

The Social Side of Scarcity: When Time Limits Create Connection, Not Competition

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Cite as:

Zhang Qian, Zhang Yakun (2026), The Social Side of Scarcity: When Time Limits Create Connection, Not Competition. *Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy*, 55th, (131695)

Paper from the 55th Annual EMAC Conference, Bath, United Kingdom, June 2-5, 2026



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Abstract

Scarcity is often viewed as a persuasive tactic that creates a sense of urgency and competition. This study reinterprets scarcity as a social signal that can foster inclusion and belonging. A between-subjects experiment using a 2 (scarcity type: limited-time vs. limited-quantity) $\times$ 2 (product type: hedonic vs. utilitarian) design with 189 participants examined how scarcity framing influences perceived inclusivity and impulse purchase intention. Perceived inclusivity refers to the extent to which consumers perceive an offer as fair, open, and accessible to everyone, rather than exclusive or competitive. The findings show that time-based scarcity enhances perceived inclusivity, which in turn increases impulse buying, particularly for hedonic products and consumers low in exclusivity motivation. These results reveal that scarcity framing carries not only economic value but also social meaning. The study makes three key contributions. Theoretically, it introduces a social identity perspective to scarcity persuasion, showing that scarcity affects behaviour through belonging and collective participation rather than urgency alone. Conceptually, it identifies perceived inclusivity as a new psychological mechanism linking scarcity appeals to consumer responses. Managerially, it demonstrates that framing scarcity as open participation can generate engagement and positive brand sentiment, transforming scarcity from a pressure tactic into an inclusive, community-building tool.

Track: Advertising & Marketing Communications