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The Effect of Scarcity Marketing by Multinational Brands on the Purchase Intentions of Gen Z in China under a Digital Environment

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Abstract. Due to digitalization, scarcity has changed from an ordinary scarcity that limited the availability of a Good to a Multi-Dimensional Marketing Strategy. This paper will examine the impacts of the strategies using digital scarcity that multinational brands use on the purchasing decisions of China's Gen Z consumers. This study will look at the case of Nike SNKRS for this purpose. The theory of scarcity also draws on research into a number of different areas: digital consumer behaviour, perceived value, FOMO, social identity and consumer engagement. These research findings suggest that the digital environmental scarcity can lead to enhancing the perceived value of products, improving brand differentiation, stimulating continued engagement with digital content and increasing social interactivity. However, these impacts result in three risks: The opacity of algorithms may lead to distrust, standardized global marketing may misfire against Chinese culture and repeated digital gap will aggravate the FOMO and cause an impulse to buy. In order to mitigate these risks, this paper proposes a system of open and transparent digital scarcity and algorithmic management; culturally sensitive digital experience design; age-appropriate marketing regulations; and a performance evaluation framework focused on long-term brand equity. This paper contributes to the understanding of digital scarcity in cross-cultural marketing and provides insights for multinational brands looking to sustainably grow in China and promote responsible marketing and consumer protection.

Keywords: Multinational Brands, Digital Context, Scarcity Strategy, Gen Z, Purchase Decision

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

In the context of digitalization, global brands are modifying their consumer engagement approach. The rapid growth of mobile shopping, social media, intelligent recommendation and online community has shifted scarcity from a characteristic of scarce commodities to a marketing strategy that is disseminated in a digital environment. China has a special relevance for researching the above phenomenon. In 2025, China's total retail sales of consumer goods were RMB 50.12 trillion, and

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online retail sales were RMB 15.97 trillion, up 8.6% year-on-year. Online retail sales of physical goods were RMB 13.09 trillion, accounting for 26.1% of the total retail sales of consumer goods [1]. The data show that online consumption plays an important role in the economy of China. Meanwhile, China has formed a highly complete digital ecology and social media matrix, providing multinational brands with more diverse means of communicating with young consumers. The importance of online consumption highlights the relevance of online marketing to young people's purchase decisions.

Group Z is of great significance in this study, as they are a generation of consumers who have grown up with the proliferation of smartphones, social media and digital technologies. Previous studies have shown that Gen Z are digital consumers with strong tendencies to engage with online information and social media advertising [2]. Studies focused on Chinese Gen Z have also indicated that online social media marketing can enhance purchase intention via emotional identification and source credibility [3]. The above characteristics make Gen Z a representative group when it comes to studying the application of online scarcity. With online platforms, consumers are not only exposed to the limited nature of the product but can also perceive the attitudes of other consumers, interact with the brand community, and receive targeted promotions.

Scarcity marketing is an effective commercial strategy that can increase perceived value and purchase intention. A meta-analysis of 131 studies and 416 effect sizes showed that, overall, scarcity has a positive impact on product desirability and purchase intention, but the effectiveness of different types of scarcity varies depending on product and consumption context [4]. For example, time-based scarcity is most effective for high-involvement products, while demand-based and supply-based scarcity function differently in different product categories. It follows from the above results that scarcity cannot be regarded as a panacea in marketing. Its effectiveness is determined by the interplay of the scarcity type, product and consumer psychology. For multinational brands, the Chinese market adds another dimension of complexity to the application of online scarcity. Digital scarcity tactics originating from overseas markets need to adapt to localized cultural expectations, social media ecology and consumer identity. It has been shown that Chinese consumers' purchase intentions towards luxury and fashion goods may be affected by perceived value, electronic word-of-mouth, social comparison, cultural identity and enjoyment [5, 6]. It follows that digital scarcity may have the potential to influence purchase intention via perceived value, excitement, social identification and fear of missing out (FOMO).

Yet at the same time, the growing potency of digital scarcity raises concern. Scarcity cues may decrease the amount of cognitive effort used in the process of making a purchase decision and may also influence how consumers evaluate products [7]. In addition, the impact may be even more pronounced in a digital context, where scarcity cues can be constantly displayed through alerts, social media, or personalized suggestions. Moreover, consumers may engage with products that reflect their identity and exhibit consumption behaviour in public due to FOMO. The new dynamics may present new opportunities for businesses; however, they also raise concerns about transparency, consumer sovereignty, and ethical marketing. This is quite a pertinent topic with a lot of commercial value and a social angle as well. From a marketing perspective, international companies will be able to tailor their digital marketing campaigns better because they will be more aware of digital scarcity and its significance.

On one hand, looking at the social aspect, the research on the psychological mechanisms underlying digital scarcity may take the debate on ethical advertising, algorithmic transparency and consumer protection to the next level. A myriad of options exists for the regulation of algorithmic recommendation systems. Chinese regulations state that fair, impartial, transparent and honest

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algorithm recommendation services are the biggest necessity. No algorithmic technique that applies undue pressure to users & consumers to over-consume products is allowed. Given the tension between these regulatory requirements and the commercial use of scarcity tactics, this is a topical issue.

1.2. Literature review

The literature has provided ample information on the impact of scarcity on consumer behaviour. Barton et al., for instance, conducted a meta-analysis of 131 studies and showed that scarcity cues increase attractiveness and purchase likelihood, but the effect of these cues depends on their type and product category [4]. This research can be useful to differentiate between supply scarcity, demand scarcity and time scarcity in the digital marketing context.

In their study, Wrabel et al. examined how scarcity cues may affect choice in online purchases, finding evidence that when people encounter scarcity information, it affects whether they see the product as highly valued and how they process information [7].

Thirdly, Wang et al. explored the concepts of rarity and exclusivity in modern luxury branding and distinguished natural rarity from virtual rarity. The authors discovered that perceived natural rarity was positively correlated with functional, emotional and social value in various luxury categories, while virtual rarity did not show such a strong relationship. This distinction is important for the current research since many examples of digital scarcity are virtual rarities, in which availability is intentionally limited or presented as scarce through digital means.

Fourth, Bilal et al. studied luxury purchase intentions in China and found that eWOM, perceived value and consumer attitudes were all significant determinants of purchase intention. Additionally, perceived enjoyment was found to moderate the relationship between perceived value, consumer attitudes and purchase intention [5]. Thus, the evidence shows that integrating both rational and emotional mechanisms is necessary in research into the online purchase behaviour of Chinese consumers. Fifth, Huang studied the purchase intention of Chinese Gen Z concerning new Chinese-style apparel by applying the stimulus-organism-response model. With data from 989 Chinese consumers aged 18–29, the study indicated that design, online social-networking community, cultural identity, and personal norms can affect purchase intention via attitudes and cultural pride [6]. This finding reveals that cultural identity plays an important role in the buying behaviour of Chinese Gen Z.

Sixth, Xi et al. studied FOMO and social media posting behaviour through research conducted in China and the United States. The findings of the study indicated that when consumers experience fear of missing out (FOMO), they may be more likely to prefer posting content about identity-relevant products. Relevant mechanisms were self-presentation and social attention [8]. This is important as scarcity is identity-relevant, especially in the case of products related to fashion and lifestyles.

Finally, Chang and Yu examined gamification in live-streaming e-commerce. According to their findings, both reward and competition can increase involvement and purchase intention. In this case, perceived presence will be an important mediating mechanism. Although it does not centre on scarcity in this study, it shows how digital interactivity can turn this purchase into a more glamorous event.

Together, these studies show that scarcity, perceived value, social influence, emotional attachment, cultural identity, FOMO and digital interactivity may all affect consumers' responses. Nevertheless, these mechanisms are mostly studied in isolation.

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1.3. Research gap

Despite the considerable growth of scarcity and digital consumer studies, there are still some research gaps.

First, much of the current scarcity literature focuses on general scarcity cues, limited editions or online retail settings rather than the composite digital tactics used by MNCs. Today's digital scarcity can incorporate limited availability with algorithms, personalized notifications, gamification, social sharing and online communities.

Second, most existing studies investigate either scarcity or Gen Z, rather than how they interact. Chinese Gen Z is shown to be highly responsive to social media communication and emotional attachment, while the effect of scarcity on purchase intention has been explored elsewhere [3, 4]. Yet, few studies have brought together these two streams of research within a Chinese MNC context.

On the other hand, the digitization of scarcity reprograms the psychology. A limited edition item signals scarcity at the moment of purchase, while notifications, countdowns, social proof and targeted recommendations can signal scarcity multiple times on an e-commerce site. Consequently, scarcity moves from being a static quality to becoming a dynamic process. To top it all off, the ethical implications are not adequately explored in the existing literature. Although digital scarcity may create income and engagement, algorithmic

Alarm bells about transparency, overconsumption, and consumer autonomy could sound as a result of personalization and repeated scarcity signalling. The current regulatory environment in China already recognizes the possible issue of algorithmic bias, overconsumption and user rights [9]. These issues demand a framework that contemplates business performance and ethical responsibility. The paper is especially pertinent to the current study because it shows that scarcity may have a different impact in digital commerce when coupled with information about online shopping, such as customer reviews. It seems that digital consumers are unlikely to respond to scarcity cues alone.

1.4. Research framework

This study will, therefore, create a framework connecting the strategy of digital scarcity with the psychological mechanism and the purchase decision of Chinese Gen Z. Firstly, scarcity is classified into three types: digital supply scarcity, such as limited stock and limited release; time scarcity, such as countdowns and limited sales periods; and interactive/social scarcity, such as exclusive access, gamification and social participation. Secondly, the effect of the digital stimulus will be studied through the following psychological mechanisms: perceived value, FOMO, and emotional/social engagement. Thirdly, psychological response will lead to a purchase decision. Fourthly, the analysis will take into account the cultural adaptation and ethical risk of digital scarcity.

2. Case context and platform overview

Nike SNKRS is a good example for the study of digital scarcity as the platform has integrated the elements of product exclusivity, digital interactivity and community involvement. SNKRS China is defined by Nike as a platform through which members have access to new releases of Nike and Jordan footwear, product stories, release information, and the ability to utilize selected reservation and collection features [10]. In this way, the platform functions not only as an e-commerce website but also as a niche digital space built around high-demand shoes.

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The case is suitable because the multinational Nike brand can be found in the context of a Chinese digital consumer market with a global brand image. SNKRS utilizes methods such as advanced release details, notification, exclusive launch and special purchase process. According to the official description of SNKRS by Nike, the platform offers advanced access, exclusive events and drops, product stories, and store reservation services [11]. Therefore, the platform integrates different forms of scarcity: the scarcity of the number of products, the scarcity of access to certain members or events, and the scarcity of limited-time availability of purchases.

The platform also presents an important social feature. Consumers who are interested in rare sneakers can track product drops, interact with other consumers and observe the reactions of consumers on social media. This is important because Chinese Gen Z uses social platforms as a source of product information and brand communication [3]. As a result, a consumer's purchase decision may not be an independent individual act. It can also be associated with identity, social validation, and membership in a certain group of consumers.

The case, however, should not be understood as evidence that all SNKRS drops use the same method of scarcity, or that all consumers react to the platform in the same way. The methods of release may vary depending on the product and the market. Also, claims about the number of Chinese users, the win rate, or the existence of cheating should not be regarded as objective facts unless verified with reliable primary sources. This analysis will focus on the actual features of the platform and on methods of operation that are supported by academic literature.

3. Analysis of digital scarcity impacts

3.1. Positive consumer responses to digital scarcity

3.1.1. Enhanced perceived value and brand differentiation

Digital scarcity can potentially increase perceived value, and this is its first positive effect. In other words, rarity differentiates things that are easier from those that are not. Barton et al. conducted a meta-analysis of scarcity. Product creativity can indeed boost desirable product evaluation and purchase intention, but to varying extents depending on context [4]. Nike can make it seem like their limited-edition products are rarer. A limited-edition shoe might not become valuable simply because it is a shoe not suitable for functional utility benefit. A rich person may buy a limited-edition shoe for the meaning, as well as the feeling that it is limited and not available to everyone. Wang et al. mention that perceived scarcity can add functional, emotional and social value, but the virtual scarcity may not always be better than real scarcity [10]. Nike should keep this in mind, as digital scarcity may generate interest in a product, but it will not necessarily make it any more valuable over time. The factor of this scarcity is especially relevant for Gen Z, who tend to view fashion items as identity through stories when they consume them on social media. If the product has a compelling brand story, Chinese Gen Z may view the possession of it as a reflection of their awareness or inclusion rather than just a material good.

3.1.2. Sustained engagement within the brand ecosystem

A second benefit of digital scarcity is that it drives consumer engagement within the brand ecosystem. The SKRS app provided by Nike offers notification of product details and special releases, among other content. The attractiveness of such features may mean that the customer returns to the application for visits, even if they do not buy the product. Nike is able to market its

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products and build relationships because of this, which is beneficial to them. Studies involving Chinese Gen Z incoming school students found that emotional connection can be a mediating factor in the relationship between digital marketing and purchase intention [3]. The relationship between consumer attitude, perceived value and purchasing intention can be strengthened by the perceived enjoyment as seen in another research study with Chinese consumers purchasing luxury online [5]. Thus, digital scarcity can act both as a sales promoter and a consumer engagement tool. The excitement of a new release can be part of the overall experience. Long-term loyalty may one day be more valuable than the few sales made on specific editions. Big global brands like Nike understand this.

3.1.3. Gamification and social amplification of involvement

The third benefit which digital scarcity offers is gaining more consumer involvement. The use of push notifications, exclusive access and other interactive elements creates a more engaging purchasing experience by combining scarcity. Researchers investigating gamified live streaming e-commerce find success of rewards and competition in enhancing user engagement and purchase intention, with the mediating role of feeling of presence a key one [12]. This insight is certainly relevant to brands outside of live streaming. By creating a sense of digital scarcity, buying can be transformed into an active process. Specifically, it becomes something that involves waiting, competing and even interacting. For Gen Z, who frequently engage with brands online, this can enhance brand recall. Furthermore, this can be amplified by social participation. Studies on FOMO found that consumers who feel FOMO are more likely to communicate publicly about products related to their identity [8]. Thus, products that are scarce can become subjects for discussion and user-generated content. This social exposure can further increase the perceived value of the product, creating a feedback loop between scarcity, attention and social presence.

3.2. Identified risks and ethical concerns

3.2.1. Algorithmic opacity and erosion of trust

One of the biggest issues is transparency. Digital scarcity depends on software systems to determine which products are visible, available, recommended, and for sale. If customers cannot grasp how these systems operate, they may deem the outcome unfair even though the system is valid.

There is a huge issue of trust. If consumers believe that access is personalized based on undisclosed criteria, then the notion of scarcity could alter from "limited but fair" to "unlimited. One issue associated with digital scarcity is its ability to undermine the perception of a product's value. In an age where consumers are increasingly price-conscious, the challenge lies in differentiating a brand from its competitors whose products and prices may seem similar. Companies are finding it difficult to justify a premium-priced product as 'natural' or 'genuine' as opposed to being 'manufactured', which creates a perception of artificiality (consumer backlash due to premium price). This affects the brand.

In China, rules on algorithm recommendation have been introduced. Service providers are required to disclose information on algorithms, boost transparency (explain mechanisms), and there are rules against any algorithms that cause consumers to consume excessively and to make sure that consumers enjoy the right to fair trading [9]. These rules indicate that being digitally scarce cannot be just a marketing issue. When algorithms significantly affect a consumer's ability to buy or purchase a product, then transparency is an element of good digital business practice. The issue is

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not scarcity as such, but rather the lack of clarity between genuine scarcity and non-transparent manipulation. A transparent limited-time release creates anticipation, while a non-transparent system creates suspicion. Suspicion ultimately affects brand trust.

3.2.2. Cultural standardization versus local relevance

Cultural relevance is the other issue. While a global brand may have a similar identity across the world, variations arise pertaining to the 'scarcity effect'. Each country's social and cultural environment influences the way differences in supply impact demand. Research focusing on Gen-Z members of China reveals that cultural identity and cultural pride, as well as virtual communities, all shape purchase intention. The implication here is that as long as the message communicates a value or idea that consumers find important to them, it is more effective. Consequently, a global campaign that translates a Western message into Chinese won't provoke the needed emotional response. The problem becomes even more serious when a scarcity is accompanied by controversial symbols or culturally inappropriate concepts. Online platforms amplify emotion, both positive and negative. A limited edition item which is culturally insensitive gets wide publicity. This is because the nature of scarcity attracts attention. The same process that can help a campaign go viral can also expedite the pace at which damage can occur to a reputation.

Cultural relevance should not be merely considered as a translation. In the Chinese Gen-Z Segment, Multinational Brands Should Pay Attention to Identity, Virtual Communities, Cultural Pride and Social Interaction. Research on Chinese Gen-Z suggests that cultural identity can mediate the effect of emotional and attitudinal effects on purchase intention [6]. Accordingly, digital scarcity may be contextualized within culturally meaningful circumstances, rather than based on an exportable marketing script.

3.2.3. FOMO-driven impulsive consumption

The final challenge is the risk that FOMO will drive impulse purchases. Scarcity implies that the consumer can either buy something right now or never again, and digital channels often increase this pressure through real-time alerts, time limits and visual evidence of others' interest. Evidence indicates that consumers can have heightened awareness and online purchase behaviour generated through scarcity signals [7]. Research also shows that FOMO shapes how consumers discuss identity-signalling products on social media [8]. FOMO and social comparison may be related, according to this.

Especially young buyers tend to attach social significance to purchases. It is possible to buy something to signal to others that one values it. Similarly, not buying something can send the signal that one is inferior in a social context. Accordingly, this paper factors in social positioning in the purchasing decisions rather than attributes.

This does not mean that all FOMO responses are damaging. Some degree of urgency can make the experience of buying fun and enhance brand engagement. What becomes problematic is if digital systems are designed to repeatedly prompt purchasing without adequate information or thought processes. China's algorithm regulations specifically ban features that stimulate overconsumption or addictive behaviour [9]. Brands must thus be able to differentiate between healthy excitement and unhealthy anxiety. Figure 1 shows that China's e-commerce market continued its growth trajectory from 2023 to 2025.

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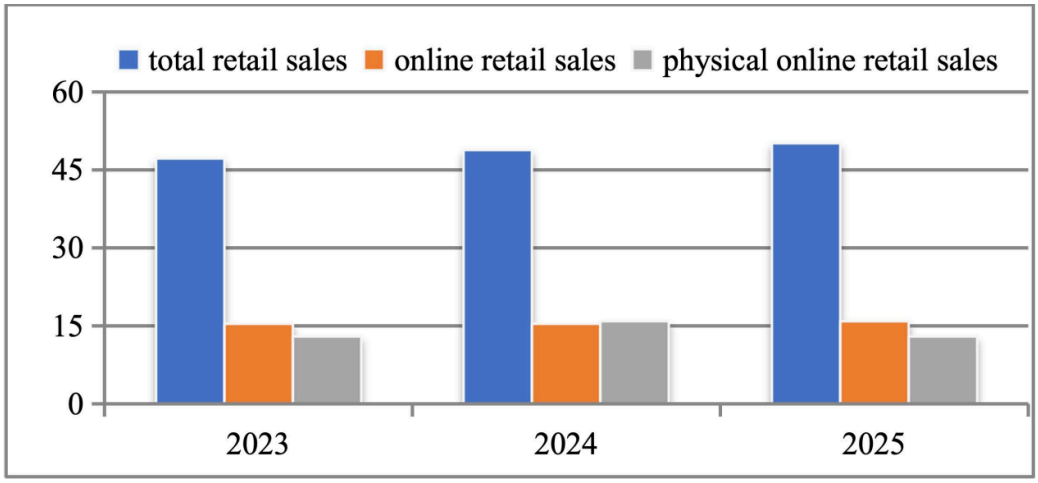


Figure 1. China's retail and online retail sales, 2023–2025

(Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China, national statistical bulletins for 2023–2025, and given in RMB trillion)

4. Strategic recommendations

4.1. Transparent governance of digital scarcity and algorithms

Creating a clear governance framework for digital scarcity is the first recommendation. Global brands should be honest as to whether scarcity is physical or virtual and should indicate where they employ digital urgency. Introduce the company's product pages with drop schedules or timeframes together with any purchasing qualification or criteria, as far as these are commercially or legally permissible.

Brands should offer users understandable explanations of the underlying mechanisms if automated systems govern consumer-facing elements such as recommendations, access or similar features. It may also be beneficial to have third-party auditing to assess whether digital release mechanisms comply with the stated principles. This is in line with China's algorithms regulations, which require transparency, fairness, consumer consent and safeguards against addictive features. By knowing the rules up front, consumers are more likely to understand failed transactions. So this is another way that transparency can protect the company's brand. Ultimately, organizations should implement internal ethical assessments for their digital scarcity initiatives. Before rolling out a program, teams must ask four questions: Is the scarcity real? Is the communication truthful? Will the design cause levels of anxiety to be unhealthy? Do consumers have sufficient information to make informed choices?

4.2. Culturally embedded scarcity campaigns

Brands need to adapt to deeper cultures. It would be a mistake to think that a scarcity campaign's success in one market can be replicated in China. The digital campaigns should be modified instead to reflect the cultural identity, the participation of the online community and the local creativity of the Chinese consumer. Research involving Chinese Gen-Z consumers indicates that cultural identity, online communities, and cultural pride play a significant role in purchase intention [6]. Cultural adaptation, therefore, needs to involve consumers in the creation of the campaign rather than just adapting the language of the advertisement. For example, collaborating with Chinese designers, artists, and cultural institutions can lead to the creation of limited editions. With digital actions,

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consumers can help design the product, vote, or even tell the story behind the product. As such, the restriction is no longer a commercial impediment, but more of belonging to a particular group. This also implies that the exclusivity may be more sustainable. By stating 'it is a part of this specific cultural and creative community', the brand implies that 'only a few people can get it'. This can build emotional connection to consumers without overwriting the anxiety of FOMO.

4.3. Consumer protection principles for young digital consumers

Third recommendation: Brands must integrate consumer protection principles in their design of digital scarcity. Brands should refrain from involving interfaces that just keep increasing urgency without adding information. The timer must accurately reflect the expiration of the promotional offer, and the stocks remaining must not be misleading. Brands can provide better product messages prior to high-pressure purchase moments. At the time of a limited edition's launch, complete product specifications, return conditions, and total cost must still be available. This can reduce the chances of a consumer making a purchase merely because of urgency. Digital platforms can offer young consumers age-appropriate educational and spend-awareness tools. For example, prompts to verify the company's purchase information and how scarcity works, along with the options to opt out of marketing notifications. These interventions don't ask brands to give up scarcity marketing. They help to distinguish between responsible urgency and manipulative urgency. Sensible urgency conveys a legitimate opportunity but maintains customer discretion.

4.4. Long-term brand equity over short-term sales conversion

Finally, companies should adjust the metrics employed to evaluate their scarcity campaigns. The above argument can be cautioned against, as it may give rise to an incentive to increase urgency by all means. More metrics such as repeat engagement, customer satisfaction, trust, return rates, complaint rates and brand sentiment are worthy of consideration. Firms have concluded that a scarcity strategy does not consistently build brand equity. It may, however, lead to a spike in purchases. A study in China shows that perceived value, attitude, eWOM and enjoyment are significant to purchase intention when it comes to luxury [5]. This indicates lasting consumer relationships are not just about short-term urgency. A strategy of scarcity that generates one-off sales while damaging trust could ultimately erode brand equity.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Key findings

This paper examines the influence of multinational brands' digital scarcity strategies on the buying behaviour of China's Gen Z. By analyzing the Nike SNKRS case study, this study finds that digital scarcity shapes consumer behaviour through multiple channels. The innovation can promote engagement in social networks, improve social interactions and increase perceived value. However, it could lead to possible pitfalls such as opacity, homogenization, and over-excitement. According to the study, the impacts of digital scarcity are neither good nor bad by nature. The way scarcity is expressed, digital instruments are used, and consumer choice is dealt with; all have an impact.

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5.2. Research significance

Theoretical, practical and social significance of the study. This research synthesizes the classical theory of scarcity with digital consumer behaviour and considers digital scarcity as the combination of product scarcity, temporal scarcity, algorithmic delivery, gamification and social interaction. In practical terms, the paper provides multinational companies with a framework to develop more effective digital marketing strategies in China. Especially, this study argues that to build lasting brand value, companies must not just restrict product availability but provide experiences that are authentic, culturally relevant and entertaining.

This research stresses the need for responsible marketing from a social aspect. As the platforms become more ambient and personalized, the need for algorithmic transparency, truthful messaging, and consumer protection has become more significant. Brands can use scarcity power responsibly, while not putting stress on young people by applying responsible digital scarcity strategies.

5.3. Limitations and future study

There is a methodological limitation to this study. The study is mainly centred around secondary data, such as studies, public information about Nike and descriptions of Nike's Digital Platforms. This study did not carry out a survey or experiment with Chinese Gen Z consumers. As a result, while this study points out possible mechanisms, this paper does not know the extent to which they apply to Chinese Gen Z.

Future research can adopt surveys to measure the effect of perceived scarcity, FOMO, perceived value, cultural identity, trust and purchase intention among Chinese Gen Z. Experimental research can test how different types of scarcity (limited quantity, limited time, limited access, etc) affect consumers' psychological processes. Additionally, interviews could be employed to further examine why Gen Z may perceive scarcity differently, as a 'good', an anxiety-inducing issue or a form of social capital. The efficacy of digital scarcity might also be looked at in future research for foreign brands vis-à-vis Chinese brands to find if cultural proximity matters. As AI technologies become increasingly integrated into digital marketing, future studies should focus on how AI drives marketing, recommendation algorithms, and personalized marketing affect digital scarcity and its boundaries.

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