The Impact of Consumer Ethics on Intention to Purchase Counterfeit Fashion Products

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Abstract: The issue of counterfeiting has long plagued many industries including fashion, automotive, electronics, and pharmaceutical. Companies face various challenges when it comes to dealing with the issue of counterfeiting, which results in financial implications, loss of brand reputation, and many more. From a consumer perspective, counterfeit is the cheaper option in a market where consumers are spoilt for choice. Advancements in technology have helped manufacturers of counterfeit to increase the similarity and to a certain extent the quality of their products to their genuine counterparts. Thus, the demand for counterfeit products in general kept rising over the years. This research looks at the influence of perceived behavioral control and consumer ethics in influencing consumer intention to purchase counterfeit fashion products. A partial least squares (PLS) approach to structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to analyze the data. Findings showed that there is a negative relationship between perceived behavioral control and intention and a positive relationship between consumer ethics and intention.

Keywords: *Counterfeit fashion, Consumer ethics, Intention, Perceived behavioral control*

1. Introduction and Background

Counterfeiting is the act of making the exact copy of the genuine product, to make it appear as if it is the original product. The early case of counterfeiting can be traced back to the Roman Empire, where wine trademarks were duplicated to make the product appear expensive (Philips, 2007). In Malaysia, based on the statistics provided by the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Cost of Living (MDTCL), as of September 2022, there were 146 cases of counterfeit seizures of fashion-related products amounting to RM3,416,039 (Ministry of Domestic Trade and Cost of Living, 2022).

Over the past few decades, the production and consumption of counterfeit items have significantly increased and globalization has influenced the expansion of the consumption pattern. Numerous firms and brands can expand into new markets, hence intensifying the aspiration to possess global brands. Global and renowned companies may command higher prices compared to local ones due to their established reputation in the market. These and other similar factors are the primary determinants of counterfeit goods sales and purchases. However, this doesn't look down on the impact of counterfeiting on local brands as well. It is well documented that a lot of Malaysian fashion brands have also suffered and are affected by counterfeiting.

From the consumer perspective, the purchase and consumption of counterfeit goods extends beyond financial reasons. Various studies have confirmed that price is regarded as one of the main reasons why consumers resort to counterfeit options (Jiang & Cova, 2012; Li et al., 2018; Ndofirepi et al., 2022; Wee et al., 1995). However, the purpose of this research is to look beyond price factors and to investigate the role of ethics in influencing the intention to purchase counterfeit fashion products. While public awareness and interest in ethical consumerism in increasing and consumers' attitudes towards it are largely favorable, there are still gaps in what consumers think is right, what they intend and what they do to support environmental and societal improvements with their available budget (Carrington et al., 2010).

Consumers tend to believe that they are ethical and are willing to pay higher prices for products that are made by socially responsible companies. According to Lee (2024), consumers have affirmed their will by participating in boycotts, whereby they avoid buying products and/or services made by companies that have done business immorally. However, despite many companies being involved in unethical practices such as sweatshops, a lot of global fast fashion brand continues to experience increased sales record (Fast Retailing, 2020). This perhaps indicates that consumers might feel that they are ethical only to a certain extent.

2. Literature Review

Behavioral intention, in essence, pertains to an individual's deliberate effort to engage in a certain activity, such as the desire to buy counterfeit fashion items. Moreover, the likelihood of carrying out such an action rises in proportion to the level of intention to act (Ajzen, 1991). Consumers' behavioral intention is a crucial notion for market researchers as it reflects their anticipated future actions. In this study, intention is defined as the conscious and purposeful act of buyers to buy counterfeit items.

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) has broad applicability and has been used to predict a wide range of behaviors. Past research can be found across various disciplines such as health, information technology, psychology, social sciences, tourism and hospitality management (Ulker-Demirel & Ciftci, 2020).

This study investigates the factors that are within the consumer's control and their perspective toward ethical issues. Sun (2020) Extends the TPB by way of adding another variable in the form of moral identity, and level of confidence as moderator, to increase explanatory and predictive ability in understanding consumer ethical decisions. One of the reasons why ethical consumers do not always make ethical decisions is due to homo economicus (Lee, 2024). Homo economicus refers to consumers who continue to purchase products from "controversial" brands as long as it benefits them (Alger & Weibull, 2013; Bègue, 2016; Skitka, 2009).

There is a difference in terms of outcome and how a consumer would feel if they have purchased either from ethical or unethical companies. Hassan et al. (2013) mentioned that consumers may feel guilty when they buy and use unethical companies' products as they feel that they are indirectly participating in unethical activities. On the other hand, according to Antonetti and Maklan (2014), ethical consumption could lead to a positive emotion such as pride. Hence, any effort to encourage consumers to behave morally could contribute to society's and individuals' well-being.

Intention
In essence, behavioral intention refers to a deliberate attempt by an individual in trying to carry out certain behavior, which in this study, is specific to the intention to purchase counterfeit fashion products. Intention signals to a certain extent the awareness and willingness of consumers to engage in actual behavior. Intentions are assumed to capture the motivational factors that influence behavior, and are considered indicators of how hard people are willing to try; and how much effort they are planning to exert, to perform the behavior (Ajzen, 1991).

The TPB posits that for actual behavior to take place, one must have the intention which is influenced by factors such as attitude, subjective norm and perceived behavioral control. From a marketing perspective, intention is a very significant element as it represents the estimated future behavior (Ajzen, 1985; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). This signals a certain element of willingness to engage in a particular behavior, and marketers will be able to act upon these "signals" to better understand their customers and provide a much more personalized strategy or tactics moving forward. Strong intentions are a better predictor of behavior, which reduces the intention-behavior gap (Conner & Norman, 2022). These intentions are more stable over time and less susceptible to change, which can influence information processing about the behavior.

In the age of digital marketing, understanding behavior and different levels of intentions are becoming much more important. High-quality content, message clarity, and belief in the message significantly enhance behavior intention, especially when mediated by empathy (Arora & Sagar, 2023).

Perceived behavioral control
Perceived behavior refers to the degree of control that an individual perceives over performing the behavior. According to Ajzen (2002), perceived behavioral control (PBC) is the extent to which a person feels able to engage in the behavior; it covers two aspects, how much a person has control over behavior, and how confident a person feels about being able to perform or not perform a behavior. Moreover, PBC can account for considerable variance in behavioral intention and actions, provided that when people believe they have more resources such as time, money and skills, their perceptions of control are high and hence their behavioral intentions increase (Ajzen, 2002).

PBC is a broad concept that pertains to customers' beliefs of whether they can control their actions. It represents the views on the availability of resources and opportunities needed to support certain behaviors, as well as an individual's self-assurance in their capacity to engage in such behaviors (Ajzen, 1985, 1991). PBC is well recognized as a crucial factor influencing behavior in several areas.

In situations where it is less financially rewarding for individuals, PBC still is a powerful motivator for human behavior (Reis et al., 2023). Furthermore, PBC has also been found to have a positive association with ethical consumption behaviors, particularly in slow fashion consumption, which indicates that consumers who feel they have control over their actions are more likely to engage in sustainable practices (Lira & Costa, 2022). Hence, the following hypothesis is developed:
H1: There is a significant relationship between perceived behavioral control and intention.

Consumer ethics

Every culture has its own set of beliefs, attitudes, and values that guide their lives. Ethics are also shaped by culture. Ethics is a word derived from the Greek word *ethos,* which means "customary" or "conventional" (DesJardins, 2009). Usually, these customary values are connected to a particular culture's religious worldview. In terms of definition, ethics may be defined as "inquiry into the nature and grounds of morality where the term morality is taken to mean moral judgments, standards, and rules of conduct" (Taylor, 1975). The study of ethics in marketing has evolved from the widest scope possible to a more narrowed micro approach.

Early developments and studies regarding marketing ethics theories focused more on ethical practices within areas such as marketing research, marketing management, sales, advertising, and social marketing (Vitell et al., 2007). The consumer ethics scale designed by Muncy and Vitell (1992) Serves the sole purpose of measuring the level of ethics of the final consumer. The definition of consumer ethics according to Muncy and Vitell (1992) is, "the moral principles and standards that guide the behavior of individuals or groups as they obtain, use and dispose of goods and services".

Different consumers from different countries might react differently towards what they deem to be ethical or non-ethical. These are also depending on the situation and the environment that they are in. For example, a consumer might not feel that downloading illegal software or music from the internet is the same as they would drinking a can of soda without paying for it at a supermarket, although both do not incur any "costs" to the consumer. (Muncy & Vitell, 1992). Ultimately, in the same study, four dimensions were identified as being part of the consumer ethics scale; (1) benefits incurred from actively engaging in perceived illegal activities, (2) benefits incurred from passively engaging in questionable activities, (3) benefits incurred from actively engaging in questionable or deceptive activities that are perceived as legal, and (4) behaviours perceived as involving "no harm/no foul" activities.

Following the previous study, Vitell (2003) Found that consumers tended to believe that benefiting actively from an illegal activity was more unethical than benefiting passively. For the first dimension, consumers might reason that if they did not initiate the activity, then it was not wrong (unethical). The second dimension signifies a situation where consumers passively benefit themselves by capitalizing on the seller's mistake. The third dimension reflects actions in which consumers are actively involved in unethical but are not necessarily illegal. Finally, in the fourth dimension, activities were not perceived as unethical at all (no harm/no foul). Most of these cases tended to be activities that involved pirating intellectual property, such as software, tapes, or movies. Thus, the following hypothesis is developed:
H2: There is a significant relationship between consumer ethics and intention.

3. Methodology

Data was collected via a self-administered questionnaire which uses established items from previous studies (de Matos et al., 2007; Hsu & Shiue, 2008; Kim & Karpova, 2009; Riquelme et al., 2012; Vitell & Muncy, 2005). All the items were measured using a five-point Likert scale. The questionnaires were distributed at both private and government organizations, as well as both private and public higher learning institutions. Snowball sampling techniques were used where the method yields a study sample through referrals made among people who share or know of others who possess some characteristics that are of research interest.

In this study, respondents must be 18 years old and above because, in Malaysia, formal education is until one reaches the age of 17. After that, he/she will either join the workforce or continue their studies at a higher learning institution. Hence, it is assumed that those aged 18 years old and above have sound knowledge and the ability to make their own purchasing decision. In Malaysia, formal education which includes both primary and secondary levels, is until one reaches 17 to 18 years old, and the legal age for voting according to the Election Commission of Malaysia is 18 years old.

The partial least square (PLS) approach to structural equation modeling (SEM) was performed due to its capability to generate more reliable estimates of the structural model and its capacity to handle latent variables in situations where normalcy assumptions are violated (Hair et al., 2014). Moreover, it also results in greater theoretical simplicity and decreases the intricacy of the model.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework
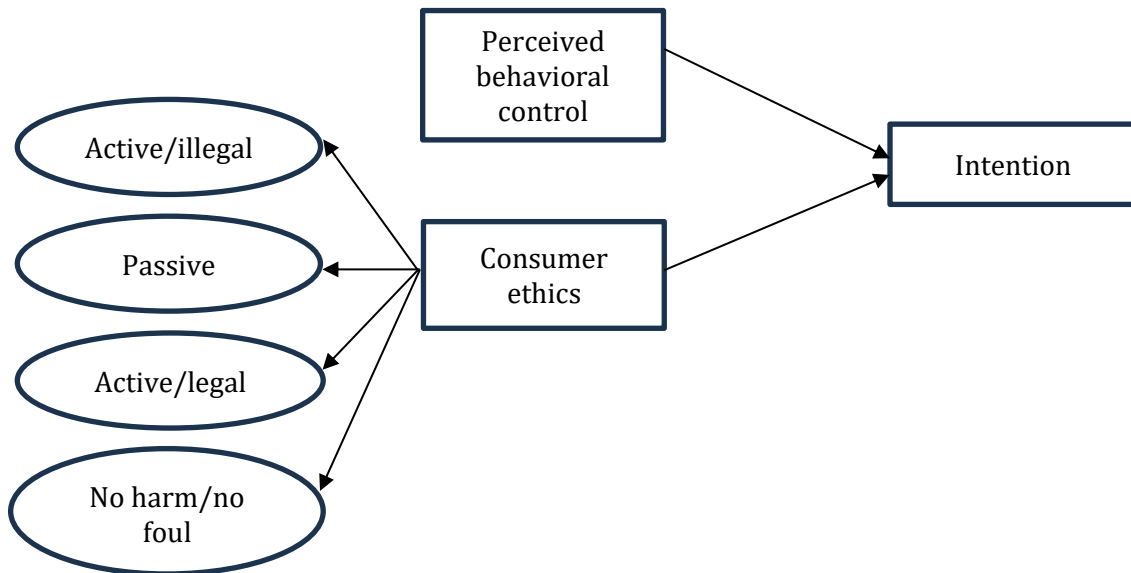
4. Results

Table 1 presents a concise overview of the background of all the participants in the study, categorized according to their demographic parameters.

Table 1: Respondents' Profile

VARIABLE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
GENDER		
Males	176	43.1%
Females	232	56.9%
AGE		
18-25	211	51.7%
26-30	68	16.7%
31-40	111	27.2%
>41	18	4.4%
EDUCATION		
SPM/STPM	69	16.9%
Diploma	129	31.6%
Degree	186	45.6%
Professional	5	1.2%
Others	19	4.7%
OCCUPATION		
Government	112	27.5%

Private sector	83	20.3%	
Self-employed	6	1.5%	
Student	203	49.8%	
Unemployed	4	0.7%	
INCOME			
Less than RM1,000	198	48.5%	
RM1,001 – RM3,000	87	21.3%	
RM3,001 – RM5,000	68	16.7%	
RM5,001 – RM7,000	43	10.5%	
More than RM7,000	12	2.9%	
RACE			
Malay	354	86.6%	
Chinese	18	4.4%	
Indian	24	5.9%	
Others	12	2.9%	

All respondents are aged 18 years old and above, with an age range between 18-25 being the majority of respondents with 211 (51.7%), followed by 26-30 years old with 111 (27.2%). The majority of the respondents possess a bachelor's degree (45.6%) and a diploma (31.6%). On the income basis, the majority had a monthly income of less than RM1,000 (48.5%) which may be due to the majority of the respondents being comprised of students. This is followed by RM1, 001 – RM3, 000 (21.3%), RM3, 001 – RM5, 000 (16.7%), RM5, 001 – RM7, 000 (10.5%), and lastly more than RM7, 000 (2.9%).

On the other hand, Table 2 presents the respondents' past encounters with counterfeit purchases and the specific types of things they had bought. The overall response shows a huge percentage for fashion-related products. More than half of the respondents (68.9%) have purchased counterfeit-related products.

Table 2: Respondents' Counterfeit Purchase Experience

PREVIOUS PURCHASE	FREQUENCIES	PERCENTAGE
Experience		
Yes	281	68.9
No	127	31.1
Product		
Clothing	192	29
Shoes	152	23
Sunglasses	98	14.8
Watch	104	15.7
Handbag	92	13.9
Others	24	3.6

Consumer ethics was conceptualized as higher-order components (HOC), which are measured based on the first-order construct (lower-order components or LOC). In theory, the LOCs will serve as the basis for the HOC dimension, which, in the context of this study, includes four first-order constructs, active/illegal, passive, active/legal, and no harm/no foul. To conduct the study, a method known as the repeated indicator technique was employed, as described by Lohmoller (1989) and Wold (1982). All the LOCs have a comparable amount of indications, except the active/illegal dimension. It is crucial to guarantee that the connections between the Higher Order Constructs (HOCs) and Lower Order Constructs (LOCs) are established to minimize bias, as stated by Becker et al. (2012).

Convergent validity: This is the degree to which each indicator represents a converging idea about indicators measuring other constructs. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) is a measure of the extent to which a latent concept accounts for the variability in its indicators (Hair et al., 2017). To attain sufficient convergent validity, each concept should explain at least 50% of the variation in the assigned indicators (AVE ≥ 0.50) (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; J. F. Hair et al., 2017). According to Table 3, all item loadings exceed 0.6, meeting the minimal requirement for both AVE and CR.

Table 3: Convergent Validity for Consumer Ethics

DIMENSION	INDICATORS	ITEMS LOADINGS	FACTOR LOADINGS	AVE	CR
Consumer Ethics				0.716	0.908
Active/Illegal	AI1	0.793	0.871	0.659	0.906
	AI2	0.786			
	AI3	0.843			
	AI4	0.823			
	AI5	0.813			
Passive	PAS1	0.828	0.919	0.704	0.905
	PAS2	0.856			
	PAS3	0.810			
	PAS4	0.860			
Active/Legal	AL1	0.861	0.921	0.748	0.922
	AL2	0.859			
	AL3	0.892			
	AL4	0.847			
No harm/No foul	NH1	0.832	0.643	0.661	0.885
	NH2	0.873			
	NH3	0.872			
	NH4	0.654			

Discriminant validity: This refers to the extent to which indicators vary across constructs or measure different ideas by analyzing the correlations between the measures of possibly overlapping (Ramayah et al., 2018).The findings in Table 4 display the AVE square root estimations, indicating that each value surpasses the correlations between the dimensions. This demonstrates the attainment of discriminant validity. This enables a more in-depth examination of the connections between more complex concepts.

Table 4: Discriminant Validity for Consumer Ethics

DIMENSION	ACTIVE/ILLEGAL	PASSIVE	ACTIVE/LEGAL	NO HARM/NO FOUL
Active/Illegal	0.812			
Passive	0.719	0.865		
Active/Legal	0.332	0.566	0.813	
No harm/No foul	0.778	0.796	0.478	0.839

Table 5: Reliability and Convergent Validity

CONSTRUCTS	ITEM	LOADINGS	CR	AVE
Intention	INT1	0.851	0.875	0.7
	INT2	0.777		
	INT3	0.880		
Perceived Behavioural Contol	PBC1	0.808	0.863	0.678
	PBC2	0.855		
	PBC3	0.806		

Table 5 summarizes the reliability and convergent validity of intention and PBC. The measurement value of the constructs has adequate levels of convergent validity meeting the minimum level of 0.5 for AVE and 0.7 for CR (Hulland, 1999)

Table 6: Hypothesis Testing

RELATIONSHIP	STD BETA	T-VALUE	P VALUE	DECISION
PBC -> Int	-0.022	0.497	0.619	Not supported
CE -> Int	-0.121	2.837	0.005*	Supported

*Significant at $p<0.05$

From Table 6 above, the relationship between PBC and intention, the results showed that there is no significant relationship, hence rejecting the initial hypothesis. This differs from past studies which have found that PBC has a significant positive relationship with intention (Lee, 2009; Liao et al., 2010; Mohamed Omar et al., 2012; Yoon, 2011). Furthermore, the relationship between consumer ethics and intention shows a significant negative relationship with a *p-value* of 0.005 and a *t-value* of 2.837.

Discussion
This study has found that perceived behavioral control has no significant influence on consumer intention toward the purchase of counterfeited fashion products. The reason for this is most of the respondents feel that counterfeit fashion products can be easily purchased in the market hence meaning they had the power to purchase counterfeit fashion products without having to have a deep knowledge regarding them as opposed to something much more technical such as software adoption. The value of the path coefficient (β = -.0.022) suggests that there may be a negative relationship between perceived behavioral control and intention to purchase counterfeit fashion products.

The study found that consumer ethics has a significant influence on the intention to purchase counterfeit fashion products. Based on Table 6, the value of the path coefficient (β = -0.121) suggests that there is indeed a negative relationship. It is significant at a one percent confidence level ($p<0.01$), with a *p-value* of 0.005. The results also showed that the *t* value of 2.837 is more than the critical value of 2.57, supporting that there is a negative relationship between consumer ethics and intention to purchase counterfeit fashion products.

5. Managerial Implications and Recommendations

This study offers valuable information especially with regards to consumer behavior when faced with ethical decision making. The context of this study was to look into counterfeit fashion products, taking into consideration factors such as intention, perceived behavioral control, and consumer ethics. It is interesting to note that, the purchase or consumption of counterfeit may not necessarily be due to financial reasons, it may also be due to the appeal that it has.

The findings also show the importance of information and educating consumers about the negative impact of counterfeiting. It is no longer sufficient to just create awareness campaigns and programs, government agencies, authorities, and brands must work together to ensure that maximum effort is put it in terms of combating counterfeiting, as well as prioritizing educating consumers through various means available.

The fight against counterfeit requires effort from not only the manufacturers, but also the whole ecosystem which consists of brand owners, suppliers, logistics partners, and consumers. Thus, awareness, integrity, and ethical values go hand in hand in helping to reduce, and ultimately eliminate the threat of counterfeiting.

Conclusion
The conceptualization of consumer ethics as higher-order modeling (HOM) enables researchers to incorporate a broader range of constructs represented by several dimensions in partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). This is achieved by summarizing the latent organizational constructs (LOCs) into a single multidimensional higher-order construct (HOC). The inclusion of both PBC and consumer ethics as antecedents to intention is aimed at examining two distinct aspects of factors that influence intention. PBC refers to consumers who make their own decisions based on their beliefs and abilities. On the other hand, consumers must consider a variety of elements in ethics, which vary from country to country due to the subjectivity and cultural specificity of ethics.

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