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The moderating effect of need for belonging and communal-brand connection on counterfeit purchasing

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ABSTRACT

Developing social-links among consumers can increase firm performance but does having a communal-brand connection impact counterfeit consumption? Two studies are implemented to explore this question. Study 1 finds that there is a positive relationship between moral beliefs towards counterfeits and willingness to purchase counterfeits. Study 1 also discovers that a weak to average communal-brand connection moderates this relationship. However, study 2 reveals that need for belonging is a stronger moderator. In particular, consumers with a low to average need for belonging are less willing to purchase counterfeits when they hold unfavorable moral beliefs towards counterfeits but are more willing when they hold favorable moral beliefs. The results suggest that need for belonging levels influences a consumer's willingness to purchase counterfeit products. Managers are encouraged to promote messages to their brand communities that decrease moral beliefs towards counterfeits, such as counterfeit consumers are inauthentic and immoral.

Keywords:

Counterfeit
Need for belonging
Communal-brand connection
Consumer behavior
Brand community
Social-linking value

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1. Introduction

Promoting communal or social connections among brand users is a prudent strategy to increase brand performance. For example, brand community members, who value their social connections with other brand users, have higher repurchase rates and brand loyalty intentions than non-members (Algesheimer et al., 2005). Besides purchasing more products, brand community members are also more likely to spread positive word-of-mouth (WOM) and protect the brand from negative information (Marzocchi et al., 2013; Pongsakornrunsilp and Schroeder, 2011). Communal connections among brand users also construct the social system necessary for identity construction (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995) and to guide competent consumption practices (Maciel and Wallendorf, 2017; Thomas, et al., 2013). Thus, developing communal connections among brand users provides benefits for both firms and consumers. Communal-brand connection refers to the degree a consumer feels socially connected to other brand users (Rindfleisch et al., 2009). However, while developing communal-brand connections can be an effective strategy to increase firm performance: what impact does communal-brand connection levels have on counterfeit consumption?

Need for belonging refers to the degree in which an individual desires to be in social relations or accepted by others (Aron et al., 1991; Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Need for belonging motivates individuals to seek out and maintain social relationships (Leary et al., 2013). Brand communities, consumption tribes, and subculture of consumption arise, in part, due to consumers' innate desire to be in close, social relations with others. For example, brand

community members not only share an affinity with a brand but also feel a communal connection or *communitas* with other users (Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001; Thomas et al., 2013). Social connections among brand users are particularly important for luxury brands, where interactions with other brand users can enhance the consumer’s overall brand experience (Tynan et al., 2010). However, extant research, especially within luxury contexts, tends to investigate the role a brand’s symbolic-value has on counterfeit consumption while ignoring the fact that brand usage can form communal-brand connections. Understanding the drivers of counterfeit consumption is important because counterfeit products degrade the original brand’s image and decrease revenues (Phau and Teah, 2009; Staake et al., 2009). Therefore, this work contributes to the literature on counterfeit consumption in a luxury context.

Two different studies confirm that favorable moral beliefs towards counterfeits is a strong, positive predictor of willingness to purchase counterfeits (Ang et al., 2001; de Matos et al., 2007; Phau and Teah, 2009; Wilcox et al., 2009). However, study 1 finds that having a low level of communal-brand connection enhances the moral beliefs-counterfeit purchasing relationship, such that those holding unfavorable beliefs towards counterfeits are less willing to purchase counterfeits while holding favorable beliefs increases their willingness to purchase counterfeits. But, when simultaneously testing the moderating role of both communal-brand connection and need for belonging, study 2 demonstrates that need for belonging has a stronger moderation effect on the moral beliefs-counterfeit purchasing relationship than communal-brand connection. Specifically, consumers with a low level of need for belonging are less willing to purchase counterfeits when they hold unfavorable moral beliefs towards counterfeits but more willing when they hold favorable moral beliefs towards counterfeits. No moderation effect was observed when consumers have a high need for belonging.

These findings have implications for both researchers and managers. For researchers, the results demonstrate that need for belonging impacts consumer behavior. In particular, having a communal relationship with other brand users does not appear to impact counterfeit consumption tendencies as much as need for belonging levels. This opens the door for additional research to investigate the impact the need for social relations has on counterfeit consumption. For managers, the results suggest that encouraging communal-brand connections, perhaps through the development of a brand community does not encourage counterfeit consumption. This is because, at least for luxury and popular brands, having a strong connection with other brand users does not appear to entice consumers to purchase counterfeits. This finding is particularly important as the luxury market is prone to counterfeiting (Phau and Teah, 2009; Wilcox et al., 2009) and the abundance of counterfeits leads consumers to view authentic items as potential fakes (Gentry et al., 2001). Accordingly, luxury managers are encouraged to develop communal-brand connections as well as promote messages that convince users that counterfeit consumers are insincere, immoral, and unethical.

2. Literature review and hypotheses development

2.1. Communal-brand connection and counterfeits

Symbolic-value research, especially within luxury contexts, shows that brands offering attractive symbolic meanings are prone to counterfeit consumption (Han et al., 2010; Hoe et al., 2003; Wilcox et al., 2009). Thus, consumers who feel they can enhance their social status through counterfeit consumption are more likely to purchase counterfeits (Phau and Teah, 2009; Sharma and Chan, 2011). Accordingly, the symbolic-value provided by luxury products makes them

attractive targets for counterfeiters. Status-based counterfeit consumption assumes the consumer is in social relations with others (Eastman et al., 1999). In other words, without social relations brands would not have the necessary shared, symbolic meaning that underlines consumers' status enhancements. Accordingly, extant counterfeit research has ignored the social-linking value of brands and instead focused on the symbolic-value of the counterfeited brand.

Consumption provides consumers with an opportunity to establish social relations with others (Cova, 1997; McAlexander et al., 2002). For example, a brand community is a network of social relations among brand users who feel a sense of moral responsibility towards a brand and other users (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). As a set of social relations, brand communities provide a structure in which individuals can form an identity and accrue social capital (Kates, 2002; Leigh et al., 2006; Schau et al., 2009). Brand communities are important to firms because they motivate members to purchase branded products, protect the brand from negative information, and spread positive WOM (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Marzocchi et al., 2013; Pongsakornrunsilp and Schroeder, 2011). Accordingly, brands provide social-linking value when they mediate social relationships with other brand users (Cova, 1997).

Additionally, counterfeit consumption is not without consequence. Internally, consumers need to process the potential moral dilemma associated with engaging in illegal behavior. In fact, prior literature indicates that a positive relationship between moral beliefs towards counterfeits and counterfeit consumption exists (Ang et al., 2001; de Matos et al., 2007; Phau and Teah, 2009; Wilcox et al., 2009). Moral beliefs towards counterfeits refers to a consumer's personal acceptance of counterfeits (Wilcox et al., 2009). Purchasing counterfeits is an illegal activity and a consumer's moral structural or ethical framework can influence their consumption choices. For instance, consumers concerned with maintaining a certain level of integrity will avoid counterfeits if their moral beliefs are unfavorable towards counterfeits (Ang et al., 2001). This is

because participating in illegal actions reduce perceived integrity levels, for consumers morally opposed to counterfeits (Phau and Teah, 2009). Additionally, consumers can be judged as insincere or inauthentic when they purposely deceive others with a counterfeit. Thus, purchasing a counterfeit carries social risk stemming from the fear of being caught (Hoe et al., 2003).

Overall, it is expected that willingness to purchase a counterfeit decreases when the consumer holds unfavorable moral beliefs towards counterfeits and, conversely, willingness to purchase a counterfeit increases when they hold favorable moral beliefs towards counterfeits. Willingness to purchase a counterfeit refers to the degree a consumer would consider buying a counterfeit product (Albers-Miller, 1999; Wilcox et al., 2009). This construct is similar to purchase intentions but specifically refers to a counterfeit product. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1. There is a positive relationship between a consumer's moral beliefs towards counterfeits and their willingness to purchase a counterfeit product.

Understanding that favorable moral beliefs towards counterfeits is a key antecedent to counterfeit consumption, we ask whether the existence of a communal connection with brand users moderate the moral beliefs-counterfeit purchasing relationship? Schouten and McAlexander's (1995) work reveals that brands mediate social relationships within subcultures. Cova (1997) argues that the social-linking value provided by a brand facilitates the formation of social relationships and consumption tribes. Muñiz and O'Guinn's (2001) work demonstrates that brand consumption facilitates the formation of social links among fellow brand users. According, brand users can develop a sense of closeness with and responsibility towards other users (Hawkins, 2018).

Consumption, then, is not entirely functional but also social. Consumption choices can help consumers develop a sense of *communitas* or togetherness with others (Thomas et al., 2013). A brand's ability to mediate social relations encourages marketers to facilitate the formation of communal connections among brand users (McAlexander et al., 2002; Schau et al., 2009). The sense of belonging provided by having a communal-brand connection motivates consumers to protect the brand during hardships and to repurchase their products. Moreover, the sense of security and support provided by a community encourages them to engage in actions that continue their communal connection (Kozinets, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2014; Rindfleisch et al., 2009).

Overall, a communal-brand connection can provide a supportive social system. A system where consumers can form friendships, develop an identity, and, perhaps, improve their self-worth through competent performance displays (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Maciel and Wallendorf, 2017; Thomas et al., 2013). We expect that having a connection with other brand users will moderate the moral beliefs-counterfeit purchasing relationship. In particular, consumers with a weak communal-brand connection are expected to evidence an enhanced moral beliefs-counterfeit purchasing relationship, such that they will be less willing to purchase counterfeits when they hold unfavorable moral beliefs towards counterfeits but more willing when they hold favorable beliefs. This is because those with a weak connection to other brand users have no reason to override their moral beliefs and purchase a counterfeit product. In other words, the brand does not mediate their social relationships. This is because they do not feel that the brand is part of their identity nor do they have a deep connection with other users (Rindfleisch et al., 2009). A weak communal-brand relationship indicates lower levels of product knowledge and purchasing a counterfeit product can increase the chances of social embarrassment since they will be less able to defend themselves when questioned about the product. Thus, counterfeit

products from the brand are relatively uninteresting for consumers with a weak communal-brand connection and unfavorable moral beliefs towards counterfeits. However, those with a weak communal-brand connection but favorable moral beliefs towards counterfeits should be more willing to purchase them. These consumers are not in a social structure that revolves around brand consumption and are less likely to feel the normative pressure to conform to communal standards regarding consumption choices (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). Additionally, being open to counterfeits can indicate that one's social group is generally more accepting of counterfeits, further reducing the social risks associated with counterfeit consumption (Franses and Lede, 2015; Gentry et al., 2001).

However, consumers with a strong communal-brand connection but who hold unfavorable moral beliefs towards counterfeits risk social embarrassment, thus decreasing their willingness to purchase a counterfeit. Conversely, consumers with a strong communal-brand connection but who hold favorable moral beliefs towards counterfeits should evidence enhanced willingness to purchase a counterfeit. This is because holding favorable moral beliefs towards counterfeits indicates they do not see counterfeit consumption as inauthentic or insincere, enabling them to feel confident in their ability to rationalize or justify counterfeit consumption choices (Wilcox et al., 2009). In essence, these consumers will evidence enhanced willingness to purchase a counterfeit because they can handle the identity related risks associated with counterfeit consumption. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H2. Communal-brand connection strength positively moderates the relationship between moral beliefs towards counterfeits and willingness to purchase a counterfeit product.

2.2. Need for belonging and counterfeits

Need for belonging represents an individual's desire to establish social relations with others (Leary et al., 2013). Being in social relations with others is an innate desire, nearly as strong as the need for food (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). A high need for belonging leads to loneliness, sensitivity to rejection, and a host of other psychological issues. An individual's need for belonging is not a static character trait but varies according to one's perceived life circumstances (Leary et al., 2013; Mellor et al., 2008). Accordingly, a person can have few friends but also a low need for belonging because those relationships fulfill their needs. Under different circumstances, the same person may have many friends but still feel a need for belonging. Individuals monitor the quality of their social relations, making decisions to both form and maintain relationships as necessary (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Loveland et al., 2010). Prior research has demonstrated that consumers make consumption decisions by taking their need for belonging levels into consideration (Leary et al., 2013), such as purchasing nostalgic products when they feel excluded (Loveland et al., 2010).

Hypothesizing a communal-brand connection moderates the moral beliefs towards counterfeits and willingness to purchase a counterfeited product relationship assumes that evaluations of one's social relationships influence consumer behavior. If this is so, consumers with a high need for belonging can fulfill their need through their consumption habits, such as consuming a product to develop a social link with others (Cova, 1997). Thus, we expect that need for belonging will also moderate the moral beliefs-counterfeit purchasing relationship.

For consumers with a low need for belonging, they will not be motivated to engage in counterfeit consumption when they hold unfavorable moral beliefs towards counterfeits. Consumers with low need for belonging but who hold favorable moral beliefs towards counterfeits should be more willing to purchase counterfeits. This is because they lack the desire

to adjust their behaviors to form social relationships or conform to social norms. Holding favorable moral beliefs towards counterfeits indicates that the consumer believes counterfeits are acceptable and feels less restrained by social pressure regarding their willingness to purchase counterfeits. Accordingly, low need for belonging should enhance the moral beliefs-counterfeit purchasing relationships.

For consumers with high need for belonging, holding unfavorable moral beliefs towards counterfeits should deter them from purchasing counterfeits; but, consumers with a high need for belonging but who hold favorable moral beliefs towards counterfeits should be more willing to purchase counterfeits. High need for belonging encourages consumers to adjust their behaviors in ways they believe will satisfy this need (Leary et al., 2013; Loveland et al., 2010). Therefore, they will be more motivated to follow their moral beliefs towards counterfeits in order to establish social relations with others. Hence, the following hypothesis is offered.

H3a. Need for belonging positively moderates the relationship between moral beliefs towards counterfeits and willingness to purchase counterfeits.

Hypothesis 2 asserts that a consumer's communal-brand connection strength enhances the moral beliefs-counterfeit purchasing relationship. However, having a communal-brand connection indicates that the consumer has some of their need for belonging met (López et al., 2017). The consumer could still have unfilled belonging needs. For instance, having little interaction with other brand users reduces the likelihood a communal-brand connection fulfills a consumer's need for belonging (Brewer, 1991). Additionally, the consumer may maintain the communal-brand connection not for personal needs, such as fulfilling a desire to maintain a certain level of self-worth achieved through competent consumption practice enactment

(Aggarwal, 2004). In particular, severing social ties effectively eliminates accrued relevant social capital thereby threatening one's self-worth (McAlexander et al., 2014). Accordingly, having a communal-brand connection does not guarantee the consumer's need for belonging is being fulfilled.

Comparing communal-brand connection against need for belonging is important because the literature suggests that consumers can form social relations through brand usage but literature also suggests that a perceived lack of social relations can lead to numerous psychological issues and anti-social behavior (Leary et al., 2013; Osterman, 2000). Thus, understanding that a consumer's need for belonging is not necessarily filled through having a consumer-brand connection, it is expected that need for belonging is a stronger moderator of the moral beliefs-counterfeit purchasing relationship. Accordingly, to provide clarity to this issue and to offer marketers advice on counteracting counterfeit consumption, we propose the following hypothesis.

H3b. Need for belonging is a stronger moderator than communal-brand connection.

3. Study 1

Study 1 determines if a positive relationship exists between moral beliefs towards counterfeits and willingness to purchase a counterfeit (H1). It also tests if and how communal-brand connection strength moderates the moral beliefs-counterfeit purchasing relationship (H2).

3.1. Sample and procedure

A survey was administered to students in a central European business school, at the end of class, as a voluntary activity. The European Union is particularly prone to counterfeits, with approximately 5% of its imports infringing on property rights (EUROPOL, 2017). In order to reduce power relationships and social pressure to complete the survey, the class instructor was not involved in the data collection. After reading the consent form, respondents rated their communal-brand connection to luxury brands. Next, respondents wrote down the name of their favorite luxury brand. Luxury brands were selected because they are a common counterfeit target which affects the original brand's image and the image of authentic product owners (Phau and Teah, 2009; Staake et al., 2009). The next page asked the respondents to indicate their willingness to purchase a counterfeit product from the brand they mentioned. Lastly, they rated their moral beliefs towards counterfeits and provided basic demographics. A total of 68 responses were collected, 64.7% were female. The age ranged from 19 to 25 with a mean of 22 years old. Nationality was not collected in this study. A total of 36 luxury brands were listed, including Hermès (n = 7), Gucci (n = 6), Louis Vuitton and dk company (n = 5).

3.2 Measures

Communal-brand connection strength was measured using a modified, 3-item, 7-point Likert communal-brand connection scale, (1) “not at all likely” to (7) “extremely likely” (Rindfleisch et al., 2009). The scale was modified to address luxury brands in general and not one specific brand. Willingness to purchase a counterfeit was measured using a single-item scale (Albers-Miller, 1999; Wilcox et al., 2009). Moral beliefs towards counterfeits was measured using a 3-item, 7-point scale (immoral to moral, unethical to ethical, insincere to sincere; Wilcox et al., 2009). Both multi-item scales demonstrated sufficient reliability and were averaged

together to form a composite variable. See table 1 for scales, reliability measures, descriptive statistics, and sources.

Table 1
Variables, scales, and descriptive statistics for study 1.

Dependent Variable	Items	α	SD	Mean
Willingness to Purchase Counterfeits	Would you purchase <i>counterfeit</i> products from the brand you listed?		2.03	2.99
<i>Sources:</i> Albers-Miller, 1999; Wilcox et al., 2009				
Independent Variables				
Moral Beliefs Towards Counterfeits	People who buy counterfeit products are..... Immoral – Moral Unethical – Ethical Insincere – Sincere	0.787	3.68	1.21
<i>Source:</i> Wilcox et al., 2009				
Communal-Brand Connection	I really identify with people who use luxury brands Luxury brands are used by people like me I feel a deep connection with others who use luxury brands	0.850	2.74	1.29
<i>Source:</i> Rindfleisch et al., 2009				

Abbreviations: α = Cronbach's alpha, SD = standard deviation.

3.3. Hypothesis testing

To test hypotheses 1 and 2, a single moderation analysis was conducted, using model 1 PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2015, V3) bootstrapping process with 5,000 samples. The overall model was significant ($R^2 = .190$, $F(3, 64) = 5.010$, $p < .004$). Summary results are

presented in Table 2. The moral beliefs-counterfeit purchasing relationship was significant ($b = 0.702$, $t(64) = 3.611$, 95% $CI[0.31$ to $1.09]$, $p < .000$). Accordingly, H1 is supported. While not hypothesized, communal-brand connection strength did not have a direct effect on counterfeit purchasing ($b = 0.162$, $t(64) = 0.909$, 95% $CI[-0.19$ to $0.52]$, $p < .367$). Unexpectedly, the interaction term was insignificant ($b = -0.231$, $t(64) = -1.914$, 95% $CI[-0.47$ to $0.01]$, $p < .060$). However, in order to ensure that the moderating variable does not influence the moral beliefs-counterfeit purchasing relationship at differing levels, a spotlight analysis was employed (Fitzsimons, 2008; Irwin and McClelland, 2001). This method determines under which conditions any moderation effect is or is not significant. Accordingly, implementing a spotlight analysis helps researchers determine the range of values a moderation effect is significant rather than assuming a (in)significant relationship is present across all values (Hayes and Matthes, 2009; Preacher et al., 2006). Specifically, values are considered low or weak when they are less than one standard deviation below the mean (-1SD) and high or strong when they are one standard deviation above the mean (+1SD). Values in the middle (mean) are consider average (Bauer and Curran, 2005; Krishna, 2016). Table 2 provides the results of the spotlight analysis at three differing levels.

Table 2
Results of moderation model in study 1.

Variables	Coefficient and p -value	Confidence intervals
Constant	2.955 ***	[2.50 to 3.41]
Moral beliefs toward counterfeits	0.702***	[0.31 to 1.09]
Communal-brand connection	0.162	[0.19 to 0.52]
Interaction term	-0.231 ⁺	[-0.47 to 0.01]
Spotlight analysis	-1SD: 1.000*** Mean: 0.702*** +1SD: 0.404 ⁺	[0.45 to 1.55] [0.31 to 1.09] [-0.04 to 0.85]

R^2

.190**

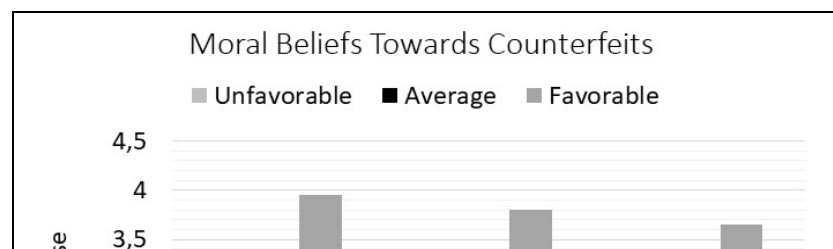
Notes:

Interaction term: refers to the term Moral beliefs towards counterfeits x Communal-brand connection.

Significance levels: $^+p < .1$, $*p < .05$, $**p < .01$, $***p < .001$.

Significance levels calculated based on t -values obtained through bootstrapping procedure.

The spotlight analysis reveals that respondents who have a weak ($b = 1.000$, 95% $CI[0.454$ to $1.546]$, $p < .000$) to average ($b = 0.702$, 95% $CI[0.313$ to $1.090]$, $p < .000$) communal-brand connection were more susceptible to their moral beliefs towards counterfeits. Specifically, they are less willing to buy counterfeits when they hold unfavorable moral beliefs toward counterfeits and more willing when they hold favorable moral beliefs toward counterfeits. However, having a strong communal-brand connection with luxury users does not moderate the moral belief-counterfeit purchasing relationship, based on the p -value being above the common 95% threshold and the confidence interval crossing 0 ($b = 0.404$, 95% $CI[-0.040$ to $0.847]$, $p < .074$; see figure 1). Therefore, H2 is only supported for consumers who have a weak to average communal-brand connection.



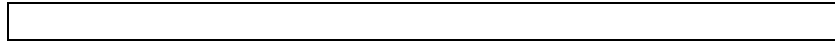


Fig. 1. Moderation effect of communal-brand connection on the moral beliefs towards counterfeits and willingness to purchase relationship (estimated means).

3.5. Summary

Study 1 demonstrates that moral beliefs towards counterfeits has a positive relationship with willingness to purchase counterfeits. Thus, consumers who hold unfavorable beliefs regarding counterfeits are less willing to purchase counterfeits and consumers who hold favorable beliefs are more willing to purchase counterfeits. Furthermore, consumers with a weak to average communal-brand connection are more susceptible to their moral beliefs towards counterfeits. This means, they are less willing to purchase counterfeits when they hold unfavorable moral beliefs towards counterfeits but more willing when they hold favorable moral beliefs towards counterfeits. However, perhaps the revealed moderation effect is a result of a need for belonging and not solely due to the respondent's communal-brand connection strength, per se: study 2 addresses this issue.

4. Study 2

4.1. Sample and procedure

Study 2 was implemented in a similar context and manner as study 1. However, respondents first rated their need for belonging (Learly et al., 2013). The next page asked the respondents to write the name of a popular brand and to rate their communal-brand connection in relation to that brand. The respondents were then asked to indicate their willingness to purchase a

counterfeit product from the brand they mentioned. Lastly, they rated their moral beliefs towards counterfeits and provided basic demographics. A total of 181 responses were collected, 50.3% were female. The age ranged from 18 to 23 with a mean of 20 years old. Respondents were from 16 different countries, with the majority (84.5%) declaring French nationality. A total of 72 brands were listed, including Gucci (n = 15), Ray-Ban (n = 14), Chanel (n = 14), and Louis Vuitton (n = 13). While this study asked respondents to list a popular brand, many listed brands were luxury brands and are common counterfeit targets.

4.2. Measures

Need for belonging was assessed using a 10-item, 6-point Likert scale, (0) “certainly, always false” to (5) “certainly, always true” (Learly et al., 2013). The same scales from study 1 were used to measure their communal-brand connection, moral beliefs towards counterfeits, and willingness to purchase a counterfeit. All multi-item scales demonstrated sufficient reliability and were averaged together to form a composite variable. Table 3 provides the scales, reliability measures, descriptive statistics, and sources.

Table 3
Variables, scales, and descriptive statistics for study 2.

Dependent Variable	Items	α	SD	Mean
Willingness to Purchase Counterfeits	Would you purchase <i>counterfeit</i> products from the brand you listed?		1.72	2.27
<i>Sources:</i> Albers-Miller, 1999; Wilcox et al., 2009				
Independent Variables				
Moral Beliefs Towards	People who buy counterfeit products are..... Immoral – Moral Unethical – Ethical	0.871	1.41	3.41

Counterfeits Insincere – Sincere

Source: Wilcox et al., 2009

Communal-Brand Connection	I really identify with people who use this brand This brand is used by people like me I feel a deep connection with others who use this brand	0.827	1.48	3.55
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Source: Rindfleisch et al., 2009

Need for Belonging	If other people don't seem to accept me, I don't let it bother me (r) I try hard not to do things that will make other people avoid or reject me I seldom worry about whether other people care about me (r) I need to feel that there are people I can turn to in times of need I want other people to accept me I do not like being alone Being apart from my friends for long periods of time does not bother me (r) I have a strong "need to belong" It bothers me a great deal when I am not included in other people's plans My feelings are easily hurt when I feel that others do not accept me	0.743	0.77	3.77
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Source: Learly et al., 2013

Abbreviations: r = reverse worded, α = Cronbach's alpha, SD = standard deviation.

4.3. Hypothesis testing

To determine if need for belonging moderates the moral beliefs-counterfeit purchasing relationship (H3a) and if need for belonging is a stronger moderator than communal-brand connection (H3b) a double moderation analysis was conducted using model 2 PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2015, V3) bootstrapping process with 5,000 samples. The overall model was significant ($R^2 = .156$, $F(5, 175) = 6.449$, $p < .000$). The significant moral beliefs-counterfeit purchasing

relationship was maintained ($b = 0.420$, $t(175) = 4.889$, 95% $CI[0.251$ to $0.590]$, $p < .000$). While not hypothesized, both the need for belonging-counterfeit purchasing ($b = -0.056$, $t(175) = -0.357$, 95% $CI[-0.366$ to $0.254]$, $p < .722$) and the communal-brand connection-counterfeit purchasing relationships ($b = -0.069$, $t(175) = -0.831$, 95% $CI[-0.231$ to $0.094]$, $p < .407$) were not significant. As expected, the moral beliefs-need for belonging interaction term was significant ($b = -0.288$, $t(175) = -2.814$, 95% $CI[-0.490$ to $-0.086]$, $p < .006$). Indicating initial support for H3a. See table 4 for detailed results.

Table 4
Detailed results of double moderation model in study 2.

Variable	DV = Willingness to purchase counterfeits	
	b (SE)	CI
Moral beliefs towards counterfeits	0.420*** (0.086)	[0.251 to 0.590]
Need for belonging	-0.056 (0.157)	[-0.366 to 0.254]
Moral-Need interaction	-0.288** (0.102)	[-0.490 to -0.086]
Communal-brand connection	-0.069 (0.083)	[-0.231 to 0.094]
Moral-Communal interaction	-0.012 (0.052)	[-0.115 to 0.091]
R^2	.156***	

Note. b = coefficient, SE = Standard error, CI = Confidence interval.
Significance levels: † $p \leq 0.10$; * $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$.

Next, to gain a deeper understanding of the interaction effect and because the moral-communal interaction term was insignificant, we ran a single moderation model (model 1, PROCESS macro, Hayes, 2015, V3). Only need for belonging was entered as a moderator in order to conduct the spotlight analysis (full results presented in Table 5). The analysis reveals that respondents having a low ($b = 0.657$, 95% $CI[0.419$ to $0.894]$, $p < .000$) to average need for

belonging ($b = 0.429$, 95% $CI[0.261$ to $0.596]$, $p < .000$) enhanced the moral beliefs-counterfeit purchasing relationship. Specifically, consumers who have their need for belonging filled are less willing to purchase counterfeits when they hold unfavorable moral beliefs towards counterfeits. However, there is no moderation effect when having a high need for belonging ($b = 0.201$, 95% $CI[-0.017$ to $0.418]$, $p < .071$; see figure 2). Therefore, we find partial support for H3a. Specifically, need for belonging moderates the moral beliefs-counterfeit purchasing relationship only when the consumer has a low to average need for belonging.

Table 5
Results of moderation model in study 2.

Variables	DV = Willingness to purchase counterfeits	
	<i>b</i> (SE)	CI
Constant	2.284***	[2.049 to 2.519]
Moral beliefs toward Counterfeits	0.429***	[0.262 to 0.596]
Need for belonging	-0.073	[-0.379 to 0.233]
Interaction term	-0.296**	[-0.496 to -0.095]
Spotlight analysis	-SD: .657***	[0.419 to 0.894]
	Mean: .429***	[0.262 to 0.596]
	+SD: .201 ⁺	[-0.017 to 0.418]
R^2	.152***	

Notes:

Interaction term: refers to the term Moral beliefs towards counterfeits x Need for belonging.

Significance levels: ⁺ $p < .1$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Significance levels calculated based on t -values obtained through bootstrapping procedure.

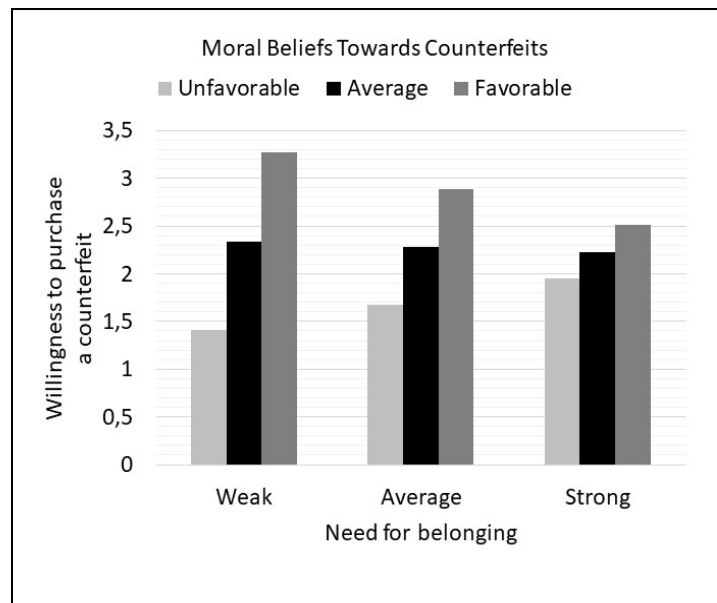


Fig. 2. Moderation effect of need for belonging on the moral beliefs towards counterfeits and willingness to purchase counterfeits relationship (estimated means).

H3b asserts that need for belonging provides a stronger moderation effect than communal-brand connection strength (H2). Table 4 shows that when modeling both need for belonging and communal-brand connection together, only need for belonging is significant. Specifically, communal-brand connection strength did not significantly moderate the moral beliefs-counterfeit purchasing relationship ($b = -0.012$, $t(175) = -0.224$, 95% $CI[-0.115$ to $0.091]$, $p < .823$). This finding suggests communal-brand connection strengthen is a weaker moderator than need for belonging, thereby supporting H3b.

To further confirm H3b, we sought to replicate study 1 results using the data from study 2. This would demonstrate that the communal-brand connection moderation effect is stable but not as meaningful as the consumer's need for belonging. As in study 1, the interaction term was not significant ($b = -0.017$, $t(177) = -0.326$, 95% $CI[-0.122$ to $0.087]$, $p < .745$) and the spotlight analysis produced similar results. Specifically, consumers who reported a weak communal-brand connection with their listed brand were more influenced by their moral beliefs towards

counterfeits ($b = 0.422$, $t(177) = 3.501$, 95% CI[0.184 to 0.666], $p < .000$). Consumers who held an average communal-brand connection were also more influenced by their moral beliefs towards counterfeits ($b = 0.396$, $t(177) = 4.564$, 95% CI[0.225 to 0.568], $p < .000$). Contrary to study 1, those who held a strong communal-brand connection were also more influenced by their moral beliefs towards counterfeits ($b = 0.371$, $t(177) = 3.272$, 95% CI[0.147 to 0.595], $p < .001$). See table A1 in the appendix for additional details on the analysis and figure A1 for a visual depiction of the results. Accordingly, this data set replicated prior findings but the moderation effect of communal-brand connection disappears when need for belonging is entered into the model. This finding suggests that need for belonging is a stronger moderator than communal-brand connection strength. Therefore, H3b is supported.

4.4. Summary

Study 2 reveals that communal-brand connection strength does not moderate the moral beliefs-counterfeit purchasing relationship after entering need for belonging into the model; instead, only need for belonging moderates the moral beliefs-counterfeit purchasing relationship. The spotlight analysis reveals that need for belonging only moderates the moral beliefs-counterfeit purchasing relationship when the respondent has a low to average need for belonging. Thus, consumers between these ranges are less willing to purchase counterfeits when they hold unfavorable moral beliefs towards counterfeits but more willing when they hold favorable beliefs towards counterfeits. Overall, the data suggests need for belonging only moderates the moral-counterfeit relationship for consumers with a low to average need for belonging.

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical implications

The data confirms that a consumer's moral beliefs towards counterfeits has a positive relationship on their willingness to purchase counterfeits (Ang et al., 2001; de Matos et al., 2007; Phau and Teah, 2009; Wilcox et al., 2009). But, this relationship is not as straightforward as assumed. While having a weak to average communal-brand connection moderates this relationship, a consumer's need for belonging has a stronger moderation effect. Despite counterfeit consumption being socially risky, consumers who hold favorable moral beliefs towards counterfeits and have a low need for belonging appear to be more willing to purchase counterfeits. It appears that these consumers do not feel social pressure to conform to the consumption choices of the group. Thus, social risk is not enough to decrease willingness to purchase counterfeits in low need for belonging consumers who hold favorable moral beliefs towards counterfeits.

Contrary to expectation, a strong communal-brand connection and high need for belonging do not encourage nor prevent counterfeit consumption. A potential explanation is that those with a high need for belonging want to be in social relationships with others and/or to minimize disruptions to existing social relationships (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Loveland et al., 2010). Then, the social risk associated with counterfeit consumption may be preventing those holding favorable moral beliefs from being more willing to purchase them, as is the case with consumers with a low to average need for belonging. This is good news for brand managers, as it suggests that developing strong communal relations among brand users may not only improve firm performance directly through increased sales but also indirectly by stabilizing consumers' willingness to purchase counterfeits when they hold favorable beliefs towards counterfeits.

Accordingly, having social relationships with other brand users does not encourage counterfeit consumption. Further, as a consumer moves from having a low or average communal-brand connection to having a high communal-brand connection the enhanced willingness to purchase counterfeits seen in consumers who hold favorable moral beliefs towards counterfeits disappears. Thus, establishing social relations with other brand users can reduce counterfeit consumption.

Overall, having a low need for belonging indicates the consumer's innate desire for social relationship is fulfilled (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Leary et al., 2013). For consumers holding favorable moral beliefs towards counterfeits, the reduction in social pressure to conform appears to make them even more willing to purchase counterfeits. Those holding unfavorable moral beliefs towards counterfeits are not motivated by any potential social-linking value provided by counterfeit consumption. Thus, they are less willing to purchase them. However, as need for belonging grows, the moderation effect weakens resulting in their moral beliefs towards counterfeits primarily driving their willingness to purchase counterfeits. Therefore, counterfeit researchers are encouraged to continue exploring a brand's social linking-value in conjunction with a brand's symbolic-value, especially in the luxury context.

5.2. Managerial implications

Collectively, the results suggest that developing social relations among brand users can reduce a consumer's willingness to purchase counterfeits when the consumer has a high need for belonging. This presents a paradox for managers. Brands should help consumers form relationships but these relationships should not fulfill their need for belonging. Perhaps, online brand communities can help form social relations while having a limited impact on their need for belonging levels. Future research would need to investigate differences in need for belonging

levels across off- and on-line contexts to shed light on this suggestion. Alternatively, a brand community could be promoted as a group of unique individuals rather than a group of friends. In this way marketing material would play on a consumer's need for uniqueness rather than making their need for belonging salient. Prior research shows that promoting products as value-expressive leads to lower intentions to purchase a counterfeit compared to social-adjustive messages (Wilcox et al., 2009). Thus, promoting a brand community's ability to express personal, unique values could discourage counterfeit consumption while still obtaining the performance advantages brand communities offer.

However, designing a marketing campaign that provides strong, unfulfilling social links seems challenging. Therefore, a more reasonable suggestion is to combat counterfeit purchasing by communicating to consumers that counterfeits are immoral and unethical and counterfeit consumers are insincere. In essence, marketers need to create unfavorable moral beliefs towards counterfeits. Then, regardless of a consumer's need for belonging level they will be less willing to purchase counterfeits.

Luxury brands are one of the most commonly counterfeited products. Counterfeit luxury products are often purchased because the consumer believes they can obtain the social-status enhancing benefits of the counterfeited brand without paying the true cost (Phau and Teah, 2009; Stöttinger and Penz, 2005; Wilcox et al., 2009). Luxury brand managers are thus encouraged to form social relations among brand users in order to reduce the enhanced willingness to purchase counterfeits in consumers holding favorable moral beliefs towards counterfeits. Additionally, willingness to purchase a counterfeit increases if a consumer's social group is accepting of counterfeits (Gentry et al., 2001). Thus, marketers are also encouraged to seed anti-counterfeiting messages into their marketing campaigns. These messages should focus on developing unfavorable moral beliefs towards counterfeits in brand users. For instance, by suggesting that

counterfeit users are insincere may increase the social risk associated with counterfeit consumption thereby reducing willingness to purchase a counterfeit (Furnham and Valgeirsson, 2007).

It is important to remember that luxury consumers do purchase counterfeits. For example, Key and colleagues (2013) found that luxury watch consumers will use a counterfeit watch when their original could get damaged. In fact, consumers form communities around the replica watch market in order to make informed decisions on which counterfeit to buy. Thus, luxury marketers need to stay vigilant in their pursuit to protect their brand image and sales revenue.

5.3. Limitations and directions for future research

This research has a few limitations that can guide future research. While younger consumers view themselves as active luxury consumers (Eastman et al., 2020) and account for 33% percent of luxury purchases (D'Arpizio et al., 2019) they often lack the necessary financial resources to engage fully in the luxury market. Thus, collecting data from European students limits the generalizability of the findings. However, this does present opportunities for future research. Cultures differ on their moral acceptance of counterfeits (Eisend and Schucher-Güler, 2006). Therefore, replicating this study with respondents from differing cultures could offer additional insights, for instance in countries where individualistic and collectivist tendencies vary. Additionally, the social norms of a group of consumers or brand community may be more or less accepting of counterfeits (de Matos et al., 2007; Key et al., 2013) indicating that future research should consider the social norms regarding counterfeits within their social groups, including any brand community they may be members of. Additionally, while students are common targets for luxury counterfeits they are often unaware of the negative impacts of

counterfeit consumption (Viot et al., 2014). Thus, researchers are encouraged to test the proposed model on older, more affluent consumers.

The survey also asked respondents to think of a luxury or popular brand resulting in brands that varied across product categories. While most of the brands considered were fashion brands, some respondents did list technology brands. Thus, slight differences in findings may exist across product categories. Accordingly, researchers are encouraged to test the results across product categories.

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Appendix

Table A1

Study 2: Detailed results of moderation effect of communal-brand connection strength.

Variables	Coefficient and <i>p</i> -value	Confidence intervals
Constant	2.266***	[2.025 to 2.507]
Moral beliefs toward counterfeits	0.396***	[0.225 to 0.568]
Communal-brand connection	-0.090	[0.254 to 0.074]
Interaction term	-0.017	[-0.122 to 0.087]
Spotlight analysis	-SD: 0.422*** Mean: 0.396*** +SD: 0.371**	[0.184 to 0.666] [0.225 to 0.568] [0.147 to 0.595]
<i>R</i> ²	0.117***	

Notes:

Interaction term: refers to the term Moral beliefs towards counterfeits x Communal-brand connection.

Significance levels: ⁺*p* < .1, **p* < .05, ***p* < .01, ****p* < .001.

Significance levels calculated based on *t*-values obtained through bootstrapping procedure. The proposed moderation model was tested using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2015, V3) model 1 bootstrapping process with 5,000 samples.

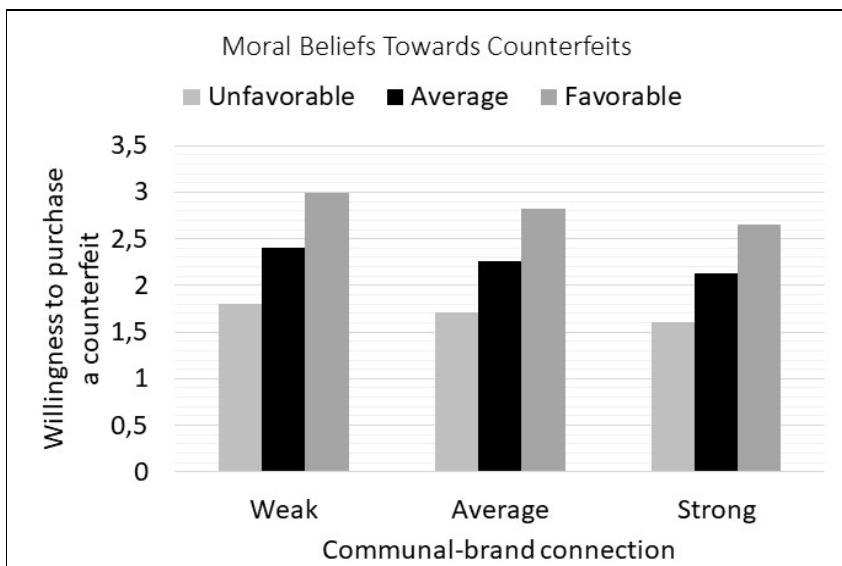


Fig. A1. Moderation effect of communal-brand connection on the moral beliefs towards counterfeits and willingness to purchase counterfeits relationship, study 2 (estimated means).

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