

“From The Street to The Screen: Fake Luxury Moves Online”

When Ava Mendenhall, a law office runner, was delivering papers to Baton Rouge City Hall wearing her Louis Vuitton Neverfull bag, she didn't expect to be shamed.

“Someone muttered ‘DHgate trash fake’ as they passed me,” she said while laughing, “I was surprised, of course, but not offended. I kind of also assume everyone wears fake bags now.”

Buying counterfeits is far from new, but its reach has expanded dramatically. What used to be a secretive practice of buying fake bags on city street corners has moved to online marketplaces and hauls promoted by influencers.

On DHgate, a Chinese wholesale app, a Louis Vuitton Neverfull tote that sells for more than \$2,000 is available for less than \$100. Scroll farther and shoppers can find Hermès belts, Tiffany jewelry and Prada handbags just a few clicks away for similar deals.

For college students like Mendenhall, this trend is changing how they view luxury. For her, the cost is only one factor playing a role in the decision to buy fakes. In addition to the low cost, she said she can wear fake bags without worrying about ruining them and she says she views buying an authentic bag as a long-term investment.

According to a 2022 study conducted by the European Union Intellectual Property Office on young people buying counterfeit goods, cost is what motivated 48% of respondents to buy fakes.

Danielle Honeycutt, a fashion trends and textiles professor at LSU, says that idea is common in Generation Z consumers. Part of the problem, she said, is that luxury brands market to the masses knowing their prices are out of reach.

“If you open any fashion magazine or walk past a building in New York, you’ll see designer ads,” Honeycutt said, “They want everyone to want their products, but only a fraction of people can afford them.”

Honeycutt says she sees the counterfeit culture as a mix of rebellion to this and resourcefulness. “I’m not a fashion purist,” she said, “while I wouldn’t purchase counterfeits, I understand why people do, and fashion shouldn’t be limited to the 1% that can afford it.”

According to Entrupy’s State of the Fake 2025 report, the global counterfeit economy is worth \$464 billion, or 2.5% of world trade. In the Americas, the top three faked brands are (in order) Louis Vuitton, Gucci and Chanel.

Entrupy is an AI tool used by most luxury brands to authenticate items sold online. Some clients include Chanel, Gucci, Prada and Dior. The company claims to have 99.81% accuracy when authenticating items.

Other companies have modeled off this business. At Swap Boutique, a high-end consignment store in Baton Rouge, authentication is everything for their customers these days.

Emma Martin, an employee at the boutique, said they use the tool Real Authentication to preserve trust for their customers.

“We had a navy Ferragamo bag come in that looked so real, but, unfortunately, it failed both authentications,” Martin said. She said they take it seriously and no matter how well the bag

would sell, the boutique won't risk it. Martin said the authentication label is a comfort to both the customers and the business.

Entrupy's report states that \$61 million worth of luxury goods in the U.S. last year were counterfeit. For small businesses like Swap Boutique, selling a fake bag could mean losing customers and trust.

Others thrive off the business of counterfeits.

Influencers on social media have built a following by sharing DHgate hauls in collaboration with the sellers on the app. According to DHgate's affiliate program, anyone can share specific links to an audience and make a commission when the item is purchased.

Content creator Sydney Manning says sellers reach out directly and offer free bags to review. Manning, who makes mostly fashion and lifestyle videos, said her DHgate reviews bring in the most attention, with one video reaching over 116,000 views.

While influencers try to grow from this content, TikTok attempts to crack down on the counterfeit culture by removing posts that explicitly mention DHgate. To avoid detection, influencers name their videos "gate hauls" or "yellow app finds," referencing the website's yellow logo. These code terms signal to the viewers what they're showing without being flagged.

"There's a huge audience for it, but people have to know where to look," Manning said.

Major luxury houses have also attempted to end the selling and trade of counterfeit goods through legal action. In Singapore this year, a High Court ordered an Instagram seller to pay Louis Vuitton \$200,000 in damages after selling and promoting fake goods on their account as authentic, according to *The Straits Times*.

Despite efforts to end knockoff culture, Honeycutt says she sees no real change happening unless alternative options are introduced. Gen Z, she said, has established that knockoffs are overall bad, but, since everyone else is buying them, it won't stop.

According to the EUIPO report, 31% of young people said they would stop buying fake if they had access to affordable alternatives.

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