

Addressing the Challenge of Counterfeits in Zimbabwe's Automotive Aftermarket Sector

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Abstract— Counterfeit products are disrupting automotive supply chains globally, especially in the aftermarket sector. This study investigated and sought to address the challenge of counterfeits in the automotive aftermarket sector of Zimbabwe by applying the Extended Resource-Based Theory. This study employed the Interpretivism philosophy, the qualitative research approach, and a case study design. The researcher used interviews and a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) as research instruments. Purposive sampling was used to draw a sample of 23 participants that was made up of aftermarket businesspeople, automotive companies, a regional automotive association, policymakers, automotive clients, logisticians, researchers, and academia. The saturation point determined the cut-off point for the number of samples. Data analysis was carried out using Thematic Analysis. The study concluded that counterfeits are causing negative financial impacts on clients, automotive aftermarket businesses, and governments. Law enforcement enhancement, policy reviews, and stakeholder collaborations were identified as critical success factors in the fight against counterfeits in the automotive sector after-market. The major finding from the study was that application of the Extended Resource-Based Theory in the fight against counterfeits has

the potential to mobilize strategic resources that can help bring back sanity to the local automotive aftermarket sector supply chains. The recommendations include conducting awareness campaigns that educate customers, training law enforcement agents in the requisite skills to combat counterfeits, and investing in technologies that detect and deter the smuggling and trading of counterfeits. Lastly, further research is recommended to establish the impact of policy on the fight against counterfeit automotive products and the role of technology in this fight. This paper contributes to policy and practice by advancing the application of the ERBT theory in driving collaborations to solve contemporary business challenges, such as counterfeiting in the automotive aftermarket sector supply chains.

Keywords— Counterfeits, quality, collaborations, synergies, policy

1. Introduction

In 2021, pirated and counterfeit goods in the European Union accounted for 4.7% of total imports and up to 2.3% of global trade, underscoring the severe risk that illicit trade poses to globalised economies [1]. Illicit trade of counterfeit goods is threatening businesses, public safety, and economic

stability; riding upon e-commerce and technological advancements for quick adaptation to evolving trade patterns [2]. Country-specific regulatory frameworks that do not enhance cross-border co-operation, and the increase in e-commerce and digital trade, are further complicating law enforcement efforts to curb counterfeits in the global automotive sector. Disruption of global automotive supply chains has a ripple effect, especially to developing economies such as Zimbabwe, which receive these shocks with even higher socio-economic impacts [3]. While pandemics and geopolitical wars are commonly known for causing supply chain disruptions, counterfeit products are one of the silent yet deadly disruptors of automotive supply chains [4, 5, 6]. This study endeavoured to investigate and address the challenge of counterfeits in the automotive aftermarket sector of Zimbabwe by applying the Extended Resource-Based Theory [7].

While the USA automotive industry contributes US\$6 billion to the annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP), directly employs 436 000 and 9.2 million indirectly, and exports US\$12 billion worth of vehicles [8]; and South Africa's automotive sector employed over 100 000 people and accounted for 47% (R33.6 billion) of the total estimated R71.5 billion exports to the US through AGOA in 2024 [9, 10]; the survival of this industry is under serious threat from counterfeit products. Counterfeit automotive parts have been red-flagged as a major threat to road safety and fiscal revenue in emerging markets such as Tanzania [11]. Low consumer literacy, enforcement relaxation, and increasingly sophisticated smuggling channels are feeding this monster called counterfeits [12].

Counterfeits, which are also referred to as imitations, fake products, or sub-standard products, have flooded the Zimbabwean market [13]. Unfortunately, these counterfeits sometimes use brand names and packaging; in some elusive ways, closely related names and colours that deceive customers, as noted by the Anti-Counterfeit Authority [14]. Unifab and the OECD note that globalization, e-commerce, and social networks have become breeding grounds of counterfeits, consequently increasing infiltration of counterfeit products into legal and formal distribution, thus severely disrupting local, regional, and global automotive supply chains [11, 13, 15].

2. Literature Review

Stakeholder Theory

Developed by Freeman in 1984, the Stakeholder Theory advances the notion that organizations are best positioned for survival in the long-term when they know and take care of the interests of individuals and entities who either have an interest in their operations or are affected by their operations, decisions, and choices [16]. As opposed to the past when businesses would pursue profit at the expense of the interests of all other stakeholders, corporate governance nowadays mandates organisations to consider and accommodate the interests of stakeholders [17]. A good example is of the management's concern for the quality of the product or service that the business offers to its clients. In relation to counterfeits, the million-dollar question becomes, "*Are we offering our customers value for money?*" The relevance of the Stakeholder Theory to this study was that if automotive businesses in Zimbabwe did not endeavour to address the persistent challenge of counterfeits, the customers would end up perceiving them as deceivers and short-changing them, consequently triggering customer flight.

Institutional Theory

Institutional theory postulates that institutions (organisations) are bound together and regulated formally through laws, regulations, and policies as well as informal guidelines that include cultural values, customs, and unwritten norms [18]. The Institutional Theory proposes that institutions participate as elements of a large ecosystem in which their designs and conduct affect them and other counterparts [19, 20]. In this ecosystem, institutions operate by both explicit frameworks and the "*taken-for-granted*" cultures, beliefs, and norms that shape the industry's best practices. High compliance levels by institutions enhance an industry's long-term survival chances, especially under a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) environment, as the one prevailing in the 21st century [21].

Extended Resource-Based Theory (ERBT)

Extended Resource-Based Theory (ERBT) [7] is an extension of the Resource-Based View (RBV) Theory, and it proposes that organisations can achieve sustainability by accessing strategic resources that are outside of their boundaries in

order to leverage strategic advantages within those firms through synergies and collaborations as espoused in the Systems Theory [22]. The relationships that exist within a supply chain network need to be strong, collaborative, and synergistic in nature to make the accessibility of each partner's strategic resources possible. For example, key stakeholders of the Zimbabwe automotive industry could benefit from collaborating in a manner such that they benefit from each other's expertise, authority, advanced technologies, and related resources [23]. In the fight of counterfeits, the Standards Association of Zimbabwe (SAZ) could offer the quality assurance expertise to detect counterfeits *vis-à-vis* original, genuine aftermarket spare parts; the Motor Industry Association of Zimbabwe (MIAZ) confirming its membership to guide law enforcement agents in compliance; and the police force (Zimbabwe Republic Police) enforcing the laws that protect consumers and selling of counterfeit spare parts [24, 25]. Universities can also come in with contributions of research and development (R&D) on the impact of policy on eliminating counterfeits, as well as technologies that help detect and fight this threat to the survival of the Zimbabwe automotive aftermarket industry [26]. The last stakeholder to complete the puzzle in line with the Systems Theory [22] and hit the final nail to the coffin becomes the government, which is responsible for policy formulation, review, and enforcement, as well as prosecution of offenders, consequently protecting the Zimbabwe automotive industry and consumer rights.

2.1 Statement of the Problem

Disruption of the automotive supply chains compromises service delivery quality, safety, and customer loyalty in once-trusted, reputable brands, consequently affecting the financial performance and sustainability of automotive companies in the aftermarket sector [6]. The Zimbabwean government has raised concern about the alarming rate across all sectors, ranging from the medical, retail, tools and hardware, electrical, automotive, and computer accessories, which is undermining local manufacturing capacity, reducing employment, and reducing government revenue through taxation [27, 28]. In February 2025, the Zimbabwe Republic Police recovered fake brake fluid, silicone, and other vehicle maintenance accessories and products at a shop in

Harare's central business district (CBD) [29]. These police busts on an automotive shop in Harare led to the recovery of 593 boxes of counterfeit brake fluid and prime bond silicone, and the arrest of two suspects [30]. Zimbabwe is suffering from a dearth of research on counterfeiting in Zimbabwe to effectively advise policy, raise awareness among the public, and educate customers so that they do not fall prey to counterfeits [14].

In a panel discussion at the 4th Procurement Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (PRAZ), CMED (Private) Limited, a Zimbabwe government transport agency, highlighted with great concern the alarming rate at which counterfeit motor spare parts and accessories were flooding the Zimbabwean market calling public procurement practitioners to carry out due diligence to enhance the safety of public officers, other roads users, as well as the citizenry at large [30]. More so, CMED highlighted how the government was financially bleeding from counterfeit automotive spare parts since these increase the rate of road accidents, loss of lives of the government and private sector workforce, and reduced life span of vehicles [30, 31, 32]. Counterfeits erode consumer trust, especially on trusted brands, subsequently negatively affecting the performance of automotive businesses in the aftermarket sector and economic stability [14, 15, 17].

Disruption of automotive supply chains due to counterfeiting in the automotive sector compromises customer confidence in reputable brands, quality of service delivery, safety of clients and other stakeholders [32, 33], and poses financial prejudice on consumers, and Intellectual Property Rights (IPR), which can ultimately lead to bankruptcy of businesses that are in the automotive aftermarket sector; consequently reducing government revenue generating capacity [34]. If this problem is not urgently addressed, the Zimbabwe automotive sector, as well as the regional and global automotive industry, could soon suffer from severe socio-economic impacts of this cancerous problem [35]. This study sought to add to the contributions made by earlier researchers on how the fight against counterfeit automotive products could be enhanced and won by applying the Extended-Resource Based Theory [7].

Main Objective

To assess the effectiveness of the application of the Extended Resource-Based Theory in reducing the proliferation of counterfeit products within the Zimbabwe automotive aftermarket sector.

3. Methodology

This study employed the Interpretivism philosophy and the qualitative research approach on a case study of Zimbabwe [36, 37, 38]. The researcher used interviews and a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) as the research instruments [39, 40, 41]. Non-probability sampling, specifically purposive sampling, was used to draw a sample of 23; a cap that was determined by reaching of the saturation point [42, 43, 44]. The sample was made up of aftermarket businesspeople, automotive companies, a regional automotive association, policymakers, automotive clients, the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport (CILT) members, researchers, and academia. Data analysis was carried out using Thematic Analysis [45], and findings were presented in thematic areas.

4. Discussion

The saturation point was reached after conducting six (6) interviews and one Focus Group Discussion that constituted seventeen (17) members; to give a total of (23) participants for the study. The gender composition was seven (7) females and sixteen (16) males. In terms of age, the majority of the participants (15) fell in the 36 to 55 age range category; whilst the majority (12) were degree holders, 5 were Master's degree holders, and the remaining 6 were diploma holders.

4.1 Respondents' OPINIONS IN FGD

This section presents the responses that were obtained from the interviewees during the FGDs. These were categorized according to commonalities culminating in major themes, which then shaped the discussion.

Response A – “Yes, I can confidently say that counterfeiting is a serious challenge in the Zimbabwe automotive sector. Unfortunately, this problem does not end locally but is also evident in regional and global markets.”

Response B – “The impacts of counterfeit automotive spare parts are far-reaching, ranging

from compromised road safety, such as braking system failure, which leads to road accidents, to short-changing of clients who pay premium prices for counterfeits with the perception that they are buying reputable brands, and finally to damage to reputable brands' reputation.”

Response C – “I just imagine getting my vehicles serviced with fake brake fluid, and then trying to brake in an emergency to avoid a road accident on the highway. Frankly speaking, this is not fair. I implore the government to do something about this issue as a matter of urgency. I feel the penalties given to these culprits must be heavy and deterrent in order to send a strong message to current and would-be criminals surviving as parasites milking innocent clients.”

Response D – “Although law enforcement agencies are trying to fight counterfeits, it is my belief that there is still more room to deal with this problem if stakeholders work together. More so, I am optimistic that the government, collaborating with all key stakeholders in the Zimbabwe automotive industry, can leverage the advancements in technology to fight counterfeits in the automotive aftermarket sector.”

Response E – “I really wonder why the Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs) are quiet about counterfeits, though they are affecting their businesses. My expectation is that they invest in this fight against counterfeits to protect their markets and reputation.”

Response F – “As for me, I am always pondering on the point at which counterfeit automotive products enter the formal distribution channels. I am sure if this point of entry could be established, that would help plug the flooding of counterfeits in the automotive supply chains locally, regionally, and globally.”

Response G – “My view is that the fight against counterfeits cannot be won by one or a few stakeholders who are directly affected by this problem threatening their businesses' survival, but by all stakeholders collectively. I believe that concerted and collective effort can help minimize, if not eliminate, counterfeits from the local market.”

Response H – “It is my observation that isolated and individual efforts in fighting counterfeit products in the automotive aftermarket sector is

quite insignificant to stop this scourge. If all affected and interested stakeholders could work together, I am confident that this problem could be solved and brought to an end."

Response I – *"I am of the opinion that different stakeholders who desire to fight counterfeiting in the automotive aftermarket sector possess different resources, which partly help fight this challenge. However, these arsenals are not being shared and collectively used to increase the impact of these efforts. For example, some stakeholders possess advanced technology, some policy initiatives, some enforcement powers, and some prosecution powers. If used in isolation, the problem persists; but if all these stakeholders could collaborate in the fight against counterfeit products, that would strengthen the whole process in the fight, and the war is easily and quickly won."*

Response J – *"Lack of resources is one factor that hinders law enforcement agencies from fully pinning down those culprits fuelling counterfeits in the country. If funds could be mobilized by all affected stakeholders in the aftermarket sector, I am convinced that this challenge could soon become a thing of the past."*

Response K – *"I feel that lack of adequate knowledge to identify counterfeits on the point of sale is the major disadvantage that consumers have, leading to them being short-changed. Unfortunately, the colours and brand names used on these counterfeits are very close to the original products, thus becoming confusing and deceiving. More so, some of these counterfeit products bear original packaging but contain fake products; for example, engine bearings, piston rings, engine oil, silicone, and brake fluid; and that makes the distinction even more difficult and complicated."*

Response L – *"Corruption is one element that I think is also hindering the current efforts in the fight against counterfeits in the automotive aftermarket sector of Zimbabwe. Although I do not have tangible evidence to confirm this position, pilferage of these counterfeit products through our borders, their transportation across the country to various distribution centres, and finally to be sold on in shops that are frequently visited by compliance officers and law enforcement agencies just reflect how corruption should be at play to sustain the thriving of this illicit business of counterfeits in such*

an economy with such robust systems to detect and deal with them."

Response M – *"Collectively, I believe we can win this war on automotive aftermarket counterfeit products. It serves the interests of the majority of the stakeholders, hence my belief tells me that these majority stakeholders cannot be outnumbered by the minority whose interests are negatively affecting the sustainable development of Zimbabwe's automotive industry."*

Response N – *"Yes, the counterfeits problem is prevalent in other economies such as neighbouring South Africa and even Dubai. My experience at one of the international exhibitions made me realize that some automotive spare parts suppliers actually ask clients if they want to order genuine spare parts, or other counterfeit brands at lower prices. I really wondered where law enforcement agents will be at such fairs if these unethical behaviours are exercised in broad daylight and in the open like that. Since OEMs and genuine, licensed after-market suppliers also exhibit at the same platforms, my expectation was to at least come across a case where a genuine after-market automotive spare parts supplier sues a business selling counterfeit products. Unfortunately, this is yet to happen."*

4.2 Major Findings

The major findings from this study reveal that customers are in great danger from vehicle malfunctions that can result in them being involved in serious and fatal road accidents, financial losses, and loss of faith in what they perceive as reputable automotive aftermarket brands. Results also show that consumers lack product knowledge to help distinguish genuine spare parts and accessories from counterfeits at the point of sale. Findings from the study also reveal that counterfeits start at the stage of aftermarket spare parts since Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs) would have produced quality and certified products, which they use in manufacturing their vehicle brands. It was also observed that at the time of the current study, Zimbabwe was not locally producing vehicle spare parts, hence the flooding of counterfeit spare parts was through imports.

The data collected also suggested that these counterfeit spare parts were being smuggled into the country through the borders and other points of

entry, such as airports, thus reflecting the porousness of points of entry. The interviewees were also of the view that Original Equipment Manufacturers and the genuine, licensed aftermarket spare parts suppliers were not doing enough in terms of investing in fighting counterfeits to protect their brand's reputation and sustainability.

Another participant had a different opinion about OEMs, highlighting that they seem relaxed in the fight, maybe because they delegate that duty to aftermarket spare parts producers whose products they certify and license as aftermarket replacement parts. Consumers were highlighted as the major victims of counterfeit spare parts and accessories due to failure to get value for money, had their vehicles damaged and life spans reduced, and had their lives under threat from under-performance and malfunction of vehicles thus exposing them to severe and fatal road accidents, for example in brake failure due to counterfeit brake fluid and sudden suspension failure in traffic flows.

Lack of strict policy enforcement in fighting counterfeit motor vehicle spare parts and accessories was also highlighted as a major contributor to the mushrooming of illegally operated shops selling these counterfeit spare parts and accessories in broad daylight. The government was identified as the key stakeholder who is expected to lead in the fight against counterfeit automotive aftermarket products based on the multiple roles that it can undertake, including policy reviews, awareness campaigns, law enforcement, and prosecution. Corruption was highlighted as one component that was making counterfeiting thrive in Zimbabwe's automotive aftermarket sector, as evidenced by porous borders that allow these counterfeits into the country. Heavy penalties were proposed to deter and eliminate counterfeits from the Zimbabwean automotive market. Lastly, collaboration of all key stakeholders was identified as the lasting, sustainable, and impactful solution to deal with counterfeits in the Zimbabwean aftermarket.

5 Conclusion

This paper contributes to policy and practice by advancing the application of the ERBT theory in driving collaborations to solve contemporary business challenges such as counterfeiting in automotive supply chains. In order to tap into the African Continental Free Trade Agreement

(AfCFTA), which is projected to boost the African automotive industry by \$12 billion by 2027 [46], the Zimbabwe government, in collaboration with all key stakeholders of the automotive aftermarket sector, should deal with counterfeits in this sector. It is concluded by the researchers that counterfeits are financially bleeding clients who are short-changed, genuine spare parts and accessories businesses that are suffering from constrained revenues, and the government, which is losing revenue on taxes. Policy reviews, especially on penalties, are critical to address the problem of counterfeits.

Collaboration through application of the Extended Resource-Based Theory is key in mobilizing strategic resources ranging from knowledge, technology, funding, and enforcement and prosecution powers that are possessed and owned by various key stakeholders in the automotive aftermarket sector of Zimbabwe to bring back sanity to the local automotive aftermarket industry supply chain [7, 27]. Use of the Extended Resource-Based Theory to allow for synergies and collaborations amongst automotive players, policymakers, and customers in the fight against counterfeits has the potential to reduce, if not totally eliminate, the proliferation of counterfeits in the Zimbabwe automotive aftermarket sector [47].

The recommendation given based on the findings from this study is that the government and automotive industry associations should conduct awareness campaigns that enlighten customers, conduct training that equips law enforcement agents with the requisite skills to deal with counterfeits, and invest in technologies that detect and deter the smuggling and trading of counterfeits. Lastly, further research is recommended to establish the impact of policy in the fight against counterfeit automotive products and the role of technology in this fight.

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