Identity Threat and Compensatory Consumption: Psychological Mechanisms in Consumer Behavior

Xibei Wen

Department of Psychology, Durham University, Durham DH1 3LE, United Kingdom

pvss78@durham.ac.uk

Abstract. In contemporary consumer societies, consumption has transcended mere material exchange to become a vital avenue for individual identity construction and psychological compensation. This paper centres on the concept of 'identity threat and compensatory consumption', systematically reviewing recent research developments and analysing the phenomenon through the lens of counterfeit luxury goods. Findings reveal: Firstly, identity threats (such as power deficits or social exclusion) significantly heighten individuals' preference for symbolic goods, though their outward manifestations vary across cultural contexts. In collectivist societies, conspicuously branded luxury items are often perceived as status symbols, whereas in cultures emphasising equality and restraint, they may be viewed as 'ostentatious displays'. Secondly, compensatory consumption is not a singular response but the interplay of multiple psychological mechanisms: social comparison and self-esteem restoration act as driving forces (GO signals), while implicit theories, personality traits, and self-control exert moderating or inhibitory effects (STOP signals). Counterfeit goods exemplify this duality: while offering marginalised groups symbolic belonging and transient solace, they simultaneously entail reputational risks and ethical dilemmas that exacerbate identity anxieties. Finally, this paper argues that interventions targeting compensatory consumption should extend beyond products and markets to encompass education, psychological counselling, and institutional regulation, thereby offering more constructive coping mechanisms. Future research should deepen its exploration through cross-cultural comparisons, longitudinal tracking, and digital consumption environments to uncover the dynamic mechanisms of compensatory consumption. This will provide theoretical underpinnings and practical insights for brand strategies, consumer education, and public governance.

Keywords: Identity Threat, Compensatory Consumption, Counterfeit Goods, Consumer Psychology.

1 Introduction

In contemporary consumer societies, consumption has long transcended mere material exchange, becoming a vital means for individuals to construct identity, self-recognition and social belonging. Extensive research indicates that consumption possesses potent

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symbolic functions: it not only satisfies basic needs but also carries multiple meanings of social comparison, status expression and psychological compensation [1]. With the advancement of globalisation and the rise of social media, challenges to identity recognition have grown increasingly complex. Individuals are more prone to experiencing feelings of inequality and psychological imbalance due to structural societal disparities (such as income, education, and occupation). This 'identity threat' often prompts people to resort to consumption as a means of achieving emotional comfort or restoring social recognition [2].

Compensatory consumption, as an individual psychological response to identity threats, has garnered significant scholarly attention in recent years. Existing research indicates that a perceived lack of power significantly heightens individuals' preference for status goods, while a brand's recognisability and symbolism amplify its efficacy in social comparison [1,3]. Building upon this, scholars have further discovered that when individuals experience identity challenges or erosion, they tend to favour products symbolising their 'ideal self' or 'socially expected roles' [4]. Collectively, these studies reveal that compensatory consumption is not merely a short-term response to specific threats but reflects deeper interactions between individuals and social structures.

Despite the emergence of a preliminary theoretical framework in this field, three key limitations persist. Firstly, most existing studies rely on experimental manipulations or cross-sectional surveys, lacking long-term tracking of actual consumption processes, making it difficult to understand the persistence and dynamics of compensatory consumption. Secondly, exploration of cultural differences remains relatively limited. Current literature predominantly focuses on Western contexts, with a lack of systematic comparative analyses of compensatory consumption mechanisms in collectivist cultures or emerging markets [5]. Thirdly, existing research predominantly focuses on the immediate compensatory effects of consumption behaviour, while overlooking its potential negative psychological consequences, such as prolonged identity anxiety, identity erosion, and value system confusion [6]. These limitations not only constrain the external validity of the theory but also impact its practical application in brand strategy and consumer education.

Consequently, this paper aims to systematically examine the psychological mechanisms linking 'identity threat' and 'compensatory consumption,' seeking to construct an integrated cross-cultural explanatory framework. Specifically, it selects the case of 'luxury counterfeits'—a phenomenon both marginal and emblematic—to analyse its multifaceted symbolic meanings across differing social structures and cultural contexts. Methodologically, this study synthesises social identity theory, self-consistency theory, and cultural psychological perspectives to explore how identity threat influences consumption choices and how consumption, in turn, constructs individual identity. Through literature review, theoretical integration, and critical evaluation, this work seeks not only to deepen academic understanding of compensatory consumption but also to provide theoretical underpinnings and practical insights for brand management, consumer intervention, and public policy formulation.

2 Types of Identity Threats and their Consumption Outcomes

Identity threat is not a singular concept but encompasses multiple manifestations. The most prevalent form involves a perceived lack of power or status. When individuals feel disadvantaged within the social structure due to constraints on income, education, or occupation, they often compensate for this psychological disparity through consumption. Experiments by Rucker and Galinsky demonstrate that individuals with low power perceptions are more inclined to purchase status goods [1]. This implies that consumption transcends material exchange, functioning as an act of restoring self-worth. In other words, luxury goods in this context are not merely "items" but tools enabling one to "reassert oneself" within social spheres.

Building upon this, whether a brand possesses conspicuous external characteristics—and thus can be readily recognised by others in social settings—has also been demonstrated to play a crucial role in consumption choices driven by identity threat. Han, Nunes and Drèze found that a luxury brand's 'salience' amplifies its role in social comparison [3]. The more easily identifiable the brand, the more it reinforces the consumer's expression of social status, thereby more effectively alleviating perceived identity threats. This indicates that identity threat manifests more in 'which luxury brand is chosen'. Consumers favour brand symbols that are visible and comprehensible to others, ensuring their consumption carries symbolic and social utility by strengthening peer recognition and a sense of belonging. This trend is frequently observed in real life—individuals favour products bearing prominent logos in public settings precisely to enable others to 'observe' the identity signals they convey. At its core, such behaviour embodies the materialisation of 'self-presentation' within the consumer context, where personal identities are constructed through goods that can be socially interpreted. However, most related research has centred on Western markets, such as middle-class populations in American or European cities. The operational mechanisms of brand visibility in non-Western cultures remain under-explored. In societies where cultural values favour subtlety and restraint—such as parts of East Asia or the Middle East—it remains to be verified whether consumers similarly favour highly conspicuous brands or instead prefer "discreet luxury" labels (e.g., Bottega Veneta, The Row). Such cultural differences may determine that identity-threat-induced consumption patterns exhibit regional and culturally dependent characteristics.

Subsequent research, such as Coleman, Williams, and Morales, indicates that identity threat can broadly enhance consumers' positive attitudes towards identity-related products [2]. They demonstrate that when individuals experience identity threat, they exhibit more favourable evaluations and stronger purchase intentions towards products linked to their identity. This phenomenon extends beyond luxury goods to encompass consumer products linked to professional, interest-based, or cultural identities, such as Louis Vuitton bags that reinforce social recognition, Nike and Adidas for sports-related identities, or Apple products that reflect technological sophistication and cultural capital. The underlying logic, consistent with social identity theory, posits that when identity is challenged, individuals actively seek products that signal identity affiliation to counteract the resulting unease. For instance, a young female solicitor

frequently encountering gender bias in the workplace may gravitate towards brands symbolising professionalism or independence to reinforce her occupational identity and social self-perception. However, current research only demonstrates that identity threats enhance consumer attitudes towards identity-related products in the short term; whether this persists in long-term consumption behaviour remains unclear. Whether identity threats permanently alter individual consumption preferences and brand loyalty, or represent merely a situational stress response, remains understudied due to insufficient longitudinal research data. Particularly in dynamic consumption environments—such as individuals frequently exposed on social media or whose cultural identities face repeated questioning—whether compensatory consumption evolves into stable patterns warrants further investigation.

In summary, while distinct forms of identity threat manifest differently, they all indicate consumption as a means of restoring self-identity. Factors such as power deficits, social comparison, and brand salience can, under certain conditions, drive consumers to increase demand for symbolic goods. These studies lay the groundwork for subsequent analysis of the psychological mechanisms of compensatory consumption, though further exploration is needed regarding their operation across different cultures and long-term consumption contexts. Theoretically, the interdisciplinary nature of this topic suggests researchers should integrate perspectives from social identity theory, consumer semiotics, and cultural psychology to establish a more systematic explanatory framework. However, identity threat does not automatically trigger compensatory consumption; whether it translates into actual behaviour often depends on a range of underlying psychological mechanisms.

3 Psychological Mechanisms of Compensatory Consumption

Although identity threats frequently trigger compensatory consumption, this process is not linear; it is typically driven or moderated by multiple psychological mechanisms. Firstly, social comparison represents one of the most theoretically intuitive mechanisms. When individuals perceive themselves as lagging behind in social status or self-image, they may consume to narrow the gap with their reference group. Research by Wilcox, Kim, and Senindicates that consumers' motivation for purchasing counterfeit luxury goods is frequently not driven by functional considerations, but rather by the desire to gain an advantage in identity symbols through social comparison. Similarly [7]. Amaral and Loken found divergent attitudes towards counterfeits across social identity groups: high-status groups tend to reject counterfeits, while low-status groups may perceive them as pathways into symbolic consumption circles [8]. Thus, social comparison mechanisms play a pivotal role in mediating identity threat and consumption behaviour. Crucially, this mechanism hinges not on whether consumption genuinely 'elevates status,' but on whether individuals 'perceive' this comparative advantage. In other words, compensatory consumption primarily operates on subjective perception rather than actual shifts in objective status. However, most such studies rely on laboratory manipulations or hypothetical scenarios, such as simulating identity threat through questionnaires or reading materials. While such methods effectively

reveal causal relationships, they remain detached from real-world consumption environments, highlighting the need for longitudinal or field-based approaches. In practice, identity threats are typically ambiguous, persistent, and intermittent—rather than one-off triggering events. Consequently, future research may consider more ecologically valid approaches, such as longitudinal tracking, mobile data collection, natural experiments, or big data analyses of online consumer behaviour [6].

Another core mechanism is self-esteem compensation. Rucker and Galinskyfound that power-deficient individuals compensate for self-esteem deficits by purchasing status goods [1]. Han et al. further emphasised that brand prominence not only elevates social standing but also improves short-term self-evaluations [3]. This indicates compensatory consumption can alleviate self-doubt and provide immediate emotional comfort. However, the long-term effects of such restoration are not necessarily positive, with existing research lacking examination of sustained consumption consequences. Particularly as digital social platforms increasingly amplify 'visible identity,' this short-term self-esteem compensation risks becoming an endless cycle: individuals repeatedly restore their self-worth through consumption yet fail to fundamentally alleviate underlying uncertainty and anxiety.

Nevertheless, not all individuals resort to consumption when facing identity threats. Xu, Huang, and Lin highlight a crucial moderating variable: the individual's implicit theory, namely whether identity and competence are viewed as malleable or fixed [9]. When confronted with threats, those who believe competence and identity are malleable are more likely to adopt non-consumptive responses, such as enhancing their capabilities or seeking growth opportunities. Conversely, those holding a fixed mindset are more likely to resort to external consumption symbols for compensation. Thus, whether compensatory consumption occurs depends not only on the intensity of the threat itself but is also strongly influenced by the individual's cognitive framework. However, research on the relationship between implicit theories and consumption remains in its preliminary stages, with no stable measurement model yet established. Future research may consider integrating this with personality variables (such as self-monitoring, locus of control, and self-construal) to further elucidate diverse response pathways in threatening situations. Nevertheless, as the study sample primarily comprised Chinese university students, its cross-cultural applicability remains to be tested.

It is worth noting that the consequences of compensatory consumption are not invariably positive. Research by Lisjak, Bonezzi, Kim, and Rucker revealed that repeated compensatory consumption within the same identity domain weakens self-regulatory capacity, increasing susceptibility to loss of control in subsequent spending [6]. Mo, based on survey data from young consumers, further contends that such behaviour may prove counterproductive, failing to alleviate identity anxiety while deepening psychological imbalance [10]. This negative cycle is particularly prevalent among individuals with lower self-control or facing high social pressures. This underscores that intervention strategies must extend beyond product design to address consumers' psychological states, including through education, counselling, and regulatory measures, developing supportive rather than exploitative marketing approaches [11]. These findings indicate that while compensatory consumption offers

short-term restorative benefits—such as boosting self-confidence, reducing anxiety, or creating a temporary sense of control—it may exacerbate identity anxiety over the long term, thereby perpetuating a vicious cycle.

In summary, the mechanisms underpinning compensatory consumption can be categorised into two broad types: on the one hand, motivational triggers (GO signals), such as social comparison and self-esteem compensation, which propel consumption; on the other, constraining or backfiring mechanisms (STOP signals), such as individual differences and negative consequences, which hinder or even undermine consumption's positive function. It is precisely the interplay of these mechanisms that determines whether identity threats translate into consumption behaviour, and the equilibrium between its short-term restorative effects and long-term consequences. Only through a more nuanced understanding of the interactive pathways between these mechanisms can social interventions or brand strategies be designed that genuinely benefit consumers' psychological wellbeing—for example, through campus-based consumer education or targeted campaigns in counterfeit-dense markets—rather than deepening their identity anxieties.

4 The Use of Counterfeit Luxury Goods, Brand Image, and the Erosion of Authentic Product Distinctiveness: A Case Study Perspective on Compensatory Consumption

The mechanisms discussed in Chapters Two and Three are particularly evident and concrete in the consumption of counterfeit luxury goods. Individuals experiencing identity threats often seek symbolic social recognition through low-cost yet highly visible consumption behaviours, such as purchasing counterfeit luxury handbags or logo-displayed sneakers. The core motivation here lies not in the product's practical utility, but in leveraging the "visibility" of symbols to achieve identity restoration [3,7]. For some consumers occupying marginalised social positions, counterfeit goods constitute a 'psychological conduit' into symbolic consumption circles, temporarily narrowing the distance between them and their ideal reference groups [8,12]. This reveals the core logic of compensatory consumption: mending identity fissures through material acquisition, such as purchasing counterfeit luxury goods to symbolically bridge perceived social gaps. Its psychological mechanisms are closely intertwined with 'conspicuous consumption' and 'distinction of taste' [13,14].

However, the symbolic nature of counterfeit goods is not universally applicable; cross-cultural studies have shown that in collectivist markets consumers are more tolerant of counterfeits as signals of group belonging, whereas in individualistic Western settings the same symbols are often judged as ostentatious and morally problematic [8, 15, 16]. In cultures emphasising social comparison and identity visibility, status symbols represented by conspicuous logos are more readily recognised and generate ostentatious effects. Conversely, in societies valuing restraint, self-control, and cultural refinement, consumers tend to favour brands embodying a "quiet luxury" aesthetic, conveying their aesthetic sensibilities and social standing through understated means [3,17]. Cross-cultural research indicates that in regions plagued by

counterfeit goods and characterised by a pragmatic consumer ethos—such as certain emerging markets—individuals exhibit greater tolerance towards counterfeit products [15,16]. Amaral and Loken observed that when societies imbue 'authentic purchases' with moral significance, individuals not only become indifferent to counterfeits but may also assign negative social evaluations to their users [8]. Thus, counterfeits represent not merely functional substitutes but outcomes of 'signalling games' within social identity interactions [18,19].

From a brand perspective, the circulation of counterfeits blurs the symbolic boundaries of genuine products, diminishing their uniqueness, scarcity, and exclusivity in social recognition. Research indicates that when counterfeits proliferate in the market, consumers' evaluations of genuine products decline due to signal dilution [11,20]. This 'signalling pollution' erodes core brand values, particularly undermining the compensatory function of genuine products in identity construction. Consequently, some brands must pivot towards more implicit, harder-to-counterfeit signalling systems to re-establish their differentiation advantage [17].

More notably, counterfeit consumption exhibits dual psychological effects on individuals. On one hand, it provides immediate psychological comfort, granting consumers transient confidence and a sense of belonging in social contexts. On the other, the associated social risks—such as fear of exposure, legal consequences, or reputational damage—combined with moral distress may plunge individuals into deeper social anxiety. Particularly among high-status groups, the authenticity of goods itself constitutes a 'boundary marker,' signifying the genuineness of cultural capital [8]. Consequently, counterfeit goods may function as both a 'GO signal' alleviating identity anxiety and a 'STOP signal' triggering fresh psychological unease. This paradoxical outcome underscores that compensatory consumption is not a unidimensional psychological response, but a complex process deeply embedded within social interactions, cultural norms, and symbolic systems—such as fashion trends and digital community norms.

5 Discussion and Future Research Directions

Having systematically examined the psychological mechanisms and social contexts of compensatory consumption, several avenues warrant further exploration. The following reflections address research methodology, cultural differences, and intervention strategies, while drawing on counterfeit goods case studies to identify potential future research questions.

Firstly, although some studies have attempted to expand beyond controlled experiments by employing longitudinal tracking, natural experiments, or experience sampling strategies [6,9], the field of compensatory consumption remains predominantly reliant on short-duration, contextually constrained experimental designs. Real-world experiences of identity threat often exhibit greater ambiguity, cumulative effects, and contextual specificity, which cannot be fully captured by one-off manipulations. Future research could further advance methodological innovation to systematically capture how individuals repeatedly employ consumption behaviours to

address identity concerns within their daily lives. Moreover, social media and online platforms have become primary arenas for identity construction and expression. Researchers may leverage big data mining techniques to reveal consumers' dynamic regulatory processes of "symbolic repair" within the interwoven online-offline contexts.

Secondly, on the cultural dimension, manifestations of identity threat and compensatory consumption exhibit significant cross-cultural variations. The same luxury brand logo may serve as a status symbol in certain social contexts, while in others it risks becoming a negative label signifying "ostentatious display." For instance, in China's tier-one cities, carrying a Louis Vuitton handbag is often perceived as a marker of middle-class entry, whereas in certain Nordic nations, a highly egalitarian cultural ethos may interpret the same logo as a negative label signifying ostentation [3,21]. Against this backdrop, some consumers actively favour understated luxury that 'transcends highly recognisable brands like Louis Vuitton,' such as Bottega Veneta's logo-free handbags. This 'hidden luxury' does not diminish the social function of luxury goods but instead becomes an alternative means of identity differentiation. In summary, future cross-national comparative research should further examine how different cultural variables (such as collectivism levels and social norm cohesion) moderate the manifestation of compensatory consumption [15,16].

Thirdly, intervention strategies for compensatory consumption should extend beyond market-based approaches. The GO/STOP signal model offers insights into consumer behaviour. GO signals—such as social comparison, self-esteem threats, and identity anxiety—often drive consumption, while STOP signals—including self-control, growth mindset, and internal locus of control—can effectively curb compensatory spending [1]. This implies that interventions should extend beyond product design and marketing to encompass educational initiatives, psychological support, and institutional arrangements that broaden individuals' coping pathways against identity threats [11]. At the micro level, campus or community programmes—such as peer mentoring, skill-building workshops, and career training—can guide adolescents towards more constructive alternatives in social comparison by reinforcing "skilled status" rather than "consumptive status." Examples include seeking identity recognition through academic achievement or professional skills. Such interventions help reduce reliance on consumption symbols, steering individuals towards more internalised self-worth construction. At the macro level, in markets saturated with counterfeit goods, social campaigns and public education can diminish public overreliance on ostentatious symbols by emphasising the value of non-consumptive identity markers [20]. Concurrently, institutional market regulatory measures can reduce opportunities for 'low-cost status substitution' offered by counterfeit goods, thereby diminishing the psychological incentives for compensatory consumption. Collectively, these interventions not only alleviate identity-threat-driven compensatory consumption demands but may also foster more sustainable identity construction patterns.

Notably, the phenomenon of counterfeit goods itself raises a series of unanswered theoretical and practical questions: Does reputational risk exert greater behavioural moderating power than moral persuasion? Does compensatory demand shift beyond

consumption to other domains? Do digital platforms amplify social comparison and the visibility of elite lifestyles, thereby increasing the frequency of identity threats? Can brands maintain their distinctiveness and appeal while avoiding the exacerbation of pathological social comparison? These questions hold not only theoretical implications but also offer new entry points for brand strategy, consumer education, and public governance. Future research could address these issues through longitudinal studies, cross-cultural experiments, or big data analyses of consumer behaviour. Such methodological advances would not only verify whether compensatory consumption persists over time, but also reveal how cultural norms and digital environments shape consumers' symbolic responses to identity threats.

6 Conclusion

This paper provides a systematic review of 'identity threat and compensatory consumption', analysing the phenomenon through the case study of counterfeit luxury goods. Overall, the research presents three principal conclusions:

Firstly, identity threat serves as the key psychological factor triggering compensatory consumption. Whether stemming from structural inequality within society or identity challenges encountered in everyday interactions, such threats drive consumers towards a more intense pursuit of symbolic goods. However, this effect is not universally applicable and is influenced by cultural contexts and social norms. In collectivist societies with high identity visibility, prominent logos carry greater symbolic value; conversely, in cultures valuing equality and understatement, the same symbols may be interpreted as negative labels of 'ostentatious display'. This indicates that compensatory consumption manifests cross-cultural variations, and its psychological logic must be understood within specific contexts.

Secondly, compensatory consumption arises from the interplay of multiple mechanisms rather than a singular response. Mechanisms such as social comparison and self-esteem restoration constitute 'GO signals' that drive consumption motivation, while implicit theories and self-control form 'STOP signals' that inhibit consumption impulses under specific conditions. Counterfeit goods cases particularly highlight this duality: on one hand, they enable lower-status groups to enter symbolic circles, providing short-term psychological comfort; on the other, they may entail reputational risks and moral pressure, thereby deepening individuals' identity anxieties.

Thirdly, from a practical perspective, interventions targeting compensatory consumption must extend beyond product and market domains to encompass education, psychological support, and institutional regulation. At the micro level, schools and communities can foster more stable identity formation among young people by promoting 'skilled status' over 'consumptive status.' At the macro level, public education and normative campaigns can reduce excessive reliance on ostentatious symbols and diminish the appeal of counterfeit markets. Such multidimensional interventions not only alleviate individual identity anxieties but also pave the way for more sustainable pathways to identity construction.

In summary, compensatory consumption emerges from the interplay of social structures, cultural contexts, and psychological mechanisms. Future research should strengthen cross-cultural comparisons and longitudinal tracking, particularly examining emerging identity threats within digital environments and social media. Only through such approaches can its dynamic mechanisms be fully illuminated, providing systematic theoretical underpinnings and practical insights for brand strategies, consumer education, and public governance.

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