luxury products (Islam *et al.*, 2021; Khan *et al.*, 2023; Pathak *et al.*, 2019), making such consumption increasingly difficult to curb.

In response, scholars have examined the mechanisms underlying counterfeit luxury consumption and proposed strategies to curb such behavior (e.g. Iyer *et al.*, 2022; Priporas *et al.*, 2020). Research shows that consumers purchase counterfeit luxury goods for both

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economic and psychological reasons (Omeraki Çekirdeci and Baroulu Latif, 2019). Early studies identified low prices and financial constraints as key economic motivators (Park *et al.*, 2025; Poddar *et al.*, 2012). Subsequent work has highlighted several psychological drivers, such as the pursuit of status (Iyer *et al.*, 2022) and self-enhancement (Shan *et al.*, 2022).

Previous research on the psychological factors underlying luxury and counterfeit luxury consumption has predominantly adopted a status-oriented perspective (Jiang *et al.*, 2023; Marín-Palacios *et al.*, 2024; Yuelong *et al.*, 2025), which has largely overlooked a key antecedent that activates status-related motives – social comparison (Samaddar and Menon, 2025). The identity-signaling function of luxury or counterfeit luxury goods depends on their role as instruments of social comparison, wherein consumption is closely tied to how one is perceived by others (Dhaliwal *et al.*, 2025; Liu *et al.*, 2025; Shan *et al.*, 2022). In fact, the motivation to acquire counterfeit luxury products for status-related purposes typically presupposes that consumers are aware of discrepancies between themselves and others and seek to reduce that gap through conspicuous consumption (Shan *et al.*, 2022) – a process inherently rooted in social comparison. Thus, social comparison is not only central to luxury consumption, but also plays a foundational role in understanding counterfeit luxury consumption (Marín-Palacios *et al.*, 2024; Samaddar and Menon, 2025).

Despite its importance, only a limited number of studies have explicitly addressed the role of social comparison in conspicuous consumption (Liang *et al.*, 2024; Zheng *et al.*, 2018), and even fewer have examined its effects within counterfeit consumption contexts. To address this gap – and in response to recent calls to explore the role of social comparison in the context of counterfeit consumption (Samaddar and Menon, 2025) – this research investigates the following questions:

RQ1. How does social comparison influence counterfeit luxury purchase intentions? What are the underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions?

Drawing on practice theory and using an experimental approach, this paper examines how social comparison shapes counterfeit luxury consumption. Across four experiments, the findings show that upward social comparison evokes perceived social discrepancies that function as moral justifications for counterfeit luxury purchases by diminishing consumers' moral perceptions. The study also identifies two key moderators – moral salience and brand transgression. Theoretically, this research contributes to the literature by establishing social comparison as a meaningful antecedent of counterfeit luxury consumption and by uncovering the psychological and moral mechanisms through which it operates. Practically, it offers insights into contextual factors that firms can manage to reduce consumers' willingness to purchase counterfeit luxury goods.

2. Literature review

2.1 Counterfeit luxury consumption

Existing research on counterfeit luxury consumption identifies two primary categories of factors that shape consumers' willingness to purchase luxury counterfeits: economic and psychological influences (Poddar *et al.*, 2012; Wang *et al.*, 2020).

For many consumers, monetary savings (Poddar *et al.*, 2012) and financial constraints (Park *et al.*, 2025) are among the most salient economic considerations. Various psychological drivers – such as security concerns (Bian and Moutinho, 2011; Garas *et al.*, 2023), status pursuit (Iyer *et al.*, 2022), social identity motives (Ngo *et al.*, 2020; Priporas *et al.*, 2020) and quality perceptions (Lisa Maria Turunen and Laaksonen, 2011) – also contribute to counterfeit purchasing. Most of these studies posit that consumers buy counterfeit luxury goods as a means of narrowing social gaps and attaining self-improvement (Liang *et al.*, 2024).

This line of research has overlooked two critical issues: the nonspontaneous nature of self-improvement motives and the distinctiveness of counterfeit luxury goods relative to genuine ones. Motivations to enhance status or pursue self-improvement are not automatically activated. Sociological theory suggests that individuals are embedded within class-based habitus and typically conform to the normative expectations of their social group rather than actively seeking upward mobility (Bourdieu, 1993). Social comparison disrupts this inertia by highlighting perceived social discrepancies (Petrescu *et al.*, 2025). In this sense, social comparison serves as a pivotal antecedent of counterfeit luxury demand.

On the other hand, counterfeit luxury consumption entails moral dynamics that differ from those involved in genuine luxury purchases. Unlike authentic luxury consumption, nondeceptive counterfeit purchases are widely regarded as unethical (Khan *et al.*, 2023). Consequently, consumers often use moral disengagement strategies to legitimize their behavior (Bian *et al.*, 2016; Chen *et al.*, 2018; Martinez and Jaeger, 2016; Wang *et al.*, 2019). As both the final outcome of moral disengagement and a key driver of counterfeit luxury consumption, moral perception is central to understanding this phenomenon. Nonetheless, it has been insufficiently examined despite its importance for informing strategies aimed at reducing counterfeit demand.

2.2 Social comparison

Social comparison plays a pivotal role in the context of counterfeit luxury consumption, serving as a key condition for status signals to be effectively conveyed through counterfeit goods (Liu *et al.*, 2025; Samaddar and Menon, 2025). Social comparison refers to individuals' inherent tendency to evaluate their abilities, possessions and opinions relative to others, a phenomenon widely exploited in contemporary marketing strategies (Tian *et al.*, 2023; Zhang and Gong, 2022). Consumers engaged in social comparison may engage in conspicuous consumption – such as purchasing counterfeit luxury goods (Jiang *et al.*, 2023; Liang *et al.*, 2024).

Beyond this, social comparison also activates moral judgments, which are particularly relevant in the domain of counterfeit consumption. This is because social comparison can elicit a range of negative emotional responses, such as envy (Kao, 2019; Sung *et al.*, 2024), and perceived unfairness (Kim *et al.*, 2018). These responses can weaken individuals' internalization of social norms and lead to moral disengagement. For example, consumers may turn to counterfeit luxury purchases as an act of restoring fairness in the face of perceived income inequality (Liu *et al.*, 2025), thereby diminishing their moral resistance to such behavior. Existing research has rarely examined how social comparison influences such behavior through moral processes – a gap that the present study seeks to address.

3. Theoretical foundation and hypotheses

3.1 Practice theory

Practice theory posits that practices emerge from the dynamic interplay among habitus, field and capital (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990). This perspective suggests that individual behavior is not entirely the result of free choice but is shaped by the social structures within which individuals are embedded, while still retaining some degree of strategic flexibility. Habitus refers to durable, transposable, yet nondeterministic cognitive and behavioral dispositions formed through long-term socialization. Field denotes relatively autonomous social arenas – such as education, art or politics – each governed by its own rules and struggles. Capital consists of economic, cultural, social and symbolic forms. The symbolic capital associated with higher-status groups is often perceived as superior, exclusive and imbued with symbolic dominance (Bellezza and Berger, 2020; Bourdieu, 1977, 1990), which, in turn, shapes human decision-making, including luxury consumption.

Luxury consumption research frequently draws on practice theory – particularly the concepts of symbolic capital and social status – to examine how luxury goods facilitate status signaling and foster social identity (Iyer *et al.*, 2022; Ngo *et al.*, 2020; Priporas *et al.*, 2020). Building on this theoretical foundation, the present article uses the interrelations among habitus, field and capital to explain why individuals engaging in upward comparison are more inclined to purchase counterfeit luxury goods than those engaging in downward comparison, and to identify the underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions.

3.2 The impact of social comparison on willingness to purchase luxury counterfeits

Individuals in disadvantaged social positions often attempt to access the symbolic capital of higher-status groups by emulating their consumption patterns. Practice theory posits that higher social classes hold disproportionate symbolic dominance (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990), making their tastes and behaviors socially consequential. Consequently, upward social comparison heightens individuals' awareness of status gaps and strengthens their motivation to approximate the symbolic assets associated with elite groups (Desmichel and Rucker, 2023; Han *et al.*, 2025; Liang *et al.*, 2024). In turn, many disadvantaged consumers engage in behaviors that mirror high-status consumption – such as adopting products or practices associated with elite groups (Bellezza and Berger, 2020; Jiang *et al.*, 2023).

Differences in habitus constrain disadvantaged groups and make them more inclined toward superficial imitation, such as purchasing counterfeit luxury goods in place of authentic ones (Brändle *et al.*, 2025). Social status creates symbolic boundaries through lifestyle and aesthetic distinctions, producing durable cultural separations across classes (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990; Saatcioglu and Ozanne, 2013). Consequently, the aesthetic aspirations of disadvantaged groups arise not only from their desire to emulate higher-status consumers but also from the dispositions embedded in their own habitus. Shaped by their lived experience and structural conditions, low-status individuals tend to favor pragmatic aesthetics that prioritize functionality and utility (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990; Zukin and Maguire, 2004). In contrast, high-status groups privilege a “pure” aesthetic and pursue forms of symbolic capital grounded in scarcity and

exclusivity to signal distinction and superiority (Bellezza *et al.*, 2014; Dhaliwal *et al.*, 2025; Fuentes *et al.*, 2023).

This aesthetic divergence explains how disadvantaged groups shape counterfeit luxury consumption. Compared to genuine luxury goods, counterfeit luxury products offer a more accessible means of acquiring the symbolic markers of status at a lower cost, thereby maximizing utilitarian and symbolic value simultaneously. For this reason, rather than blindly imitating luxury consumption, low-status consumers may turn to counterfeit luxury goods. Based on the above, this paper introduces *H1*:

H1. Compared to downward social comparison, consumers involved in upward social comparison are more willing to purchase luxury counterfeits.

3.3 The mediating role of moral perception

Within the context of social comparison, disadvantaged groups show a stronger reliance on a survival-oriented habitus than their advantaged counterparts. For individuals occupying lower social positions, this habitus is shaped by a “survival-first” mindset (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984). For example, lower-status individuals are more inclined to donate urgent necessities that satisfy basic needs rather than nonessential items (Vieites *et al.*, 2022). Working-class mothers tend to prioritize securing their children's fundamental educational rights rather than competing for elite opportunities (Reay, 2005).

This survival-oriented habitus also shapes moral perception, making disadvantaged individuals more inclined to view certain rule violations as justifiable when framed as matters of necessity (Bourdieu, 2000; Wacquant, 2009). Research shows that when individuals perceive themselves as being unfairly treated, they are more inclined to morally disengage and rationalize cheating – an effect that is particularly salient among lower-status individuals (Gino and Pierce, 2009). In contexts where income inequality is salient, counterfeit luxury consumption can be perceived by some consumers as a symbolic attempt to restore social equity (Liu *et al.*, 2025). Taken together, upward social comparison may trigger moral adjustment among disadvantaged consumers, wherein individuals interpret their position in the social hierarchy as a legitimate rationale for engaging in unethical consumption. Based on the above, this paper introduces *H2*:

H2. Moral perception mediates the relationship between social comparison and willingness to purchase luxury counterfeits. Moral perception of consumers involved in upward social comparison (vs downward social comparison) are higher, and consumers are more willing to purchase luxury counterfeits.

3.4 The moderating role of moral salience

Higher levels of moral salience can effectively enhance the consistency between individuals' moral beliefs and their behavior. Moral salience in this context refers to the extent of an individual's focus on moral values compared to other values (Brown *et al.*, 2016; Krakowiak and Tsay-Vogel, 2015). Evidence suggests that moral and personality-based commendations can catalyze self-regulatory processes (Brummelman *et al.*, 2016). Activating an individual's focus on moral values initiates a positive moral self-assessment and triggers self-regulatory mechanisms (Chen and Treviño, 2023), thereby promoting alignment between an individual's actions and moral beliefs.

Individuals with heightened moral salience are less likely to be influenced by social comparison when it comes to engaging in counterfeit luxury consumption. When moral considerations are made salient, individuals are more likely to behave in accordance with established moral and social norms. For example, when moral self-concept is activated – such as after signing an honesty pledge – individuals are less inclined to engage in unethical behavior to preserve a positive self-image (Mazar *et al.*, 2008). Based on this reasoning, this paper proposes that moral salience negatively moderates the effect of social comparison on counterfeit luxury consumption. Based on the above, the present study introduces *H3*:

H3. Moral salience negatively moderates the relationship between social comparison and counterfeit luxury purchasing, such that the relationship between social comparison and counterfeit luxury purchasing is attenuated when moral salience is high (vs low).

3.5 The moderating role of brand transgression

Brand transgressions can reshape consumers' expectations of the brand–consumer relationship and, in turn, influence their attitudes and behaviors. Aaker *et al.* (2004) define brand transgression as a violation of the implicit or explicit norms that govern this relationship. Such violations disrupt perceptions of the brand's consistency or moral integrity and have been shown to meaningfully alter consumers' evaluations and behavioral responses (Kim and Hur, 2025; Tran and Bartsch, 2025).

In social comparison contexts, observing others' transgressions can legitimize subsequent deviant behavior by providing psychological justification (Zhong *et al.*, 2009), thereby influencing counterfeit consumption. From a practice theory perspective, individuals' behaviors are shaped by their habitus within a given field and guided by the rules and norms that sustain symbolic order (Bourdieu, 1990). Adherence to these norms ensures social stability and symbolic reproduction. However, witnessing transgressions undermines the perceived legitimacy of field norms and prompts individuals to reassess their own behavioral standards (Bourdieu, 1993). Empirical evidence supports this logic: corporate hypocrisy triggers consumer retaliation (Kim and Hur, 2025), and irresponsible firm behavior elicits stronger condemnation when the firm is viewed as credible or when misconduct is exposed by trusted third parties (Zhou *et al.*, 2025). Accordingly, when a brand commits a transgression,

this erosion of trust facilitates moral justification – captured in the belief that “if corporations act immorally, I am not obligated to uphold moral standards” (Kim and Hur, 2025; Romani *et al.*, 2013). As a consequence, counterfeit consumption may be reframed not as an inherently immoral act but as a low-risk and defensible response within a compromised system. Based on the above, this paper introduces *H4*:

H4. Brand transgression negatively moderates the relationship between social comparison and counterfeit luxury purchasing, such that the relationship between social comparison and counterfeit luxury purchasing is attenuated when brand transgression is present (vs absent).

Overall, the conceptual model is shown in Figure 1.

4. Method

The present research uses scenario-based experiments as the primary methodological approach, implementing four studies to rigorously test the proposed hypotheses (Study 1 for *H1*, Study 2 for *H2*, Study 3 for *H3*, Study for *H4*). In terms of product selection, items chosen for the studies were universally applicable to both genders, ensuring gender neutrality in the experimental stimuli (Lanvin scarves for Study 1, ZPOS watches for Study 2, Loewe shoes for Study 3 and Cartier sunglasses for Study 4). All experimental procedures were conducted with informed consent obtained from all participants.

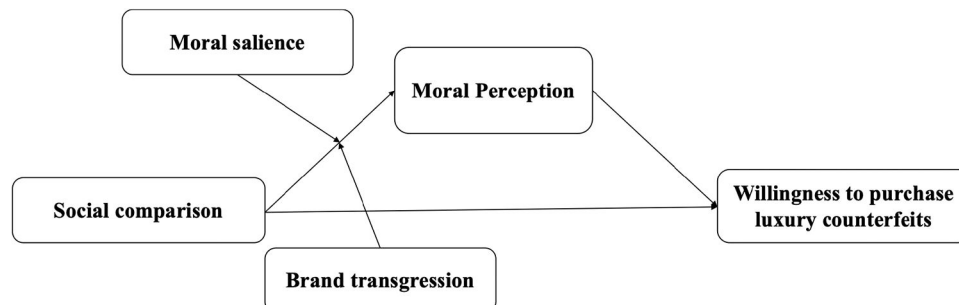
4.1 Study 1

4.1.1 Participants and design

Study 1 tested *H1*. Participants were recruited from Credamo, a Chinese online platform known for high-quality and geographically diverse samples. Of the 190 individuals initially recruited, 187 (56.7% female, 43.3% male) remained after excluding three who failed an attention check and were randomly assigned to an upward or downward social comparison condition.

Social comparison was manipulated using a character-description task adapted from Schlosser and Levy (2016). Participants in the upward-comparison condition listed three acquaintances socially superior to themselves, identified them by initials (e.g. J.D.), and described why one selected person was superior. Those in the downward-comparison condition

Figure 1 Conceptual model



Source: Authors' own work

listed three socially inferior acquaintances and described why one was inferior. Participants wrote at least 30 words and then completed a seven-point item assessing perceived relative superiority (1 = not at all, 7 = very much so; Appendix 1).

Participants next completed the counterfeit manipulation (Wilcox *et al.*, 2009). They were shown a Lanvin scarf (Appendix 2), introduced as a luxury item made with high-quality materials and associated with elevated status. They were then asked to imagine encountering a highly convincing counterfeit version at a substantially lower, easily affordable price.

4.1.2 Measurement

Participants were instructed to complete a structured questionnaire measuring several variables (see Appendix 1). Willingness to purchase was assessed with the item from Wilcox *et al.* (2009), specifically asking participants, "Would you be willing to purchase this high-quality counterfeit?" Brand knowledge was included as a control variable and measured using a three-item scale adapted from Zhang and Patrick (2021) ($\alpha = 0.94$) (see Appendix 1). Finally, demographic variables, including gender, age, educational attainment and average monthly disposable income, were recorded.

4.1.3 Results

Manipulation check: A one-way ANOVA was conducted to assess participants' perception of superiority. Results showed that the self-superiority ratings of the upward social comparison group were significantly lower than those of the downward social comparison group, $F(1,185) = 141.355$, $p < 0.001$, $M_{up} = 3.34$, $SD = 1.03$, $SE = 0.11$; $M_{down} = 5.27$, $SD = 1.20$, $SE = 0.13$. This indicates that the manipulation of social comparison was successful.

Hypothesis testing: Using the willingness to purchase as the dependent variable and social comparison as the independent variable, a one-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect of social comparison. Participants in the upward social comparison group were more willing to purchase luxury counterfeits than those in the downward social comparison group, $F(1,185) = 9.997$, $p = 0.002$, $M_{up} = 4.21$, $SD = 1.82$, $SE = 0.19$; $M_{down} = 3.36$, $SD = 1.86$, $SE = 0.19$.

4.1.4 Discussion

Brand knowledge and monthly disposable income were included as covariates. The results confirmed the robustness of the findings: brand knowledge, $F(1,184) = 9.610$, $p = 0.002$ and monthly disposable income, $F(1,184) = 8.962$, $p = 0.003$. These results indicate that neither brand familiarity nor income meaningfully alters the main effects observed in this study. The use of the Lanvin brand may have introduced uncontrolled confounding factors, including brand identity, reputation and electronic word-of-mouth, which could affect the validity of the findings. For this reason, Study 2 used a fictitious brand to eliminate these potential influences.

4.2 Study 2

Study 2 aims to examine the mediating role of moral perception (H2) while ruling out several alternative explanations. Prior research suggests that individuals in the upward social comparison condition may develop heightened status needs (Dubois *et al.*, 2012; Iyer *et al.*, 2022). In response, consumers

might use luxury counterfeits – leveraging the brand image of genuine products (Gao *et al.*, 2016), or to psychologically compensate for their lower social standing (Wilcox *et al.*, 2009). Alternative mechanisms such as status needs, status signaling and social adjustment are considered and ruled out in Study 2.

4.2.1 Participants and design

In a manner akin to Study 1, Study 2 used the Credamo platform for participant recruitment, and conducted a single-factor between-subjects experiment with 130 individuals. A total of ten participants were excluded due to failed attention checks (six participants) and incomplete responses (four participants), resulting in 120 valid participants (64.2% female, 35.8% male). The social comparison manipulation used the same character description task used in Study 1. Participants were then introduced to the second part of the experiment, involving a new product test for a fictitious Swiss watch brand ZPOS (see Appendix 2).

4.2.2 Measurement

The study proceeded by assessing the dependent variable – willingness to purchase – along with the mediator of moral perception (Wilcox *et al.*, 2009), using items that measured ethicality of purchasing luxury counterfeits (see Appendix 1), with an internal consistency of $\alpha = 0.83$. Status needs, status signaling and social adjustment were measured using scales from Dubois *et al.* (2012), Gao *et al.* (2016) and Wilcox *et al.* (2009), respectively (see Appendix 1). Finally, demographic variables including gender, age, educational attainment and average monthly disposable income were collected.

4.2.3 Results

Manipulation check: A one-way ANOVA was conducted to assess perceptions of social comparison, revealing that participants in the upward social comparison group rated themselves as significantly less superior than those in the downward social comparison group, $F(1,118) = 215.366$, $p < 0.001$, $M_{up} = 2.40$, $SD = 1.30$, $SE = 0.17$; $M_{down} = 5.70$, $SD = 1.16$, $SE = 0.15$. These results confirm the effectiveness of the social comparison manipulation.

Hypothesis testing: A one-way ANOVA with willingness to purchase as the dependent variable and social comparison as the independent variable showed a significant main effect of social comparison. Participants in the upward social comparison group were more willing to purchase luxury counterfeits than those in the downward social comparison group, $F(1,118) = 4.505$, $p = 0.036$, $M_{up} = 3.90$, $SD = 1.86$, $SE = 0.24$; $M_{down} = 3.20$, $SD = 1.75$, $SE = 0.23$. Another one-way ANOVA with moral perception as the dependent variable and social comparison as the independent variable revealed a significant main effect of social comparison, where subjects in the upward social comparison group showed a higher moral perception, $F(1,118) = 4.434$, $p = 0.037$, $M_{up} = 3.89$, $SD = 1.48$, $SE = 0.19$; $M_{down} = 3.32$, $SD = 1.50$, $SE = 0.19$.

Mediation analysis: A mediation test was conducted using Hayes' PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2018) with social comparison as the independent variable, willingness to purchase luxury counterfeits as the dependent variable and moral perception as the mediator, with a bootstrap sample size of 5,000. The indirect effect was significant, with a 95% confidence interval not including zero ($\beta = 0.23$,

95% CI = [0.0111, 0.5600]). The path coefficients were shown in Figure 2. These results support H2, confirming that moral perception mediates the impact of social comparison on the willingness to purchase counterfeits.

Alternative explanations: Separate one-way ANOVAs indicated no significant main effects for these variables: status needs: $F(1,118) = 0.183, p = 0.670$; status signaling: $F(1,118) = 0.063, p = 0.802$; social adjustment: $F(1,118) < 0.001, p = 0.988$. Mediation analyses also showed that the indirect effects of all three models were not significant, with 95% confidence intervals including zero: status needs: $\beta = 0.07, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-0.0980, 0.1692]$; status signaling: $\beta = 0.04, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-0.0705, 0.0900]$; social adjustment: $\beta = 0.07, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-0.1035, 0.1120]$. These results rule out status needs, status signaling and social adjustment as alternative explanations.

4.2.4 Discussion

Study 2 examined the mediating role of moral perception and enhanced the external validity of the experiment by modifying the experimental stimuli, thereby affirming the robustness of its findings. A fictitious brand for manipulation removed the confounding effects of real-life brands. This study included average monthly disposable income as a covariate in analyzing the main effects, and the results remained significant, $F(1,117) = 4.508, p = 0.036$. This outcome indicates that consumer income levels do not influence the findings.

4.3 Study 3

Study 3 focused on examining the moderating effect of moral salience on the relationship between social comparison and the willingness to purchase luxury counterfeits (H3).

4.3.1 Participants and design

The study engaged 270 participants from Credamo in a 2 (social comparison: upward vs downward) \times 2 (moral salience: high vs low) between-subjects design. After excluding 14 individuals for failing the attention checks and 4 due to incomplete responses, 252 participants were considered valid for the analysis. The social comparison manipulation used a character description task, similar to Study 1. Following the methodology of Krakowiak and Tsay-Vogel (2015), participants were subjected to a moral salience manipulation. Participants in the high moral salience condition recalled and described a personally meaningful action that aligned with their core values and elicited a sense of pride, while those in the low

moral salience condition described their most memorable recent action.

Then, participants were introduced to a new product evaluation for Loewe, a renowned Spanish luxury brand. Loewe's latest offering was a line of universally appealing shoes (see Appendix 2). Participants then imagined discovering an almost identical, significantly cheaper counterfeit of these shoes within their budget.

4.3.2 Measurement

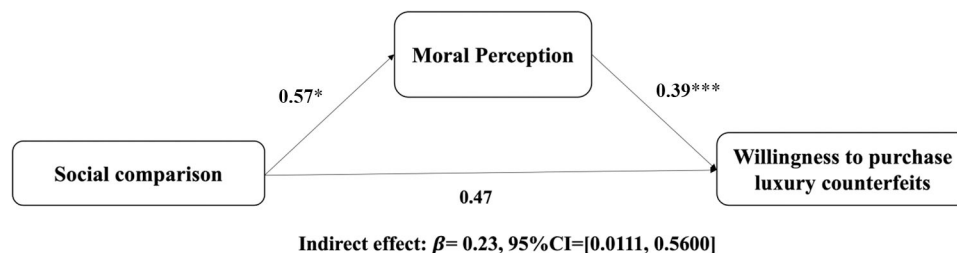
The study then measured the dependent variable of willingness to purchase (Wilcox et al., 2009) alongside consumer choice decisions, asking participants to choose between a same styled and priced shoe from an unfamiliar brand, Quique and a counterfeit Loewe counterpart. Measures also included moral perception (Wilcox et al., 2009) and brand knowledge (Zhang and Patrick, 2021). Following these questions, participants completed a scale measuring moral salience, using a seven-point format to assess the morality, ethics and sincerity of the action described at the beginning of the study (see Appendix 1). Demographic details were measured last.

4.3.3 Results

Reliability test and validity test: This study also conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to ensure that all items loaded onto their expected dimensions, and a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to verify the measurement model and to assess convergent and discriminant validity. Most factor loadings (EFA and CFA) were greater than 0.70, indicating adequate reliability. Composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha (α) values exceeded 0.80, demonstrating strong internal consistency for each construct (Sarstedt et al., 2019). Average variance extracted values for each construct were nearly equal to or greater than 0.70 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981), suggesting acceptable convergent validity (see Appendix 3).

Manipulation check: A one-way ANOVA revealed that the upward social comparison group rated themselves significantly lower than the downward social comparison group, $F(1,250) = 204.773, p < 0.001, M_{up} = 3.49, SD = 1.30, SE = 0.12; M_{down} = 5.55, SD = 0.96, SE = 0.08$, indicating successful social comparison manipulation. A similar analysis for moral salience showed that participants in the high moral salience group rated their actions as significantly more moral than those in the low moral salience group, $F(1,250) = 46.891, p < 0.001, M_{high} = 6.61, SD = 0.64, SE = 0.05; M_{low} = 5.86,$

Figure 2 Mediation path in Study 2



Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Source: Authors' own work

SD = 1.10, SE = 0.09, confirming successful manipulation of moral salience.

Hypothesis testing: A one-way ANOVA showed a significant main effect. Participants in the upward social comparison group were more willing to purchase luxury counterfeits than those in the downward social comparison group, $F(1,250) = 7.814$, $p = 0.006$, $M_{up} = 3.78$, SD = 1.69, $SE = 0.15$; $M_{down} = 3.20$, SD = 1.60, $SE = 0.14$.

A chi-square test indicated that social comparison significantly influenced the purchase of counterfeits, $\chi^2 = 7.232$, $p = 0.007$. 25.8% of the upward social comparison group chose to purchase counterfeits, compared to only 12.5% in the downward social comparison group. A one-way ANOVA with moral perception as the dependent variable showed that participants in the upward social comparison group showed a higher moral perception, $F(1,250) = 7.807$, $p = 0.006$, $M_{up} = 3.75$, SD = 1.44, $SE = 0.13$; $M_{down} = 3.28$, SD = 1.25, $SE = 0.11$.

A two-way ANOVA with social comparison and moral salience as the fixed factors and willingness to purchase as the dependent variable revealed a significant interaction, $F(1,248) = 7.128$, $p = 0.008$. The simple effects analysis indicated that when moral salience was low, upward social comparison elicited greater willingness to purchase counterfeit luxury products than downward social comparison, $F(1,248) = 14.69$, $p < 0.001$, $M_{up} = 4.29$, SD = 1.49, $SE = 0.18$; $M_{down} = 3.23$, SD = 1.59, $SE = 0.19$. No significant difference was found in high moral salience conditions, $F(1,248) < 0.001$, $p = 0.977$, $M_{up} = 3.16$, SD = 1.71, $SE = 0.23$; $M_{down} = 3.18$, SD = 1.64, $SE = 0.22$.

The two-way ANOVA for moral perception also indicated a significant interaction between social comparison and moral salience, $F(1,248) = 6.204$, $p = 0.013$. The simple effects analysis showed that when moral salience was low, participants exposed to upward social comparison reported higher moral perceptions of counterfeit purchasing than those exposed to downward social comparison, $F(1,249) = 14.04$, $p < 0.001$, $M_{up} = 4.05$, SD = 1.42, $SE = 0.17$; $M_{down} = 3.20$, SD = 1.09, $SE = 0.13$. No significant difference was noted in high moral salience conditions, $F(1,249) < 0.001$, $p = 0.952$, $M_{up} = 3.39$, SD = 1.39, $SE = 0.18$; $M_{down} = 3.37$, SD = 1.43, $SE = 0.19$.

Moderated mediation test: Using Hayes' PROCESS Model 7, with social comparison as the independent variable, willingness to purchase luxury counterfeits as the dependent variable, moral perception as the mediator and moral salience as the moderator (sample size: 5,000), regression results showed that the moderated mediation index was significant, with a 95% confidence interval that excluded zero ($\beta = -0.47$, 95% CI = [-0.9160, -0.0863]), supporting the moderated mediation. Moral salience significantly negatively moderated the relationship between social comparison and both moral perception and willingness to purchase counterfeits. These results validated *H2* and *H3*, and the path coefficients were shown in [Figure 3](#).

4.3.4 Discussion

It is noteworthy that consumer choice preferences were also measured in Study 3. The results demonstrated robust main effects, indicating that participants favored counterfeit luxury goods over other products in upward social comparison condition.

Brand knowledge and average monthly disposable income were incorporated as covariates in the analysis of the main effects separately, and the results remained unchanged, brand knowledge: $F(1,249) = 7.388$, $p = 0.007$; average monthly disposable income: $F(1,249) = 8.635$, $p = 0.004$.

4.4 Study 4

Study 4 was designed to test *H4*. A 2 (social comparison: upward vs downward) \times 2 (brand transgression: absent vs present) between-subjects experimental design was used. Since prior findings suggests that social comparison can trigger conspicuous consumption by strengthening individuals' perceptions of self-improvement ([Liang et al., 2024](#); [Shan et al., 2022](#)), this study included the measurement of perceived self-improvement.

4.4.1 Participants and design

Participants were also recruited from Credamo, and of the 340 participants initially recruited, 326 (56.7% female, 43.3% male) were retained after excluding 14 for failing an attention check or failing to complete the task seriously, randomly allocated to one of the four conditions.

The social comparison manipulation was as same as Study 1 ([Schlosser and Levy, 2016](#)), followed by the product introduction, where participants were introduced to a new product from Cartier, a pair of sunglasses (see [Appendix 2](#)). Then, referred to previous work ([Aaker et al., 2004](#); [Paharia, 2020](#)), the brand transgression manipulation was conducted by presenting participants with information about Cartier. In the brand transgression condition, participants were informed that Cartier had been criticized for its cultural insensitivity. In contrast, in the no-transgression condition, participants were shown a neutral brand introduction to Cartier, which served as a filler task to control for brand exposure (see [Appendix 2](#)). Participants were exposed to the counterfeit manipulation ([Wilcox et al., 2009](#)), in which they were instructed to imagine encountering a highly convincing counterfeit version of the Cartier sunglasses offered at a substantially discounted price.

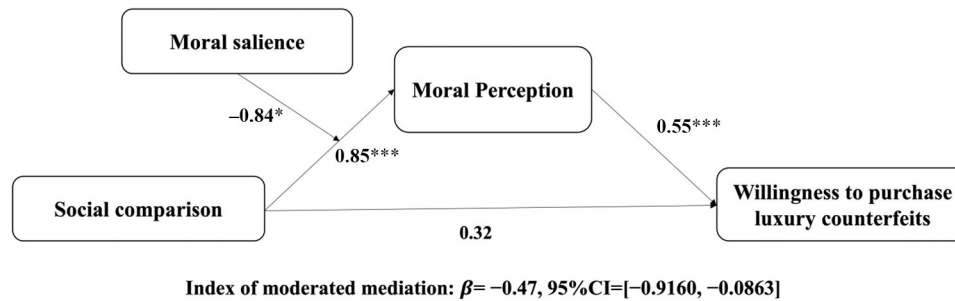
4.4.2 Measurement

The willingness to purchase counterfeits, moral perception ([Wilcox et al., 2009](#)) and perceived self-improvement were measured ([Diel et al., 2021](#)). The questionnaire included superiority perception ([Schlosser and Levy, 2016](#)) and perception of brand transgression ([Aaker et al., 2004](#)); the detailed items for these constructs were shown in [Appendix 1](#). Demographic information was collected at the end.

4.4.3 Results

Manipulation check: A one-way ANOVA revealed that the score for upward social comparison groups was significantly lower than that for downward social comparison groups, $F(1,324) = 382.063$, $p < 0.001$, $M_{up} = 2.79$, SD = 1.17, $SE = 0.09$; $M_{down} = 5.78$, SD = 1.56, $SE = 0.12$, indicating successful social comparison manipulation. A similar analysis for brand transgression revealed that participants in the transgression-present group rated the brand as significantly more transgressive than those in the transgression-absent group, $F(1,324) = 63.0$, $p < 0.001$, $M_{present} = 4.37$, SD = 1.48, $SE = 0.11$; $M_{absent} = 3.06$, SD = 1.15, $SE = 0.12$, confirming successful manipulation of brand transgression.

Figure 3 Moderated mediation path in Study 3



Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Source: Authors' own work

Hypothesis testing: A one-way ANOVA showed that participants in the upward social comparison group were more willing to purchase luxury counterfeits than those in the downward social comparison group, $F(1,324) = 5.407$, $p = 0.021$, $M_{up} = 4.10$, $SD = 1.66$, $SE = 0.13$; $M_{down} = 3.68$, $SD = 1.64$, $SE = 0.13$. A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of social comparison on moral perception, with participants in the upward comparison condition reporting higher levels of moral perception than those in the downward comparison condition, $F(1,324) = 9.091$, $p = 0.003$, $M_{up} = 4.00$, $SD = 1.48$, $SE = 0.12$; $M_{down} = 3.53$, $SD = 1.34$, $SE = 0.11$.

A two-way ANOVA with social comparison and brand transgression as the fixed factors and willingness to purchase as the dependent variable revealed a significant interaction, $F(1,322) = 4.068$, $p = 0.045$. The simple effects analysis revealed that, in the absence of brand transgression, upward social comparison led to greater willingness to purchase counterfeit luxury products than downward social comparison, $F(1,322) = 9.447$, $p = 0.002$, $M_{up} = 4.20$, $SD = 1.51$, $SE = 0.19$; $M_{down} = 3.40$, $SD = 1.49$, $SE = 0.19$. No significant difference was found in present brand transgression conditions, $F(1,322) < 1$, $p = 0.778$, $M_{up} = 4.01$, $SD = 1.79$, $SE = 0.18$; $M_{down} = 3.94$, $SD = 1.73$, $SE = 0.18$.

The two-way ANOVA for moral perception also indicated a significant interaction between social comparison and brand transgression, $F(1,322) = 6.204$, $p = 0.002$. Participants in the upward social comparison group had higher moral perceptions regarding the willingness to purchase counterfeits, $F(1,322) = 13.902$, $p < 0.001$, $M_{up} = 4.07$, $SD = 1.43$, $SE = 0.16$; $M_{down} = 3.23$, $SD = 1.20$, $SE = 0.16$. No significant difference was noted in present brand transgression conditions, $F(1,322) < 1$, $p = 0.531$, $M_{up} = 3.94$, $SD = 1.53$, $SE = 0.15$; $M_{down} = 3.81$, $SD = 1.42$, $SE = 0.15$.

Moderated mediation test: A moderated mediation analysis was conducted using Hayes' PROCESS Model 7 (sample size = 5,000), with social comparison as the independent variable, moral perception as the mediator, brand transgression as the moderator and willingness to purchase counterfeit luxury goods as the dependent variable. The index of moderated mediation was significant ($\beta = -0.40$, 95% CI = [-0.7756, -0.0468]), suggesting that brand transgression weakened the indirect effect of social comparison on willingness to purchase counterfeits via moral perception. These results support both

the mediation $H2$ and the moderation $H4$, and the path coefficients were depicted in Figure 4.

4.4.4 Discussion

A simple effects analysis also revealed that brand transgression significantly increased purchase intention among participants in the downward social comparison condition, $F(1,322) = 4.429$, $p = 0.036$ ($M_{absent} = 3.40$, $M_{present} = 3.94$). This suggests that advantaged group are more sensitive to brand transgression. The analysis with perceived self-improvement as the mediator indicated that the index of moderated mediation was not significant ($\beta = -0.04$, 95% CI = [-0.2335, 0.1214]), ruling out perceived self-improvement as an alternative explanation. The effect remained significant when controlling for brand knowledge, $F(1,321) = 5.959$, $p = 0.015$ and disposable income, $F(1,321) = 5.589$, $p = 0.019$.

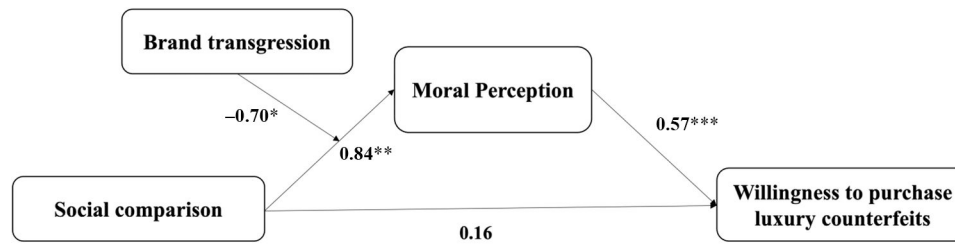
5. General discussion

Across four experimental studies, the findings consistently demonstrate that consumers engaged in upward social comparison exhibit a higher willingness to purchase counterfeit luxury products, and that this effect is mediated by moral perception. Specifically, upward comparers tend to morally justify their behavior, perceiving the purchase of counterfeits as ethically acceptable and reasonable. Moral salience and brand transgression negatively moderate this relationship.

5.1 Theoretical contributions

Drawing on practice theory – particularly the interactions among habitus, field and capital – this study identifies social comparison as a more fundamental antecedent of counterfeit luxury consumption, thereby extending current understanding of counterfeit purchase decisions. Prior luxury research of has predominantly focused on status pursuit (Iyer et al., 2022; Omeraki Çekirdekci and Barouneu Latif, 2019), and social identity motives (Ngo et al., 2020; Priporas et al., 2020). Yet, existing literature largely overlooks a crucial prerequisite for status-seeking behavior: consumers must first perceive a status discrepancy between themselves and others. At this point, social comparison acts as the critical trigger. Using practice theory, this paper conceptualizes counterfeit luxury purchasing as a practice shaped by utilitarian aesthetic tendencies of lower-status groups (habitus), aspirations for symbolic capital

Figure 4 Moderated mediation path in Study 4



Index of moderated mediation: $\beta = -0.40$, 95%CI=[-0.7796, -0.0597]

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Source: Authors' own work

(capital) and imitation triggered by higher-status groups (field). In other words, under a habitus oriented toward practicality, consumers engaging in upward social comparison pursue symbolic capital through the superficial imitation of higher-status individuals – opting to buy counterfeit rather than genuine luxury goods. Thus, moving beyond prior work centered on symbolic value and status motives, this practice theory offers a more nuanced explanation of the complex mechanisms underlying counterfeit luxury consumption.

This paper uncovers a novel function of social comparison and extends mechanism of counterfeit luxury consumption. Unlike prior research that highlights status-seeking (Shan *et al.*, 2021; Yuelong *et al.*, 2025), self-enhancement (Liang *et al.*, 2024; Shan *et al.*, 2022) or perceived benefits (Ryu *et al.*, 2023) as primary mechanisms, and unlike studies treating social comparison mainly as a driver of self-improvement or social identity (Dhaliwal *et al.*, 2025; Liu *et al.*, 2025), the findings reveal that within upward social comparison, individuals' perceived disadvantaged status can function as a survival-based excuse that legitimizes their engagement in counterfeit luxury consumption. Building on this insight, the paper connects practice theory with the moral disengagement literature, showing that individuals with different habitus exhibit distinct moral perceptions. In doing so, it broadens current understanding of how habitus shapes downstream psychological and behavioral outcomes.

The current work introduces two novel moderators that not only refine the boundary conditions of counterfeit luxury consumption but also expand the contextual application of practice theory. Whereas previous research has primarily examined product- and individual-level moderators – such as product conspicuousness (Davidson *et al.*, 2019), appearance (Le Roux *et al.*, 2016), consumer knowledge (Cesareo and Bellezza, 2025; Wong and Ho, 2025) and brand attachment (Baghi *et al.*, 2016) – this paper demonstrates that moral salience and brand transgression can fundamentally shift the influence of habitus and field norms. Specifically, high moral salience constrains disadvantaged consumers' survival-oriented habitus, thereby weakening their capacity to morally justify counterfeit purchasing. Brand transgression undermines adherence to field norms, reducing consumers' moral perceptions and increasing counterfeit purchase intentions. By incorporating these moderators, the paper extends practice theory into the domains of moral decision-making and brand

transgression, offering fresh insights into the dynamics of counterfeit luxury consumption.

5.2 Practical implications

Luxury marketers should be mindful of how social comparison operates within their advertising strategies. Although luxury promotions often rely on elite figures or celebrities to communicate exclusivity and prestige, the current findings suggest that such tactics may backfire. Strong upward comparison cues may intensify consumers' recognition of their lower social position, which can, in turn, increase their tendency to purchase counterfeit luxury products as a symbolic means of compensation. To avoid this risk, brands may benefit from using noncelebrity endorsers. Compared with celebrity endorsers, ordinary individuals are less likely to evoke upward comparison or status anxiety and can enhance the perceived accessibility of the brand message (Kim and Johnson, 2016).

Luxury brands should recognize the significant role of moral considerations in shaping potential customers' purchasing decisions, particularly relevant to governmental regulatory efforts. Recently, many brands have addressed counterfeit products through legal protections; for example, Nike established the Nike Intellectual Property Protection Center. This paper highlights that moral persuasion as an equally vital approach. Consumers' moral perceptions of counterfeit goods are a key determinant in their decision to purchase either counterfeit or genuine items. Strengthening the moral condemnation of counterfeit goods is a shared responsibility for both brands and governments.

An effective way to reduce consumers' inclination for luxury counterfeits is encouraging them to reflect on their own positive values. According to the study's findings, emphasizing moral salience can effectively curb the purchase of counterfeit goods. In practice, brands can invite consumers to participate in initiatives that align with ethical values, such as donating a portion of profits from each genuine purchase to intellectual property protection projects in the consumer's name, accompanied by certificates of appreciation for their integrity.

In cases where luxury brands engage in brand transgressions, it is crucial to implement both preventive and remedial communication strategies. According to the findings of this study, brand transgressions predominantly affect consumers in higher social positions, increasing their likelihood of turning to

counterfeit alternatives. To mitigate this risk, brands should prioritize postcrisis clarification. Following a transgression, brands need to promptly deliver tailored clarifications or official statements that address the concerns of their core consumers – particularly those occupying higher social positions.

5.3 Limitation and suggestions for future research

Results are consistent but not without several limitations. Regarding methodology and sample, this study relies on experimental methods to test its hypotheses. Although experiments are effective in controlling external interference and establishing causal relationships, they often lack external validity, limiting the generalizability of the findings. More importantly, scenario-based experiments cannot capture consumers' actual behaviors with the same precision as field data. Future research could address this limitation by using methods with stronger external validity, such as secondary data analysis or field study.

Beyond the moderators investigated in this study – moral salience and brand transgression – there may be additional contextual and individual-level factors that moderate these relationships. For instance, brand-level signals of social status, such as brand conspicuousness (Wilcox *et al.*, 2009) and brand prominence (Feng *et al.*, 2023; Jiang *et al.*, 2023), may serve as important boundary conditions. Prior studies suggest that products with higher brand prominence can enhance consumers' motivation for conspicuous consumption (Jiang *et al.*, 2023). Consumers with a higher power distance belief may exhibit stronger desires to mimic high-status individuals through counterfeit consumption (Park *et al.*, 2025).

Social comparison may also influence a wider array of ethically questionable behaviors beyond counterfeit consumption. For instance, it may induce risk-taking or impulsive behavior driven by perceived inferiority and moral justification, or even more severe social consequences such as cyberbullying motivated by malicious envy. These potential extensions open promising avenues for future research on the broader moral and behavioral consequences of social comparison across consumer contexts.

Author contribution

Jiaen Zhang: Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; Defeng Yang: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Supervision; Yu Sun: Conceptualization, Supervision, Methodology; Yuanhui Yan: Methodology, Data curation, Writing – original draft.

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Further reading

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Appendix 1


Table A1 measures of constructs

Constructs	Items
Superiority perception	To what extent you think your own situation are superior to those who you described before
Willingness to purchase luxury counterfeits	Would you be willing to purchase this high-quality counterfeit
Moral perception	Purchasing luxury counterfeits is . . . (1 = immoral, 7 = moral) Purchasing luxury counterfeits is . . . (1 = unethical, 7 = ethical) Purchasing luxury counterfeits is . . . (1 = insincere, 7 = sincere)
Brand knowledge	You are an expert on this brand You are well-informed about this brand You possess more knowledge about this brand than other consumers
Status needs	I have a desire to increase my position in the social hierarchy I want to raise my relative position to others Getting to climb the social ladder is a priority for me I would like to be viewed as being of higher standing than others
Status signaling	Purchasing this product will improve my social status Purchasing this product will help establish my position in society Buying this product would confer prestige to me Using this product would confer status to me
Social adjustment	Luxury brands are a symbol of social status Luxury brands help me fit into important social situations I like to be seen wearing luxury brands
Moral salience	I enjoy it when people know I am wearing a luxury brand (Specific behavior) is . . . (1 = immoral, 7 = moral) (Specific behavior) is . . . (1 = unethical, 7 = ethical) (Specific behavior) is . . . (1 = insincere, 7 = sincere)
Perceived self-improvement	Wearing this pair of sunglasses would improve myself Wearing this pair of sunglasses make me feel better about myself Wearing this pair of sunglasses would make me to evaluate myself well
Perception of brand transgression	Cartier's actions represented a violation of social norms Cartier makes mistakes There are times when Cartier lets me down Cartier can let me down

Source(s): Authors' own work

Appendix 2

Figure A1 Material stimuli and manipulation in four studies

Study	Material stimuli	Manipulation
Study1		<p>See the <i>Participants and design</i> of Study 1 in the paper</p>
Study2		<p>See the <i>Participants and design</i> of Study 2 in the paper</p>
Study3		<p>See the <i>Participants and design</i> of Study 3 in the paper</p>
Study4		<p>Brand Transgression Condition: In January 2025, Cartier faced public criticism for its high jewelry collection, which was accused of silently appropriating traditional symbols and motifs from Asian cultures — such as totems, masks, and ornamental patterns. The brand was said to have “Westernized” and commercialized these elements without acknowledging the original cultural contexts or the artistic contributions of the communities from which they were drawn.</p>

(continued)

Figure A1

		<p>No Transgression Condition:</p> <p>Cartier is a prestigious French luxury brand established in 1847 and headquartered in Paris. Renowned for its fine jewelry, timepieces, and accessories, the brand is known for its commitment to craftsmanship and its pursuit of cultural inspiration. Cartier often draws creative influence from diverse global traditions and has launched numerous artistic and limited-edition collections that reflect its dedication to innovation and heritage.</p>
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Source: Authors' own work

Appendix 3

Table A2 Reliability test and validity test in Study 3

Factors	EFA	CFA
KMO = 0.713, $p < 0.000$, CFI = 0.985, TLI = 0.978, SRMR = 0.042		
<i>Moral perception</i> ($\alpha = 0.85$, CR = 0.86, AVE = 0.67)		
Purchasing luxury counterfeits is ... (1 = immoral, 7 = moral)	0.895	0.861
Purchasing luxury counterfeits is ... (1 = unethical, 7 = ethical)	0.899	0.848
Purchasing luxury counterfeits is ... (1 = insincere, 7 = sincere)	0.841	0.738
<i>Brand knowledge</i> ($\alpha = 0.91$, CR = 0.92, AVE = 0.79)		
You are an expert on this brand	0.875	0.764
You are well-informed about this brand	0.948	0.958
You possess more knowledge about this brand than other consumers	0.945	0.936
<i>Moral salience</i> ($\alpha = 0.87$, CR = 0.83, AVE = 0.70)		
(Specific behavior) is ... (1 = immoral, 7 = moral)	0.907	0.871
(Specific behavior) is ... (1 = unethical, 7 = ethical)	0.903	0.858
(Specific behavior) is ... (1 = insincere, 7 = sincere)	0.860	0.776
Source(s): Authors' own work		

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