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Loyalty under strain: Consumer pathways and the role of counterfeit purchase

Abstract

Purpose: This study examines how consumer strain reshapes the balance between identity-consistent consumption and resource constraints by focusing on loyalty toward authentic brands and non-deceptive counterfeit purchase as alternative responses. Specifically, it investigates how self-brand connection, social influence, and perceived counterfeit benefits and risks shape consumer decision-making when marketplace disruption, financial pressure, and uncertainty make ordinary consumption choices more constrained.

Design/methodology/approach: Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire from 177 consumers who were instructed to answer with the pandemic as the reference context for strain. Structural equation modelling was used to estimate the direct net associations between the predictors and the two outcomes, while fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis identified configurational pathways through which identity-related and evaluative mechanisms combine to produce loyalty toward authentic brands or counterfeit purchase.

Findings: Self-brand connection strengthens loyalty toward authentic brands under strain, confirming the stabilising role of identity-relevant brands. Perceived counterfeit benefits reduce authentic-brand loyalty and increase counterfeit purchase, whereas perceived counterfeit risks discourage counterfeit purchase. Social influence does not operate as a direct net predictor, but the configurational results show that it matters conditionally, particularly when perceived counterfeit benefits are weak. The findings therefore show that loyalty and counterfeit purchase are not simple opposites, but context-

dependent responses shaped by different combinations of identity-related and evaluative conditions.

Originality/value: The study contributes by integrating brand loyalty and counterfeit consumption within a single strain-based framework. It explains how consumers preserve authentic-brand loyalty, consider non-deceptive counterfeits, or reject counterfeits depending on how identity motives, social pressures, and benefit-risk evaluations combine under conditions of strain. By revealing multiple pathways to these responses, it advances a configurational understanding of adaptive consumption under constraint.

Keywords: brand loyalty; counterfeit purchase; consumer strain; identity; configurational analysis; consumer marketing

Loyalty under strain: Consumer pathways and the role of counterfeit purchase

1. Introduction

Brand loyalty has long been a central concept in consumer marketing, reflecting a commitment to repurchase a preferred brand even when situational or competitive factors encourage switching (Oliver, 1999). Beyond repeated behaviour, loyalty encompasses psychological attachment, preference, and resistance to alternatives, qualities driving brand performance and long-term profitability (Watson *et al*., 2015). However, marketplace disruptions, restricted access to products, financial pressure, and uncertainty may alter how consumers evaluate preferred brands (Nkuna *et al*., 2024; Rather *et al*., 2022). Under these conditions, authentic brand loyalty may be preserved, weakened, or reconfigured as consumers adapt identity-driven consumption to constraints (Hamilton *et al.*, 2019). Consumers may adopt more strategic decisions, weighing identity needs, brand attachment, budget constraints, social expectations and perceived risks (Geiger *et al*., 2023; Mende *et al*., 2024; Mookherjee *et al*., 2024). While identity still guides consumption, its expression may adapt to prevailing limitations (Reed *et al*., 2012; Srivastava *et al*., 2025). Understanding when loyalty holds or falters is therefore theoretically and managerially important.

In this study, consumer strain denotes a context-specific condition where financial pressure, restricted marketplace access, uncertainty, and heightened evaluation of alternatives combine to constrain consumption choices. This definition recognizes that constraints reduce purchasing power while altering how consumers allocate attention, evaluate trade-offs, and preserve valued identities (Hamilton *et al*., 2019). The pandemic provides a relevant strain context, having disrupted routines, restricted brand access,

increased uncertainty, and intensified consumers' need to justify their spending (Zwanka and Buff, 2021). Thus, consumer strain is conceptualised as the cumulative effect of interconnected marketplace constraints that heighten the tension between identity expression and adaptive consumption.

While extensive research examines brand loyalty in stable environments, less is known about how it operates under co-occurring pressures (e.g., Desveaud *et al*., 2024). Life disruptions can destabilise identity continuity, prompting reliance on consumption practices to maintain a coherent sense of self (Toteva *et al*., 2024). One such practice is non-deceptive counterfeit consumption, whereby consumers knowingly purchase imitation products rather than mistakenly believing them to be genuine. The counterfeit consumption literature documents a diverse range of drivers, spanning economic, ethical, social, and identity-related considerations (Eisend and Schuchert-Güler, 2006; Elsantil and Hamza, 2021; Staake *et al.*, 2009). In particular, counterfeit consumption can represent a deliberate strategy to preserve identity expression by providing recognisable brand symbolism at a lower cost (Staake *et al.*, 2009; Stöttinger and Penz, 2015). However, less attention has been devoted to understanding how these identity-preservation dynamics function under conditions of consumer strain. Under these circumstances, counterfeit purchasing may shift from a marketplace alternative to an adaptive strategy for preserving brand meaning and desired identity signals, rather than reflecting detachment from them.

Non-deceptive counterfeit purchase involves active consumer evaluation shaped by value perceptions, social signalling, perceived risk, moral rationalisation, and symbolic appeal (De Matos et al., 2007; Wilcox et al., 2009). Consequently, preferring genuine brands does not automatically preclude counterfeit consideration. Consumers may simultaneously value authentic brands and consider counterfeits for symbolic or

economic advantages (Bian and Haque, 2020). Building on these insights, this study examines authentic-brand loyalty and non-deceptive counterfeit purchase within a unified, strain-based framework, clarifying when consumers preserve loyalty versus become receptive to alternatives.

This study integrates these perspectives within a common framework of adaptive consumption under strain, recognizing that brand loyalty and counterfeit purchase may represent concurrent responses to the tension between identity maintenance and resource limitations (Bian and Haque, 2020; Wilcox *et al*., 2009). Internally, consumers strive for alignment between self-concept and consumption choices (Hillman *et al*., 2023; Swann, 1983). Although strong self-brand connections support brand loyalty during disruptive contexts (Rather et al., 2022; Toteva et al., 2024), consumer strain may alter how identity motives are enacted by making lower-cost symbolic alternatives more salient and more acceptable to consumers. Externally, social influence guides behaviour, as individuals seek to maintain social standing and signal valued identities (Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004; White and Argo, 2009). Under strain, counterfeits may function as symbolic substitutes, reshaping benefit-risk evaluations (Amaral and Loken, 2016; Khan *et al*., 2023; Marticotte and Arcand, 2017; Wilcox *et al*., 2009). What might otherwise be dismissed as inferior or morally questionable, may thus be reframed as a pragmatic identity-maintenance strategy (Mukherjee and Datta, 2025).

Drawing on self-verification and social exchange theories, this research conceptualises self-brand connection, social influence, and perceived counterfeit benefits and risks as complementary mechanisms shaping consumer responses under strain, offering a threefold contribution. First, it extends brand loyalty research by specifying how loyalty toward authentic brands operates under constraints and accessible symbolic alternatives. Second, it advances counterfeit consumption literature by demonstrating that non-

deceptive counterfeit purchase is a context-dependent response that may coexist with continued symbolic attachment to authentic brands. Third, it introduces a configurational view of consumer behaviour under strain by showing how identity motives, social pressures, and benefit-risk evaluations combine uniquely across loyalty and counterfeit-purchase outcomes.

2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

Major systemic disruptions can destabilise marketplaces by restricting product access, increasing uncertainty, and heightening sensitivity to economic and symbolic trade-offs (Hamilton *et al*., 2019). These conditions generate consumer strain, a context-specific state where financial pressure, marketplace disruption, and uncertainty constrain ordinary consumption choices. Under strain, consumers do not necessarily abandon identity motives. Instead, they may seek alternative ways to maintain self-continuity, social standing, and valued consumption meanings while adapting to restricted circumstances.

Within this context, loyalty toward authentic brands and non-deceptive counterfeit purchase represent different responses to the same underlying tension. Authentic-brand loyalty preserves continuity through continued engagement with a preferred brand (Oliver, 1999). Non-deceptive counterfeit purchases offer access to recognisable brand cues at lower cost, but lack the authenticity, quality assurance, and legitimacy of genuine brands (Wilcox *et al*., 2009). This framework does not treat counterfeiting as a psychological detachment from brand meaning or a simple opposite to loyalty. Rather, it views them as related outcomes shaped by identity maintenance and exchange evaluation under strain (Elsantil and Hamza, 2021).

To understand how consumers navigate these tensions, this research adopts internal and external perspectives on identity maintenance. Internally, self-verification theory posits

that individuals are motivated to maintain consistency between their self-concept and brand-related choices (Swann, 1983). Self-brand connections reinforce attachment to brands that express valued identities, even when circumstances become challenging. Externally, social influence shapes how consumers manage impressions and maintain social standing by signalling identities that align with how they wish to be seen (e.g., Cialdini and Goldstein 2004). Under strain, when identity-signalling resources are limited, the need to preserve favourable impressions becomes salient, prompting consumers to turn to lower-cost symbolic substitutes.

Complementing these identity perspectives, social exchange theory views behaviour as a subjective cost-benefit calculus where individuals seek to maximize rewards and minimize costs (Cropanzano *et al*., 2017). Strain fundamentally alters this calculus. While authentic loyalty yields symbolic rewards at high financial costs, non-deceptive counterfeits offer a low-cost alternative. Under strain, the benefits of a counterfeit (e.g., affordability, recognizable symbolism; Mishra and Mund, 2024) can outweigh its functional and reputational risks, transforming counterfeit purchase into a contextually viable, adaptive strategy to maintain identity signals (Stöttinger and Penz, 2015).

2.1. Internal Identity Maintenance

Self-verification theory suggests that individuals choose brands that confirm and express core aspects of who they are (Swann, 1983). In consumer marketing contexts, a primary vehicle for this validation is self-brand connection. This construct represents the extent to which a brand becomes embedded within a consumer's self-concept, linking meaningful identity elements to the brand (Escalas and Bettman, 2003; Toteva *et al*., 2024). When self-brand connection is strong, brands function as symbolic extensions of identity. They reflect consumers' values, personality, and social roles, helping consumers

maintain a coherent and continuous sense of self (Fournier, 1998).

This stabilizing role becomes more pronounced under strain. Marketplace disruption and heightened uncertainty challenge a consumer's self-coherence (Rather *et al*., 2022; Toteva *et al*., 2024). In these environments, brands strongly connected to the self serve as psychological anchors. These anchors help consumers preserve identity continuity despite contextual pressures (Rather *et al*., 2022; Verlegh *et al*., 2021). Consequently, consumers with stronger self-brand connections are more likely to remain loyal under strain.

H1. Self-brand connection is positively associated with loyalty toward authentic brands under strain conditions.

At the same time, strain may reduce access to genuine identity-relevant brands, increasing the appeal of more accessible symbolic substitutes. Conditions of consumer strain heighten resource constraints while leaving identity motives intact (Alonso *et al*., 2017; Khan *et al*., 2021). When preferred authentic brands become financially or situationally less accessible, consumers with strong identity needs may still seek ways to express and protect a coherent sense of self. Counterfeits can provide such an option because they offer lower-cost access to recognized brand symbolism (Ang *et al*., 2001; Randhawa *et al*., 2015). Despite their legal and ethical implications, counterfeits are often perceived as value-for-money substitutes capable of conveying partial status and identity signals, particularly when symbolic visibility outweighs objective authenticity (Jiang *et al*., 2023; Wilcox *et al*., 2009). Under these conditions, consumers who are highly attached to identity-relevant brands may turn to counterfeits as a pragmatic means of sustaining a coherent sense of self regardless of contextual constraints (Chand and Fei, 2021; Wang

et al., 2024). Accordingly, strong self-brand connections may increase the likelihood of counterfeit purchasing as a compensatory identity-maintenance strategy.

H2. Self-brand connection is positively associated with non-deceptive counterfeit purchase under strain conditions.

2.2. External Identity Maintenance

From an external perspective, consumption behaviour is shaped by social influence because individuals seek validation of their self-views from others and aim to maintain a coherent sense of self (Hillman *et al.*, 2023; Swann, 1983). In this sense, social influence reflects the extent to which consumers' choices are shaped by others' opinions, expectations and evaluations (Bhukya and Paul, 2023; Cialdini and Goldstein 2004), capturing outward-facing concerns with social standing and impression management (Jaeger and Schultz, 2017; Ozuem *et al*., 2021).

During periods of disruption and heightened uncertainty, consumers increasingly rely on social cues to reduce ambiguity and guide behaviour (Bhukya and Paul, 2023; Liu-Thompkins *et al*., 2022). This amplified sensitivity to others' opinions reinforces engagement with authentic brands that hold shared symbolic value, helping consumers maintain approval, avoid negative social evaluation, and project consistent identity-relevant signals (Jaeger and Schultz, 2017; Ozuem *et al*., 2021). Under consumer strain, resource constraints intensify the importance of protecting social standing, even as identity-related concerns continue to shape consumption (Mandel *et al.,* 2017). Therefore, consumers may feel greater pressure to align their consumption with how they wish to be perceived, strengthening consistent brand choices.

H3. Social influence is positively associated with loyalty toward authentic brands under strain conditions.

Consumers do not make consumption decisions in isolation; rather, their choices are shaped by the expectations and opinions of peers and reference groups (Bhukya and Paul, 2023; Wood and Hayes, 2012). When others' opinions matter, consumption acts as a means of managing impressions and signalling valued identity cues (Iyer *et al*., 2022; Jiang and Cova, 2012). Under consumer strain, access to preferred identity-signalling brands may become limited, while heightened uncertainty increases reliance on social cues and socially endorsed shortcuts to guide behaviour (Liu-Thompkins *et al.,* 2022). In such contexts, consumers who place strong importance on others' opinions may become more receptive to symbolic alternatives that allow them to maintain visible identity signals despite constraints (Priporas *et al.*, 2015).

Counterfeits can serve this role because they offer a low-cost avenue for accessing recognizable brand elements that carry social and identity-relevant meanings (Bian and Moutinho, 2011; Eisend and Schuchert-Güler, 2006; Shan *et al*., 2021). Even without full authenticity, these symbolic cues may help consumers present identity-consistent signals.

H4. Social influence is positively associated with non-deceptive counterfeit purchase under strain conditions.

2.3. Exchange Evaluation

While identity-based perspectives explain why consumers seek continuity, social exchange theory clarifies how they evaluate their options under strain. Under these conditions, the salience of exchange value increases, forcing consumers to weigh the symbolic benefits of counterfeits against their functional and moral risks (Wenzel *et al*., 2021). Beyond economic savings, acceptable functional quality and accessible brand cues (Perez *et al*., 2010; Wilcox *et al*., 2009), consumers under strain may rationalise non-

deceptive counterfeit purchases through a “Robin Hood” effect, framing their behaviour as justified resistance to unfair premium pricing (Poddar *et al.*, 2012). When these perceived benefits are salient, consumer evaluations may shift. This re-prioritization is intensified by the uncertainty, stress, and constraints of marketplace disruption, where consumers seek financial relief without sacrificing symbolic or hedonic rewards (Davari *et al*., 2022; Gordon-Wilson, 2022).

H5a. Counterfeit perceived benefits are negatively associated with loyalty toward authentic brands under strain conditions.

H5b. Counterfeit perceived benefits are positively associated with non-deceptive counterfeit purchase under strain conditions.

Perceived counterfeit risk is included as part of the exchange-evaluation logic rather than as a standalone novel predictor. In counterfeit research, perceived risk refers to the anticipated negative consequences associated with buying or using non-deceptive counterfeits, including functional, psychological, social, and ethical drawbacks (Veloutsou and Bian, 2008). Functional risk arises because counterfeit products may fail to deliver expected quality, durability, or performance (Bian and Moutinho, 2009). Affective and moral risk may also emerge when consumers experience discomfort or dissonance from engaging in ethically questionable consumption (Gregory-Smith et al., 2013). Reputational risk is particularly relevant when consumers fear embarrassment or negative social evaluation if the counterfeit nature of the product becomes visible to others (Jiang et al., 2023). Under strain, these risks remain important because consumers may become more attentive to potential losses and less willing to tolerate uncertain outcomes (Chiang and Xiao, 2017). However, in the present framework, the key issue is not only whether risk discourages counterfeit purchase, but whether it operates

symmetrically across the two outcomes. Avoiding counterfeits because they are risky does not necessarily imply stronger loyalty toward authentic brands. Therefore, perceived risk may function primarily as a deterrent to counterfeit engagement rather than as a positive driver of authentic-brand commitment. As such:

H6a. Counterfeit perceived risks are positively associated with loyalty toward authentic brands under strain conditions.

H6b. Counterfeit perceived risks are negatively associated with non-deceptive counterfeit purchase under strain conditions.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Context and Design

Data were collected post-pandemic using a cross-sectional online questionnaire. Respondents were instructed to recall and reflect on their purchasing behaviour during the pandemic, using it as the reference strain context. The pandemic serves as an ideal bounded disruption that constrained consumer choices through uncertainty, limited marketplace access, and resource pressure (Zwanka and Buff, 2021), intensifying the tension between maintaining identity-consistent consumption and adapting to constrained circumstances. This procedure ensured constructs were assessed in relation to a common, lived strain episode rather than as abstract or context-free attitudes. Participation was voluntary, anonymous and conducted with informed consent.

3.2. Sample and Data Collection

Due to the lack of a comprehensive sampling frame for post-strain consumer behaviours, a non-probabilistic snowball sampling strategy was adopted. Network-based recruitment is well-established in consumer research when probability sampling is impractical (e.g.,

Meyer and Manika, 2017). This approach enhances feasibility and participation while allowing access to respondents with relevant strain consumption experiences. Consistent with established practice in crisis and counterfeit research (e.g., Nkuna *et al*., 2024; Pueschel *et al*., 2017), theoretical mechanism testing rather than statistical generalizability guided the sampling strategy. The final sample comprises 177 valid responses after removing incomplete cases. Respondents were predominantly female (74.6%), young adults aged 18-25 years (38.4%) or 26-35 years (26%), single (60.5%), and college educated (54.8%). A sensitivity power analysis for the SEM component indicates that with N = 177 and nine predictors (including controls) per endogenous construct, the sample is adequately powered to detect medium-sized effects, although small effects may remain difficult to detect. Consequently, nonsignificant paths are interpreted conservatively as indicating the absence of a robust direct net association within this sample, rather than as definitive evidence that the mechanisms are irrelevant.

3.3. Instrument Development and Measures

The survey instrument followed established procedures (Hair *et al*., 2019). Three branding scholars assessed face validity, clarity, and response format, and a pilot study refined wording and survey flow. Translation and back-translation ensured linguistic equivalence. All constructs used established multi-item scales, adapted where necessary to fit the study context while preserving original conceptual meanings. For the counterfeit-related measures, the questionnaire defined “counterfeit or imitation products” as products knowingly purchased despite not being genuine, using respondent-friendly terminology to improve comprehension and reduce social desirability bias. This phrasing was applied uniformly across the counterfeit-related scales. Appendix A reports the constructs’ item wordings and sources. Control variables included age, gender,

education, income, and social status. All items were measured using a seven-point Likert-type response format ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

3.4. Common Method Bias

Common method bias was mitigated through procedural and statistical remedies. Ex ante, the survey ensured respondent anonymity, carefully worded items, and separation of predictor and criterion items to reduce evaluation apprehension and response consistency effects. Ex post, Harman's single-factor test and a confirmatory single-factor model indicated poor fit (the first factor accounted for only 18% of the total variance, and $\chi^2_{(209)} = 1357.45$, $p = 0.00$; CFI = 0.34; IFI = 0.34; TLI = 0.27; RMSEA = 0.18), suggesting that common method variance is unlikely to drive the observed relationships.

3.5. Analytical Strategy

The study combines SEM and fsQCA because the two approaches address different but complementary questions. SEM estimates the average direct net association between each predictor and the outcomes, making it appropriate for testing the hypothesised directional relationships. However, consumer responses under strain may not follow a purely additive logic. Different consumers may arrive at similar outcomes through different combinations of identity-related and evaluative conditions. Accordingly, fsQCA was used to identify configurational pathways sufficient for loyalty toward authentic brands and non-deceptive counterfeit purchase. This combination allows the analysis to distinguish between direct net effects and conjunctural patterns, thereby clarifying whether unsupported SEM paths may still matter conditionally in specific configurations.

4. Results

4.1. Structural Equation Modelling

SEM analyses were conducted using maximum likelihood estimation. The measurement model, assessed to establish reliability and validity, demonstrated an appropriate fit ($\chi^2_{(149)} = 265.20$, p = 0.00, CFI = 0.93, IFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.90, RMSEA = 0.07) (Hair *et al*., 2019). All constructs met the recommended thresholds for composite reliability, average variance extracted, and Cronbach's alpha and discriminant validity was confirmed. Descriptive statistics and correlations are presented in Table I.

Table I. Means, standard deviations, and correlations

	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**	**11**
1. Self-brand connection	**0.71**										
2. Social influence	0.40**	**0.87**									
3. Counterfeit perceived benefits	0.19**	0.17*	**0.82**								
4. Counterfeit perceived risk	0.01	0.08	0.32**	**0.75**							

5. Brand loyalty under strain conditions	0.26**	0.22**	-0.12	0.02	**0.71**						
6.Counterfeit purchases under strain conditions	0.13	0.07	0.32**	-0.04	-0.28**	**0.85**					
7. Age	-0.16*	-0.28**	-0.08	0.16*	-0.07	-0.03	-				
8. Gender	0.13	-0.12	0.10	0.15	0.02	-0.06	0.17*	-			
9. Education	0.27**	0.29**	0.12	0.01	0.27**	0.11	-0.37**	-0.12	-		
10. Income	0.06	-0.05	-0.05	-0.01	0.26**	-0.14	0.10	0.46**	0.09	-	
11. Social status	-0.29**	-0.24**	0.07	0.16*	-0.14	0.23**	0.63**	-0.02	-0.23**	-0.02	-
Mean	2.41	2.94	2.82	3.39	2.85	2.05	2.33	1.25	5.18	2.39	1.47
SD	1.22	1.18	1.32	1.39	1.16	1.18	1.43	0.44	1.12	0.7	0.6

										2	5
Composite reliability	0.75	0.86	0.86	0.71	0.75	0.91	-	-	-	-	-
Average variance extracted	0.51	0.76	0.67	0.56	0.50	0.72	-	-	-	-	-
Cronbach alpha	0.76	0.85	0.86	0.70	0.70	0.90	-	-	-	-	-

** sig. 0.01; * sig 0.05 (2 tails); the square root of AVE is in bold on the top diagonal.

Source: Authors own work

To test the proposed relationships, two models were estimated, each exhibiting a good fit. The control model explained 11.6% of the variance in brand loyalty and 13.2% in counterfeit purchase, while the final model explains 47,8% and 24%, respectively.

Table II reports standardised estimates, p-values, and hypothesis. H1 is supported, indicating a positive association between self-brand connection and loyalty toward authentic brands under strain ($\beta = 0.67$, $p = 0.004$). H2 is not supported, as self-brand connection is not significantly associated with non-deceptive counterfeit purchase ($\beta = 0.09$, $p = 0.362$). Social influence is not significantly associated with either loyalty toward authentic brands ($\beta = -0.11$, $p=0.382$) or non-deceptive counterfeit purchase ($\beta = 0.04$, $p = 0.682$), providing no support for H3 or H4. Counterfeit perceived benefits are negatively associated with loyalty toward authentic brands ($\beta = -0.34$, $p<0.001$) and positively associated with non-deceptive counterfeit purchase ($\beta = 0.32$, $p<0.001$), supporting H5a and H5b. Counterfeit perceived risks are negatively associated with non-deceptive

counterfeit purchase (β = −0.20, p = 0.044), supporting H6b. However, the association between counterfeit perceived risks and loyalty toward authentic brands is marginal (β = 0.19, p = 0.061), not supporting H6a at the conventional 0.05 level.

The non-significant SEM paths for social influence require a cautious interpretation. These results indicate that social influence does not operate as a robust direct net predictor of either loyalty toward authentic brands or non-deceptive counterfeit purchase under strain. However, this does not necessarily mean that social influence is irrelevant. Because social influence may depend on how consumers simultaneously evaluate counterfeit benefits, risks, and identity-related motives, its role may be conjunctural rather than additive. The fsQCA analysis therefore provides an important complementary test of H3 and H4 by examining whether social influence appears within specific configurations associated with high or low loyalty and high or low counterfeit purchase.

Table II. Structural Equation Modelling Results

	Hypothesis	**Control model**	**Final model**
Self-brand connection (Self) → Brand loyalty under strain conditions (Loy)	H1		0.67 (0.004)
Self → Non-deceptive counterfeit purchases under strain conditions (Count)	H2		0.09 (0.362)
Social influence (Social) → Loy	H3		-0.11 (0.382)

Social → Count	H4		0.04 (0.682)
Non-deceptive counterfeit perceived benefits (CBenef) → Loy	H5a		-0.34 (0.000)
CBenef → Count	H5b		0.32 (0.000)
Non-deceptive counterfeit perceived risk (CRisk) → Loy	H6a		0.19 (0.061)
CRisk → Count	H6b		-0.20 (0.044)
Controls			
Age → Loy		0.11 (0.324)	-0.09 (0.436)
Age → Count		-0.28 (0.006)	-0.22 (0.032)
Gender → Loy		-0.04 (0.710)	-0.12 (0.223)
Gender → Count		0.06 (0.511)	0.03 (0.769)

Education → Loy		0.22 (0.015)	0.10 (0.234)
Education → Count		0.10 (0.232)	0.01 (0.936)
Income → Loy		0.20 (0.037)	0.14 (0.109)
Income → Count		-0.14 (0.106)	-0.09 (0.281)
Social status → Loy		-0.17 (0.112)	0.06 (0.612)
Social status → Count		0.41 (0.000)	0.44 (0.000)

Note: The table shows the standard estimates and p-values (2-tails)

Control model ($\chi^2_{(66)}$=134.73; p=0.00; CFI=0.94; IFI=0.94; TLI=0.91; RMSEA=0.08)

Final model ($\chi^2_{(149)}$=246.78; p=0.00; CFI=0.94; IFI=0.95; TLI=0.91; RMSEA=0.06)

Source: Authors own work

4.2. Configurational Analysis

fsQCA identified the necessary conditions and sufficient configurations associated with loyalty toward authentic brands and non-deceptive counterfeit purchase under strain. Continuous variables were calibrated into fuzzy sets using the direct method, with the 25th, 50th and 75th percentiles serving as the thresholds for full non-membership, the crossover point, and full membership, respectively. Analyses were conducted separately

for the presence and absence of each outcome to account for causal asymmetry (Ragin, 2009). Necessary condition analysis using a consistency threshold of 0.90 revealed that no single condition or negated condition qualified as necessary for either outcome. Therefore, analysis proceeded to sufficient configurations.

For loyalty toward authentic brands, the results identified two configurations for high loyalty and three for low loyalty. The high-loyalty configurations show that loyalty under strain may emerge through more than one route. One configuration is characterised by low perceived counterfeit risk, while another features low self-brand connection. The latter indicates that some consumers may remain loyal under strain through non-identity mechanisms, such as routinised choice, inertia, or low engagement with counterfeit alternatives. Conversely, low loyalty configurations consistently involve either high social influence or high perceived counterfeit benefits, suggesting that loyalty toward authentic brands is particularly vulnerable when consumers perceive counterfeits as beneficial or when social influence redirects consumption away from stable brand commitment.

For non-deceptive counterfeit purchase, one configuration explained high purchase while three explained low purchase. The high-purchase pathway is centred on high perceived counterfeit benefits, consistent with the SEM results. However, low-purchase configurations consistently involve low perceived counterfeit benefits, combined alternatively with high social influence, low perceived risk, or low self-brand connection. This configurational evidence suggests a clear substantive pattern: perceived benefits are the main condition separating counterfeit receptiveness from avoidance, whereas social influence and identity-related conditions dictate how these benefit evaluations operate across distinct consumer segments. Table III shows the configurational analysis results.

Table III. Configurations Analysis Results

Condition	**High brand loyalty**		**Low brand loyalty**		
	Configuration				
	C1	**C2**	**C3**	**C4**	**C5**
AvSelfRef		⊗	⊗		
AvSocInf				●	
AvCBenef					●
AvCRisk	⊗				
Consistency	0.67	0.61	0.70	0.66	0.72
Raw coverage	0.65	0.62	0.68	0.64	0.67
Unique coverage	0.09	0.06	0.12	0.05	0.04
Overall solution consistency	0.89		0.93		
Overall solution coverage	0.60		0.61		

Condition	**High counterfeit purchases**	**Low counterfeit purchases**		
	Configuration			
	C1	**C2**	**C3**	**C4**

AvSelfRef				⊗
AvSocInf		●		
AvCBenef	●	⊗	⊗	⊗
AvCRisk			⊗	
Consistency	0.72	0.79	0.78	0.84
Raw coverage	0.74	0.48	0.53	0.78
Unique coverage	0.74	0.04	0.02	0.02
Overall solution consistency		0.93		
Overall solution coverage		0.61		

Note: ~ represents the absence of a condition. Black circles ("●") indicate the "presence" of a condition, and circles with an X ("⊗") indicate its "absence".

Source: Authors own work

The configurational results clarify the role of social influence more explicitly than the net-effect model. For loyalty toward authentic brands, two configurations were associated with high loyalty and three with low loyalty. High loyalty did not depend on social influence as a central condition, which is consistent with the SEM finding that H3 was not supported as a direct relationship. Instead, loyalty under strain appears to be explained primarily by identity anchoring and by the absence of attractive counterfeit alternatives. This indicates that social influence does not generally strengthen loyalty toward authentic brands in the way proposed by H3.

However, social influence becomes relevant in the configurations explaining low loyalty. In particular, one low-loyalty pathway includes high social influence, suggesting that socially sensitive consumers may be more vulnerable to external pressures that redirect consumption away from stable authentic-brand commitment. This finding does not support H3 in its original positive form. Rather, it qualifies H3 by showing that social influence matters conditionally and may weaken, rather than strengthen, authentic-brand loyalty when it operates together with other strain-related evaluations. Thus, the configurational evidence helps explain why social influence was not significant in SEM: its effect is not uniform across consumers but depends on the broader constellation of identity and exchange conditions.

For non-deceptive counterfeit purchase, the high-purchase configuration is centred on high perceived counterfeit benefits, supporting the SEM evidence that perceived benefits are the clearest driver of counterfeit receptiveness. Social influence does not appear as a central condition in the high-purchase pathway, which explains why H4 was not supported in the SEM model. Therefore, social influence does not generally increase counterfeit purchase under strain.

Nevertheless, social influence is important in one configuration associated with low counterfeit purchase. Specifically, when perceived counterfeit benefits are low, the presence of social influence contributes to counterfeit avoidance. This result qualifies H4 by showing that social influence does not necessarily encourage counterfeit purchase; instead, socially sensitive consumers may avoid counterfeits when these products offer insufficient symbolic or economic payoff. In such cases, social influence may amplify concerns about social evaluation and reputational exposure rather than promote counterfeit adoption. Overall, the fsQCA results show that H3 and H4 are not supported

as direct positive effects, but they remain theoretically relevant because social influence shapes consumer responses conditionally within specific configurational pathways.

5. Discussion

This study examined how consumers respond to strain when identity-consistent consumption becomes more difficult. By distinguishing loyalty toward authentic brands from non-deceptive counterfeit purchase, the findings clarify that these outcomes are related but not simple opposites. Consumers may remain loyal to authentic brands, become receptive to counterfeits, or avoid counterfeits depending on how identity connection, social influence, and perceived counterfeit benefits and risks combine under constraint.

The results support three main conclusions. First, self-brand connection remains a strong stabilising mechanism for loyalty toward authentic brands under strain. Second, perceived counterfeit benefits are the clearest predictor of counterfeit receptiveness and also weaken loyalty toward authentic brands. Third, social influence does not exert a uniform direct effect, but it matters conditionally in configurational pathways. These findings refine both loyalty and counterfeit research by showing that strain does not simply erode loyalty or increase counterfeit purchase; rather, it changes the conditions under which identity and exchange evaluations shape consumer responses.

In more detail, findings confirm that self-brand connection is positively associated with loyalty under strain, consistent with self-verification theory and prior evidence that identity-relevant brands provide stability in uncertain contexts (e.g., Malär *et al.*, 2011). However, the configurational analysis unveils a more intricate picture. While one pathway includes strong self-brand connection within high-loyalty solutions, another

indicates that high loyalty can also arise when self-brand connection is low. To interpret this pathway, reflecting the principle of equifinality, we look beyond identity-based interpretations. Under strain, loyalty may also be supported by alternative mechanisms that account for this configuration. These include habit and inertia, which simplify decision-making in demanding conditions (Olsen *et al.*, 2013), or perceived switching costs, which make maintaining one's preferred brand a comparatively safer or more efficient option (Burnham *et al.*, 2003; Evanschitzky *et al*., 2022). Regarding non-deceptive counterfeit purchases, results indicate that the sense of self is not a central issue. Although counterfeits can be considered alternatives, they do not fully replace genuine brands in identity expression, consistent with Castaño and Perez (2014).

The lack of support for H2 indicates that self-brand connection does not directly drive counterfeit purchasing. Consumers with strong self-brand connection rely on brands for self-expression and may not view counterfeits as viable self-verifying substitutes. Although counterfeits replicate visible brand cues, they lack the authentic brand meaning required to validate the self-concept (Castaño and Perez, 2014). Under strain, self-brand connection appears to stabilise loyalty toward authentic brands rather than a path to alternative consumption.

The findings regarding social influence refine the proposed hypotheses and constitute a central contribution of the study. H3 and H4 proposed that social influence would positively predict loyalty toward authentic brands and non-deceptive counterfeit purchase, respectively. The SEM results do not support these hypotheses, indicating that social influence does not exert a uniform direct effect under strain. However, the fsQCA results show that social influence remains theoretically meaningful when interpreted configurationally. For loyalty, social influence appears in a low-loyalty pathway, suggesting that external social pressure may destabilise authentic-brand commitment

rather than reinforce it. For counterfeit purchase, social influence appears in a low-purchase pathway when perceived counterfeit benefits are weak, suggesting that socially sensitive consumers may avoid counterfeits when these products fail to provide sufficient symbolic or economic value. These findings extend social influence research by showing that, under strain, social influence does not operate as a simple positive driver of consumption responses. Instead, it functions as a conditional mechanism whose effect depends on the perceived benefits of counterfeits and the broader identity-evaluation context in which consumers make decisions.

Perceived counterfeit benefits and risks reveal the clearest exchange-based pattern: benefits weaken loyalty toward authentic brands while increasing non-deceptive counterfeit purchase, indicating that strain heightens the salience of economic savings and symbolic access (e.g., Bian and Moutinho, 2009). When counterfeits are perceived as offering value for money, acceptable functionality, or access to desired brand cues, consumers may become more willing to compromise authenticity (Wilcox et al., 2009). The configurational analysis refines this insight. Low brand loyalty appears when benefits are high, reflecting the appeal of symbolic or economic gains under constraints (Wilcox *et al*., 2009). Interestingly, loyalty can coexist with low counterfeit risk, suggesting that emotional attachment, habitual purchasing or switching-cost considerations may override risk perceptions (Albert *et al.*, 2008; Kuikka *et al*., 2025). Benefits emerge as a condition for counterfeit purchase: consumers only consider counterfeits whey they perceive some symbolic or economic value. In contrast, low counterfeit use consistently appears in configurations characterized by weak perceived benefits, an effect amplified when low benefits co-occur with high social influence, low self-brand connection, or low perceived risk. These combinations indicate that, under strain, different mechanisms can compound the discouraging effect of low benefits. For example, concerns about social evaluation

may lead socially sensitive consumers to avoid options that offer limited symbolic payoff (Razmus *et al.*, 2024), while reliance on authentic brands for identity anchoring (Malär *et al*., 2011) or the absence of identity-based ties further reduce the appeal of counterfeit alternatives.

The findings concerning perceived counterfeit risk should be interpreted as a boundary condition rather than as a standalone contribution. Consistent with prior counterfeit research, perceived risk significantly reduces non-deceptive counterfeit purchase. This result confirms that concerns about functional failure, reputational exposure, guilt, embarrassment, or other negative consequences continue to discourage counterfeit engagement under strain. However, the more informative finding is that perceived risk does not significantly strengthen loyalty toward authentic brands. This asymmetry suggests that risk operates primarily as a deterrent to counterfeit purchase rather than as a loyalty-building mechanism. In other words, consumers may avoid counterfeits because they perceive them as risky, but this avoidance does not automatically translate into stronger commitment to authentic brands. This distinction helps clarify the broader argument of the study: under strain, loyalty and counterfeit avoidance are related but not equivalent outcomes. The benefit side of the exchange evaluation weakens loyalty and increases counterfeit purchase, whereas the risk side mainly suppresses counterfeit purchase without clearly reinforcing authentic-brand loyalty.

6. Conclusion

Theoretically, this study contributes to consumer behaviour and marketing research in three ways. First, it refines loyalty research by showing that loyalty toward authentic brands remains meaningful under strain, but its drivers must be understood in relation to constrained symbolic alternatives. Self-brand connection continues to support loyalty,

while perceived counterfeit benefits weaken loyalty by making alternative symbolic consumption more attractive. Second, the study advances counterfeit consumption research by positioning non-deceptive counterfeit purchase within a broader identity-and-exchange framework. Rather than treating counterfeit purchase simply as the opposite of authentic-brand loyalty, the findings show that counterfeit receptiveness is primarily activated when perceived benefits are salient, while perceived risks mainly operate as deterrents. Third, the study demonstrates that direct net effects and configurational pathways provide complementary insights. This configurational view helps explain why some theoretically plausible predictors, such as social influence, do not operate as uniform direct effects but become meaningful within specific combinations of identity-related and exchange-evaluation conditions.

Managerially, the findings suggest that brands dealing with strain must reinforce authentic-brand meaning while reducing the perceived attractiveness of counterfeits. Because self-brand connection supports loyalty, managers should emphasise identity-relevant brand narratives, community belonging, and continuity with consumers' values. However, loyalty cannot be protected by identity appeals alone. Since perceived counterfeit benefits weaken loyalty and increase counterfeit purchase, managers must minimize the perceived value gap between genuine and counterfeit options by communicating quality assurance, after-sales support, durability, ethical production, and authenticity cues. Finally, because perceived risk discourages counterfeit purchase more effectively than it strengthens authentic loyalty, anti-counterfeit communication should avoid relying solely on fear appeals. Instead, practitioners should combine risk communication with positive, value-driven incentives to remain loyal to authentic brands.

This study has limitations that create opportunities for future research. First, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference. Future studies could use longitudinal or

experimental designs to examine how loyalty and counterfeit purchase evolve as strain fluctuates. Second, while the pandemic provided a theoretically appropriate context combining uncertainty, access restrictions, and financial pressure, other forms of strain may produce divergent consumer patterns. Future research could compare these findings against inflationary pressure, unemployment, supply shortages, or personal financial shocks. Third, the sample featured a high proportion of female respondents. Although the study provides valuable insights into consumer responses under strain, the predominance of female participants may limit the generalisability of the findings. Future research should replicate the proposed framework using larger and more gender-balanced samples. Finally, while the sample size yielded adequate statistical power to detect medium and large effects, it possessed limited power to capture smaller effects. Consequently, the non-significant structural paths should be interpreted cautiously and re-examined in future studies to fully test their boundary conditions.

Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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