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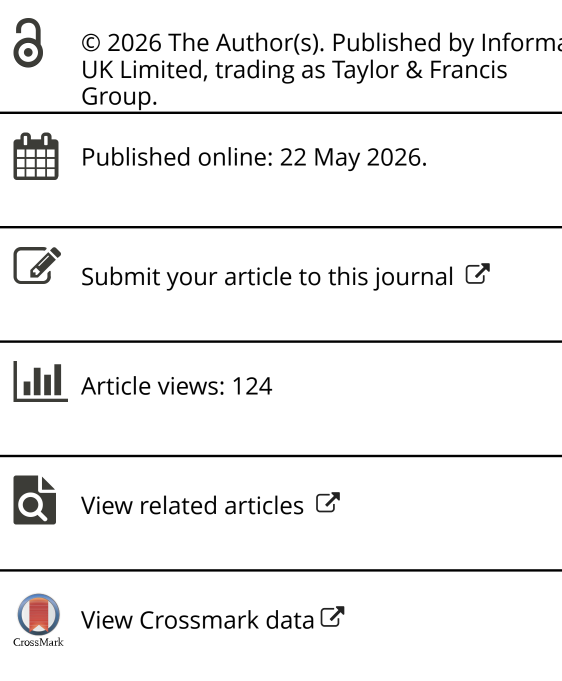

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Counterfeit couture: epistemic contestations through fake luxury in Pakistani bazaars

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ABSTRACT

This study examines counterfeit luxury consumption in Pakistani bazaars through a postcolonial lens, asking how do market practices simultaneously reproduce and resist colonial epistemologies of authenticity? Drawing on 30 in-depth interviews, we identify three mechanisms. First, *epistemic layering* refers to the accumulation of dominant Western knowledge systems over local ways of knowing, creating hierarchies that bury rather than erase indigenous authentication practices. Second, *stratified consciousness* captures how market actors hold multiple, hierarchically organised knowledge systems and exercise *epistemological mobility* by strategically traversing these strata depending on context. Third, *mimetic resistance* describes how marginalised actors use imitation to contest economic exclusion yet inadvertently reinforce dominant brand hierarchies rooted in colonial authentication standards. These mechanisms advance authentication scholarship by showing how colonial power relations shape legitimacy, extend postcolonial consumer research by specifying cognitive effects of epistemological multiplicity, and reconceptualise resistance as potentially reinforcing what it opposes.

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Counterfeit consumption; luxury brands; postcolonial theory; epistemic layering; stratified consciousness; mimetic resistance

Introduction

Look closely at the shirt I am wearing . . . can you tell if it is a real *Next* shirt or a counterfeit? . . . .But that [distinguishing authentic from fake] is not the real problem. The real question is: who gets to decide what counts as real and what counts as fake [*asli kaun aur nakli kaun*]? When my cousin buys an expensive brand shirt, people respect him. When I buy the same brand and design for less money [fake], suddenly it's wrong . . . .The truth is that both of us are just trying to look good at what we can afford. (Interviewee 9, consumer)

This reflection foregrounds a central paradox of the counterfeit market. What appears, at first glance, to be a simple distinction between real and fake quickly develops into a question of authority and judgement. The market actor does not deny the existence of counterfeits. Instead, they challenge the moral and social weight attached to the distinction, asking who has the power to define authenticity and why that definition carries social respect for some consumers but stigma for

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others. This challenge unsettles the binaries through which marketing discourse typically organises consumption, such as authentic versus fake (Hamelin et al., 2013), legitimate versus illegitimate (D'Amato & Papadimitriou, 2013), and ethical versus unethical (Bian et al., 2016). These binaries present themselves as objective classifications, yet they function as normative judgements that sort consumers, practices, and markets into hierarchies of value. As Hietanen et al. (2020) note, such categories are not neutral or universal. They are produced in specific historical contexts and gain authority through repetition within academic, managerial, and regulatory discourses.

From this perspective, the policing of authenticity does more than protect brands or intellectual property. It institutionalises a historically situated set of assumptions about originality, ownership, and legitimacy, which crystallised through the global expansion of Euro-American market systems and continue to shape how value is recognised. In this sense, what appears as a neutral standard of authenticity reflects the consumption norms codified through European colonialism, while marginalising alternative understandings grounded in affordability, imitation, or pragmatic self-presentation (Abid et al., 2023; Sandikci, 2022). Postcolonial scholars describe this process, whereby dominant epistemologies displace or invalidate local ways of knowing, as *epistemic violence* (Spivak, 1988).

This epistemological ordering finds a clear expression in the global luxury brand market. Dominant conglomerates assert exclusive ownership over designs, symbols, and production methods, constructing hierarchies of value that position their products as authentic (Morhart & Malar, 2020) while casting all alternatives as inferior fakes (Penz & Stöttinger, 2008). By taking these hierarchies as given rather than historically produced, marketing scholarship has largely approached counterfeit consumption through lenses that reinforce, rather than examine, dominant epistemologies that have achieved institutional authority through colonial and postcolonial economic arrangements. This pattern extends beyond scholarship produced in Euro-American contexts but also to research conducted globally that adopts these epistemologies uncritically, including work emerging from postcolonial nations themselves (Varman & Saha, 2009). The issue is not geographic origin but epistemological orientation.

Research on the drivers of counterfeit consumption (Wilcox et al., 2009), its ethical framing (Bian et al., 2016), and brand dilution effects (Sun, 2015) largely operates in knowledge systems that treat codified intellectual property regimes as given. These regimes, originating in 19th-century European commercial law and exported through colonialism (Hesse, 2002), function as an unquestioned baseline. This orientation does not simply guide analysis; it defines the terms through which counterfeiting becomes thinkable. As a result, even critical accounts that position counterfeiting as resistance (Hietanen et al., 2020) remain tethered to the same conceptual ground, often overlooking how the categories that render such resistance intelligible also reproduce colonial power relations.

A postcolonial lens unsettles these categories, exposing their contingency and the hierarchies they sustain. In doing so, it redirects attention from what counts as authentic or fake to who has the authority to decide. As Varman and Saha (2009) argue, this reflects a broader process of epistemological colonisation, where Western[1] knowledge structures are adopted as universal, marginalising alternative understandings of markets. Colonial epistemologies, in this sense, denote knowledge systems

formed during European colonial expansion and later institutionalised through legal, educational, and market arrangements that continue to delegitimize other ways of knowing (Bhambra, 2014).

This postcolonial reframing, however, raises a methodological tension. It risks flattening complexity by grouping diverse practices and perspectives under broad categories. Yet this simplification is intentional. Following Spivak's (1993) notion of strategic essentialism, we use it provisionally as an analytic device, not as a claim about cultural homogeneity. Its purpose is to bring into view the power-laden epistemological hierarchies that otherwise remain obscured. For instance, the category 'Western' is far from uniform. French heritage houses differ from American lifestyle brands, and luxury conglomerates from Japan, South Korea, and China increasingly mobilise similar authentication logics (Tungate, 2009). The distinction we draw between dominant and subordinate epistemologies does not map neatly onto geography. Instead, it traces how certain knowledge systems have acquired institutional authority through colonial and capitalist expansion, regardless of where they are now situated. The binary at stake is not West/non-West, but the hierarchy that legitimises some authentication practices while marginalising others: a distinction we have explained in endnote 1.

This hierarchy becomes visible not in abstraction but in everyday market settings, where its assumptions are taken up, reworked, or quietly set aside. Nowhere is this clearer than in Pakistani bazaars, the informal marketplaces where counterfeit goods circulate in ways that unsettle Western distinctions between the authentic and the fake. Rather than simply reproducing these distinctions, bazaar exchanges expose the tensions they carry by raising sharper questions: how authenticity is constructed, whose knowledge confers legitimacy, and which forms of economic activity are marked as criminal or worthy. Against this backdrop, we ask: *How do market practices in Pakistani bazaars simultaneously reproduce and resist colonial epistemologies of authenticity*? Drawing on a qualitative study of consumers, retailers, and manufacturers involved in counterfeit luxury clothing, we trace how market actors manage these tensions. The analysis shows that colonial knowledge structures persist, but not uncontested.

We contribute to postcolonial consumer research through three theoretical mechanisms that explain how market practices in Pakistani bazaars simultaneously reproduce and resist colonial epistemologies. First, *epistemic layering* describes a process in which knowledge systems shaped by colonial legacies gradually accumulate over local ways of knowing. These dominant systems privilege written documentation over oral testimony, standardised measurement over embodied judgement, and individual ownership over collective stewardship. Rather than fully displacing indigenous knowledge, they settle above it, producing a hierarchy of epistemological authority that buries alternative logics without erasing them. Second, *stratified consciousness* captures how market actors hold multiple, hierarchically organised knowledge systems with different levels of legitimacy and accessibility. This allows for *epistemological mobility*, allowing actors to shift between knowledge strata depending on audience, setting, and stakes. Third, we identify a paradox in which marginalised actors use imitation to contest their economic exclusion, yet in doing so, inadvertently reinforce the very Western brand hierarchies they seek to resist: a pattern we term *mimetic resistance*.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. After reviewing counterfeit consumption, authenticity, and postcolonial theory, we outline the empirical methodology, present

findings, develop the three theoretical mechanisms, and conclude with limitations and future directions.

Conceptual background

Counterfeit consumption and the politics of authenticity

The marketing discourse on counterfeit consumption has largely framed it as a deviant behaviour requiring correction or control. Sharma and Chan (2011, p. 603), for example, describe counterfeit products as 'illegally manufactured copies' and 'a form of IPR [intellectual property right] infringement', situating them in a criminalised discourse grounded in the intellectual property law. Similarly, counterfeiting is defined as 'the unauthorized manufacturing of articles which mimic certain characteristics of genuine goods' (Staake et al., 2009, p. 321) and even labelled 'the oldest crime in history' (Hamelin et al., 2013, p. 159). Such definitions do more than describe a practice; they actively structure how it is understood. They rely on and reproduce a binary logic of authentic versus counterfeit, treating authenticity as if it were an inherent, objective property of goods and brands (Morhart et al., 2015). Through this framing, authenticity is naturalised as a rigid hierarchy: authentic goods are positioned as legitimate, original, and superior, while counterfeit goods are cast as illegitimate, derivative, and inferior (Eisend, 2019).

By contrast, some authentication scholars challenge this essentialist view, arguing that authenticity is not intrinsic but socially constructed through ongoing interactions among market actors (Koontz, 2010). From this perspective, drawing a rigid line between authentic and counterfeit is not a neutral classificatory move but an epistemic act that actively organises what counts as legitimate knowledge. Historically, this binary emerged through colonial law that imposed European intellectual property regimes onto colonised territories, systematically delegitimising indigenous practices of design adaptation, shared authorship, and communal ownership (Sherman & Bently, 2004). Colonial administrations constructed authenticity through documentation requirements, standardised measurement protocols, and individual authorship claims that privileged documentary and proprietary epistemologies over oral transmission, embodied assessment, and collective stewardship (Abraham, 2013). What presents itself as universal standards of authenticity thus carries specific genealogies traceable to colonial governance structures that determined which knowledge practices would count as legitimate.

These epistemological assumptions also shape how consumer motivations for purchasing counterfeits are interpreted. Dominant social-psychological accounts, such as Wilcox et al. (2009) and Ngo et al. (2020), explain counterfeit consumption primarily through constructs of status-seeking and self-expression developed within Anglo-American consumer psychology. Such explanations narrow what counterfeit consumption can mean, obscuring interpretations in which the pursuit of luxury goods may also express long histories of exclusion from global consumption markets and uneven access to symbolic goods. Cultural studies offer an important corrective by introducing non-Western concepts such as *mian-zi* and *lian* (Shan et al., 2021; Song et al., 2021). Yet these accounts can unintentionally position such logics as culturally 'Other', rather than treating them as equally valid ways of making sense of consumption. In doing so, they risk leaving Anglo-European consumption habits as the implicit baseline.

Other marketing scholars such as Grayson and Martinec (2004) offer a useful distinction between indexical and iconic authenticity. Indexical authenticity refers to an object's perceived material or historical connection to its origin, for instance a luxury handbag produced by the original brand. Iconic authenticity, by contrast, arises when an object evokes the look, feel, or aura of the authentic, as with a well-made replica that closely mirrors a designer item. This distinction shows that authenticity is not a single property but something consumers experience in different ways. At the same time, these categories remain grounded in Western epistemological assumptions about origin, authorship, and material verification. As a result, it remains uncertain whether they fully capture how authenticity is understood, negotiated, and enacted in non-Western settings.

Some scholars challenge dominant views of counterfeit consumption by shifting attention from illegality to meaning-making. Anthropological work, including Nakassis (2012) and Thomas (2012), treats counterfeiting as cultural production and a site of resistance. Yet these accounts often romanticise such resistance at the expense of recognising the enduring grip of colonial power. In calling counterfeiting 'creative', they remain tethered to Western ideals of originality, i.e. the very concepts that colonial regimes used to dominate markets through the imposition of intellectual property laws (Birla, 2011). A similar tension appears in Thompson and Kumar (2022), who adopt a semiotic approach to move beyond the simplistic authentic/inauthentic binary, framing authenticity as an ongoing negotiation within networks of contingent cultural relations. Their semiotic square maps how the foundational opposition generates intermediate positions, such as 'not authentic' and 'not inauthentic', producing four analytical categories that capture ambiguity in how goods are evaluated as genuine or counterfeit.

Yet this analytical gain comes at a cost. By treating authenticity as universally applicable, they overlook its potential roots in colonial epistemology. The focus on 'cultural contradictions' (Thompson & Kumar, 2022, p. 21) abstracts authenticity into a cultural game while downplaying the material inequalities that underpin these conditions. By neglecting how Western brands extract value from the Global South, the analysis risks inadvertently reinforcing the very power structures it aims to critique.

Historical research on consumer culture formation shows that authentication practices are not fixed or universal. They emerge through ongoing negotiations among consumers, marketers, and institutional authorities (Karababa & Ger, 2011). The historical precedent suggests that authentication systems claiming universal validity often conceal prior power struggles that determined which knowledge practices would achieve institutional recognition. Hietanen et al. (2020), drawing on Baudrillard, read authenticity through seduction and ambivalence in consumption. However, their account remains rooted in European philosophy and aestheticizes consumer behaviour, offering limited attention to the lived struggles of postcolonial consumers and the structural inequalities shaping access to global commodities. See Table 1 for a comparison of major approaches to authenticity.

The review above suggests that research on counterfeit consumption often carries unexamined colonial assumptions. In doing so, it marginalises alternative epistemologies that could help explain how consumers in postcolonial contexts position themselves in global capitalism through practices labelled as 'counterfeit'. Understanding these practices requires situating them within the marketplaces (such as bazaars) where they are lived, negotiated, and assigned meaning.

Table 1. Comparative analysis of major authenticity approaches.

Theoretical approach	Concept of authenticity	Treatment of counterfeit goods	Epistemological assumptions	Relevance to postcolonial contexts
Brand authenticity scale (Morhart et al., 2015)	Authenticity as measurable brand attribute comprising: continuity, credibility, integrity, symbolism	Counterfeits inherently lack authenticity as they fail measurement criteria, particularly credibility and integrity dimensions	Objectifies authenticity as inherent product quality measurable through standardized Western metrics	Minimal; imposes rigid authentic/fake binary based on Western legal and ethical standards presumed universally valid
Dual-pathway model (Grayson & Martinec, 2004)	Distinguishes between indexical authenticity (physical/factual connection to claimed origins) and iconic authenticity (successful capture of authentic appearance/feel)	Counterfeits may achieve iconic authenticity (sensory resemblance) but lack indexical authenticity (genuine connection to origin)	Assumes universal ability to distinguish factual connections from sensory resemblance based on Western semiotics	Limited; the distinction between indexical and iconic authenticity presupposes Western semiotics that may not capture how bazaar actors authenticate through embodied knowledge, relational trust, and oral testimony rather than documented provenance; the very notion of 'factual connection' is epistemologically contested when colonial legal systems have defined what counts as fact
Semiotic square model (Thompson & Kumar, 2022)	Authenticity emerges through network of contingent relationships producing four classifications (authentic, inauthentic, not authentic, not inauthentic)	Positions counterfeits within cultural contradictions that brands manage through redemptive or deceptive paths	Treats authenticity as culturally negotiated but maintains Western category of authenticity as universally applicable	Moderate; acknowledges cultural negotiation but overlooks how Western brands extract value from Global South; reduces authenticity to cultural game
Baudrillardian analysis (Hietanen et al., 2020)	Authenticity as seductive simulation where distinctions between real/fake collapse in hyperreality	Counterfeits embody simulacra - copies without originals in regime of simulation	Employs European postmodern philosophy emphasizing ambivalence and play of signs	Limited; while sophisticated theoretically, remains rooted in European philosophical traditions that may not capture postcolonial lived experiences
Cultural face theory (Shan et al., 2021; Song et al., 2021)	Authenticity evaluated through Chinese concepts of *mian-zi* (social prestige) and *lian* (ethical integrity)	Counterfeit consumption as double-edged sword - gains *mian-zi* (status) but risks losing *lian* (ethical face) if exposed	Adds non-Western concepts but frames them as exotic additions to Western theoretical base	Moderate; recognizes cultural specificity but exoticizes non-Western practices as "Other" requiring special explanation

(*Continued*)

Table 1. (Continued).

Theoretical approach	Concept of authenticity	Treatment of counterfeit goods	Epistemological assumptions	Relevance to postcolonial contexts
Anthropological approach (Nakassis, 2012; Thomas, 2012)	Authenticity as ongoing cultural production rather than fixed property	Counterfeiting as creative cultural practice generating new meanings rather than simple imitation	Views authenticity as emergent from local practices rather than imposed categories	High; documents how counterfeit practices constitute cultural creativity; challenges Western property regimes

The bazaar as a heterotopic space

The bazaar, both as concept and lived practice, defies its frequent reduction to a chaotic or 'Oriental' marketplace awaiting modernisation (Sarkar, 2024). Etymologically derived from the Persian *bāzār* and spread across North Africa, Turkey, and Southeast Asia, the term denotes a heterotopic space. For Foucault (1986), heterotopia describes a counter-site where multiple social, cultural, and economic orders meet, overlap, and sometimes invert dominant norms. Pakistani bazaars fit this description: they are structured spaces where kinship-based access, overlapping authentication systems, and compensatory trading mechanisms coexist and constantly interact. This heterotopic quality does not come from a simple mixing of 'traditional' and 'modern' elements, a move that would flatten the concept by extending it to all capitalist spaces. Instead, the bazaar operates as a counter-site governed by its own rules of access, hierarchy, and exchange, while maintaining a continuous and often tense relation to formal market structures (Deka, 2023).

In contrast to neoclassical accounts that treat efficiency as the central market principle and classify non-economic factors as distortions, bazaars rely on clientelization and sustained bargaining practices (Geertz, 1978). Even so, drawing a rigid line between formally regulated retail and bazaar economies obscures more than it clarifies. Informal economies exist across Europe and North America, from flea markets in Paris to street vendors in New York, car boot sales in Britain, and farmers' markets worldwide, and all rely on bargaining, relational exchange, and quality assessment through personal interaction rather than standardised certification (Gregson & Crewe, 2003). The real difference lies less in geography and more in institutional status: which practices receive legal backing, state support, and epistemic legitimacy.

The persistence of bazaar economies also disrupts teleological narratives of market development that treat such economies as vestiges destined for transformation or disappearance (Deka, 2023). Historical evidence shows that vernacular business practices were often delegitimized under colonial regimes that separated the public/economic from the private/cultural (Birla, 2009). Yet bazaars endured, organising commercial life alongside formal markets. Their activities cannot be reduced to illicit transactions as they emerge through the bazaar's capacity to mediate competing knowledge systems, allowing actors to move between global brand regimes and local forms of meaning and value. Seen this way, the bazaar's epistemic plurality offers a grounded setting for observing how postcolonial theory's abstract concepts materialise in actual market practices.

Postcolonial perspectives on authenticity

Postcolonial theory reorients authenticity away from a property of objects towards a discourse of power that legitimises certain ways of knowing while marginalising others. It examines how colonial legacies continues to shape cultural values, knowledge systems, and legitimacy in the postcolonial era, questioning who defines authenticity, through which standards, and to what effect. From this angle, authenticity is not inherent in objects, identities, or practices. It is an outcome of unequal power relations that privilege some epistemologies while disqualifying others.

Homi Bhabha's work can be read as an entry point for this critique. His concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and the 'third space' unsettle colonial claims to pure/authentic origins and stable cultural hierarchies (Bhabha, 1994). Hybridity describes the emergence of cultural forms at the intersection of colonial and local systems; forms that are neither fully indigenous nor simply imposed from outside. The third space created by hybridity disrupts essentialist claims to authenticity by showing that meaning is continually negotiated rather than inherited intact. Mimicry sharpens this argument by exposing the instability of colonial authority itself. When colonised subjects appear 'almost the same, but not quite' (Bhabha, 1984, p. 126), colonial claims to originality lose coherence, exposing authenticity as an anxious performance rather than a secure foundation.

Yet Bhabha's formulation leaves certain questions unresolved when applied to an actual market. Mimicry in colonial governance depends on imperfect repetition that exposes difference, whereas imitation in markets, including counterfeiting, often pursues high levels of technical accuracy. Here, destabilisation does not arise from visible failure to copy but from the circulation of objects that meet aesthetic standards while bypassing authorised systems of value. What matters, then, is not resemblance alone but the regulatory infrastructure that defines legitimacy through ownership, documentation, and provenance. Bhabha gestures towards this, yet his account does not fully capture how imitation can reproduce colonial hierarchies even while appearing to unsettle them, especially when global brands appropriate and commercialise practices that once sat outside their control.

Where Bhabha emphasises cultural instability, Du Bois directs attention to lived experience in overlapping systems of recognition. His concept of double consciousness captures the condition of seeing oneself through dominant systems while holding alternative self-understandings that do not fit with them (Du Bois, 1903). This is not only a psychological tension but also an evaluative one, since standards of authenticity and worth are imposed in ways that produce continual misrecognition. Yet Du Bois also notes that this condition can generate 'psychological wages' (Du Bois, 1935/2017, p. 626), including dignity and meaning that exist alongside material exclusion. For questions of authenticity, double consciousness shows how actors move between competing evaluative systems without fully resolving their contradictions.

The emphasis, however, remains on tension and strain rather than on the practical capacity to operate across multiple regimes of valuation. This limitation becomes clearer in work on contemporary consumption. Varman et al. (2024), for instance, show how postcolonial respectability is built through contradictory claims to authenticity. Middle-class Indian consumers seek to counter colonial degradation by asserting indigenous authenticity, while still treating Western modernity and branding as markers of legitimate

consumption. Authenticity here becomes a neocolonial battlefield, where efforts to reclaim respect through consumption can reproduce the very hierarchies of class, colour, and centre – periphery relations that colonial epistemologies first installed.

This is where Gayatri Spivak's notion of epistemic violence becomes important. Spivak shifts the focus from subjective ambivalence and internal conflict to the structural conditions that determine whose knowledge counts in the first place (Spivak, 1988). Epistemic violence refers to the systematic exclusion of subaltern ways of knowing through institutionalised categories of intelligibility. Her question 'Can the subaltern speak?' is not about voice alone, but about recognition, or whether speech is intelligible in inherited colonial epistemologies. In authenticity debates, this means that certain practices of evaluation, such as embodied skill, oral transmission, or relational trust, are ignored and rendered unintelligible.

Applied to market contexts, this helps explain why local forms of authentication are often dismissed as informal, subjective, or illegitimate. Bazaar actors routinely assess quality, and value through situated knowledge, yet these judgements fail to register within branding systems that rely on trademarks, documentation, and standardisation. Authenticity here is not absent; it is structured differently. Spivak's contribution reframes the issue as one of epistemic hierarchy rather than simple disagreement over truth or fakery. Still, it leaves open how subordinated knowledge systems continue to function alongside dominant ones in everyday practice over time.

Later postcolonial scholarship extends these debates by recasting cultural production as an ongoing and generative process rather than a reactive one. Mbembe (2004) distinguishes mimesis from mimicry, emphasising creative reworking over derivative copying. Similarly, Donner (2020) shows that middle-class consumers in India do not treat tradition and modernity as opposites but mobilise both in unequal global conditions. Across these accounts, authenticity shifts from fidelity to origin towards situated practice shaped by use, circulation, and recognition. This move unsettles binary accounts of resistance versus compliance. Postcolonial subjects instead draw on multiple repertoires to manage layered systems of meaning without fully reconciling them. Authenticity, in turn, emerges as something negotiated and performed in everyday market practice rather than fixed or given. To examine how these dynamics play out in the bazaar, we now turn to our methodology.

Methodology, data collection and analysis

We adopted a qualitative case study approach (Yin, 2014) to explore consumer perceptions of counterfeit consumption in Pakistani bazaars. This design suits a postcolonial orientation by foregrounding situated knowledge and privileging the perspectives of those who live the phenomenon (Spivak, 1988). Engaging deeply with a variety of market participants helps counter colonial stereotypes through field immersion (Saha, 2024).

Research context: Pakistan

In Pakistan, the coexistence of traditional bazaars and modern shopping malls provides a rich setting for examining how brand authenticity is constructed in a postcolonial nation experiencing rapid middle-class growth (Maqsood, 2017). This coexistence is rooted in

a class structure that folds historical hierarchies into contemporary forms of capitalism. Economic power remains concentrated in an oligarchic order that mediates relations among landed elites, industrialists, and a military extensively involved in commercial activity (Khan, 2021). While segments of the landed aristocracy have diversified into urban and corporate ventures, urbanisation has also produced 'intermediate classes' (Akhtar, 2018, p. 12), composed largely of entrepreneurs in informal markets.

These structural conditions are evident in the retail – wholesale sector, which accounts for 18.4% of gross domestic product and employs 41% of the urban workforce, largely through informal networks, with about 94% of enterprises operating without formal registration (Javed, 2017; Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2021). A substantial number of these unregistered businesses engage in the circulation of counterfeit goods. In some product categories, counterfeits exceed 20% of retail offerings (News International, 2024), and the informal sector is estimated to be up to 64% larger than the formal economy (Tribune, 2024). Against this backdrop, bazaars emerge not simply as marketplaces but as heterotopic sites where competing claims about value, legitimacy, and authenticity are actively negotiated.

Contested epistemologies of the Pakistani bazaar

Pakistani bazaars offer a distinctive lens on counterfeit consumption. In contrast to Western markets, where counterfeiting is addressed through established consumer protections and long-standing brand histories, Pakistani bazaars negotiate these practices through uneven postcolonial ties to global capitalism (Deka, 2023). What matters is not simply the presence of counterfeits, but the historically grounded social arrangements through which they are interpreted, tolerated, or contested. Even here, counterfeiting forms only one strand of bazaar life, which also sustains older systems of craft production, trust, and reputation-based exchange.

These commercial worlds long predate colonial rule. They developed through mercantile traditions shaped by religious commercial ethics, guild-based transmission of craft knowledge through master-disciple relations, and kinship networks that regulated quality through reputation rather than formal certification (Yang, 1998). Economic life rested on epistemologies unlike those of Western market systems. Trust accumulated over generations, quality was judged through tactile assessment and personal familiarity, and value was negotiated with attention to social obligations as much as price (Yang, 1998). What appears informal from a Western perspective was, in practice, loosely structured and socially embedded.

Colonial rule did not simply reorganise these systems; it actively discredited them. From the mid-19th century onward, legal and institutional reforms privileged European forms of knowledge while casting indigenous practices as backward (Tarar, 2011). This stance is evident in the remarks of colonial administrator Baden Powell, who dismissed Indian manufacturing as 'wholly empirical' and incapable of improvement, reducing orally transmitted knowledge as static and inferior (Tarar, 2011, p. 205). As Birla (2011) shows, colonial legislation such as the Companies Acts, including India's 1882 Act modelled on English law, served British commercial interests while marginalising indigenous enterprise. Vernacular forms such as the Hindu Undivided Family or partnership arrangements like *shiraakat* found little legal recognition, often forcing firms into corporate structures

that disrupted customary practice. Colonial courts further delegitimized bazaar exchange by rejecting verbal contracts sanctified through religious oaths and insisting on written documentation unfamiliar to bazaar traders (Abraham, 2013). English-medium commercial education reinforced these shifts by privileging Western accounting systems over indigenous bookkeeping practices such as *bahi-khata*, despite the latter's grounding in generations of commercial experience (Kalpagam, 2000).

After Pakistan's independence in 1947, this epistemic marginalisation did not reverse. Instead, state-led modernisation recast bazaars as impediments to development, to be reformed along Western economic models (Qadeer, 2006). This orientation intensified under neoliberal reforms, particularly during General Zia-ul-Haq's regime and subsequent International Monetary Fund's structural adjustment programmes (Abbasi, 2021). Market liberalisation in the 1990s opened the door to global brands into Pakistan while weakening support for local industries. The rapid expansion of shopping malls in major cities produced a spatial and symbolic divide: formally regulated retail zones received investment and legitimacy, while traditional bazaars faced neglect and increasing scrutiny (Maqsood, 2017). Trade policies further prioritised intellectual property enforcement defined through Western legal standards, recasting long-standing practices of design adaptation as criminal counterfeiting (Abid et al., 2023). These changes contributed to fractured class formations, as established merchant families either adapted to corporate models or retreated into informality (Akhtar, 2018).

Yet these transformations remain incomplete and contested. For many poor and marginalised communities, bazaar knowledge continues to anchor a sense of authentic Pakistani identity (Abid et al., 2023). Small-scale manufacturers in cities such as Sialkot and Gujranwala preserve apprenticeship systems that sustain craft expertise even as they feed into global supply chains. Middle-class consumers often celebrate bazaar authenticity for traditional goods while rejecting it for modern, branded commodities. Bazaars, then, have not faded. They persist as parallel commercial worlds, governed by alternative rationalities that coexist uneasily with dominant market regimes. To ground this discussion, a few images in Figure 1 below present scenes from the bazaars where counterfeit clothing circulates.

Data collection

We adopted a two-phase qualitative design that combined exploratory focus groups with semi-structured interviews. Ethical approval was obtained from SZABIST University Institutional Ethical Review Board prior to fieldwork. All participants were provided with a written information sheet explaining the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time without consequence, and the anonymisation procedures applied to all data. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to interview, including consent for anonymised quotations to be reproduced in academic publications. The first phase comprised 5 focus groups in Lahore with young, educated consumers aged 18–35 who regularly purchased counterfeit goods. Each group included 6–8 participants, and sessions ran for about 2 hours. While all participants had experience with counterfeits, the groups were structured to vary by gender and purchase frequency to capture contrasting viewpoints. Analysis of these discussions produced a set of core themes that shaped the interview guide for the second phase.

Figure 1. Counterfeit clothing on display at a bazaar.

Building on this foundation, the second phase involved 30 semi-structured interviews conducted by the second author in counterfeit bazaars across Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, and Sialkot. Data were collected between 2020 and 2022 as part of a broader project. Fieldwork coincided with COVID-19 disruptions, which led to delays, restricted access to crowded markets during lockdowns, and required additional safety precautions, extending the overall timeline. Participant demographics are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Demographics of interview participants.

Characteristics	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	18	60%
	Female	12	40%
Role	Consumer	16	53%
	Retailer	10	34%
	Manufacturer	4	13%
Age distribution (in years)	20–23	9	30%
	24–27	10	33%
	28–31	2	7%
	32–35	4	13%
	36–39	5	17%
Education level	Primary	10	33%
	Higher secondary	15	50%
	Graduate	4	13%
	Postgraduate	1	3%
Monthly income bracket (000 in Pakistani Rupee)	0–40	6	20%
	40–80	16	53%
	80–120	5	17%
	120–200	3	10%
Monthly frequency of counterfeit purchase	Low (less than 5 items)	3	10%
	Medium (5–10 items)	6	20%
	High (more than 10 items)	21	70%
Geographic location (city)	Islamabad	6	20%
	Lahore	7	23%
	Karachi	9	30%
	Sialkot	8	27%

Our purposive sampling strategy developed in stages over the course of the study. We began with clear inclusion criteria, focusing on individuals directly engaged in the counterfeit luxury market. We group these participants as 'market actors', a label that includes sellers, buyers, and producers whose practices and relationships shape counterfeit trade in Pakistani bazaars. Among consumers, we recruited middle- and upper-middle -class participants who varied in purchasing frequency, from occasional to regular buyers, and differed in age, gender, and occupation. For retailers and manufacturers, we sampled across key dimensions of market diversity: scale of operation, from small family-run businesses to larger enterprises; market positioning, from low- to high-end counterfeits; and experience, from recent entrants to long-established actors. This staged and differentiated approach allowed us to capture variation in perspectives while remaining closely tied to the social structure of the market itself.

Initial recruitment began with on-the-ground engagement in counterfeit bazaars across Lahore, Karachi, Sialkot, and Islamabad. The second author, fluent in local languages, built rapport through informal conversations about products before introducing the study. As data collection progressed, we used theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 2004), adjusting participant selection in response to emerging themes. For instance, once workplace norms surfaced as relevant to counterfeit consumption, we deliberately recruited participants from corporate settings where dress codes shaped purchasing decisions. In parallel, snowball sampling extended our reach, with early participants referring others who offered contrasting or complementary accounts. This strategy was particularly effective for accessing manufacturers, who were initially reluctant but became more forthcoming through trusted referrals.

By early 2022, we had reached theoretical saturation. Recruitment did not stop at that point; instead, we used it selectively to probe disconfirming cases and test the robustness of emerging interpretations. By mid-2022, the final phase of interviews focused on participants able to speak directly to epistemic violence, a theme that had surfaced as significant yet underexplored. This iterative process produced a layered account of the counterfeit marketplace, bringing together the perspectives of buyers, sellers, and producers. Interviews lasted between 80–120 minutes and generated detailed narratives that captured the complexity of the bazaar.

Data analysis

We adopted an iterative coding process informed by reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2022), treating interpretation as an active, accountable practice rather than a neutral step. This approach allowed themes to develop progressively while keeping our role in meaning-making visible. It offered a flexible yet systematic way to examine both semantic and latent patterns across qualitative data. Analysis began with close familiarisation through repeated readings of interview transcripts (Saldana, 2014). We then moved into systematic coding, shifting from descriptive labels to conceptually grounded interpretations tied directly to the research question (Dusi & Stevens, 2023). As coding advanced, we moved back and forth between data, codes, and emerging themes, developing ideas through constant comparison rather than treating stages as fixed or linear.

Throughout, we remained attentive to our positionality (Corlett & Mavin, 2018). Our training in Anglo-American academic institutions, our theoretical commitments, and prior

engagement with bazaars might have shaped how we interpreted participants' accounts. Acknowledging these influences helped us stay grounded in participants' meanings while examining our own assumptions. This reflexive stance became especially important when interpreting accounts of resistance or agency, where postcolonial analysis can easily slip into romanticised readings. Coding and theme development involved regular dialogue between both authors, drawing on an intercoder approach to question, improve, and rework interpretations through discussion (Campbell et al., 2013).

Reflexive notes capturing our emotional and intellectual responses formed an additional analytic layer, helping us trace how subjectivity entered the process. This practice also responded to long-standing critiques that postcolonial research can reproduce the very power relations it seeks to challenge (Smith, 1999). The iterative movement between data, codes, and provisional themes supported continuous conceptual development. Rather than producing topical categories, the final themes captured shared meanings organised around core analytic ideas (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Ongoing discussions with senior qualitative marketing scholars further pushed our interpretations, extending their depth and scope. We used NVivo 12 to manage the data systematically, achieving an initial inter-coder agreement of 87% on theme identification. Disagreements were resolved through discussion and recoding until consensus was reached.

Findings

Four interrelated themes trace the layered dynamics of the bazaar. We begin with the epistemological conditions shaping how market actors know and make sense of their world (Theme 1). We then examine the structural mechanisms through which knowledge hierarchies are produced and enforced (Theme 2). The analysis shifts next to the strategies actors use to cope with and work around these hierarchies (Theme 3), before concluding with the paradoxes that follow from such efforts (Theme 4). Each theme builds on the last, producing a clear progression from context to structure, from structure to agency, and finally to paradox. Next, we develop each theme, combining quotations with our interpretations, retaining selected Urdu terms to preserve the subtlety of participants' responses.

Epistemological multiplicity in the bazaar

We identified this theme in the coexistence of multiple, often competing, knowledge systems that shape how authenticity, quality, and value are defined in the bazaar. Rather than operating through a single epistemology, market actors in the bazaar bring together traditional craft knowledge, Western brand logics, religious norms governing commercial conduct, and pragmatic market calculations. These forms of knowing do not sit neatly side by side. They intersect, overlap, and are selectively mobilised in everyday transactions, rendering epistemological boundaries porous. This layering becomes especially visible in manufacturers' narratives. They trace genealogies of knowledge across generations, linking inherited techniques with acquired brand vocabularies and shifting moral expectations. In doing so, they position themselves at the intersection of these traditions, actively negotiating their tensions and contradictions. Authenticity in the bazaar, then, does not stem from a single authoritative source. It is produced through this ongoing

negotiation among competing knowledge systems. As one manufacturer producing counterfeit Nike sportswear explained:

> When my father taught me this business, he would judge fabric by rubbing it between his fingers ... he could tell you the thread count, the weave pattern, whether it would last through monsoon season. I still do this, but my customers don't care about monsoon durability. They ask, 'Does the swoosh look genuine? ... So now I have my father's technique of *kapray ki asliyat* [the authenticity of the fabric] and the customer's love for brand appearance. Sometimes there is a conflict ... the best fabric for Punjab's [name of a province] climate would never pass for authentic Nike material. But I need both techniques to make money. When I buy materials, I use my father's technique. When I sell, I use brand knowledge. Both are necessary. (Interviewee 13, manufacturer)

The father's method of authentication rests on embodied sensory knowledge, built through years of tactile practice and transmitted orally across generations. Long positioned as subordinate in colonial hierarchies of knowledge, this craft-based expertise draws on collective wisdom rather than individual judgement. Yet this mode of knowing cannot circulate easily in market settings that prioritise written specifications, standardised metrics, and legal proof of brand ownership.

What emerges, then, is not a replacement of one system by another, but their coexistence. The manufacturer works across parallel epistemologies: traditional knowledge grounded in sensory judgement and Western brand logic tied to visual conformity with corporate standards, each activated selectively in response to transactional demands. His claim that 'both are necessary' reflects an awareness of epistemological plurality rather than an effort to reconcile them into a single truth.

Religion adds a further layer of complexity. Market actors frequently invoke Islamic commercial ethics while engaging in trademark infringement. This apparent contradiction can be read as a strategic shifting between overlapping moral economies. A retailer who operates multiple counterfeit shops explained:

> In Islam, we have *halal* business: honest weight, fair dealing, no deception. My grandfather would say *sach ka sauda* [truthful trade] brings *barkat* [divine blessing] ... .But what is the deception here? I tell customers these are copies. They know, I know, everyone knows. The deception is from the big companies who charge 50,000 rupees for a shirt that costs 500 to make. That's the real *dhoka* [fraud] ... .When I sell a copy for 2,000, I'm being more truthful about actual value than they are. Of course, I don't put this [logic] in my prayers ... there I ask forgiveness for whatever sins I don't understand. But in the bazaar, this is how we make sense of things. *Bazaar ki apni sacchai hai*. [the bazaar has its own truth] (Interviewee 15, retailer)

The retailer's movement between Islamic commercial ethics and counterfeit trade indicates neither hypocrisy nor cognitive dissonance but creative reconfiguration. The distinction between 'bazaar truth' and prayer indicates compartmentalised epistemologies that coexist without needing resolution. This arrangement enables market actors to maintain religious identity while engaging in legally questionable commerce, not through stretching moral reasoning but through recognition that different domains operate under different rules of judgement.

These negotiations extend beyond moral positioning to the material evaluation of goods. In the bazaar, quality is not treated as a single, settled standard but as a disputed category assessed through distinct evaluative lenses. Traditional criteria prioritise durability, climatic suitability, and visible craft skill, while Western brand logics emphasise

design novelty, seasonal turnover, and heritage narratives attached to labels. Counterfeit goods introduce further measures, including fidelity of imitation, the ability to 'pass' in social interactions, and pragmatic judgements of price relative to appearance. Rather than merging these criteria into a unified scale, market actors keep them distinct, selectively adjusting according to audience and context. In this sense, actors do not simply inherit competing knowledge systems; they work through them in practice. Their judgements take shape through an ongoing balancing of colonial legacies and local traditions. This process does not produce synthesis; it preserves multiplicity as a survival strategy for operating within uneven global power relations.

Hierarchising local knowledge

The epistemological negotiations described earlier unfold within a structured configuration of power. Market actors do not move between knowledge systems on equal terms; they operate within layered hierarchies that privilege some ways of knowing while subordinating others. These hierarchies are not abstract. They are reproduced through everyday practices that sort, rank, and discipline what counts as credible knowledge in the bazaar. Our data point to four interlinked hierarchies through which this ordering takes shape: valuation, legitimacy, circulation, and normalisation. Each works in tandem with the others, creating a system that both constrains and directs how actors engage with competing epistemologies.

At the level of valuation, traditional craft knowledge still underpins production, yet its worth steadily erodes in market discourse. Indigenous skills remain central to how counterfeit goods are made, but they no longer define what counts as quality. Instead, value shifts towards standardised and externally validated criteria, displacing embodied expertise from the terms of exchange. A manufacturer described this shift with visible ambivalence:

> When I trained as a tailor, my *ustad* [master craftsman] taught me techniques handed down for generations . . . complex stitching methods that showed the skill of the maker. But now? No one cares about these traditions. My customers only ask, 'Does it look exactly like the original Gucci?' . . . I've stopped explaining our craft's special features because nobody wants to hear it. They just want to know if the logo looks authentic enough. *Puraane zamane ki karigari ka koi mol nahin raha* [The value of traditional craftsmanship has disappeared]. Sometimes I feel like I'm erasing my own heritage with every counterfeit I create. (Interviewee 19, Manufacturer)

Here, craft knowledge is neither forgotten nor abandoned. It is retained by producers but rendered commercially mute. Skills transmitted through apprenticeship and evaluated through tactile judgement do not convert into exchange value in settings that privilege brand documentation, standardised sizing charts, and intellectual property certificates as markers of authenticity. The same pattern is repeated in seller – customer encounters. Sellers continue to rely on embodied expertise yet refrain from explaining it, having learned that such explanations carry little weight in transactions. Over time, consumer reliance on brand-based authentication confers higher standing on Western-derived criteria, stabilising a hierarchy in which local knowledge survives only as background labour.

This ordering is not only economic; it is institutional. A parallel hierarchy of legitimacy is reproduced through formal training and credentialing. As one business school academic noted, Anglo-American marketing scholarship is treated as the only credible reference point:

> We teach our business students marketing using Harvard case studies about American and European brands. When students suggest Pakistani examples, professors say, 'That's nice, but let's focus on *international standards*'. Even our textbooks rank brands in a clear hierarchy: Western luxury brands at the top, local brands somewhere at the bottom if they appear at all. We internalize this message: to succeed means to think like them, design like them, value what they value . . . I see it in my students' eyes . . . shame about our own market innovations, our own business models . . . When I suggested researching local bazaar marketing strategies, my department head warned me it wouldn't get published in 'top journals'; as if this will not be useful knowledge. (Interviewee 27, consumer/academic)

This privileging is not neutral. It rests on colonial preferences that rank knowledge by both form and origin. Written case studies from Harvard are treated as authoritative, while oral transmission from master craftsmen is sidelined. Standardised marketing models, validated through peer-reviewed journals, carry more weight than experiential judgement built over generations of bazaar exchange. The same hierarchy extends to authorship. Individual ownership and intellectual property claims displace collective stewardship, recasting traditions shaped through shared practice as if they were the outcome of singular creativity. As a result, Western models saturate classrooms, assessments, and professional reward systems. Local practices are reduced to illustrative anecdotes rather than treated as sources of theory.

This dynamic becomes visible in the hierarchy of circulation, where local knowledge travels outward, returns in altered form, and acquires value only through Western mediation. A retailer described how traditional embroidery is extracted, rebranded, and reintroduced:

> You should see what happens with our traditional embroidery. The big European fashion houses regularly visit us for our *zardozi* and *resham* work . . . but they use it in their own collections and call it something else [such as ethnic wear] . . . Then their counterfeits come back to this market, and suddenly our own traditional techniques are valuable; but only when they appear on fake Dior shirts! One customer actually told me that the traditional patterns on my genuine local shirts but without a brand looked 'too Pakistani' [our emphasis] but the same patterns on a fake Dior looked *shandaar* [high-end]'. (Interviewee 22, retailer)

The circulation hierarchy shows how colonial epistemologies persist in contemporary markets. European fashion houses legitimate appropriated embroidery through documented design sources, registered trademarks, and certified production chains. These written, standardised, and individually owned forms of authorisation displace the oral histories, embodied judgements of skill, and collective custodianship through which bazaar communities have long validated the same patterns. Once separated from their social contexts and reintroduced under Western labels, these designs are recast as 'style' rather than lived tradition. Circulation therefore reproduces older hierarchies by reaffirming that value is realised through Western channels, even when the material itself is locally produced.

Finally, these layers coalesce into a hierarchy of normalisation, where Western standards no longer appear as one option among many but as the default logic of the market.

What began as a preference hardens into common sense. A business owner advising his nephew captured this shift as simple realism:

> When my nephew started his clothing business, he asked me for advice. I told him, 'First, design your products. Then find what Western brand they most resemble and apply that label'. He was shocked and asked why we can't just sell the products based on our own local style and local brand . . . I had to explain that it's not how this [counterfeit] market works. *Ye duniya ka kanoon hai* [This is the law of the world]. Even our most successful local brands succeed by copying Western marketing techniques, Western style, Western packaging. No one questions this anymore. We don't even see it as Western . . . it's just professional marketing and following what everyone else is doing . . . It's just common sense now that quality means Western labels (Interviewee 16, consumer/business owner)

Here, Western epistemology is no longer experienced as external pressure but as common sense. Yet other participants also describe this ordering as constraint rather than inevitability, suggesting that normalisation is learned, not given. Multiple epistemologies continue to coexist, but not on equal terms. They are arranged in a ranked configuration: institutional recognition accumulates at the top, while experiential and locally grounded knowledge is confined to informal or private domains. These hierarchies do not remain separate; they reinforce one another through feedback loops. Devaluation in exchange (hierarchy 1) weakens institutional legitimacy (hierarchy 2), which narrows circulation pathways (hierarchy 3), and in turn further naturalises Western dominance as self-evident (hierarchy 4).

Taken together, these four hierarchies operate through three connected processes. *Sedimentation* occurs as new knowledge forms accumulate over older ones without fully displacing them. Traditional embroidery, for instance, is still practiced and understood, yet it sits beneath a layer that assigns authenticity through Western branding. *Compression* follows as each additional layer restricts the space in which subordinate knowledges can be expressed. The manufacturer who stops explaining his craft has not lost knowledge; he has lost the conditions in which that knowledge counts as valuable speech. Finally, *epistemic domination* emerges when upper layers define what qualifies as legitimate knowledge, relegating other forms to categories such as nostalgia, habit, or folklore. Western academic marketing theories, presented as universal, occupy this dominant stratum, while bazaar practices persist as embodied competence without institutional voice.

Traversing stratified realities

Consumption practices in the bazaar are not just acts of imitation or resistance but reflect a deeper cognitive and epistemic negotiation. Individuals operate within a condition in which multiple knowledge systems coexist, interact, and inform everyday decisions. This layered awareness enables market actors to simultaneously engage with local traditions, global brand ideologies, economic constraints, and transnational aspirations. As one consumer explained:

> I want to feel connected to my friends abroad and the global brands they talk about. But the reality is, I can't afford the real thing. So, I buy counterfeits . . . they look close enough to fool people online. It's like I'm *do duniya ka musafir* [a traveller between two worlds]. I carry the knowledge of what's possible globally and what's possible here. I know the brand is fake, but

> I also know it speaks a language my cousin in London understands. That's a kind of knowledge too ... how to move between worlds without belonging fully to either. (Interviewee 5, consumer)

This quote captures *stratified consciousness*: the ability to inhabit and move between competing epistemologies, including global consumer logics, local economic constraints, digital identity performance, and claims of cultural authenticity, without forcing them into contradiction. The individual does not choose one truth over another but learns to move across them, using different forms of knowledge as needed. This epistemological mobility is not a private cognitive exercise but shapes how consumers interpret authenticity, value, and social belonging. Another participant described this experience as a blending of systems of meaning:

> I know our local culture, but I also feel pulled towards Western trends. When I wear these international brands, even if they're fake, I feel like I'm part of something bigger, something global ... It's like we're mixing our *riwayyat* [traditions] with our *Amrika kay khawab*. [dreams of the West] (Interviewee 3, consumer)

Here, the consumer is not simply adopting a foreign aesthetic but actively synthesising multiple knowledge systems: inherited cultural values, aspirational global modernity, and the pragmatic awareness of economic limitation. This synthesis does not remain at the level of individual decision-making. It is stabilised and reproduced through everyday retail practices, where merchants act as epistemic intermediaries. As one retailer in Sialkot put it with striking clarity:

> Do you think it [Sialkot] is a small city? People here have one foot in Sialkot and another in London. They're hungry for international brands ... because these brands speak a global language. Local brands? *Unhain koi nahin janta* [They're invisible]. So, we adapt by offering *naqal* [counterfeit] that looks authentic. It's not just about selling clothes; it's about giving people a global passport. We act as middlemen, helping people from *Silakot* live their local lives while dreaming international. (Interviewee 24, retailer)

This quote points to more than market adaptation; it captures a form of epistemological brokerage. The retailer understands that consumers are not simply purchasing products; they are accessing a knowledge system associated with global visibility, status, and recognition. By offering counterfeits, the retailer enables clients to perform within multiple epistemic registers: appearing 'global' in digital or diasporic spaces while maintaining local livelihoods and social roles. This is not deception. It is a strategic form of literacy: knowing when and how to deploy the right signs in the right context.

Seen this way, the practice reflects a broader pattern of agency among marginalised actors. Individuals with stratified consciousness read and act across overlapping knowledge systems without collapsing them into a single logic. They move between them. Their decisions show control, not confusion. As one consumer put it, they become *do duniya ka musafir*: a traveller between two worlds, carrying multiple truths at once. This reflects *stratified consciousness* or the simultaneous possession of hierarchically organised knowledge systems. Western academic and corporate models dominate the professional sphere, while experiential bazaar knowledge occupies a lower, yet still meaningful, position. This stratification enables *epistemological mobility*, i.e. strategic movement between knowledge layers depending on context. The retailer, who uses relational quality

assessment when sourcing but brand correspondence when selling, deliberately exercises this capacity to traverse strata.

The paradox of mimetic resistance

This paradox materialises through a complex interplay of oppositional practices that simultaneously subvert and reproduce colonial hierarchies. This phenomenon transcends simple binaries of compliance versus resistance, pointing instead to a complex mechanism in which market actors weaponise imitation as both liberation and entrapment. The first movement of this paradox manifests through *appropriative reversal*, wherein the act of copying shifts from passive reception to active seizure. What looks like mimicry becomes a calculated intervention into systems that would otherwise exclude local actors. The exercise of agency through counterfeits extends beyond individual consumers to local producers and retailers, who use counterfeiting as a market entry strategy:

> Launching our own brand? That's the dream. But in this bazaar, you can't just show up with a new name and expect to survive. Counterfeits are the *pehli seedhi* [first steps] on our journey. They've taught us how the bazaar works, built our customer base, and showed us what sells. It's like we're learning to swim in the shallow end before diving into the deep. Every fake we make is a lesson, every sale a building block . . . O my brother, it's not the *seedha rasta* [most honest path], but it's the only one open to me and my cousins. We're not just copying designs; we're reverse-engineering our way into the bazaar. One day, we'll have our name on the label. (Interviewee 25, manufacturer)

This manufacturer's trajectory unfolds through three temporal stages that are specific to bazaar economies and largely absent from formal retail. The first stage centres on skill acquisition through master – disciple apprenticeship, where learning to copy comes before learning to create. Imitation is not a shortcut but the core training method through which technical competence, aesthetic judgement, and production discipline are acquired. The second stage is market entry via counterfeit production. Producing fakes allows new manufacturers to attract customers, circulate goods, and accumulate capital in ways that original brand launches cannot sustain in bazaar settings. Counterfeiting operates here as a pragmatic strategy for survival and learning. It enables firms to build reputation and networks without the resources or legitimacy required for formal branding. The third stage is the imagined shift to autonomous brand creation. This transition is rarely achieved and often deferred indefinitely, yet it remains structurally necessary. The aspiration to eventual originality sustains entrepreneurial identity, even as everyday practice remains anchored in imitation. Taken together, these stages show that mimetic resistance functions as a developmental pathway rather than an endpoint.

This temporal progression also shows what formal markets foreclose. Formal retail systems demand originality at inception or entry through partnerships with established brands, leaving little room for gradual advancement through imitation. Bazaar informality permits a different trajectory, where counterfeiting functions as business education rather than criminal deviation. When a market actor claims, 'we're reverse-engineering our way into the bazaar', the statement signals more than technical competence. It points to a reordering of power relations grounded in deliberate taking rather than authorised access. The counterfeit becomes a tool of cultural appropriation that unsettles Western brands' control over luxury aesthetics. Yet this appropriation is deeply ambivalent. Each

carefully produced fake Gucci simultaneously contests and confirms Gucci's authority. Resistance remains dependent on the value hierarchy it seeks to disrupt. In transforming Western designs into affordable commodities, the manufacturer does not displace those designs as standards of value but quietly reinstates them.

Performative sovereignty constitutes the second movement, emerging when technical mastery becomes a declaration of equality that nevertheless remains trapped within aesthetic subordination. The manufacturer's lament, 'Every fake we make is a lesson, every sale a building block', captures this tension. The ability to replicate Western designs with precision shows unequivocal technical competence, a form of sovereignty expressed through mimetic excellence. This mastery proves that the supposed superiority of Western production rests not on superior skill but on accumulated symbolic capital and market positioning. However, the same manufacturer's struggle to establish original brands brings into focus how performative sovereignty operates within circumscribed boundaries. The capacity to copy perfectly coexists with an inability to generate autonomous value outside Western aesthetics. Technical equality thus fails to translate into epistemological independence, as the very demonstration of skill requires submission to foreign design languages.

Unlike factory production where workers execute predefined tasks, bazaar manufacturers exercise creative judgement throughout the counterfeiting process. They select which Western designs merit replication based on local tastes, modify patterns to suit South Asian bodies and climates, and calibrate quality to match price expectations. This creative agency hardly exists in formal luxury supply chains, where design decisions flow unidirectionally from European ateliers to global production facilities. The bazaar counterfeit thus embodies a form of design sovereignty: the ability to reinterpret and redistribute luxury aesthetics according to local circumstances. Yet this sovereignty operates entirely within Western design vocabularies. The manufacturer who adjusts an Armani cut for Lahore's climate, exercises technical mastery while remaining aesthetically subordinate. Performative sovereignty thus names this condition where technical autonomy coexists with aesthetic dependence.

Recursive subjugation that characterises the third movement appears in consumer narratives that acknowledge resistance while describing entrapment. The complex interplay between global brand hegemony and local consumption practices reflects deliberate consumer strategies. One participant said:

> Look, I'm not stupid ... Why should I *purse khali karun* [empty my wallet] for an original Armani when I can get the same look for a fraction of the price? It's not about owning original Armani; it's about *dikhawa* [appearing as if you do] ... It's my way of beating the system, of saying 'I deserve this too'. Sure, it's *asli nahin hay* [not the real deal], but who cares? In the end, we're all just trying to fit into a world that wasn't built for us. (Interviewee 29, consumer)

The previous quote encapsulates how each act of defiance draws the actor further into the very system being resisted. Buying counterfeit luxury pushes back against economic exclusion, rejecting the idea that limited means should block entry into global consumer culture. Yet this resistance demands continuous reaffirmation of Western brands as arbiters of a desirable lifestyle. The agency exhibited through counterfeit consumption is therefore double-edged. It extends beyond access to include strategies of accumulation and stylistic variation, as another participant explained:

> It's simple math, but it's also about outsmarting the big brands. One 'real' Next shirt for Rs.6,000 [$22]? *Ye qeemat tou aasman ko cho rahi hay* [this is an exorbitantly high price]. But give me that same money, and I'll turn it into a whole wardrobe of fakes. Six shirts instead of one. Twelve different looks instead of the same old thing. It's not just about saving money; it's about maximizing my options, my freedom to choose. Major fashion companies try to control what we wear, but with fakes, *meri marzi*. [I'm in command] (Interviewee 10, consumer)

The consumer who accumulates 'six shirts instead of one' asserts agency through volume, yet relinquishes control over how quality is defined. This recursive logic reinforces dependency through opposition as challenging exclusion from global brand culture requires perpetual acknowledgement of that culture's centrality. A retailer who also runs a small production setup in the basement of his shop said:

> I learned these stitches from my grandmother; the peacock patterns, the mirror work that tells our stories ... But now I spend my days copying Gucci logos instead. My hands know both traditions, but the bazaar only pays for one ... The customer wants [fake] luxury, not traditional designs ... So, I perfect the counterfeit while my grandmother's patterns fade from memory. This is how we live now ... by closing our eyes to who we are. (Interviewee 6, retailer/worker)

This account points to a mechanism specific to bazaar-based kinship economies. The retailer did not learn the grandmother's stitches through vocational training or a design academy, but through years of embodied co-presence in the home. When counterfeit production enters this space, it does not simply replace a technique, it disrupts an entire mode of knowing in which value, beauty, and commercial ethics are woven into kinship relations. This testimony also brings into focus the erosion of ancestral stitches and motifs. Traditional knowledge is not just sidelined but made unseen under the pressure of Western design preferences. The shift is not abrupt but cumulative, as inherited forms lose their audience and, with it, their relevance.

Yet, the retailer's ability to move between indigenous embroidery and counterfeit luxury points to a form of performative sovereignty. Hands capable of sustaining cultural continuity are redirected towards reproducing external symbols of prestige. This is not simple capitulation but a skilled negotiation of competing value systems, where adaptability becomes a condition of survival. Finally, the retailer's acceptance of this exchange, producing fakes while grieving the loss of inherited crafts, points to recursive subjugation. Survival depends on a quiet consent that normalises self-effacement.

Thus, the paradox of mimetic resistance shows how colonial power persists through the very practices that seek to oppose it. Each counterfeit sold, each Western logo meticulously copied, each traditional design abandoned for international aesthetics represents both an act of defiance and an act of submission. The tragedy lies not in the contradiction itself but in its inescapability as market actors remain locked in recursive loops where challenging exclusion requires affirming the excluding system's legitimacy. The bazaar thus becomes a space where liberation and subjugation merge into a single, paradoxical practice that sustains colonial epistemologies through the very acts meant to subvert them.

Discussion

Our findings identify a set of mechanisms that explain how market actors inhabit and experience contested epistemic terrains. Epistemological negotiations signal the

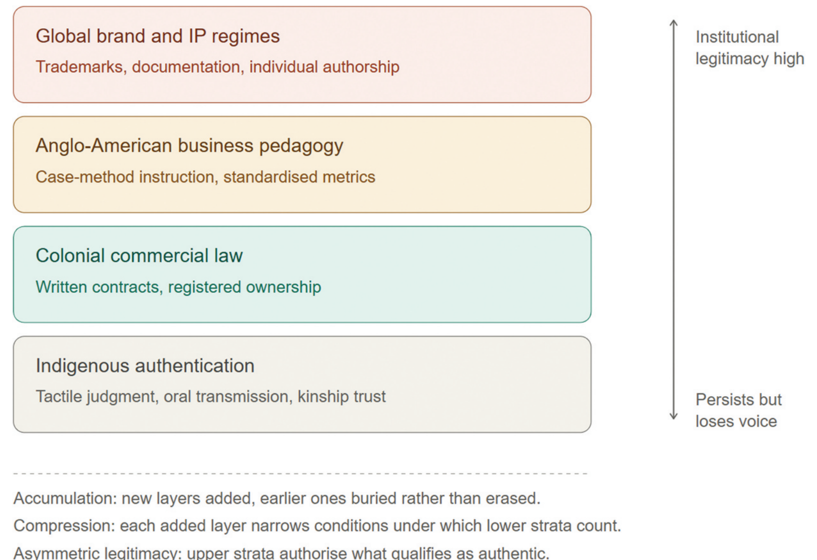

Figure 2. Epistemic layering. Dominant knowledge systems accumulate over local ones, producing asymmetric legitimacy.

coexistence of multiple knowledge systems, producing epistemic layering. This layered condition is not abstract. It is absorbed into everyday reasoning through the architecture of hierarchies, producing a stratified consciousness in which actors rank and reconcile competing forms of knowing. Traversing these stratified realities captures the strategic movement across knowledge regimes, a process we term epistemological mobility. Yet such movement does not resolve tension. It often reproduces it. The paradox of mimetic resistance captures this dynamic, showing how practices framed as opposition at once contest and reinscribe dominant forms of power. Taken together, these mechanisms emerge from the lived rhythms of the bazaar and, in turn, make sense of the patterned ways observed among its market actors. Figure 2 shows epistemic layering as a hierarchy of institutional legitimacy.

Based on this architecture, we contribute to three literature streams. We extend authentication scholarship (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Morhart et al., 2015) by arguing that colonial epistemologies determine which authentication practices acquire legitimacy. We also advance postcolonial consumer research (Varman et al., 2024) by specifying the cognitive effects of multiple epistemologies operating in market contexts. Finally, we contribute to the consumer resistance literature (Hietanen et al., 2020) by theorising how resistance enacted through everyday market practices can, paradoxically, reinforce what it opposes. We now turn to explaining these contributions.

Epistemic layering as market practice

The four hierarchies identified in the data do not just coexist, they operate through *epistemic layering*, a process whereby dominant knowledge systems accumulate over local or indigenous ways of knowing, producing hierarchical levels of epistemological

authority within the same actors and spaces. Although prior work in philosophy treats layering as the coexistence of parallel knowledge levels (Cummins et al., 2004), we rework it as a power-laden process with three properties. First, layering proceeds through accumulation: new forms of knowledge are added onto existing ones rather than displacing them. Second, it generates compression, as each added layer narrows the conditions under which subordinate knowledge can be expressed or valued. Third, it produces asymmetric legitimacy, whereby upper layers acquire institutional recognition while lower ones lose authority. Under this formulation, epistemic layering shifts from a descriptive metaphor to a causal mechanism that explains how hierarchies of knowledge are reproduced over time.

A clarification follows. References to 'dominant' or institutionally authorised epistemologies do not map neatly onto a West versus non-West divide. The hierarchies at stake are institutional, not geographic. They trace how colonial administration, intellectual property regimes, and contemporary global brand architectures have conferred legitimacy on certain authentication practices while subordinating others, regardless of their present location.

Layering does not erase local knowledge outright; rather, it buries it beneath successive strata of legitimised epistemologies, making it progressively less accessible and less valued, even by those who inherit it. Epistemic violence emerges here through authenticity hierarchies that privilege documentary, proprietary, and individually authored definitions of quality, originality, and legitimacy, while casting local knowledge as invisible or deficient. Much like the formation of sedimentary rock, each historical period deposits a new layer of knowledge structures: pre-modern traditions, colonial legal systems, postcolonial state narratives, global market logics. Earlier forms of knowing persist, but they are compressed and obscured, and increasingly difficult to retrieve or recognise as valid. As layers accumulate, communities are distanced from their own epistemic inheritance. Authentication, in turn, shifts from evaluating intrinsic product qualities (Morhart et al., 2015) to judgements mediated through these accumulated strata, which crowd out alternative criteria of value.

By theorising epistemic layering as accumulation rather than replacement, this analysis reorients authentication scholarship (Grayson & Martinec, 2004) away from questions of what makes products authentic towards examining which knowledge systems are authorised to make that judgement. This shift matters for how consumer researchers theorise legitimacy in markets characterised by epistemological pluralism (Karababa & Ger, 2011), particularly where formal and informal economic rationalities intersect. Bazaar exchanges provide examples of how such authentication processes operate through 'network[s] of contingent relationships' (Thompson & Kumar, 2022, p. 24). Yet, our analysis points out that these networks are not neutral but structured by colonial epistemologies that determine which relationships count as legitimate. Whereas Thompson and Kumar (2022) emphasise contradictions internal to capitalism, the bazaar economy shows how contradictions of authenticity stem from the violent imposition of foreign epistemologies onto existing socio-economic formations. Likewise, while Grayson and Martinec (2004) distinguish indexical and iconic authenticity as parallel pathways to genuineness, our findings indicate that these categories themselves enact epistemic violence by imposing a semiotic grid grounded in colonial commercial law that cannot accommodate alternative systems of value and legitimacy.

Some accounts of knowledge colonisation assume a replacement model wherein dominant epistemologies eradicate subordinate ones through education and modernisation. Epistemic layering, however, points to an even insidious dynamic: traditional knowledge often remains accessible as market actors retain local quality indicators, design meanings, and trust mechanisms. Yet this knowledge persists beneath layers that mark it as inferior. This process is not unique to postcolonial contexts. Working-class knowledge in Britain, indigenous practices in settler-colonial states, and folk epistemologies throughout Europe have been similarly layered beneath credentialed expertise (Wynne, 1996). What distinguishes postcolonial contexts is the intensity and institutional reach of this layering, the racial and civilisational logics that justified it, and its persistence through contemporary global markets. Pakistani bazaars render visible a process that operates, with varying intensity, wherever knowledge hierarchies are institutionally enforced. This perspective also reframes Spivak's (1988) notion of epistemic violence since the tragedy is not an inability to speak, but the lack of epistemic weight when one does.

This lens explains some puzzling patterns in our data that existing theories struggle to address. For instance, it sheds light on why decolonisation initiatives in markets often stall. Campaigns to 'buy local' or 'value traditional crafts' attempt to access lower strata without dislodging the accumulated layers above. The result is predictable: subordinate knowledge is symbolically celebrated yet structurally marginalised. Additionally, we contribute to debates on the social construction of authenticity (Nakassis, 2012). While authenticity is indeed shaped through market participation, in bazaar contexts that participation unfolds within constrained epistemic hierarchies that limit which constructions can gain legitimacy.

Stratified consciousness and epistemological mobility

The accumulation of epistemic layers produces a corresponding psychological phenomenon at the individual level. Layering creates *stratified consciousness*: a condition in which market actors hold multiple, hierarchically ordered knowledge systems at once. These systems do not simply coexist, they are ranked, with some forms of knowing granted greater legitimacy, visibility, and authority than others, depending on context. Although the term 'stratified consciousness' appears sporadically in psychology, sociology, and postcolonial studies, it has not been developed as a theory of individual cognition. Related concepts, like Du Bois's (1903) double consciousness, Moscovici's (2008) 'cognitive polyphasia', or 'cultural frame switching' in cross-cultural psychology, describe coexisting knowledge systems but treat them as parallel or situationally activated, without addressing their hierarchical ordering. In contrast, stratified consciousness foregrounds this ordering shaped by power relations. Actors move across ranked epistemic strata, adjusting their stance in response to situational demands and uneven legitimacy.

This becomes visible in everyday professional life. Consider the business school professor who teaches Porter's Five Forces while knowing, through lived experience, that Pakistani bazaars operate through entirely different logics of kinship, trust, and long-term reciprocity. This is not a case of dissonance or illusion. It is a disciplined awareness of how Western academic models occupy the upper, institutionally sanctioned layer, while experiential bazaar knowledge is relegated to a lower stratum: functional yet publicly

delegitimized. They fluidly code-switch between strata, speaking the language of 'competitive advantage' in the classroom while relying on relational networks in the market.

We advance postcolonial consumer behaviour literature (Varman et al., 2024) by moving beyond double consciousness as psychological tension towards stratified consciousness as cognitive architecture, showing how market actors maintain multiple hierarchically organised knowledge systems without necessarily experiencing the internal conflict that Du Bois describes. Where Varman et al. (2024) emphasise identity politics and respectability through strategic essentialism, avenging degradation while desiring modernity, we theorise epistemological mobility as an operative capacity that allows deliberate traversal across knowledge strata depending on social context. This shift argues that colonial power operates through accumulation and sedimentation rather than replacement, creating authentication hierarchies where local knowledge persists in subordinate layers rather than existing in binary opposition to Western epistemologies. Our contribution thus reorients postcolonial consumer research from analysing split subjectivity towards examining the structural mechanisms through which epistemic violence layers dominant knowledge systems over indigenous ones, producing not warring ideals but stratified realities that actors traverse with complex multi-level awareness.

Moreover, stratified consciousness explains seemingly irrational market behaviours. Why would someone who recognises the superior quality of local leather still prefer counterfeits? Because consciousness stratification means that 'understanding' operates differently at different levels. At one level, they know the material quality grounded in local expertise; at another, socially dominant level, they know that fake Gucci has higher symbolic value. Both knowledges are simultaneously true within their respective strata.

This stratification creates *epistemological mobility* or the capacity to move across these layers strategically. A retailer who understands quality as trust and relationships built over time, yet adopts international quality language when dealing with customers, signals this capacity. They ascend to upper strata (international quality) when persuading customers and return to lower strata (relational quality assessment) in sourcing. This is not deception but positioning in stratified realities where different truths operate at different levels. Hence, stratified consciousness provides the cognitive architecture (the vertical arrangement of knowledge systems) while epistemological mobility constitutes the ability to traverse that arrangement. This distinction matters because possessing layered knowledge (consciousness) does not automatically confer the ability to move between layers (mobility). Mobility requires additional competencies: recognition of contextual triggers that demand stratum-switching, mastery of performative codes associated with each layer, and the social capital to legitimate one's presence within different layers. The retailer who shifts between relational and global quality discourses is not only aware of both layers but skilled in inhabiting each convincingly.

The paradox of mimetic resistance

Our findings point to a paradox: market actors resist and reproduce colonial power relations through the same act of counterfeit consumption. By paradox, we mean a condition in which two logically opposed outcomes, resistance and reproduction of the dominant order, are not just coexistent but generated by the same underlying mechanism. Efforts to contest exclusion thus simultaneously stabilise the very system

that produces it (Bhabha, 1994; Hietanen et al., 2020). We theorise this as *mimetic resistance*, a process in which marginalised consumers use imitation to contest economic exclusion, even as that practice reinscribes the hierarchies they aim to unsettle. Counterfeiting turns imitation into a vehicle of access and self-assertion. Yet it also amplifies the symbolic authority of the brands and aesthetic regimes that organise exclusion in the first place. Imitation, in this sense, does not dilute power. It redistributes and intensifies it.

This reframing extends Bhabha (1984, 1994) notion of colonial mimicry by shifting attention from ambivalence and slippage to the strategic pursuit of near-perfect replication. Contemporary market actors do not just repeat dominant forms imperfectly; they weaponise imitation as a visible and deliberate practice that operates at once as resistance and reproduction. Such acts generate a *subversive compliance*: practices that challenge exclusionary boundaries while preserving the cultural supremacy of hegemonic brands. Resistance, in this formulation, does not stand outside the system. It works through it, and in doing so, helps sustain it.

The paradox arises because authenticity functions as a contested and unstable category rather than a fixed property of goods (Thompson & Kumar, 2022). When marginalised consumers appropriate luxury symbols through counterfeit products, they disrupt brand-based exclusions tied to price and access. At the same time, they reaffirm the authority of those brands to define taste, value, and social status. Resistance, in this sense, does not escape the dominant order but circulates within it. Mimetic resistance therefore departs from established postcolonial accounts in a few ways. Whereas Bhabha's mimicry unsettles authority through imperfection and ambiguity, mimetic resistance hinges on the careful crafting of imitation, a move that stabilises what is copied even as it is contested. It is neither concealed nor peripheral; it is a conspicuous practice that asserts agency while producing new forms of dependence. In turn, what might seem like a pathway towards autonomy instead tightens the grip of dominant systems of value, binding actors to them through the very acts intended to oppose them. Resistance, here, is redirected into practices that reproduce subordination, even when enacted in the name of autonomy.

Our data shows that mimetic resistance operates through three simultaneous movements: appropriative reversal, performative sovereignty, and recursive subjugation. Taken together, these movements exceed what Grayson and Martinec's (2004) dual-pathway model or Thompson and Kumar's (2022) account of contradictory relations can explain. Where Grayson and Martinec theorise authentication as a consumer-level judgement between indexical factuality and iconic resemblance, mimetic resistance shows authentication as a site of structural violence, where the capacity to judge is itself hierarchically distributed through colonial epistemologies. What counts as a 'factual' connection depends on which documentation systems, measurement protocols, and ownership regimes have acquired legitimacy through historically sedimented power.

Similarly, where Thompson and Kumar (2022) propose that brands negotiate authenticity through 'redemptive' and 'deceptive' paths, mimetic resistance in the bazaar suggests a third trajectory: authentication through deliberate inauthenticity. The counterfeit producer who perfects Western designs while 'struggling to sell their own creations' authenticates skill through the capacity to deceive. This reverses dominant authenticity logics that privilege originality over mastery and exposes their cultural specificity.

Mimetic resistance also extends resistance theory in consumer research (Hietanen et al., 2020) by identifying a previously untheorised form: resistance that paradoxically solidifies what it opposes through the very mechanisms deployed to contest it. Where existing accounts treat resistance and reproduction as sequential or separate processes, mimetic resistance show their simultaneity and mutual dependence. This matters for understanding market activism in postcolonial contexts, where strategies that appear emancipatory may inadvertently increase dependence on dominant systems of value. Figure 3 visualises this paradox.

Mimetic resistance helps explain the persistence of counterfeit markets. It offers psychological wages (Du Bois, 1935/2017): the thrill of transgression, pride in skilful imitation, and the satisfaction of accessing what is formally denied. These symbolic rewards offset material disadvantages, making practices that might appear irrational legible as forms of dignity work. This perspective treats authenticity as a social accomplishment, produced through ongoing contestation among competing knowledge systems, power relations, and cultural meanings. In postcolonial settings, such contestation acquires added force, as market practices both reproduce and unsettle colonial hierarchies of legitimacy.

What distinguishes this paradox in bazaar contexts from corporate appropriation lies in the mechanisms through which it operates. Western luxury houses appropriate South Asian textile patterns through design studios, legal teams, and marketing campaigns that reframe extraction as inspiration. Bazaar counterfeiters, in contrast, work through kin-based apprenticeships, where imitation is learned, improved, and passed on. When the manufacturer teaches his cousin to replicate a Gucci logo, he is not only transferring

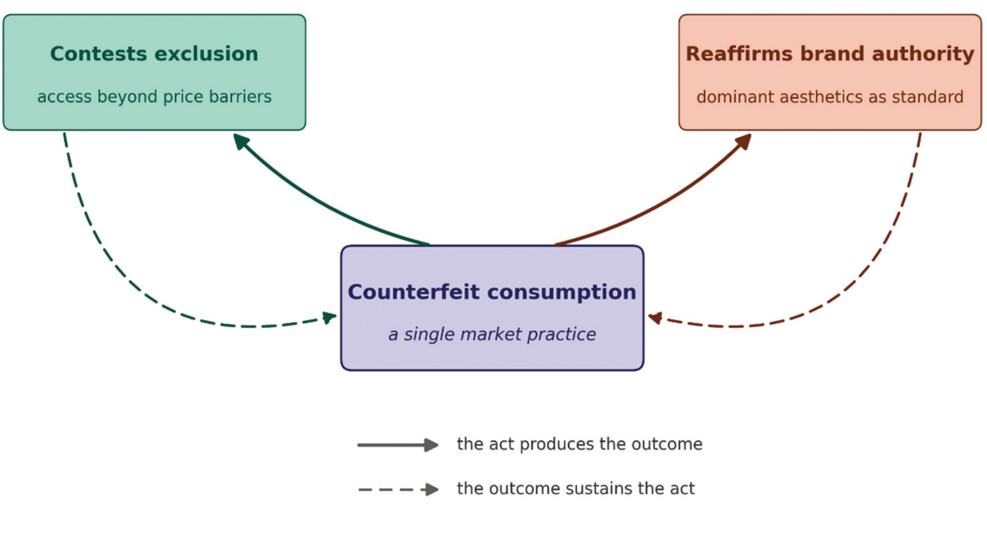

Figure 3. The paradox of mimetic resistance. A single act generates two logically opposed outcomes; each feeds back to sustain the act.

a technique but also a logic of resistance-through-imitation that becomes part of bazaar commercial identity. Over time, this embedding distinguishes bazaar appropriation from corporate appropriation: the former transforms resistance into economic survival strategy across family networks, while the latter transforms appropriation into profit maximisation through organisational resources and legal cover. The bazaar thus produces a specific form of mimetic resistance that is not available in formal retail, where appropriation typically requires legal authorisation, contracts, and brand partnerships rather than clandestine skill transfer.

We must note that mimetic resistance is not confined to postcolonial actors engaging with Western brands. Fast fashion retailers in Europe and North America regularly appropriate designs from luxury houses; American brands imitate European heritage aesthetics; and Chinese luxury brands are now copied by Western competitors (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012). The directionality of mimesis is not fixed by geography. What matters is how power asymmetries shape meaning and consequences of mimetic practice. When luxury fashion houses such as LVMH or its brands draw on Asian textile and craft traditions, the move is often celebrated as creative inspiration (Friedman & Raj, 2023). By contrast, the reproduction of luxury-brand designs by manufacturers and sellers in Pakistan is commonly framed through the legal and moral discourse of counterfeiting (Hussain et al., 2017). The difference does not lie in the act of imitation itself but in the institutional lens that assigns legitimacy, a lens with roots in colonial legal regimes.

Managerial implications, limitations and future research directions

The mechanisms we identify (epistemic layering, stratified consciousness, and mimetic resistance) also shed light on practical challenges for brands, policymakers, and local businesses in postcolonial markets. Turning these ideas into strategy requires recognising that conventional Western management approaches often reinforce the very epistemological hierarchies our analysis critiques. For luxury brands, this means moving beyond a narrow reliance on intellectual property enforcement to engaging the cultural and economic complexities of bazaars. These are not spaces to be eliminated, but sites where alternative epistemologies of authenticity and quality emerge. Addressing this reality calls for strategies that acknowledge why consumers buy counterfeits; not only as cheaper substitutes but as instruments of status negotiation. Ignoring this social function leads to blunt, ineffective responses. Tiered product lines could provide accessible entry points while respecting local constraints and aspirations. Brands should also avoid imposing Western templates. By collaborating with local artisans, they can fuse traditional craftsmanship with contemporary design, promoting new forms of branding that draw on multiple knowledge traditions rather than subordinating one to another.

Our study, however, has limitations. The empirical focus on Pakistan restricts generalisability, and comparative research across postcolonial contexts could establish whether similar patterns recur elsewhere. The urban, middle-class sample leaves out rural and lower-income groups whose market practices may differ in important ways. Reliance on self-reported data also raises bias concerns; integrating observational or experimental designs would add depth and test behavioural claims. There is also a conceptual caveat. Although the analysis critiques binary thinking, it risks reinscribing a West/non-West divide that can flatten variation.

Future research could also examine how the epistemological patterns we identify operate within Western informal economies, how non-Western brands construct and police their own authentication hierarchies, and how actors in the Global North manage tensions between dominant and subordinate knowledge systems. Such comparative work would test whether epistemic layering, stratified consciousness, and mimetic resistance are specific to postcolonial contexts or part of a broader condition of epistemological plurality in contemporary markets.

Conclusion

We argued in this paper that practices marketing scholarship often dismisses as deviant are better understood as complex negotiations among competing knowledge systems. Authenticity, in this view, is not a stable attribute but a contested field shaped by colonial histories and ongoing power asymmetries. Decolonising marketing therefore demands more than adding marginalised voices to existing conversations. It calls for a rethinking of whose knowledge is treated as legitimate, how authenticity is produced, and which economic practices are granted recognition rather than punishment. Such shift in perspective cannot rely on reversing old binaries. The aim is not to celebrate 'non-Western' epistemologies against 'Western' ones, but to examine how certain knowledge practices came to dominate through historical processes that can be traced, analysed, and reworked. From this perspective, the tragedy is not the persistence of counterfeit markets, it is our inability to see them as sites where alternative understandings of value, quality, and authenticity struggle to survive under colonial knowledge structures. Moving past moralising accounts of intellectual property violation opens the possibility of markets in which local knowledge systems can thrive without seeking Western validation.

Note

1. We do not treat the term 'Western' as a geographic or civilisational category, nor as a claim about the internal coherence of societies in Europe and North America, which are themselves plural and contested. Following the postcolonial literature, we use 'Western' as shorthand for a historically constituted assemblage of knowledge practices that gained institutional dominance through colonialism and has since been absorbed into global commercial infrastructures. The term thus refers to *where institutional authority accumulated*, not *where people live or think*. Where specificity is needed, we name the referent: colonial-era European legal regimes, Anglo-American business school pedagogy, global luxury conglomerates, or institutionally dominant brand authentication systems. Where we retain the broader term, we do so to name the hegemonic formation these specific referents jointly constitute.

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