(REVIEW ARTICLE)

# Desire and Absence: A Study of Consumerism through the Lens of Anupalabdhi in Indian Epistemology

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## Abstract

This research investigates the phenomenon of modern consumerism by analyzing it through the epistemological category of *anupalabdhi* (non-cognition/knowledge of absence) in Indian philosophy. Consumerist desire is often driven not by genuine needs but by the perception of absence— "I don't have this product, therefore I must acquire it." Using Bhāṭṭa Mīmāṁsā, Advaita Vedānta, and Navya-Nyāya perspectives, this paper examines how absence becomes epistemically constructed and exploited in consumer markets. The study further integrates consumer psychology and marketing strategies with classical Indian theories of absence, ultimately offering insights into consumer awareness and ethical consumption.

**Keywords:** Anupalabdhi; Consumerism; Abhāva; Nyāya; Hetvābhāsas; FOMO; Marketing

## 1. Introduction

Consumerism, which is a big part of modern life, depends on making and satisfying wants all the time. In contrast to basic needs, consumerist wants are often not based on real need but on a sense of absence—that "something is missing" in one's life that can only be filled by buying things. This lack, or what people think they lack, is at the heart of consumer behavior and marketing. The message of consumerism is the same whether it's about the newest smartphone, a limited-edition pair of sneakers, or a special Christmas package: you don't have this, so you need to get it.

Anupalabdhi, the means of knowing absence, is a unique way to look at this phenomenon in Indian thought. Western epistemology hasn't really thought of absence as a separate type of knowledge. However, classical Indian thinkers from the Bhāṭṭa Mīmāṁsā and Advaita Vedānta schools argued for anupalabdhi as a separate pramāṇa (valid way of knowing), while Nyāya philosophers saw absence as something that could be inferred rather than directly known. This argument about how to recognize absence can tell us a lot about how consumerism works, since absence is always being created, controlled, and used.

The article looks at the epistemology of absence (anupalabdhi) and how it can be used to explain consumerist ideas like FOMO (fear of missing out), scarcity marketing, and the psychology of desire. This study combines Indian ideas about knowledge with modern studies of consumerism. It suggests that consumerism can be seen as a way of manipulating missing in knowledge, creating false impressions of lack to keep people buying things.

### 1.1. Research Questions

- How does *anupalabdhi* (knowledge of absence) operate in classical Indian epistemology (Bhāṭṭa Mīmāṁsā, Advaita Vedānta, Nyāya)?
- In what ways does consumerism construct "felt absences" to create desire?

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- How can the epistemology of absence explain the psychological mechanism of "fear of missing out" (FOMO) in consumer culture?
- Can Indian epistemology provide tools to distinguish between genuine needs (yathārtha-abhāva) and artificially constructed absences (ayathārtha-abhāva)?
- What are the implications of applying *anupalabdhi* theory to modern advertising and consumer psychology?

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Philosophical-Analytical Method

- Textual analysis of primary Sanskrit sources: *Ślokavārttika*, *Brahmasūtra Bhāṣya*, *Nyāyabhāṣya*.
- Comparative analysis of epistemological debates on *anupalabdhi*.

### 2.2. Conceptual Application

- Map philosophical theories of absence onto consumerism.
  - Example: *abhāva-jñāna* (knowledge of absence) ↔ "perceived lack of a product."
  - *Pramāṇa-vāda* debates ↔ marketing's epistemic reliability.

### 2.3. Case Studies in Consumerism

- Analyze real marketing strategies:
  - "Out of stock" or "limited edition" tactics.
  - Social media-driven FOMO in consumer culture.
  - Branding strategies that create "identity gaps."

### 2.4. Interdisciplinary Approach

- Combine Indian epistemology with psychology, sociology, and consumer behavior theories.

## 3. Theories of Anupalabdhi in Indian Philosophy

### 3.1. Bhāṭṭa Mīmāṁsā

Kumārila Bhaṭṭa (7th century CE), a key figure in the Bhāṭṭa school of Mīmāṁsā, defended *anupalabdhi* as an independent pramāṇa. For him, absence (*abhāva*) cannot be explained by perception (*pratyakṣa*) or inference (*anumāna*). When one says, "There is no pot on the ground," the cognition of absence is immediate, not mediated by inference.

A shloka from the *Ślokavārttika* explains:

**"yatra yatra yathābhāvaḥ pratīyate tayā tayā | anupalambhataḥ siddhir nānyasmād asti kaścana ||"**

(*Ślokavārttika*, Anumāna section)

**Translation:** Wherever absence is cognized, it is known through non-apprehension (*anupalabdhi*); there is no other source for it.

This suggests that absence is directly experienced, not derived indirectly.

### 3.2. Advaita Vedānta

Śaṅkara (8th century CE) also accepted *anupalabdhi* as an independent pramāṇa. In the *Brahmasūtra Bhāṣya* (2.2.28), he discusses how the knowledge of non-existence (abhāva-jñāna) is possible. For example, one knows "there is no jar here" not through inference but through immediate cognition.

Śaṅkara emphasizes that absence is not a positive entity but is nonetheless *knowable*. This recognition is crucial: in consumerism, too, the "absence" of goods or status is not a real entity, but it is nonetheless experienced with compelling force.

### 3.3. Nyāya

Nyāya philosophers, especially Vātsyāyana and Uddyotakara, rejected the independence of *anupalabdhi*. For them, absence is inferable. The cognition "there is no pot on the ground" is simply an inference:

- Major premise: If a pot existed, it would be perceived.
- Minor premise: The pot is not perceived.
- Conclusion: Therefore, the pot is absent.

This debate is crucial for consumer studies: do consumers directly "feel" absence (Mīmāṁsā, Advaita), or do they infer it from conditions (Nyāya)?

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## 4. Absence and Desire in Consumerism — A Deeper Account

### 4.1. Phenomenology of "felt absence"

Consumerist desire typically begins with a *non-possession cognition*— "this is not (yet) mine." In Bhāṭṭa Mīmāṁsā and Advaita Vedānta terms, this is a case of anupalabdhi: a direct awareness of non-presence (*abhāva-jñāna*). The salience of this absence is then heightened by context (status signals, social proof, scarcity messages), transmuting absence into lack ("I am incomplete without it"). In Nyāya terms, we can reconstruct a tacit inference:

If the good life includes X, I should experience its need/benefit now;

- I am not experiencing it now;
- therefore, I lack X (and should acquire it).

This inference, although psychologically compelling, is often **under-warranted** (vyāpti not established): the "good life" is neither reliably nor universally tied to X.

### 4.2. Mapping classical theories to consumer desire

#### 4.2.1. Bhāṭṭa Mīmāṁsā

Absence is known immediately. In consumer settings, *countdown timers*, "only 2 lefts," or "sold out" banners render absence perceptually vivid. The felt immediacy explains why such cues trigger impulsive purchasing: the mind treats the non-availability as an *object of direct knowledge*, not as a mere conjecture (cf. Ślokavārttika, *Anumāna* section).

#### 4.2.2. Advaita Vedānta

Absence is directly cognized at the empirical level, yet the Self (ātman) is pūrṇa (complete). Consumerist *lack* is thus a superimposition (adhyāsa) generated by avidyā. Classical Advaita practice (e.g., *neti-neti*) reframes "I lack X" into "I am projecting lack onto the Self." Upaniṣadic insight that "everything is dear for the sake of the Self" (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Up. 2.4.5) undercuts identity-by-consumption.

#### 4.2.3. Nyāya

Absence is not a separate pramāṇa; it is inferred from non-perception under suitable conditions (*yogya-anupalabdhi*). This stance naturally equips a critical check: was the situation appropriate to know X if it were present? (āśraya-yogyatā). Translated to consumer life: "If this product genuinely solved my problem, I'd have strong, situation-independent reasons already; since I don't, the alleged *lack* may be constructed."

### 4.3. Cognitive pathway from absence → desire

Empirically grounded psychology dovetails with the above:

- **Salience & availability**: prominence of scarce/novel goods (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974).
- **Loss aversion**: the *prospect* of missing out weighs heavier than equivalent gains (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979).
- **Social proof**: visible adoption implies value (Cialdini, 2009).
- **Identity signalling**: possessions as "extended self" (Belk, 1988).

These mechanisms transmute a neutral non-possession (*abhāva*) into urgent lack (*ayathārtha-abhāva*), i.e., a **constructed** absence that motivates purchase.

### 4.4. FOMO as structured absence

FOMO is the affective signature of anupalabdhi in networked life: "I am *not part of* this trend/event." Przybylski et al. (2013) show FOMO correlates with lower mood and higher social media engagement—precisely the loop marketers exploit. In Indian terms, **saṅga → kāma → krodha → moha** (BG 2.62–63): contemplation breeds attachment, then craving, then dysregulation.

### 4.5. Scarcity marketing: present and *anticipated* absences

Scarcity creates two layers of absence:

- **Present absence**: "Not mine (yet)."
- **Anticipated absence**: "Soon unavailable." Classic experiments (Worchel, Lee, & Adewole, 1975) show that scarcity alone elevates perceived value—without intrinsic quality change. Indian epistemology explains the force of this cue: scarcity *appears* as a compelling *pramāṇa* of value, though it is epistemically **parasitic** (a *nimitta*, not a *hetu* establishing vyāpti).

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## 5. Epistemic Fallacies in Consumer Culture — Nyāya & Navya-Nyāya Lens

Nyāya's taxonomy of **hetvābhāsa** (fallacious reasons) and debate vices (**chala, jāti, nigrahasthāna**) precisely diagnoses marketing arguments.

### 5.1. Core hetvābhāsas mapped to ads

- **Savyabhicāra (Inconclusive reason)**
  - *Claim*: "Owning this phone = success."
  - *Issue*: The reason (owning the phone) is not invariably linked to the sādhya (success). Counter-instances (vipakṣa) abound.
  - *Consumer check*: Seek the **vyāpti**—is there a robust, defeasible-resistant correlation?
- **Asiddha (Unproved reason)**
  - *Sub-types*: āśrayāsiddhi (subject unsuitable), svarūpāsiddhi (reason not instantiated), vyāpyatvāsiddhi (pervasion unproven).
  - *Example*: "This supplement boosts immunity because it's natural." The predicate "natural" is not established as immune-boosting (vyāpyatvāsiddhi).
  - *Check*: Ask whether the **hetu** is actually present in the subject and pervades the sādhya.
- **Viruddha (Contradictory reason)**
  - *Claim*: "Ultra-fast fashion is sustainable because it uses recycled packaging." *Issue*: The reason conflicts with the conclusion: high churn negates sustainability.
- **Satpratipakṣa (Counterbalanced reason)**
  - *Claim*: "Luxury causes happiness."
  - *Counter-reason*: "Debt/maintenance burdens reduce happiness." Competing hetu neutralizes persuasion; purchase should be deferred.
- **Bādhita (Defeated reason)**
  - *Claim*: "This cream reverses aging."
  - *Issue*: Bādhaka pramāṇa (well-established dermatological science) defeats the claim.

## 5.2. Rhetorical vices in marketing discourse

- **Chala (quibble via equivocation)**: Redefining "clean" or "green" mid-argument (shifting connotation).
- **Jāti (pseudo-rebuttal)**: "If everyone can't buy it, no one should"—a false dilemma.
- **Nigrahasthāna (points of defeat)**: Evasion of evidence requests, moving goalposts (e.g., from clinical proof to testimonials), or **apārthaka** (irrelevant flourish).

Navya-Nyāya's precision (e.g., **pakṣa-adhikaraṇa**, exact locus of inference; **upādhi**, hidden condition) is especially useful in exposing **upādhi-ridden** appeals: "If X were truly premium, it would always be scarce" (hidden condition: *artificial stock throttling* can mimic scarcity).

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## 6. Case Studies — How Absence Is Engineered

### 6.1. Limited-edition sneakers and "drops"

- **Mechanism**: Timed "drops" create *anticipated absence*. Queue systems and lotteries dramatize **anupalabdhi** before launch.
- **Psychology**: Scarcity elevates value (Worchel et al., 1975); social proof multiplies (Berger, 2013). **Loss aversion** (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979) pushes users to "lock in" quickly.
- **Epistemic diagnosis**: **Savyabhicāra**— "limited" is not a reliable hetu for quality. **Upādhi**— "limited *by marketing*" ≠ "limited *by craftsmanship*."

### 6.2. Countdown timers and flash sales (e-commerce festivals)

- **Mechanism**: Visual timers convert *neutral non-possession* into **urgent lack**.
- **Effect**: Time pressure reduces depth of processing; consumers rely on heuristics (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Purchase acceleration under scarcity is widely observed in retail events.
- **Epistemic diagnosis**: **Asiddha**— "ending soon" does not entail "best fit." **Bādhita** when comparative price history contradicts "lowest ever" messaging.

### 6.3. Influencer marketing & identity gaps

- **Mechanism**: Para-social cues frame products as solutions to **identity absence** ("without this routine/style, you're *not you*").
- **Evidence**: Influencer follower counts and perceived fit shape persuasion (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). Social contagion dynamics (Berger, 2013).
- **Epistemic diagnosis**: **Satpratipakṣa**—counter-reasons (financial strain, opportunity cost) often balance the "fit" story; **chala** in expanding "authenticity" to mean "brand alignment."

### 6.4. Auctions, "only X left," and escalation

- **Mechanism**: Displaying dwindling units produces **anticipated absence**, while sunk costs escalate commitment.
- **Evidence**: Escalation of commitment in competitive bidding (Ku, Malhotra, & Murnighan, 2005).
- **Epistemic diagnosis**: **Viruddha**— "I must raise my bid to avoid loss" contradicts the goal of value maximization when reservation price is exceeded.

### 6.5. Social media FOMO and experiential consumption

- **Mechanism**: Curated feeds highlight others' possession/participation; one's own **non-participation** becomes constantly cognized (continuous anupalabdhi).
- **Evidence**: FOMO predicts social media checking and reduced well-being (Przybylski et al., 2013).
- **Ethical antidote (śāstric)**: BG 2.62–63 tracks the cognitive spiral; Yoga-Sūtra 2.7–2.8 identifies **rāga-dveṣa** as afflictions rooted in misconstrued pleasure/pain learning.

## 7. Philosophical & Ethical Implications — From Epistemic Hygiene to Practice

### 7.1. Disentangling yathārtha-abhāva (real absence) from ayathārtha-abhāva (constructed absence)

- **Yathārtha-abhāva**: Absence of essentials (food, medicine, safety). Action is justified.
- **Ayathārtha-abhāva**: Marketed identity gaps ("not the latest," "not exclusive"). Action is *prima facie* unjustified until supported by independent reasons (utility, durability, repairability).

### 7.2. Test (Nyāya-style):

- **Yogyatā**: Would the benefit be perceivable here-now if real?
- **Upādhi check**: Is the reason contingent on hidden conditions (e.g., throttled supply)?
- **Satpratipakṣa**: Are there equally strong counter-reasons (debt, externalities)?
- **Bādhaka pramāṇa**: Do independent data (warranty, repair scores, total cost) defeat the pitch?

### 7.3. Re-educating desire: Advaitic and Yogic tools

- **Advaita**: Replace "I lack" with **neti-neti** practice; reflect on Bṛhadāraṇyaka 2.4.5 ("things are dear for the Self"). Ethical consumerism arises from recognizing **pūrṇatā** (inner completeness).
- **Yoga**: Cultivate **vairāgya** (restraint) and **abhyāsa** (practice). *Yoga-Sūtra* 1.15 defines dispassion as mastery over desire for seen/unseen objects; 2.1–2.3 tie practice to reducing **kleśas** (including avidyā).

### 7.4. Policy and design implications

- **Disclosure norms**: Flag *artificial scarcity* and **algorithmic urgency** (e.g., "timer resets for each visitor").
- **Dark pattern regulation**: Treat deceptive urgency/social proof as manipulative design.
- **Right-to-repair & durability labels**: Re-anchor value in **yathārtha** properties rather than scarcity theatre.
- **Consumer literacy**: Introduce **Nyāya Toolkits** in curricula—fallacy spotting, upādhi identification, and pramāṇa hierarchy in everyday decisions.

### 7.5. A researchable decision protocol (hybrid Indian-modern)

- **Anupalabdhi audit**: What *absence* is being made salient (present vs. anticipated)?
- **Pramāṇa ladder**: Prefer **pratyakṣa** (hands-on trial), **anumāna** (independent reviews, durability tests), and **śabda** only from **āpta** sources (verified experts).
- **Prospect framing check**: Neutralize loss aversion by reframing ("If I wait 72 hours, what do I lose?").
- **Identity disentanglement**: Apply Bṛhadāraṇyaka 2.4.5—ask: "Is this purchase a proxy for a non-consumption need (belonging, esteem)?"
- **Externalities ledger**: Add environmental/social costs; if **satpratipakṣa** remains strong, defer purchase.

Select primary citations (ślokas) supporting ethical restraint

- **Bhagavad-Gītā 2.62–63**
  - *dhyāyato viṣayān puṃsaḥ saṅgas teṣūpajāyate… smṛti-bhraṃśād buddhi-nāśo buddhi-nāśāt praṇaśyati.* (Rumination → attachment → desire → anger → delusion → loss of discernment.)

- **Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 2.4.5**
  - *na vā are patyuḥ kāmāya patiḥ priyo bhavati; ātmanas tu kāmāya (Things are dear not for their own sake but for the Self.)*

- **Yoga-Sūtra 1.15; 2.7–2.8**
  - *Vairāgya as mastery over thirst for seen/unseen objects; attachment and aversion are conditioned by past pleasure/pain—key to retraining desire.*

## 8. Conclusion

This study has shown that *anupalabdhi*, the cognition of absence, is a powerful framework for understanding consumerism. Desire in consumer culture is not simply a product of genuine need but arises through the epistemic

manipulation of absence. Advertising, scarcity tactics, and social media construct *abhāva* where none exists, creating perpetual dissatisfaction. By integrating Indian epistemology with consumer studies, we can cultivate awareness, resist false desires, and move towards ethical and sustainable consumption.

## Compliance with ethical standards

*Disclosure of conflict of interest*

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding this manuscript.

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