The Emotional Pathways of Scarcity: Examining the Role of Benign Envy and Social Proof in Shaping Brand Preference

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Abstract

Scarcity has long been employed as a persuasive device in marketing, often signaling limited availability to enhance perceived value and motivate swift consumer action. Although prior research has documented the influence of scarcity on cognitive processes such as urgency, reduced deliberation, and impulsive buying, less is known about how different forms of scarcity namely, product scarcity (limited quantity) and resource scarcity (limited time or access) differentially affect consumer evaluations. Moreover, the emotional and contextual mechanisms through which scarcity influences consumer behavior remain underexplored. This research develops and tests a theoretical framework that explains how scarcity type influences brand preference and ease of decision making, both directly and indirectly, through the emotional pathway of benign envy. Drawing on scarcity theory and social comparison theory, we argue that product scarcity and resource scarcity trigger distinct psychological responses. Product scarcity is posited to increase perceived exclusivity and encourage upward social comparison, which may lead to benign envy a non-hostile emotion characterized by admiration and motivation to emulate others. In contrast, resource scarcity is expected to evoke urgency without necessarily fostering social comparison or emotional aspiration. We further propose that the effect of scarcity on benign envy is contingent on social proof a contextual cue reflecting the perceived behavior of others. High social proof, such as the awareness that many others have purchased or endorsed a product, increases the salience of comparison targets and may intensify benign envy in response to scarcity. The model hypothesizes that benign envy mediates the relationship between scarcity type and consumer outcomes, and that social proof moderates the effect of scarcity type on benign envy. The research is conducted through four experimental studies ($N = 1,446$) using a fictional smart wearable product, NeuraRing, as a stimulus. In Study 1 ($N = 210$), we establish the baseline effect of scarcity messaging by comparing a scarcity condition to a control. Participants exposed to scarcity cues report significantly higher brand preference and decision ease than those in the control group. A pretest ($N = 85$) confirms the effectiveness and distinctiveness of the product and resource scarcity manipulations. Study 2 ($N = 315$) compares the direct effects of product versus resource scarcity. Product scarcity yields significantly higher brand preference and greater ease of decision making, suggesting that consumers interpret limited quantity as a signal of desirability and quality. Study 3 ($N = 380$) introduces benign envy as a mediator. Results show that product scarcity evokes stronger benign envy than resource scarcity, and that benign envy significantly mediates the relationship between scarcity type and both outcome variables. Study 4 ($N = 456$) tests a moderated mediation model, introducing social proof as a moderator.

A 2 (scarcity type) × 2 (social proof) design reveals that the effect of product scarcity on benign envy is stronger when social proof is high. Moderated mediation analysis confirms that benign envy mediates the effect of scarcity type on brand outcomes only under high social proof conditions. This research makes three contributions. First, it provides a nuanced understanding of how different scarcity types shape consumer responses. Second, it introduces benign envy as a theoretically grounded but previously unexamined emotional mediator in scarcity contexts. Third, it identifies social proof as a key boundary condition that enhances the emotional impact of scarcity. Together, these findings advance theory on consumer decision making under scarcity and offer practical implications for marketers seeking to leverage scarcity and social cues to influence brand perception and choice.

Track: Consumer Behaviour