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**Dressing Without Logos: How Chinese Consumers
Make Sense of and Legitimize Quiet-Luxury-Inspired
Imitation Fashion Products**

MASTER'S THESIS

SMMP40 | 30 credits

By

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2026-05-18

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, we would like to acknowledge the contribution of all the participants in this study. Without your generous willingness to share your perspectives and experiences, this thesis would not have been possible.

We would also like to express our gratitude towards our supervisor, Emma Samsioe, for her guidance and encouragement throughout the entire thesis process. From the early stages of preparation, through the five supervision meetings during the writing process, to the completion of this thesis, her support and insightful feedback have been of great value to us.

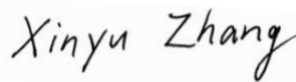
Additionally, we would like to thank all the teachers and classmates we have met during our two years at Lund University. Thank you for your kindness, support, and help along the way.

Finally, we would like to thank ourselves for having travelled across great distances to study here. As one journey comes to an end, a new one is already beginning.

Thank you all!



and



Helsingborg, 2026-05-18

Abstract

This thesis explores the phenomenon of quiet-luxury-inspired imitation fashion products in China. In recent years, quiet luxury has regained increasing visibility as a fashion aesthetic associated with understated design, subtle distinction, and material quality. With this trend, Chinese e-commerce platforms have seen the growth of brands that imitate the aesthetic and material qualities of high-end minimalist fashion without directly reproducing visible logos. While previous research on imitation and counterfeit consumption has mainly focused on luxury goods with explicit brand markers, less attention has been paid to products that imitate a quieter and more logo-free aesthetic system. This study departs from Chinese consumers of such products, with the aim of contributing to the understanding of how consumers make sense of quiet-luxury-inspired imitation fashion products and how they construct and legitimize this form of consumption in relation to their identity and values. To fulfill this aim, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted. Based on the empirical material, the study presents results showing that these products are generally not understood simply as fake luxury goods, but are instead evaluated through fabric, cut, silhouette, overall wearing effect, and value for money. The results further show that consumers use this form of consumption to present themselves as tasteful, rational, restrained, and discerning customers, while also legitimizing it through different forms of justification, boundary drawing, and responsibility management. From these results, two conclusions can be drawn. First, quiet-luxury-inspired imitation consumption is understood less through visible brand substitution than through aesthetic and material evaluation. Second, consumers do not make this form of consumption acceptable by denying imitation altogether, but by presenting it as a choice that fits their values, self-image, and practical circumstances.

Keywords: quiet luxury; imitation fashion products; Chinese consumers; consumer legitimation; identity.

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1. Introduction

This chapter begins by presenting the background of the study, the growing visibility of quiet luxury and the rise of related imitation products in China. Then it develops the problematization by identifying the gap in existing research, followed by the study's aim, research questions, and the thesis's structure.

1.1 Background

“Quiet luxury”, also described as “silent luxury” or “stealth wealth”, has become an increasingly visible fashion aesthetic and consumption trend after COVID-19 (Girardin, 2025). In contrast to luxury styles that rely on prominent logos or highly recognizable brand symbols, quiet luxury is characterized by understated design, subtle visual cues, and allows consumers to convey more subtle and sophisticated status signals (Han et al., 2010; Girardin, 2025). It is often discussed as a revival of earlier ideals of refined luxury rather than as a completely new trend. For example, contemporary discussions of quiet luxury frequently refer to this style associated with Carolyn Bessette Kennedy, whose minimalist and understated way of dressing is now often used as a historical reference point for this aesthetic (Nair, 2024).

The growing visibility of quiet luxury can also be seen in China, the second most important luxury market in the world. A report by Vogue Business and Barclays shows that, by the third quarter of 2023, 49% Chinese luxury consumers preferred minimal logos and timeless pieces, and linked this fashion preference to the growing appeal of “stealth wealth” and “old-money” aesthetics under a weaker economic climate (Vogue Business & Barclays, 2023). This trend is also reflected on digital platforms such as Xiaohongshu, one of the most popular social media platforms in China. And the 2024 Fashion Luxury Trend White Paper notes that Chinese fashion consumers were frequently discussing keywords such as “rational return” and “minimalist quiet luxury” on social media, reflecting a broader turn toward more restrained and practical fashion consumption (Vogue Business China & Xiaohongshu, 2024). The same report further suggests that this shift is closely tied to consumers' growing interest in practicality, functionality, and more rational forms of style consumption in China (Vogue Business China & Xiaohongshu, 2024). By February 2026, tags related to quiet luxury on Xiaohongshu have accumulated more than 700 million views and over 800,000 discussions.

Against the growing popularity of quiet luxury aesthetics, a new category of fashion brands has emerged on Chinese e-commerce platforms. For the purposes of this study, these brands can be understood as quiet-luxury-inspired imitation brands: they do not usually copy brand names, logos, or explicit trademarks, but instead imitate the aesthetic and material features associated with high-end minimalist brands. More specifically, their imitation mainly operates along two dimensions: design silhouette and fabric texture. At the design level, they reproduce recognizable yet relatively diffuse style elements, such as Lemaire's curved trouser shape or the cut and proportions of The Row pieces (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). Because such minimalist designs have already circulated widely across the market and now appear at different price points, they do not always point exclusively to one single brand. By contrast, these brands usually avoid copying highly distinctive signature details that remain strongly tied to a particular label, such as Prada's triangular sleeve-pocket design. At the material level, these brands place strong emphasis on fabric quality as a key selling point. Their product descriptions often highlight claims such as same-source fabrics, shared suppliers, or the recreation of the original garment's hand feel and texture through similar fibers, weaving methods, or finishing techniques. In this way, they position their products not as straightforward counterfeits, but as more affordable alternatives that can deliver a similar aesthetic and material effect. Unlike fast-fashion retailers such as H&M or Zara, which are more commonly associated with rapid trend adaptation and lower quality, these brands emphasize fabric, cut, silhouette, and understated refinement. Industry commentators often describe these phenomena as part of the rising demand for "pingti" (designer dupes), which appeal to consumers seeking similar aesthetic and material qualities without paying luxury brand markups (Bloomberg News, 2024; Wenduji, 2025). And such a strategy has proven commercially successful, with brands such as Chicjoc, Keigan, and UNICA generating annual sales of hundreds of millions of yuan between July 2023 and July 2024 (Bloomberg News, 2024).



Figure 1: Original pants style by The Row

Source: La Garçonne product page for The Row Keenan Pant. <https://lagarconne.com/products/ss24trm09-the-row-keen-an-pant>



Figure 2: Imitation pants style by another brand

Source: Taobao product listing of a quiet-luxury-inspired imitation brand inspired by The Row. <https://e.tb.cn/h.R1YCrBZHFyrXMT6?tk=rd085HfpvsS>

1.2 Problematization

Existing research offers some useful starting points for understanding this phenomenon. Studies on luxury consumption suggest that quiet luxury relies less on visible brand logos and more on culturally shaped ideas of taste, while the ability to recognize particular cuts, fabrics, or stylistic cues can itself function as a marker of distinction (Berger & Ward, 2010, p. 556; Han et al., 2010). At the same time, research on imitation consumption shows that consumers' acceptance of imitation products increasingly depends on functional evaluation and aesthetic similarity rather than the simple substitution of brand symbols (Van Horen & Pieters, 2012; Prendergast et al., 2002). However, these two strands of literature rarely meet. Existing studies of questionable luxury consumption still focus mainly on counterfeit goods with visible logos or explicit brand imitation, while much less attention has been paid to products that imitate logo-free aesthetic forms. As a result, it remains unclear how consumers make sense of imitation when what is being borrowed is not a highly visible brand marker, but a style language associated with understated luxury.

This question is especially relevant in the Chinese context. China has long been associated with different forms of imitation and copycat production, including shanzhai

products that imitate original brands through visual or functional similarities and may also provide additional benefits (Qin et al., 2019). Research has also shown that, compared to “traditional” counterfeiting, which is obviously low-quality goods, higher-quality counterfeits and claims of “real copies” produced by the same factories as genuine brands have become increasingly visible in the market (Jiang & Shan, 2018). This suggests that China’s imitation products have already developed beyond the conventional image of cheap and easily recognizable fake goods. And customers’ demand standards for imitation have significantly increased. Against this background, quiet-luxury-inspired imitation fashion products present a more specific development. Earlier forms of counterfeit consumption were more closely tied to visible logos, recognizable trademarks, and the symbolic value of established luxury brands. By contrast, in this study, the quiet-luxury-inspired imitation fashion products rely less on explicit brand markers and more on silhouette, fabric, cut, and overall aesthetic and material effect. Here, what is being imitated is no longer just a luxury handbag or a coat, but a quieter, more niche aesthetic preference. Meanwhile, as quiet luxury becomes more popular in China, related discussions on social media platforms increasingly revolve around practicality, good materials, and value for money. Against this broader consumption background of economic slowdown, tighter budgets, and more cautious spending (Vogue Business & Barclays, 2023), the Chinese context offers a useful setting for examining how imitation is understood when consumers increasingly evaluate fashion through practicality, value for money, and material quality rather than through visible logos alone.

Based on this, the present study shifts attention from why consumers buy these products to how they understand and legitimize such consumption. While previous studies have examined how consumers justify morally controversial purchases, these discussions have focused primarily on counterfeit luxury goods with visible logos or clear brand markers (Koay, 2018; Pérez et al., 2010). When imitation instead takes the form of a logo-free, quiet-luxury aesthetic, the way consumers construct its meaning may be different. To address this gap, this study adopts a qualitative approach to examine how Chinese consumers perceive, interpret, and legitimize the consumption of quiet-luxury-inspired imitation brands.

1.3 Aim and Research Questions

This thesis aims to explore how Chinese consumers understand and legitimate the consumption of quiet-luxury-inspired imitation fashion products. Despite the growing visibility of these products in the Chinese fashion market, limited research has examined how consumers understand, construct, and make this form of consumption acceptable in relation to their identity and to the evaluative concerns that appear in their accounts, such as practicality, value for money, restraint, and responsibility. Based on this aim, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do Chinese consumers make sense of their consumption of quiet-luxury-inspired imitation fashion products?

RQ2: How do consumers construct and legitimize this consumption in relation to their own identity and values?

1.4 Structure of the thesis

This thesis is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the background of the study, including the resurgence of quiet luxury aesthetics and the emergence of quiet-luxury-inspired imitation fashion brands in China. It also presents the problematization, the aim of the study, and the research questions. Chapter 2 reviews previous literature on luxury consumption, brand imitation, and consumer interpretations. Chapter 3 outlines the theoretical framework and explains how it is applied in the analysis. Chapter 4 presents the research approach and the methods used for data collection and analysis. Chapter 5 presents and analyses the empirical material. Finally, Chapter 6 answers the research questions, discusses the findings, and concludes the study by reflecting on its limitations.

2. Literature Review

This literature review is structured around three closely related areas of research: luxury consumption, brand imitation, and consumer justifications and the legitimization of imitation consumption. Each area offers a different theoretical angle for the phenomenon examined in this thesis. The first area reviews the symbolic meaning of luxury consumption. In recent years, with the rise of understated luxury aesthetics such as quiet luxury, symbolic expression has increasingly shifted from visible brand markers to more implicit forms of taste and aesthetic judgment. Understanding this shift is important for clarifying what exactly these imitation brands are imitating, and why consumers are drawn to them.

Building on this, the second part reviews studies on brand imitation and the Chinese phenomenon of “shanzhai.” It examines how consumers evaluate and respond to products that resemble well-known brands without directly copying their trademarks. These studies provide important background for understanding the broader context in which imitation products are discussed and interpreted.

Finally, the review turns to how consumers understand and explain this kind of consumption. Existing studies have often approached this issue through moral rationalization or identity construction, showing how consumers make sense of purchasing counterfeit or imitation products. However, most of this work focuses on counterfeit goods with visible brand markers, while paying less attention to imitation products that borrow design language or aesthetic style rather than directly copying brand symbols. By bringing these three strands of research together, this thesis aims to provide a perspective on how contemporary consumers interpret and justify this form of imitation consumption.

2.1 Luxury Consumption, Cultural Capital, and Social Distinction

Luxury consumption has long been understood as an important arena of social distinction. People buying luxury reflect not only their economic resources but also their cultural position. Bringing Bourdieu’s (1984) theory of cultural capital into consumer research, Holt (1998) argues that in contemporary consumer society, cultural capital is no longer expressed only in an objectified form through the possession of particular goods or symbols. It is also embodied in taste, knowledge, and ways of

consuming (Holt , 1998, pp. 2–4). From this perspective, social status is shaped not simply by purchasing power, but also by culturally valued forms of taste and consumption competence. Different social groups maintain distinctions through different consumption practices and aesthetic preferences, and these differences communicate identity and status in social interaction as well. Therefore, apart from their high prices or high-quality products, the value of luxury goods also lies in their ability to carry cultural values and highlight social differences (Holt, 1998, pp. 2–4).

Vigneron and Johnson (1999) propose that luxury consumption is driven by both interpersonal and personal motivations. The former include conspicuousness, the snob effect, and social value, all of which emphasize luxury goods as visible markers of status and group boundaries. The latter include hedonic value and perfectionism, which draw attention to sensory pleasure, aesthetic appreciation, and quality recognition associated with the product itself. Tynan et al. (2010) extend this view and argue that luxury value is not simply imposed by brands, but co-created through brand narratives, consumption experiences, social recognition, and emotional investment. This understanding is particularly important for the discussion of quiet luxury, because if the value of luxury has never depended solely on overt branding, then its symbolic force can also be sustained through less visible forms.

Subsequent research has revised some traditional assumptions about luxury consumption from the perspective of brand signal structure. Han et al. (2010) introduce the concept of brand prominence and show that luxury does not always rely on highly visible branding to communicate status. On the contrary, truly high-end luxury products often reduce brand visibility, whereas entry-level luxury goods are more likely to emphasize logos. For affluent consumers, subtle signals do not mean giving up distinction. Instead, they shift the audience from the general public to those who are able to recognize such cues.

Berger and Ward (2010) further explain this pattern by combining signaling theory with cultural capital theory. They argue that explicit signals are easier for the mass market to recognize, but are also easier to imitate and appropriate. By contrast, subtle aesthetic cues require specific cultural knowledge to be recognized, and therefore work more effectively as markers of group membership. So choosing understated luxury does not mean giving up one's status as an expression. Consumers just shift their status display from widely visible signs to less obvious forms of identification that rely on taste and

cultural knowledge (Taylor et al., 2025). This suggests that the logic of distinction in luxury consumption does not inherently depend on visible logos. The logic can also be achieved through more nuanced design language, aesthetic judgment, and cultural knowledge.

Research in the Chinese context further shows that the difference between loud and quiet luxury is not only about signal form, but is also closely related to consumers' social situations and psychological needs. Drawing on attitude function theory, Jiang et al. (2022) suggest that when social-adjustive attitudes are activated, consumers are more likely to prefer products with prominent logos to gain external recognition, whereas the appeal of quiet luxury lies more in its exclusive mode of aesthetic recognition and the sense of superiority attached to it. This indicates that luxury signaling is shaped not only by structures of cultural capital but also by identity needs and concerns about how one is perceived in specific social contexts. More recently, with the rise of quiet luxury, this shift has become especially visible among younger consumers. Liu et al. (2025) argue that, for Chinese Gen Z in particular, luxury consumption is moving away from overt conspicuous display toward orientations that place greater emphasis on self-expression and cultural authenticity. In this context, insider knowledge and inconspicuous snob behavior increasingly become important resources for identity expression, as consumers display taste through their understanding of cuts, fabrics, craftsmanship, and brand traditions rather than relying primarily on visible brand logos.

2.2 Brand Imitation and “Shanzhai”: From Symbolic Display to Functional and Aesthetic Substitution

While luxury research has shown that status can be communicated through increasingly subtle aesthetic cues rather than visible logos alone, some other researchers have examined how consumers engage with similar symbolic meanings without purchasing authentic products. These scholars have broadened their perspective from the traditional counterfeits that directly replicate brand logos to a broader range of counterfeits. These counterfeits are products that are very similar to well-known brands in design, style or aesthetic features, but do not replicate their trademark logos.

Early research focused on clarifying the boundary between different forms of non-authentic products. Prendergast et al. (2002) distinguish between counterfeit brands

(CB) and imitation brands (IB). Counterfeit brands replicate brand names and logos, and allow consumers to access the symbolic meanings associated with luxury brands at a lower cost. Imitation brands usually borrow design or stylistic features without directly copying trademarks. Because these products lack explicit brand symbols, they are more likely to be evaluated in terms of function, price, and overall value. This distinction indicates that imitative consumption is not merely a symbolically displayed cheap version. It can also involve more practical judgments regarding design, usefulness and value.

Van Horen and Pieters (2012) further classify imitation into feature imitation and theme imitation (pp. 246–247). Feature imitation refers to the direct copying of brand appearance or visual elements, while theme imitation refers to borrowing the broader meaning or aesthetic theme associated with a brand. Their research shows that consumers are generally more accepting of theme imitation than of direct visual copying. This distinction can help understand that quiet-luxury-inspired imitation. For imitations of the quiet luxury style, what is borrowed now is usually not a visible logo or trademark, but a minimalist style, some kind of outline, or a low-key aesthetic language.

Moreover, consumers do not always perceive imitation products negatively. Visual similarity often triggers quality associations, leading consumers to infer that similar-looking products may have comparable quality. This effect becomes especially strong when the imitation product is offered at a lower price, which further increases its attractiveness (Warlop & Alba, 2004). Further studies also demonstrate that consumer evaluations of imitation products are influenced by specific consumption contexts. Van Horen and Pieters (2013) show that under conditions of uncertainty, imitation products can provide familiarity and serve as a reference point for quality, thereby reducing perceived risk and functioning as a decision-making heuristic. In other words, imitation is not only a market strategy; it can also work as a cue that helps consumers make decisions when they have limited information. To summarize, the above studies suggest that imitation consumption cannot be explained by symbolic considerations alone. It also involves functional value, context, and consumer evaluation.

In the Chinese context, imitation consumption also presents a form of expression with a special cultural and industrial background, namely “shanzhai.” This phenomenon is often understood as an imitation practice between originality and copying. Its core

characteristic lies not in the copying of brand symbols, but in the flexible borrowing and creative adaptation of product forms and functions, which is often an important initial stage for emerging brands (Jiang & Shan, 2016).

Some studies further suggest that the relative acceptance of such imitation in emerging Asian markets is shaped not only by lower prices, but also by broader social and cultural conditions. For example, research on the Indian market shows that within a social structure characterized by high power distance and low indulgence, consumers experience a tension between the desire to signal status through consumption and social norms that emphasize restraint and rational spending (Singh et al., 2021). Under such conditions, imitation products become attractive precisely because they can satisfy symbolic aspirations while remaining economically restrained and socially reasonable. A similar tension can also be observed in Chinese consumer culture, where aspirations for distinction coexist with an emphasis on practicality, value for money, and rational consumption. This provides a comparable social foundation for the emergence of shanzhai.

Against this background, the consumption motives for shanzhai products also present a specific value structure. Qin et al. (2019) further point out that consumers' evaluations of shanzhai products cover four dimensions: functional value, social value, personal value, and financial value. These studies indicate that shanzhai consumption is not just a simple imitation of brand style, but a consumption choice that balances price, function, and symbolic meaning. In addition, China's distinctive industrial clusters and highly modularized production system provide the institutional and technological conditions that enable the rapid replication and adaptation of product designs, allowing shanzhai products to be produced and updated at scale within a short period of time (Tse et al., 2009).

Overall, existing research shows that consumers do not necessarily treat imitation products as inferior substitutes. Their acceptance of imitation products increasingly depends not only on the substitution of brand symbols, but also on judgments about design similarity, functional value, and style. For this reason, the form of imitation based on design and style has become particularly prominent in the rise of contemporary quiet luxury goods. At the same time, less attention has been paid to how consumers understand this kind of imitation when what is being borrowed is not an

explicit brand marker, but a logo-free aesthetic style, and how they connect it to identity and cultural meaning.

2.3 Consumer Justifications and the Legitimation of Imitation Consumption

No matter how much copy there is, purchasing imitation products instead of authentic luxury goods is often treated as a morally controversial form of consumption, as it may undermine the symbolic and economic value of original brands (Bian & Veloutsou, 2007). However, the previous literature can prove that such imitations still have a very large market among consumers, with countless consumers scrambling to engage in such immoral behavior. For this phenomenon, an important question is not only why consumers buy imitation products, but how they make sense of and justify such behaviour. Existing research suggests that in morally controversial consumption contexts, consumers often develop various explanations and justifications that allow them to defend, normalize, or reframe their unethical actions (Eckhardt et al., 2010).

Within the luxury field, this discussion has mainly been developed by research on counterfeit luxury goods. A recurring finding in previous literature is that moral attitudes alone do not necessarily prevent consumers from purchasing counterfeits, because consumers may rely on contextual interpretations and justificatory accounts when facing moral dilemmas (Cordell et al., 1996; Pérez et al., 2010; Koay, 2018; Eisend, 2019; Wang et al., 2020). In other words, counterfeit consumption is not only explained through desire, price, or access, but also through the ways consumers make their choices appear understandable and rational. For instance, Pérez et al. (2010) show that consumers may construct themselves as “savvy consumers” who optimize their resources by refusing to pay for luxury brand premiums. Similarly, Koay (2018), drawing on neutralization theory, demonstrates that counterfeit purchases may be justified through mechanisms such as denial of responsibility and denial of the victim. To summarize, previous research shows that counterfeit consumption involves not only the act of purchase itself, but also the interpretive work through which consumers explain and normalize it.

However, existing literature has clear limitations. Most existing studies examine counterfeit versions of well-established luxury brands, such as Gucci, Chanel, and Louis Vuitton, where imitation is tied to recognizable brand identities and visible brand symbols. Much less attention has been paid to imitation products that do not rely on

direct brand logos but instead rely on claims about fabric, tailoring, and material quality. In the Chinese context, quiet-luxury-inspired imitation fashion products represent precisely such a case. Their relation to luxury is not established mainly through explicit brand markers, but through subtler aesthetic and material cues. As a result, it remains unclear whether consumers interpret and justify these products in the same way as they do more conventional counterfeit goods.

Overall, the literature reviewed in this chapter shows that luxury consumption is increasingly communicated through subtle aesthetic cues rather than visible logos, that imitation products may be valued not only as symbolic substitutes but also through design, function, and style, and that consumers actively interpret and justify such consumption through their own accounts. At the same time, these strands of research do not yet fully explain how Chinese consumers make sense of and legitimize quiet-luxury-inspired imitation fashion products, where imitation operates through logo-free aesthetic and material cues and is closely related to taste, identity, and values.

3. Theory

This study draws on two complementary theoretical perspectives. The first perspective is consumer culture research, and particularly the research on consumer identity projects, which provides the broader framework for understanding how quiet-luxury-inspired imitation fashion products become meaningful in relation to identity. Accounts theory is then used as a more specific lens to examine how consumers justify and legitimize this form of consumption in talk. These perspectives help address both how consumers make sense of this consumption and how they present it as acceptable in relation to their identities and values.

3.1 Consumer Identity Projects in Consumer Culture Research

To understand how consumers make sense of their consumption choices, this study draws on consumer culture research, particularly the work on consumer identity projects, which approach consumer research as a deeply cultural practice. In this view, the marketplace is not simply a place where goods are exchanged. It is also where values, meanings, and social relations take shape and are negotiated (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, pp. 869–870). Therefore, in addition to obtaining goods through consumption in the market, consumers also understand and express themselves through consumption, and attempt to shape how others perceive them.

Within consumer culture research, identity is not understood as an ongoing project that is constructed and negotiated through consumption. Larsen and Patterson (2018) show that consumer identity projects are closely tied to the central place of the market in contemporary life. Products, brands, and styles matter not simply because they are chosen, but because they provide cultural resources through which people make sense of themselves and communicate who they are or want to become.

In Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) tradition, Arnould and Thompson (2005) identify four interrelated research programs, and the one most relevant to this study is consumer identity projects (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, pp. 871–873). This project is based on the premise that consumers are not merely purchasers of products but also individuals who utilize market resources to construct and convey their own stories. Through

customers' consumption choices, individuals draw on the symbolic resources the marketplace offers to build, maintain, and communicate narratives about themselves. Consumption has become a continuous practice of identity. It involves the active use of goods, brands, styles and market meanings to create a sense of coherence among different aspects of the self (sometimes conflicting).

At the same time, CCT also clearly pointed out that this seemingly autonomous process of identity construction cannot do without the structural influence of external environments such as the market (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). In many cases, seemingly personalized acts of self-expression still rely on the product categories, cultural symbols, and aesthetic codes provided by the market. As Larsen and Patterson (2018) suggest, consumer identity work is therefore marked by a tension between individuality and commodification. Consumers are encouraged to be unique, but they often have to realize this uniqueness through already available and market-mediated symbols. Consumer agencies do not have absolute freedom. It can only operate within the possibilities that the market has already constructed. Consumers can only demonstrate their freedom and initiative within a certain range.

This study examines how young Chinese consumers make sense of and legitimize their consumption of quiet-luxury-inspired imitation fashion products. From a CCT perspective, this form of consumption can be understood as part of an identity project. While purchasing imitations of a certain aesthetic style, consumers are also expressing who they are and how they wish to position themselves. By choosing logo-free, understated, and luxury-inspired styles, consumers may seek association with imagined taste communities while distancing themselves from stigmatized forms of conspicuous consumption, counterfeit consumption, or blind brand worship. Consumer identity projects offer a useful basis for understanding how this form of imitation consumption becomes meaningful in relation to identity, value, and legitimacy.

3.2 From Market Meaning to the Self

If consumption is an important resource for identity construction, a further question is where the meaning attached to consumer goods comes from? To understand how consumption shapes identity, it is first necessary to examine the origin of the meaning of consumer goods. In his highly influential "Cultural Meaning Transfer Model", McCracken (1986) argues that goods do not carry meaning on their own. Instead,

consumer goods gain symbolic significance when cultural meaning is transferred from the broader cultural world into goods, via cultural intermediaries such as advertising, the fashion system, and mass media. Consumers then extract and internalize these meanings through rituals such as possession, exchange, grooming, and divestment (McCracken, 1986, pp. 78–83). Through this process, abstract cultural values, such as freedom, refinement, or rebellion, are materialized in tangible goods, becoming resources for individuals to express their identity.

Belk develops this argument further through the concept of the extended self. He argues that possessions can become a part of personal identity, breaking away from the traditional separation between people and objects. As he famously put it, “we are what we have” (Belk, 1988, p. 160). Belk further explained that people incorporate possessions into their sense of self through control, creation, knowing, and contamination (Belk, 1988, pp. 160–168). In this way, goods are no longer merely external property, but symbolic resources intertwined with memory, relationships, and social identity.

However, as Ahuvia (2005) points out, this focus on “static possession”, is still not sufficient to explain the full complexity of the relationship between consumption and identity formation. Through his study of consumers’ relationships with “loved objects,” Ahuvia suggests that identity is more fully formed through identity narrative (pp. 171–172). Rather than simply incorporating possessions into their sense of self, consumers make sense of who they are and how they came to be that way by embedding specific loved objects into their personal life stories. These loved objects matter because they help resolve tensions between conflicting identity needs, weaving contradictory self-images into a more coherent narrative (Ahuvia, 2005, pp. 174–175). In this sense, consumption objects may not only extend an existing self. They may also support self-transformation by helping consumers move toward desired ways of being.

This becomes especially visible in fashion, which is directly relevant to the phenomenon examined in this study. Thompson and Haytko (1997) show that consumers do not simply take up meanings from the fashion system. They also discuss and interpret those meanings in everyday life as they make sense of their own consumption practices. They work through tensions between different cultural values, for example, between individual expression and social norms, or between rejecting conspicuous consumption and pursuing refined aesthetics. Compared with

McCracken's emphasis on meaning transfer through cultural intermediaries, Thompson and Haytko (1997) show more clearly how fashion meanings are shaped within micro-social groups. Clothing and style therefore become highly visible symbolic resources through which consumers can quickly communicate social positioning and value orientations.

To summarize, these studies highlight a core insight of CCT: market resources do not determine consumer identities in any simple or one-way manner, but consumers actively interpret, appropriate, and reconstruct these resources within specific cultural contexts to serve their own identity construction projects. This is particularly critical for contemporary fashion consumption, as brands, style, and aesthetic practice frequently serve as key symbolic tools for expressing identity and values. In this study, the consumption of quiet-luxury-inspired imitation products is understood in these terms. It is approached not only as a matter of product choice, but also as a form of identity practice through which consumers give meaning to what they buy and relate it to broader questions of self and legitimacy within specific cultural contexts.

In summary, these studies show that goods become meaningful to consumers not simply through market circulation, but through the ways they are interpreted and woven into identity. Building on consumer identity projects within CCT, this study examines how young Chinese consumers draw on marketplace meanings, aesthetic codes, and symbolic resources to make sense of quiet-luxury-inspired imitation fashion products, to position themselves socially, and to relate this form of consumption to who they are or who they wish to become. In this way, consumer culture research helps explain how this form of consumption becomes meaningful as an identity practice, while also showing how consumers negotiate their identities through market-mediated interactions.

3.3 Accounts theory

To provide more insights into how consumers construct and legitimize their consumption in relation to their own identities and values, the present study draws on accounts theory. The classic discussion of accounts originates from Scott and Lyman (1968), who define an account as a statement made by a social actor to explain unanticipated or untoward behavior. When behavior becomes subject to evaluative inquiry, social actors do not simply leave it open to judgment; instead, they provide

explanations that help bridge the gap between action and social expectation. Thus, accounts are crucial because they help prevent conflict from escalating (Scott and Lyman, 1968). Scott and Lyman (1968) also emphasize that accounts are socially situated and culturally standardized, which means that particular interactional and social contexts shape the forms of explanation available to actors. For this study, it is essential to closely integrate China's unique consumer culture and the specific characteristics of Chinese consumers to better analyze their consumption behaviour.

The two authors distinguish between two main types of accounts: excuses and justifications. Excuses are accounts in which the actor admits that the act may be wrong or inappropriate but seeks to mitigate or deny responsibility for it. There are several forms of excuses, including appeal to accidents, appeal to defeasibility, appeal to biological drives, and scapegoating. Justifications are accounts in which the actor accepts responsibility for the act but denies its negative moral quality (Scott and Lyman, 1968). And it includes forms such as denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of the condemners, and appeal to loyalties, as well as "sad tales" and self-fulfillment. This distinction is useful for the present study because it helps explain how consumers may either deny the problematic nature of imitation consumption or acknowledge its controversial character while distancing themselves from full responsibility. And it is highly relevant to luxury-related research on how consumers interpret and rationalize their own consumption behaviors. Buying quiet-luxury-inspired imitation fashion products may be interpreted positively as aesthetic appreciation, rational consumption, or resistance to excessive brand premiums, but it may also be associated with fakery, vanity, imitation, or deception. Consequently, consumers may be unlikely to simply describe what they buy; they are also likely to tell a story about explaining why they buy it and why they do not see it as equivalent to buying counterfeits. Accounts can offer a useful way to analyze how consumers construct the acceptability of this form of consumption.

Although previous research on luxury, fashion, counterfeit, and imitation consumption has rarely used accounts explicitly, many studies identify patterns of consumer justification and self-presentation, which are highly aligned with accounts perspectives. For instance, Bloch et al. (1993) show that consumers play an active role in counterfeit consumption rather than merely participating passively in it. Pérez et al. (2010) further demonstrate that counterfeit luxury goods consumers may construct themselves as savvy consumers, thinking of such purchases as smart, fun, and harmless. This can be

understood as a form of justification, in which the act is not denied, but its moral meaning is redefined. Koay (2018), drawing on neutralisation techniques, which are the primary mechanisms individuals employ when offering justifications for their actions (Scott and Lyman, 1968), shows that consumers may rely on denial of responsibility or denial of the victim to rationalize counterfeit luxury consumption. In this sense, previous studies suggest that consumers work discursively to make their consumption appear legitimate and compatible with a desired self-image.

Based on this, the present study uses accounts theory explicitly to examine how consumers construct and legitimize their consumption of quiet-luxury-inspired imitation fashion products in relation to their identities and values. More specifically, it focuses on how consumers use excuses and justifications to present such consumption as reasonable, harmless, or consistent with who they are, and how these accounts help reduce moral stigma while supporting identity work.

To summarize, the CCT perspective provides the broader framework for understanding how young Chinese consumers make sense of quiet-luxury-inspired imitation fashion products as culturally meaningful resources in identity construction. It helps explain not only what this form of consumption means to consumers, but also why it becomes meaningful in relation to identity. Furthermore, to examine how this kind of consumption is defended and made acceptable in discourse, this study draws on accounts theory, focusing on how consumers use excuses and justifications to present the consumption of quiet-luxury-inspired imitation fashion products, and how these accounts help reduce moral stigma while supporting identity work.

4. Methodology

This chapter introduces the strategy and the design of this research, and the methods for data collection and analysis. This chapter begins by introducing the research strategies and reflections about the study. It then details the qualitative approach and its relevance to the current research, followed by a practical description of the data collection process, specifically the use of semi-structured interviews. Furthermore, the analysis of the empirical material is explained. Finally, the chapter addresses reflections on research ethics, as well as the limitations of the chosen approach.

4.1 Research Strategy

This study adopts a qualitative research strategy and combines purposive sampling and snowball sampling to reach participants who relate to quiet-luxury-inspired imitation fashion products in different ways. Purposive sampling is used to identify consumers with different degrees of familiarity, experience, and involvement, since it may involve selecting cases with different intensities of experience for comparison (Flick, 2014, p. 317). In this study, that difference includes consumers who purchase such products repeatedly, consumers who are still exploring them, and consumers who remain hesitant or critical. Snowball sampling is used as a supplementary strategy, since participants who are familiar with this form of consumption are not always easy to identify directly, and referrals from existing participants can help reach those who may be less visible but still helpful to the study (Wagner & Gillespie, 2019, p. 37). So these two approaches make it possible to find a diverse range of participants who may discuss the phenomena from various standpoints, instead of only recruiting those who are most conspicuous or engaged.

Recruitment begins with a preliminary observation of relevant brands on Xiaohongshu and Taobao, as these platforms provide access to consumers who are already exposed to or engaged with this form of consumption. The brands themselves are not the focus of the study, but their characteristics help narrow down and identify consumers who are more likely to be familiar with this form of consumption and therefore may become potential participants. Brands were selected based on three key criteria: design, fabric, and value. To capture a broad audience, the research also analyzed comment sections and hashtags, reaching both casual and highly engaged consumers. Potential participants were approached through these online discussions and invited to take part

in an interview directly and to share the invitation with others who may also fit the study. At the same time, recruitment is also carried out through public posts on social media platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Douban, which are two popular social media platform in China, as not all relevant consumers actively comment on brands or products online, even if they are familiar with or have experience of this type of consumption. These posts identify the researchers as master's students from Lund University, briefly introduce the topic of the study, specify the type of participants sought, and state that participation is voluntary and confidential.

After sampling, a total of fifteen respondents were included in the final study. To better understand how Chinese customers understand and interpret quiet-luxury-inspired imitation products, the study focuses on consumers who are familiar with this kind of products to different degrees and who can speak about this form of consumption from different positions. So before starting the formal data collection, participants were asked about their engagement levels, like whether they were familiar with the brands, if they had made any purchases, and if so, how many times. Based on the differences in familiarity and engagement with quiet-luxury-inspired imitation products, 15 interviewees were grouped into four categories. They were anonymized using a coding system consisting of a capital letter and a number (e.g., A1, B2). The first group is heavy consumers, they are A1, A2 and A3, who have longer-term purchasing experience and relatively strong knowledge of brands and materials; the second group is exploratory consumers, they are B1, B2, B3, B4, B5 and B6, who have purchased such products but have not yet formed a stable position toward them; the third group is critical consumers, they are C1, C2, C3, C4 and C5, who are familiar with related content but have not purchased and still have reservations about doing so. And the fourth group is an online influencer from Xiaohongshu as a supplementary participant. This grouping is introduced to make visible how meaning-making and legitimation vary with participants' varying familiarity with the products under study. It should not be understood as a ranking of who offers more valid interpretations and insights, nor as implying that participants with more experience and knowledge are analytically more valuable. Instead, the grouping helps clarify whether similar themes recur across different consumer positions, and whether certain ways of interpreting and legitimizing this consumption become more pronounced in some groups.

To provide greater transparency regarding the sample, an overview table of the participants is presented in Table 1, which includes basic background information of the participants.

Table 1: Interviewees' information

Name	Gender	Age	Occupation	Interview
A1	Female	38	Founder of a small design studio	2026-04-04
A2	Female	28	Working professional	2026-04-05
A3	Female	30	Store owner in the fashion wholesale	2026-04-011
B1	Female	24	Employee of a new media company	2026-04-04
B2	Female	24	International student in the UK,	2026-04-04
B3	Female	29	Self-employed in a creative field	2026-04-05
B4	Female	22	Upcoming graduate	2026-04-06
B5	Female	30	Owner of a physical clothing store	2026-04-07
B6	Male	25	International student in the UK	2026-04-09
C1	Female	24	Working professional	2026-04-05
C2	Female	27	Training-related work	2026-04-06
C3	Female	30	Working professional	2026-04-07
C4	Female	23	Master student in Beijing	2026-04-08
C5	Female	43	Professional working in intellectual	2026-04-10
Influencer	Male	30	Law-related professional; Part-time	2026-04-03

4.2 Data Collection: Semi-Structured Interviews

This study uses semi-structured interviews as its main method of data collection. As a qualitative method, semi-structured interviewing is suitable because it combines focused questions with open-ended discussion, allowing participants not only to give direct answers but also to elaborate on their experiences and interpretations flexibly (Engler & Stausberg, 2021, p. 349; Flick, 2014, p. 367). The method supports the study's interest in both consumers' consumption experiences and the ways they interpret and justify them. Since semi-structured interviews are organized around topical areas and purposively formulated questions (Flick, 2014, p. 386), they allow for

exploring shared themes across interviews while still following up on the different ways participants describe and justify this form of consumption. This study, it allows the analysis to identify common patterns across consumers, while also capturing differences in how quiet-luxury-inspired imitation products are understood in relation to value, identity, and legitimacy.

The interview guide is constructed around the study's research questions and the main themes developed from the literature review and theoretical framework. It is organized around 4 thematic areas, including participants' consumption background and everyday fashion practices, their quiet-luxury-inspired imitation fashion products perceptions and category boundaries, their purchase decisions, hesitation, and comparison and how this form of consumption is connected to self-understanding, social positioning, and legitimacy evaluation. For example, participants are asked how they would describe their own style of dress, what quiet luxury means to them, how they distinguish these products from "fake" goods, and how they understand their own choices in relation to taste, practicality, and personal values.

All interviews are conducted in Mandarin Chinese, allowing participants to use their mother tongue to express their experiences and views. Most interviews take place online via WeChat video call or Tencent Meeting, and each interview lasts approximately 60 minutes. With participants' consent (see Appendix), all interviews are audio-recorded and later transcribed. They are first transcribed in Chinese and then translated into English. Following a semi-structured format, the interviews begin with broader questions about participants' clothing style and fashion consumption and gradually move to more specific issues related to quiet luxury, imitation products, identity, and justification.

4.3 Analysis of the Interviews

The analysis follows an iterative process rather than a separate stage that begins only after data collection. During the early interviews, brief analytical notes are made on the material and highlighted in the shared interview files when particular expressions, distinctions, or evaluations appear repeatedly. For example, participants repeatedly describe these products through terms such as "fabric", "cut", "texture", "value for money", while other interviewees raise questions about copying, originality, and whether such products should still be seen as counterfeit. Participants in the fashion and

intellectual property (IP) sectors tended to hold negative views regarding the copyright aspects of these products, whereas other respondents often exhibited indifference. This makes it possible to identify patterns such as participants' repeated emphasis on fabric, cut, silhouette, and value for money, as well as themes such as the reframing of imitation as aesthetic and material value and the legitimation of consumption through justification and boundary drawing in data collection process. The analysis examines how consumers with different relationships to quiet-luxury-inspired imitation fashion products understand these products, how they distinguish them from "fake" goods, how they relate this form of consumption to identity and values, and how they justify and legitimize it in their accounts. In this way, the analysis attends both to participants' subjective perspectives and to similarities and differences across cases (Flick, 2014, p. 643).

The analytical process begins with repeated readings of the transcripts and is followed by coding. As Flick (2014, p. 648) notes, coding as a first step in analysis is a process of labeling and categorizing data. Initial codes are developed around recurring expressions, evaluations, and distinctions in the material, and are subsequently grouped into broader categories and themes. For example, statements such as "it gives a similar effect for much less money", "I care more about fabric and cut than the logo", "this is a design copycat", and "it is still basically a high-grade fake" are first noted as recurring ways of evaluating the products. These are then grouped into more focused codes, such as value for money, material evaluation, difference from fake goods, and copying concerns. Later, such codes are brought together into broader themes, like the reframing of imitation as aesthetic and material value, identity construction through taste and rationality, and the legitimation of consumption through justification, boundary drawing, and responsibility management. In this way, the analysis moves from participants' concrete expressions to broader interpretive patterns. Consumer culture research, particularly the perspective of consumer identity projects, is used to examine how participants attach meaning to products and construct themselves, while accounts theory is used to analyze how they explain, justify, and make acceptable this form of consumption. These perspectives are used together because the analysis does not treat identity construction and legitimation as separate processes. Participants' effort to present themselves as tasteful, rational, or restrained are closely tied to how they explain and defend their choices. The analytical ambition helps retain the complexity

of participants' interpretations rather than reduce them to simple explanatory relationships (Alvehus, 2024, p. 10).

4.4 Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Ethical considerations were considered throughout the whole research process. Before each interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without any reason. Consent to audio-record the interview was obtained before the conversation began. Because the topic concerns a potentially sensitive and morally evaluative form of consumption, the interviews were conducted with care to avoid unnecessary pressure, accusation, and discomfort (Bryman, 2016; Silverman, 2013). During the writing process, confidentiality was protected by anonymizing the material and replacing participants' names with participant codes. Throughout the process, the material was treated with the aim of representing participants' views as accurately and responsibly as possible (Engler & Stausberg, 2021, pp. 90, 95).

The handling of data also involved several practical and ethical considerations. In the process of transcribing the audio recordings into Chinese, speech-to-text functions in Feishu, Tencent Meeting, and the iPhone Voice Memos app were used as supportive tools. Following the automated transcription, the text was manually verified to ensure anonymity and data privacy. In the later stage of translating the transcripts from Chinese into English, ChatGPT, Gemini and Grammarly were used as supplementary tools to assist with wording and translation, especially when the material contains culturally specific Chinese expressions that were difficult to render directly in English. All AI-assisted transcriptions and translations were manually checked and revised against the original audio recordings or Chinese transcripts. All interview files were initially stored locally on the researchers' own computers. Xinyu Zhang stored the interview materials for A1, A3, B2, B3, B6, C4, and the influencer, while Qifei Wei stored the materials for A2, B1, B4, B5, C1, C2, C3, and C5, including both Chinese and English versions. During the coding process, the Chinese interview transcripts were uploaded to a shared Google document, which is used only by the two researchers for collaborative coding.

At the same time, the study involves several limitations. One limitation concerns language, transcription, and translation. Because interviews were conducted in Chinese, but the thesis is written in English, there are some nuances of tone, wording, or

culturally specific meaning that may be difficult to preserve fully. Such shifts in meaning may occur when interview transcripts are translated from Chinese into English, and in the process, as the interview guide is written in English and the questions are translated orally into Chinese during the interviews. A further limitation concerns recruitment. Because participants are recruited mainly through online platforms and referrals, the sample is more likely to include consumers who are digitally visible, active on social media, or willing to speak about this topic. Consumers who engage with the phenomenon in more private or less visible ways may therefore be less represented in the material. The findings should therefore be understood as an in-depth qualitative interpretation of a specific group of consumers rather than as broadly generalizable conclusions.

5. Analysis

This chapter presents the analysis of how Chinese consumers make sense of quiet-luxury-inspired imitation fashion products and how they construct and legitimize this consumption. As participants differ in their familiarity and engagement with these products, they are grouped into four categories.

5.1 Reframing imitation as aesthetic and material value

This part examines how interviewees make sense of quiet-luxury-inspired imitation products. For the respondents, the main issues, apart from the accuracy of the imitation, also include whether they can offer relatively high-quality clothing at more acceptable prices, as well as similar aesthetic and material effects. This means that these products are evaluated as garments first, rather than as moral or legal objects to be judged. Participants are repeatedly evaluated through fabric, cut, silhouette, and overall wearing effect. This is especially visible among heavy consumers, who speak most confidently about texture, tailoring, and the possibility of achieving a luxury-like effect at a lower cost.

A1: At first, I bought some authentic pieces too, because I was worried they might not really be the same thing. So I bought a few authentic items to compare, and I found they were actually pretty close.

A1's answer shows that even for imitation, acceptance is still based on quality. Customers first test the product against the original and only then conclude that it is "pretty close", which suggests that resemblance is treated as something to be materially assessed.

And even for interviewees with prior purchasing experience who now refuse to buy or remain hesitant, they still tend to evaluate them using similar criteria, focusing on style, materiality, and overall effect.

C4:I feel that clothes from the same source may place more emphasis on the texture of the fabric and consistency in fit... If they are from the same source, the fabric and texture are basically guaranteed.

Even more hesitant participants will evaluate these products based on texture and fit, not mainly giving a relatively negative assessment of the products themselves, simply because they think it is counterfeit or fake. It suggests that the material and aesthetic framing of the product is shared across different consumers, even when the final attitude towards purchase differs. And similarity is often understood in terms of style, atmosphere, or silhouette, while the value of the product is in what it can deliver as a garment, which helps explain why many interviewees suggest that most Chinese consumers are not especially concerned with whether such products involve copying in a strict sense. Fashion insiders and people with stronger knowledge of brands, many consumers are described as paying more attention to cut, price, quality, or the social effect of wearing the garment than to questions of originality or intellectual property. Participant A3 has given her opinion about it:

A3: (When asked how they would introduce such imitation products to others) It depends on whether the other person is an insider... Things like intellectual property and originality are not really what the general public cares about. Honestly, most people are not going to pay extra money for things like brand originality, intellectual property protection, or other kinds of value that are more cultural or symbolic.

A3's answer draws a clear distinction between insiders and the public. For insiders, questions of originality and intellectual property are crucial, but for ordinary consumers, these products are more likely to be discussed through style, quality and price, showing that the meaning of the product varies from person to person.

And those who point out design copying issues might be viewed as outliers by the general public. When asked whether there are some bad comments about imitation, B1, a fashion lover, answers:

B1: There are definitely some comments from more extreme people... you can see that in the comment section too. They may be paid posters or just haters, but I think those kinds of comments are still in the minority... they are not very common. It is not like, when you scroll through the comments, they are all like that. I feel like a lot of those comments are just copied and pasted, rather than people's genuine opinions.

Interviewer: So the negative comments usually focus on the product itself in that store, rather than discussing how similar it is to those international luxury brands in terms of, say, the cut or the appearance.

B1: Right.

Thus, for some consumers, criticism centered on copying is treated as excessive. A reasonable evaluation should focus on the quality of the product itself. Whether the clothes refer to the cutting styles of mature brands is not included in the evaluation system.

At the same time, among different interviewees, they paid close attention to the differences, especially in terms of fabric composition, cut, and wearing effect. This was particularly evident among critical consumers. Their claim indicates that the value of these products lies in the fact that they can produce similar effects on the basis of being similar to the original products, although quality differences often exist. Here, the wearing effect has become the focus of attention more than similarity

C2: They do not have any design costs, because they are all copied... They may not copy the original fabric or the tailoring, and instead use a much cheaper substitute. So sometimes, when you see the copied version in person, you can tell straight away that the whole thing is off. Some fabrics are simply not suited to that kind of cut, right? Some hold their shape better, while others are softer and much harder to structure. So in the end, I think a lot of them come out looking quite odd.

C2's account explains how cheaper fabrics fail to support the cut and how this affects the final appearance of the garment. For critical consumers, the gap between imitation and originality is often identified through garment performance.

C5: I have compared them side by side. Once I got it, I checked the fabric composition carefully and found that the percentages were different.

The comparison made by C5 shows that what she cares about most is the quality gap brought about by the brand gap, and the quality gap is exactly what she is most concerned about.

And when discussing the relationship between imitation and originality, several participants prefer these brands to adapt international luxury designs for the local market, though their attitudes towards such adaptations varied. Some believe that such adaptation is a proactive act of catering to local market demands,

A1: But if it is not copying those symbolic elements, and the adjustment is really made reasonably... like changing the length, adjusting the shoulder width, making it fit Asian body types better, or adding some localized elements, then I think it is still something that can be discussed...

while others argue that these modifications do not change the underlying nature of copying.

Influencer: I think this kind of adjustment to the cut is actually a one-time thing... China's supply chain is already very mature, and factories can do it for them. These creative directors are not really putting thought into design. I do not think it is any different from copying.

A1 evaluates localization from the standpoint of consumer usefulness, whereas the influencer evaluates it from the standpoint of design authorship. Thus, the same modification can be interpreted either as a meaningful adaptation or as another form of copying, depending on which evaluative standard is prioritized.

A comparison across the three groups shows both shared and distinctive tendencies. Heavy consumers tended to articulate this reframing most confidently, often presenting these products as a cost-effective way to obtain the texture, silhouette, and overall effect associated with luxury brands. Exploratory consumers also emphasized fabric, cut, and whether the product seemed to be carefully made, but were more likely to speak in terms of evaluation and testing. Critical consumers, while more critical of the gap between imitation and original, still did not reduce these products to mere fakes; instead, they assessed them through detailed comparisons of fabric, composition, and fit. Thus, these products were commonly understood not simply as copies, but as consumer objects whose value was judged through aesthetic and material criteria.

5.2 Constructing the Self Through Taste, Restraint, and Rationality

This section examines how consumers construct the self through the consumption of quiet-luxury-inspired imitation products. In the interviews, interviewees were not only evaluating products. They were also using these products to explain who they are, what kind of image they hope to present, and how this form of consumption fits into their understanding of themselves. It shows that the consumption of quiet-luxury-inspired imitation products is not merely a purchasing act, but a way to shape a sense of self. The narratives interviewees developed around these products reflect an ongoing consumer identity project, in which aesthetic judgment, social restraint, and rationally autonomous self-presentation each play a distinct role (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

5.2.1 Constructing the Self Through Aesthetic Discernment

In the interviews, almost all interviewees repeatedly emphasized fabric, color, and cut when explaining why they would choose quiet-luxury-inspired imitation products. Consumers often explain why they make a purchase by emphasizing attention to detail. Here, they are highlighting their self-image as consumers who pay more attention to aesthetic experience rather than brand symbols. This tendency is very obvious in the material.

A1 explained:

I don't like chasing those popular pieces that everyone can recognize immediately. What I care more about is that, when someone sees what you're wearing, even if they don't know the brand, they can still tell from the material and the overall effect that it is definitely not a cheap piece of clothing.

A3 similarly noted:

I work in design myself, so I pay a lot of attention to the fabric and silhouette... I don't think the quality of a garment lies in the brand logo or the exact design. It lies in the care put into the details. When you wear it, people will think you have taste and that you care about quality of life.

These evaluations are grounded in a concrete ability of perception and recognition. Compared with the direct status symbolism conveyed by prominent logos, quiet-luxury-inspired imitation products rely more on subtle cues that require a certain level

of cultural capital and aesthetic experience to decode (Berger & Ward, 2010). Taste is not expressed through the possession of an immediately legible consumption symbol, but through a particular mode of appreciating fabric, silhouette, color, and overall styling (Holt, 1998). What interviewees emphasize, therefore, is not simply “what I buy”, but “what I can recognize”.

Essentially, this form of identity construction is often strengthened through distinction from others. B6 described this quite directly:

I think people who like quiet luxury have a certain sense of elitism inside. It's like, there are many things I don't need to say, but through the things I casually post on social media, if you know, you know. And if you don't know, then I've also conveniently completed a kind of filtering and distinction.

Many participants' responses expressed a negative attitude towards prominent trademarks and conspicuous consumption. A1 considered overly large logos to be “a bit tacky”, while C2 described all-over logo pieces as “basically like a billboard”, and added that “I wouldn't really wear something that visually loud, because I feel like everyone is wearing the same thing, and that makes me uncomfortable.”

Consumers showcase themselves through inconspicuous brand signals and knowledge that requires a certain amount of time and effort to acquire. They distinguish themselves from the ordinary customers who buy big logos to show that they pay more attention to details and have better taste (Liu et al., 2025). They are drawing on symbolic resources provided by the marketplace to continuously construct and communicate identity narratives about themselves (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

What is especially interesting is that B6 clearly recognized that this “low-key” style does not actually escape status expression. According to her, this kind of aesthetic presentation achieved through resisting logos “is not really low-key at all, but just another way of expressing superiority”. Her critical reflection shows that the consumption of quiet-luxury-inspired imitation products does not truly move beyond the logic of status distinction, but shifts the language of distinction from overt brand display to more implicit forms of aesthetic recognition. Consumers try to distinguish themselves through how they dress. But the styles they rely on are still drawn from

what the market already offers. This means that even the image of being “more discerning than the masses” is formed through market-based consumption. (Larsen & Patterson, 2018).

5.2.2 Constructing the Self Through Maturity, Propriety, and Social Legibility

This session points more clearly to a socialized and situational form of self-construction. Many respondents regarded the imitation as a need in specific situations, such as work, meeting clients, aging and changes in life stages. In the above context, what these clothes express far exceeds an individual’s aesthetic needs and represents a more mature self-image. The respondents are confident that they know what kind of self they should present in different situations

This view appeared clearly in the accounts of several interviewees. B5 said:

As a working woman, I need to make people feel that I am proper and generous. These clothes are not as serious as formal workwear, but they can also be worn in daily life. At the same time, they give people the impression that you pay attention to social etiquette. If you also manage your hair and makeup well, people may feel that you are very professional at work, at least at the level of a manager or above.

C2 explained this choice from the perspective of a changing mindset:

In the past, when wearing products with big logos or obviously famous brands, you might have needed the extra value and outside recognition that the brand could bring. But as your social status and income increase, you no longer need to rush to show yourself through luxury or overly complicated clothing.

In these accounts, changes in clothing preferences were understood as a form of individual growth. They are presenting one’s current self by wearing the “right” clothes. Drawing on Jenkins’ notion of achieved or acquired identity, Larsen and Patterson (2018) suggest that identity is not simply claimed from within, but gradually accomplished through interaction with social situations and, more broadly, through the relationship between the individual, collective expectations, and the wider socio-cultural context.

For some younger interviewees who were still in a period of identity transition, this consumption practice reflects their beautiful vision for the future, or a future self that had not yet been fully realized. B4 noted:

I started trying this kind of clothing when I began internships. I felt that maybe I had reached a stage where I should not dress too casually anymore. These clothes make me feel that I am slowly becoming more like someone who is already working.

Here, the product supports a desired future identity and it helps people to imagine what kind of person they could become.

By contrast, C4 said:

Given my usual consumption level, even if I bought imitation products, other people probably still would not think they were fake.

According to her, what is most important is individuals themselves, not the clothes. If the wearer herself has already met certain standards set by society for consumers of the quiet luxury style, then even if she is wearing counterfeit goods, others will not be able to identify them. So the boundary between real and fake becomes blurred in actual social interaction. In this sense, it can even be argued that it is the consumer, rather than the product alone, who finally completes the transfer of meaning (McCracken, 1986). This also resonates with Ahuvia's (2005) argument that consumption objects become significant through their incorporation into a coherent identity narrative, where they help consumers negotiate tensions between lived circumstances, social recognition, and desired ways of being. Consumers convey the characteristics that can be interpreted by others through their garments, and thereby gain stronger competitiveness or social status in society

5.2.3 Constructing the Self Through Rational Autonomy

This layer highlights the image of a rational consumer centered on self-knowledge. Many interviewees thought quiet-luxury-inspired imitation products as items should serve their own feelings, everyday condition, and dressing needs. In this narrative, functional value and personal value often took priority over social value (Qin et al., 2019).

B1 said:

If these clothes are comfortable to wear and can also make you look decent, I do not mind whether they are from a big brand. I would not blindly chase brands.

B3 also explicitly defined herself as rational:

When I buy clothes for myself, I care more about whether they are comfortable and look good. The logo is not that important. That is also why I can accept imitation products.

C1 framed this kind of consumption as a more self-oriented way of dressing:

I do not think people buy this kind of product because they want to show that they are different from others. It is simply because they like this style. Dressing is for myself, not for sending some kind of message to other people.

A2 further described this autonomy as an active refusal to be shaped by outside opinions:

What other people say and how they judge you is not something we can decide or control. The key is not to let yourself be affected by that. You buy these clothes for yourself, to wear and enjoy.

In these accounts, interviewees tried to present themselves as consumers who were not led by brands and who did not mainly rely on external recognition to confirm their own value. Thus, the advantages of quiet-luxury-inspired imitation products are not affordable price but because they allow consumers to describe themselves as people with judgment, with their own standards, and unwilling to pay brand premiums blindly.

But according to some other participants, how they choose clothes was not entirely detached from the gaze of others. When talking about these products, some respondents kept emphasizing that most people around them were not able to identify the copied brands, especially when the logos are not that important. They have reduced the symbolic intensity of clothing as a form of identity display and also lowered the social risk of being perceived as wearing non-original clothing. C5 said that “most people do not really care about brands, and they probably cannot tell the difference anyway”.

A1 similarly noted:

It is not like those old big-logo brands, where you might worry that people would recognize it as fake. Most people actually cannot tell quiet luxury brands apart. They may not even realize that what you are wearing is imitating a certain brand. They would just directly feel that the cut and fabric of your clothes look very good, and that itself gives me a kind of satisfaction.

A2 added that many people “do not really follow fashion; they just want to buy a piece of clothing that looks good, feels reasonably priced, and is comfortable to wear, that is all”.

For these consumers, they purchase these counterfeits not because most people cannot recognize them. The reasons for purchase are more often derived from the product itself, like whether the clothes fit or are comfortable. The respondents continued to portray themselves as more natural, more autonomous and less constrained by the symbolic system, insisting that “most people don't really care” and “others may not be able to tell no matter what”. At the same time, this narrative of “dressing for oneself” did not necessarily mean a full acceptance of imitation products. Some interviewees could understand why such products appealed to the wider public, and they acknowledged their practical attraction in terms of price, appearance, and wearing experience. Yet at the personal level, they still maintained clear psychological boundaries. C5 said:

Many people do not know much about fashion, so they may not know which brands are being copied. But because I often deal with intellectual property issues in my work, I feel very uncomfortable about it. If I accidentally bought something and then found out it was copied, I would feel a bit bad about it.

B6 was even more direct:

If most of your items are imitation products, the overall aura you have will still feel different from someone wearing the real thing. The confidence that styling can give you is not something imitation products can fully provide. If you have the financial ability, it is still better to support the original.

These statements indicate that even in the narratives of “It suits me” and “I don’t need to care about the brand”, some consumers who purchase imitations still not completely give up their attention to originality, authenticity and legality. Not all “rational and autonomous” consumers could complete this identity construction smoothly. Consumption choices here were not simply treated as matters of personal preference; they were also moralized, so that judgments about what one bought could easily become judgments about the kind of person one was (Larsen & Patterson, 2018). This pressure did not disappear simply because the product had no visible logo. Instead, it remained in a more internalized form, becoming a tension that consumers had to negotiate when trying to construct themselves as people who were “not blindly led by brands.” Precisely for this reason, the question of how consumers further seek clearer legitimacy for their consumption will become the focus of the next theme.

From a comparison of the three consumer groups, all of them linked this form of consumption, to different degrees, with the question of “what kind of person I am,” but the extent to which this identity narrative could be completed varied. Group A consumers were the most able to incorporate quiet-luxury-inspired imitation products into a self-narrative centered on taste, discernment, and personal standards, presenting themselves as consumers who know how to reject unnecessary brand premiums and judge value for themselves. Group B consumers remained more in a process of negotiation. They identified with the aesthetic and identity imagination attached to these products, but still compared, selected, and carefully decided which imitation items could be incorporated into the self they were still forming. Group C consumers, by contrast, more often maintained distance from imitation products and expressed discomfort around originality and authenticity. Overall, the consumption of quiet-luxury-inspired imitation products was not simply accepted or rejected. Rather, it became a site where consumers constructed, tested, and negotiated different versions of the self through taste, propriety, and rational autonomy. At the same time, these identity narratives were closely tied to broader evaluative concerns about what counts as worthwhile, appropriate, and acceptable consumption. These concerns become more explicit in the next section, which examines how interviewees justified this form of consumption through ideas such as practicality, value for money, restraint, and responsibility.

5.3 Making imitation worth buying

This section examines how interviewees justify quiet-luxury-inspired imitation fashion products and present them as worth buying. It focuses on the evaluative concerns that appear in their accounts and then shows how consumers make this form of consumption appear reasonable and acceptable in relation to their own standards and circumstances.

5.3.1 Making imitation worth buying: value, materiality, and access

According to Scott and Lyman, accounts are statements made when conduct is subjected to valiative inquiry and understood as untoward and they help “bridge the gap between action and expectation” (Scott & Lyman, 1968, p.46). Justifications are accounts in which the actor accepts responsibility for the act but denies the pejorative quality associated with it (Scott & Lyman, 1968, p.47). In this study, it is visible that many interviewees do not deny buying, considering, or accepting quiet-luxury-inspired imitation products. Rather, they justify such consumption by redefining it in terms of value, usefulness, and material or aesthetic return.

Among all the interviewees, many emphasized the value for money of these imitations:

A1: But I think the key point is still value for money, because it is cheaper. A single piece from a major luxury brand can cost tens of thousands, or even over a hundred thousand, but if these brands are offering a similar effect, they may only charge a few thousand... So it is a downgraded consumption experience, but one that brings an upgraded sense of actual enjoyment and satisfaction.

A1 does not deny that these products are connected to luxury originals, but she shifts the focus from originality or authorship to utility and effect. In Scott and Lyman’s terms, this is precisely how justification works: the act is acknowledged, but its pejorative quality is challenged by asserting a different positive value (Scott and Lyman, 1968, p.47). Here, imitation is acceptable. People did not deny their similarity to the original version, but on this basis, proved that they were paying for what they considered important

This form of justification also relies heavily on materiality. Interviewees frequently present themselves as consumers who care about fabric, cut, composition, comfort, and overall quality. For example, B3 emphasized that the true texture and feel are more important than others,

B3: As long as the texture and feel are very close to the original brand, that is enough for me. Things like thread count, color fastness, or whether there is absolutely no colour difference from the original do not matter that much to me...My conclusion is that, in some cases, there is really no difference.

B3 narrows the criteria by which the purchase should be judged. Once “texture and feel” become the relevant standards, visible differences such as colour fastness lose their importance. In this way, the speaker is redefining what counts as a reasonable evaluation of the product. This again fits Scott and Lyman’s description of justification as accepting the act while disputing its negative interpretation (Scott and Lyman, 1968, p.47). It works by redefining what counts as the proper object of evaluation: not the brand origin, but the material and functional qualities of the product.

Among interviewees, quiet luxury is characterized as a more sophisticated, niche, and aspirational aesthetic. Several interviewees argued that these products expand consumers’ access to silhouettes or wearing experiences about quiet luxury. Like A2 said:

A2: For consumers, I feel these imitation products offer more choices. They may not be authentic, but they give us a chance to experience and try out this style and this kind of product, and to see whether it actually suits us.

What is being justified here is access to a desired style and quality level. In this respect, the account presents the purchase as a way of moving closer to the kind of style consumers want for themselves, which comes close to what Scott and Lyman describe as self-fulfillment. (Scott & Lyman, 1968, p.52).

In some cases, this justification becomes even more explicitly practical. Interviewees describe imitation products as easier to maintain, less risky to try, or more compatible with their actual lives than expensive originals, especially when it comes to situations where price or value for money is not the primary driver of their purchase. Such accounts broaden the meaning of “value” beyond the point of sale. In this context, the justification for choosing imitations is the superior practicality. B2 and B3 provide some practical use of imitation products:

B2: A lot of major brands use materials like mohair or alpaca wool, which are quite difficult to take care of. In those cases, I actually prefer buying more affordable alternatives, because the maintenance cost is just too high.

B3: I want to add one more thing. I also buy dupe bags because, when I travelled to Europe for the first time, I was worried that carrying a luxury bag might make me a target for theft, so I bought a dupe instead.

When B2 stresses maintenance cost and B3 emphasizes travel risk, imitations serve as a more practical option under specific circumstances compared to the original ones. Interviewees judge these products by identifying whether they are worth the price, whether the materials and cuts are good enough, whether they suit their bodies and lifestyles, and whether they provide access to a desired style that would otherwise remain inaccessible. In Scott and Lyman's terms, this is a clear form of justification: the act is not denied, but its pejorative quality is challenged (Scott&Lyman, 1968, pp.51). They are redefined as practical, rational, and materially worthwhile consumption by customers.

5.3.2 Drawing the line: acceptable borrowing versus fake consumption

Interviewees repeatedly draw lines between forms of imitation they can tolerate and forms they regard as deceptive, vulgar, or excessive. Meanwhile, they create distinctions between borrowing, adaptation, replication, and fake consumption. Thus, a graded moral map of imitation is created.

The first boundary is logos and symbolic markers. For many interviewees, the threshold of illegitimacy is crossed when a product does not merely resemble a luxury brand in style or silhouette but utilizes counterfeit logos. For example, A1 has given clear identification:

A1: Counterfeits are making others think you are wearing a real luxury brand... It is to keep up appearances. But if you meet with someone who actually knows, it will look very fake and be pretty awkward. And counterfeits directly carry the real brand's logo, so in essence, they are copying the original exactly. I think that kind of thing is a deliberate imitation...

A1's account establishes a moral threshold. People condemn trademarked imitations not just because they are similar to the original works, but also because when wearing these imitations, others will think that the wearer is passing off as a luxury item. And customers also imagine that if they encounter people who are knowledgeable about luxury brands, their moral image might be damaged by being perceived as someone who is driven by vanity. By contrast, logo-free borrowing remains discussable precisely because it does not claim the same symbolic authority. Consequently, the account draws a boundary between two different kinds of acts, allowing one to be condemned while leaving room for the other to remain legitimate.

A second boundary concerns the degree of copying. Interviewees often indicate that they are able to tolerate inspiration, adaptation, or partial borrowing, but become much more critical when a product appears to be 1:1 or excessively close. And they tend to give an exact number to show the degree precisely:

B1: I can accept it as long as the level of similarity stays within maybe 4/5, but I cannot accept a 1:1 copy. If it is done like that, I feel the brand has nothing of its own at all, and it gives me the feeling that I am wearing a fake...

Without saying yes or no, B1 turns imitation into a matter of degree. This shows that consumers do not approach imitation through law, regulations, or ordinances, but through an ordinary moral scale. If similarity appears too complete, the product moves from acceptable borrowing into the category of fake or improper imitation.

A third boundary is drawn through the intention and manner of selling. Many interviewees were more concerned with the marketing methods and the seller's motivations.

A2: Then it is definitely a counterfeit... Whatever is popular at the moment, they just make it to earn some quick money. But if your shop or your brand has consistently paid attention to international fashion, or to luxury brands with a similar style, and then you borrow from or imitate them, I feel that is still more acceptable.

According to A2, if a seller's practices lead consumers to believe they are exploiting consumer vanity or merely chasing trends for a quick profit, like "just earn money from

what is popular now”, consumers are more likely to develop a sense of resistance. Conversely, imitation may remain acceptable if it is presented as part of a coherent store style, a long-term aesthetic orientation, or a more careful process of adaptation. Therefore, the judgment between imitation and counterfeiting depends not only on whether the clothes themselves involve copying, but also on the merchant’s commercial intention and how customers interpret it.

Most participants drew the line relatively loosely, as most of them acknowledged the grey area between imitation and originality. When they talked about classic styles, basic items, or styles that had already become very popular and were being adopted by many brands, this tendency is much more evident. For example, B2 explained:

B2: If it uses that brand’s signature design element, then I would see it as copying. But if that element has already become so common that it has turned into a style, then the boundary becomes blurred... Even if you wanted to accuse it of copying, it would be hard to say clearly who the actual victim is.

B2’s words indicate that, in the fashion industry, once a certain design element becomes popular, then it is very challenging for people to identify a definite victim or pick out a criminal. In Scott and Lyman’s terms, this is a way of condemning condemners (Scott & Lyman, 1968, p.51). Here, the negative results of acts are reduced by questioning victims and by suggesting that many others are doing the same things (Scott and Lyman, 1968, p. 51). By distinguishing and defining acceptable consumption, customers can maintain the legitimacy of their own purchases and continue to buy their favorite brands and clothing with peace of mind. “What is fake” is not fixed in advance. It is produced through the very accounts of interviewees.

The standards of imitation varied from person to person. For participants with backgrounds related to fashion work (the influencer), clothing design (A3), or intellectual property protection (C5), the boundary tended to be drawn more strictly, and these interviewees were more likely to see these imitation products as equivalent to counterfeits, even in the absence of a logo.

A3: From a legal point of view, I think it is counterfeit... Even though it does not use the brand’s logo, it is still a counterfeit.

C5: For me, this is basically a high-grade fake...

Influencer: I still think this is basically a counterfeit, just without the logo. It is a more legalized kind of counterfeit.

So not everyone approached the issue primarily as a matter of moral choice. These participants judge imitation products from positions closer to design, copyright, or production, and shift the issue from dressing value to authorship, labour, and legal standards. Furthermore, such differences can be understood through Scott and Lyman's discussion of background expectations. Whether an account is accepted depends not only on its content, but also on the social circle and on what is treated as common sense within this circle (Scott & Lyman, 1968, pp. 53). It's natural that ordinary consumers don't take copyright into account. But when the people around you generally pay more attention to copyright, you are more likely to care about the issue of copyright protection

5.3.3 Managing responsibility: ignorance, limits, and the position of the consumer

This section focuses on excuses. Scott and Lyman describe excuses as accounts in which an actor acknowledges that a questioned act may be problematic, but denies full responsibility for it (Scott & Lyman, 1968, p.47). In this study, participants often described themselves as normal people with limited knowledge and capabilities. Here, acceptability is produced by repositioning the consumer.

Among all interviewees, some of them explicitly reject the role of moral judge. They didn't shy away from acknowledging that imitation is problematic. But they argued that consumers are often not the ones who are obliged to know, verify, or adjudicate whether a product is truly original. So ignorance can be used to reduce the degree of responsibility of consumers, and it is not regarded as a problem.

B1: I do not think I really need to make that distinction. What matters to me is simply whether it feels comfortable on me and whether it looks good. As a consumer, the first thing I care about is quality... And I am not an expert in this area, nor am I a professional buyer, so I am definitely not good at telling what counts as a fake. I cannot trace a piece of clothing back to its source. That is just not something I can do.

B1 believes that she lacks the knowledge and ability to solve these problems, which fits closely with Scott and Lyman's appeal to defeasibility, where responsibility is mitigated by claiming that relevant information is unavailable or that the actor is not in a position to know fully what is at stake (Scott & Lyman, 1968, p. 48). By emphasizing the difficulty of tracing the origin of the design and investigating the impossibility of every purchase, respondents reduced their moral responsibility for copyright protection for themselves. This ethical responsibility is being redistributed from customers to sellers and imitation brands. The issue is no longer framed as a matter of individual moral failure, but as a consequence of market opacity, asymmetric information, and the limits of consumer competence.

When interviewees talk about practical constraints, they put up more excuses. Many of them mention that originals have certain drawbacks, such as being excessively expensive or difficult to store. In contrast, imitations offer greater advantages in these areas. So for these participants, choosing an imitation product is a more practical choice. When they purchase counterfeits, they do not merely care about the counterfeits themselves. They are more influenced by the environment or their own needs.

A1: ...I really liked that old-money kind of understated luxury, but a lot of the big brands, like Max Mara, easily cost over ten thousand, which was still a bit too much for me. I also just did not want to spend that much money on clothes...

Some interviewees emphasized that they do not really care whether the clothes they buy are authentic or imitations. They argue that wearing a real luxury item does not necessarily prove wealth, taste, or status. As a result, wearing an imitation is also not seen as something with such serious moral issues. Among these statements, there is not much need to distinguish genuine goods from imitations.

C2: Now I feel that, whether the clothes are real or fake, it does not really prove anything... These days, a lot of clothes can be bought on instalments anyway, so what does that actually show? It is just one piece of clothing. For many people, it is not that they cannot afford to buy it. It is more a question of whether it is necessary.

C2's account diminishes the symbol's importance. If authentic luxury no longer proves anything, then buying imitation also becomes less morally weighty. This is another way of making the act easier to defend, because the issue is redescribed as minor and socially ordinary rather than serious.

According to Scott & Lyman (1968), if an individual senses that some incident has cast doubt on that image of herself/himself, the individual is likely to save her/his face by trying to integrate the incongruous events by means of apologies, little excuses for self, and disclaimers (Scott & Lyman, 1968, p.52). Consumers who knowingly purchase counterfeits do their best to justify the rationality of their purchases. For example, B6 mentioned:

B6: I'm still trying to buy the real thing whenever I can. I would only choose this kind of product if it is something I cannot get, or something I really want but genuinely cannot afford. So even though I have said quite a lot just now, the pieces in my wardrobe that are actually made from copied patterns probably make up only a very, very small part... maybe just a few items. And even those were bought only after I had chosen very carefully.

By stressing that most of the wardrobe is authentic, and that those imitation clothes were chosen very carefully, this interviewee made a great effort to show that he was not a fan of fake products. And it helps rationalize the purchase and save face. The point is not to deny the act, but to present it as controlled, exceptional, and therefore less damaging to himself.

5.3.4 From individual benefit to broader environment

Many participants reflect on what imitations mean beyond the individual purchase. According to them, imitation is not described as simply good or bad. They often acknowledge two things at the same time. On the one hand, such products can be useful, accessible, and even beneficial for consumers. On the other hand, they may also damage originality, design culture, and the wider market in the long run. This critical reflection is especially evident among critical interviewees. These accounts show not only how consumers justify or excuse their own choices, but also how they view the relationship between personal benefit and collective harm.

Interviewees clearly recognize the consumer-side benefits of imitation. These products are described as giving people more choice, lowering the cost of trial and error, and so on.

B4: I think for Chinese consumers, it gives us more choices...

C1: I think this phenomenon is actually a good thing for consumers, because it gives you more choices... And if you find that there are decent dupes of an expensive brand you like, and they are actually within your reach, then you may keep following that style.

These accounts position imitation's value at the level of consumer need. More choice, lower trial cost, and wider access are invoked to show that the practice serves ordinary consumers in concrete ways. The act here is not defended as universally good, but as permissible because its value can be asserted against a more negative interpretation (Scott & Lyman, 1968, p. 47). Although the act of purchasing imitations is indeed not a completely correct choice, for consumers, the positive impact brought by this behavior can dilute their negative effects

Some interviewees move away from the level of individual consumer responsibility and instead interpret imitation through the logic of the fashion market itself. In these accounts, the issue is how different segments of the market are structured and how trends circulate across them.

B2: I used to work at Jil Sander, and I would directly come across customers who bought the authentic pieces and then went back to copy them... These customers were usually quite easy to deal with, because they would not return or exchange them. My boss's view was that customers who buy authentic products will always be the ones who buy authentic products, while people making copies were never the target customers in the first place, so it did not really matter... And if dupes, in turn, help drive a market trend, that may not necessarily be a bad thing for the original brand. Take Lemaire's dry silk shirt, for example. Even though there are many dupes, they have actually made more and more people realise that Lemaire was the original source.

B2 shifts the issue from individual morality to market structure. Once originals and imitations are treated as serving different consumers, the charge of harm becomes weaker. The account admits imitation but argues that its consequences are not that serious. In this sense, it is close to what Scott and Lyman describe as denial of injury, since the act is not rejected, but its harmfulness is weakened (Scott & Lyman, 1968, p. 51).

Some third-group interviewees gave relatively negative evaluations or even expressed concern. These critical accounts refuse the consumer-centered viewpoint, like many other interviews. They begin to talk about design work, copyright, originality, and the future of the industry. In these accounts, imitation is judged from the standpoint of those who create, design, and absorb the costs of originality.

C2: There is definitely a negative impact... People are becoming less willing to study design. After all, design is costly, time-consuming, and involves a lot of risk... No one will want to put real effort into innovation anymore. In the end, that is bad for the whole market...

C3: ...I think only when people are willing to pay for design will all those industries connected to design really thrive... Right now, China is caught in a vicious cycle where everyone just copies from others...

C5, who works in a profession related to patent protection, also raised the issue of how the widespread prevalence of copycat styles in China may affect the country's international reputation.

C5: In terms of how many Chinese products are viewed internationally, it reinforces the impression that China likes to copy. I assume these brands would also take legal action, although I do not know the specifics. A company like Disney, for example, has a very strong legal team, and I imagine these brands would have similar kinds of enforcement efforts.

Although these interviewees who point out the issues generally admit that such imitation brands provide tangible benefits to individual consumers, such as offering a high-quality garment that truly exists. But at the same time, their accounts create a more layered moral framing. They do not simply provide a “good” or “bad” evaluation, but analyze the situation from multiple perspectives. A product may be good for access,

convenience, or experimentation, while still being bad for design incentives, fairness, or the long-term health of the market. In Scott and Lyman's terms (1966), these accounts show that the restoration of moral equilibrium does not always depend on a single clear justification or excuse. Sometimes equilibrium is restored by acknowledging the problem, but containing it within a broader narrative: yes, there may be harm, but there is also access to solve; yes, copying may be unfair, but the market already works this way; yes, originality matters, but consumers still face real constraints. Such accounts allow interviewees to continue seeing imitation as understandable or even acceptable at the level of everyday consumption, while also admitting that its wider effects may be troubling.

In the face of the same approach, some people describe it as expanding consumers' choices, lowering barriers to participation, or filling market gaps. Some people describe others as undermining originality, disrespecting design labor, or deteriorating the broader intellectual property environment. The purpose of this article is to draw a single conclusion from the respondents' responses. The key point is to put many of these contradictory evaluations together and then found that the legitimacy of imitation is not based on the absence of moral issues, but on being able to coexist with it, explain it, and place it in a broader context of how the fashion market operates.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter brings together the main findings of the thesis and discusses what they contribute to the understanding of quiet-luxury-inspired imitation consumption. It begins with a summary of the study before moving on to the discussion and conclusion, and reflections on implications and limitations.

6.1 Summary

This research aims to understand Chinese quiet-luxury-inspired imitation fashion consumption by exploring how Chinese consumers make sense of these products and how they construct and legitimize this form of consumption. To achieve this aim, the study examines how consumers interpret quiet-luxury-inspired imitation fashion products, how they distinguish them from other forms of imitation or counterfeit goods, and how they explain, justify, and morally negotiate their consumption. A qualitative research approach is adopted, based on 15 semi-structured interviews. The findings show that quiet-luxury-inspired imitation fashion products are not primarily understood as fake goods. They are often evaluated through fabric, tailoring, silhouette, and overall wearing effect. Therefore, they are interpreted as products that can provide a similar aesthetic and material experience to luxury originals at a more acceptable price. At the same time, consumers do not simply identify the distinction between imitation and authenticity. Many of them remain focused on differences in fabric composition, fit, production process, and overall quality, and they also differ in how they view claims of localization or adaptation. Furthermore, the findings show that this form of consumption is closely tied to identity construction. Consumers use these products to present themselves as tasteful, restrained, rational, and independent, while also developing different forms of justification to make such consumption acceptable. These include appeals to value for money, practicality, access, personal standards, limited responsibility, and broader arguments about the fashion market and consumer need. To summarize, the study shows that this kind of consumption is not simply about buying cheaper versions of luxury goods, but about negotiating aesthetic value, self-image, and moral legitimacy at the same time.

6.2 Discussion and Conclusions

This study addresses two research questions, RQ1: How do Chinese consumers make sense of their consumption of quiet-luxury-inspired imitation fashion products? and RQ2: How do consumers construct and legitimize this consumption in relation to their own identity and values? The answers to these questions show that quiet-luxury-inspired imitation consumption is not understood simply as a matter of buying fake luxury, nor is it made acceptable through one single logic. Instead, consumers interpret and justify this form of consumption through a combination of aesthetic evaluation, identity construction, and moral negotiation.

Regarding RQ1, the study shows that Chinese consumers are most concerned about quiet-luxury-inspired imitation fashion products themselves, rather than regarding them as objects of legal or moral judgment. These products are mainly evaluated through fabric, cut, silhouette, wearing effect, and value for money. So they are often understood as products that can provide a similar aesthetic and material effect at a more acceptable price. At the same time, consumers do not simply collapse the distinction between imitation and originality. Many remain attentive to differences in fabric composition, fit, production quality, and overall effect. Therefore, the findings show that these products are typically understood as similar enough to deliver a comparable aesthetic and material effect, while still remaining recognizably different from the original. This also helps explain why they are often discussed less through the language of obvious counterfeit consumption and more through the language of style, practicality, and material evaluation.

Regarding RQ2, the study shows that consumers construct and legitimize this consumption in two closely connected ways. First, they use these products in identity work. Quiet-luxury-inspired imitation fashion products become resources through which consumers present themselves as tasteful, discerning, restrained, mature, and rational. Through these products, consumers do not simply communicate that they like a certain style; they also position themselves as the kind of people who notice fabric and cut, reject unnecessary logo display, and make choices according to their own standards. Second, consumers legitimate this form of consumption through a set of evaluative concerns that are closely tied to their values. In the interviews, these values appear in discussions of practicality, value for money, restraint, originality, and responsibility. Consumers make this consumption acceptable by presenting it as a practical and worthwhile choice, by drawing boundaries between acceptable borrowing and fake consumption, and by limiting their own responsibility as ordinary consumers

with incomplete knowledge or limited control. As a result, the findings show that this form of consumption is made legitimate not by denying imitation altogether, but by presenting it as consistent with both consumers' self-image and the values through which they judge what counts as reasonable and acceptable consumption.

To summarize, this study shows that quiet-luxury-inspired imitation consumption cannot be fully understood through the framework of conventional counterfeit consumption. Earlier research has mainly focused on luxury goods whose imitation is tied to visible logos, explicit brand markers, or clearly recognizable originals. By contrast, the present study shows that when imitation is conveyed through fabric, cut, silhouette, and overall aesthetic effect, consumers understand it through material quality, taste, practicality, self-presentation, and responsibility. Therefore, this research offers a clearer understanding of imitation when the object being copied is a low-visibility aesthetic and material system. What emerges here is a different form of imitation and a different way in which consumers make it meaningful and acceptable in everyday consumption.

6.3 Managerial Implications

The findings of this study show that quiet-luxury-inspired imitation consumption is more than a cheaper alternative to luxury goods. Consumers give these products value through their appearance, material quality, price, and the kind of self-image they help express. Based on this, the managerial implications mainly concern two types of market actors: original brands and imitation-oriented brands.

For original brands, the findings suggest that their value is still recognized, even when consumers buy imitation products. Many interviewees said that imitation products cannot fully replace the original. They pointed to differences in design consistency, material use, and the overall experience of buying and wearing the product. These differences became especially clear when consumers saw the products offline, because it was easier to notice the original brand's stronger control over design, quality, and presentation. So it suggests that quiet luxury brands cannot depend only on brand recognition. They need to show more clearly what makes the original valuable, including design, craftsmanship, material choices, and retail experience. Because quiet luxury brands do not rely heavily on obvious logos, they need to make the source of that value easier for consumers to see, instead of letting price speak for itself. For

imitation brands or emerging retailers inspired by quiet luxury aesthetics, the findings indicate that consumers do not necessarily reject borrowing itself, but they do draw boundaries around how imitation should be carried out. Compared with one-to-one copying, many interviewees were more accepting of products that are derived from the original but also show some degree of transformation or reinterpretation. This suggests that imitation may serve as a starting point for market entry, but it is unlikely to function as the basis of long-term competitiveness. More specifically, these retailers cannot remain at the level of simply resembling a particular brand. They need to develop a more coherent product narrative through their treatment of materials, craftsmanship, silhouettes, and wearing scenarios. Put differently, consumers are willing to buy such products not only because they resemble luxury brands, but because they are framed as a more rational, knowledgeable, and personally suitable consumption choice.

Overall, this study shows that quiet-luxury-inspired imitation consumption is not driven simply by a low-price substitution logic. Rather, it is a process of meaning construction shaped around product value, self-positioning, and consumption legitimacy. This means that, for both original and imitation brands, competition is not only about the product itself, but also about who can more effectively explain why a product is worth buying, and what kind of taste, values, and identity this consumption choice can represent.

6.4 Limitations and Future Research

By examining an underexplored form of imitation consumption, this study offers an initial qualitative account of how quiet-luxury-inspired imitation fashion products are understood, justified, and made acceptable by Chinese consumers. More specifically, it shows that when imitation no longer depends on visible logos or direct trademark copying, consumers do not simply evaluate such products as “fake” or “real.” Instead, they make sense of them through fabric, cut, aesthetic effect, value for money, and the kinds of identity these products allow them to construct. In this respect, the study provides a useful starting point for future research on imitation consumption beyond the conventional counterfeit framework.

However, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample was relatively small and included more female interviewees, which may have shaped the way taste, identity, rationality, and self-presentation were articulated in the data. The findings

should therefore be understood as an in-depth qualitative interpretation of a specific group of consumers rather than as broadly generalizable claims about all Chinese consumers. Future research could examine more explicitly whether male consumers, or other consumer groups, make sense of and legitimize this form of consumption in different ways.

Second, this study relies mainly on interview accounts. As a result, the analysis captures how consumers describe, interpret, and justify their consumption, rather than directly observing how such decisions are made in practice. In a topic such as imitation consumption, where questions of authenticity, value, and legitimacy are already sensitive, participants may be especially likely to present themselves as more rational, tasteful, or morally acceptable in retrospect. However, this is also part of what makes these accounts analytically valuable, since the study is concerned not only with what consumers buy, but also with how they narrate and defend these choices. Future research could therefore combine interviews with other forms of material, such as digital ethnography, platform discourse analysis, or observations of online shopping environments, in order to better understand how these meanings are produced and reinforced in practice.

Finally, the study is situated in the Chinese market, where e-commerce and social media play a particularly central role in shaping quiet-luxury-inspired imitation consumption. This context is highly relevant to the emergence of the phenomenon, but it also limits the extent to which the findings can be transferred to other settings. Future research could compare different national markets, platform environments, or consumer groups to examine whether similar patterns of interpretation and legitimation appear elsewhere. It would also be valuable to move beyond consumers alone and investigate how sellers, influencers, and digital platforms participate in shaping what counts as tasteful, rational, and acceptable imitation. In this way, future studies can build on the present research to develop a fuller understanding of how imitation consumption is socially produced, interpreted, and legitimized across different cultural and market contexts.

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Appendix 1

Interview protocol

1. Consumption Background and Everyday Fashion Practices

- 1) Would you please introduce yourself (age, gender, your occupation)?
- 2) What kinds of fashion brands, clothing content, or styling accounts do you usually follow? How would you describe your own style of dress?
- 3) What does quiet luxury mean to you? What kinds of products, brands, or styles would you associate with quiet luxury?
- 4) Why do you think more people around you, or on social media platforms, have started to pay attention to this style in recent years?

2. Product Perceptions and Category Boundaries

- 5) How did you first come across quiet-luxury-inspired imitation fashion products? What was your first impression?
- 6) What do you think is the main appeal of these brands or products? In your view, what are people mainly buying when they buy them—design, fabric, value for money, style, a certain lifestyle, or something else?
- 7) In your view, what is the biggest difference between this kind of product and “fake” goods? And how is it different from ordinary substitutes or fast-fashion copies?
- 8) How important is the brand logo to you?
- 9) In your view, what kinds of products would be crossing the line, and what kinds would remain within an acceptable range? At what point does a product feel “too close” to a particular brand?
- 10) If a product has no logo, but is still clearly copying the design or silhouette of a certain brand, how would you see it?

3. Purchase Decisions, Hesitation, and Comparison

- 11) Can you tell me about one specific recent experience in which you bought, almost bought, or decided not to buy this kind of product?

- 12) Did you compare it with the original branded version? How did you think about the gap between them?
- 13) Do you think you will continue buying this kind of product in the future? Or, if you have not bought it, what has stopped you from doing so? If those concerns disappeared, do you think you might buy it?

4. Meaning-Making: Identity, Taste, and Legitimacy

- 14) What do you think people usually care about when they buy, or refuse to buy this kind of product?
- 15) In your view, how might this kind of consumption be connected to ideas such as taste, practicality, independence, or something else?
- 16) Has anyone ever asked you, “Is this from [the original brand]?” If yes, how did you respond? If not, how do you think you would respond?
- 17) Do you think the popularity of these products has any impact on anyone—for example, the original luxury brands, smaller independent designers, or consumers themselves? How do you understand that impact?
- 18) Do you think this kind of consumption is generally accepted among people around you, or on social media platforms? If people criticize it, why do you think they do so?

Appendix 2

Interview Consent Form

Thesis title:

Dressing Without Logo: How Chinese Consumers Make Sense of and Legitimize Quiet-Luxury-Inspired Imitation Fashion Products

Authors:

Qifei Wei and Xinyu Zhang

About the study

This study examines a fashion phenomenon that has become more visible in China in recent years. Some sellers offer clothing that is presented as similar to high-end brands in style, cut, or fabric, and may claim to use similar materials or the same suppliers, but without using the original brand's logo. The interview will focus on how consumers understand, evaluate, and talk about this type of product.

Interview Consent Form

I have been given information about the thesis Dressing Without Logo: How Chinese Consumers Make Sense of and Legitimize Quiet-Luxury-Inspired Imitation Fashion Products and discussed the research project with Qifei Wei and Xinyu Zhang, who are conducting this research as part of the Service Management, Retailing and Consumption at Lund University.

I understand that, if I agree to participate in this project, I will be asked to take part in an interview lasting approximately 45–60 minutes.

I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary, I am free to refuse to participate and I am free to withdraw from the research at any time.

By signing below, I am indicating my consent to participate in the research as it has been described to me. I understand that the data collected from my participation will be used for my thesis only and will be deleted after completion, and I consent to it being used in that manner.

Name:

Signed:

Date: