

Knockoff psychology: I know I'm faking it

April 05, 2010

Within just a few blocks of my office, street vendors will sell me a Versace t-shirt or a silk tie from Prada, cheap. Or I could get a deal on a Rolex, or a chic pair of Ray Ban shades. These aren't authentic brand name products, of course. They're inexpensive replicas. But they make me look and feel good, and I doubt any of my friends can tell the difference.

That's why we buy knockoffs, isn't it? To polish our self-image—and broadcast that polished version of our personality to the world—at half the price? But does it work? After all, we first have to convince ourselves of our idealized image if we are going to sway anyone else. Can we really become Ray Ban-wearing, Versace-bedecked sophisticates in our own mind—just by dressing up?

New research suggests that knockoffs may not work as magically as we'd like—and indeed may backfire. Three psychological scientists—Francesca Gino of Chapel Hill, Michael Norton of Harvard Business School, and Dan Ariely of Duke—have been exploring the power and pitfalls of fake adornment in the lab. They wanted to see if counterfeit stuff might have hidden psychological costs, warping our actions and attitudes in undesirable ways.

Here's an example of their work. The scientists recruited a large sample of young women and had them wear pricey Chloe sunglasses. The glasses were the real thing, but half the women thought they were wearing knockoffs. They wanted to see if wearing counterfeit shades—a form of dishonesty—might actually make the women act dishonestly in other ways.

So they had them perform a couple tasks—tasks that presented opportunities for lying and cheating. In one, for example, the women worked on a complicated set of mathematical puzzles—a task they couldn't possibly complete in the time allowed. When time elapsed, the women were told to score themselves on the honor system—and to take money for each correct score. Unbeknownst to them, the scientists were monitoring both their work and their scoring.

And guess what. The women wearing the fake Chloe shades cheated more—considerably more. Fully 70 percent inflated their performance when they thought nobody was checking on them—and in effect stole cash from the coffer.

To double-check this distressing result, the scientists put the women through a completely different task, one that forced a choice between the right answer and the more profitable answer. And again the Chloe-wearing women pocketed the petty cash. Notably, the women cheated not only when they expressed a preference for the cheap knockoffs, but also when the real and fake designer glasses were randomly handed out. So it appears that the very act of wearing the counterfeit eyewear triggered the lying and cheating.

This is bizarre and disturbing, but it gets worse. The psychologists wondered if inauthentic image-making might not only corrupt personal ethics, but also lead to a generally cynical attitude toward other

people. In other words, if wearing counterfeit stuff makes people feel inauthentic and behave unethically, might they see others as phony and unethical, too? To test this, they again handed out genuine and counterfeit Chloe shades, but this time they had the volunteers complete a survey about “someone they knew.” Would this person use an express line with too many groceries? Pad an expense report? Take home office supplies? There were also more elaborate scenarios involving business ethics. The idea was that all the answers taken together would characterize each volunteer as having a generally positive view of others—or a generally cynical view.

Cynical, without question. Compared to volunteers who were wearing authentic Chloe glasses, those wearing the knockoffs saw other people as more dishonest, less truthful, and more likely to act unethically in business dealings.

So what’s going on here? Well, the scientists ran a final experiment to answer this question, and here are the ironic results they report on-line this week in the journal *Psychological Science*: Wearing counterfeit glasses not only fails to bolster our ego and self-image the way we hope, it actually undermines our internal sense of authenticity. “Faking it” makes us feel like phonies and cheaters on the inside, and this alienated, counterfeit “self” leads to cheating and cynicism in the real world.

Counterfeiting is a serious economic and social problem, epidemic in scale. Most people buy these fake brands because they are a lot cheaper, but this research suggests there may be a hidden moral cost yet to be tallied.

Excerpts from “We’re Only Human” also appear in *The Huffington Post* and *Scientific American Mind*. Wray Herbert’s book, *On Second Thought: Outsmarting Your Mind’s Hard-Wired Habits*, will be published by Crown in September.