THE
ANTI-SLAVERY
COLLECTIVE

Fake Fashion:
A Human Rights Scandal

How counterfeit fashion intersects with
organised crime & labour exploitation

THE
ANTI-SLAVERY
COLLECTIVE

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper was written by Hannah Grey and Gemma Parkin (The Anti-Slavery Collective) with editorial support from The Anti-Slavery Collective's CEO Sarah Woodcock. Sincere thanks to Brandon Daniels from EXIGER for his thought leadership and support, Michael Ellis for championing our work, Jeffrey Hardy for his technical expertise, and Matthew Knowles and Phil Lewis for connecting us to so many stakeholders and experts. Our thanks also go to Dr Mark Shepherd, Mohammed Tariq, Professor Howard Reed, and Vidyuth Srinivasan for contributing their valuable insights. We are grateful to all partners, colleagues and experts who generously shared their expertise for this position paper, including but not limited to: ACG, TRACIT, Entrupy, the University of Portsmouth School of Criminology, the Greater Manchester Police, and Camden Trading Standards.

ABOUT THE ANTI-SLAVERY COLLECTIVE

The Anti-Slavery Collective is a human rights organisation with a mission to keep modern slavery on the agenda by telling stories about labour exploitation and abuse that reframe narratives, build empathy, and drive action. TASC creates linkages between decision-makers, corporates, and civil society allies to disrupt the business of forced labour and raise awareness of this devastating human rights abuse.

MEDIA

All media inquiries should be directed to contact@theantislaverycollective.org

SOCIAL MEDIA

Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/the_anti_slavery_collective/?hl=en-gb
LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/company/theantislaverycollectiv
Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/TASC.org

5 Brayford Square
LONDON
E1 0SG
www.theantislaverycollective.org

Design: Chloe Hodgkinson

THE ANTI-SLAVERY COLLECTIVE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword

Executive Summary

- Key Findings
- Recommendations

Introduction

1. **Fake Fashion: An Overview**
   - The scale of fake fashion
   - Organised crime and counterfeiting
   - Legitimate versus illegitimate fashion supply chains
2. **Fake Fashion & Labour Exploitation**
   - The intersection of counterfeiting and labour exploitation
   - How illicit supply chains conceal forced labour
   - Spotlight: State-sponsored labour exploitation in China
3. **Social Media, Influencers & Fake Fashion**
   - The rapid expansion of online counterfeiting
   - The role of social media and influencers
   - Shifting attitudes: Gen Z and fake fashion
   - Spotlight: Football fakes
4. **Detection & Law Enforcement Challenges**
   - Legislation, detection and enforcement
   - The vital importance of data sharing
   - Case study: Operation Vulcan

Methodology & Limitations

References

STATS

New data commissioned by The Anti-Slavery Collective, 2025 (unless otherwise marked)

£274 BILLION

Value of internationally traded fake fashion, which represents 63% of all internationally traded counterfeit goods.

£9 BILLION

Total value of internationally traded counterfeited goods for the UK economy

£2.55 BILLION

Amount of annual tax revenue foregone by the UK Exchequer due to counterfeiting

1/3

More than a third of Gen Z respondents had deliberately purchased a fake designer item in the previous year *EUIPO

£2.7 BILLION - £3.6 BILLION

Upper and lower band estimates for total value of internationally traded counterfeit apparel goods in the UK economy

The UK Government could afford the following public service workers with tax revenue lost through counterfeiting

47,300 POLICE OFFICERS

51,400 NURSES

47,100 TEACHERS

$550 BILLION

Total value of internationally traded counterfeit goods in 2025. A 17.7% increase since 2021 when it was estimated to be $467 billion.

$346 BILLION

Specific estimate of the value of internationally traded counterfeited goods in the apparel sector

$1.899 TRILLION

Total global value of digital piracy including filesharing and streaming (using 2025 prices)

#1

Counterfeiting is the most profitable income stream for organised criminal groups. More than twice as lucrative as the second highest category, drug trafficking.
*Global Financial Integrity

$747 - $910 BILLION

Wider global economic and social costs of counterfeiting (using 2025 prices)

FOREWORD

Counterfeit fashion is booming — and with it, so is human exploitation. For too long, fake fashion has been trivialised as a harmless shortcut to a more desirable lifestyle. A bargain. A slice of luxury at a fraction of the price. But this report paints a much darker picture — one where fake fashion is embedded in a complex criminal underworld rife with abuse and exploitation.

Behind every fake handbag, pair of trainers, or football shirt lies a murky supply chain laced with exploitation, coercion, and in some cases forced labour. Fuelled by a convergence of intersecting social, economic, and technological dynamics, counterfeit trade has become a globalised industry. This lucrative trade is driven by organised crime groups who treat people as disposable business inputs, and who use profits to finance violent criminal activities.

Fake fashion has existed for millennia, but the scale of its production and distribution has expanded rapidly over the last five years. What was once a fringe activity is now firmly mainstream, ranging from luxury knockoffs to sportswear reps. What this report shows is that counterfeit fashion is far from a harmless side hustle; it is a gateway for criminal networks to move money, exploit workers, and erode our collective safety. The consequences are wide-ranging and significant — billions of lost tax revenue, huge costs to law enforcement, damaging health impacts, and environmental damage. However, the heaviest toll of these illicit operations is borne by the people — men, women and children — who have been deceived, coerced or forced to commit crimes, often at huge personal risks with little personal gain.

Counterfeiting supply chains prey upon the vulnerable and profit directly from labour exploitation. This paper uncovers the hidden risks and impacts of fake fashion and reveals its links with forced labour and organised crime. We hope our research and findings will help raise awareness of this underexplored and underreported human rights scandal.

Sarah Woodcock
CEO, The Anti-Slavery Collective

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Key Findings

Fake fashion harms people, economies and the planet

The manufacture and sale of fake fashion is responsible for many deeply damaging harms. These include: a significant loss of taxation; damage to legitimate businesses; harmful environmental manufacturing processes; dangerous health and safety impacts, and increased crime.[1] This report also reveals the underreported connections between counterfeiting and forced labour.[2]

Profits from fake fashion fund darker and more violent criminality

Counterfeit goods[3] are an extremely lucrative and low risk economic activity for criminal actors.[4] There is growing evidence that counterfeiting profits are funding other forms of violent criminality, such as money laundering and drug, gun, and human trafficking.

Gathering data on counterfeiting and forced labour is a major challenge

Forced labour is a crime that thrives on the vulnerability and isolation of victims who can be too fearful, too desperate, or simply unaware of their rights to seek help. Counterfeit production and distribution are deliberately concealed, with goods crossing borders through informal networks and with criminals often operating in regions with weak regulation or corruption. The same secrecy that protects these operations also hides exploitative labour practices such as forced or child labour; this makes quantifiable data very challenging to trace.

Data sharing deficits hinder evidence-based policymaking

There are significant gaps and inconsistencies in data sharing between public and private actors on the extent and nature of counterfeiting. This hinders government bodies, law enforcement agencies, and intellectual property specialists in identifying and targeting criminal operations and exploitation. Brands that possess vital data and supply chain monitoring capacity represent an underutilised source of insight.

Counterfeiting operations apply different norms, patterns and business models

The risk of modern slavery and other forms of labour exploitation exists in all business supply chains. In legitimate manufacturing businesses, labour exploitation risk is highest at the production and manufacturing stages. Although there are some examples of labour exploitation in the distribution and sale of legally compliant goods, the exposure to labour abuse at these stages is significantly lower than it is in counterfeiting supply chains. The Anti-Slavery Collective has collected case studies that suggest labour exploitation exists from end to end in counterfeit supply chains, including at the assembly and sale stages.

Counterfeiters evade detection by exploiting international legal loopholes

The fragmented international legal landscape around counterfeiting allows criminal actors to exploit loopholes and evade detection. Counterfeit production is increasingly localised, particularly in free trade zones, where counterfeiters deceive enforcement by shipping unbranded disassembled materials separately.[5] Law enforcement agencies are struggling to keep pace with evolving covert production and distribution methods.

The eCommerce landscape presents new challenges

eCommerce has boomed since the COVID-19 pandemic and accelerated the rise of online shopping.[6] It is forecast that, by 2026, 39% of global retail purchases will be made online.[7] The eCommerce marketplace is driven by social media platforms, and global brands are omnipresent. This has fuelled an exponential growth in counterfeiting as criminal groups are increasingly able to target a global consumer base.

Social media platforms and influencers are driving fake fashion sales

The influence of social media on consumer purchasing is clear; it's forecast that by 2030, 42% of all purchase intent will come from social media eCommerce platforms.[8] There is growing evidence that influencers are promoting and selling counterfeit fashion items on social media platforms with ease and relative impunity. These platforms are now a vast, lucrative marketplace for counterfeit fashion products.

A profound attitudinal shift has occurred

Whereas owning counterfeit goods was once stigmatised, attitudes amongst younger demographics have changed dramatically. Buying, wearing, and owning counterfeit goods has become entirely normalised. In particular, Gen Z consumers perceive fake goods as being harmless, a savvy economic choice , or even as a defiant stance against corporate profits.

The counterfeiting of apparel goods has reached epidemic proportions

New data commissioned by The Anti-Slavery Collective estimates the total value of internationally traded counterfeit goods in 2025 is $550 billion[9], with fake fashion constituting a majority share (63%) of this trade.

Recommendations

1. An international, multi-stakeholder approach is required

The responsibility for tackling counterfeiting falls across international jurisdictions, public and private sector actors, and government departments. Sustainability, human rights abuses, and poly-criminality cannot be understood in isolation; multi-stakeholder cooperation needs to be prioritised and a big picture leadership approach applied to facilitate greater cooperation and joined up action.

2. Data sharing is an urgent priority

Restricted access to data and intelligence limits our understanding of the true scale and nature of the fake fashion market and its intersection with labour exploitation. Governments, law enforcement agencies, intellectual property (IP) experts, and trading standards groups urgently require more data to target their investigations. A culture of transparency and collaboration around data sharing between the public and private sectors is required.

3. Law enforcement officers and private investigators need targeted training

IP crime investigators in law enforcement agencies and private investigators hired by brands often do not have comprehensive training on recognising the signs of labour exploitation. Targeted training is required which would also contribute to a culture of data and intelligence sharing.

4. Counterfeiting must be treated as a serious crime

Enforcement policies and tactics need to take counterfeiting as seriously as other forms of organised crime, rather than viewing it as a secondary IP concern. This would promote stronger interagency cooperation, harmonised international standards, and more consistent penalties across jurisdictions. It would also enable law enforcement and regulatory bodies to better target the organised networks linked to labour exploitation.

5. Gen Z targeted awareness-raising campaigns should be prioritised

Awareness-raising campaigns should target Gen Z consumers in response to their demand for fake fashion and the marked attitudinal shifts towards counterfeiting amongst this cohort. These campaigns should leverage existing consumer insight research and apply a behavioural change approach.

6. More comparative legal analysis is required

There are some countries where legislation exists to criminalise the purchase of illicit and counterfeit goods. These include France and Italy, where the luxury fashion markets are economically significant. Historically, there has been little appetite for a change in the law in the UK. This is largely due to significant challenges in enforcement and judicial capacity. There is also a persistent belief that IP protection primarily serves the interests of brands rather than being integral to tackling criminality. More comparative legal analysis is needed on the effectiveness of different legal approaches to assess the potential for deterring consumers from buying counterfeit goods that contribute to exploitative labour practices.

7. The new eCommerce landscape needs to be better understood

Partnerships with eCommerce and social media platforms should be prioritised to better understand the challenges in verifying sellers, identifying fakes, protecting IP, and prosecuting criminals.

8. AI technology should be increasingly leveraged

AI-powered technology is already being used to spot fakes by comparing millions of images of real and counterfeit products. AI technology could be leveraged more widely by private and public sector organisations to target and disrupt counterfeiting.

INTRODUCTION

Between 2018-2023, the number of people living in modern slavery rose by 10 million. Today, an estimated 50 million people are living in modern slavery, with 28 million of these in forced labour.[10] Systemic governance failures such as weak labour laws, poor regulatory oversight, and limited enforcement capacity[11] create fertile ground for all forms of labour abuse. While the risk of modern slavery and other forms of labour exploitation exists in all legitimate business supply chains, this paper focuses on how forced labour and labour exploitation intersects with the unregulated, opaque, and clandestine world of counterfeits.[12]

Counterfeit fashion is booming due to the convergence of complex social, economic, and technological dynamics. This paper contends that the current stratospheric boom in counterfeit markets has been driven by a perfect storm of fragmented regulation, globalisation, exponential growth of eCommerce platforms, and shifting consumer attitudes toward fakes. This has triggered a global expansion of one of the most profitable but least reported exploitative industries: counterfeit fashion.

A 2017 report from the US-based group, Global Financial Integrity, analysed the relative value of different forms of illicit trade and found that counterfeiting was more profitable for organised crime groups than drugs, weapons, or human trafficking.[13] The poly-criminal nature of these actors means that counterfeiting, smuggling, money laundering and forced labour are often undertaken in tandem.[14] Yet counterfeiting is often rationalised as trivial, non-violent, or low-risk and is not taken as seriously as other forms of illicit trade like drug trafficking. Moreover, quantitative data about the nature and extent of counterfeiting operations is extremely difficult to obtain; the odds are therefore stacked against enforcement agencies in their efforts to tackle it.

To inform this paper, The Anti-Slavery Collective interviewed law enforcement agencies, academics, IP and brand protection experts, civil society groups, brands, trading standards bodies and legislators as well as conducting extensive desk research. This paper builds on the existing work of technical experts like the ILO, OECD, INTERPOL, UNODC and our partners EXIGER, The Anti-Counterfeiting Group (ACG) and the Transnational Alliance to Combat Illicit Trade (TRACIT).

1. FAKE FASHION: AN OVERVIEW

The scale of fake fashion

Counterfeit goods span many industries including luxury, intermediate products (partially finished goods) and consumer goods[15] with fashion (clothing, accessories including leather goods, and footwear), representing one of the most commonly targeted categories.[16] New data commissioned for this report estimates the value of internationally traded counterfeit apparel in the UK economy in 2025 at between £2.7 billion and £3.6 billion. Our research shows that counterfeiting, including fake apparel, will cost the UK Exchequer £2.55 billion in lost tax revenue in 2025. This lost revenue could pay for 51,400 new nurses or 47,300 new police officers. Global counterfeit trade, in absolute terms, exceeds the entire GDP of advanced OECD countries such as Austria and Belgium.[17]

Fake fashion remains a major focus for counterfeiters due to its high profit margins, strong consumer demand, and relative ease of manufacture. Estimates suggest that 60–80% of the global supply of counterfeit goods are consumed in the United States[18], with Louis Vuitton, Gucci and Chanel being the most frequently faked brands, highlighting the scale of demand in high-income countries.[19]

In Europe, fake fashion dominates the counterfeiting landscape. According to EU enforcement data, clothing, accessories, and footwear accounted for 57% of all counterfeit seizures.[20] Yves Saint Laurent was the most counterfeited brand in Europe and the Middle East, closely followed by Louis Vuitton and Chanel.

Fake fashion, however, isn't confined to the counterfeiting of luxury labels. In the U.S., sneakers now account for a significant and increasing share of intellectual property-infringing goods seized by Customs.[21]The counterfeiting of sneakers, including brands like Adidas, Nike and New Balance, is so prevalent that a growing subculture of 'reps' - a high-quality, intentional counterfeit sneaker design has emerged. The demand for 'reps' is driven by influencers on TikTok and YouTube.[22]In the UK, the size of the market in 2023 for fake football shirts was almost a third of the value of legitimate sales.

"There's never been a case where an Intellectual Property crime has been just that. Whether it's human trafficking, whether it's slavery, whether it's money laundering, tax evasion. There's always something more than just the IP crime. Always."

Michael Ellis, former Assistant Director of Organised Crime at INTERPOL

Organised crime and counterfeiting

The Global Organised Crime Index (2025) suggests that organised crime operations have been expanding since 2020. Conflict, major political shifts and economic hardship have seen organised groups take advantage of instability, vulnerability and commodity shortages.

The Anti-Slavery Collective has identified two broad types of counterfeiters: criminal enterprises which largely commit economic crimes like fraud and tax evasion, and organised crime groups (OCGs), which engage in wider poly-criminality. OCGs are highly diverse in scale and scope. They range from informal criminal alliances to sophisticated transnational enterprises.

Recent data from the Index has shown that counterfeiting has the strongest global link to other criminal activities. In other words, countries with significant counterfeit activity are more likely to experience elevated levels of other forms of organised crime.[23] Therefore, there is an intrinsic link between OCGs who commit counterfeiting and also engage in more violent criminality including arms, drugs and human trafficking.

Unlike drugs or arms trafficking, counterfeiting carries minimal legal risks and the profit margins can be enormous. For example, counterfeit software can cost as little as $0.23 to produce and can sell for upwards of $52.[24] Profits from counterfeiting are routinely laundered through small, low-value cash transactions and cash-intensive businesses. Once washed, these funds are recycled to finance further criminal activity[25] Criminal groups continually adapt their counterfeiting activities to exploit weak legal and enforcement structures. They also use counterfeiting to launder the proceeds from other criminal enterprises.[26]

There is widespread public and legislative disdain for certain facets of the counterfeit industry, in particular counterfeit drugs, but counterfeit fashion is often viewed as trivial or low-risk. This distinction between what is considered ‘dangerous’ and what is not, feeds the misconception that fake fashion is harmless.[27]

Legitimate versus illegitimate fashion supply chains

Global labour exploitation scandals within the legitimate garment manufacturing industry have surfaced regularly over the last 30 years. The harmful practices involved have included debt bondage, forced labour, child labour, abusive living or working conditions, or physical or sexual violence. Exposés of state-imposed forced labour in Uzbekistan’s cotton harvests, the 2013 Rana Plaza factory disaster in Bangladesh and, most recently, the exploitation of Uyghur Muslims within Chinese fast fashion supply chains have all attracted global attention and condemnation.

The 2023 Global Slavery Index detailed the extent of fashion's entanglement with human rights risks. It found that G20 countries imported $468 billion worth of goods at risk of being produced with modern slavery. Of this, garments accounted for $147.9 billion and textiles nearly $13 billion. The U.S. was the biggest importer of at-risk garments and textiles at $57 billion, followed by Germany ($20 billion), Japan ($19 billion) and the United Kingdom ($11 billion).[28]

Counterfeiting operations exist outside of national and international legal and regulatory frameworks - human rights risks across the entire supply chain from production and manufacturing, through to distribution and sale. There is a growing trend of criminal groups infiltrating legitimate distribution channels and blending legal and illegal activities to produce counterfeit goods. Some transnational criminal networks have become so professionalised in their supply chain operations that their high quality fakes are almost impossible to distinguish to the naked eye.[29]

In theory, all legitimate businesses operate within legal frameworks and are beholden to laws, regulation, and standards; illicit businesses exist entirely outside those rules. However, the line between legitimate and counterfeiting businesses is blurred and legal compliance is best understood on a spectrum. It is therefore helpful to recognise the significant variation between businesses that operate in both spaces, legitimate and illegitimate. Consumer expectations add another layer of complexity and risk. There is an increasing demand and expectation for brands to act ethically and sustainably, yet this moral scrutiny rarely extends to counterfeit markets.

2. FAKE FASHION & LABOUR EXPLOITATION

The intersection of counterfeiting and labour exploitation

The Anti-Slavery Collective has identified three ways in which counterfeiting intersects with human trafficking, forced labour and labour exploitation.

1. There is growing evidence that exploitation (including child labour and forced labour) exists end-to-end in illicit supply chains from the gathering of raw materials, manufacturing and production through to assembly, distribution, and sale.
2. Laws and regulations that prevent legitimate businesses from using products or raw materials made with forced labour are irrelevant to counterfeiters. Counterfeiters are incentivised to find the cheapest materials (including cotton produced with forced labour) and exist in an extra-legal space where they are not subject to audits or inspections and have no motivation to comply with safety standards or labour laws.
3. Counterfeiting is an extremely lucrative and low risk enterprise for criminals. The ILO and UNODC found that profits from fakes are invested by criminal groups into other more violent criminal activities like human trafficking. People working within counterfeiting supply chains are viewed as commodities that can be transferred between illegal operations and disposed of when they are no longer deemed a profitable input.

The boundary between victim and perpetrator can also be blurred. Many individuals within criminal networks knowingly participate in illegal activities, but do so under coercive circumstances. In other words, a young person selling counterfeit goods may appear complicit, yet their capacity to refuse participation may have been systematically eroded.

How illicit supply chains conceal forced labour

Forced labour is notoriously difficult to spot in legitimate business supply chains. It is a crime that exists in the shadows and thrives on the vulnerability and isolation of victims who can be too fearful, too desperate, or simply unaware of their rights to seek help. The complexity of modern supply chains and inadequate regulatory oversight also contribute significantly to the problem's invisibility.

Data on the scale and scope of human exploitation within counterfeiting operations is extremely limited. Criminal groups target regions with weak regulation or high levels of corruption for counterfeiting operations. Manufacturing, production and distribution processes are hidden from sight. This secrecy also conceals exploitative labour practices such as forced or child labour. Counterfeiting "thrives in the shadows" making data very challenging to collect.[30]

Despite these data limitations, qualitative evidence and investigative reports consistently point to the exploitation of vulnerable workers as a fundamental characteristic of counterfeit supply chains. The absence of robust statistics does not equate to absence of harm or provide an excuse for inaction.

Spotlight: state-imposed labour exploitation in China

China's systematic use of forced labour in the Xinjiang region is well-documented and there is a growing body of evidence that demonstrates how The People' s Republic of China (PRC) has implemented state control over the 13 million Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other minority ethnic and religious groups in the Xinjiang region.

Even with the most sophisticated supply chain visibility systems, it is still challenging for firms using cotton or cotton products within their manufacturing processes to guarantee it is forced labour-free. Most brands only have direct relationships with their first-tier suppliers (e.g., garment manufacturers) and lack visibility into lower tiers, such as spinning mills, fabric mills, and the raw cotton farms, where forced labour often occurs.

Cotton blending is also a major problem given cotton from different origins is frequently blended at spinning mills to create yarn. This makes it nearly impossible to trace the origin of the raw material in the final product through documentation alone. Cotton from high-risk regions may be routed through intermediary countries (like Pakistan or Vietnam). In these third countries, the cotton or partially processed textiles can be relabelled with a false "origin" to bypass import bans and regulations in consumer countries. As a result, many major corporations have been linked to Uyghur forced labour.[31]

The Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (UFLPA), enacted by the U.S. in December 2021, presumes that any goods mined, produced or manufactured wholly or partly in the Xinjiang region are made with forced labour and are therefore banned from the U.S. unless an importer can provide "clear and convincing evidence" to the contrary.[32] Laws like the ULFPA demand increased capacity of border agents to scrutinise imports, with many lessons on the logistics of enforcing such bans potentially transferable to new anti-counterfeiting initiatives.

It is widely reported that China is the dominant source of global counterfeit goods; in 2021, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection data indicated that 75% of counterfeit and pirated goods originated from China and Hong Kong.[33] This underscores how the same industrial and labour mechanisms that drive China's legitimate export economy, including the exploitation of cheap and, in some cases, forced labour, can also sustain illicit production. This blurs the boundaries between legal and illegal manufacturing, making it difficult for consumers, brands, and regulators to determine whether counterfeit goods are linked to forced labour practices.

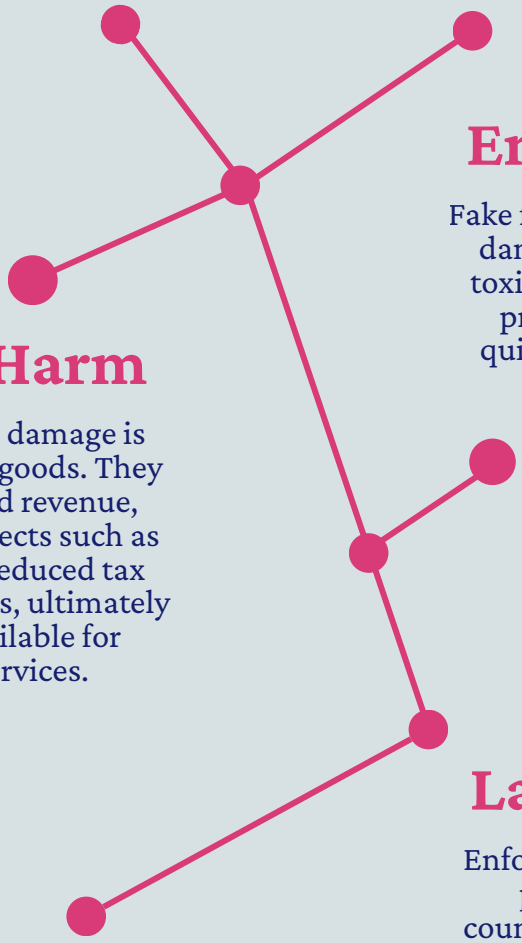
A CONSTELLATION OF HARMS

Consumer Safety

Counterfeit goods pose a significant threat to public health and safety. From toxic chemicals and dyes used in counterfeit textile, to cyber and financial crime through online purchases, counterfeit goods can be extremely harmful to consumers.

The Human Cost

Across counterfeit supply chains - from manufacturing, transportation, assembly and distribution - men, women and children are being exploited for their labour.



Environmental Toll

Fake fashion contributes to environmental damage. Unregulated factories release toxic chemicals into water supplies and produce low-quality goods that are quickly discarded, creating significant waste and disposal challenges.

Economic Harm

Widespread economic damage is inflicted by counterfeit goods. They erode legitimate brand revenue, triggering knock-on effects such as global job losses and reduced tax revenue for governments, ultimately limiting funding available for essential public services.

Law Enforcement

Enforcement and judicial systems are put under strain as a result of counterfeiting. Enforcement is costly, prosecutions are challenging, and customs officers face risks when handling hazardous counterfeit goods.

Organised Crime

Counterfeiting is conducted by criminals with the financial proceeds from their operations often flowing into larger networks of organised crime that engage in more violent activities such as the drugs and arms trade and human trafficking.

3. SOCIAL MEDIA, INFLUENCERS & FAKE FASHION

The rapid expansion of counterfeiting online

Online shopping has grown exponentially since the COVID 19 pandemic.[34] The eCommerce landscape is continually evolving with the adaptation of new technology, globalisation, expanding social media shopping platforms (TikTok Shop, Instagram Shop and Facebook Marketplace) and the growing reach of dedicated second-hand marketplaces, including eBay, Vinted and Depop. Counterfeiters are increasingly leveraging this online retail environment to access a global consumer base.

Networks trafficking fakes between Paris, Hong Kong, Ankara, and Moscow have become highly professionalised. The quality of counterfeit luxury goods is improving and even trained experts struggle to distinguish real from fake.[35] A survey by MarqVision on how counterfeiters are using emerging channels and generative AI revealed that 71.6% of respondents unknowingly encountered counterfeit products when shopping online.[36]

Online counterfeiters are diligent about responding to feedback from customers about products. This feedback loop is unique in the organised crime world.[37] Although platforms like Instagram have introduced security measures, counterfeiters are continuously adapting to circumvent them.[38] A survey conducted by Which? in 2024 revealed that a third (32%) of buyers on second-hand marketplaces had experienced at least one scam in the past two years, including the sale of counterfeit goods. Second-hand marketplaces present their own unique set of challenges. They are perceived as relatively low-risk but buyers are at greater risk of being scammed on customer-to-customer platforms.[39]

All the evidence indicates that social media and second-hand retailers, brands, and law enforcement agencies need to collaborate on proactive solutions to tackle counterfeiting. These include AI-driven content monitoring, stricter enforcement of IP laws, and consumer education to curb the supply and demand for counterfeit fashion.[40]

New technology to counter these worrying trends is being developed. Founded in 2012, Entrupy is a U.S.-based company offering an AI-powered product verification solution to retailers selling apparel online or in the second hand or vintage space. It identifies fakes by comparing millions of images of real and counterfeit products. As the AI model analyses more items, the technology improves. By collaborating with leading businesses and brands to gather millions of images using microscopic photographic technology, Entrupy has created a massive database for training its AI. This process involves a rigorous three-step process, combining human expertise and AI, to ensure data accuracy. This dataset covers a wide range of product styles, from decades-old classics to the latest trends.

The role of social media and influencers

Social media has become a powerful tool for the promotion and sale of counterfeit fashion products. It facilitates a vast underground economy that poses significant risks to legitimate businesses and consumers. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, Pinterest, TikTok and Reddit have emerged as key marketplaces where counterfeit goods are marketed through influencers, special hashtags, and private messaging groups.[41]

Research by social media analytics firm Ghost Data identified more than 20,000 active counterfeiter accounts on Instagram and 26,000 on Facebook in 2021.[42] Between July and December 2023, TikTok blocked over 37 million attempted product listings from its online shop, many of which were suspected to be counterfeit.[43] Counterfeit sellers utilise key features on social platforms such as temporary stories and direct messaging to facilitate sales while evading detection.[44] They also exploit detection loopholes by using coded language, private payment methods such as WeChat Pay and PayPal, and automated bots which artificially inflate the credibility of counterfeit-selling accounts. MarqVision found that 31.8% of fakes sold online were first viewed on one social media platform but purchased on another. This has made protecting IP an increasingly complex task.[45]

Social media influencers also play a crucial role in driving the demand for counterfeit fashion. Some influencers leverage trust-based relationships with followers to facilitate the sale of counterfeit goods.[46] Research commissioned by the UK's Intellectual Property Office discovered that, on average, 22% of social media users aged 16-60 admitted to purchasing counterfeit products based on influencer endorsements. In the 16-24 cohort, 36% of females purchased an endorsed counterfeit item in the previous 12 months (26% knowingly and 10% unknowingly); for males the figure was 51% (41% knowingly and 10% unknowingly). For both genders, clothing and accessories are in the top three categories of counterfeited products purchased on the recommendation of social media influencers.[47]

Shifting attitudes: Gen Z and fake fashion

Gen Z (those born between 1997 and 2012) have grown up with omnipresent brand marketing and influencer culture which promotes the importance of aesthetics, status and consumption. The desire for social acceptance, alongside a lack of awareness about the consequences of counterfeiting, has driven a massive spike in the demand for counterfeit fashion, spanning luxury knockoffs, mid-tier imitations, and fake sportswear. A 2023 survey by the European Union Intellectual Property Office (EUIPO) found that more than a third of Gen Z respondents had deliberately purchased a fake designer item in the previous year.[48]

The research reflects a significant cultural shift in attitudes towards counterfeit fashion. Once perceived as cheap and stigmatised, counterfeit fashion has gained huge popularity in recent years. Gen Z, who have grown up as digital natives, often perceive buying fake goods as a victimless crime.

"Demographics respond very differently. Millennials still associate counterfeit goods with organised crime and view them as tacky. This is not the same for Gen Z."
- Vidyuth Srinivasan, CEO Entrupy

Gen Z will play a pivotal role in shaping the future of fashion consumption and their attitudes toward counterfeit products reflect broader social and economic pressures. A global study by the International Trademark Association found that income and morality are the two most influential factors shaping Gen Z's views on counterfeit goods, but financial constraints outweigh ethical concerns. Three in five Gen Z respondents said they cannot afford the lifestyle they aspire to, and this economic pressure significantly informs their purchasing choices. Consequently, 79% of Gen Z respondents reported purchasing counterfeit products in the past year, with apparel, shoes, and accessories topping the list.[49]

This normalisation of fake fashion coexists with a conflicted sense of ethics. While 52% of Gen Z expect to reduce their counterfeit consumption in the future, the remainder do not intend to change their habits.[50] The UK IPO tested which messages are most effective in changing public behaviour towards counterfeiting, finding that 39% of people were most influenced by information linking counterfeit goods to sweatshop labour and exploitative conditions. The role of organised crime was the second most powerful potential deterrent. This suggests that consumers may reconsider their purchases if they understand that their savings come at the cost of someone else's freedom, safety, or dignity.[51]

Spotlight: football fakes

In 2024 the value of fake UK Premier League football shirts was estimated to be £180 million, almost a third of the value of legitimate sales in 2023.[52] Between January and August 2025, 67,573 fake football shirts and kits were seized, which, if genuine, would have had a total retail value of £5.1 million.[53]

Fake football kits represent a sizeable chunk of counterfeit fashion in the UK and occupy a unique place in the consumer experience; they aren't just merchandise but symbols of belonging, identity and community. Fans of all backgrounds buy shirts to signal membership to a club. Despite this, many choose counterfeits over the genuine club products. A 2025 survey by The Athletic revealed that 77.8% of football fans admitted to knowingly purchasing a counterfeit shirt and 66% would do so again.[54] Price is a key factor with counterfeiters selling Premier League shirts at an average price of £11, compared to the £76.50 average price for legitimate shirts. This equates to an 86% price differential.[55]

This trend cuts across generations. The pressure to demonstrate team loyalty by owning each season's latest kit creates financial strain for many supporters, from parents buying shirts for their children to lifelong fans facing rising living costs. For some, counterfeit shirts offer a way to participate in football culture without the financial burden.

4. DETECTION & LAW ENFORCEMENT CHALLENGES

Legislation, detection, and enforcement

International anti-counterfeiting efforts exist within two overarching legal frameworks: The Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agreement established by the World Trade Organisation and the Paris Convention for the Protection of Industrial Property. The manufacture and sale of counterfeit goods is illegal in almost all developed nations, including the UK, U.S., Australia, France and Germany. However, very few countries criminalise the purchase of counterfeit goods; the exceptions in Europe include Italy and France.

Globally most jurisdictions lack stringent laws against counterfeit production and distribution, and have varying interpretations of IP law which counterfeiters can exploit. Variations in enforcement practices and a lack of political support also creates barriers to global collaboration.[56] Historically, prosecutors have been less inclined to take on counterfeiting cases which generally attract less attention than drug, arms or human trafficking cases.

The current legislative landscape allows organised criminal groups to thrive. These groups exploit legal loopholes, regulatory blind spots, and jurisdictional gaps to evade detection. Highly agile and responsive to market demand, counterfeiters are quick to adapt to new technologies, consumer habits and enforcement strategies. This poses multiple challenges for enforcement agencies. It is also critical to recognise the considerable challenges involved in detecting forced labour, even within legitimate supply chains subject to audits, inspections, and reporting requirements.

The increasing complexity of global supply chains presents a significant challenge. Widespread subcontracting means companies operate across multiple jurisdictions, diluting traceability and responsibility across the production process. This fragmentation allows opportunities for counterfeiters to infiltrate legitimate supply chains. Customs agencies also face the increasingly sophisticated design and packaging of fake goods, and shipments being made in smaller packages to avoid detection. Additionally, many counterfeit goods are now being manufactured in the countries in which they are sold, meaning individual component packages, at the point of importation, may appear entirely legal and therefore bypass detection by Customs authorities.[57]

Without sufficient training or expertise, enforcement agencies will continue to face challenges in combating counterfeiting and exploitative labour practices regardless of legislation. There is an urgent need for a multifaceted approach which encompasses international cooperation and legal harmonisation to effectively address the global challenge of counterfeiting.

The vital importance of data sharing

The COVID-19 pandemic, shifts in the geopolitical climate, and the rise of eCommerce have transformed the counterfeiting landscape over the last five years and made the enforcement of anti-counterfeiting measures increasingly difficult. International supply chains have become significantly more complex and the subsequent shift towards localised production methods enables counterfeit products to evade detection. Anti-counterfeiting initiatives remain a relatively low priority for enforcement authorities, which further emboldens the counterfeiters. Nevertheless, a coordinated and collaborative approach to data collection and sharing among enforcement agencies, private sector brands and civil society could be the key to solving these challenges.[58]

The UK IPO's 2023-2027 counter-infringement strategy highlights the importance of collaboration and partnerships within the UK Trading Standards community (including police forces, HM Revenue and Customs, Companies House, the IPO Intelligence Hub and UK Border Force) to better understand the scale and scope of the challenge.[59] While this does acknowledge the importance of data sharing, since Brexit UK law enforcement agencies often find themselves operating in silos from their European counterparts.

Since the end of 2020, the UK has lost access to the Schengen Information System (SIS II), a central EU database used extensively for real-time criminal alerts.[60] Moreover, before Brexit, the UK Border Force and HMRC were mandated to share data on counterfeit goods seizures with the European Commission's Directorate-General for Taxation and Customs Union (TAXUD). Since leaving the EU, this data sharing has ceased. This prevents a unified, coordinated approach across jurisdictions and allows organised crime groups to continue to operate across borders with impunity and even exploit blind spots across the continent.

UK enforcement agencies have stepped up their response to illicit trade, as highlighted by Operation Vulcan in Manchester and multi-agency initiatives such as the Intellectual Property Crime Group. However, challenges remain in ensuring consistent engagement with the broader anti-counterfeiting community including government departments, civil society, private sector brands and the media. Where collaborations between the public and private sectors are possible, data shared by legitimate businesses can provide valuable insights to law enforcement and government agencies. Intelligence from businesses on the counterfeiting of their own brands, as well as data from eCommerce platforms that may inadvertently host counterfeit products, could significantly shape strategies. Greater transparency and routine cross-sector engagement would help establish a collective understanding of emerging threats and enable proactive responses.

Case Study: Operation Vulcan

In 2022, the Greater Manchester Police (GMP) launched Operation Vulcan, a multi-agency initiative designed to rid the Cheetham Hill and Strangeways areas of Manchester of dangerous criminal activity.

For 40 years, Cheetham Hill was known as 'Counterfeit Street' and was the UK's capital of counterfeit goods with an estimated 50% of the country's fake goods trade occurring there. In 2021 before Operation Vulcan began, 200 tonnes of fake goods valued at £500 million were seized. Detecting modern-day slavery, forced labour and sexual exploitation were also priorities for the GMP operation. 54 modern slavery incidents were notified to GMP in 2021 and intelligence suggested that there was also a thriving sexual exploitation trade in Cheetham Hill.

The police identified 33 organised crime groups operating in the area. These were producing counterfeit goods as part of their wider criminal operations. GMP intelligence suggested cash flow from counterfeiting was driving human trafficking, drug dealing, organised exploitation of immigrants, and serious violent crime.[61]

During the November 2022 GMP operation, young men were found to be working as spotters for illegal counterfeit stores. They were expected to stand on the streets for long hours outside of counterfeit stores to monitor police movements and direct buyers into clandestine shops. They used burner phones to communicate, were paid £20 a day, and in some instances, had only arrived in the country 24 hours earlier.

Operation Vulcan highlighted the interconnected nature of organised crime and how counterfeiting and the movement of people are linked with the broader criminal economy. Organised crime groups often exploit vulnerable individuals as a cheap, disposable labour force to sustain high-profit, low-risk operations, while simultaneously engaging in other forms of criminality. Operation Vulcan demonstrated that counterfeiting cannot be viewed in isolation and needs to be considered as an integral driver of exploitation and criminality.

METHODOLOGY & LIMITATIONS

Methodology

This research sought to answer the following questions:

- To what extent does fake fashion intersect with or drive forced labour?
- How does the risk profile of an illegitimate fashion supply chain compare to one from a legitimate one?
- How effective is existing legislation and how do different regulatory frameworks compare?
- What are the main challenges faced by law enforcement?
- What impact have public awareness campaigns had?
- How does the work of IP and brand protection teams intersect with law enforcement?
- What new trends can we identify in consumer attitudes?
- Are there social behaviour change tactics we can identify?

We undertook this analysis through a mixture of interviews with law enforcement, brand protection specialists, academics, civil society groups, trading standards teams, campaigners, and policy makers. We conducted desk research on consumer habits and attitudes and presented a synthesis of existing research on the links between counterfeit goods and forced labour. We also considered the challenges, and potential tactics and solutions, for law enforcement agencies and other public and private actors involved in the detection and prosecution of counterfeit criminality. Finally we commissioned a senior economist to update data from the OECD and Frontier Economics models calculating the scale and value of the global trade in counterfeits. The OECD model measures internationally traded counterfeit goods. The Frontier Economics model is more expansive and, in addition to internationally traded goods, includes domestic production and consumption, digital piracy, and wider economic and social costs.

Limitations

- This paper's focus is counterfeit apparel: not fast fashion, dupes, knockoffs, or cheap clothing (even though plenty of the issues intersect).
- There are other areas of illicit trade like counterfeit pharmaceuticals, cosmetics or fake parts that we have not chosen to include in this research.
- Our research focuses on forced labour and labour exploitation, but it is important to acknowledge that counterfeiting is linked to harmful health impacts, environmental damage and tax evasion.

- This report considers all counterfeit apparel, i.e. clothes, bags, shoes and sneakers. Combined, these account for a significant share of the overall global counterfeiting market. This report also considers fakes across all tiers of the fashion world from fake Birkins and Laboutins, and North Face dupes to knock-off Manchester United and Liverpool FC shirts.
- Counterfeiting by its nature operates in the shadows. The most significant limitation we face in exposing and quantifying the links between counterfeiting and labour exploitation is the absence of data.
- Research on counterfeiting is largely reliant on law enforcement data, much of which is not publicly available and limited to convictions, which represents a tiny fraction of illicit trade activities. It has been estimated that 80% of the world's counterfeit apparel is manufactured in China, so language barriers and limited access to information and data means these operations remain under the radar.
- Child labour is not a primary focus of this research. However, The Anti-Slavery Collective has found evidence of multiple ways in which children are drawn into the production of counterfeit goods and also smuggled into, or recruited within, the UK, mainland Europe, and the U.S. by gangs managing the sales side of counterfeiting operations.

References

1. UNODC, The Illicit Trafficking of Counterfeit Goods and Transnational Organized Crime.
2. Forced Labour is defined by the ILO Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29), as "all work or service that is exacted from any person under the menace of penalty and for which the said person has not offered themself voluntarily".
3. Counterfeiting is defined by The International Anti Counterfeiting Coalition as a fraudulent imitation of a trusted brand and product, and is a serious crime, and a counterfeit as an item that uses someone else's trademark without their permission.
4. Global Financial Integrity, Transnational Crime and the Developing World, 2017.
5. OECD, Mapping Global Trade in Fakes 2025: Global Trends and Enforcement Challenges, 2025.
6. McKinsey & Company, Emerging Consumer Trends in a post COVID-19 World, 2021.
7. WARC, E-commerce to account for 33% of retail sales this year, 2023.
8. Social Tip, 2025.
9. This estimate was drawn by updating the methodologies of the OECD and Frontier Economic models.
10. Walk Free, The Global Slavery Index, 2023.
11. Ethical Trading Initiative, Modern Slavery & Forced Labour, 2025.
12. Counterfeit fashion encompasses unauthorised replicas of branded goods (often produced in unregulated environments) mimicking genuine products' trademarks and designs. These products often fail to adhere to safety, labour, and environmental standards as they exist entirely outside of legitimate, regulated markets.
13. Global Financial Integrity, Transnational Crime and the Developing World, 2017.
14. TRACIT, The Human Cost of Illicit Trade, 2021.
15. OECD & EUIPO, Trends in Trade in Counterfeit and Pirated Goods, 2019.
16. OECD, Mapping Global Trade in Fakes 2025: Global Trends and Enforcement Challenges, 2025.
17. OECD, Counterfeit and pirated goods, 2025.
18. Federal Research Division, U.S. Intellectual Property and Counterfeit Goods—Landscape Review of Existing/Emerging Research, 2020
19. Entrupy, State of the Fake Report, 2025.
20. UNODC, The Globalization of Crime: A Transnational Organized Crime Threat, 2010.
21. Entrupy, State of the Fake Report, 2024.
22. Entrupy, State of the Fake Report, 2025.
23. The Global Organised Crime Index, 2025.
24. UNIFAB, Counterfeiting and Organised Crime, 2025.
25. Mekong Club, Illicit Trade and Modern Slavery 2022.
26. UNIFAB, Counterfeiting and Organised Crime, 2025.
27. Gabriella Manduca, Threads of Terror, Crime, & Slavery, 2019.
28. Walk Free, The Global Slavery Index, 2023.

29. UNIFAB, Counterfeiting and Organised Crime, 2025.
30. OECD, Mapping Global Trade in Fakes 2025: Global Trends and Enforcement Challenges, 2025.
31. Sheffield Hallam University's Helena Kennedy Centre for International Justice, Uyghur Forced Labour: Why Is This Happening, 2023.
32. US Customs and Border Protection, Uyghur Forced Labour Prevention Act.
33. US Customs and Border Protection, FY 2021 Intellectual Property Rights Seizure Statistics Book, 2021.
34. McKinsey & Company, Emerging Consumer Trends in a post COVID-19 World, 2021.
35. Entrupy State of the Fake report 2024.
36. MarqVision, State of Brand Protection Report 2025, 2025.
37. Entrupy interview, 2024.
38. Ghost Data, Instagram and Counterfeiting in 2019: New Features, Old Problems, 2019.
39. Which?, A third of buyers have experienced a scam on popular second-hand marketplaces in the last two years, 2024.
40. McKinsey & Company, Emerging Consumer Trends in a post COVID-19 World, 2021.
41. Ghost Data, Instagram and Counterfeiting in 2019: New Features, Old Problems, 2019.
42. Ghost Data, The Counterfeiting Empire, 2021.
43. TikTok, TikTok Shop Safety Report, 2023.
44. Ghost Data, Instagram and Counterfeiting in 2019: New Features, Old Problems, 2019.
45. MarqVision, State of Brand Protection Report 2025, 2025.
46. David Shepherd et al, The Impact of Deviant Social Media Influencers and Consumer Characteristics on Purchasing Counterfeit Goods, 2023.
47. IPO, The impact of complicit social media influencers on counterfeit purchasing among male consumers in the UK, 2024.
48. EUIPO, Half of young consumers find it acceptable to buy fakes, 2023.
49. International Trademark Association, Gen Z Insights: Brands and Counterfeit Products, 2019.
50. International Trademark Association, Gen Z Insights: Brands and Counterfeit Products, 2019.
51. UK IPO, IPO Counterfeit Goods Research, 2021.
52. Corsearch, Counterfeit UK Football Shirts Market Estimated at Shocking £180 Million per Year, Reveals Corsearch, 2024.
53. PIPCU, Seven arrested and £5 million worth of counterfeit football merchandise seized, 2025.
54. The Athletic, Fake Football Shirts Survey, 2025.
55. Corsearch, Counterfeit UK Football Shirts Market Estimated at Shocking £180 Million per Year, Reveals Corsearch, 2024.
56. Generis Global Legal Services, The Global Challenge of Enforcing Anti-Counterfeiting Measures, 2024.
57. OECD, Mapping Global Trade in Fakes 2025: Global Trends and Enforcement Challenges, 2025.
58. OECD, Mapping Global Trade in Fakes 2025: Global Trends and Enforcement Challenges, 2025.
59. UK IPO, Tackling IP crime with Trading Standards, 2022.
60. Euro Prospects, Shared Threats, Divided Laws: The Post-Brexit Future of UK–EU Crime and Data Cooperation, 2025.
61. Greater Manchester Police, Operation Vulcan: The Plan, 2022

THE
ANTI-SLAVERY
COLLECTIVE