The impact of the need for uniqueness on counterfeit luxury apparel consumption: an attitude-based mediation model

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ABSTRACT – REZUMAT

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Economic and technological developments in recent years have facilitated the introduction of counterfeit products into the market. The spread of counterfeit luxury apparel has brought on both legal and economic challenges for the global textile industry. This study examines the mediating role of attitude in the relationship between consumers' need for uniqueness (NFU) and their purchase intentions for counterfeit luxury apparel products in Türkiye, a country with a high circulation of counterfeit products. Data from 365 Turkish participants collected via an online survey were analysed using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). The findings indicate that the NFU significantly increases positive attitudes toward counterfeit apparel, and these attitudes are a strong predictor of purchase intentions. The lack of a significant direct relationship between the NFU and purchase intentions suggests a full mediating effect of attitude. These findings explain why individuals purchase counterfeit luxury apparel and suggest an argument for promoting ethical and sustainable luxury products.

Keywords: *need for uniqueness, counterfeit products, luxury apparel, consumer behaviour, textile industry, apparel*

Impactul nevoii de unicitate asupra consumului de articole vestimentare de lux contrafăcute: un model de mediere bazat pe atitudine

Evoluțiile economice și tehnologice din ultimii ani au facilitat introducerea pe piață a produselor contrafăcute. Răspândirea articolelor vestimentare de lux contrafăcute a generat provocări atât de natură juridică, cât și de natură economică pentru industria textilă globală. Prezentul studiu examinează rolul de mediator al atitudinii în relația dintre nevoia consumatorilor de unicitate și intențiile lor de cumpărare a articolelor vestimentare de lux contrafăcute în Turcia, o țară cu o circulație ridicată a produselor contrafăcute. Datele colectate de la 365 de participanți turci prin intermediul unui sondaj online au fost analizate utilizând modelarea ecuațiilor structurale (SEM). Rezultatele indică faptul că nevoia de unicitate (NFU) crește semnificativ atitudinile pozitive față de articolele de îmbrăcăminte contrafăcute, iar aceste atitudini constituie un predictor puternic al intențiilor de cumpărare. Lipsa unei relații directe semnificative între NFU și intențiile de cumpărare sugerează un efect de mediere complet al atitudinii. Aceste rezultate explică motivul pentru care indivizii achiziționează articole de îmbrăcăminte de lux contrafăcute și oferă un argument în favoarea promovării produselor de lux etice și durabile.

Cuvinte-cheie: *nevoia de unicitate, produse contrafăcute, îmbrăcăminte de lux, comportamentul consumatorilor, industria textilă, îmbrăcăminte*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, developments in the apparel industry and increased access to information have highlighted variations in consumers' apparel preferences. Although many consumers are aware of fast fashion's environmental harms, others continue to buy luxury apparel to express their identities in social contexts. It is frequently discussed in the literature that consumers buy many products for their symbolic and social value rather than their functional value [1]. Since individuals construct their social identities through possessions [2], luxury goods become powerful indicators of status and personal identity [3]. In this context, understanding the fundamental psychological mechanisms underlying luxury consumption behaviour is crucial. The perception of luxury as a status symbol is driven by the "Need for Uniqueness" (NFU), which is defined as individuals' desire to distinguish themselves from others by owning rare products [4]. Owning unique products allows people to feel more valued and privileged and to reflect their differences [5, 6]. Consequently, this search for uniqueness leads people to adopt new things, challenge traditions, and seek out rare and unusual objects [7]. Therefore, it is not surprising that exclusive luxury products, which are produced in limited quantities and are not affordable to everyone, respond to consumers' search for uniqueness.

While each luxury product category has its own unique benefits, what they all have in common is that they are all defined by elements such as rarity, quality, and originality [8]. Consequently, luxury fashion brands in particular face a growing threat from counterfeits of original products [9]. Technological

advances have expanded counterfeiters' capacity to imitate original products with minimal constraints. As a result, imitations have become common even before the original product is introduced to the market. Although it is difficult to measure the exact volume of counterfeit goods trade, its actual size is estimated to far exceed official estimates [10]. Global trade in counterfeit products reached an estimated value of US$467 billion in 2021, representing about 2.3% of all world imports. During 2020–2021, Türkiye was the second-largest provenance economy, after China, for counterfeit goods seized on their way to the European Union, accounting for approximately 22% of seizures [11]. The rapid rise of counterfeiting is causing economic losses to legitimate brand owners and damaging brand reputations [12]. In Türkiye, a country with a high rate of counterfeit apparel, it is crucial to investigate the factors that influence consumers' purchases of counterfeit luxury apparel over originals. Counterfeit apparel production and circulation rely heavily on consumer demand. Therefore, this study aims to shed light on this growing global problem by examining how consumers' need for uniqueness influences their attitudes and purchase intentions toward counterfeit luxury apparel.

LITERATURE

Counterfeit luxury apparel

Luxury product lines are typically characterised by rarity, superior quality, aesthetic appeal, and premium pricing. Therefore, consumers purchase luxury apparel not only for its functional benefits, such as quality and design, but also for the prestige and social status it provides [13–15]. Thus, the luxury apparel sector, with its strong symbolic and hedonic appeal, has become a prime target for counterfeiting [16]. Counterfeiting is defined as the illegal production of products protected by legal means such as trademarks, copyrights, or patents [17]. It covers a wide range of industries, including fashion, accessories, and electronics. These unlicensed imitations often copy the trademarks of legitimate companies and offer lower-quality copies that resemble the original products [18]. Accordingly, consumers purchase counterfeit products to attain social status and identity associated with genuine luxury brands. They do so without paying a high price, especially during periods of economic hardship [19–22]. In contrast, Fiza et al. [23] found that economic attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control significantly influence intentions to purchase counterfeit textiles, while hedonic attitudes have no significant effect.

Linking NFU to counterfeit consumption: hypothesis development

The Need for Uniqueness (NFU) is an individual's drive to differentiate themselves from others by acquiring, using, or disposing of products and varies across individuals and situations [4, 5]. Individuals with a high NFU prefer to buy unusual, distinctive, unique, and luxury products to strengthen their self-identity and avoid being perceived as an ordinary person by those around them [7, 24, 25]. Social identity theory suggests that consumers gravitate toward products that enable them to express their distinctiveness, a tendency often amplified by social media dynamics [26, 27]. Individuals with a strong NFU are typically early adopters of innovative products and designs. Their pursuit of distinctiveness can enhance brand preference and foster loyalty toward brands perceived as exclusive or exceptional [28]. The hypothesis based on these arguments is as follows:

H1: Consumers' need for uniqueness positively and significantly affects their attitudes towards counterfeit luxury apparel.

The central argument of this study is that NFU may paradoxically encourage consumers to purchase counterfeit luxury apparel. While genuine luxury apparel often satisfies this need [5], financial constraints and high prices may make counterfeit apparel attractive to individuals seeking status and uniqueness [29]. Luxury brands inherently embody attributes such as rarity, exceptional quality, visual appeal, personalisation, prestige, and exclusivity, and can satisfy NFU [5, 8, 14]. Consumers exhibiting a high NFU generally place greater value on items that signal scarcity and evoke a sense of exclusivity [30]. Previous studies have shown that NFU is strongly linked to status-motivated consumption and has a significant impact on purchase intentions [31, 32]. The hypothesis based on these arguments is as follows:

H2: Consumers' need for uniqueness positively and significantly affects their purchase intention toward counterfeit luxury apparel.

Consumers with high NFU may view counterfeit luxury apparel as a mechanism to show their uniqueness and gain social recognition [33]. Studies show that status-focused consumption, closely linked to NFU, has a significant impact on developing positive attitudes and purchase intentions toward counterfeit goods [34, 35]. Furthermore, consumers who are price-sensitive but still seek uniqueness may choose counterfeit brands to differentiate themselves without incurring high costs [36]. This tendency is especially evident among young, fashion-oriented consumers who perceive counterfeit goods as an affordable means of expressing uniqueness [37, 38]. Previous research has well documented the positive link between consumer attitudes toward counterfeit goods and purchase intentions [34, 39–41]. Attitude is a person's tendency to evaluate an object positively, negatively, or neutrally and is generally an indicator of behavioural intentions [42]. Consumers who purchase counterfeit goods exhibit positive attitudes and are satisfied as long as these products meet their expectations and needs [43]. This positive attitude is likely to trigger repeat purchases. Therefore, it is predicted that consumers' attitudes toward counterfeit luxury apparel will also influence their purchase intentions. Furthermore, the conceptual framework presented thus far suggests that a consumer's NFU fosters a more positive attitude toward counterfeit

luxury apparel, which in turn drives purchase intentions. Based on these arguments, the hypotheses are as follows:

H3: Consumers' attitudes toward counterfeit luxury apparel positively and significantly influence their purchase intentions.

H4: Consumers' attitudes toward counterfeit luxury apparel mediate the relationship between their NFU and purchase intentions.

The research model, established to determine the relationships among variables based on past research and research hypotheses, is presented in figure 1.

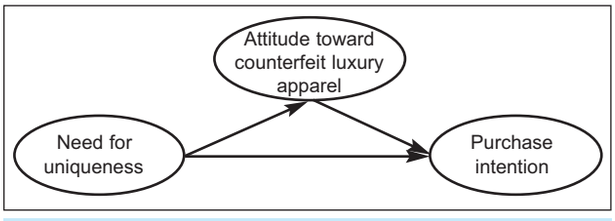


Fig. 1. Research model

METHODOLOGY

Data collection methods and techniques

Research data were collected through an online survey from volunteers using a convenience sampling method. Designed using Google Forms to ensure accessibility and clarity, the survey was pretested with a small pilot group before being applied to the main sample. Participants were contacted through social media, email, and online groups. Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose and data confidentiality, and their consent was obtained. Participants were not offered any incentives to provide unbiased responses. This approach facilitated broad participation and maintained ethical research standards.

Description of the instruments

This study used an online questionnaire to collect data. The survey consisted of two main sections. The first section included questions aimed at identifying NFU, attitude, and purchase intentions of participants. The second section contained demographic details, such as the respondents' age, gender, and educational qualifications.

Scales previously validated in international studies were adapted for use in Türkiye through a process of translation and back-translation. All items, except demographic characteristics, were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Three variables were examined in the study: need for uniqueness, attitude towards counterfeit luxury apparel, and purchase intention. The NFU was measured using the 8-item scale developed by Lynn and Harris [44] ($\alpha = 0.78$). To measure consumers' attitudes toward counterfeit apparel, the 6-item scale by Huang et al. [45] ($\alpha = 0.85$) was used. Purchase intention toward counterfeit apparel was measured using five items adapted from Ang et al. [39] ($\alpha = 0.92$) and Phau and Teah [34] ($\alpha = 0.93$).

Sample description

Convenience sampling, a non-random sampling method, was used in this study due to its speed, practicality, and cost-effectiveness. The sample consisted of 365 volunteer participants. The sample size was calculated using the formula by Bartlett et al. [46]. As a result, complete and reliable data collected from 365 participants were found to be sufficient at a 95% confidence level. Demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in table 1.

Table 1

PARTICIPANTS' CHARACTERISTICS			
Criterion		**Value**	**Percentage**
Gender	Female	185	50.7
	Male	180	49.3
Education	Primary School	4	1.1
	High School	50	13.7
	Associate degree	44	12.1
	Bachelor's degree	155	42.5
	Postgraduate	85	23.3
	PhD	27	7.4
Age	18–24	115	31.5
	25–34	163	44.7
	35–49	63	17.3
	50–64	24	6.6
n=365			

RESULTS

Normality test

A normality test was conducted to determine whether the data followed a normal distribution. As seen in table 2, all skewness and kurtosis values fall within the range of –1.5 to +1.5 [47]. This confirms that the data meet the normality assumption and allows the

Table 2

NORMALITY TEST					
Scales	**N**	**Mean**	**S.D.**	**skewness**	**kurtosis**
Need for Uniqueness (NFU)	365	2.8976	0.83586	0.313	–0.588
Attitude (A)	365	2.3032	0.95520	0.684	–0.333
Purchase intention (P)	365	2.2460	1.04233	0.659	–0.452

use of parametric statistical techniques in further analyses.

Validity and reliability of the measurement model

Within structural equation modelling, the measurement model specifies construct indicators and enables the assessment of construct validity [48]. To assess the construct validity of the research scales, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed using AMOS.

The CFA results revealed that the obtained loadings ranged from 0.549 to 0.886 and were statistically significant (table 3). According to Hair et al. [48], factor loadings above 0.50 are considered acceptable, indicating that the variables demonstrate satisfactory construct validity. To establish construct validity, both convergent and discriminant validity must be ensured. Convergent validity indicates a strong correlation among the variables within the model. According to Fornell and Larcker [49], it is achieved when AVE exceeds 0.50 and CR exceeds 0.70, though an AVE of 0.40 may be acceptable in social sciences. As shown in table 3, AVE values ranged from 0.451 to 0.713 and CR values from 0.866 to 0.925, confirming adequate convergent validity.

Discriminant validity, which indicates how distinct the factors in a model are from one another, must also be established to confirm construct validity. According to Fornell and Larcker [49], this validity is achieved when the square root of each construct's AVE exceeds its correlations with other constructs. As shown in table 4, the AVE square roots were greater than the inter-construct correlations, confirming that the model demonstrates adequate discriminant validity.

Alongside validity, assessing reliability is also crucial. Reliability refers to the consistency of results obtained from repeated measurements using the same method within similar samples. Cronbach's Alpha values above 0.70 indicate acceptable internal consistency [50]. As shown in table 3, all scales in the study had Alpha values exceeding this threshold, demonstrating strong reliability.

Table 3

RELIABILITY AND CONVERGENT VALIDITY

Factors	Items	Loading*	AVE	CR	Cronbach Alpha
Need for Uniqueness (NFU)	NFU1	0.591	0.451	0.866	0.865
	NFU2	0.595			
	NFU3	0.772			
	NFU4	0.591			
	NFU5	0.726			
	NFU6	0.627			
	NFU7	0.702			
	NFU8	0.737			
Attitude (A)	A1	0.731	0.557	0.881	0.876
	A2	0.784			
	A3	0.723			
	A4	0.816			
	A5	0.837			
	A6	0.549			
Purchase intention (P)	P1	0.840	0.713	0.925	0.925
	P2	0.886			
	P3	0.854			
	P4	0.793			
	P5	0.847			

Note: *All standardised factor loadings are significant at the 0.001 level.

Table 4

CORRELATIONS AMONG VARIABLES AND DISCRIMINANT VALIDITY

Factors	Mean	S.D.	NFU	A	P	√AVE
NFU	2.8976	0.83586	-	0.211	0.225	0.672
A	2.3032	0.95520	0.211	-	0.711	0.746
P	2.2460	1.04233	0.225	0.711	-	0.845

Note: * $p<0.001$.

Table 5

GOODNESS OF FIT STATISTICS OF THE RESEARCH MODEL [48]					
Goodness of fit values	**χ^2/df**	**GFI**	**CFI**	**NFI**	**RMSEA**
Research model	2.037	0.924	0.964	0.933	0.053
Good fit	≤3	≥ 0.95	≥ 0.95	≥ 0.95	≤ 0.05
Acceptable fit	≤ 5	≥ 0.90	≥ 0.90	≥ 0.90	≤ 0.08

Table 6

PARAMETER ESTIMATES OF THE STRUCTURAL MODEL					
Paths	**Path coefficients**	**Standard error**	**t-value**	**p-value**	**R^2**
NFU → A	0.240	0.067	3.769	<0.001	0.058
A → P	0.882	0.115	10.512	<0.001	0.808
NFU → P	0.063	0.051	1.776	0.076	

As shown in table 5, the research model demonstrates an acceptable overall fit to the data.

Structural equation model

Structural equation modelling was used to measure the significance of the relationships between the research variables. Table 6 presents parameter estimates for the structural model, including path coefficients, standard errors, t-values, and p-values. The structural model results indicate that the need for uniqueness has a significant positive effect on attitude toward counterfeit products ($\beta = 0.240$, $p < 0.001$). Attitude, in turn, strongly influences purchase intention ($\beta = 0.882$, $p < 0.001$). However, the direct effect of need for uniqueness on purchase intention is not statistically significant ($\beta = 0.063$, $p > 0.05$). These findings suggest that attitude mediates the relationship between need for uniqueness and purchase intention. Therefore, while H1 and H3 are supported, H2 is not supported.

The mediation effect of attitudes toward counterfeit luxury apparel was tested using the modern approach [51] based on the bootstrap technique, as it provides more valid and reliable results than the traditional causal steps method [52]. In the modern approach, the primary focus is to calculate the indirect and direct effects and to make inferences from these values. According to the modern approach, if the indirect effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable is significant as a result of the bootstrap test, the mediation model is confirmed [53]. The analysis, conducted in AMOS with 5,000 bootstrap samples, revealed significant indirect effects, confirming the mediation model. Standardised direct, indirect, and total effects are presented in table 7.

The analysis shows that the indirect effect of need for uniqueness on purchase intention through attitude ($\beta = 0.212$, $p < 0.001$) is significant, while the direct effect ($\beta = 0.063$) is not. This indicates that attitude fully mediates the relationship between need for uniqueness and purchase intention. Therefore, H4 is supported.

Table 7

MEDIATION ANALYSIS (TOTAL, DIRECT, AND INDIRECT EFFECTS)				
Paths	**Direct effect**	**Indirect effect**	**Total effect**	**p-value for the indirect effect**
NFU → A → P	0.063	0.212	0.274	<0.001

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Although the rising incidence of counterfeiting in the luxury apparel market creates financial concerns, buyers usually prefer these items because of the prestige and social status that they offer. The goal of this study is to investigate the mediating role of attitude in the influence of customers' NFU on purchase intentions for counterfeit luxury items. The first major result of the study is that the NFU has a statistically significant positive influence on attitudes toward counterfeit luxury apparel. This finding suggests that individuals' desire to distinguish themselves from others leads them to develop positive attitudes toward counterfeit luxury products as much as toward original products. As Snyder and Fromkin [4] demonstrated, individuals with high NFU prefer to buy unusual and rare products. While luxury goods are a natural way to satisfy this desire for originality [5], counterfeit apparel can offer a comparable social signal at a reduced cost. This appeals to customers who do not have access to these products or who face financial restrictions [29, 36]. Therefore, counterfeit luxury apparel carries a symbolic value that satisfies individuals' desire to appear "different", which in turn leads to the formation of a positive attitude.

Another important finding of the study is that positive attitudes toward counterfeit luxury apparel have a strong and significant positive effect on purchase intention. This result is in full agreement with the previous counterfeiting studies [34, 39, 42]. The more positively consumers evaluate a counterfeit product, the more likely they are to purchase it. As long as these products meet basic expectations and satisfy social needs (status, identity expression), consumers

can derive satisfaction from their counterfeit product purchasing behaviour [43].

One of the most notable findings is the absence of a significant direct relationship between NFU and purchase intention. This shows that the effect of NFU on purchase intention is not direct, but entirely indirect. The bootstrap analysis revealed that the attitude variable plays a full mediating role in this relationship. In other words, a high level of NFU does not, by itself, drive a consumer to purchase counterfeit apparel; rather, it creates a positive attitude toward these products, which then translates into purchase intention [29, 33, 34]. This finding contributes to a more nuanced understanding of consumer behaviour. NFU, a psychological need, can be transformed into a concrete behavioural intention only through a cognitive and emotional evaluation process (attitude).

The relatively low mean values of attitude (M = 2.3032) and purchase intention (M = 2.2460) toward counterfeit luxury apparel indicate that respondents' overall interest in counterfeit luxury products is not particularly high in Türkiye. A primary possible reason for this situation may be the increased ethical awareness of Turkish customers regarding the negative impacts of counterfeit products. Sustainability and ethical sensitivity have become widespread, particularly among younger generations, and the importance given to concepts such as fair trade, sustainable consumption, and ethical consumption has increased. The influence of religious and cultural norms on consumer behaviour in Türkiye may also support these findings. Values such as "halal consumption" or "honesty" (avoiding waste, unjust enrichment, and deception) may have negatively impacted attitudes towards counterfeit products. Furthermore, the increase in customs and police inspections in recent years is also an important legal requirement that deters consumers from purchasing counterfeit luxury apparel. In addition to increased customs inspections, recent legal regulations concerning intellectual property rights and how these have been covered in the media may have increased consumer awareness and risk perception.

Another possible reason for low averages is that the use of counterfeit luxury apparel brings social risks to consumers. Firstly, since luxury apparel is a status symbol, wearing counterfeit versions can create an image of unreliability or low status. This also increases the risk of social stigma; using counterfeit apparel may be perceived as unethical, against the rules, or opportunistic. Because luxury brand communities value authenticity, individuals who use counterfeit luxury apparel may face the risk of exclusion. Finally, interpreting the preference for counterfeit products as a sign of financial inadequacy or lack of status can negatively impact an individual's social self-perception. These risks indicate that counterfeit luxury apparel consumption involves substantial social consequences beyond economic considerations. Moreover, participants may have also exhibited social desirability bias. They may have reported more negative attitudes toward counterfeit products than they hold, driven by concerns about maintaining a socially acceptable image. Indeed, communication factors such as the increase in marketing content for genuine luxury brands on social media, influencers promoting original luxury apparel, and the discrediting of counterfeit apparel may have influenced these results.

Furthermore, considering the prices of genuine luxury apparel, the low propensity for counterfeit luxury apparel may be related not only to ethical or social risks, but also to alternative consumption patterns such as the development of the "second-hand luxury" market or the proliferation of "affordable luxury" brands. In addition, the risks associated with product performance, such as poor quality, lack of durability, or aesthetic shortcomings, associated with counterfeit luxury apparel may also have lowered attitudes. This includes not only social but also functional risks. However, despite low absolute means, SEM analysis has shown that there is a statistically significant and positive relationship between "NFU and attitude" and between "attitude and intention to purchase". This supports the validity of the research model. The low overall tendency does not obscure the existence and structure of the relationship. On the contrary, it shows that individuals with high NFU have significantly more positive attitudes, even with a low overall tendency, and that this fully mediates intention.

The results of the present research provide major contributions to both theoretical and practical fields. Theoretically, this research expands the knowledge on psychological variables that drive counterfeit luxury consumption. It does so by identifying the full mediating role of attitude in the relationship between NFU and purchase intention. Furthermore, the fact that it was conducted in Türkiye, which is both a source and market for counterfeit apparel, enhances the validity and originality of the findings. The results of the research have various real-world implications for both fashion companies and regulatory agencies. Luxury fashion brand managers should be mindful that consumers' NFU might paradoxically drive demand for counterfeit items, and they ought to attempt to alter their favourable attitudes towards counterfeits. Therefore, marketers should prioritise genuine brand value and individualised customer experiences when creating their promotional activities. The usage of product traceability technologies, such as digital labels and blockchain-based verification, can dramatically improve brand legitimacy. Furthermore, fashion companies should provide education on awareness that emphasises the negative ethical, social, and quality constraints associated with counterfeit items while also improving their brand image. Policymakers might also create awareness campaigns for young customers, who are more inclined to perceive counterfeit luxury products as a means of expressing their sense of self.

This study has various shortcomings that may lead to further research. First, the convenience sampling approach reduces the findings' generalizability to the

entire Turkish population. Furthermore, the study concentrated primarily on the luxury apparel category. Future studies should include larger, more probabilistic samples from several product categories (accessories, cosmetics, and electronics). Finally, the use of self-reported measurements raises the possibility that social desirability bias impacted the results. Future studies could overcome these limitations by employing more diverse, cross-cultural samples and longitudinal or experimental designs to trace the evolution of attitudes toward counterfeits. Furthermore, incorporating other variables that may influence counterfeit consumption, such as cultural norms, ethical perception, brand loyalty, or social media influence, into the model would provide a more comprehensive understanding of this complex behaviour. Furthermore, the study's dataset may be considered a "low-involvement sample" due to low average attitude and intention values. Therefore, future research with different segments exhibiting stronger intentions may yield different results. Future research could highlight the importance of the cultural-economic context by comparing attitudes and behaviours towards counterfeit luxury apparel in developing countries like Türkiye or in European countries. Ultimately, this study establishes that the pursuit of uniqueness, when mediated through attitude, is a pivotal factor in understanding the consumption of counterfeit luxury apparel. Addressing this underlying psychological motivation offers a strategic pathway for the textile and fashion industries to reduce counterfeiting and promote sustainable consumption.

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