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Article

Nafdac And The Counterfeit Crisis In Nigeria: Chinese-Linked Networks, Supply-Chain Vulnerabilities And Regulatory Challenges

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Abstract: Counterfeit products constitute a growing public health, economic and regulatory challenge in Nigeria. Recent disclosures by the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC) indicate that some alleged Chinese-linked counterfeit operators have moved beyond importing fake products to establishing production and distribution networks within Nigeria. This development raises concerns about the changing structure of counterfeit supply chains and the adequacy of existing regulatory and enforcement mechanisms. This study examines Nigeria's counterfeit crisis, focusing on foreign-linked networks, domestic supply-chain vulnerabilities, public-health consequences and institutional responses. A qualitative documentary research design was adopted, drawing on NAFDAC documents, Nigerian regulatory frameworks, World Health Organization reports, OECD/EUIPO evidence and relevant scholarly literature. The study finds that counterfeiting is increasingly a networked problem involving production, importation, warehousing, logistics, wholesale, retail and consumer demand. NAFDAC reported that more than ₦1.5 trillion worth of regulated products had been confiscated and destroyed in major enforcement operations and that 64 counterfeit-related convictions were secured between June 2025 and June 2026 (Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation [FMINO], 2026). The study argues that attributing the crisis exclusively to foreign operators would overlook Nigerian actors and institutional weaknesses that enable counterfeit products to reach consumers. It therefore recommends integrated counterfeit intelligence, end-to-end product traceability, coordinated prosecution, stronger market surveillance and accelerated legitimate local manufacturing. The study concludes that Nigeria must move from reactive seizure towards preventive disruption of the supply chains that sustain counterfeiting.

Keywords: Counterfeit products; NAFDAC; supply chains; Chinese-linked networks; regulatory enforcement; Nigeria

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1. Introduction

Counterfeiting has evolved from a traditional problem of fake branded merchandise into a complex transnational economic, public-health and regulatory challenge. The expansion of international trade, digital commerce, fragmented manufacturing and global logistics has created legitimate opportunities for economic integration while simultaneously providing illicit actors with multiple channels through which counterfeit products can be produced, transported and marketed. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and European Union Intellectual Property Office (EUIPO) estimated that counterfeit and pirated goods accounted for approximately US$467 billion, or 2.3% of global imports, in 2021 [1]. Counterfeit products now extend across almost 50 product categories, including clothing, footwear, electronics, pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, food products and automotive components.

The structure of counterfeit trade is also changing. Counterfeiters increasingly exploit legitimate supply chains, postal systems, e-commerce platforms, warehouses and other logistics channels to reach consumers.

The OECD and EUIPO report that shipments containing fewer than ten counterfeit items accounted for 79% of seizures in 2020–2021, compared with 61% in 2017–2019, illustrating how illicit traders increasingly rely on smaller and more fragmented consignments to complicate detection [2]. The same report identifies a growing practice of "localisation", whereby counterfeit goods are produced or assembled closer to destination markets, including through the importation of unassembled components, packaging and labels.

The European experience demonstrates that counterfeiting cannot be addressed solely through border seizures. The European Union remains a major destination for counterfeit products, with counterfeit imports estimated at US$117 billion, equivalent to 4.7% of EU imports in 2021 [3]. The diversity of source economies and increasingly sophisticated trade routes have encouraged European authorities to strengthen customs cooperation, market surveillance, information sharing and collaboration with rights holders and logistics intermediaries. The European experience therefore demonstrates the importance of treating counterfeiting as a supply-chain governance problem rather than simply an intellectual-property infringement issue.

The global distribution of counterfeit production also requires careful interpretation. China remained the dominant provenance economy in global customs seizure data, accounting for a substantial proportion of seized counterfeit goods, while other economies across Asia, Europe, Africa and the Middle East also featured in illicit trade routes (OECD & EUIPO, 2025). This evidence should not be interpreted as suggesting that legitimate Chinese businesses or Chinese nationals generally participate in counterfeiting [4]. Rather, it demonstrates the role that particular production and logistics networks can play in global counterfeit markets.

The public-health consequences are particularly serious in Africa. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that at least one in ten medicines in low- and middle-income countries is substandard or falsified, while countries collectively spend an estimated US$30.5 billion annually on such products . Substandard and falsified medicines can contain incorrect ingredients, inappropriate quantities or no active pharmaceutical ingredients, potentially resulting in treatment failure, adverse health outcomes and increased antimicrobial resistance (WHO, 2024). Informal markets, online platforms and complex distribution systems can create additional opportunities for such products to reach consumers [5].

Nigeria faces particularly significant regulatory pressures because of the scale and complexity of its consumer market. Counterfeit products affect medicines, foods, beverages, cosmetics, household products and other regulated goods. The problem is intensified by informal markets, complex distribution chains, limited consumer verification, porous supply channels and the ability of illicit operators to adapt to enforcement measures. Nigerian research has similarly identified weaknesses in counterfeit detection, pharmaceutical manufacturing capacity, supply-chain monitoring and the regulation of informal drug markets as persistent challenges to effective control [6].

The recent disclosures by NAFDAC have, however, introduced a significant dimension to the Nigerian counterfeit debate. In September 2026, NAFDAC disclosed that some alleged Chinese-linked counterfeit operators who previously operated from China had established production and distribution networks in Nigeria. According to the agency, some operators identify products with strong market demand, obtain product information or samples, reproduce the products and distribute them within Nigeria. NAFDAC also stated that some implicated operators use logistics companies to facilitate distribution and that investigations had resulted in arrests and seizures in several locations, including Kano, Sokoto, Delta and Onitsha in Anambra State [7].

The disclosure is significant because it suggests a possible transition from a predominantly import-dependent counterfeit model towards a more locally embedded model in which production, warehousing, transportation and distribution occur within the destination market. This development corresponds with the broader international trend identified by OECD and EUIPO, which describes the increasing "localisation" of counterfeit production closer to end markets.

NAFDAC has also reported intensified enforcement. According to the Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation (FMINO, 2026), NAFDAC reported 64 convictions between June 2025 and June 2026, which it described as the highest number of convictions in its history. The agency has also reported major seizures and destruction of counterfeit, falsified, substandard and unregistered products [8]. These developments demonstrate increased regulatory activity, but they also raise an important policy question: whether seizures and prosecutions alone are sufficient to dismantle the networks that continually reproduce and redistribute counterfeit products.

NAFDAC's Strategic Plan 2024–2027 recognises the need for stronger intelligence, surveillance, enforcement, local pharmaceutical manufacturing and follow-up inspections [9]. The plan targets 800 surveillance operations annually, 80% of investigations resulting in enforcement actions by 2027, closure of open drug markets and substantial improvement in local medicine production [10].

The central argument of this study is therefore that Nigeria's counterfeit crisis should increasingly be understood as a supply-chain governance and regulatory-control problem. Foreign-linked networks may constitute an important component of particular counterfeit cases, but they cannot operate effectively without domestic demand, local distribution channels, storage facilities, transport networks, market intermediaries and regulatory vulnerabilities. A sustainable response must consequently move beyond the seizure of counterfeit products towards the disruption of the networks that make counterfeiting commercially viable.

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria has maintained an extensive regulatory and enforcement architecture against counterfeit and substandard products, yet the persistence of counterfeit goods indicates that enforcement has not eliminated the underlying supply-chain vulnerabilities. The Counterfeit and Fake Drugs and Unwholesome Processed Foods (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act prohibits the production, importation, manufacture, sale, distribution, possession and display of counterfeit, adulterated, fake and substandard regulated products and provides enforcement mechanisms against offenders [11], [12].

Despite this framework, counterfeit products continue to enter and circulate within Nigerian markets. The problem is particularly concerning where products directly affect health and safety. WHO has established that falsified and substandard medical products remain a significant global public-health threat, while Nigeria's large and fragmented consumer markets create opportunities for illicit products to move through formal and informal channels.

Recent NAFDAC disclosures suggest that the structure of the problem may be changing. Rather than counterfeit products being produced entirely outside Nigeria and subsequently imported, some alleged foreign-linked operators may now establish production, warehousing, logistics and distribution networks within the country [13].

This development presents three related problems. First, localisation makes border-focused enforcement less effective because products can be manufactured after entry into the country. Second, the involvement of domestic intermediaries complicates attribution and enforcement because counterfeit networks may involve multiple actors operating at different stages of the supply chain. Third, continued consumer demand creates an economic incentive for counterfeit production and distribution.

The problem, therefore, is not simply that Nigeria has counterfeit products. It is that the country faces a continually adaptive network of production, importation, logistics, distribution and consumption that can reproduce the counterfeit market despite seizures and prosecutions [14]. The research problem is consequently to determine how Nigeria can strengthen regulatory control by identifying and disrupting the supply-chain vulnerabilities that sustain counterfeit trade.

Objectives of the Study

The study seeks to:

i. examine the changing structure of counterfeit product networks in Nigeria, including foreign-linked and domestic supply-chain actors;
ii. assess the major supply-chain and regulatory vulnerabilities that facilitate the circulation of counterfeit products;
iii. examine the public-health and economic consequences of counterfeit products in

Nigeria; and

iv. evaluate existing regulatory and enforcement responses and propose strategies for stronger counterfeit control.

Research Questions

i. How is the structure of counterfeit product networks changing in Nigeria?
ii. What supply-chain and regulatory vulnerabilities facilitate counterfeit trade in Nigeria?
iii. What are the major public-health and economic consequences of counterfeit products?
iv. How effective are existing regulatory and enforcement responses, and what strategies can strengthen counterfeit control?

2. Concept of Counterfeit Products

Counterfeit products are goods deliberately produced or presented in a manner intended to deceive consumers concerning their identity, origin, quality, composition or authenticity. The concept extends beyond trademark imitation because counterfeit products may also involve false documentation, fraudulent packaging, unauthorised reproduction and misrepresentation of regulatory status.

The distinction between substandard and falsified products is particularly important in the health sector. WHO describes substandard products as those that fail to meet established quality standards, while falsified products deliberately misrepresent their identity, composition or source. Both categories can produce serious consequences, although falsification involves an intentional element of deception.

In Nigeria, counterfeit products therefore encompass a broad range of goods, including medicines, foods, beverages, cosmetics and other regulated products. Their common feature is that consumers are induced to believe that they are purchasing genuine, safe or legally approved products when that representation is false [15].

Counterfeiting and Global Supply Chains

The traditional conception of counterfeiting often assumes a simple relationship between an external producer and a consumer. Contemporary counterfeit markets are more complex. OECD and EUIPO demonstrate that counterfeiters increasingly exploit legitimate trade infrastructure, logistics providers, small parcels, postal systems, online platforms and fragmented supply chains.

The localisation of counterfeit production is especially significant. Rather than transporting finished counterfeit products across international borders, illicit operators can import components, packaging or raw materials and undertake final production closer to the destination market. This strategy reduces exposure to border enforcement and creates difficulties for regulatory authorities that rely heavily on customs interception [16], [17].

The implication is that counterfeit control requires visibility across the entire supply chain. Border enforcement remains necessary, but it must be complemented by intelligence, licensing, facility inspection, market surveillance, logistics monitoring, product verification and coordinated prosecution.

Foreign-Linked Networks and Domestic Facilitation

The recent Nigerian disclosure concerning alleged Chinese-linked counterfeit networks illustrates the importance of distinguishing between foreign-linked operators and the wider national supply-chain ecosystem. NAFDAC reported that some alleged operators had established production and distribution arrangements within Nigeria and that investigations had identified logistics-related activities connected to counterfeit distribution.

This should not be interpreted as evidence that Chinese businesses generally participate in counterfeiting. Indeed, China is also one of Nigeria's major legitimate trading partners. The analytical issue is narrower: particular counterfeit networks may exploit legitimate commercial relationships, manufacturing capabilities and logistics infrastructure to undertake illicit activities.

Domestic actors may also play important roles as warehouse operators, distributors, wholesalers, retailers, transporters or market intermediaries. Consequently, foreign-linked production cannot explain the entire Nigerian counterfeit market. Demand, domestic distribution and regulatory weaknesses determine whether counterfeit

products can successfully reach consumers [18].

Counterfeit Medicines and Nigerian Markets

Counterfeit medicines represent one of the most dangerous dimensions of the counterfeit crisis. WHO estimates that at least one in ten medicines in low- and middle-income countries is substandard or falsified, while such products are often sold through informal markets and online channels.

Nigeria's pharmaceutical environment presents particular regulatory challenges because of its large population, extensive informal markets and complex distribution structures. NAFDAC's Strategic Plan 2024–2027 explicitly identifies open drug markets, surveillance, enforcement and local pharmaceutical manufacturing as areas requiring stronger intervention.

The literature consequently supports a shift towards a more integrated approach that connects product regulation with market governance, supply-chain security and public education.

3.Supply Chain Governance Theory

Supply Chain Governance Theory provides the principal analytical framework for this study. The theory emphasises the structures, relationships, rules and coordination mechanisms through which activities within a supply chain are controlled. In legitimate markets, governance mechanisms establish standards, verify suppliers, regulate transactions and ensure accountability.

Applied to counterfeit products, the theory suggests that illicit trade thrives where supply-chain visibility is weak, verification systems are inadequate and accountability is fragmented. Counterfeiters exploit gaps between manufacturers, importers, warehouses, transporters, wholesalers, retailers and regulators [19].

The theory is particularly relevant to Nigeria because recent evidence indicates that counterfeit activities may increasingly be embedded within domestic production and distribution networks. The appropriate response is therefore not simply to seize individual products but to identify the points within the chain where intervention can prevent production, movement and sale.

Routine Activity Theory

Routine Activity Theory, associated with Cohen and Felson, explains crime through the convergence of a motivated offender, a suitable target and the absence of capable guardianship. The theory is useful for understanding counterfeit markets because counterfeiters are motivated by financial returns, consumers provide the market for products and weak regulatory or commercial controls can provide opportunities.

Within this framework, effective counterfeit control requires strengthening capable guardianship. NAFDAC, customs authorities, police, market regulators, intellectual-property institutions, logistics companies, manufacturers, retailers and consumers can all function as guardians within different parts of the supply chain [20].

The two theories complement each other. Supply Chain Governance Theory explains where vulnerabilities occur within the chain, while Routine Activity Theory explains why those vulnerabilities create opportunities for illicit activity.

4. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative documentary research design. This design was considered appropriate because the research examines regulatory developments, institutional responses, documented enforcement actions and broader patterns of counterfeit trade rather than collecting primary survey data.

Documentary sources comprised NAFDAC regulatory documents and strategic plans, official Nigerian government publications, relevant Nigerian legislation, WHO publications, OECD/EUIPO reports and peer-reviewed academic literature. Particular attention was given to evidence published between 2021 and 2026, while earlier theoretical works were retained where necessary for conceptual grounding.

The data were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis. Documents were reviewed and organised around four principal themes corresponding to the research objectives: changing counterfeit networks; supply-chain and regulatory vulnerabilities; public-health and economic consequences; and regulatory and enforcement responses.

A source-critical approach was applied to contemporary allegations. In particular, recent claims concerning alleged Chinese-linked counterfeit operators were treated as agency disclosures and reported investigations, rather than as independently established facts about Chinese nationals or Chinese businesses generally. This distinction is important for maintaining analytical accuracy and avoiding overgeneralisation.

5. Result and Discussion

Nigeria's Counterfeit Problem Is Becoming a Supply-Chain Security Challenge

The study finds that Nigeria's counterfeit problem increasingly resembles a supply-chain security challenge rather than a conventional problem of illegal imports. NAFDAC's September 2026 disclosure that some alleged foreign-linked operators have established production and distribution networks within Nigeria demonstrates the possibility of a more locally embedded counterfeit model . This development is consistent with the international localisation trend identified by OECD and EUIPO, whereby counterfeiters increasingly produce or assemble goods closer to destination markets.

The implication is significant. If counterfeit products are manufactured or assembled domestically, customs interception at the border cannot by itself provide an adequate control mechanism [21]. Regulatory attention must extend to manufacturing premises, warehouses, logistics companies, packaging suppliers, wholesale markets, retailers and online distribution channels. Counterfeit control must therefore become increasingly intelligence-led and supply-chain oriented.

The Crisis Involves Both Foreign and Domestic Actors

The study further finds that the foreign dimension of counterfeiting should not obscure the domestic structures that allow counterfeit goods to circulate. NAFDAC's disclosure concerns specific alleged operators and networks rather than Chinese businesses or nationals generally. The wider literature demonstrates that counterfeit supply chains are typically distributed across multiple locations and actors. OECD and EUIPO (20 similarly identify multiple provenance economies and increasingly fragmented production and distribution structures.

In Nigeria, foreign-linked production may therefore constitute only one stage in a broader chain involving local warehouses, transporters, wholesalers, retailers and consumers. The economic sustainability of counterfeiting ultimately depends on the ability of these networks to connect illicit supply with market demand. This means that enforcement directed exclusively at foreign producers risks leaving domestic facilitators and distribution channels intact [22].

Enforcement Has Increased but Detection Does Not Equal Elimination

The study finds evidence of stronger enforcement by NAFDAC. The agency reported 64 convictions between June 2025 and June 2026, describing this as its highest number of convictions in a single comparable period. NAFDAC has also reported major seizures and destruction of counterfeit and other regulated products. These achievements demonstrate institutional capacity and increasing willingness to prosecute offenders. However, seizures and convictions primarily represent responses to detected violations. They do not necessarily eliminate the structural conditions that permit new counterfeit networks to emerge.

NAFDAC's own Strategic Plan recognises this challenge by setting targets for surveillance, investigation, enforcement, closure of open drug markets, follow-up inspections and local pharmaceutical manufacturing. The appropriate performance measure should consequently extend beyond the quantity of products seized [23]. Regulatory effectiveness should increasingly be assessed through indicators such as the number of illicit production sites dismantled, supply-chain nodes disrupted, repeat offenders prevented from re-entering the market, suspicious logistics networks identified, prosecution outcomes achieved and legitimate market share protected.

Public Health Is the Most Serious Consequence

The public-health consequences of counterfeit products are particularly severe when medicines, food, beverages and cosmetics are involved. WHO reports that substandard and falsified medicines can contain incorrect ingredients, inappropriate quantities or no active pharmaceutical ingredients, potentially resulting in treatment failure and other serious health consequences.

The Nigerian situation is therefore not merely a commercial or intellectual-property issue. It is a public-health governance problem. Counterfeit medicines can undermine confidence in healthcare systems and impose additional costs on households that purchase ineffective products and subsequently require further treatment. Inappropriate medicines may also contribute to antimicrobial resistance where patients receive ineffective or incorrect treatments [24].

The reported investigation into counterfeit toothpaste and other consumer products further illustrates that the threat extends beyond medicines. NAFDAC reported investigations and seizures relating to suspected counterfeit toothpaste in Kano, Sokoto, Delta and Onitsha, with prosecutions initiated in some cases. The implication is that counterfeit regulation must be risk-based, giving priority to products whose falsification can directly cause death, illness or serious physical harm.

Counterfeiting Undermines Legitimate Economic Activity

Counterfeiting also imposes economic costs on legitimate manufacturers and traders. Businesses that invest in regulatory compliance, quality control, research, branding and intellectual-property protection may find themselves competing against producers who avoid these costs. OECD and EUIPO estimate the global counterfeit trade at approximately US$467 billion in 2021, demonstrating that counterfeiting is sufficiently large to affect legitimate economic activity and trade governance [25].

In Nigeria, the problem can weaken incentives for investment in legitimate manufacturing if consumers cannot reliably distinguish genuine products from counterfeit alternatives. This is particularly important for pharmaceutical and other regulated-product manufacturing, where NAFDAC's strategic framework already identifies local manufacturing as an important regulatory and supply-security objective.

Strengthening legitimate domestic production can therefore contribute to counterfeit control by improving availability of verified products, reducing supply gaps and creating stronger traceability within legitimate markets [26].

Institutional Coordination Is Central to Counterfeit Control

The study finds that institutional fragmentation remains one of the central challenges in counterfeit control. NAFDAC cannot independently control every stage of a supply chain. Effective intervention requires collaboration among regulatory, border, policing, judicial, market and private-sector actors.

NAFDAC's strategic plan itself emphasises surveillance, investigation, enforcement, inspections and cooperation across regulatory functions. The international evidence similarly stresses coordinated enforcement, information sharing and collaboration with trade intermediaries and rights holders [27], [28], [29].

The Nigerian response should therefore integrate NAFDAC intelligence with the activities of the Nigeria Customs Service, Nigeria Police Force, Standards Organisation of Nigeria, Federal Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, intellectual-property institutions, relevant state authorities and the judiciary.

Logistics companies should also be incorporated into the preventive framework because counterfeiters may exploit transport and warehousing systems. The recent NAFDAC disclosure concerning alleged use of logistics companies illustrates the importance of this dimension [30].

6. Conclusion

Nigeria's counterfeit crisis is becoming more complex, adaptive and deeply embedded within supply chains. Recent NAFDAC disclosures concerning alleged Chinese-linked operators establishing production and distribution networks in Nigeria represent an important development that deserves sustained regulatory and scholarly attention. However, the evidence should not be interpreted as a general indictment of Chinese businesses or nationals. The central concern is the emergence of specific illicit networks and the domestic supply-chain vulnerabilities that allow them to operate. The study concludes that seizures and prosecutions remain essential but are insufficient when used as the principal response. Counterfeiters adapt by changing routes, production locations, packaging arrangements and distribution methods. International evidence demonstrates that localisation, fragmented shipments and exploitation of legitimate logistics systems are increasingly important features of counterfeit trade.

Nigeria therefore requires a shift from a predominantly reactive enforcement model to a preventive supply-chain governance model. Such a model should combine intelligence, traceability, facility inspection, logistics oversight, market surveillance, coordinated prosecution, consumer awareness and legitimate domestic manufacturing. The ultimate objective should not simply be to seize more counterfeit products. It should be to make the production, movement and sale of counterfeit products increasingly difficult, commercially unattractive and legally consequential. The Federal Government should establish an integrated counterfeit intelligence and supply-chain monitoring framework linking NAFDAC with relevant regulatory, border, policing, market and judicial institutions. NAFDAC to establish an integrated intelligence mechanism for identifying counterfeit production, warehousing, logistics and distribution networks.

Nigeria Customs Service in collaboration with the Nigeria Police Force and relevant regulatory agencies to routinely share intelligence on suspected counterfeit networks and repeat offenders.

NAFDAC to develop risk profiles for high-risk products, locations and supply-chain actors. The Federal Government should strengthen end-to-end product traceability to make it easier to verify legitimate products and identify points of diversion or substitution. NAFDAC to expand digital product verification and traceability for high-risk regulated products. Federal Competition and Consumer Protection Commission in collaboration with NAFDAC to strengthen consumer-facing mechanisms for reporting suspected counterfeit products. The Federal Government should strengthen coordinated enforcement and prosecution to ensure that counterfeit cases are pursued across the entire supply chain rather than against only the final point of sale. NAFDAC in collaboration with the Nigeria Police Force to prioritise investigation of producers, financiers, warehouse operators, logistics providers and major distributors. The Federal Ministry of Justice in collaboration with relevant prosecutorial authorities should strengthen specialised handling of counterfeit-related cases. The Judiciary to ensure timely determination of properly prosecuted counterfeit cases in accordance with applicable law. The Federal Government should accelerate legitimate domestic manufacturing and market surveillance as complementary strategies for reducing counterfeit demand and supply. NAFDAC in collaboration with the Federal Ministry of Health to strengthen regulatory support and compliance monitoring for legitimate local pharmaceutical and regulated-product manufacturers. NAFDAC in collaboration with relevant state authorities should intensify market surveillance and enforcement against illegal production and open-market distribution of regulated products.

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