Fake objects, true love
The symbolic aspects of consumption of counterfeit goods[1]

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Abstract

The article explains the voluntary consumption of counterfeit goods as an example of the productive nature of consumption trends. The use of the object, as well as the symbolic manipulation operated by the consumer, in fact represents a new manufacturing process for the good itself, making the consumed object radically different from the original one. Cultural elements are essential in the voluntary consumption of counterfeit goods, since without them it is not possible to understand the scope and the diffusion of the non-deceptive counterfeiting phenomenon. Indeed, the theory linking counterfeit goods to a mere question of price is contradicted in practice by the widespread phenomenon of mixed consumption. The data on consumers of fashion goods, reveal that subjects radically manipulate objects on an ontological level. Strictly speaking, the consumed objects are not merely true or false, but equally likely. However, these processes can apply only to people with some knowledge of fashion, allowing us to conclude that those who have a high cultural capital occupy an advantaged position.

Keywords: non-deceptive counterfeit goods, symbolic manipulation, willing consumption

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Introduction

"Truth and lies are not in matter itself (...) but only in the mind",
Aristotle, *Metaph.*, E IV, 1027b, 25, 29[2]

The phenomenon of counterfeit goods has long been interpreted in the light of illegal manufacturing dynamics. Although this approach is still relevant, especially in legal and economic terms, a theory (Grossman and Shapiro, 1988) able to distinguish between deceptive and non-deceptive counterfeiting is needed in order to give the consumer a more central role and allow a more precise distinction between different strategies and rationales within the same market. Indeed, the phenomenon of deceptive counterfeiting is nothing but an information gap: the consumer is not able to identify the counterfeit product and is therefore an unaware victim of fraud (Pincella, 2010). Although consumers could play a more active role by strengthening their ability to recognise and select the genuine product, their power and responsibility are still very limited. Conversely, non-deceptive counterfeiting means that consumers knowingly choose to purchase a counterfeit product, which they can easily recognise as such by the packaging, the sale context and the low price. This phenomenon affects several consumption areas, from fashion products to media and computers.

This study examines the products purchased as an outcome of non-deceptive counterfeiting, in order to understand why consumers deliberately choose such products. In particular, the research focuses on counterfeit fashion accessories. The choice of accessories as a main element of discussion is for several reasons, both material and symbolic, and related both to the manufacturer's and consumer's standpoint. From the point of view of the manufacturer, accessories have gained considerable importance in the fashion sector: bags in particular have proved a key product, able to boost an entire *maison* (see, for instance, the case of *maison* Fendi after the launch of the *Baguette* bag in 1997: Thomas 2007). Equally, accessories represent a pleasurable purchase for the consumer, and their choice does not need to be limited by body size or physical imperfections. Accessories therefore represent a privileged vehicle for the construction and representation of one's identity.

The article is organised as follows. The first section provides a brief introduction on the historical development of counterfeiting vis-à-vis imitation processes (§1). The second section presents a methodological discussion on the need for qualitative research in the counterfeit field (§2.1) and the specific research strategy implemented (§2.2). The third part of the paper features the main outcomes of the research as regards market segmentation (§3.1), internal divisions between consumers (3.2) and moral issues (§3.3). Finally, the fourth part outlines the conclusions and indicates directions for future research.

1. Voluntary purchase of counterfeit objects: an ancient phenomenon? Counterfeiting and imitation: a comparison

Before illustrating the methodology of this study, we examine the historical roots of counterfeiting and the difference between counterfeiting and imitation. Indeed, the latter distinction is necessary in order to define the symbolic manipulation of goods more precisely. The voluntary purchase of counterfeit goods is usually interpreted in the context of consumption as a tool of social growth. As highlighted above, this interpretation is limited and it is important to investigate the relation between the contemporary phenomenon of counterfeiting fashion goods and the ancient concept of imitation.

As a result of the erosion of sumptuary codes in 16th-and 17th– century Europe, manufacturers of "fashion goods"[3] started to respond to the growing demand for low-price products. An eloquent example of this is the fabrics manufacturing sector,which saw the

2 Translation from the Greek by C. Pincella.

3 For further details on the use of the term "fashion" in its historical meaning, see Belfanti 2008.

creation of new goods that were highly similar in appearance, but actually of lower quality than authentic products, especially in terms of the raw materials used. For instance, the silk manufacturing sector witnessed a considerable increase in the production of mixed fabrics, composed of silk and other cheaper materials such as wool, cotton linen, or of silk obtained using less prestigious yarns (Belfanti 2008, p. 38-39). These were products that intended to preserve the visual prestige of fabrics while reducing their costs by using less expensive materials.

This trend also occurred in manufacturing techniques: in the velvet manufacturing sector, for instance, the production process was modified in order to cut costs. In some cases, the decorative patterns of certain fabrics were reduced, as this could lead to a simpler and quicker structure of the yarn, thus resulting in an easier transfer between different types of manufacture. Within the product range available to the customer, therefore, new materials were introduced, which appeared very similar to the more prestigious ones but had a much lower cost. The fashion world – together with its revolutionary potential – managed to reach people belonging to the most varied social backgrounds, thus defining itself as an institution able to establish rules that applied to a wide range of individuals. In a system where the sumptuary codes imposed and promoted a concept of elegance as merely typical of certain social ranks, the fashion world presented itself as something that could (and should)[4] be reached by anyone, regardless of their economic or cultural means.

The trend affecting the fabric sector also characterised other areas such as, for instance, the production of buttons, which as of the 17th century started to be considered a proper accessory (Bettoni 2009). The button-jewel was therefore followed by a wide range of very attractive alternatives, produced with less expensive materials. The Murano glass craftsmen, for instance, employed *pani di smalto* and *paste di vetro* in order to produce fake buttons and pearls that, due to their texture, reflections and veins, could easily be mistaken for carnelians, agates, lapis lazuli, rubies, mother-of-pearls and granites (Bettoni 2009). These objects were initially created to reflect the taste and the needs of the middle-class consumer, but ended up reaching a higher-level target, thus obtaining a certain dignity and esteem. As time went by, this type of buttons became a new type of accessory whose history progressed independently of that of their original counterpart.

The tendency to imitate – to create a product with the same aesthetic appearance of a luxury good, but with lower-quality materials – progressed in parallel with the evolution of fashion, to extend itself later to various other sectors. Thanks to the gradual diffusion of "fashion", consumers who wished to be elegant but were not sufficiently wealthy were still able to express their taste with their own means. The products designed to imitate other precious objects, often in a very precise way, therefore became increasingly important. However, it needs to be pointed out that the counterfeit products manufactured in Europe between the 17th and the 18th century were cheaper only as a result of less prestigious raw materials and not of innovated manufacturing processes which speeded up the production.

It could therefore be stated that, although imitation has always existed in the fashion sector, today models and innovations are protected by a special legislative system prohibiting copycats. However, the issue appears much more complex if we take into consideration a very important new element of present counterfeiting practices: the association of brand with symbolic meanings more than a with a guarantee of good quality. The first instances of fashion counterfeits appeared at the beginning of the 20th century[5] and evolved, both in complexity and number, throughout the second half of the century. After the Second World War the sector of *haute couture* changed considerably as a result of market contraction . The rise of *prêt-à-porter* – and therefore of the industrial dimension of tailored clothing – was therefore inevitable,

[4] The normative stance can be taken when considering fashion as social institution (Kawamura, 2005)

[5] It is important to note that, at the beginning of the 20th century, a considerable proportion of counterfeits took inspiration from the creations of Parisian *maisons*, and that in many cases – especially in the North American market – the consumer was unable to distinguish between a genuine and a counterfeit product (Belfanti 2008).

although the main fashion brands appeared reluctant to join this new branch of the market. On the one hand, they tried to increase the number of their customers, while on the other they tried to find ways to avoid devaluing the image of the sector.

One of the most cost-effective strategies was the introduction of licences. Dior was among the first to follow this direction, but it was Pierre Cardin who really managed to overcome the image of an aristocratic and traditional Parisian *maison*, transforming it into a successful designer label (Belfanti 2008, pp. 220-223).

The opening up of the fashion world to a broader middle-class audience went hand in hand with the industrialization of manufacturing processes that previously had been strictly hand-crafted, resulting in a gradual standardization of shapes and finishes. The phenomena of production out-sourcing are in this sense the later examples of a process dating back to the 1950s. This manufacturing revolution was followed by a symbolic one, whereby the manufacturers have had to transfer emphasis from the material aspects of products onto their symbolic qualities, thus weakening the connection between the two.

Before the introduction of "democratic luxury", indeed, a branded product went hand in hand with high quality whereas today, especially as a result of the aforementioned manufacturing requirements, the symbolic aspects are often more relevant to a certain brand than its actual material features. An example of this is the distinction between jewels, understood in their ancient meaning, and bags as they are construed today. Goldsmith's products have always carried a symbolic meaning, mainly related to prestige and vanity; this symbolic meaning is nonetheless closely linked to the special value and rarity of the raw materials and the manufacturing processes involved. Conversely, in the case of fashion goods, the symbolic and material dimensions are not necessarily linked. Although such goods are not of poor quality in themselves, the symbolic meaning they carry is more often attached to the brand they represent rather than to their precious fabrics or refined hand-craft processes. As a consequence, the symbolic and material features of a certain fashion article develop independently of each other, and this allows copies to become yet another part of their world without necessarily representing an obstacle.

The distance between imitation and counterfeiting is therefore clear. The objective of imitation is not a finished product but rather a visual effect, and this is confirmed by the fact that imitations normally follow an industrial and commercial process that is completely independent from that of the products from which they originally took inspiration.[6] Counterfeiting, on the other hand, is characterised by a completely different relation between genuine and fake products, which mutually adjust the value of the other. Whilst copies acquire a certain value from being similar to a famous and desired object, the genuine product is in fact fully recognised only in relation to its fake version. Without counterfeits, products, fabulous and longed for as they may be, would remain mere objects, and not *originals*.

In addition, counterfeiting practices deal with finished objects, whose value depends on the exactness with which they represent the original brand: this scale of precision is the key element that allows distinction between good and bad counterfeits. The manufacturing processes characterising imitation and counterfeiting are also extremely different: whilst imitation relies on a very complex and difficult process requiring high expertise, this does not apply to counterfeiting. In this case, the process comes to an end only at the moment of consumption, where the individual chooses to own a certain counterfeit object and put it in his/her own material world.

2.1. A qualitative approach: main reasons

The choice of empirical structure for this research follows a detailed analysis of the existing studies on voluntary consumption of counterfeit goods. These are mainly quantitative studies that focus on economic factors, which reveal very few certainties on the nature of this

6 This element acquires particular importance since it allows to see how imitation still gives priority to the material aspects of an object, and how its symbolic aspects are strictly dependent on them rather than progressing independently.

phenomenon. For instance, until now it has not been possible to draw a precise portrait of the average consumer of counterfeits: all the studies on this question have so far produced contradictory results (Phau et al. 2001, Ang et al. 2001), and this has led to consideration of counterfeiting as a transversal phenomenon (Cheung et al. 2006).

Moreover, counterfeiting cannot be limited merely to economic factors: this certainly does not help understanding of the phenomenon, especially because consumers seem to have different conceptions of what "saving" really means to them.[7] It may therefore happen that consumers willing to "save money" act in completely different ways (see Tom et al. 1998). Some of them see the act of purchasing counterfeits as a clever choice and are proud of exhibiting well-known brands that they managed to buy at a very low price; other consumers, meanwhile, prefer to buy genuine products, considering them as a long-term investment.

Some studies suggest that the consumer's choice is linked mainly to the resemblance between genuine and counterfeit goods: the higher it is, the more likely the consumer will choose the counterfeit. Penz and Stottinger's research (2008), however, provides an overview of counterfeiting in different national contexts and highlights that in the United States it works in the opposite way: the more similar a product is to the genuine one, the more a consumer will be inclined to buy the branded object. This surprising phenomenon appears to be linked to the North American tendency to privilege material uniqueness.

Further studies on counterfeiting also neglect an aspect that seems to call out for investigation: what are the negative consequences of non-deceptive counterfeiting on the manufacturers of genuine goods? Some publications (Higgins and Rubin 1986, Grossman and Shapiro 1988, Bloch et al. 1993) pointed out that in the case of status goods there is a connection between their being high-class and the total number of consumers. When the same object is purchased by a large number of people, it immediately becomes less sought after by those who wish to be part of an elite. The manufacturers of genuine goods are therefore not able to offer consumers the chance to obtain prestige from the purchase of their products, since counterfeiting opens the doors to a less sophisticated group of people.

The above considerations, however, do not take into account the complex dynamics regulating the market of status goods. For instance, Barnett's work (2005) highlights that an easily recognisable counterfeit object not only does not have negative consequences on the manufacturer, but can even improve manufacturing productivity. This is because the purchase of fashion goods strongly depends on factors linked to status: the presence of counterfeit products allows manufacturing companies to understand better the social context of such products. In this sense, fakes make genuine objects even more alluring. Status is in fact a relative concept by definition: when compared and related to lower-class objects, fashion goods become even more prestigious, and this benefits the consumer's status. The presence of copies enhances the value of genuine products in the eyes of those who cannot afford to buy them. In other words, fashion goods become more sought after and authentic thanks to their fake counterparts.

Nia and Zaickowsky's research (2000) directly investigated the alleged negative consequences of counterfeit goods on manufacturing companies in terms of image by interviewing the people who claim to buy only genuine products. 70% of interviewees highlighted that the value, satisfaction and benefits linked to status that result from owning a genuine product are not negatively affected by the presence of counterfeits. More than half of the interviewees also maintained that the presence of counterfeits does not have a negative effect on their intention to buy genuine luxury products. The above elements show how difficult it is to explain an apparently self-evident phenomenon without considering the social context in which it takes place. The particular nature of the objects, satisfying a need for social identification, is linked precisely to the fact that such objects fully depend on external judgement and recognition.

Therefore, it remains necessary to investigate the manufacturing process (what do the "serious consequences" on manufacturing companies really imply?) as well as individual

[7] See Miller (1998) on a different topic.

behaviour (why do people choose a fake product?). The easiest answer to this last question – to save money – implies that the consumer puts the genuine and the counterfeit object on the same level, thus giving priority to the symbolic aspects without taking the material characteristics of the product into consideration. This clearly applies to those copies where the quality is considerably lower than that of their genuine counterpart.

Due to the complexity of the subject and the current lack of accurate data on non-deceptive counterfeiting, the main objective of the present study is to carry out exploratory research. Indeed, previous studies have failed to investigate reasons other than the "saving" factor. Clearly, when the interviewee is asked whether the economic factor has played a role in their choice to buy a certain product, they will very often answer positively. However, this aspect is not as important as it seems, both because it can simultaneously justify the purchase of originals and of their counterfeits, and because it does not help understand how the individual evaluates a certain object. With regard to the material aspects of products, past studies have failed to describe the variety of counterfeit products, based precisely on their quality. Focusing only on costs also does not explain the motivations of that considerable portion of consumers who buy both genuine and counterfeit objects. For all these different reasons, only a qualitative approach could be considered a sound strategy, as quantitative methods have already revealed their limits and cannot generate new insights or proper theory.

2.2. Research design and methodology

As stated above, it is impossible to understand the phenomenon of counterfeiting without putting it in the social and cultural context of consumption. In this instance, it is important to highlight that the term "consumption" refers to all those actions by which an individual puts a certain object in his or her material world. This process implies a symbolic manipulation (De Certeau 1980, Appadurai 1986) at the end of which the object becomes considerably different from what it was at the end of the industrial manufacturing process. This article aims to investigate how this process becomes particularly important in the case of counterfeit objects, whose inner essence undergoes a transformation at the moment of consumption. Since previous studies on counterfeiting give little importance to what happens after the purchase of the good, the present research aims to analyse the steps that take place after this moment in order to understand the reasons behind a specific choice made by the consumer.

Due to the lack of precise references in literature, the in-depth interview based on the grounded theory method[8] has been adopted as the best investigation tool (Charmaz 2006). This method was designed (Glaser and Strauss 1967) to encourage researchers to interact persistently with their data, while remaining constantly involved with their emerging analyses. Our data collection and analysis thus proceeded simultaneously, with each informing and streamlining the other. The interactive process of moving back and forth between empirical data and emerging analysis made the collected data progressively more focused and the analysis more theoretical, allowing the research to involve only twenty-five interviewees.

The interviewees were asked to answer questions on the basis of concrete information, such as the purchase experience and the composition of their wardrobe, in order to facilitate directs links between the conceptual or symbolic aspects and the material ones. This specific methodology allowed us to obtain useful information even from those consumers who had never thought about this subject. Indeed, even though not all consumers of counterfeits make a conscious reflection on their choice all are able to give their own view on the counterfeit world. For this reason, interviews focused principally on concrete aspects of the respondents' daily life.

More precisely, the interviews dealt with the following issues:

- the type of object, places and methods of purchase methods, including in relation to the criteria allowing assessment of the quality of the object itself;

[8] The grounded theory method comprises a systematic, inductive and comparative approach for conducting inquiry for the purpose of developing theory.

- how the object is used, and – in the case of consumers also buying genuine goods – the differences in the usage of each type of goods;
- social behaviour related to the nature of the purchased object: do consumers admit its falsity or not? And under which conditions?

Although it is evident that the interviews do not include explicit and direct questions on the reasons that motivated the purchase, these can be easily deduced from the answers. Some declarations on the places where counterfeits were purchased have later been verified through field studies. The latter research phase has been crucial to address the important impact of contextual variables in purchasing behaviours. Moreover, the "place variable" is also the main indication of "untruthfulness" of the good, when the latter is difficult to assess by objective difference between a true and a false object (§4). In-depth interviews are at the same time limited, since they could create a selection bias. It may be, in fact, that only those consumers who are not ashamed of their choices are inclined to answer, therefore failing to consider potential negative feelings associated with their consumption. While interviewed, though, some respondents appeared somehow apologetic, which indicates that they do recognise this phenomenon as being in need of a justification, mainly because of its illegality. It is therefore possible to maintain that this form of in-depth interview also allows some sort of identification of feelings of subtle shamefulness. On the other hand, more structured surveys would fail on the task, since the social pressure on giving certain answers is higher.

In this respect, it is interesting to note that feelings of shamefulness – if any – come from different sources than those promoted by anti-counterfeiting campaigns. Ethical considerations on working conditions in the counterfeiting sector are hardly taken into account, let alone those related to the potential damage to the company object of imitation. Conversely, consumers tend to worry more about issues related to the construction of their social identity (Velotsou and Bian 2008).

3. Main findings

The research has shed new light on some crucial points about the market configuration of non-deceptive counterfeit goods. This specific type of consumption is not based on a cohesive market, since there are different types of goods (market segmentation) (§3.1), different consumers (§3.2) buying according to different rationales (§3.3). On the first point, it emerged in the interviews that the market is segmented into three levels. The lower level includes all those objects that cheaply imitate a genuine product, the middle one covers goods that are very similar to the genuine product, but the quality, and finally the highest level includes products of a very high quality. As regards the consumption side, the research proposed two ideal-types of consumer based on the frequency of purchase (often/seldom) and level of symbolic manipulation (high/low), closely linked to the reason for the purchase itself (*accessory/souvenir*).

3.1. Market segmentation

The interviewees easily acknowledged that there are several categories of counterfeits, based mainly on the product's features: they explicitly mentioned the existence of different quality levels, which translate into a considerable segmentation of the market whereby the best quality is associated with the most precise reproduction of the genuine product, thus implying a higher price. It can therefore be said that the good-quality counterfeit is very similar to its genuine version, including in its price, and it is interesting to note that very low prices are normally regarded with suspicion, as if they implied deceit. Consumers tend to think that quality is expensive, a consideration that clashes only in part with the concept of counterfeiting.

It is therefore possible to identify three levels of counterfeiting. The lower level includes all those objects that cheaply imitate a genuine product or brand. Even a non-expert eye is able to detect their falsity. This group also comprises those objects imitating the brand but not the original model, as well as those that imitate both in such a cheap way as to be easily recognised by anyone. This is an evident falsification, and it is normally referred to as imitation, since the interviewees maintained that these objects are clear fakes and are therefore

hold little or no attraction. The middle level includes all those objects that are very similar to the genuine product, except for some characteristics that remind the consumer of their nature. In this case, only a very expert consumer will be able to identify a product featuring small and hidden elements proving its falsity. This group comprises all those objects that do not imitate a precise product directly, but only its brand, colours or fabrics. These counterfeits do not represent a particular original model, but it is very hard to distinguish them from other genuine objects. Finally, the highest level includes products of a very high quality that are even considered by some interviewees as genuine products distributed through alternative channels. Most people, however, do not ask themselves too many questions about these products. They simply acknowledge their similarity to the genuine model, sometimes doubting their falsity. The most frequent consumers, in particular, prefer not to focus on the abstract authenticity or otherwise of such products or on the reliability of the retailer, but rather to carry out a personal analysis of the object. This personal analysis, as discussed below, is the precise moment at which the purchasing experience of the counterfeit object is shaped.

3.2. Occasional and regular consumers

Besides the above-mentioned categories, the present research includes a further classification of consumers according to how they relate to the counterfeiting market. Consumers who declared that they have been *tempted* by a counterfeit only once over the past year have been defined as occasional consumers. They admit they may buy more fake products, but they do not seem particularly interested in the subject. Most of them acted on impulse, including as a result of external factors such as a friend's or family's suggestion, or a holiday context which made it acceptable to break their normal rules. Consumers who have bought counterfeit objects several times in the past year have been defined as regular consumers.

Occasional consumers can easily be differentiated from regular consumers by their fundamental approach towards fakes. They do not carry out a conceptual re-elaboration and symbolic manipulation, which represents a crucial part of the regular consumers' experience. The occasional consumer describes his or her actions as a moment of weakness or temptation, which sometimes led to regret and an attempt to justify later. It is often an impulsive act, and it is this rather than a mere moral consideration that usually makes occasional consumers feel ashamed. A purchase that is not planned or thought out well in advance, regardless of the category of the product or of its legality, is normally categorised as rushed and reckless, thus making the buyer feel regretful. The purchase of counterfeit objects can certainly be included in this category since they are more likely to feature hidden defects or imperfections than any other product. In some cases, the people who were satisfied with the product admit that they might repeat this action, never ceasing to consider it as an exception, rather than a real purchase. This is also linked to the fact that one counterfeit item does not play a significant role in the entire wardrobe of an individual. In light of the above considerations, these consumers do not feel at all affected by the institutional guidelines on counterfeiting. They do not consider themselves in any way guilty, feeling completely redeemed by the uniqueness of their action. This group of consumers also includes people who do not approve of counterfeiting; they do not necessarily perceive a contradiction since they still do not see themselves as users of counterfeit goods. More generally, they tend to describe this experience as a playful act rather than a real purchasing experience. Occasional consumers do not appear to privilege particular distribution channels, although given their lack of proper knowledge on the subject they tend to purchase their products from street sellers. This is usually a series of random coincidences characterising the event as rare and sometimes even unique.

It is also interesting to note that objects purchased in this way are also used infrequently. This may be another consequence of the impulsive act and the regret related to it. In addition, precisely because they do not consider this as an act of real purchasing, occasional consumers tend to see it as frivolous and eccentric, even when they end up judging it negatively: the consumption of counterfeit goods is usually considered a "venial sin" also by those people who claim that they would only do it once. As a result of the above, these consumers tend to think about fakes as mere "souvenirs" rather than actual possessions.

Conversely, the *regular consumers* represent the most aware group of users in the

counterfeiting market. The term "aware" is meant to indicate a higher level of reflection than that of the occasional consumer, leading to an in-depth analysis on the purchase and usage practices. Regular consumers have a completely different point of view on the importance and place of counterfeit objects in their wardrobe, mixing them in with genuine ones. They consider them as fully-fledged accessories and fashion goods, sometimes even forgetting that they are fakes. From an empirical point of view, this implies a whole range of consumption practices, ranging from the use of genuine or fake objects on different occasions and with different objectives to a total manipulation of the border between true and false so that the consumer him-/herself seems to forget the real nature of the object, now seen as irrelevant.

One element that characterises both occasional and regular consumers is *mixed consumption*, meaning the consumption of both genuine and counterfeit goods in the past year. Similarly to the file-sharing phenomenon in the music sector (Dei 2007), in the fashion world counterfeit consumption does not aim to replace but rather to supplement that of genuine products, which thus go hand in hand. Nowadays, the Internet gives users the possibility to own the most varied selection of music tracks and allows them to buy only those products that they consider of real quality. The same applies to "real" consumers of fake products, who can vary their wardrobe while investing only in classic accessories. Moreover, as "free downloading" allows the consumer to widen the horizon of his/her consumption space to the border of trash, in an analogous way counterfeiting allows fashion consumers to expand their wardrobe to previously unknown limits.

As in the file-sharing sector, the existence of counterfeits in the fashion world simply leads to a different approach to genuine products rather than to their elimination. The above remarks mainly apply to regular consumers, since the occasional ones do not normally consider themselves as *real* purchasers of counterfeits. Occasional consumers, in fact, put a clear boundary between the world of fakes and that of genuine products, whereby only the purchase of a genuine object is seen as a real choice.

Conversely, regular consumers are real experts of counterfeits and could easily replace all their genuine belongings with fakes, although in practice they do not do so: the interviewees emphasised that counterfeits usually go side by side with genuine products, without ever replacing them. The element of variety plays a fundamental role in contemporary consumption patterns, and this also applies to a modern fashion world based on multiple trend diffusion channels.

The diffusion of many trends makes it more difficult for consumers to choose a unique style. In this sense, counterfeiting allows individuals to experience very eccentric products that fall outside their usual consumption patterns, thus enabling them to participate fully in the *fashion game*. However, as in the music sector, the interviewees declared themselves totally uninterested in counterfeits that appear of very low quality, declaring that they would not even accept them if they were free since they are in bad taste.

3.3. Reasons justifying the purchase

Regular and occasional consumers can also be distinguished according to the reasons that motivate their purchases. The occasional consumer usually sees this kind of purchase as a playful experience, merely based on the desire to be part of a *group game* or to break the rules for once. In this context, price plays a fundamental role because occasional consumers do not buy counterfeits thinking about their future usage, but mainly for frivolous reasons related to the present moment. They agree to pay in order to participate in a game rather than to own a certain object: this is why they would only accept to invest a very low amount of money. Price certainly represents a crucial element also for regular consumers, although in a different way. Regular consumers hanker after, search for, evaluate and buy a proper object rather than a mere playful experience. The more experienced consumers are in the counterfeiting sector, the less will they trust a low-priced product. Their main point of reference to determine the quality of a certain product is always the original, and this also applies to the price. A good-quality counterfeit cannot be too cheap, and usually those sellers who do not agree to discounts will be privileged.

Assuming that quality is expensive may appear odd in this particular context, but it

actually makes sense if we put it into a perspective of consumers evaluating a certain object and claiming the validity of their own judgement. Regular consumers tend to believe that, even if it is true that "quality is expensive", the most famous luxury brands often apply unacceptable prices to objects of a modest quality. This normally refers to the raw materials used – and in particular the so-called technical fabrics – and to the outsourcing of manufacturing to far – Eastern countries. These two elements are believed to lead to an unbalance in the quality-price ratio, whereby the price remains higher even when quality is low. Consequently, those who master both counterfeit and genuine products consider it wise to be able to judge and choose between originals and fakes.

It is therefore possible to talk about a consumer who is extremely interested in new fashion trends without necessarily being an unaware target of market strategies. This attitude of interested and independent judgement towards the institution of fashion also leads to a distinction between fashionable and classic products. Consumers agree to spend considerable amounts of money on the latter but not on the former. Since fashion is in constant evolution, people refuse to invest large sums on objects that will soon be set aside. Nonetheless, wherever possible, they want to be a real part of the fashion game by buying the most fashionable outfits and showing them off, while at the same time investing their money in a more "classic" item.

More generally, consumers distinguish between the material and the symbolic aspects of products, drawing their own personal conclusions. The symbolic meaning of an object, unlike its material features, can easily be de-constructed and manipulated. Many regular consumers of counterfeits describe counterfeiting as a tool that allows them to freely build their own personal material world. This is precisely where consumers of counterfeit goods derive their pleasure: most interviewees find it rewarding to own a fake object because they are the ones who give it value. Furthermore, the focus is not on the individual object, but rather on the wider context of goods in which it is placed. It is therefore not possible to analyse a single counterfeit object without considering its surrounding context: from a practical point of view, all of the items that make up an individual's wardrobe are closely inter-related and draw their value from one another.

This focus on the overall context also underlines the fact that all social classes are involved in the consumption of counterfeit goods: the consumer, indeed, benefits especially from participating "*more*"[9] in the fashion game. Referring to a higher degree of participation draws attention to consumers' interest in the fashion world and its trends rather than to their social and economic status. By purchasing a counterfeit good, they simply want to make an addition to their wardrobe, regardless of their starting point. Whilst fashion is normally seen as an institution with strict rules, counterfeiting gives users the option of adhering to those rules in a broader and more unconditional way. Consumers therefore reclaim the importance of their role in multiple ways: by manipulating the object's meaning, building worlds made of goods that communicate meaning among themselves, interpreting the fashion rules in their own personal way and finally by offering judgements on the manufacturing side of this sector.

4. Fake objects appearing genuine and genuine objects appearing fakes: how knowledge changes the nature of things

If it is true that the symbolic dimension of an object can be radically changed and that the material dimension of a brand can easily be imitated, what are the elements that make an object genuine? If an expert consumer cannot tell what is genuine and what is not, how can fake and original products really be distinguished? A similar question has often been the focus of scholars in relation to contemporary arts. Arthur Danto (1981) commented Warhol's works by asking how two objects undistinguishable to human senses can actually be two separate elements. What is it that makes an object a real "work of art", or in this particular case, a "genuine product"? The answer to this question can be found in the overall relational dimension

9 This relates to the number of possessions, to their stylistic variety but also to their frequency of use. Counterfeits are in fact mainly aimed at daily usage, in order to preserve the integrity of their original counterpart over a long period of time.

where this object is placed.

The relational dimension is represented here by the material world of each individual, which is constantly evolving and changing according to the new symbolic meanings that the object acquires. This context is fundamental in order to determine the real essence of the object, that can be defined as genuine or fake only in relation to all its surrounding goods: it is therefore easy to understand the crucial role played by the consumer's expertise in determining the real nature of such an object. The part of the study focusing on the actual usage of the counterfeit object highlighted the importance of the manipulation carried out by the consumer. It is in fact very hard to define the precise nature of this specific group of goods until the consumer actually owns them.

We can therefore say that counterfeiting confers a primary role to expertise, and therefore to the ability to manipulate the symbolic meanings of an object. In this sense, counterfeiting may be considered a source of democratization of the fashion world, not simply because the low price of counterfeits opens the door to a broad range of people, but also because the limited importance of economic aspects compared to a specific cultural capital related to consumption leads to a higher upwards mobility in the world of appearances. In this perspective, could counterfeiting perhaps be understood as a *modern* attempt to challenge current social distinctions, similar to the erosion of sumptuary codes?

As mentioned above, in the world of counterfeiting a crucial role is played by the non-material elements *preceding* and *following* the moment of purchase and in particular by the ability to recognise and select the objects that can successfully be included in one's own material universe and used on different social occasions. This articulated system of skills may be defined as a particular form of cultural capital, which is mainly translated into specific consumption abilities. Just like the types of capital discussed by Bourdieu (1979), this can also be used as a resource in the context of social competition; it originates from a family background, although it is not limited to it. In a similar way to the concept of cultural capital in its broader meaning, this capital of skills and expertise can be acquired, enhanced and strengthened through channels that go beyond the traditional family-based transmission, which always remains the main method of diffusion. Like the cultural capital examined by Bourdieu, this specific type of knowledge can also be taught, although it needs to be properly digested and incorporated into the individual's personal taste in order to be efficiently implemented in his/her own purchasing choices, without therefore running the risk of appearing anomalous (as happened with the middle class in Bourdieu's description).

It is curious to see how the voluntary consumption of counterfeit goods appears to be in line with this dynamic, when analysing both the moment of purchase and that of consumption. Taking the moment of purchase as a starting point, the present study has highlighted the internal segmentation of the counterfeiting market. Counterfeits can in fact be distinguished according to at least three elements: their intrinsic quality, their similarity to the original, and their distribution channel. In order to identify a certain object, consumers need to possess specific skills that they acquire in different ways. It is interesting to see that a consumer is not able to describe the precise source of information on the material and non-material features of the object, assuming that it is *something that they just know*. These elements range from the history of the object itself to the events characterising a particular brand or the manufacturing processes employed, up to the so-called *tricks* that allow easy distinction of a genuine product from a counterfeit one. These considerations derive from a real interest in all aspects of fashion, which from a practical point of view translates as great familiarity with the original models and the contexts in which they are used. The more consumers know about the original object, the easier it will it be for them to select a high-quality counterfeit, which will hardly be recognised as such.

The same applies to the moment of consumption. We have described how consumers tend to give relative value to a single object, privileging the overall value of the whole group of objects they own, as well as the relation between them and the broader social context where they are employed. At the moment of consumption, a crucial role is played by the ability to use

the objects in an appropriate way[10]. Indeed, it is extremely important first of all to create a credible and consistent group of objects, in order to later harmonise the material universe of a consumer with the social context that he/she decides to join. Once again, those who are more familiar with the original models will be able to create more effective universes, especially because these people are often able to integrate genuine products with fake ones. Consumers from the higher ranks of society possess the skills necessary to select the objects that are most suitable for each situation; conversely, those who do not have these skills often remain mere occasional consumers.

As a result, the "revolutionary" aspect of counterfeiting appears to be fairly limited. The most important role in the world of fakes is played rather by the capital of expertise related to consumption. In particular, specific skills in the fashion sector are crucial – exercised both on the object itself and on its symbolic manipulation – and end up transcending simple economic considerations. Consumers with considerable economic resources and the will to invest them in the purchase of originals – along with specific skills in understanding consumption – are also privileged when purchasing counterfeits. The two elements are in fact closely linked. The knowledge of the technical aspects of a certain product is developed, improved and strengthened through the simultaneous experience of its genuine counterpart.

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[10] For further details on the role played by the consumption methods, please refer to Veblen 1899.

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