

On Your Terms Episode 140:
We Need to Talk About Dupe Culture

Sam Vander Wielen: Hey there, and welcome back to On Your Terms. This is your host, Sam Vander Wielen. So, I'm a little nervous to talk to you about dupe culture because I'm kind of worried I'm going to get cancelled for dupes. I've been talking to my sister so much about, like, my dupe tirade, and she's just like, "No. I'm not having this conversation with you. Like, don't take my dupes away." Or now she starts every conversation with like, "I know you hate dupes but --" I'm like, "Oh, my gosh."

So, hear me out. We've got something to talk about when it comes to dupe culture, okay? So, dupes is when you find out there's Lululemon dupes, the Align Leggings dupes, you know, everything that's like something. I think if you're a business owner, you've got to listen to this episode and we have to have a conversation about it because - yeah, you'll see.

So, okay, here's the backstory. Since my mom died, I've been knocked out of commission. I basically got my PhD in YouTube while I was having some downtime, but I used that time. Because I'm genuinely interested in marketing stuff and business stuff, I get targeted with a lot of videos on YouTube that are from, you know, big publications that talk about marketing, big, big marketing stuff, not marketing influencers.

So, I was getting targeted with all these videos about dupe culture, and one of them had referenced this article that had come out recently in The Cut. So, I'm going to link down below in the show notes to this article that I'm talking about from The Cut. But, basically, the article from The Cut was talking about whether we've reached peak dupe culture, whether is it over, did it have its heyday, all of this kind of stuff.

I just find this topic around dupes super fascinating because, for me as a business owner, when dupe started - and we're going to go through kind of like the history of some of this and how some of it had very good intentions and some of it has really gone awry - a lot of what I see other business owners sharing and some influencers have built their entire businesses off of this in terms of sharing links to resources and making affiliate commissions is that I'm always a little shocked at like, "Don't you realize that what you're sharing is copycat products?"

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But then, we're all sitting here being like, "Oh, my gosh. This person copied me on Instagram," or "This person is starting the same course that I started, and blah blah blah," "Buy these dupe leggings." I'm like, "Wait. You're literally peddling copycat fraudulent products that you would be upset about in your business." And, yes, I get it all day long, I'm like, Lululemon is not hurting. I understand. That's always people's first argument.

Unfortunately, first of all, besides the fact that that's not a sound legal argument, you can't just be like "Target makes a lot of money so that's why I shoplifted." Life doesn't work that way. So, that's one. Two is, if you're a business owner and you respect innovation, trade secrets, intellectual property, and you want to be respected for it in your business, you have to respect it in other people's businesses regardless of the size. Because the size of someone's business doesn't mean that they have to be stolen from.

So, I think what makes dupe culture so complicated is that it makes a lot of sense that we need more affordable options a lot of times when it comes to certain products. Like, certain products are just out of reach, certain products are super over overpriced, and it makes sense to me that there's an entire industry out of "Hey. Here's a more affordable option."

And at first I think when dupe culture started - which I learned in The Cut article, was just short for duplicate, which for some reason I never thought about - it was really meant to be more like the dupe was the alternative. It was really, really popular for things that had sold out, things that were no longer available.

I know when I started seeing dupe culture, if I can think back to the earliest kind of dupe culture that I remember, it's when I was really little and I was obsessed with magazines. I really, really loved magazines. My sidebar, my dream job back when I was little was to work for a magazine. I wanted to work for Glamour or Cosmopolitan, or some magazine, Health and Fitness, whatever, it didn't matter. I was just obsessed with

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magazines.

And if you remember back in the day, and probably they still do this, there was always a section of Us Weekly and stuff like that, people that showed you an outfit that somebody fancy would be wearing, some celebrity had some really killer outfit. And then, they would show you how to recreate the outfit using different products. To me, that's the earliest that I remember. Obviously, I'm sure dupes go back way longer than this, but that's what I remember as being the earliest.

And to me, that was kind of the intention behind what dupe culture was meant to be because it was meant to be here's a more affordable alternative, not a copy, not an illegal copy of somebody's product, and knowhow, and IP, and all that kind of stuff.

So, when they would show you the fancy outfit and they would show you the celebrity was wearing \$200 jeans, or I think when I was in high school, like, \$2,550 jeans, Seven7 Jeans were so expensive, they would show you like, "Here's a pair of jeans from the Gap that looks so similar that you can get for a quarter of the price." It wasn't the Gap trying to make a pair of Seven7's look like Seven7's but not and just be cheap. That's not what it was. It was literally showing you how to get alternatives at a more affordable price. They were not identical copies of. It was just like getting a similar effect for a better price.

And I feel like what started as honest recommendations for more affordable versions of products or alternative products that were maybe sold out, or whatever, it has turned into a cheap mass produced way to just copy people and the dupes are bad. A lot of dupes are bad. I know maybe if you're a dupe lover, you're listening to this and you're like, "No. I got a dupe of Align Leggings and they're just as good." That's awesome. And there are some out there that I've heard.

And it's kind of funny, though. When you talk to people who are really into dupes - because now this has become a little passion project of mine - when everybody gets on me about how I don't like dupes anymore, I'm like, "Okay. Tell me about some of the

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dupes that you bought." And it's like, "Well, you know, I wore them for a while, but then they weren't as good," or "I had to buy like three of them and, you know, blah, blah, blah," or "This one ripped," or "This one started to peel." My sister was telling me about this pair of leggings, but they get kind of hot, but the real material doesn't and this kind of stuff.

So, I feel like if you start to poke behind the scenes of these things, it's not that it is literally exactly the same and just as good. There are some things that people find. And, again, I hate having this conversation because there's a difference between needing an affordable alternative and you want a certain product, you need some sort of functionality, whatever. That's not what I'm talking about. What I'm talking about is the willful promotion of copied products, stolen products, stolen product ideas and designs, and all this kind of stuff when you're a business owner.

I just think that we owe some kind of responsibility. I just always feel like as a business owner, me and other business owners, whether it's the guy who owns Target, or the woman who runs L'Oreal Cosmetics, or whatever it is, it's like we're in a club together. And I don't care that my business is a minuscule baby version of what they have. I feel like we're all in it together and I respect what they've put into it. And I respect what they have the right to. And I don't think it's cool and I don't think it's funny to be like, "Oh. Here's a fake knockoff product of this kind of stuff."

What I found so interesting about some of the articles I dove into about dupe culture - that I'll link to below in case you, too, want to dive into it - was that, first of all, this idea - I kind of quickly mentioned this - about how much dupe culture has led to a lot of trash and waste. I found that really interesting.

It was something I kind of suspected, but I wasn't sure until I read these articles that they were actually seeing proof that a lot of dupe culture is leading to. First of all, because they're mass producing stuff and then not selling necessarily all of the product, they're not moving all the product, but also because people are buying these things and you're just tearing through them quickly. And so, dupes often overtake the originals. I

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found that really interesting. They'll often sell more of the dupes than the actual thing it's trying to replicate. And then, there's waste.

I also thought it was really interesting about dupes, knockoffs, and counterfeits - when I was in high school or college or whatever, I remember people would get knockoff Louis Vuittons. That sounds horrible. It's like cheap, terrible. Now, it's a dupe - it just feels like it's a marketing conversation and a marketing tactic where people have taken something, that if you told them it was a knockoff this or a counterfeit. If you called your Lululemon Align Leggings counterfeit Align Leggings, would it sound nearly as cool as if you said "Hey. I got these dupe leggings." Because now it just sounds like you scored. It sounds like almost an accomplishment. I think people talk about them.

Like my dad used to think he was gaming the system when he used coupons. He'd be like, "You won't believe how much I got this for." And I thought it was so cute. And there's something about being in, like, the know and getting a deal. You feel like you've stolen something and gotten away with it in a good way. And I feel like that's how people talk about it. Whereas, if we talked about it as "I got these knockoff leggings," it doesn't sound nearly as cool.

A lot of times, too, with influencer culture - I find influencer culture so fascinating - you see that they're pushing people to affiliate links. This is where I come in, I guess, with the legal side of things, for one, I think it's important that you know that when you share links to things, you have some sort of responsibility. There is a legal responsibility there because you are endorsing something. So, if you don't have the proper disclaimers in place and all of that, you are exposing yourself legally.

But the second thing is that the FTC actually has rules. The Federal Trade Commission actually has rules around affiliate sharing, linking, endorsing products, recommending products. First of all, you're only allowed to share things you've actually tried. So, I think that's always interesting. Two is that if you've tried these things and you didn't like it, but then you're on there saying that you did like it, that's a problem with the FTC.

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So, sometimes what I see in influencer culture is that they share about things, and yes, maybe they've tried it, they bought the dupe leggings or whatever - not to pick on leggings. I love leggings. But I'm just using it as an example because it's one of the most popular dupes that I know about - but they have the Align Leggings and they like them better. They don't actually think that these are as good. They don't think that they're that great. They don't think that they've held up. Or they don't start sharing like, "Hey. After the third time I washed it, they disintegrated." They don't tell people that. That is a problem when it comes to the FTC. So, we do have a responsibility there.

And so, when it comes to these affiliate links, I mean, besides the fact that we have a responsibility, not just a moral responsibility, but also a legal responsibility, there are legitimate laws around this. I always feel like screaming that from the rooftops, "Hello. There are laws here."

But I also loved the story - it's in one of the articles I'm going to link to below - about this anthropology mirror that was apparently, like, a \$1,600 mirror. I mean, just a very expensive mirror that a lot of people were pushing online. And so then, they were saying that that was the original and then they were pushing a lot of dupes to it.

Some of the mirrors that some of the influencers ended up pushing people to buy - because there's such an incentive to just get people to click on your links. And then, whatever they end up buying from that company now or for a certain period of time counts towards your affiliate commission - some of the mirrors that they were linking to on there were one inch tall and some didn't even have a frame.

The entire point of this anthropology mirror that was overly priced at \$1,600, probably, it was really big and had this insane frame, this really beautiful kind of delicate frame. And so, some of the ones that people were pushing people to were actually just one inch big.

So, what's my point? What the hell does this have to do with anything? I am not anti-dupe culture. I'm not here to tell you don't buy something that's more affordable or

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whatever. I mean, I try to be as much of an environmentalist as I can in my life anyways. Sometimes I just try to be like, "Do I even need that thing?" I mean, I would love to have a whole consumerism conversation with you in general because this is something I'm really passionate about and something I see so much in our industry - man, I would really get slammed for that one. No. I'm just kidding.

But I talk about this sometimes here and there, but there's just this general push. And being on social media in general makes me feel like I have to buy more and more things. And it makes me feel like what I have is not enough. And it makes me feel like what I have is not good enough. And it also just brings a lot of awareness. Like, you know how you don't even know about something until you're scrolling on social media and then you're like, "Now, I have to have this thing," but two minutes ago you didn't know about it. And if you didn't have social media, you never would have bought it. So, there's that. There's that drive of consumerism culture and capitalism, but also this want, want, want.

And I always say to Ryan that I can't describe it other than that, this tends to leave me in a feeling of lurching. I feel like I don't know the distance between where I am and what I should be kind of reflected back to me on social media feels so uncomfortable. And I noticed that when I take time and breaks away from social, I don't buy as much. I don't feel like I need as much. I'm happier with what I've got already. I'm more grounded. I spend more time in nature.

So, I recommend breaks and all that kind of stuff. But the reason I wanted to have the dupe conversation was because, one, I do feel like as a business owner, we owe it to our community to step back sometimes and realize that if we're participating in something that we wouldn't accept for our own businesses. And I do feel a responsibility to call that out a little bit.

I think the other reason, the second reason I wanted to have this conversation with you is also because there's a bit of buyer beware. I want you to know and read through some of these resources that I'm linking to here that, you know, sometimes there are

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bigger motivations behind people sharing things like influencer culture, like affiliate culture, like the affiliate driving of the links, and that they get credit for whatever else you buy from there sometimes for many days or months after you even click on the link. So, it's just important to know and kind of remember that when we're looking at people pushing things online.

So, yeah, this was something I just kind of generally thought was a good thing to open up the conversation about. I'm also going to link below to one of these articles - it's from CNN - about how Lululemon recently held a dupe swap where people could bring in their dupe leggings in exchange for getting the real Align Leggings because Lululemon felt so confident that if you turned in your dupe, first of all, it probably helps them legally.

So, I was kind of giggling about this because I was thinking if they could collect the dupes and they could probably go after people to start learning where are these dupes coming from, where are they being manufactured, that kind of stuff. But, also, because they're using it as a marketing campaign to show how different they actually are. And that is not actually a "dupe." It's not as good. That's their position.

My sister swears that she has a dupe that is just as good, and now she's afraid to even talk to me about it because I get on my high horse. I'll end it with this, just saying that I'm not trying to be on a high horse. I have purchased dupes in the past. It's something that I feel like I started to get more aware of and was like, "Wait a minute. What's the difference between this and somebody stealing my course?" So, I started paying attention more to that. But I have purchased dupes. I love people who purchase dupes. None of this is meant to insult anyone.

I mean, this is what I love about having a podcast and having more long form content in general is that it annoys me with social media that there's no time or space for nuance and context and living in the in between, and just having a conversation and saying I understand why you've had to buy dupes or you still have to buy dupes for certain things. I understand the desire to want those things because of how much they're being peddled to you. I get that. I've been there. I've clicked and bought stuff that I did not

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need because at midnight I saw an ad for it, and two seconds ago I didn't know anything about it, and now I can't live without it. I'm no different, no better.

But this is what I like about long form content is that we can have these conversations and have more of those Oh moments. I listen to podcasts all the time and I'm like, "Oh. That really opened my eyes to something that I hadn't really thought about before." So, I hope maybe this sparked a little bit of an idea. Or maybe you're like all in on dupe culture now and you're like, "Go screw yourself. I'm buying all my dupes."

I don't know. I'm open. You don't have to agree with me. I'm open to talk about it. I just think it's really interesting and I'm so excited to hear what your reflections are after listening to this episode. So, reach out to me on Instagram, @samvanderwielen. Share this episode with your friends if you think that they would find it interesting. And wherever you listen to this podcast, if you could please do me a favor and take two seconds to leave a quick review or rating, I would so appreciate it. With that, I will see you in the next episode.

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