

Deceptive Consumption

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Abstract

Why do consumers engage in deceptive consumption? We propose a theory that deceptive consumption serves as a compensatory tool to combat economic inequalities. Across four studies (n=354,273), we find evidence supporting the proposition that economic inequality is positively associated with various types of deceptive consumption - committing tax fraud, buying knock-off electronic goods, wearing counterfeit luxury watches. This relationship exists when assessing inequality at the country level, when measuring individual perceptions, or when experimentally manipulating it. We find that the decision to engage in deceptive consumption is driven by beliefs that deceptive consumption makes the world feel more equal, not by benefiting consumers directly through economic or status benefits, but by “getting back” at exclusive institutions that perpetuate inequalities. Together this work suggests that deceptive consumption arises as a compensatory tool to address undesirable social conditions.

Keywords: Inequality, Deception, Fairness