

Scarcity, not abundance, enhances consumer creativity, study says

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Resource scarcity translates into enhanced consumer creativity, according to new research co-written by University of Illinois business professor Ravi Mehta.
Credit: University of Illinois College of Business

Even in an age of affluence and abundance in which round-the-clock

consumerism and overspending are the norm, limits and constraints can still serve a purpose. According to new research co-written by a University of Illinois expert in new product development and marketing, resource scarcity actually translates into enhanced consumer product-use creativity.

A general sense of scarcity activates a constraint mindset that manifests itself through increased novelty in subsequent product-usage contexts - that is, limits force consumers to think beyond the traditional functionality of a given product, thus enhancing product-use creativity, says published research from Ravi Mehta, a professor of business administration at Illinois.

"As the Western world becomes more affluent, I wanted to know how a sense of abundance affects creativity, because it's creativity that moves society forward," Mehta said. "New inventions and innovations - they all come from creativity. So how does an abundance mindset affect creativity? What we found is that abundant resources may have a negative effect on creativity. When you have fewer resources, you use them more creatively."

Across six experiments that tested their hypotheses, Mehta and co-author Meng Zhu of Johns Hopkins Carey Business School consistently demonstrated that scarcity leads to more novel product usages "without compromising the appropriateness of the consumption solutions," according to the paper.

It's a phenomenon that can be observed anecdotally in many poor parts of the world, Mehta said.

"If you look at people who don't have resources or only have limited resources, they actually end up being more creative with what they have," he said. "If you go to a poor country and see how they solve

problems by repurposing older products, it's super-innovative. When times are tough, resource-poor people become more creative in their use of everyday products."

The inverse also is true: When a general sense of abundance is prevalent, a constraint mindset will not be activated and individuals are less likely to move away from the traditional functionality of a given product, thereby resulting in lower levels of creativity.

"Everyday life here in the U.S. is so abundant that our control condition matched up with abundance, which makes sense," Mehta said.

"Abundance is our default setting here in the U.S."

The implications for advertisers and marketers are, if you want to promote creativity, don't feature abundance, Mehta said.

"Our research indicates that highlighting abundance - presenting abundant rather than scarce supply of the available items, for example - could backfire, leading the designers or consumers in a focus group to be less creative. That finding suggests that marketers should activate a general sense of scarcity rather than abundance."

The long-term implications of favoring abundance over creativity are even more pronounced.

"Findings from other research indicate that as we become a more abundant society, our aggregate average creativity levels decrease," Mehta said.

According to the paper, a prior analysis of the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking performance data over the past five decades indicated that, in spite of the rise in IQ scores, creative thinking scores have significantly decreased since 1990, especially for kindergarteners

through third-grade students.

"Once we become used to not being creative - to being merely passive consumers - it seems that the creativity muscle begins to atrophy, which does not bode well for future generations," Mehta said. "It also doesn't bode well for the present, because we need every ounce of [creativity](#) that we have to tackle our problems."

More information: Ravi Mehta et al. Creating When You Have Less: The Impact of Resource Scarcity on Product Use Creativity, *Journal of Consumer Research* (2015). [DOI: 10.1093/jcr/ucv051](https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucv051)

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