The dangers of buying high-end counterfeit goods

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**James Rowe:** Fake products at cheap prices cause more harm than good. Look beyond the price tag and you could see a dangerous world.

**James Rowe:** Hello, it's James Row here with this week's episode of Witch Shorts, the podcast that gives you a free insight into one of our magazines every single Wednesday. Now, today I'm bringing you a piece that Ellie Simmons wrote for the October issue of Witch Magazine that looked at the murky world of counterfeit products.

**James Rowe:** Whether you end up buying fake goods knowingly or unknowingly, you could be bringing a dangerous item into your home while it's also funding a world of criminal activity. So how bad is it? And how can you ensure you're buying safe, genuine goods? Well, here's Ellie's piece, adapted for the podcast this week.

**James Rowe:** Read by Cut Ger.

**Kat Cereda:** Not long ago, counterfeit products were usually comical looking knockoffs that no one would fall for. But now there's a new threatened town, the high end fake. These new counterfeits are shiny, polished, and very plausible. At first glance, many are indistinguishable from the real thing. Our investigation found dangerous components including dupes with fake fuses, which make them a major fire risk.

**Kat Cereda:** So how did we end up here? Well, we bought eight products we suspected might be fake from third party sellers on a range of popular online marketplaces, Amazon Marketplace, eBay, Temu, and Vintage. These included a Dyson hairdryer, GHD, hair Straighteners, apple AirPods, and England football shirt, OG boots, and a Disney stitch toy.

**Kat Cereda:** All items that are made by brands known to be targeted by counterfeiters. At first glance, almost all the products looked identical to the genuine ones. We examined what they looked like and how they felt weighed and handled. Often the differences were barely noticeable, but once we spotted them, they were hard to overlook.

**Kat Cereda:** Take the football shirt, for example. The messy stitching was a giveaway. The label was different too, and the tag didn't have a hologram. The clue for the Dyson hairdryer was a clumsy typo in some tiny words on the casing, the word water was spelt with two Rs. The airports looked virtually identical, but were given away by their weight.

**Kat Cereda:** Almost half what they should have been. And GHD straighteners were half a centimeter longer than a legit pair. The A boots had different stitching, a thinner sole, and what felt like cheaper lining, and the Disney toy lacked the vivid colors of the original. It was much smaller and didn't have the famous logo.

**Kat Cereda:** But it's not just the looks that are the problem. We sent the electricals to be inspected by experts at campaigning Charity electrical safety first, and what they found was shocking. Both the hairdryer and the hair straighteners had fake fuses, a major fire risk. The pins on the hair hairdryer plug were too short to meet the British standard, and the straighteners had a much older type of circuit board.

**Kat Cereda:** Giuseppe Campana, who works for electrical safety first told us that people don't understand the dangers of buying counterfeit electrical products. They look the same and they still seem to do the same job, but the reality is that genuine products cost more because they use higher quality components.

**Kat Cereda:** They're tested. Counterfeit sellers are putting a lot of people's lives at risk, and the problems are likely to extend even further. Fake toys are often made with weak seams, easily accessible buston batteries and breakable parts, and that's before you think about the dangerous dyes, banned chemicals and flammable materials that can be used.

**Kat Cereda:** So if you buy a fake, knowingly or not, where does your money go? Well, counterfeits are often linked to other types of crime, including child labor, fraud, prostitution, modern day slavery, illegal drugs, trafficking, and terrorism. Often illegal drugs and weapons will be transported alongside the counterfeits on the same illicit trade routes.

**Kat Cereda:** For example, when police in Manchester seized 30,000 fake football shirts in 2022, they found among those working in the shops, selling them were children who had gone missing from asylum seeker hotels in England. Often the working conditions of the people making the fakes are horrifying. In 2020, authorities in Spain uncovered a counterfeit cigarette factory in an underground bunker with people forced to work in dangerous conditions and not allowed to leave on their own.

**Kat Cereda:** Phil Lewis is the director general at Anti Counterfeiting Group. They told us many people are unaware that by buying a fake, they're potentially helping to fund the activities of international criminals that threaten our families, our national security economies. And jobs counterfeiting is not a victimless crime.

**Kat Cereda:** If you buy fakes, are you committing a crime? Well, you'd likely fall into one of two camps. Either you buy in the full knowledge that what you're buying is likely to be a fake, or you are deceived into thinking you're buying the genuine article. While three and 10 of us have knowingly bought fake products, there's also a significant number.

**Kat Cereda:** One in six who say they've unintentionally bought a counterfeit product. This is most likely for toys, clothing, and footwear and sports and electricals according to a 2023 survey from the intellectual property office. Buying counterfeits isn't illegal, but those making them break intellectual property or trademark laws, which can be civil or criminal matters.

**Kat Cereda:** So how are we the consumer being protected? Global brands have large enforcement teams to fight back. Apple has teams that work in more than 100 countries and monitor over 150 online marketplaces, for example. But this isn't enough. Proper enforcement is key, and counterfeiters are quick to exploit gaps in the UK Trading standards is supposed to enforce laws including those around counterfeit goods, which protect consumers.

**Kat Cereda:** But data obtained by which under the Freedom of Information Act shows that intellectual property and counterfeit work was one of the most commonly deprioritized areas by trading standards in Great Britain over the past five years. Counterfeiting requires a joined up approach from trading standards and police, but the system is too fragmented now.

**Kat Cereda:** We are calling for an overhaul of the consumer enforcement system with more scrutiny of its effectiveness, better intelligence sharing, and more oversight.

**Kat Cereda:** So how can you avoid buying dangerous, counterfeit products? Starts by picking a reputable retailer. Buy from the brand directly, or an established store with a well-known name. Avoid third party sellers on online marketplaces, particularly those selling supposedly new, unopened branded products at a lower price than you would expect.

**Kat Cereda:** Next, look at the price. It's good to shop around and compare prices. But steer clear of any price that appears too good to be true, as it probably is. Examine the pictures. Counterfeit sellers often use official photos from the brand. If the pictures on the listing only look like ones from a catalog or from the brand's website, then tread carefully.

**Kat Cereda:** Pay attention to the wording. Ironically, phrases like genuine article or original should ring alarm bells when shopping online. Any listings that emphasize how real a product is of probably protesting too much, steer clear, or do more digging. And finally do some quick quality checks on the physical product.

**Kat Cereda:** Look for poor quality manufacturing, cheap dented or torn packaging and typos or misapplied logos. You can also run the serial number through the brand website to check if it's legit, report any fake to trading standards. We approach the brands and online marketplaces involved in our investigation.

**Kat Cereda:** Amazon, eBay, Temu and vintage, all said counterfeit products were strictly prohibited on their platforms, that they take this issue seriously and have proactive measures to prevent such listings. Disney said, we take reports of suspected infringements very seriously. We encourage consumers to always buy authentic products from trusted retailers.

**Kat Cereda:** Dyson said, although counterfeit products can look almost identical to the genuine article, they are manufactured in inferior environments that compromise on quality and safety.

**James Rowe:** That brings to an end another podcast from Witch. There's loads more for you to read about everything we discuss today. Just head to the episode description for more useful everyday advice. There you'll also find an exclusive offer for podcast listeners like you to become a witch member for 50% off the usual price, giving you access to our product reviews, our app, one-to-one, personalized buying advice, and every issue of which magazine across the air.

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