

Scarcity Appeals in Advertising: Psychological and Social Mechanisms of Consumer Buying Behaviour

Zixian Tang*

Faculty of Arts, University of Nottingham, NG72RD Nottingham, United Kingdom

Abstract. Scarcity advertising appeals play a key role in shaping consumers' repurchase intentions in digital marketing. Based on psychological, cognitive, and social perspectives, this paper discusses how scarcity appeals in advertising influence consumers' impulse buying behaviour. It is worth considering how scarcity causes emotional arousal, influences perceived value and leads to consumers' House of identity. This study extends Psychological Reactance Theory, Commodity Theory and Symbolic Interactionism to construct a multidimensional model explaining how scarcity messages lead to impulsive choices. Taking two real cases of scarcity marketing as examples, which are Adidas's limited-edition Yeezy products and Pop Mart's Labubu blind-box marketing, this research demonstrates how scarcity exerts influence in a cultural context and a commercial context. The two cases show that scarcity marketing is not only an effective stimulus for immediate buying but also helps establish an emotional connection and symbolic meaning between brands and consumers. In this way, scarcity is still an effective and culturally bound strategy in modern consumer culture, which influences behaviour and identity subtly but powerfully.

1 Introduction

In today's marketplace of digital commerce, emotional advertising appeals play a key role in shaping consumers' repurchase intentions [1]. From a long list of persuasive approaches, scarcity advertising has growing appeal to consumers because scarcity advertising can induce immediate consumer response. In recent years, it has often been found that the sentences of "limited time offer" or "limited stock left" are used on e-commerce platforms, in retail stores, and even in advertisements on social media. By offering consumption opportunities as scarce, marketers gain attention and accelerate purchase intentions from consumers [2].

Scarcity appeals can be defined as promotional messages highlighting the limited availability of a product either in quantity or in time [3]. The effectiveness of scarcity lies in the notion that scarcity always increases the perceived value of a product and that consumers will consider scarce products more desirable. Recent research shows that scarcity cues heighten anxiety and urgency, leading to more spontaneous purchases [4]. These emotions

* Corresponding author: Aqzyl@Nottingham.ac.uk

enhance urgency and decrease deliberate reasoning, which lead to immediate purchase decisions. This can also be connected to the concept of impulse buying, which describes unplanned and irrational purchases made without much cognitive evaluation [5]. Impulse buying takes up a significant proportion of consumers' spending. When consumers are faced with scarcity cues in the environment, they often act immediately to avoid losing out, which shows their impulsive buying behaviour.

Although most studies have shown that scarcity appeals promote impulsive buying, the question of how scarcity appeals promote impulsive buying is still not clearly understood. Numerous studies have confirmed a positive link between scarcity appeals and impulsive buying [6]. Most studies focus on the outcome rather than the process. In existing studies, few studies integrate psychology and communication to explain how scarcity works at different levels. Psychology explains how scarcity works at the psychological and cognitive level, while psychology explains internal reactions, and communication studies help clarify how scarcity is socially framed [7]. Without integrating these two perspectives, the complete meaning-making process of scarcity is still lacking.

This paper aims to bridge this gap by developing an interdisciplinary framework integrating psychological and communication perspectives. Drawing on Psychological Reactance Theory, Commodity Theory and Symbolic Interactionism, this paper explores how scarcity drives impulse buying at psychological, cognitive and social levels. This paper examines how scarcity influences decisions, perceived value and competitive or conformist behaviour. This dual orientation should make it clearer both how individuals respond to scarcity in consumer culture and how the collective responds.

To provide a foundation for this exploration, the paper employs two types of case studies of selected advertising campaigns. Although selected advertising campaigns serve as concrete examples of the theoretical process in action, these concrete examples illustrate how real examples of scarcity appeals work at two levels in three different cultural contexts. Taken together, these examples demonstrate that scarcity marketing not only influences purchase behaviour but also creates social meaning and identity in consumption. Through theory and example, it is important that the appeal of scarcity is not simply economic but psychological and social processes that sustain the appeal of scarcity in marketing.

2 Psychological Reactance Theory and Consumer Psychology

To have a complete understanding of how scarcity impacts consumer impulse buying, it is needed to consider some theoretical perspectives that help to explain the psychological processes behind it. Most of the works on scarcity in the marketing context have shown its effectiveness in promoting products by increasing purchase intentions. However, there are fewer works that try to explain the psychological process that leads to that effect. Among these perspectives, Psychological Reactance Theory can be a useful tool to understand how scarcity messages cause emotional tension and motivation that lead to impulsive behaviours. As stated by this theory, when people feel that their freedom to choose is limited or threatened, they experience a negative motivational state called Reactance, which drives them to reestablish that lost freedom [8]. That restriction of autonomy usually causes discomfort and emotional distress, and as a consequence, people will act in a way that counteracts that limitation [9].

Therefore, scarcity messages like "only today" or "last items left" can be seen as subtle threats to the freedom to delay or reconsider the purchase [10]. These messages cause anxiety and psychological reactance in consumers, who then try to relieve that tension by taking an immediate action, usually an impulsive purchase, to reestablish control and influence [10].

When consumers read an ad with scarcity messages about time or quantity, they cannot help but feel that their freedom to delay or reconsider is limited or threatened. That restriction

to their autonomy causes in them a psychological state called reactance, composed of anxiety and the need to reestablish control and influence. To avoid that discomfort, people usually act fast, sometimes impulsively, making unplanned purchases. That symbolic action helps them to reestablish a lost autonomy and avoid the possible feeling of loss or regret. Thus, scarcity appeals activate a chain reaction in consumers' minds: the subtle threat to autonomy causes tension and then an impulse to act in a way that restores that emotional balance and self-determination.

Recently, research proved it true. Research found that scarcity cues in online shopping contexts heighten the fear of missing out (FOMO), and this mediates the effect of the perception that an individual's freedom is threatened on impulsive buying [4]. Similarly, Zhang et al discovered that when faced with uncertainty, consumers who are exposed to scarcity-framed messages exhibit greater anxiety and urgency and purchase more impulsively [11]. Combined with the above research, the results indicate that the impulses triggered by psychological reactance are actually emotional rather than cognitive, that is, the need to take action to regain control and avoid loss.

In summary, according to Psychological Reactance Theory, scarcity advertising does not work by appealing to consumers rationally, but by inducing a motivational state of resistance and urgency. Consumers' attempts to restore their threatened freedom can be observed in the form of impulsively buying more. Therefore, psychological reactance is one of the most important ways through which scarcity affects consumers' behaviour.

3 Commodity Theory and Multiplication of the Value

Commodity Theory posits that the scarcity of a product or opportunity increases its perceived value [12]. It argues that people tend to assign greater worth to objects, experiences, or opportunities that are difficult to obtain. The theory applies specifically to items that are ownable, useful, and transferable from one person to another, suggesting that value arises not only from utility but also from the potential for possession and exchange. This explains why products that are either limited in supply or high in demand are perceived as more valuable. When an item is difficult to acquire, consumers often interpret its rarity as a signal of higher quality, uniqueness, and desirability. In marketing and advertising, scarcity is therefore employed as a key strategy to enhance perceived value and influence consumer evaluations and purchase decisions.

The entire process can be staged sequentially in terms of psychology. When consumers encounter time-limited or quantity-limited scarcity advertising, the process begins with an elevated perception of uniqueness and value, i.e. the limited edition of the product is believed to be unique and thus valuable. In turn, this heightened perception of uniqueness and value enhances motivation to acquire the product, because having a unique and valuable product makes the owner both personally proud of his or her purchase and more socially desirable. In turn, this heightened motivation and emotional arousal reduce deliberation time and lead to impulsive purchase behaviour. Thus, scarcity that initially started as a marketing message is psychologically transformed into a marketing trigger that causes impulsive purchase behaviour.

Consumers purchase products not only because they are scarce and thus rare, but also because they induce anticipatory pleasure and fear of loss. Both anticipated pleasure and fear of loss motivate consumers to act quickly and buy products before the opportunity to do so is gone. A great example of this would be Adidas Yeezy sneakers. Adidas, in partnership with celebrity designer Kanye West, would release Yeezy models in limited quantities and through exclusive online drops. The limited quantities of each release would create hype and be widely discussed on social media, cementing the idea that Yeezy sneakers were a status symbol of exclusivity and cool. In turn, consumers would be motivated to act immediately

(i.e. create a digital waiting list or use a bot) and purchase the sneakers out of fear of missing out on a unique opportunity. This example demonstrates that scarcity is not only an economic value that increases the perceptions of psychological ownership, self-expression and belonging, but also a psychological one.

Academic studies also support this finding. In recent research on hype-based marketing, digital scarcity and social amplification positively affect joint variations of perceived value and impulsive behaviour [4]. The Yeezy case further demonstrates how scarcity and social desirability combine to convert perceived rarity into immediate consumer behaviour in online “drop culture” where limited releases equal prestige and status.

In short, the commodity theory offers an essential background to the hype phenomenon because scarcity, as assessed psychologically, not only serves through economic mechanisms but also through symbolic and emotional evaluations in which scarcity takes a symbol of prestige, identity, and attractiveness of a commodity. This theoretical perspective will explain how marketing stimulates consumers’ immediate behaviour through their value perception. Scarcity, as assessed psychologically, is also associated with cultural meanings, which will be connected to symbolic interactionism in the following chapter. That is, scarcity functions as a social symbol representing distinction and identity.

4 Scarcity as a Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic Interactionism holds that people’s actions are influenced by the meanings they ascribe to things, and these meanings are constantly constructed and modified through social interactions [13]. In this perspective, products are not just useful things; more importantly, they are symbols expressing a person’s social standing, identity, and sense of belonging to particular communities.

In the context of scarcity marketing, limited-edition products often transcend their practical use and take on meanings of prestige, expertise, or group identity. One obvious example is the Hermès Birkin bag, which for many women is a kind of “VIP entry ticket”. The Birkin is a status symbol associated with wealth, exclusivity and high social standing. Now, the material quality and craftsmanship of the bag are critical, but what people attach to the value of a Birkin is, in large part, the meanings that women ascribe to it. No woman wants to be without a product that combines both product value and social reputation. Because what they want is the social recognition that comes with products rather than a high-end handbag. This example shows how the combination of scarcity and the consumer’s perception creates the symbolic power of a product.

There is another example. If ads attribute symbolic meanings (such as status, prestige, social recognition) to scarce products (people will start to think of these products not as useful things, but as symbols of their self-image), then continued social interaction rewards and praises them for the symbols of status they hold. As positive social meanings diffuse from peer group to peer group and social media site to social media site, scarcity comes to stand for self-image: own the product and the people who bought it will be considered a member of a desirable or prestigious group. This belief in self-image enhances the motivation to purchase, because getting the product is a way to build or assert self-image, to maintain status, or to confirm belonging. As time goes by, the original simple message of scarcity becomes a socially communicated symbol that induces consumption through a quest for social recognition and belonging. In this way, scarcity appeals can trigger impulsive buying that is driven not only by desire for a product, but by the need to be recognised, to signal self-image, and to display status relative to others.

The conclusion is supported by empirical evidence. In various studies, consumers have been willing to pay more for a product and have made snap buying decisions when a product has social or symbolic meaning attached to it [14]. In the digital age, social media and

influencer marketing power the social diffusion of images of scarce products to inspire admiration, envy, and imitation of which fuel impulsive buying.

In short, while Commodity Theory explains how scarcity appeal raises perceived value, Symbolic Interactionism reveals the social and symbolic meanings associated with scarce products. Scarcity is a marker of rarity or value for money, but also a means of communication to express who they are, to gain recognition, and to fulfil their need for belonging through what they buy.

5 A case study of Labubu's scarcity appeal advertising

To better explain the multidimensional mechanisms of scarcity appeal, this study analyses the branding strategies of Labubu, a classic character of the Chinese collectable toy brand Pop Mart. Created by Hong Kong artist Kasing Lung, Labubu is an elf from Nordic Forest. The character started as a limited-run designer toy, but it evolved into a global cultural icon. Its enormous success is the result of Pop Mart's clever play on scarcity, marketing stories and appeals, and symbolic consumption. Combining various strategies, these marketing tactics have transformed Labubu from a few collections of toys into a sign of contemporary youth culture, subjectivity, and creativity [15].

As an outsider, Pop Mart employs several scarcity tactics in making appeals, such as blind boxes, limited releases and arbitrary restocks. Of these, the blind box system is perhaps most transparent in its logic of scarcity. Consumers have no idea which figure they will receive when breaking the box. And this is by design. If someone misses this batch, he may never get another chance. Consumers will act impulsively before the clock runs out. This type of artificial scarcity not only creates a sense of limited opportunity but also generates impulsive purchase behaviour that yields short-lived bursts of happiness and emotional reward.

If viewing this marketing strategy through Psychological Reactance Theory, Pop Mart is limiting consumers' perceived freedom of choice. The randomness of the box and the time-limited nature of new releases make buying consumers feel that they have lost control of their decision. This, in turn, triggers the fear of missing out (FOMO). To compensate and restore a sense of control and autonomy, consumers will often act irrationally by buying several boxes at once or visiting resale platforms like Goofish or eBay to hunt for the figure they want. In this way, they restore a sense of control and autonomy.

From the perspective of Commodity Theory, scarcity greatly increases how valuable Labubu appears to consumers. Rare editions, regional editions, and hidden figures are all symbols of status for Labubu collectors. Some Labubu toys sell for several or dozens of times their original price on Goofish and eBay. This example shows how scarcity can transform emotional desire into real economic value. The Labubu toy generates a symbolic premium that far exceeds its utility or physical value.

From the perspective of Symbolic Interactionism, Labubu's meaning is not located in its visual appearance or as a symbolic object as a collectable. At this point, Labubu becomes a symbol of taste, creativity and belonging. On Rednote, Instagram, TikTok, showing off the Labubu collection and collection becomes a way for people to signal their identity and to signal to others their identity. Online interaction and discussion will give meaning to the idea of owning Labubu.

In short, the Labubu case illustrates that when scarcity appeal is accompanied by emotional storytelling and cultural communication, consumers will trigger a psychological and social response that is not only leads to impulsive buying, but also to a symbolic system of consumption transcending culture. The Labubu case proves that marketing scarcity is not just an economic response, but a form of communication with cultural roots. It shows how today's consumers confront the emotional desire, social connection and symbolic meaning across borders.

6 Conclusion

This study attempts to explore how scarcity appeals in advertising can arouse consumers' impulsive buying by uncovering the psychological and social processes behind scarcity appeals in advertising. Based on Psychological Reactance Theory, Commodity Theory, and Symbolic Interactionism, this study revealed that scarcity influences consumers at three levels: psychological, cognitive, and social. That is, scarcity messages mislead consumers into thinking that their freedom of choice is being removed, which triggers psychological reactance and FOMO (the fear of missing out). Moreover, scarcity messages also enhance consumers' perception of product value by suggesting scarcity and exclusivity and adding symbolic meanings that associate consumption with social identity and culture.

Furthermore, Adidas' limited-edition Yeezy releases and Pop Mart's Labubu blind-box marketing were selected as case studies to verify the findings above. These two cases not only show that scarcity can arouse consumers' impulsive buying in the moment but also establish long-term emotional ties between consumers and brands. By letting consumers feel the anticipation and belonging in the scarcity marketing strategy, brands establish social communication that gives meaning to consumers' experience in the long run rather than merely stimulating consumers' impulsive behaviour.

In terms of theory, this study extends the understanding of scarcity beyond stimulating consumers' behaviour and establishes a multidimensional model that connects together consumers' psychological motivation, perceived value, and symbolic interaction. In practice, this study provides references for marketers and advertisers in designing more ethical scarcity strategies. Marketers and advertisers should be aware that although scarcity is an extremely powerful tool in stimulating consumers' purchase intention, overusing scarcity or abusing it for manipulative marketing will only lead to distrust and scarcity market fatigue from consumers.

In the future, more research on how people in different cultural contexts interpret scarcity and respond to scarcity could be conducted. As globalisation consumer culture meets digital marketing in an information society, people in different cultures may have different interpretations of scarcity and respond to scarcity in different ways. Experimental or longitudinal studies could also be conducted to examine whether impulse buying driven by scarcity turns into brand loyalty in the long run or leads to regret after purchase. Scarcity is one of the most powerful advertising strategies, yet it is also very puzzling. It works not only because it makes consumers buy impulsively in the moment, but also because scarcity marketing gives consumers a sense of belonging and meaning in the long run. Understanding scarcity not only at the behavioural level but also at the level of meaning and identity provides a more human understanding of why scarcity marketing still works in today's information society.

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