

# ORIGINAL

## FASHION'S TRIVIAL MYSTERY

**MARIA SPADONI BATTISTONI**

Independent Researcher, Italy

*[mariaspadoni@outlook.it](mailto:mariaspadoni@outlook.it)*

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## Abstract

This mythology analyzes two images of garments: a T-shirt repeatedly printed with the word 'ORIGINAL' and a jacket bearing its misspelled variant 'ORIGIANL'. Through close reading, it approaches garments as sites in which the term 'original' is tested and deformed. From this starting point, the text conceptualizes 'original' as a fashion myth: not an empirical quality, but a discursive mechanism that organizes value, novelty, and authorship within a paradoxical system structurally dependent on repetition. Drawing on Barthesian myth critique, the text traces how originality is produced through linguistic declaration and collective recognition rather than through actual material difference or origin. The mythology argues that counterfeit and Shanzhai practices do not negate originality; instead, they render its mythic structure visible, transforming imitation into a form of vernacular critique. In doing so, the text contributes to debates on fashion's discursive mechanisms, showing how the mythology of originality persists not despite repetition, but because of it.

**Keywords:** *Original; Fashion's paradox; Myth; Shanzhai; Counterfeit.*

## INTRODUCTION

A long white T-shirt features a repeated pattern of black sans-serif text printed diagonally across its surface. Its arrangement evokes the monograms of luxury brands typically used in linings.

The repetition is uncanny, almost incantatory.

It reads: *original, original, original, original, original...* (Fig. 01).

'Original' is often defined as a beginning, a source, a point from which something emerges for the first time, and from which copies may subsequently derive (Oxford University Press, n.d.).

Yet, the garment does not display visible elements that might substantiate its claim of originality.

Instead, the self-proclamation floats unanchored, raising the question of whether the print functions

less as material proof than as a mysterious claim.

To investigate the elusive meaning of 'original', I examine how the term appears as printed text on garments. The analysis centers on two images depicting worn knock-off clothing produced in Shanzhai economies—the Chinese

manufacturing system that produces modified copies and creative reinterpretations of branded goods (Han, 2017). Through close reading,

I describe their material, textual, and visual features as a basis for interpreting how originality operates within knock-off and counterfeit cultures.

Based on this garment analysis, I conceptualize 'original' as a mythology in the Barthesian sense.

By presenting constructed meanings as self-evident, myths naturalize social and cultural hierarchies



Fig. 01

(Barthes, 1957). I argue that ‘original’ operates in this way, naturalizing fashion’s reliance on repetition while presenting novelty as self-evident (Barthes, 1967).

## METHODS AND CASE SELECTION

This article adopts a qualitative close-reading approach, focusing on two photographed garments as singular case studies. The images are drawn from the *Shanzhai Lyric* archive, a multidisciplinary project that collects and recontextualizes ‘broken’ English found on Chinese counterfeit garments (Schwartz, 2023). The archive comprises both physical garments and visual documentation, including images of garments presented unworn as well as images of them in use on the body. The two images are drawn from a wider corpus for their formal comparability: they both depict human figures from behind wearing garments printed with the word ‘original’, but they differ in their graphic treatment. I propose approaching

these garments as textual-material objects: forms that function simultaneously as readable surfaces and material things, occupying a space between written clothing and image clothing in Barthes’s sense (1957), where printed words and visual form are inseparable in the production of meaning. Accordingly, the close reading attends not only to the print but also to the color, scale, typography, and placement on the body.

In both cases, placement is crucial, as the back operates as the primary site of address, making the claim to originality publicly legible.

Methodologically, this approach draws on object-based material culture analysis, which treats artifacts as primary evidence and begins with careful description before interpretation (Prown, 1982). Dress scholarship likewise demonstrates how close analysis of garments can support broader claims about fashion and meaning (Mida & Kim, 2019). Close reading is particularly suited to these objects, as it allows small visual differences to be treated as meaningful.

The argument does not depend on claims about manufacture, brand identity, or maker intention, as such information is unavailable. Instead, it remains limited to what can be established through visual analysis of the photographs.

## ORIGINAL, *ORIGIANL*

Figure 01 shows a woman walking along a sunlit street. Her face is not visible; instead, the image directs attention to the back of her oversized white T-shirt dress, which becomes the primary site of investigation.

Formally, the contrast between white fabric and black lettering printed on it, together with the vertical composition, turns the back of the body into a surface to read. The garment is covered with the word ‘ORIGINAL’, printed in small uppercase sans-serif letters and scattered diagonally across the surface. In this arrangement, the words no longer read as a single statement but form a continuous graphic field.

This repetition produces a monogram-like effect that resembles the visual codes employed in luxury branding (Von Pezold, 2026). The garment does not seem to have visible brand labels or logos.

What is peculiar about the print is that it prompts the question: in what sense is it ‘original’?

Is the t-shirt claiming to be an original garment, an original brand, or original in the sense of being a prototype from which copies are derived?

The assertion of originality is unmistakable; yet its precise meaning remains elusive. Figure 02 depicts an ordinary traffic scene: a group of motorcyclists stopped at an urban intersection. Helmets, motorcycles, license plates, and street signs fill the frame. The central rider stands out: the back of his jacket is marked by a large word, printed in white uppercase letters across a black band. The contrast between beige fabric, black stripe, and white lettering makes the text immediately legible, like a billboard sign. The word reads 'ORIGIANL'.

Branded sportswear often features big typography printed across the back of hoodies or trouser legs, and the jacket seems to borrow those visual codes precisely. But the error becomes the image's decisive detail, redirecting attention from the rider to the garment as a textual object. Since it remains unclear whether the misspelling is accidental or deliberate, the jacket does not simply assert originality but renders that claim unstable (Fig. 02).

In the T-shirt dress of Figure 01, the repeated word 'ORIGINAL' is dispersed across the fabric, no longer functioning as a singular statement but as a pattern, an ornamental surface, turning the claim to originality into an atmosphere rather than a material quality.

By contrast, the beige jacket of Figure 02



Fig. 02

concentrates its claim in a single oversized back print, where the misspelled term 'ORIGIANL' appears not as a minor flaw but as the garment's most conspicuous feature.

Where the first garment seems to raise uncertainty about the intended meaning of the word through repetition, the second appears to complicate this relation: by claiming originality through a visible error, it may paradoxically affirm that authority. One could argue that claiming originality through misspelling constitutes an original strategy in itself. In both cases, the term 'original' is used to produce a visual effect through different graphic strategies. At close reading, admittedly limited by the fact that we can only see the garments in partially framed photographs, neither piece seems to clarify the intended meaning of 'original'.

Yet both are pictured in use, suggesting that the claim retains its appeal, at least for those who wear them. They seem to employ 'original' as a wearable label, a brand of newness in itself, whose appeal survives the dress's patterned repetition and the jacket's orthographic error. They exaggerate and distort the claim, offering a glimpse into how originality is declared without needing to be demonstrated.

It is precisely within this gap that counterfeit and Shanzhai objects become particularly revealing: they do not reject originality, but instead push it to its limits, suggesting that its appeal persists across repetition, displacement, and even error. Seen together, the garments allow us to question if originality depends less on demonstration than on declaration.

## ORIGINAL: A NECESSARY MYTH

The ambiguity of 'original' mirrors broader patterns in fashion discourse. In mainstream fashion journalism, 'original' functions as a privileged term of evaluation (Van de Peer, 2022): it is invoked to praise novelty, as in *Business of Fashion's* description of a brand as "truly original" (Flaccavento, 2025), or to guarantee authenticity, as when *Vogue* claims that "nothing beats an original" (Jarman, 2026).

This ubiquity is conceptually unstable, as the term saturates fashion discourse by designating a seemingly self-evident quality of uniqueness, even within a system structured around recurrence, citation, and variation (Esposito, 2011). Fashion, as Simmel argued (1904), is driven by the simultaneous demands of imitation and



differentiation; it satisfies the desire to belong by following shared patterns while also fulfilling the wish to be different by presenting those patterns as singular and new.

What fashion calls originality, then, cannot be understood simply as unprecedented, since novelty in fashion emerges less from absolute rupture than from the recombination of existing forms (Kawamura, 2023; Entwistle, 2015). Esposito (2011) elaborates on this paradox by describing fashion as a system of 'originality through imitation', one that stabilizes itself precisely by masking repetition with the appearance of novelty.

Fashion relies on two interlocking paradoxes: the 'stability of transition' in which constant change becomes the only stable rule, and the 'conformity with deviance', in which everyone seeks to appear unique by adopting socially legible forms of uniqueness (Esposito, 2011).

Seen through this lens, originality therefore appears not as the opposite of imitation, but as one of the mechanisms through which imitation becomes culturally legible, desirable, and hierarchically distributed. The term allows fashion discourse to render neutral its own paradox, because it calls singular and unique what is already modified and varied; and presents as exceptional what is reproducible.

The meaning of 'original' is rarely interrogated because it appears self-evident.

As Esposito observes, "Fashion is so successful in articulating and combining its paradoxes that people usually don't think much about it [...].

The demonstration of the power of fashion is precisely the fact that we do not take it seriously" (2011, p. 610). Originality seems to function in a similar way: it seems obvious, and for that very reason remains unexamined. Its meaning persists as a trivial mystery, one too banal to question. Barthes provides a framework for understanding how this operation takes place within discourse. In *Mythologies* (1957), Barthes described myth as a second-order signifying system that transforms historically contingent relations into natural, self-evident truths, converting history into nature and making motive appear as reason.

Read in this way, originality appears less a material quality than a mythic discursive mechanism: it does not eliminate repetition but naturalizes some repetitions as creativity while relegating others to the status of derivation or plagiarism.

This is where Pham's account of racialized and culturally uneven 'copynorms' (2022) becomes crucial, because it shows that the distinction between 'original' and 'copy' is sustained not by neutral legal principles but by informal judgments about whose borrowing counts as authorship and whose counts as theft. To call a garment original, then, is not merely to describe it; it is to participate in a mythology that legitimizes designers, organizes value, and distributes cultural authority.

Originality, then, can be staged as a Barthesian myth: not a property inherent in the garment, but a discursive operation that naturalizes fashion's dependence on repetition, citation, and imitation. What it conceals is less copying itself than the social and cultural work by which some variations are authorized as innovation and others dismissed as copies.

## WHERE THE MYTH FRAYS

If originality functions as a myth within fashion, Shanzhai objects can be read as one of the points at which that myth becomes less secure.

Rather than being understood only through the western legal category of counterfeiting (Liao, 2020; Wilf, 2019; Pham, 2022), Shanzhai practices also suggest a different understanding of making, one that Han describes through 'decreation', where value does not depend on a single, untouched origin but on a process of variation, transformation, and relationality (Han, 2017).

In this light, the mistranslations, misspellings, and textual distortions that appear on Shanzhai garments allow us to read these objects as sites of distributed authorship, where meaning emerges through repetition, circulation, and alteration rather than through the authority of a single creator. Such garments, therefore, invite what *Shanzhai Lyric* describes as a 'reparative mode of reading', one that is attentive to how broken or unstable language can open alternative ways of making sense under contemporary capitalism's standardization (Schwartz, 2023).

In this sense, they can be read as vernacular commentary (Schwartz, 2023) on fashion's own logic, that unsettle the claim of originality while exposing and making more legible its constructed nature.

Importantly, this exposure occurs within markets where counterfeits are not marginal but structurally significant. As Bombardini (2019) and von Pezold (2025; 2026) argue, they play an important role

in shaping access, value, and participation in specific economic and geographical contexts. What such garments make visible, then, is not the absence of originality, but its dependence on circulation, recognition, and shared belief.

## CONCLUSION

The two garments examined in this Mythology suggest that originality in fashion does not manifest as a verifiable property of the object, but as a claim enacted through visual language, repetition, and social recognition.

The repeated “ORIGINAL” and the misspelled “ORIGIANL” do not merely fail to authenticate the garments; they offer insight into how originality is asserted within a fashion system structured by citation and variation.

These Shanzhai objects offer a glimpse into the translation, reproduction, and collective authorship that the myth of originality typically conceals. What they reveal, then, is not the absence of originality but the way it operates. In this sense, Shanzhai objects can be framed as points where the myth of originality becomes most legible. Ultimately, this mythology argues that originality endures not because it is materially fixed, but because it continues to be collectively affirmed.

## CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] 2022. Courtesy of Shanzhai Lyric.

[Fig. 02] 2024. Courtesy of Shanzhai Lyric.

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