

Shopping safely online – how to make sure you get the real stuff

Expert Insight by Christina Mitropoulos



Christina Mitropoulos is Manager, Brand Protection & Manufacturing Initiatives at the American Apparel & Footwear Association (AAFA).

In this role she serves as the liaison for AAFA's Brand Protection Council, advocating on behalf of major name brands in the protection of their intellectual property rights. In her article, Christina discusses the health and safety risks of counterfeit apparel, the latest deceptive trends, and what consumers can do to protect themselves from fakes when shopping online.

While it's easy to grasp the safety hazards of counterfeit pharmaceuticals or electronics, the dangers of counterfeit apparel should be taken just as seriously. When people purchase shoes or clothes made and sold illegally, they run the risk of being exposed to dangerous chemicals from unregulated manufacturing processes. When such chemicals come into contact with your skin, they can cause rashes or unexpected allergic reactions. Some chemicals can even present a fire hazard.

Just take children's apparel as an example. This category is subject to strict flammability regulations. Bad actors, however, don't care if they produce a onesie that is not up to code in terms of flammability or other safety regulations. Other items of apparel are also at risk: counterfeit down jackets are frequently filled with substandard materials and may foster uncontrolled bacteria growth—not something you want to be wearing.

These and other cases always lead to the same conclusion: counterfeit apparel contains chemicals and unregulated materials that should not come into contact with consumers' skin.

Use online platforms with caution

One of the most common ways that counterfeits enter our lives is through online purchases. E-commerce has exploded in recent years, bringing with it a boom in counterfeit clothing and footwear, as well. Counterfeits are infiltrating even the largest, most popular platforms at alarming rates.

Some governments, such as in the USA and EU, are increasing the accountability of online platforms in terms of regulating sellers and preventing the sale of counterfeit products. Even with the collaboration of governments and law enforcement, consumers are an important partner in the fight against fakes. Make sure to verify the authenticity of products before purchasing them!

How do you do that? First and foremost, check. When purchasing a particular name brand, find out who is actually selling it. With this information, it is usually possible to check on the original brand's website to see if that seller is listed as an authorized retailer.

Another obvious indication is if no brand names are mentioned. Many online platforms automatically flag a product as suspicious if it uses a brand name in the description. For that reason, counterfeiters will often try to avoid getting caught by using overly descriptive product names like "designer faded blue jeans" or "authentic leather purse designed in Italy".

Current trends to look out for

Counterfeiters are always coming up with new ways to trick people. Recently, we've been seeing increased advertising for counterfeits on almost every social media channel. Counterfeiters prey on users by infiltrating trusted websites they visit every day. These advertisements take high-quality images, sometimes pulled directly from the original brand's website, and lure unsuspecting consumers to illegal websites.

Another unfortunate trend has come out of the COVID-19 pandemic. Counterfeiters moved quickly to produce and sell face masks with recognizable brand logos, sometimes faster than the real brand manufacturers. Consumers thought they were getting high-quality masks and were unaware of the risks associated with the counterfeits. Masks come into direct contact with a very sensitive area of skin – your face – plus, you breathe through them. You don't want unknown chemicals from cheap production in your face mask.

Checklist to help you buy authentic and safe products*

To help you stay safe, AAFA has put together a list of questions you should ask yourself when purchasing products online:

1) Is the online marketplace an authorized retailer of the brand?

Check the brand's website for a list of authorized retailers. They may also offer a URL search tool to verify a vendor's site. If the site is not authorized, extra caution is advised.

2) Who is selling the product?

On a third-party marketplace, look into the seller (e.g. location, name, reputation, other products sold). Please note: if the seller's name includes the brand name, this is not necessarily an indicator of authenticity.

3) Where does the product ship from?

Check if the product listing page includes any details about where the product is shipping from. If it's not coming from where you expected, be suspicious.

4) What do the reviews say?

Online reviews can indicate product authenticity, but it is important to remember that fake reviews are common on third-party marketplaces. High ratings and/or being sponsored by the platform does not guarantee authenticity.

5) Does the product description include any red flags?

Red flags that indicate inauthenticity include: an overly descriptive product title; no textual reference to a brand, only a logo in the image; blatant misspellings; references to "replica" or "inspired" brands.

6) What about images of the product?

Do not rely on images in determining fakes. Counterfeiters often take copyrighted images to sell counterfeit products.

Take an active role in your safety

There are many ways to recognize fakes – but it's not easy. The first step is to realize that counterfeit products are out there, widespread, and available on many platforms, from consumer shopping sites to the most popular social media channels. The next step is to play your part in stopping the spread of these illegal and potentially harmful goods.

It's always a good idea to spend time on your favorite brands' websites. In recent years, brands have begun to focus on raising consumer awareness of the dangers of counterfeits, e.g. providing educational resources to help you recognize the real thing.

You are also encouraged to reach out to a brand if you discover a counterfeit product. This gives brands the opportunity to find out more about the counterfeiter and how they sell fake products (portal or advertising). The brand can then take steps to help prevent other consumers from purchasing potentially hazardous or sub-standard products.

*Source: AAFA website, retrieved Sept. 2020: https://www.aafaglobal.org/AAFA/Solutions_Pages/Fighting_Fakes.aspx