The Effectiveness of Inoculation in Promoting Sufficiency Consumption

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Eco-fashion has been on the rise in response to the growing concerns for the exhaustive impact of the clothing industry on our planetary boundaries. Although efforts to produce apparel more environment-friendly can be seen as a step in the right direction, concerns have been raised that this move is still geared towards persuading consumers to buy new (albeit sustainable) goods and has even been linked to increasing consumption levels. If the goal is to limit the environmental impact of the industry, promoting sufficiency consumption – the practice of consuming according to actual needs, thereby preventing overconsumption – might be a necessary route.
Although there have been attempts at marketing sufficiency consumption (e.g., Patagonia's famous "Don't buy this jacket" advertisement), it is still considered a niche phenomenon compared to pro-consumption marketing. Especially in online environments, pro-consumption marketing largely predominates. Clothing is one of the most frequently advertised goods online and social media use has been linked to conspicuous consumption. More research is therefore necessary to explore whether and how sufficiency consumption can be promoted in online environments when most communication is still geared towards promoting consumption.
The ability to actively reflect on the consequences of our behavior is a relevant component in pro-environmental decision-making. One way to trigger critical reflection could be through psychological inoculation. Research on inoculation has shown that warning a person of a preeminent attempt of persuasion has been proven effective in eliciting critical thinking, making it then easier to resist the persuasion attempt. We propose that the concept of inoculation might be effective in aiding consumers to resist pro-consumption marketing attempts (even if those promote eco-fashion) and practice sufficiency consumption. We hypothesize that inoculating consumers against pro-consumption marketing attempts, prior to showing them an advertisement for eco-fashion, will lead to lower purchase intention and higher intention to practice sufficiency consumption in general. This effect is hypothesized to be stronger when the inoculation message contains specific arguments that target the marketing message, rather than when the inoculation message is more general. In addition, we expect the inoculation effect to be stronger for those who have a green attitude, compared to those with lower green attitudes. Not only will green consumers respond more favorably to the eco-fashion advertisement when not inoculated, their values are more likely to be triggered by the inoculation message.
To test these hypotheses, we have conducted an online experiment (n=395) with three (general inoculation vs. specific inoculation vs. no inoculation) conditions. Participants were shown an advertisement for a t-shirt made from organic cotton (with the message that organic cotton comes with a 91% water reduction compared to normal cotton), after which both their purchase intention for the shirt as well as their intention to practice sufficiency consumption regarding clothing in the future was measured. In the 'general inoculation' condition, participants were shown an inoculation message prior to viewing the advertisement that warned that not buying anything new is more sustainable than buying eco-fashion. In the 'specific inoculation' condition, the inoculation message prior to the advertisement specifically mentioned water reduction