

HOW CONSUMERS COPE WITH BUYING COUNTERFEITS: EFFECTS OF DISSONANCE REDUCTION STRATEGIES

Martin Eisend, European University Viadrina, Germany
Pakize Schuchert-Güler, Berlin School of Economics, Germany

ABSTRACT

Previous research has provided weak results for the impact of the consciousness of illegality or moral reasoning on purchase decisions for counterfeit products (Eisend and Schuchert-Güler 2006). Those studies have further shown that consumers tend to be satisfied with counterfeit purchases and have a strong inclination to repurchase (Bloch, Bush, and Campbell 1993; Kwong et al. 2003; Tom et al. 1998). Given the fact that purchasing counterfeit products is an illegal behavior, these results let us question how consumers manage to ignore moral concerns.

The weak impact of moral consciousness on counterfeit purchases can be explained by the fact that consumers are either not fully aware of the illegality of their behavior or that consumers who are aware apply dissonance reduction strategies in order to reduce the cognitive dissonance between their behavior and their moral beliefs. Cognitive dissonance after purchases depends on the attractiveness of the purchase offer. When the illegality becomes apparent too, a moral issue arises and becomes another dissonant element. Moral issues are the main sources of cognitive dissonance (Steele 1988); they vary in intensity, subject to the perceived consequences of immoral behavior (Jones 1991). The attractiveness of the offer then becomes a moderating variable as it alters the degree of moral intensity, and as such the degree of cognitive dissonance experienced by consumers. An attractive offer for a counterfeit product intensifies the need for justification and for application of coping strategies. An unattractive offer provides an external justification for immoral behavior and reduces the need for strategies to lower cognitive dissonance (Festinger and Carlsmith 1959).

The results of an experiment with a 2 (unattractive vs. attractive offer) by 2 (low vs. high awareness of consequences) between-subjects factorial design with 100 German graduate students support those assumptions. The findings show that consumers of counterfeit products successfully apply coping strategies. Consumers with low awareness of negative consequences comply with coping strategies in the case of unattractive offers. When consumers become aware of the negative consequences of their behavior, they comply with coping strategies more often when offers are attractive resulting in enhanced evaluation and satisfaction of the purchase compared to less attractive offers. The most successful dissonance strategy is the "devaluation of the non-chosen alternative"-strategy which serves both: it alters perceptions of attractiveness and reduces the perceived degree of harm for a genuine brand. The findings contribute to the research on counterfeiting by explaining why previous research has provided rather mixed results for the impact of moral consciousness on counterfeit purchases. The results have significant implications for manufacturers and policy makers who are concerned about the rise of counterfeiting. Countermeasures should not only focus on making consumers aware that their behavior is illegal, they should also be concerned about the attractiveness that counterfeit products have for consumers.

References available upon request.