Urban Consumer Behaviour Under Time Scarcity Pressure: A Review

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***Abstract*—Urbanisation and digital infrastructure have turned time into a scarce, contested resource in modern consumption. This review brings together research on how time scarcity shapes urban consumer behaviour. It treats time both as a finite economic resource and as a subjective psychological experience. Using a systematic narrative synthesis, it draws on peer-reviewed studies from Web of Science, EBSCOhost and PsycINFO covering the past four decades. Findings were coded into three clusters: cognitive resource depletion, emotional anxiety responses and maladaptive intertemporal choice. The review finds that perceived time pressure pushes consumers toward heuristic judgment, a preference for immediate rewards, and compensatory behaviours such as multitasking, indulgent consumption and sensory stimulation. Busyness also works as a status signal. These effects are not evenly spread. They vary with socioeconomic status, gender, household roles and the density of the urban setting. Women and dual-earner households carry a particular burden through unequal mental labour and "role overload". The review argues that time scarcity is better understood as a systemic product of urban and labour structures than as an individual management problem. For marketers, it points toward offerings that reduce cognitive load instead of generic time-saving claims. For policymakers, it points toward care provision and proximity-based planning such as the "15-minute city". It closes with a research agenda covering digital labour and the gig economy, "slow living" interventions, cross-cultural time poverty, and subjective, data-rich accessibility models.**

***Index Terms*—Time scarcity, Time poverty, Urban consumer behaviour, Consumer decision-making**

I. INTRODUCTION

Cities are getting faster and more digital, and one result is that time has become something people compete for when they shop and spend (Kilani, 2017). Urban life rewards efficiency and quick movement, and in that setting the feeling of being short on time acts as a real psychological constraint that interferes with how people normally make decisions (Samson & Freudendal-Pedersen, 2022; Woermann & Rokka, 2015). Under that squeeze, people tend to lean on mental shortcuts and simpler ways of judging options instead of working through all the available information (Sarkar & Mehta, 2026; Tang, 2025). This review therefore pulls together the existing research on consumer time, asking how the time people actually have and their personal time orientations work together to shape retail engagement (Lallement & Gourmelen, 2018). It also responds to the fact that marketing has paid little attention to time as a driver of retail outcomes, especially the gap between objective time limits and how individuals perceive them (García & Ruíz-Mezcua, 2016). Beyond that, it looks at how time pressure changes the usefulness of self-service technologies and store involvement, and at how crowded spaces affect the way people sense time (Elmashhara & Soares, 2024; Tan et al., 2025). The aim throughout is to close some of these gaps by treating time both as a finite economic resource and as a subjective psychological construct (Lallement & Gourmelen, 2018; Woermann & Rokka, 2015). A further question is whether scarcity works mainly as a lasting mindset, an outside threat, or a shifting reference point that reshapes what people buy over time (Goldsmith et al., 2020). By separating objective time constraints from subjective time-trait orientations, the review argues for a more unified theoretical framework in marketing research (García & Ruíz, 2016; Lallement & Gourmelen, 2018). In particular, it tries to clarify how time orientation, from what goes on inside one person's head to the pace set between people, shapes customer experience and value co-creation in dense urban settings (Vancaillie et al., 2025).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Early work on consumer decision-making usually treated time as a finite economic resource that people allocate carefully to get the most out of it (Woermann & Rokka, 2015). On this view time is a linear, divisible commodity much like money, something that can be optimised through rational planning and efficient exchange (Lallement & Gourmelen, 2018). More recent work separates this objective, resource-based view from the subjective, internalised experience of time that actually shapes everyday consumption (Ayar & Burnaz, 2022). The point is that time is not just an amount to be managed. It is also a psychological variable, and feeling short of it can change a person's self-concept and the criteria they use to judge options (So et al., 2025). Goal conflict appears to be one important driver. The stress and anxiety of competing objectives make people feel they have far less time than their schedules actually show (Etkin et al., 2014). That feeling of scarcity also works as a heuristic: people reach for immediate gratification, or prefer providers who seem capable of easing their time worries (Belk et al., 2023). Individual differences matter as well. Whether a consumer looks mainly to the past, present or future affects how they organise and prioritise time when deciding (Roy & Naidoo, 2020). The idea of "consumer timework" shows people dealing with these tensions actively, either bringing their orientations toward the past and future into line or breaking them apart (Robinson et al., 2021). City life adds to this. Dense environments and fast social rhythms act as outside stressors and push consumers toward defensive ways of handling time (Blagoev et al., 2023). The faster pace in particular pushes people toward simple decision rules, such as judging a product on only a few attributes to keep mental effort low (Godinho et al., 2016).

III. METHODOLOGY

This review uses a systematic narrative synthesis to assess the research on time scarcity and consumer behaviour. The search covered scholarly databases including Web of Science, EBSCOhost and PsycINFO and targeted peer-reviewed articles from the past four decades, so that both the early resource-allocation models and the newer psychological work on time constraints were included (Ryynänen & Heinonen, 2020; Sun & Teichert, 2022). Inclusion criteria were strict. Studies had to link perceptions of resource scarcity to behavioural outcomes empirically, and purely theoretical essays and research that did not centre on consumers were left out. Findings were coded into three main clusters: cognitive resource depletion, emotional anxiety responses and maladaptive intertemporal choice (Chang et al., 2023; Veer et al., 2024). The coding also took a developmental angle, looking at how childhood socioeconomic status and long-term goal pursuit combine with immediate time pressure to shape adult consumption (Hosany & Hamilton, 2022). Sorting studies this way makes it easier to see how time-scarce consumers handle difficult trade-offs. They often become more risk averse or lean toward immediate rewards, as a way of coping with a perceived shortage of mental bandwidth (Bruijn & Antonides, 2021; Jin & Lyu, 2025). This fits evidence that consumers deal with shortages in different ways, either by planning efficiently to stretch the time they have left or by planning around priorities and giving up less essential goals (Fernbach et al., 2014). The structure also includes the "being rushed" element of chronic time pressure, which separates an objective shortage of time from the subjective, emotional experience of urgency (Szollos, 2009). With this lens, the review looks at how time pressure drives heuristic judgment, mainly by pushing people to concentrate on particular product dimensions instead of integrating information (Samson & Voyer, 2014; Urbina et al., 2021). It also considers the time horizon of threatened needs, which affects whether consumers favour present satisfaction over future goals (Sharma et al., 2023). A dual-processing lens maps the shift from careful, exhaustive evaluation to fast, intuitive responses once people feel their time is used up (Saikia & Rahman, 2025). Overall, the framework shows that a scarcity mindset places a heavy load on cognition and makes it harder for consumers to find the best option under environmental pressure (Cheng et al., 2023). It is extended with work on financial and structural instability, which often overlaps with time scarcity, adds to the sense of a future burden and leads to defensive, precautionary spending (Rashidin & Javed, 2026). The review also examines how different motivations, specifically "have-to" versus "want-to" obligations, moderate the move from abstract long-term planning to concrete, detail-focused decisions

(Yuan & Sun, 2024). Another strand covers the anxious drive for efficiency, in which consumers under pressure to show progress on their goals redirect their effort to tasks with quicker payoffs (Koley et al., 2025). This matches self-regulatory models that treat such shifts as a way of restoring control: consumers try to regain a sense of agency by securing tangible, near-term results (Cannon et al., 2018). The review further looks at how seeing oneself as busy signals high personal value, leading consumers to prefer services that clearly promise to save time (Baalbaki-Yassine et al., 2023). That sense of being productive can raise a person's feeling of importance and make it easier to exercise self-control in later consumption decisions (Kim et al., 2018). When chronic busyness undermines the sense of control instead, consumers often turn to compensatory behaviour, such as seeking intense sensory stimulation to take back their psychological autonomy (Xia et al., 2026). Nostalgic consumption also becomes more likely, as a way of restoring a sense of control when the time demands around them feel overwhelming (Huang et al., 2026). Finally, the synthesis shows that a positive reading of busyness supports analytical deliberation, while negative readings, marked by anxiety and stress, lead people to rely on experiential thinking (Li et al., 2025; Zhang & Zhu, 2026).

IV. RESULTS

The results show that time-related personality variables correlate strongly with inefficiencies in the marketplace, which suggests that people's habitual planning styles directly shape how scarce they feel their time is (Kaufman-Scarborough & Lindquist, 2003). Consumers with a strong future time orientation are more likely to use precommitment devices to get past present-biased preferences, and this lowers the risk of procrastination (Lynch et al., 2009). That foresight can be undone by the "mere deadline effect". When a deadline is far away, consumers may overestimate how hard a task will be, take on too much and make less progress toward their goal (Zhu et al., 2018). Urban consumers also tend to multitask to win back a sense of agency when time limits make them feel they have little control. The result is fragmented decision-making, weaker performance and less satisfaction with what they end up choosing (Han & Broniarczyk, 2021). Busyness is also framed subjectively as a status signal. Urban individuals increasingly shape their consumption to show that their time is scarce, which reads as a sign of professional demand and high social value (Bellezza et al., 2016). Busyness also shows up as more variety-seeking, as consumers try to reclaim control over their time by diversifying their choices and breaking the monotony of tight schedules (Jiangang et al., n.d.). People who see their busyness in a positive light tend to prefer larger assortments, since they use analytical thinking to optimise their picks, while those who feel negatively about it choose smaller, more manageable sets (Zhang & Zhu, 2025). A pervasive busy mindset also leads urban consumers to favour self-improvement products, which they see as boosting their personal efficacy in a fast-moving environment (Du et al., 2024). Digital purchasing is increasingly used to hand off mental effort. Time-scarce urbanites automate routine transactions to save mental bandwidth for high-priority tasks (Kim et al., 2018). Their move toward digital convenience is reinforced by the fact that people tend to underestimate how busy they currently are, so they undervalue time-saving services that could ease later stress (Whillans et al., 2018). When deadlines slip, consumers often turn to indulgent consumption to regulate their mood and take the edge off the stress of failing to manage time (Vallen et al., 2014). A high level of perceived busyness also pushes people toward energy-dense, high-calorie food as a quick way to replenish drained cognitive and physical resources (Ai & Jiang, 2024). Intense sensory stimulation can serve a similar purpose, offsetting the loss of control that comes with the mental load of constant time pressure (Xia et al., 2026). Power distance beliefs interact with perceived busyness to change whether people prefer material or experiential consumption, which suggests that the drive for status decides whether they look for time-saving tools or meaningful leisure (Park et al., 2023). The level of busyness is also a boundary condition. When perceived time pressure is high, people lean toward minimalist advertising because it reduces processing disfluency (Chen et al., 2023). Socioeconomic status matters as a moderator too. Higher-income urbanites often use money to outsource time-intensive tasks, which turns perceived scarcity into a strategic allocation of resources (Campo et al., 2016; Yang et al., 2024). For people with lower socioeconomic standing, time poverty can feel like a fixed constraint.

They are more vulnerable to the psychological effects of stress and more likely to choose poorly between material and experiential consumption (Zhao et al., 2023). The growing economic value placed on one's time adds to these feelings of scarcity and makes people less patient in their decisions as they try to get the most out of limited schedules (DeVoe & Pfeffer, 2011). Empirical evidence also suggests that as the pace of life speeds up, people show a clear preference for immediate rewards and pay less attention to long-term accumulation. This temporal myopia is made worse by economic inequality, which is a main driver of perceived time poverty, largely through status anxiety (Zhao et al., 2023). Urban settings with rapid time-keeping or many fast-food outlets sharpen the sense of running short, which encourages impulsive consumption of low-nutrient, high-calorie food as a way to manage mental load (Kapoor & Tripathi, 2019; Logan & Jacka, 2014). In these settings people often hold zero-sum beliefs about their time, which creates a lasting imbalance in social interactions in which seeking help is favoured over reciprocating (Cao et al., 2025). Visibly keeping a busy lifestyle has likewise become a deliberate signal of human capital and professional scarcity in competitive urban labour markets (Bellezza et al., 2016). The social pressure to perform busyness can raise perceived stress and, paradoxically, make people more willing to take risks as they try to cope with the uncertainty of demanding workplaces (Li et al., 2025). The experience of a "time crunch" is also unevenly spread, and it is often a bigger concern for higher-income groups who work in complex, high-demand careers. It is not only a product of work demands, though. A richer leisure life, with varied social and recreational commitments, can create a sense of fullness that comes close to anxiety (Lu et al., 2025). People who juggle several roles, such as employed parents and single-parent households, often report "role overload", where occupational and domestic demands together make time feel finite and quickly depleted (Celnik et al., 2012). This strain often leads to more present-oriented decisions, as people go for immediate gratification to cope with the psychological cost of chronic resource depletion (Wang et al., 2023; Zhen et al., 2026). The need to coordinate complicated routines adds to the burden, because it makes people treat time as a commodity to be tightly scheduled rather than something that flows naturally (Southerton, 2003). Together these shifts produce a distinct "time-poor" group, in which balancing work with essential caregiving is the main source of lasting feelings of being overwhelmed (Strazdins & Loughrey, 2007). Gendered patterns of time use remain an important moderator. Women in particular report more intense time pressure even when their objective free time stays the same (Mattingly & Sayer, 2006). This lasting subjective stress suggests that coordinating household and market roles creates a distinct "time work" burden that falls disproportionately on women, whatever their actual hours of paid work (Hamermesh & Lee, 2007; Moen et al., 2013). The fragmented nature of household responsibilities adds to the gap by limiting women's sense of control over their daily schedules compared with men (Peters & Raaijmakers, 1998). This uneven experience of time stress suggests that the subjective burden of managing time mediates the link between social roles and psychological well-being, especially for employed people (Roxburgh, 2004). Here the "time squeeze" often appears as harriedness, a state defined by substantive overload and the mental difficulty of coordinating practices within rigid institutional or social structures (Southerton, 2007). These effects are stronger in dual-earner households, where professional obligations and domestic caregiving combine into a cumulative "dual burden" that heightens the sense of time scarcity (Lippe, 2007; Zannella et al., 2018). Time poverty is also not confined to the individual. It spreads within close relationships, so one partner's time strain significantly worsens the others through shared family activity (Zhang et al., 2025). Finally, the deregulation and flexibilization of modern work blurs boundaries and makes it harder for households to agree on regular periods of shared leisure (Gerold et al., 2023).

V. DISCUSSION

The findings point to the unequal distribution of mental labour as a root of the subjective experience of time scarcity. This labour is largely invisible, yet it acts as a chronic cognitive stressor. Often, it takes the form of main responsibility for running the household and managing children's needs, and it is directly linked to greater psychological distress and lower life satisfaction (Reich-Stiebert et al., 2023). The gap in cognitive load between women and men is wider still. Even when working hours are similar, women's

domestic multitasking is mostly tied to housework and childcare, while men's simultaneous tasks tend to be lighter and more voluntary (Offer & Schneider, 2011). This imbalance is held in place by men's tendency to put their careers first while women manage domestic expectations, which has stalled the equalisation of household labour even as more women enter formal work (Craig & Tienoven, 2020). These unequal demands leave many women mentally fatigued, since they often carry the "invisible" organisational burden of home life even during paid working hours (Barigozzi et al., 2025; Dean et al., 2021). This "double shift" entrenches traditional gender roles and forces women to move between paid work and essential caregiving with little relief (Verma, 2025). Such inequities in time poverty matter for public policy. They call for structural measures, such as encouraging fathers to take on more domestic work, to spread the cognitive and time load more fairly (Hyde et al., 2020; Rodgers, 2023; Rose, 2017). For marketers, this means moving away from generic "time-saving" value propositions and toward offerings that address the limited cognitive bandwidth of time-poor consumers (Craig & Brown, 2016; Tammelin, 2020). Services that cut cognitive overload, such as errand outsourcing or integrated family management, can ease the "worrying" and "caring" burdens that define the time-poor experience today (Kurowská, 2018). Policymakers should also recognise that the "time squeeze" is a structural barrier to sustainable consumption and wider civic engagement, because chronic cognitive load leaves little room for deliberate lifestyle changes or taking part in public life (Godin & Langlois, 2021), (Helgøy & Weeks, 2025). Dealing with these imbalances means bringing urban planning and social support together to reduce the "double burden" that limits the mobility and agency of time-poor households (Lindkvist, 2024; Turner & Grieco, 2000). Future policy should focus on making the distribution of unpaid, non-market work more egalitarian, which is key to reducing the gendered stress that comes with sustained time poverty (Giménez-Nadal et al., 2011). Closing the time-poverty gap also matters for labour market participation and personal autonomy, since the persistent, gendered nature of unpaid work is a systemic barrier to fair socio-economic outcomes (Cieplinski et al., 2023). Ultimately, the answer is to move away from individual time-management strategies and toward public provision of strong care services for children and older people, which is vital for separating domestic obligations from chronic time poverty (Vega-Rapun et al., 2020). If "time to care" is treated as a foundation of sustainable development rather than a personal constraint, societies can move toward patterns that put well-being ahead of consumption-heavy lifestyles. That transition means leaving behind the current emphasis on fast-paced, convenience-driven economies in favour of institutions that actively foster "time prosperity" and support sustainable, care-centred social practices (Jouzi et al., 2026). Aligning consumer research with circular economy frameworks likewise calls for rethinking "pro-sumption" and self-sufficient practices, which currently struggle against the time-intensive nature of care work (Greene et al., 2023). Bringing this "time-to-care" view into marketing and public policy means shifting from commodifying convenience to supporting lifestyles in which having enough time for self-care and social contribution is seen as part of human well-being (Smetschka et al., 2023). Urban planning can help by fostering proximity and connectedness in residential areas, which can ease the stress of the expectation to be productive all the time (Samson & Freudendal-Pedersen, 2022). Redesigning urban spaces to shorten commutes and improve access to essential services would help planners break the "cycle of servitude" that worsens health among the time-poor (Jaggi & Gupta, 2025). Adding specialised data on informal, locally based care networks to Time Use Surveys is also essential, so that these invisible, self-managed practices can be measured and become eligible for targeted public support (Cubillos-Almendra et al., 2026). It is equally important to recognise how social reproduction has intensified under disciplinary neoliberalism, so that policies address the structural gaps in state-provided care instead of just shifting domestic burdens around (Elias & Shirin, 2018). In this context, "societing" frameworks let companies stop exploiting time scarcity and start building social environments that put collective well-being ahead of market-driven consumption (Black et al., 2017). That calls for a different use of productivity gains, with working hours reduced to free up personal time for civic and social engagement instead of constant consumption (Bengtsson et al., 2018). It also recognises that current economic systems often mistake leisure for idleness,

when leisure is actually necessary for sustaining care relationships and community cohesion (Beyeler & Jaeger-Erben, 2025; Sahakian & Rossier, 2022). Recognising the "consumption work" needed to keep these social cycles going would also help urban strategists support circular practices, which are currently pushed aside by a lack of discretionary time (Friant et al., 2023; Hobson et al., 2021). Above all, tackling the "time squeeze" means shifting the debate toward social values and asking whether current development paradigms favour public solutions to private coordination problems that threaten environmental sustainability and social cohesion (Jarvis, 2005). In the end, this requires an urbanism that treats care-based infrastructure and reproductive agency as its main measures of social equity (Amorim-Maia et al., 2021). In practice, that means moving urban development toward "15-minute" models in which local accessibility replaces car-dependent mobility, cutting the time exhaustion of getting to everyday services (Bruno et al., 2024). Combined with the "mobility of care" framework, these layouts shift the focus from commuting to work to reaching essential care destinations, easing the heavier travel burden women carry (Soukhov et al., 2025). Planning of this kind also reduces the "social exhaustion" that now comes from the commodification of reproductive labour (Belingardi et al., 2024). Planners and policymakers will need to stop seeing care as an individual burden and treat it as critical infrastructure, which makes collective responsibility for social reproduction part of the system (Bertram et al., 2025; Binet et al., 2022). Through "chrono-urbanism" strategies, cities can move toward the "15-minute city" model, where key amenities are reachable within short distances by active transport (Moreno et al., 2021; Pozoukidou & Angelidou, 2022). This polycentric model addresses urban residents' time constraints by decentralising activities, which reduces dependence on long trips and supports a more sustainable, equitable rhythm of daily life (Hill et al., 2024). Applying chrono-urbanist principles needs care, however. The benefits of accessibility have to be distributed fairly across socio-economic groups so that existing urban inequalities are not reinforced (Ferrer-Ortiz et al., 2022). To avoid this, the "15-minute city" idea has to go beyond proximity metrics and take in service quality, social diversity and inclusive urban governance (Hill et al., 2024; Mahmoudpour & Shirazi, 2025). Policymakers also have to deal with obstacles such as gentrification, so that proximity-based design improves social cohesion instead of displacing the vulnerable people it is meant to serve (Reddy, 2026). Researchers and urban practitioners should likewise adopt more detailed, user-based measures such as "CityTime", which redefines proximity as an adaptable, borderless ecosystem, so that these frameworks work across different cultural and morphological settings (Biraghi et al., 2025). Decentralising essential services is also a proactive way for urban authorities to reduce the mobility disparities that hit vulnerable groups hardest (Marquet & Maciejewska, 2024; Salazar et al., 2025). This calls for global collaboration to share insights on legislation and citizen involvement, so that diverse socio-economic and cultural contexts are built into urban development strategies (L'Hostis et al., 2024). Success will depend on a consistent assessment model that benchmarks spatial configurations against individual travel tolerance and varied local needs (Lissandrello et al., 2024). It also means moving away from rigid, one-size-fits-all time thresholds, because people differ widely in how they perceive walking time and how relevant particular opportunities are (Vale & Lopes, 2023). Future urban interventions should therefore replace abstract distance-based metrics with standardised indices that combine subjective preferences, geographical constraints and the quality of pedestrian infrastructure, in order to capture the lived experience of accessibility (Guzmán et al., 2024). With this kind of human-centred data, planners can move past physical proximity toward a "subjective accessibility" model that reflects individual capabilities and specific local conditions (Glock & Gerlach, 2023; Rodríguez-Hernández et al., 2022). This methodological shift matches calls for multidisciplinary approaches that bring sensor-driven data together with resident co-design, so that urban policies reflect the lived realities of proximity-based planning (Nurse et al., 2025).

VI. CONCLUSION

Research on urban consumer behaviour has matured to the point where time scarcity can no longer be treated as an individual management problem. It is a systemic by-product of neoliberal urbanisation and rigid labour structures. Key contributions have brought together

work on reproductive labour and time constraints, showing that current consumption patterns are increasingly set by the time demands of urban life. Future research should look empirically at how digital labour and algorithmic management deepen this time stratification, particularly in the gig economy. Longitudinal studies are also needed to test whether emerging "slow living" interventions in cities can separate consumer well-being from the relentless pace of productivity-driven markets. Interdisciplinary work should also examine the cross-cultural side of "time poverty", so that policies fit their context and do not flatten urban life across very different socioeconomic settings. By linking the sociology of time with spatial planning, researchers can build a comprehensive framework that puts human well-being ahead of optimising market-driven mobility.

Spatiotemporal big data will also be essential for refining accessibility models, since these need to account for the opening hours of urban services and for uncertainty in travel-time reliability (Chen et al., 2016; Neutens et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2018). Multiscale methods of this kind would give a clearer picture of how different socioeconomic groups deal with time constraints, going beyond normative accessibility thresholds to reflect the subjective realities of individual urban residents (Dodge & Nelson, 2023; Pot et al., 2021). Future studies should also use mixed methods, pairing quantitative behavioural datasets with ethnographic insight, to test properly how environmental changes affect mobility outcomes over the long term. Research priorities should shift to cover how complex domestic routines, gendered travel patterns and non-working activity cycles interact (Chidambaram & Scheiner, 2023; Jackson et al., 2006). In particular, studies need to ask how time-density centralities intersect with changing transport infrastructure, to address the persistent spatial disadvantages faced by different demographic groups (Duarte & Troncoso, 2019). Scholars should also look at how individualised, tech-enabled scheduling could align collective travel strategies with the rhythms of destinations and so ease the systemic pressures of time-scarce environments (Dickinson et al., 2013). We also need a systematic analysis of how particular spatial and temporal resolutions affect accessibility metrics, so that simplified models do not miss the complexity of daily mobility. This also requires stochastic modelling of travel costs, which captures the volatility of urban transport systems better than traditional deterministic approaches (Qin & Liao, 2023). Moving toward a modern time-geography that links individual internal factors with external structural processes will be vital for building more robust accessibility frameworks (Brum-Bastos & Páez, 2023).

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