Toward a Typology of Copying Practices in Fast Fashion[1]

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ABSTRACT

The growth of the global fashion industry has been driven partly by the fast fashion sector. While it has been claimed that fast fashion democratizes fashion, it has drawn criticism for several reasons that have been extensively studied in academic literature – such as its impact on production, consumption behavior, and environmental sustainability. One of the features of fast fashion is its reliance on copying practices, which can undermine creative innovation and challenge intellectual property norms. Copying practices range from exact duplication to less obvious adaptations, and have varying degrees of legality.

Our research reveals that while terms such as counterfeits, knockoffs, and dupes are often used interchangeably, they are in fact distinct copying practices with unique characteristics and implications for the fashion industry. In addition, despite its current popularity, the relatively recent phenomenon of dupes remains underexplored in academic literature – particularly in comparison to other forms of copying – and lacks clear conceptualization.

This paper proposes a comprehensive typology of copying practices prevalent in the fast fashion industry. Through a systematic examination of current definitions, we identify the nuanced differences between different copying practices in this industry. The resulting typology not only clarifies these distinctions but also provides a foundation for future research on various copying practices. This paper also fills a significant gap in academic literature by providing a formal definition of "dupes" – identified as the biggest shopping trend in recent years – which has thus far lacked scholarly conceptualization despite its widespread use in popular discourse. Through a methodical analysis of the current usage of the term, we identify and synthesize core features to propose a definition that distinguishes dupes from other forms of fashion copying. This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of fashion copying practices and offers insights for industry stakeholders, policymakers, sustainability advocates, and researchers navigating the complex landscape of fast fashion and design reproduction.

Keywords: Fast Fashion, Fast Fashion Copying, Counterfeits, Dupes, Copycats

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INTRODUCTION

With the emergence of mass markets, the fashion industry has increased in scope in terms of production, consumption, and profitability, becoming one of the most profitable sectors in the world (Aspers & Godart, 2013; López-Espinola et al., 2025) and lending credence to the statement "Fashion is about bodies: it is produced, promoted and worn by bodies" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 79). Part of the growth of this $1.7 trillion global industry is due to the rise of fast fashion; competition in this sector is expected to intensify in coming years (Amed & Berg, 2023), especially given higher inflation levels leading to consumers becoming more price-sensitive (Balchandani et al., 2024). Fast fashion refers to lower-cost fashion brands (e.g. Zara, H&M) that produce affordable versions of trending, higher-quality designs on a rapid and large scale (Hemphill & Suk, 2008; Joy et al., 2012; Wen, Choi, & Chung, 2019). Fast fashion emerged in the United Kingdom between the 1980s and 1990s because of changing dynamics in the fashion industry (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010; Binet et al., 2019) that forced retailers to demand low cost and flexibility in design, quality, logistics, and supply chain, and consequently, forced suppliers to deliver smaller batches with reduced lead time (Binet et al., 2019; Doyle, Moore, & Morgan, 2006; Tyler, Heeley, & Bhamra, 2006).

The growth of fast fashion was an inevitable development, with several forces contributing to the expansion of fast fashion as a continuous, trend-based industry. First, to keep up with the quick turnover of short-lived trends and fleeting styles, and to stay fashionable at lower prices, individuals moved from overconsumption to hyper-consumption (Sánchez Contreras, 2024). Consumer demand for immediacy, accessibility, and options in clothing – as opposed to fashion as a long-term investment – propelled the expansion of fast fashion (Binet et al., 2019). In addition to market demand, overproduction was also a reason for the growth of the fast fashion industry. Every year, the global fashion industry generates approximately 100 billion garments (Napier & Sanguineti, 2018). The global apparel production chain made it possible for the industry to globalize products and to dominate the world fashion economy (Ghemawat, 2003; Ozdamar-Ertekin, 2016).

Third, retailers, brands, and enterprises adopted agile fast fashion as a viable business model, and invested in more efficient and cost-effective supply chains to increase productivity and thus better adapt to shifting trends and demand (Jin et al., 2012; Moon, Lee, & Lai, 2017). Finally, another force driving this expansion was the advent of the Internet. The Internet made the world a global village, where individuals from all over began having access and purchasing popular items without having to be present in person and without paying full price (Rosskamp, 2018). Information technology and digital media have also made it easier for retailers to keep up with consumer behavior changes and made it possible for them to implement technology-enabled designs (Buzzo & Abreu, 2019; Peroni & Vitali, 2017; Rocamora, 2017).

While it has been claimed that fast fashion can democratize the fashion industry (Bateman, 2022; Phau & Teah, 2009; Sitaro, 2020), one of the several claims made by detractors is that it goes against stylistic innovation, such as original haute couture (Aspers & Godart, 2013). In some cases, fast fashion is not just an inspiration, adaptation, or interpretational copying of high-end trends or fashions to be sold at a bargain, but the exact or close-copying of designs, paving the way for copyright quandaries (Cohen, 2012; Hemphill & Suk, 2008).

Copying of fashion designs can take different forms, ranging from exact duplication to mere inspiration. For instance, a counterfeit is a nearly exact copy of an item that is usually passed off as being the original (Ferrill & Tanhehco, 2010), whereas a dupe is a similar product that is usually priced lower than the original (Dawkins, 2023). Of these forms, dupes were the biggest shopping trend in 2023 (Kern & Henschel, 2023). The phenomenon of dupes, also referred to as "dupe culture", has been exacerbated due to social media, dupe influencers, major players, and younger generations who proudly share dupe finds with their followers and friends (American Apparel & Footwear Association, 2021; Roberts, 2024). In spite of this, academic literature has not yet conceptualized dupes. This is typical of academic research on fashion, which is hindered by a lack of clarity even for core concepts; for instance, what fashion is, and how it is distinguished from related concepts, such as fads, trends, or styles (Aspers & Godart, 2013).

One of the objectives of this conceptual paper is to create a typology of copying practices prevalent in the fast fashion sector. To do so, we first identified the various forms of copying practices in fast fashion. We then searched for formal definitions of these terms, and analyzed them to identify commonalities and differences. During this process, we found that the term dupe has not been formally defined in academic research, although the term seems to be ubiquitous and is often used interchangeably with other forms of copying. Hence, part of this paper is devoted to crafting a definition for the term dupe. To this end, we examined the various ways in which the term is used in popular media, and arrived at a synthesis of common features that resulted in our proposed definition, rendering the typology comprehensive.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Fast fashion is a business model that incorporates four elements: (a) A constant turnaround mechanism incorporating fast response to market developments, just-in-time production, and rapid distribution cycles. This is in contrast to the fashion industry's "traditional model" of seasonal cycles of clothing, which is heavily promoted through advertising. (b) A wide product variety and regular selection adjustments. (c) Attractive designs at affordable rates. (d) Meeting high levels of consumer demand (Binet et al., 2019; Barnes & Lea-Greenwood, 2006; Caro & Martínez-de-Albéniz, 2015; Crofton & Dopico, 2007; Mazaira, González, & Avendaño, 2003).

Today's expansion of the fast fashion industry, however, is not without accompanying consequential negative effects. In light of climate challenges and evolving societal mindsets, there is a pressing need for environmentally friendly behaviors and globally sustainable consumption practices (Munaro, Barcelos, & Maffezzolli, 2024; Peters, Li, & Lenzen, 2021). While overproduction is one of the forces that contributed to the expansion of fast fashion, it also contributed to a major dilemma corresponding to the true cost of fast fashion, a cost that goes beyond exclusively financial problems and creates bigger negative environmental consequences. For instance, Mango MNG Holding SL and El Corte Inglés both sourced clothing from a factory in poor conditions (Moffett, 2013). More generally, overproduction generates 92 million tons of solid waste every year while utilizing huge quantities of non-renewable natural resources (Binnuri, 2024; Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017; Hendriksz, 2017). This dilemma is juxtaposed against fast fashion's impact on consumer self-perception and young consumers' deeply held desires for luxury fashion (Joy et al., 2012; Legere & Kang, 2020). Thus, aligning corporate social responsibility with authentic messaging, competitive pricing, legitimation strategies, and strategic sustainability signaling is

crucial to appeal to ethically conscious as well as price-sensitive consumers (Demaj & Isufi 2024; Tiia et al., 2024; Zaborek & Nowakowska, 2024).

The fast fashion industry has become tremendously profitable mostly by providing attractive design imitations (Caro & Martínez-de-Albéniz, 2015). "Copying" implies that there is an original, established product that has enjoyed some degree of success within its product category, making it worthy of emulation. From the consumer's perspective, buying a counterfeit of a luxury brand is seen as not just having a status motivation, but also as functioning to address inequality (Liu, Wakeman & Norton, 2024). Copying practices fall under the broad umbrella of "strategic imitation" defined as "a firm's purposeful attempts to reproduce, in whole or part, another firm's products, processes, capabilities, technologies, structures, or decisions in its pursuit of competitive advantage" (Posen et al., 2023, p. 6).

Notably, copying practices, regardless of what form they may take, can further exacerbate the sustainability problem by encouraging disposable fashion and short-lived wardrobe cycles. The industry accounts for 8-10% of global carbon emissions, which is more than international aviation and shipping combined (Maiti, 2025). Different copying mechanisms contribute distinctly to environmental degradation. Counterfeits often operate through underground supply chains with minimal environmental oversight, potentially utilizing more toxic production methods.

The rise of "dupe culture" specifically promotes quantity over qualityhttps://www.benlabs.com/resources/understanding-dupe-culture-for-brands/ (Moore-Crispin, 2023), encouraging multiple purchases of lower-quality items that have shorter lifespans. This runs counter to sustainability principles, as one study noted that consumers now buy 60% more clothing items than in 2000 but wear them less than 7 times before disposalhttps://www.projectcece.com/blog/656/psychology-of-fast-fashion/ (Remy, Speelman, & Swartz, 2016). Approximately 80% of all textiles go to landfills annuallyhttps://www.genevaenvironmentnetwork.org/resources/updates/sustainable-fashion/ (UNECE, 2018) and fast fashion's copying practices accelerate this cycle by constantly introducing new versions of existing products, creating artificial obsolescence. The constant cycle of dupe promotion on platforms like TikTok directly fuels this consumption pattern.

Recent industry data and cases demonstrate the prevalence and impact of such copying practices. Major fast fashion players have faced plagiarism controversies: more than 40 independent artists and designers publicly accused Zara of copying their work in 2016 (Dunne, 2016) and ultra-fast retailer Shein has been criticized for directly duplicating small designers' products rather than merely drawing inspiration (Hernandez, 2023). Even luxury brands are not spared, and mass-market retailers have produced lookalikes of Hermès' iconic designs (such as the Hermès Oran sandal), fueling legal debates about what constitutes protectable design versus "permissible" imitation (The Fashion Law, 2019).

A scan of published academic research in the disciplines of business and law revealed definitions for the following copying practices: copycats, counterfeits, imitations, and knockoffs. However, even though it has been called the biggest shopping trend of 2023 (Kern & Henschel, 2023), to the best of our knowledge, not only has there been scant research in this area, but the term "dupe" has not been defined formally so far, which is a critical first step in establishing commonality of thought in current and future research. Dupes are becoming increasingly popular, especially with younger cohorts. For instance, approximately 49% of

Gen Z and 44% of millennials admit to having intentionally purchased a dupe (Briggs, 2023), with some studies showing even higher percentages for Gen Z at 70% (Dawkins 2023), while the overall number for adults is 31% (Solá, 2023). In general, and as referred to in popular media and within consumer communities, a dupe refers to an offering that emulates the features or the experience of using a more established, and successful offering at an accessible price point. Dupes run the gamut of the goods-services continuum, from durable products to personal care products to experiential offerings such as travel destinations.

The phenomenon of dupes is sufficiently significant that retailers have taken note of it. Some have responded by forbidding the use of the term "dupe" in describing items. For instance, Target's legal team does not allow using the term dupe (Kern & Henschel, 2023) and Amazon forbids the use of the term in connection with a brand name in item descriptions (Amazon.com Associates Central, n.d.; Masters, 2023). Hashtags such as #designerdupe and #designerreplicas are blocked on TikTok (Van der Sar, 2022), and the American Apparel & Footwear Association (2021) encourages other platforms to block #designerdupes as well as related hashtags.

METHODOLOGY

In order to analyze various copying practices, we first scanned academic research that addresses this topic – specifically within business and law – to identify typical terms used to refer to these practices. Next, we looked for instances where the researchers have defined these terms formally. Finally, we scanned popular mass media publications – both general interest and business – for recent industry insights and updates in this domain.

To ensure a comprehensive review, we employed a systematic search strategy. We consulted multiple academic databases (including EBSCO, JSTOR, SSRN, and Google Scholar) using keywords such as "fast fashion", "copying practices", "dupes", "knockoffs," "replication", "counterfeits", "imitations", and related terms. Our inclusion criteria focused on English-language sources from approximately 2000 onward, prioritizing peer-reviewed articles as well as reputable industry reports and legal case information that discussed fashion design copying. We also included trade publications and reports from organizations like OECD, WIPO, and industry associations for empirical data. Legal cases from major jurisdictions (e.g., U.S. and EU) were considered if sourced from official records or credible secondary summaries. Ambiguous uses of terms were cross-checked and included only if clearly relevant to our typology.

Our multi-step process revealed the following insights: First, there are four terms that are typically used in this context – Copycats, Counterfeits, Imitations, and Knockoffs. Second, several researchers either cite a pre-existing definition of a term for the tactic they address in their research, or do not attempt to define it at all. Others explicitly define or describe the specific tactic they address in their research. We categorized and collated twenty-one definitions (Refer to Table 1 for a complete list). Third, from a scan of popular media sources, we noticed that a notable, but relatively recent phenomenon – dupes – has been minimally addressed in academic research, and has not been conceptualized. We include this additional tactic in the typology to analyze if it is a distinct copying practice in itself.

Each of the five copying practices mentioned above is discussed in detail below.

1/ Copycat

Table 1 lists published definitions of the term "copycat" along with the sources. Most of the literature on copycats is in the marketing discipline. Viewpoints range from strategy – more specifically, how a copycat can be used as a tool for competitive advantage – to consumer psychology, where studies generally focus on how visual similarities can affect consumer perceptions and behavior. In both cases, the term copycat refers to brands or products that imitate the product features of a leading or established brand. The imitation specifically focuses on external attributes such as logos, package design, and other visual cues, typically referred to as trade dress (Aribarg et al., 2014). It is assumed that the copycat brand may benefit from the positive perception and reputation of the imitated brand. Researchers in marketing have also used the term to refer to private label (store) brands that copy visual features of national (manufacturer) brands (Kumar & Steenkamp, 2007; Crettez, Hayek, & Zaccour, 2018).

From the legal perspective, copycat brands are generally considered to be legal. It is only when the consumer is likely to be confused about the source of the copycat brand that trade-dress infringement occurs (Aribarg et al., 2014).

2/ Counterfeit

The definitions for the term "counterfeit" are mostly from research articles in disciplines such as law and business – specifically, from marketing and logistics. When generalized across disciplines, the broad meaning remains the same: It refers to a product that is intentionally copied or duplicated to closely resemble an original item. Copying can be just of the design or even trademarks and branding, but the common understanding across disciplines is that the intention is to deceive consumers in trying to pass as the authentic product. In doing so, counterfeiting violates intellectual property rights.

There are some minor contradictions between disciplines about whether product quality is included in the definition or whether consumers recognize attempts at deception. However, these minor contradictions do not detract from the common understanding across disciplines that a counterfeit deliberately intends to deceive. Thus, counterfeiting is not just an attempt to create a product that closely resembles another; it is unauthorized and violates intellectual property rights.

In terms of the research focus of different disciplines, the legal perspective – as expected – tends to focus on the intellectual property infringement and legality rather than price and quality differences or consumer perceptions. In business disciplines, marketing tends to focus on consumer perceptions and consumption behavior. For instance, the development of counterfeited brands has been attributed to the social visibility and display of expensive fashion brands (Juggesur & Cohen, 2009). Research in this area in management tends to focus on market impact, whereas, logistics addresses this topic from the perspective of supply chain related issues.

3/ Imitation

An imitation is an alternative product that copies attributes such as a logo or a design from a more well-known brand. The definitions of this term (refer to Table 1) are from business-related disciplines, and not many researchers have addressed this topic (or defined it). Imitation can take different forms: "pure

imitation" which is identical copying of a competitor's product or "creative imitation", which refers to adapting, modifying, or enhancing a product based on competitors' originals while introducing new or improved features (Lee & Zhou, 2012). Notably, the use of the term "imitation" is commonplace in literature on various copying practices, where it tends to be used as a synonym for the term "copy", rather than referring to a specific type of copying practice.

4/ Knockoff

The term "knockoff" (refer to Table 1 for definitions) generally refers to a product that closely imitates or copies the design and elements of an original product but is not explicitly misrepresented as the original. In other words, it mimics the look or style of another product, without claiming to be the original product. Both research articles that define the term are from legal disciplines (law and technology; fashion law). Interestingly, the former includes a mention about a lack of attempt to pass as the original whereas the fashion and law definition does not seem to address this and is focused on the imitation aspect. As in the case of the term "imitation", the term "knock-off" seems to also be used across disciplines in a less-defined manner, as a synonym for any attempt at copying.

5/ Dupe

The noun dupe has been in use since the 1910s; it refers to an individual who is the victim of deception (Oxford University Press, 2024). As used currently, the term dupe can refer to alternative products in a variety of categories, ranging from durable products (e.g. luxury accessories), to personal-care products (e.g. skincare or perfumes), to experiences (e.g. travel and tourism) (Burrell, 2023; Raza, 2024). While the use of the term has different nuances in different online communities in the marketing and consumption contexts (e.g. gamers, crafters, makeup enthusiasts, etc.), historically, duping has always been a synonym for tricking, deceiving, or swindling (Kern & Henschel, 2023).

As mentioned previously, the term dupe has not received much attention in academic research and, to the best of our knowledge, has not been formally defined in published research in business, law, or fashion marketing. The next part of the paper looks at the various dimensions of current use of the term in order to arrive at a comprehensive and descriptive definition for the phenomenon.

Table 1

Copying Practices: Published Definitions

Source	Authors	Definition
Copycat		
International Journal of Research in Marketing	Van Horen & Pieters, 2012, p. 246	"Copycat brands imitate the trade-dress of a leading brand, such as its brand name or its package design, to take advantage of the latter's reputation and marketing efforts".
Journal of Brand Strategy	Marsden et al., 2024, p. 74	"Copycats are products that are packaged in a design style that closely resembles the visual cues expressed by the market leader."
Journal of Consumer Psychology	Warlop and Alba, 2004, p. 21	"A copycat strategy uses visual similarity to an established leader as a persuasion tool." "Copycat appearance and trade-dress imitation are the respective marketing and legal terms for the same phenomenon. We use them interchangeably but intentionally avoid the term me-too products, which refers to similarity in positioning rather than physical appearance".
Journal of Consumer Research	Van Horen & Pieters, 2017, p. 816	"Copycat brands imitate the trade dress of other brands, such as their brand name, logo, and packaging design, to take advantage of the positive associations of the imitated brands."
European Journal of Marketing	Nguyen & Gunasti, 2018, p. 1574	"The marketing literature adopts a broad definition of copycat brand, that is, any brand that imitates the trade-dress (brand name, logo, trademarks) or product features of a leading brand"
Counterfeit		
United States Code	15 U.S.C. §1127	"A "counterfeit" is a spurious mark which is identical with, or substantially indistinguishable from, a registered mark"
Asia Pacific Journal of Management	Lai & Zaichkowsky, 1999, p. 180	"A counterfeit is a 100% direct copy usually having inferior quality, although not always"

Source	Authors	Definition
Business Horizons	Wilke & Zaichkowsky, 1999, p. 9	"Counterfeiting refers to a 'direct' copy"

Table 1 (continued)

Source	Authors	Definition
Counterfeit (continued)		
North Carolina Journal of Law & Technology	Ferrill & Tanhehco, 2010, p. 254	"A counterfeit represents a nearly exact duplicate of an item sold with the intent to be passed off as the original"
OECD/EUIPO	OECD/EUIPO, 2021, p. 11.	"The term counterfeit […] refers to tangible goods that infringe trademarks, design rights or patents"
International Anti-Counterfeiting Coalition	What Is Counterfeiting? 2021	"A counterfeit is an item that uses someone else's trademark without their permission".
Academy of Marketing Science Review	Eisend & Schuchert-Güler, 2006, p. 2	"Counterfeiting is defined to mean that an original product with a remarkable brand value worth copying already exists on the market. Its characteristics are copied into another product, which is indistinguishable from the original, and is sold at a lower price as if it were the original. Nevertheless, consumers are well aware of the difference between the two products."
European Journal of Marketing	Staake, Thiesse & Fleisch, 2009, p. 322	"...goods that, be it due to their design, trademark, logo, or company name, bear without authorization a reference to a brand, a manufacturer, or any organization that warrants for the quality or standard conformity of the goods in such a way that the counterfeit merchandise could, potentially, be confused with goods that rightfully use this reference"
Transportation Research Part E: Logistics and Transportation Review	Wang, Lin & Choi, 2020 p. 1-2	"Counterfeiting usually refers to the manufacturing and sales of "copied products" which are illegal." "Counterfeits refer to items which are manufactured by imitating branded products."

Advances in Consumer Research	Penz & Stottinger, 2005, p. 568	"Counterfeiting, the production and sale of fake products, which seem identical to the original product"
Journal of Consumer Psychology	Liu, Wakeman & Norton, 2024 p. 2	"Counterfeit luxury goods are manufactured to resemble legitimate luxury branded goods but are typically lower-priced."

Table 1 (continued)

Source	Authors	Definition
Imitation		
Journal of International Marketing	Lee & Zhou, 2012, p. 2	"With "pure imitation," a firm clones its products to be identical to those of competitors; with "creative imitation," a firm modifies or adds new features to its own products based on competitors' originals"
International Journal of Production Economics	Crettez, Hayek, & Zaccour, 2018, p. 139	"Imitation [...] can be defined as copying certain attributes (e.g., logo, design) of a well-established product"
Knockoff		
North Carolina Journal of Law & Technology	Ferrill & Tanhehco, 2010, p. 254	"A knockoff is a close copy of the original design, mimicking its elements, but is not sold in an attempt to pass as the original"
Carolina Academic Press	Kolsun & Hand, 2020, p. 488	"The term 'knockoff' in the fashion industry simply refers to any article that imitates or copies another article"

Research Objective #1: Conceptualizing the Term "Dupe"

The popularity of dupes is a complex intersection of several factors. Fast fashion copying, particularly dupes, triggers a neurological reward system that encourages repeated consumption. Research suggests the brain's pleasure center activates more intensely when purchasing cheaper items (Knutson et al., 2007), creating a "dopamine trap" where the initial excitement fades quickly (often within four wears for clothing), leading consumers to seek another purchase to regain that high (Wijngaarden, 2024). This cycle fuels the popularity of dupes, which offer frequent, affordable bursts of satisfaction followed by "hangovers" (Wahnbaeck & Roloff, 2017). Unlike counterfeits, which carry social stigma, or copycats, which subtly reference the original, dupes openly celebrate their connection to the original, making them a socially accepted form of status-seeking.

The digital landscape has reshaped how copying is perceived and promoted. Dupes are now framed as a sign of consumer intelligence rather than a compromise (Jones, 2022). This kind of reframing shifts self-perception from "unable to afford the original" to "savvy enough to find the alternative," reinforcing a positive identity around dupe consumption. In addition, social media platforms, especially those like TikTok, have revolutionized how dupes are discovered and validated. Finding and sharing dupes goes

beyond being just a "social" activity on these communities, it is also a validation system for participants; in other words, it is a "valued" social activity. This differs significantly from both counterfeits (which operate through concealment) and copycats (which typically operate through suggestion rather than explicit comparison).

An analysis of the term "dupe" reveals varying perspectives across 10 different sources (see Table 2).

Chaudhry (2022) – one of the few academic sources – addresses dupes in the context of discussing a case that Amazon brought against two dupe influencers. However, no definition was provided; they note that "dupe" is merely slang for duplicate, without further elaboration. Contemporary media sources focus on three primary dimensions: (1) affordability, (2) similarity to original products, and (3) legal status. All sources agree that dupes are: Less expensive than the original, intentionally similar to a more expensive product, and – unlike counterfeits – legal. We examine each dimension below.

Affordability: Multiple mainstream media outlets emphasize the economic aspect of a dupe. CNBC (Solá, 2023), Business Insider (Dawkins, 2023), and Inc. (Crumley, 2023) describe dupes as economical alternatives to luxury items. CBS News (Petrillo, 2024) refers to dupes as providing luxury-like qualities at significantly reduced prices. In fact, affordability is at the crux of dupe culture, where dupes are positioned as smart alternatives to higher-priced products.

Similarity to Original Product: This aspect is highlighted by several sources. USA Today (Lee, 2023) and Reuters (Masters, 2023) emphasize visual and functional similarity to premium products. While dupes have been described as being near-identical (Khan, 2022), most discourse on this topic suggests only a certain degree of similarity in either aesthetics or function. Mashable (Kern & Henschel, 2023) expands this perspective beyond physical features to include experiential characteristics.

Legal Status: Ironically – considering the original meaning of the term – contemporary use of the term "dupe" does not seem to suggest any intent to deceive. The Washington Post explores the cultural connotation of dupes as part of Gen Z consumer habits, and is the only source that suggests a social perception where a dupe wearer might "trick" others into believing that a product is a designer product (Judkis, 2023). In contrast, most sources explicitly distinguish dupes from counterfeit goods, stating that dupes avoid trademark infringement (Lee, 2023; Petrillo, 2024).

From the analysis of the three dimensions above, it is clear that dupes are a distinct and unique copying practice with some features in common with the other practices discussed previously. For instance, unlike counterfeits, they are legal. Similarly, both dupes and copycats resemble the original product visually. However, copycats borrow trade dress to confuse and influence consumer perceptions and leverage a market leader's reputation, whereas dupes focus on legal, budget-friendly alternatives that provide similar benefits as the original product, without any intent to confuse or deceive.

Based on this analysis, we propose the following definition for the term "dupe":

> *A dupe is a lower-cost product that closely replicates the aesthetic, functional, or experiential attributes of a more expensive item, while still being legal.*

Legality in the case of physical goods means that dupes do not infringe on trademarks or logos or have any intent to deceive. Hence, a dupe offers consumers an affordable, but sufficiently similar alternative to a more expensive product, and may appeal to value-conscious buyers seeking comparable quality or aesthetics.

In the next section of the paper, we examine the dimensions of various copying practices to identify their shared and unique features to arrive at a typology.

Table 2

Usage Instances of the Term "Dupe"

Source	Authors	Description
The Guardian	Khan, 2022	Dupes "are near "duplicates" of luxury items created by budget brands
Business Horizons	Chaudhry, 2022	Dupe is "slang for duplicate"
CNBC	Solá, 2023	"Dupes," short for "duplicate," are cheaper alternatives to premium or luxury consumer products, and they are increasingly popular among Gen Z and millennial shoppers and app users
USA Today	Lee, 2023	Dupes copy or imitate the physical appearance of other products but don't copy the brand name or logo of a trademarked item the way a counterfeit, or fake, does
Inc.	Crumley, 2023	Dupes are "less expensive duplicates of established brands increasingly popular with younger buyers"
Business Insider	Dawkins, 2023	Dupes are "less expensive alternatives for popular products"
Reuters	Masters, 2023	"Dupes" - sufficiently similar replicas of higher-priced products
Mashable	Kern & Henschel, 2023	Dupes (short for "duplicates"), are products that replicate the experience of more expensive or inaccessible items

The Washington Post	Judkis, 2023	Dupes are a "Gen Z rebranding of fashion and beauty products that are cheaper versions of the real thing—duplicate, but also duplicity, since the wearer might trick someone into believing they bought designer"
CBS News	Petrillo, 2024	Dupes are not counterfeits or illegal knockoffs. They're products that closely mimic high-end items without breaking the bank, offering consumers the feel of luxury at a fraction of the cost

Research Objective #2: Synthesizing the Definitions into a Typology

In our analysis of the various dimensions of the different forms of copying that fast fashion can take – namely copycats, counterfeits, knockoffs, imitations, and dupes – knockoffs and imitations emerged as terms that were used to refer to copying practices in general, rather than being unique practices themselves. As noted previously, very few authors have defined these terms.

For instance, in the context of store/private brands (typically referred to as a type of copycat brand), the term "imitation" is used to describe copying in general (Aribarg et al., 2014). The copying of certain visual attributes of an existing product has been referred to as "brand imitation" in the context of discussing various forms of copying (Crettez, Hayek, & Zaccour, 2018). Again, imitation seems to refer to the act of copying, rather than being a specific practice that can stand on its own, and it is implied that copying practices can vary in terms of degree of imitation. It has also been used to describe counterfeits (Staake, Thiesse, & Fleisch, 2009) and to refer to copycat brands (Van Horen & Pieters, 2017). Similarly, the term knockoff seems to be used synonymously with copying practices in general. There are also scattered references where they have been used as an alternate term for another existing copying practice. For instance, the term knockoff is used to refer to products that copy design features from authentic products (Hietanen et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2024); a practice that other researchers typically refer to as "copycats". For these reasons, imitations and knockoffs are not considered to be distinct forms of copying and are not included in the typology.

Our final typology of copying practices is composed of three types (1) Copycats, (2) Counterfeits, and (3) Dupes. While some of them may have similar characteristics, there are significant differences that distinguish them from each other. This prevents them from being used as either a generic term for copying or as an alternate term for other forms of copying. These characteristics are listed in Table 3; we discuss each of them next. Figure 1 represents this typology visually in a flowchart-style diagram illustrating the decision criteria that differentiate different fashion copying types. In addition, Figure 2 shows a visual comparison of copying types across their key features.

Affordability:

In terms of affordability, all three copying practices offer lower-priced alternatives to original products. Counterfeit products replicate the original items while providing cost advantages, targeting consumers seeking the appearance of authenticity without the associated expense. While affordability may not be explicitly emphasized for copycats, consumers tend to recognize that they represent affordable options to existing successful products. On the other hand, dupes distinctly emphasize affordability and are presented as budget-friendly alternatives.

Similarity to Original Product:

The degree of similarity to the original product varies significantly among the three practices. Counterfeit products attempt to mimic the design and/or branding of the original product, making them indistinguishable from an original brand. Copycats may not be identical, but attempt to leverage a successful

product's reputation by copying significant visual features or trade dress. Dupes, in contrast, may be only loosely similar to the original, since the focus is on providing similar functional or aesthetic attributes rather than precise replication.

Legal Status:

The legality of any copying practice is related to the fact that visual symbols, logos, and packaging help create unique perceptions in consumers' minds. In other words, trade dress is linked to a brand's identity and attempts at imitation could result in trademark or trade dress infringement (Aribarg et al., 2014). An examination of the legal status of the three copying practices reveals a clear hierarchy that distinguishes them from each other. Counterfeiting is explicitly illegal, as it constitutes a direct violation of intellectual property laws by reproducing the original product without authorization. While copycats may create confusion, they are typically considered lawful as they avoid exact replication and instead emulate distinctive features. While considered legal, copycats might not be ethical when they create confusion. Dupes, on the other hand, are entirely legal alternatives, as they do not infringe upon intellectual property and make no claims of being equivalent to the original.

Intent:

The intent underlying these practices also differs significantly. Counterfeit goods are created with the explicit intent to deceive consumers into believing they are purchasing the original product. Copycats, while not aiming to deceive outright, are intended to position themselves as alternatives to successful products by borrowing key design elements. Dupes, however, lack any deceptive intent and are instead presented as affordable options that make no pretense of authenticity. Thus, while counterfeits are marketed as equivalents of the original products, copycats and dupes are merely presented as alternatives.

Consumer Perception of Authenticity:

Counterfeit products may or may not be recognized as inauthentic by consumers, depending on the quality of the copy and the consumer's knowledge. Some consumers may initially mistake a counterfeit for the genuine product until closer inspection, while others knowingly purchase counterfeits, raising questions of consumer ethicality. Copycat products can cause initial confusion, for instance, a consumer might notice a copycat's packaging or design and momentarily associate it with the imitated brand – but generally consumers understand that the copycat is a different brand offering a "similar" option. Dupes are almost always clearly identified as alternatives; consumers typically are fully aware they are buying a cheaper, unbranded (or differently branded) product that simply delivers a similar aesthetic or function. In essence, consumers do not expect authenticity from dupes, but rather appreciate the *comparison* to a higher-end item – perceiving a dupe as being a smart buy as mentioned previously.

Source/Framing:

The way these products are presented in the market is also different. Counterfeits are often falsely presented – by illicit sellers – as if they were the authentic original. For example, a street vendor might insist a fake

purse is "real" or a website might not disclose the item's true nature. Copycats are marketed by their own brands but intentionally designed to remind consumers of another product; the marketing may hint that "if you like Brand X, you'll like our product," sometimes without overtly saying so. Dupes, on the other hand, are frequently framed by consumers themselves rather than marketers. For instance, a beauty blogger or influencer might call a store-brand makeup item a "dupe" for a luxury product. Brands producing dupes often market them just on price and features, letting consumers draw the comparison. In other cases, third-party reviewers or shoppers apply the "dupe" label in social media discussions, effectively marketing the product as a savvy find.

Table 3

A Typology of Copying Practices

Feature	Counterfeit	Copycat	Dupe
Affordability	Lower-priced alternative	Lower-priced alternative	Lower-priced alternative
Similarity to Original Product	Exact replication	Significant visual/trade dress	May resemble the original
Legal Status	Illegal	Legal	Legal
Intent	Deceptive	To position as an alternative to an existing successful product	No deceptive intent
Consumer Perception of Authenticity	May or may not perceive as authentic	May be confused	Clearly recognize as non-authentic
Source/Framing	Marketer-framed as the original	Marketer-framed as an alternative	Usually consumer-framed as a "smart" alternative

In practice, the lines between these categories can become blurred. A low-priced item may resemble a copycat but becomes a counterfeit if it includes unauthorized branding. A product could be referred to as a "dupe" on social media but if its packaging and aesthetic becomes indistinguishable from a leading brand's (potentially confusing consumers), it is no longer a dupe, but rather a copycat. The Frye Campus boots case demonstrates blurring of boundaries: When Target created a $50 version of the popular $500 Frye boots, they marketed them without reference to Frye, making it a "copycat". When it was identified by consumers/influencers on TikTok specifically as a "Frye dupe", the product became a dupe (Pisani, 2020). Another case of boundary blurring was demonstrated by Lululemon: Multiple Lululemon copycats existed on Amazon, but only after a TikTok user posted about the apparel and the video went viral did they become dupes (OpSec Security, 2023).

In summary, counterfeit, copycat, and dupe practices all offer lower-priced alternatives to original products but differ in intent, similarity, legality, consumer perceptions, and framing. Counterfeits are framed as authentic by marketers, copycats as affordable alternatives, and dupes as "smart" budget-friendly options typically promoted by consumers. Consumer perceptions reflect these differences, with counterfeits risking misidentification as authentic, copycats causing potential confusion, and dupes being clearly recognized as non-authentic yet inspired alternatives.

Figure 1
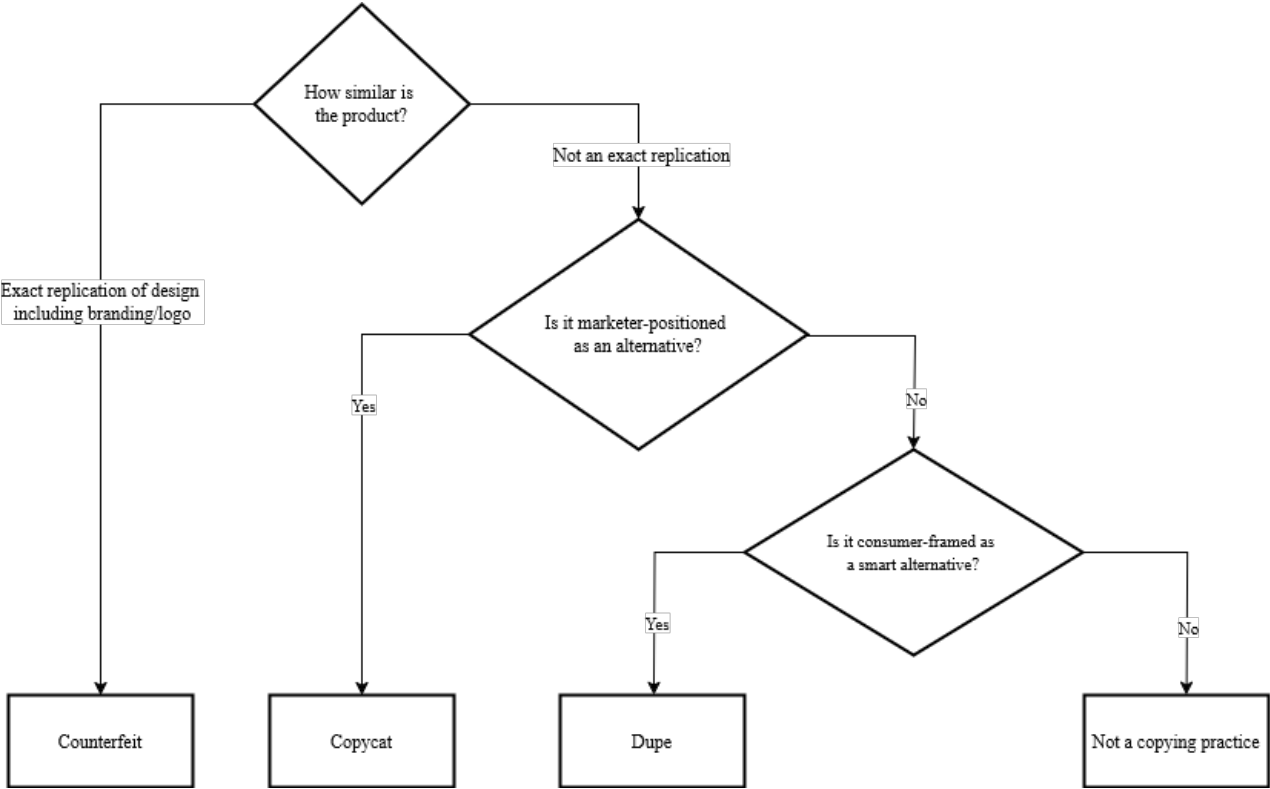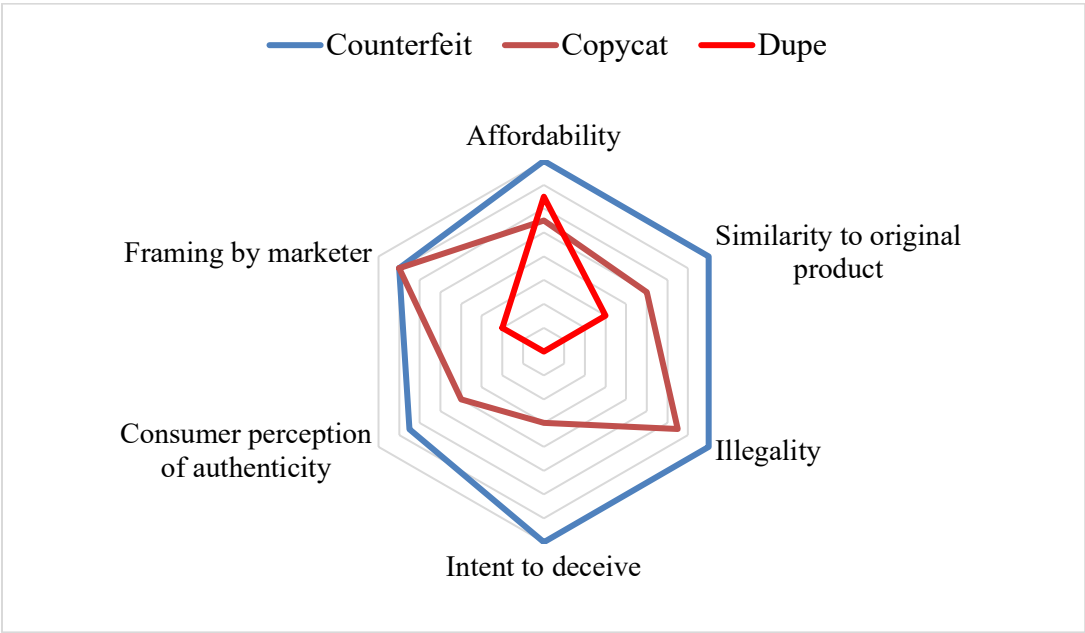
A Decision-tree for Copying Practices

Figure 2

A Typology of Copying Practices: An Illustration

CONCLUSION

In this paper we systematically analyze copying practices in the fast fashion industry, and achieve two primary objectives. First, we propose a formal definition for "dupes" – a phenomenon that has gained significant traction recently, but lacked academic conceptualization. Second, we developed a comprehensive typology of copying practices in the fast fashion industry, addressing a critical gap in academic literature where terms like counterfeits, knockoffs, and dupes are often used interchangeably without clear differentiation. In doing so, we have provided researchers with a standardized framework for future investigations in this domain.

The success of copying practices in fast fashion can be explained through the lens of consumer psychology. As Eagly and Chaiken (1993) note, consumers often employ simple heuristics in decision-making, such as assuming that when things look the same, they must also work the same. This explains why they are drawn to copied products, and why marketers are able to successfully leverage this tendency. This psychological mechanism, combined with increasing price sensitivity due to economic pressures and inflation (Balchandani et al., 2024), suggests that the fast fashion industry, particularly its copying practices, will most likely continue to grow. Copying practices may intensify overconsumption, waste, and environmental harm, making it all the more urgent for researchers and policymakers to scrutinize the fast fashion industry.

In recent years, the fast fashion industry has evolved, with the emergence of third-generation fast fashion retailers like Shein, which have revolutionized the sector by creating engaged social media community-based loyalty programs (Amed & Berg, 2023). This development marks a significant shift from traditional fast fashion business models, as these companies are attempting to build emotional connections with consumers through social communities, rather than relying solely on price and trend advantages. While these companies may face increasing scrutiny regarding sustainability and trade practices, their business model represents a significant evolution in the fast fashion landscape. This makes academic research in this area increasingly crucial, and our research especially timely.

The standardized definition for the term "dupe" and the typology presented in this paper provide a foundation for future research. Future research areas could focus on exploring the complex dynamics of copying practices and their effect on consumers, such as consumer acceptance and motivations for purchasing dupes, relative perceptions of different types of copied products (e.g., dupes versus copycats), and the relationship between consumer attributes and preferences for different forms of copying. Other areas might include the brand community aspect, both from the perspective of influencers in normalizing and promoting dupe culture, as well as consumer communities fostered by third-generation fast fashion retailers.

Future research on fast fashion copying practices could also include empirical research in the form of surveys or experimental designs that explore consumer perceptions, including authenticity, confusion between categories, and factors such as social status sensitivity, materialism, and brand loyalty. Studies could also examine motivations for purchasing dupes, how consumers differentiate between dupes and copycats, and the influence of individual traits on purchasing decisions. Industry-focused research could use expert interviews or the Delphi method to clarify how professionals distinguish dupes from copycats. Case studies on legal disputes would provide rich insights into ethical and regulatory challenges. Dupe culture, specifically, revolves around consumer buzz and brand communities, so an examination of the role of social media and influencers in promoting dupes is another promising area for research, especially in the context of third-generation fast fashion retailers' attempts at fostering consumer engagement. While this paper focuses on developing a conceptual typology of copying practices, the logical next step would be to develop and validate a measurement scale to categorize copying practices, which would transform the conceptual typology into a practical tool for both academic researchers and practitioners.

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