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Buy Now or Wait for Better? The Role of FOMO–FOBO Conflict in Consumers' Responses to Limited-Time Scarcity Promotions in Online Fashion Shopping

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Abstract

Online fashion retailers rely more on limited-time scarcity promotions such as countdown timers, low-stock alerts, and flash-sale notices to create urgency and expedite consumer purchase decisions. While scarcity can make consumers feel Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), the abundance of alternative products available across online platforms may create both Fear of Better Options (FOBO), a reaction based on doubt in the belief that a superior alternative may exist elsewhere. This paper proposes a research model, grounded in the Stimulus Organism Response (SOR) perspective, to examine how these two competing psychological states jointly shape consumers' responses to scarcity-based promotions in online fashion retail. Focusing specifically on online fashion shoppers, the study proposes a 2 × 2 factorial experimental design that manipulates scarcity level (high/low) and alternative availability (high/low) to examine their independent and interactive effects on FOMO, FOBO, and purchase outcomes, including immediate purchase, continued search, delay and giving up. Six hypotheses are the direct connection of scarcity to FOMO, alternative availability to FOBO, and both factors leading to different behaviours. By adding scarcity marketing, FOMO, and FOBO within a single framework, the study contributes to a clear-cut understanding of when scarcity leads to purchase decisions and when it instead produces hesitation, delay, or purchase abandonment.

Keywords: Scarcity Marketing, FOMO, FOBO, Online Fashion, Purchase Decision, Consumer Behaviour

1. Introduction

The rapid growth of e-commerce has transformed the way consumers search for, compare, evaluate, and purchase products. Online fashion shopping represents one of the offering a wide range of choices digital purchasing environments because consumers can access multiple alternatives at the same time: numerous brands, designs, colours, sizes, prices, reviews, discounts, and promotional offers. This wide range of choices provides consumers with more flexibility but can also make purchase decisions more challenging.

At the same time, online retailers progressively employ scarcity-based promotional methods to create a sense of urgency. Examples include "Only 2 left," "Sale ends in 15 minutes," "Limited stock," "Last chance," and countdown timers show that a worthwhile buying opportunity may run out if the consumer takes more time. Scarcity therefore creates a sense of urgency and may shorten the decision time for evaluation.

The psychological method often connected with this process is Fear of Missing Out (FOMO). Consumers may fear missing out on a product, special offer, trend, or purchasing opportunity if they delay the decision. previous research has linked FOMO

and scarcity-related marketing methods with purchase-oriented and immediate consumer responses (Bernandy & Arifah-2025, Fernandes-2025, Rodrigues-2025).

However, online fashion shopping creates a paradox that is not fully explained by the usual scarcity–FOMO–purchase relationship. Even when a specific product is shown as scarce, consumers are often freely available to that product alone. They can immediately search for hundreds of different choices of fashion products on the same platform or across different platforms. In this context, the present study focuses on online fashion shoppers in Nilgiri District, Tamil Nadu, to examine how consumers respond to limited-time scarcity promotions when alternative choices are readily available.

1.1 Scarcity Marketing in Online Shopping

Scarcity marketing refers to marketing activities that show limited access to a product, service, special offers, or purchasing opportunity, based on limited product, limited time, limited opportunity, or short supply. Digital shopping platforms make scarcity particularly easy to use through real-time inventory information, countdown timers, flash-sale notices, and signs of popularity. The hidden psychological logic is that limited availability can make an opportunity appear more urgent and likely more valuable, prompting consumers to shorten their analysis process.

Recent research continues to examine scarcity in relation to FOMO, purchase intention, and impulsive buying, with studies in online fashion similarly indicating the relevance of scarcity-based tactics to consumers' buying behaviour (Fernandes, 2025; Rodrigues, 2025). Kumar and Dadwal (2025) also highlight the psychological and ethical dimensions associated with scarcity and FOMO-based marketing. However, much of the conventional scarcity literature focuses on positive behavioural outcomes such as purchase intention, urgency, and impulsive buying. The present study proposes that scarcity may not always accelerate decision-making; under conditions of high alternative availability, scarcity may instead interact with consumers' concerns about making the wrong choice.

1.2 Fear of Missing Out

Fear of Missing Out refers to the concern that one may miss a good opportunity or experience. In consumer contexts, FOMO may appear when consumers think that delaying the buying decision will result in missing the chance to buy the product, discount, trend, or social opportunity. Flecha Ortiz and colleagues (2024) examined FOMO and FOBO in terms of consumer purchase desire and found that the two affect choice differently. FOMO can push consumers towards immediate decision-making, while FOBO can create uncertainty and encourage them to postpone the decision.

1.3 Fear of Better Options

Fear of Better Options refers to indecision based on the belief that a better option is out there. Unlike FOMO, fear of missing out on the current opportunity, FOBO is fear of missing out on a better future option. FOBO is particularly significant to online fashion because consumers can easily move between brands, products, websites, and applications within seconds; the cost of continuing the search is relatively low, although the number of alternatives is very large. Bai et al. in a study conducted by(2026), FOBO was examined in the context of action uncertainty. The results show that FOBO is triggered by a large number of choices, supporting the concept of treating the number of available options as an important element in consumer decision-making.

1.4 The FOMO–FOBO Conflict

FOMO and FOBO can be understood as psychologically different factors. FOMO is based on the present ("Buy now or lose this opportunity"), while FOBO is oriented toward the future ("Wait because something better may appear"). Therefore, FOMO leads toward quick purchase, while FOBO leads toward further comparison or slowing down. This creates the central FOMO–FOBO contradiction assessed in the present study. In an online fashion environment, consumers may receive a scarcity cue while dealing with both access to a variety of choices, so that the scarcity message leads to quick decision-making at the same time the availability of better choices leads to more searching.

1.5 Statement of the Research Problem

Already available scarcity marketing research has primarily examined how limited availability pushes quicker action, FOMO, purchase desire, and spontaneous buying (reference from the study of Bernandy & Arifah-2025, Fernandes-2025, Rodrigues-2025). At the same time, FOBO has come up as a significant study for uncertainty and struggle in finalising consumer selection (from Bai et al., 2026; Flecha Ortiz et al., 2024). However, these two streams of research have not sufficiently addressed the psychological tension that may arise when consumers experience both a strong scarcity signal and a high availability of alternatives, a condition particularly relevant to online fashion shopping, where a consumer may face high urgency from a scarce product while simultaneously knowing that numerous substitutes are available. The research problem, therefore, is not simply whether scarcity causes consumers to purchase, but under what conditions it does so.

1.6 Research Gap

There are three gaps identified. First, scarcity research remains primarily FOMO-oriented, generally assuming a Scarcity, FOMO, Purchase pathway without examining whether scarcity can result in FOMO might coexist with FOBO. Second, while the study of Flecha Ortiz and others (2024) examined FOMO and FOBO together and identified their differing effects on decision-making, the current study focuses specifically on their operating at the same time within a limited-time scarcity marketing environment in online fashion shopping, bringing together two methods commonly treated as different from each other. Third, alternative availability remains in need of more research in scarcity situations. Online consumers rarely encounter scarcity in isolation, and although Bai and others (2026) link a wide range of options with FOBO, the connection between limited-time scarcity and substitute availability within online fashion purchasing requires additional research.

The study therefore addresses the combination of scarcity marketing, FOMO, FOBO, alternative availability, online fashion, and purchase decision shifting from the conventional scarcity purchase intention relationship toward a more detailed analysis of competing psychological effects.

1.7 Objectives of the Study

- To study the effect of limited-period promotions based on limited availability on consumers' FOMO in online fashion shopping.
- To investigate the relationship between better choice of options and consumers' FOBO.
- To review the effect of FOMO on consumers' immediate buying behaviour.
- To research the impact of FOBO on consumers' purchase waiting before buying and exploring other options
- To review whether FOMO and FOBO operate as competing psychological processes in consumers' responses to limited-time promotions based on limited availability.
- To examine whether the interaction between need for quick action and better choice availability encourages consumers' final purchase actions.

1.8 Research Questions

1. Does being exposed to short-term offers increase FOMO among online fashion shoppers?
2. Does expected availability of better choices of fashion products increase FOBO?
3. Does FOMO prompt consumers to make quick purchase actions?
4. Does FOBO influence purchase hesitation or further product search?
5. Does the simultaneous presence of scarcity urgency and alternative availability create a FOMO–FOBO conflict?
6. Under what conditions does FOMO dominate FOBO, and under what conditions does FOBO dominate FOMO?

1.9 Conceptual Framework

The developed model is grounded in the Stimulus Organism Response (S-O-R) understanding. Limited-time scarcity and alternative availability represent environmental stimuli, FOMO and FOBO represent psychological organism states, purchase decision represents the behavioural response.

Formally:

Limited-Time Scarcity → Perceived Urgency → FOMO → Immediate Purchase Tendency

Alternative Availability → Decision Uncertainty → FOBO → Purchase Delay / Continued Search

1.10 Hypotheses

H1 (Scarcity and FOMO): Limited-time scarcity communicates that an opportunity may disappear if consumers delay, which is expected to increase fear of losing the present opportunity. H1: Limited-time scarcity promotions have a significant positive effect on consumers' FOMO.

H2 (Alternative Availability and FOBO): Greater perceived alternative availability may increase consumers' belief that a better option can be found if they postpone their decision. H2: Perceived alternative availability has a significant positive effect on consumers' FOBO.

H3 (FOMO and Immediate Purchase): FOMO creates concern that the current opportunity may disappear, encouraging consumers to reduce deliberation and act immediately. H3: FOMO has a significant positive effect on immediate purchase tendency.

H4 (FOBO and Purchase Delay): FOBO represents concern that the current option may not be optimal, encouraging continued search and delay. H4: FOBO has a significant positive effect on purchase delay.

H5 (Competing Effects of FOMO and FOBO): FOMO encourages commitment to the present opportunity, whereas FOBO encourages continued evaluation. H5: FOMO and FOBO significantly predict opposing consumer decision outcomes under limited-time scarcity conditions.

H6 (Interaction Between Scarcity and Alternative Availability): High scarcity combined with low alternative availability may strengthen FOMO, whereas high scarcity combined with high alternative availability may produce greater psychological

conflict. H6: The interaction between limited-time scarcity and alternative availability significantly influences consumers' final purchase decisions.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The study proposes a quantitative experimental research design. An experimental design is appropriate because the study aims to examine consumers' responses to controlled marketing stimuli rather than merely measuring general attitudes toward scarcity marketing. A scenario-based online fashion shopping experiment is proposed.

2.2 Experimental Design

A 2 × 2 factorial design is proposed, based on two independent variables — scarcity level and alternative availability:

Experimental Group	Scarcity	Alternative Availability
Group 1	Low	Low
Group 2	High	Low
Group 3	Low	High
Group 4	High	High

In the high-scarcity condition, participants may be exposed to a message such as "Only 2 pieces left. Offer ends in 15 minutes." In the low-scarcity condition, participants may see "Available now. Regular price applies." For high alternative availability, participants will be shown several comparable fashion products representing different brands, styles, and price ranges; for low alternative availability, participants will be shown only a small number of comparable products. This design enables the researcher to examine whether the effect of scarcity changes when consumers have access to different levels of alternatives.

2.3 Population and Sampling

The proposed population consists of consumers aged 18 years and above residing in Nilgiri District, Tamil Nadu, who have experience purchasing fashion products through online shopping platforms. Respondents may be required to have purchased at least one fashion product online during the previous six months. Purposive sampling may be adopted, given the requirement for prior online fashion-shopping experience. An initial sample of approximately 350 respondents may be targeted, with the participants distributed across the experimental conditions. However, the final sample size and allocation across conditions should be determined through appropriate statistical power analysis before data collection.

2.4 Variables of the Study

1) **Independent Variable 1 — Limited-Time Scarcity:** the extent to which consumers perceive that a product or promotional opportunity is available only for a restricted period, manipulated as high vs. low.
2) **Independent Variable 2 — Alternative Availability:** the perceived availability of competing or potentially superior products.
3) **Mediating Variable 1 — FOMO:** the fear of losing the current purchasing opportunity, expected to explain the relationship between scarcity and immediate purchase tendency.
4) **Mediating Variable 2 — FOBO:** the fear that a better alternative may be available, expected to explain the relationship between alternative availability and purchase delay or continued search.

5) **Dependent Variable — Purchase Decision Outcome:** the behavioural tendency following exposure to the experimental condition, including immediate purchase, continued search, purchase postponement, and purchase abandonment.

2.5 Measurement of Constructs

Constructs should be measured using or adapting established measures from previous literature and subsequently assessed for reliability and validity. FOMO items may capture concern about losing the current opportunity, anxiety about delaying the purchase, concern that the product or promotion may disappear, and the desire to act before the opportunity is lost. FOBO items may capture concern that a better product may exist, difficulty committing to the current option, the desire to continue searching, concern about making the wrong choice, and hesitation caused by alternative products. Purchase decision outcome can be measured using behavioural intention and decision-tendency items. Because FOBO remains a comparatively emerging construct within consumer research, its measurement scale should be carefully adapted to the online fashion context and subjected to reliability and validity assessment; Bai et al. (2026) provide relevant support for conceptualising FOBO in relation to decision uncertainty, alternatives, and hesitation.

2.6 Proposed Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics will be used to understand the demographic characteristics and online shopping behaviour of respondents. Cronbach's alpha may be used to examine the internal consistency of the measurement scales, and Exploratory or Confirmatory Factor Analysis may be conducted to assess construct validity. ANOVA can be used to examine differences in FOMO, FOBO, and purchase outcomes across the four experimental conditions, specifically the main effect of scarcity, the main effect of alternative availability, and their interaction effect. Mediation analysis can examine whether Scarcity → FOMO → Immediate Purchase and Alternative Availability → FOBO → Purchase Delay represent significant psychological pathways, while interaction analysis can determine whether alternative availability changes the relationship between scarcity and consumer responses. If the final sample size and measurement model are appropriate, Structural Equation Modelling may be employed using AMOS or SmartPLS to examine the complete conceptual model.

3. Results and Discussion

As this paper presents a conceptual framework and a proposed research design rather than the outcome of completed data collection, this section outlines the expected findings and their theoretical and practical implications, to be tested through the proposed 2 × 2 experimental design.

3.1 Expected Findings

The proposed study challenges the traditional assumption that scarcity marketing necessarily accelerates purchasing. The conventional scarcity mechanism can be represented as Scarcity → Urgency → FOMO → Purchase. However, the digital fashion environment introduces a competing mechanism: Alternative Availability → Uncertainty → FOBO → Delay. Consequently, scarcity is expected to create a psychological dilemma rather than an automatic movement toward purchase.

For example, consider a consumer searching for a pair of shoes online who sees "Only 2 pairs left – Sale ends in 15 minutes." The message is expected to create FOMO, since the consumer fears losing the opportunity. However, the consumer can simultaneously access hundreds of similar shoes on the same platform or competing platforms, which is expected to create FOBO — the concern that a better option may appear if the purchase is delayed. The consumer is therefore positioned between fear of losing the current opportunity and fear of losing a potentially better future one. This distinction matters because final

behaviour may not be adequately explained by purchase intention alone: a consumer may purchase immediately because FOMO dominates, continue searching because FOBO dominates, delay the decision because the two fears conflict, or abandon the purchase because the decision becomes too uncertain. The proposed study therefore reframes scarcity marketing as a potentially dual-effect mechanism.

3.2 Theoretical Implications

The anticipated findings would extend scarcity marketing research by proposing a dual psychological pathway, positioning FOBO as a competing mechanism alongside FOMO rather than treating FOMO as the sole important consequence of scarcity. They would also contribute to the emerging literature on FOBO by situating it within a marketing-induced decision environment, connect scarcity research with online choice abundance, and extend the S-O-R perspective by proposing that consumers may experience competing organism states — Marketing Stimulus → FOMO → Immediate Purchase, alongside Marketing Stimulus/Alternative Availability → FOBO → Purchase Delay — offering a more nuanced understanding of consumer responses to digital promotional cues.

3.3 Managerial Implications

For online fashion retailers, the anticipated findings suggest that scarcity messages may not always accelerate purchase, and their effectiveness may depend on how easily consumers can find alternative products. Scarcity may be more effective when a product is highly differentiated and difficult to substitute; where similar products are easy to find, the same scarcity message may instead encourage continued comparison. Marketers should also use scarcity claims responsibly, since repeated or misleading messages such as "Only one left" may create short-term pressure but damage consumer trust if the scarcity is perceived as artificial. Retailers should distinguish genuine scarcity from manipulative scarcity, providing accurate information about availability and promotional deadlines, and should recognise that consumer decision-making is shaped not only by the attractiveness of the current offer but also by the perceived opportunity cost of committing to it.

3.4 Consumer Implications

The findings also carry practical relevance for consumers, who may benefit from distinguishing "I genuinely want this product" from "I am buying this because I am afraid I will lose the opportunity." Similarly, consumers experiencing FOBO should distinguish useful comparison from excessive searching: comparison can improve decision quality, but excessive searching may make commitment increasingly difficult. Greater awareness of FOMO and FOBO may help consumers recognise the psychological forces operating during online purchasing.

4. Conclusion

Scarcity marketing has traditionally been viewed as an effective mechanism for creating urgency and stimulating consumer purchases. However, the online fashion environment challenges this simple assumption because consumers simultaneously experience scarcity messages and an abundance of alternative products. This paper proposes that limited-time scarcity may activate FOMO by creating fear of losing the current opportunity, while alternative availability may simultaneously activate FOBO by creating fear of choosing an inferior option. The resulting FOMO–FOBO conflict may determine whether consumers purchase immediately, continue searching, postpone their decision, or abandon the purchase.

The central contribution of the proposed study is therefore a shift from asking "Does scarcity increase purchase intention?" to asking "When scarcity tells consumers to buy now, while alternative availability tells them to wait for something better, which fear dominates?" By integrating scarcity marketing, FOMO, FOBO, and online choice abundance within a single framework, the study offers a more nuanced perspective on digital consumer decision-making. Future empirical testing through the proposed 2 × 2 experimental design can determine whether scarcity and alternative availability produce distinct psychological pathways, and whether FOMO and FOBO function as competing mechanisms in online fashion purchasing.

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