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## **Deceptive status signaling through fake luxury brands: Is it effective?**

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### **Abstract**

*Consumers may use luxury brands as a means of impressing other people and displaying status. Individuals may purchase fake luxury products for their ability to confer status at a lower cost. But is this a truly effective strategy? In this empirical study we examine how other people view consumers of fake luxury brands. More specifically, we consider perception of status, motivation to affiliate, and desirability as a romantic partner. To that end, we develop and test a set of research hypotheses drawing on evolutionary psychology perspectives. We show that there is no difference in perception of status between consumers who own a counterfeit luxury brand and those that own a low-status brand. We also find that people have a stronger motivation to affiliate with consumers who own a low-status brand. Finally, men's choice of counterfeit luxury brands can negatively influence their desirability as partners.*

## **Introduction**

Counterfeit items are illegal, low-priced, and often lower-quality replicas of products that typically possess high brand value (Lai & Zaichkowsky, 1999). These products, which blatantly infringe trademarks, are sold at a fraction of the price of the authentic designer version (e.g., a Louis Vuitton purse for \$1,000 vs. a counterfeit for \$115). According to the International AntiCounterfeiting Coalition, the value of global trade in counterfeit goods in 2015 exceeds \$1.77 trillion with roughly 4% of this total reserved for counterfeit luxury items. Consumers often knowingly purchase counterfeits luxury goods (Nia & Zaichkowsky, 2000).

The academic literature displays a strong focus on the supply side, while the demand side- why consumers buy counterfeit luxury brands- has attracted far less attention. Prior research has linked the decision to knowingly purchase counterfeit products to a number of factors, which can be classified into four categories (Eisend & Schuchert-Guler 2006). The first category includes demographic and psychographic variables, as well as attitudes toward counterfeiting. For example, it has been shown that consumers who purchase counterfeit products are of lower social status (Bloch, Bush & Campbell, 1993) and have more favorable attitudes toward counterfeiting (Penz & Stottinger, 2005). In addition, consumers' preferences for a counterfeit brand and the subsequent negative change in their preferences for the real brand are greater when luxury brand attitudes serve a social-adjustive rather than a value-expressive function (Wilcox, Kim, & Sen, 2009). Research linking consumers' beliefs about counterfeits to their purchase behavior (e.g., Gentry, Putrevu, & Shultz, 2006) also falls under this category. The second category focuses on aspects of the product, such as price, uniqueness, and availability. The third and fourth categories refer to the social and cultural context respectively in which the counterfeit purchase decision is made, ranging from cultural norms (Lai & Zaichkowsky, 1999) to

the shopping environment (Leisen & Nill, 2001). Chaudry and Zimmerman (2009) proposed that consumers' complicity to buy counterfeit products is a function of both intrinsic (demographics, attitudes, cultural values and ethical perspective) and extrinsic (social marketing communications, shopping experience, and product attributes) determinants.

Cordell, Wongtada, and Dieschnick (1996) investigated the motives associated with purchasing two types of counterfeits: functional and prestige. They found that functional counterfeits are those that are purchased for their utility (i.e., electronics, software, etc.) while prestige counterfeits are those purchased for their ability to confer status (i.e., clothing, accessories, etc.). Bloch et al. (1993) asked consumers to choose between three cotton shirts: a designer label shirt priced at \$45, a counterfeit version of the shirt for \$18, and a shirt without a label for \$18. Although all three shirts were identical, individuals who chose the counterfeit shirt rated it highest on being a good value and equal to the designer label, and higher than the shirt without a label, in terms of prestige. In addition, participants who chose the counterfeit shirt over the designer label rated themselves as being less successful, less confident and of lower status than those who chose both the designer and the no-label shirts. A more recent study showed that wearing fake products makes individuals feel less authentic and increases their likelihood of both behaving dishonestly and judging others as unethical (Gino, Norton, & Ariely, 2010).

Consumers are not always aware that they are buying a fake product. This is often the case in categories such as automotive parts, consumer electronics, and pharmaceuticals (Grossman & Shapiro, 1988). In luxury brand markets however most consumers know what they are buying and are able to distinguish counterfeits from genuine brands on the basis of price, distribution

channels, and the inferior quality of the product itself (Nia & Zaichkowsky, 2000; Wilcox et al., 2009).

The main purpose of this study is to examine how other people view consumers of counterfeit luxury products. More specifically, we consider perception of status, motivation to affiliate, and desirability as a romantic partner. To that end, we develop and test a set of research hypotheses drawing mainly on evolutionary psychology perspectives.

Additionally, we consider two personality variables that play an essential role in influencing purchase intention of luxury brands but little is known about their role in consumption of counterfeit luxury brands, narcissism and materialism. In particular, it has been shown that narcissists are motivated to acquire luxurious brands that allow them to display their superiority and draw attention to themselves (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). Others have found that narcissists express their high self-regard through heightened materialism and an enhanced desire for expensive products (Kasser & Ryan, 1996; Rose, 2007). Moreover, materialistic consumers tend to consume more than other consumers, with a clear intention to consume products that generate social recognition or status for the owner (Mason, 2001). Therefore, an additional goal of this study is to examine how other people view consumers of counterfeit luxury brands in terms of materialism and narcissism.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The next section explains consumer preferences for counterfeit luxury brands in terms of evolutionary principles and the process of deceptive status signaling. The third section develops our research hypotheses. The fourth section presents our method. The empirical results are presented next. This is followed by discussion. A concluding section discusses implications for practice and research.

### **Evolutionary Roots of Preferences for Counterfeit Luxury Brands**

Evolutionary psychology suggests that human preferences for luxury items relate to costly signaling, in that ownership of luxury brands signals desirable traits to others (Griskevicius et al., 2007; Miller, 2009; Nelissen & Meijers, 2011; Saad, 2007, 2011; Saad & Vongas, 2009; Sundie et al., 2011). Therefore, costly signaling theory may explain why luxury brands are so widely desired. According to costly signaling theory, signals communicate underlying characteristics of an organism that are not easily perceivable and are linked to fitness-relevant qualities. The consumption of luxury brands may function as a costly signal of an individual's fitness value. It is a signal that reveals quality by wasting resources (Miller, 1999). Individuals may use luxury brands to flaunt or emphasize their physical attractiveness, intelligence, aggressiveness, social status, and other capacities to gather resources, thereby enhancing their reproductive success (Miller, 2000; Sundie et al., 2011).

Many consumers however cannot afford or are not willing to pay for authentic status-conferring goods. Some of them use fake luxury brands as a substitute for the real thing. If this strategy remains undetected by observers, fake products allow their owner to free ride on the status benefits tied to authentic items without incurring the whole cost (Grossman & Shapiro, 1988; Van Kempen, 2003). The process of sending false status signals is called *deceptive status signaling*.

Deceit occurs when the signaler's fitness increases at the cost of the receiver's fitness (McFarland, 2006). Deceptive signaling can emerge when it is less costly to send a deceptive signal than a truthful signal (Grafen, 1990). The signaler is able to select what information is transmitted, and so the signaler will elect only to emit signals that will induce a desirable behavior from the receiver (Wiley, 1983). According to a recent study (Lu & Chang, 2014), low-status individuals are more motivated to deceive, whereas high-status individuals are more

motivated to detect deception because high-status individuals have more means to acquire resources less accessible to low-status individuals.

Several species engage in various forms of deceptive signaling (Saad, 2011). In some instances, the deceptive signal has evolved for the purposes of survival and in other instances for the purposes of gaining an advantage in the mating game. For example, consumers may purchase sham luxury items (e.g., counterfeit Rolex watches) to fake social status, income and occupational achievements (Saad, 2011). Fake luxury items are often purchased for public consumption in situations with clear evolutionary-significant themes, such as impressing a member of the opposite sex or a potential client, or shadowing the consumption behaviors of members of aspirational groups. It has been suggested that deceptive status signaling is what causes some people to fill their grocery carts with extremely expensive items and then abandon the cart quietly once they have finished parading through the aisles (Van Kempen, 2003). It has been suggested that a market segment in developing countries may use deceptive status signaling strategies to keep up with the Joneses of developed countries (Bekir, El Harbi, & Grolleau, 2011).

It is conceivable that authentic luxury products are not necessarily proof of status and wealth. It could be argued that deceptive status signalling may also involve consumption of original luxury items by individuals who lack the implied wealth and economic resources. These individuals may use credit or make enormous sacrifices to buy luxury items. Unfortunately, this may also apply to impoverished people who cannot afford expensive brands (Frank, 1985a; Van Kempen, 2004; Christen & Morgan, 2005; Drèze & Nunes, 2009).

## Research Hypotheses

As noted above, the purpose of the present study is to consider how consumers of fake luxury products are viewed by other people who know or can infer the truth about the product quality.

Consumers may purchase luxury brands to gain status in their groups. Status is strongly influenced by economic power and ownership of costly material possessions provides some evidence of the latter (Gilbert, 1998). Therefore, consumption of original luxury brands is expected to increase perceptions of status relative to both counterfeit luxury brands and low-status brands (Frank, 1999; Veblen, 1899). On the other hand, low-status brands cost about the same as fake luxury brands and we do not expect a difference in perceptions of status and wealth between these two brand type choices. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

**H1:** An original luxury brand increases perception of status relative to both (a) a counterfeit luxury brand and (b) a low-status brand.

**H2:** There is no difference in perception of status between a counterfeit luxury brand and a low-status brand.

The consumption of counterfeit versions of prestigious brands is perhaps the most frequently used deceptive status signaling strategy (Van Kempen, 2003). This strategy is far less costly than status signaling involving authentic luxury items. It is reasonable to postulate that consumers who own counterfeit luxury brands will be perceived as having higher intention to deceive about their status and economic resources. In addition, low-status brands not only are affordable but also lack any status signaling value compared to authentic luxury brands. As noted above,



genuine luxury items are not necessarily proof of status and wealth (Frank, 1985a; Van Kempen, 2004; Christen & Morgan, 2005; Drèze & Nunes, 2009). . Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

**H3:** A counterfeit luxury brand increases perception of deceiving status relative to both (a) an original luxury brand and (b) a low-status brand.

**H4:** An original luxury brand increases perception of deceiving status relative to consumption of a low-status brand.

As a group-living species, humans invest heavily in building and maintaining relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Forming and maintaining relationships have survival benefits through resource sharing and mutual protection (Buss, 1990). Affiliating with high status individuals avails oneself of the positive externalities (i.e., properties of one individual that are incidentally beneficial to another Tooby & Cosmides, 1996), which result from high-status individuals having greater control over their physical and social environments (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). Moreover, affiliating with high-status individuals provides opportunities to “infocopy” (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). Infocopiers may unconsciously acquire mannerisms, consciously acquire verbal knowledge and arguments, and consciously or unconsciously imitate action patterns. Nelissen and Meijers (2011) showed that people are more compliant and generous to people who display luxury and are even willing to pay a cost to affiliate with them. Thus, based on the notion that original luxury brands serve as costly signals of wealth and status (Nelissen & Meijers, 2011), we expect that participants will be more motivated to affiliate with consumers who own original luxury brands than fakes or low status brands due to positive externalities and opportunities to “infocopy” skillful and prestigious individuals. Therefore, we propose that:

**H5:** Participants will be more motivated to affiliate with consumers who own an original luxury brand than (a) a counterfeit luxury brand or (b) a low-status brand.

In general, deceptive behavior has negative consequences for friendships and relationships. Relationship satisfaction, trust and commitment can decrease with deception (Cole, 2001). Therefore, we expect that participants will be more motivated to affiliate with consumers who own low-status brands than counterfeit luxury brands since the consumption of counterfeit luxury brands is seen as a deceptive strategy. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

**H6:** Participants will be more strongly motivated to affiliate with consumers who own a low-status brand than a counterfeit luxury brand.

We also address the question as to whether the consumption of counterfeit luxury brands influences the signaler's desirability as a mate relative to both original luxury brands and low status brands. It has been suggested that women across cultures place a high value on wealth and resources in a mate, particularly when evaluating a man as a long-term partner (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004; Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002; Shackelford, Schmitt & Buss, 2005). Sundie et al. (2011) found that a physically attractive, successful man who chose to purchase a luxury product was more desirable to women as a short-term partner than the same man portrayed as instead having chosen to purchase a non-luxury product. Moreover, men may falsely present themselves as embodying the desires a woman holds, such as possessing resources or occupying a position of high status (see e.g., Tooke & Camire, 1991). According to Strategic Interference Theory, women express greater upset than men about being deceived about a partner's status and economic resources (Haselton, Buss, Oubaid & Angleitner, 2005). As counterfeit luxury brands appear to be used in mating mainly by men, we predict that the consumption of counterfeit luxury brands would decrease men's desirability as both short-term

and long-term mates relative to both original luxury brands and low-status brands. We also predict that the consumption of authentic luxury brands would enhance men's desirability as short-term mates but not necessarily as long-term mates relative to low-status brands since conspicuous consumption is used as a signal mostly in short-term mating contexts (Sundie et al., 2011). We note in passing that health and fertility cues are more highly valued than status or resource cues by men in mate choice and thus we do not expect conspicuous consumption to affect women's desirability as either a short-term or a long-term partner. Therefore, we propose that:

**H7:** Consumption of a counterfeit luxury brand will decrease men's desirability as both short-term and long-term mates relative to both (a) an original luxury brand and (b) a low-status brand.

**H8:** The consumption of an original luxury brand will enhance men's desirability as short-term mates but not necessarily as long-term mates relative to a low-status brand.

Furthermore, because conspicuous consumption is driven by men who are following a lower investment (vs. higher investment) mating strategy (Sundie et al., 2011; Griskevicius et al., 2007), we predict that women should perceive men who engage in consumption of original luxury brands or counterfeit luxury brands as more inclined to follow an unrestricted (short-term) mating strategy relative to low-status brands. On the other hand, we do not expect perceptions among men of a woman's sexual strategy to be influenced by whether the woman engages in the consumption of luxury brands – original or counterfeit – or low status brands since it has been found that women's conspicuous consumption does not function as mating signal directed at men (Sundie et al., 2011; Griskevicius et al., 2007).

## **Method**

### *Participants and design*

Participants were asked to evaluate a target individual who had recently purchased (a) a counterfeit luxury brand, or (b) an original luxury brand, or (c) a low-status brand. The study was fully cross-sexed such that male and female participants read the description of male and female target individuals. A total of 168 undergraduate students (60 men and 108 women) participated in the study for partial course credit. The experiment was computer-based and run in small group sessions (10 participants). The experiment used a 2(target sex: men/women) x 3(product type: original luxury brand vs. counterfeit luxury brand vs. low-status brand) between-subjects design. Participants evaluated target individuals' status, the extent to which the person wants to deceptively signal status, the target's desirability as a mate and the desire to affiliate with the target. Male and female participants evaluated male or female targets that had recently purchased either an original luxury brand or a counterfeit luxury brand or a low status brand.

### *Procedure*

Participants were informed that they would be making evaluations of contemporary business people and then read a description of the same or opposite-sex person that has been successfully used in previous research (see Sundie et al., 2011). The description included information about the target's age (32), education (MBA), occupation (at the banking sector), hobbies (biking) and leisure activities (going to movies, listening to music).

Embedded within the person's description was the key manipulation. The description noted that the person had just purchased a new wallet. It was either an original luxury wallet (Louis Vuitton) or a counterfeit luxury wallet (Louis Vuitton) or a low-status wallet (ZARA). The two brands were pre-rated by a separate group of 23 participants. Louis Vuitton was perceived as

more conspicuous and associated with higher status relative to ZARA ( $M_s = 8.16$  vs.  $3.28$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Each of the two brands were equally liked ( $M_{LV} = 3.6$  vs.  $M_{ZR} = 4.20$ ,  $p = .136$ ) and equally familiar ( $M_{LV} = 6.96$  vs.  $M_{ZR} = 7.59$ ,  $p = .102$ ) to the participants.

#### *Dependent measures*

Participants rated on a scale (1=*not at all*, 9=*very much*) the target's status (items: "this person has high status", "this person is well respected") (Nelissen & Meijers, 2011) and the target's desire to mislead regarding his status (items: "this person wants to mislead regarding his status"). The target's desirability as a mate was assessed for opposite-sex individuals asking the extent to which "this person would be desirable for a short-term relationship (a date)" and "desirable for a long-term relationship (marriage)". Responses were provided on a 1-9 scale (1=*not at all desirable* to 9=*very desirable*). Motivation to affiliate was measured by (1) their desire to become friends with the target individual, (2) their admiration for the target individual, and (3) the degree to which participants perceive their own status and popularity increasing by becoming friends with the target individual. The 7-point scale was developed by Cloud (2012) and the four items were averaged to form a composite score ( $\alpha = .79$ ), with higher values indicating higher motivation to affiliate.

#### *Other measures*

Participants were asked to respond to some additional items as they thought the target person would answer them. The target's mating strategy was assessed with the SOI items to assess receptivity to uncommitted sexual encounters. For instance, participants were asked to rate the extent to which they thought the target would agree or disagree with the statement "I can imagine myself being comfortable and enjoying casual sex with different partners". Response was on a 1 to 9 scale (1=*strongly disagree* to 9=*strongly agree*). Participants, also,

completed the Material Values Scale (Richins, 2004) and the Narcissistic Personality Inventory scale (Emmons, 1984).

## Results

We first considered perceptions of the target's status, wealth and intention to deceive about his/her status. Inspection of Table 1 reveals that perceptions of status ( $F(2,165)=10.032$ ,  $p<0.001, \eta^2=.11$ ), wealth ( $F(2,165)=13.231$ ,  $p<0.001, \eta^2=.138$ ) and intention to deceive ( $F(2,165)=14.249$ ,  $p<0.001, \eta^2=.147$ ) differed between conditions. Post hoc analyses revealed that when displaying an authentic luxury wallet, the person received higher status ratings and was perceived as wealthier than when displaying a counterfeit luxury wallet or a low-status wallet. There were no significant differences in perceived status and wealth between the last two conditions, in support of H2. Additionally, targets who owned a counterfeit luxury wallet ( $M=5.33$ ,  $SD=2.188$ ) were perceived as having higher intention to deceive status relative to both an original luxury wallet ( $M=4.24$ ,  $SD=1.852$ ) and a low-status wallet ( $M=3.36$ ,  $SD=1.853$ ). Interestingly, targets who owned an original luxury wallet were perceived as having higher intention to mislead regarding their status comparing to targets who owned a low-status wallet, thus confirming H4. Furthermore, targets who owned a luxury wallet – original ( $M=3.50$ ,  $SD=.465$ ) or counterfeit ( $M=3.49$ ,  $SD=.422$ ) – were perceived as highly materialistic ( $F(2,165)=33.594$ ,  $p=.000, \eta^2=.29$ ), relative to targets that owned a low-status wallet ( $M=2.88$ ,  $SD=.491$ ). The results also indicated that targets who owned a genuine luxury wallet ( $M=.73$ ,  $SD=.235$ ) were perceived as highly narcissistic ( $F(2,165)=41.353$ ,  $p=.000, \eta^2=.33$ ) compared to targets who owned a counterfeit luxury wallet ( $M=.63$ ,  $SD=.267$ ) and targets who owned a low-status wallet ( $M=.32$ ,  $SD=.237$ ).

---INSERT TABLE 1 HERE---

Moreover, our analysis revealed a significant effect of product type on affiliation motive ( $F(2,165)=9.062, p<0.001, \eta^2=.098$ ). However, in contrast to Hypothesis H5, participants were not more strongly motivated to affiliate with consumers who own original luxury brands. Analysis of variance (Table 1) revealed that participants were more motivated to affiliate with consumers who own low-status brands ( $M=5.81, SD=1.03$ ) than original luxury brands ( $M=4.97, SD=1.44$ ) and counterfeit luxury brands ( $M=4.73, SD=1.68$ ) in support of H6 but not H5. Affiliation motivation scores did not indicate any differences between counterfeit luxury brands and original luxury brands.

#### *Mediational analysis*

To test whether participants' increased motivation to affiliate with consumers that own low-status brands was mediated by the targets' perceived narcissism, we conducted a mediational analysis using Baron and Kenny's steps. In Step 1 of the mediation model, the regression of the product type on affiliation motivation, ignoring the mediator, was significant,  $\beta=.42, t(166)=3.09, p=.0024$ . Step 2 showed that the regression of the product type on the mediator, perception of narcissism, was also significant,  $\beta=-.21, t(166)=-8.6, p=.000$ . Step 3 of the mediation process showed that the mediator, perception of narcissism, controlling for product type, was significant,  $\beta=-1.23, t(165)=-2.81, p=.0056$ . Step 4 of the analyses revealed that, controlling for the mediator (perception of narcissism), product type was not a significant predictor of affiliation motivation,  $\beta=.17, t(165)=1.06, p=.289$  (see Figure 1). A Sobel test (Baron & Kenny, 1986) was conducted and found full mediation in the model ( $z=2.65, p=.008$ ). These results indicate that targets' perceived narcissism fully mediated the relationship between product type and participants' affiliation motivation.

--- FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE---

Furthermore, we examined the desirability of the target as a romantic partner based on whether he or she owned an original luxury wallet, a counterfeit luxury wallet or a low status wallet. As predicted ( $F(2,52)=8.020, p=0.001, \eta^2=.24$ ), a counterfeit luxury wallet ( $M=5.74, SD=2.31$ ) decreased a man's desirability to women for a potential short-term relationship compared to an original luxury wallet ( $M=7.78, SD=.43$ ) but not compared to a low-status wallet ( $M=5.89, SD=1.78$ ), in partial support of H7. However, information that a man owned an original luxury wallet ( $M=6.94, SD=1.69$ ) did not enhance his desirability to women as a potential marriage partner ( $F(2,52)=7.157, p=0.002, \eta^2=.22$ ), relative to a low-status wallet ( $M=6.50, SD=1.69$ ) but only relative to a counterfeit luxury wallet ( $M=5.05, SD=1.39$ ). These results confirm H8 and partially H7 (see Figure 2). The female target's desirability to men did not differ across product types or relationship contexts, i.e., short-term partner ( $F(2,27)=.468, p=.631, \eta^2=.034$ ); long-term partner ( $F(2,27)=.556, p=.580, \eta^2=.04$ ).

In conclusion, a counterfeit luxury brand decreased the desirability of the male target as a short-term relationship partner relative to an original luxury brand but not relative to a low-status brand. A fake luxury brand decreased the desirability of the male target as a long-term relationship partner relative to both an authentic luxury brand and a low-status brand. These results also suggest that the consumption of counterfeit luxury brands was unrelated to the female's desirability for either relationship type.

Finally, our analysis indicated a significant effect ( $F(2,165)=4.918, p=.008, \eta^2=.056$ ) such that targets who owned a luxury product – original ( $M=5.46, SD=1.63$ ) or counterfeit ( $M=5.20, SD=1.62$ ) – were perceived as having a less restricted approach to mating (attitudinal factors in the SOI) compared to those who own a low-status product ( $M=4.52, SD=1.63$ ).

--- FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE---



## Discussion

The results demonstrate that individuals who own an original luxury brand are perceived as having higher status and wealth relative to both individuals who own a counterfeit luxury brand and a low-status brand. However, there is no difference in perception of wealth and status between individuals who own a counterfeit luxury brand and a low-status brand. This finding suggests that consumers of counterfeit luxury brands are actually not acquiring the prestige and status they are seeking. Additionally, individuals who own a counterfeit luxury wallet are perceived as having higher intention to mislead regarding status relative to both an original luxury wallet and a low-status wallet, confirming that counterfeit luxury brands are perceived as a deceptive status signal tactic. Moreover, our findings did not support the prediction that participants would be more motivated to affiliate with individuals who own an original luxury brand than a counterfeit luxury brand or a low status brand.

Our analysis produced an interesting, unexpected finding: participants reported a stronger motivation to affiliate with individuals who own a low-status brand and equally motivated to affiliate with participants who own a counterfeit luxury brand or an original luxury brand. Results of the mediational analysis reveal that perceived narcissism mediates the relationship between product type and affiliation motivation. In particular, individuals who own a luxury brand – original or counterfeit – are perceived as highly narcissistic in comparison to those who own a low-status brand and this result to stronger motivation of the participants to affiliate with owners of a low-status brand. Our findings also suggest that men's choice of counterfeit luxury brands may actually negatively influence their desirability as a romantic partner (short-term or long-term) as women express greater upset than men about being deceived about a partner's status and economic resources.

## **Conclusions and implications**

In the context of the foregoing it is clear that consumption of counterfeit luxury products may not be an effective deceptive signaling strategy, especially when observers are in a position to know or infer the truth about the product quality.

It has been shown that individuals that own a counterfeit luxury brand are perceived as having equal status and wealth as the owners of a low-status brand. Perhaps more importantly, we have found that individuals are more strongly motivated to affiliate with consumers who owned a low-status brand than those who owned an original or fake luxury brand. Moreover, in contrast to our predictions, individuals are equally motivated to affiliate with consumers who owned an original luxury brand and a counterfeit luxury brand. These findings are not entirely consistent with the conjecture that greater benefits are realized by affiliating with high status individuals as they emit positive externalities (e.g., opportunities to infocopy).

The mediational analysis suggests that owners of original and counterfeit luxury brands are perceived as highly narcissistic in comparison to those who own a low-status brand and this perception results to stronger motivation to affiliate with owners of a low-status brand. Narcissism belongs to the Dark Triad personality traits (i.e., Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy) (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). These traits are often deemed undesirable because of antisocial life outcomes frequently associated with them (see Kowalski, 2001).

It is also useful to note that even though mating motives trigger conspicuous consumption among men, men's choice of counterfeit luxury brands negatively influence their desirability as a romantic partner, especially a long-term one. This is attributed to women expressing greater upset than men upon the discovery that they have been deceived about the potential partner's status and economic resources. Consistent with the work of Sundie et al. (2011), the flaunting of

original luxury brands appears to have the desired effect on female observers since men who own genuine luxury goods are perceived as more attractive short-term partners. Our results indicate that men who display counterfeit luxury brands to gain status and reproductive rewards can be more desirable short-term romantic partners only if their deceptive exploitation remains uncovered by women.

An affiliation motive might lead people to seek brands and styles that help them fit in (Griskevicius & Kenrick, 2013). One can argue that consumption of luxury brands is rooted in the desire to signal group membership. Social exclusion in the form of being implicitly ignored increased conspicuous consumption, whereas being explicitly rejected increased helping and donation behavior (Lee & Shrum, 2012). Future research is needed to examine how social exclusion causes people to consume counterfeit luxury brands in the service of affiliation.

The rise of counterfeit luxury products is an issue of massive economic significance and attracts considerable interest from researchers, practitioners and policy makers. The current research provides evidence for the evolutionary roots of counterfeit luxury brands consumption and is the first to apply an evolutionary informed perspective to the consumption of counterfeit luxury brands. It is hoped that the present work may provide the stimulus for new research in this exciting area of individual behavior.

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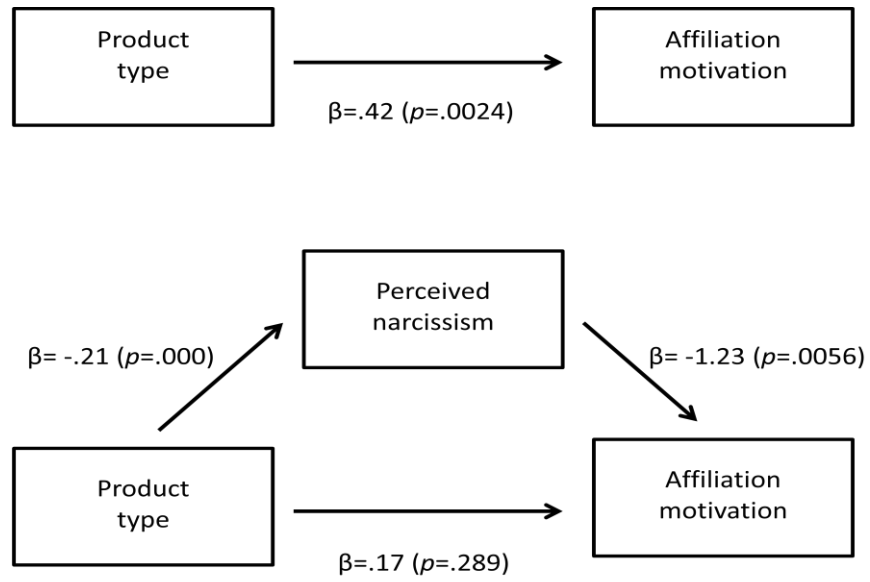
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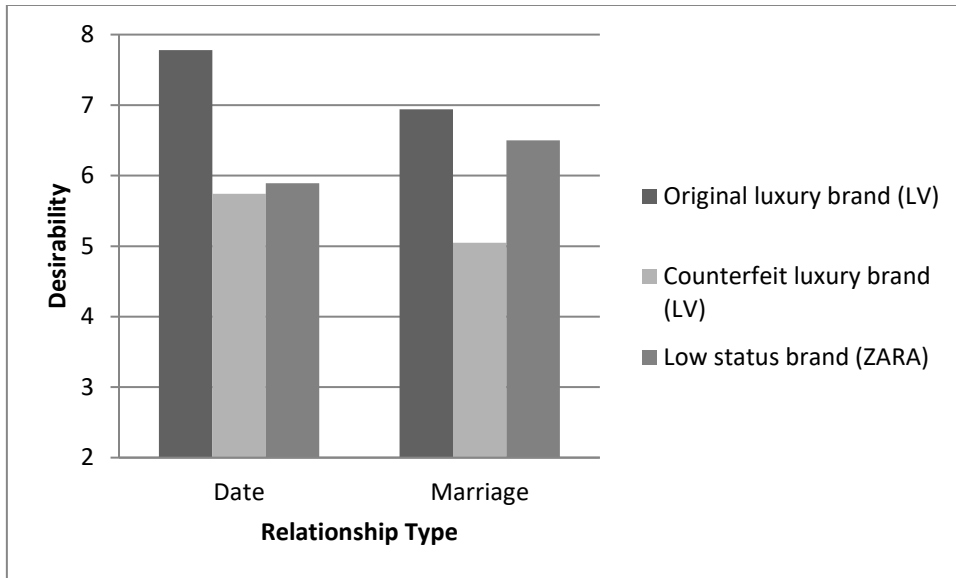
**Table 1**

*Average ratings of perceived status, wealth, narcissism, materialism, SOI, intention to deceive status and motivation to affiliate with the target person, when owing an original luxury wallet (LV), a counterfeit luxury wallet (LV) or a low status wallet (ZARA)*

Perception	Original LV		Counterfeit LV		ZARA	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
<b>Status</b>	6.96	0.961	6.05	1.303	6.20	1.143
<b>Wealth</b>	6.24	1.258	5.15	1.159	5.30	1.209
<b>Status Deception</b>	4.24	1.852	5.33	2.188	3.36	1.853
<b>Affiliation</b>	4.97	1.44	4.73	1.68	5.81	1.03
<b>Narcissism</b>	.73	.235	.63	.267	.32	.237
<b>Materialism</b>	3.50	.465	3.49	.422	2.88	.491
<b>SOI</b>	5.46	1.63	5.20	1.62	4.52	1.63



**Figure 1.** Mediation of the relationship between product type and affiliation motivation by perceived narcissism.



**Figure 2.** Women's perception of a man's desirability as a long-term versus short-term mating partner as a function of the man owning a luxury wallet – original or counterfeit – or a low status wallet.