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Too Much Stuff: Is a Thriving Economy Killing Our Creativity?

Despite rising affluence and increasing IQ scores, creative thinking scores have significantly declined in the Western world during the last 25 years. According to a recent study in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#), the cause could be the abundance of wealth and resources within our reach—all our stuff.



“Contrary to common belief, abundant resources may have a negative effect on creativity—and creativity is vital to moving societies forward through invention and innovation. We found that scarcity forces consumers to think beyond the traditional function of a given product and enhances creativity,” write authors Ravi Mehta (University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign) and Meng Zhu (Johns Hopkins University).

A series of studies showed that scarcity versus abundance leads to creativity by encouraging more novel use of everyday items. Consumers preconditioned to think in terms of scarcity and constraint came up with more innovative, nontraditional uses for the same items given to consumers preconditioned to think in terms of abundance. For instance, a box of tacks was used to make a wall sconce for a candle, and bubble wrap took on hundreds of unconventional uses.

In another study, participants were asked to generate designs for an improved computer keyboard. Again, those in a scarcity mindset came up with more novel and imaginative ideas than those in a mindset of abundance.

“These findings have important implications for industries that thrive on the creativity of their employees and consumers, such as home décor or fashion. More broadly, the findings pose a significant cultural question: as societies become more abundant, do average creativity levels decrease? Thinking ‘inside the box’ could come at a considerable cost,” the authors conclude.

Ravi Mehta and Meng Zhu. “[Creating When You Have Less: The Impact of Resource Scarcity on Product Use Creativity](#).” *Journal of Consumer Research*: February 2016. DOI: [10.1093/jcr/ucv051](https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucv051)



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