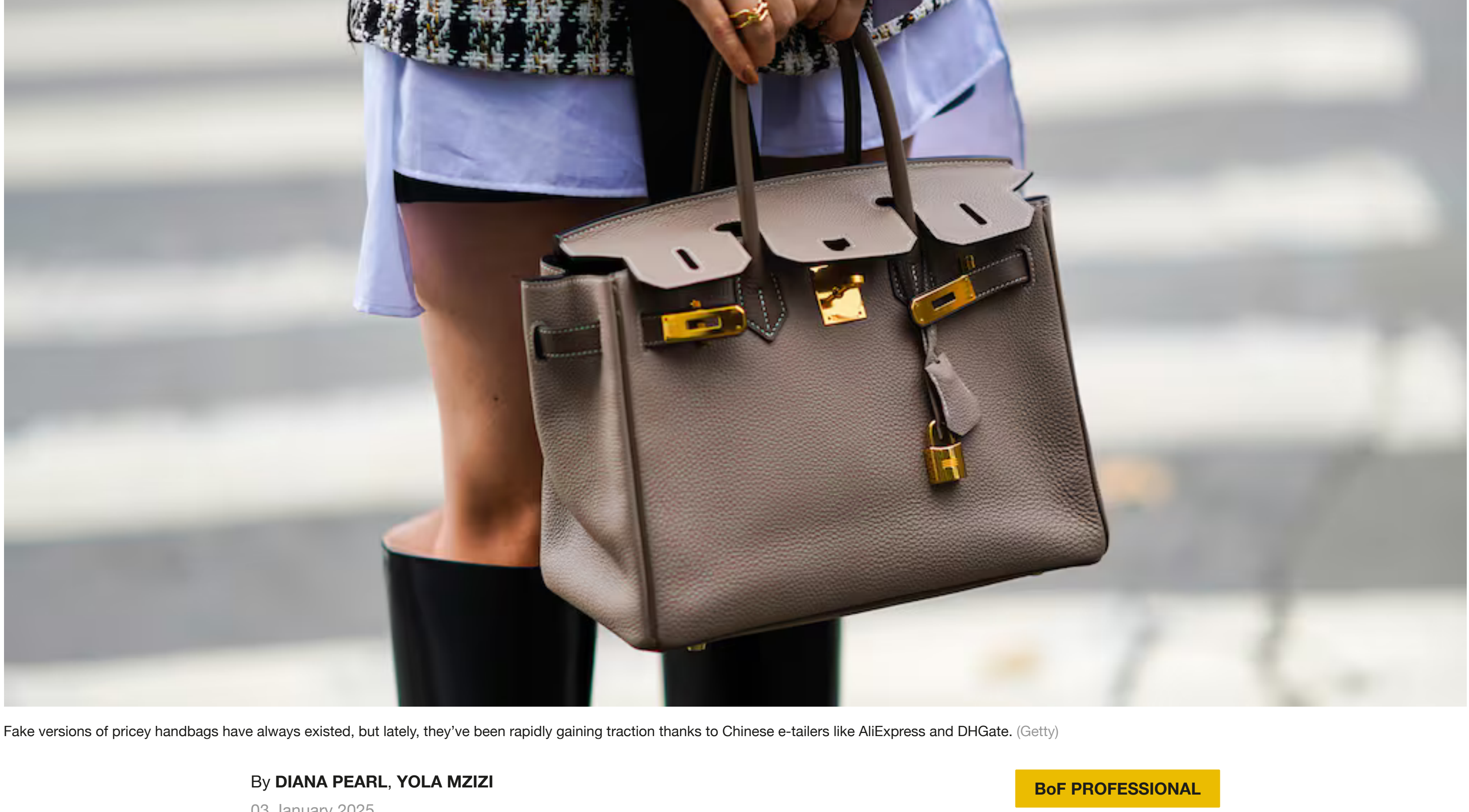


MARKETING

# Why the ‘Walmart Birkin’ Struck a Nerve

While far from the only dupe on the market, the fact that a copycat version of Hermès’ ultra-coveted bag attracted so much attention speaks to a shift in consumer attitudes towards luxury goods.



Fake versions of pricey handbags have always existed, but lately, they’ve been rapidly gaining traction thanks to Chinese e-tailers like AliExpress and DHGate. (Getty)

By **DIANA PEARL, YOLA MZIZI**

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BoF PROFESSIONAL

Three days in, and 2025 already has its first viral bag.

In the lull between Christmas and New Year’s, TikTok was flooded with videos centred on a rectangular bag with a lock-and-key hardware and top handles that was briefly for sale on Walmart’s website. The accessory bore an uncanny resemblance – at least, in its product photo – to Hermès’ Birkin, but at \$78 sold for less than one one-hundredth of the price. The so-called Walmart Birkin, or Wirkin, quickly sold out of all 12 colours and both sizes available in the listing, which was posted by third party merchants with names like Kamugo and Bestspr and has since been removed.

While plenty of creators showed off their Wirkins on TikTok, even more were talking about it. Some said it spelled doom for Hermès, and ultra-exclusive handbags generally. Others questioned whether designer dupes had finally gone too far.

Such concerns are overblown; the Wirkin isn’t the first, and almost certainly not the last, cheap clone of a designer bag to hit the market. But the degree to which the conversation took off – and how much glee commenters expressed at the emergence of a so-called threat to Hermès – speaks to a growing sentiment among shoppers, whose frustration with big luxury has contributed to a slowdown at many brands. (Though not at Hermès, which reported an 11 percent year-on-year increase in third-quarter sales.)

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Fake versions of pricey handbags have always existed, but they’ve become easier than ever to buy thanks to Chinese e-tailers like AliExpress and DHGate. And TikTok has helped change attitudes around knockoffs. Carrying a fake version of a luxury bag is no longer something the wearer keeps hush-hush – now, they proclaim it to millions of viewers on social media.

One reason consumers are flocking to these copies: It’s not so easy to get your hands on the real thing. On average, luxury prices have risen 54 percent since the onset of the pandemic, according to HSBC. While these products are further out of reach for the average shopper, they’re more visible than ever on social media. The Birkin, once more of an if-you-know-you-know signifier of wealth, is now a mainstream symbol, even if it can take years and tens of thousands of dollars to actually acquire one.

Meanwhile, consumers across the income spectrum complain that while costs have gone up for legitimate bags, the quality of some items has gone down. The line between dupe and counterfeit can be a thin one – sophisticated fakes have been known to slip through even the most rigorous authentication checks at resale sites.

Put all those factors together, and suddenly, dupes start looking more tempting, and the Wirkin destined for virality, experts say.

“Luxury brands are not being the ethical stalwarts of quality they should be, so the dupes are more aggressive and more acceptable,” said Milton Pedraza, founder and CEO of consultancy the Luxury Institute. “Consumers think ‘Well, you deserve it.’ That is not a good thing.”

## How does the Wirkin measure up to the real thing?

According to TikTok creators who managed to buy a Wirkin, the bag’s hardware and shape appear at least superficially identical to the original, albeit without the Hermès logo. The similarities probably end there; while advertised as genuine leather, that descriptor can mask huge differences in quality of materials. The Wirkin also isn’t handmade in France, as true Birkins are.

Sellers on Walmart.com never claim their bags are genuine Birkins. But they – and Walmart – could find themselves on the wrong side of trademark law. The brand can still claim that the lookalike bags violate the Birkin’s trade dress, or visual design and configuration that differentiates it from other bags in the market, which is protected by the brand’s trademark. Sellers could be liable for copying Hermès’ designs, and the retailer for facilitating their sale if they are found to be counterfeits, according to Alli Elmunzer, a trademark lawyer and founder of law firm Influencer Legal.

“People are more under the impression that Walmart is the one that created it and is selling it, so that almost legitimises it as a dupe,” she said. “They’re saying, ‘Okay, this is coming from Walmart. Well, if Walmart’s doing it, then it’s legal.’”

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As of Jan. 2, all lookalike Birkins had been removed from the retailer’s website, leaving behind only listings for pre-owned handbags. Consumers who got their hands on the bag, however, seem to be satisfied. Kristi Stephens, a South Carolina-based TikTok creator who goes by @StyledByKristi, bought a green version of the bag at the end of December, adding it to her Walmart order while shopping for groceries after seeing another creator post about it on TikTok.

“It’s a quality bag,” she said. “It smells like leather, feels like leather. The hardware is nice, it came with a lock and the key and it’s got little feet. It’s a good bag, especially for \$80.”

## Why did the Walmart Birkin, out of thousands of luxury dupes, go viral?

The sheer ubiquity of luxury goods on social media has made it so more people than ever want to buy these items. The wide availability of high quality knockoffs, sometimes even made in the same factories as the original, has made it so they can. It’s not about buying a quality bag, it’s about owning a status symbol – and if a shopper can’t pay the price in dollars, they’ll sacrifice legitimacy to get it.

“Luxury is really bought for hedonic reasons, more so than functional reasons ... they just give you pleasure in either wearing them or carrying them,” said Ludovica Cesaro, assistant professor of marketing at Lehigh University. “That’s why [some shoppers] called it the Birkin for the working class.”

It’s a fact that luxury brands must contend with today: Consumers – whether accurate in their perception or not – increasingly view luxury goods not as a symbol of painstaking craftsmanship and design, but the product of a corporation with deep pockets. Because of this, many consumers who buy dupes today do so without guilt.

“This one bag is not going to break Hermès,” said Stephens. “It’s a drop in the bucket when you think about how big they are. I don’t feel like it’s that big of a deal.”

The situation also sheds light on the challenges Walmart faces in its efforts to court luxury brands and higher income shoppers, which chief executive Doug McMillon called a key priority in a November earnings call. The retailer’s third-party marketplace lists pre-owned items from Prada and Michael Kors, as well as secondhand Hermès Birkins. But convincing higher-end brands to sell on a website where shoppers can also buy toilet paper and dish soap – and where third parties can list lookalikes of their most coveted products – is a difficult task.

“This is not a good look for Walmart right now or any company that appears to be allowing copying or embracing counterfeiting,” said Susan Scafidi, professor of fashion law at Fordham University and founder of the Fashion Law Institute. “It does not bode well for attracting customers who would actually buy the real thing.”

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No matter where they’re sold, there will always be a long list of would-be buyers for a real Birkin. And those who buy the Walmart version, like Stephens, likely wouldn’t have ever bought a real one to begin with. (As she put it: “I’m never going to drop \$30,000 on a bag.”)

Still, its success should serve as a reminder to luxury brands: With so many consumers comfortable buying dupes – and fed up with prices that feel out of alignment with quality – brands need to work harder to prove that their pieces are worth getting the real thing.

“Sometimes there really isn’t that much of a difference in the quality, so it has to be very unique,” said Pedraza. “The standards for uniqueness are getting higher, as copycats, counterfeits and dupes get close to the same level.”

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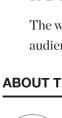
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