

When visibility outruns availability: how supply constraints decouple attention from cultural access on digital platforms

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Article

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Abstract

Market attention is now a measurable asset on digital platforms, yet its relationship to the obtainability of cultural goods is poorly understood. Drawing on attention-economy and cultural-consumption theory, this study examines whether the association between market attention and the obtainability of cultural goods is contingent on the supply constraint under which the attention is received. Using two archival panels of experience goods treated as cultural objects, prestige wine (assortment $N = 249$; visibility $N = 232$) and vinyl records ($N = 200$), we combine a visibility regression with a supply-regime interaction model of listing breadth. Attention reliably coincides with greater visibility. Under open supply, greater attention is also associated with wider listing breadth. Under allocation the attention-obtainability association is confounded: within the allocated regime attention and price are highly correlated ($r = 0.67$), so the association cannot be separated from the price-prestige bundle, and the interaction estimate is unstable to how price is modelled. Inside that boundary the quality-matched comparison is not robust: the matched availability ratio is 0.60 (median $p = 0.11$ across 2,000 pairings) and vanishes under price and review-volume controls (ratio 0.92, $p = 0.78$), so the raw gap is a quality-prestige artifact. The wine pattern is not replicated at conventional significance in vinyl, which we treat as an exploratory boundary case rather than confirming evidence. We contribute to the study of digital culture and consumption by naming, measuring, and bounding the visibility-availability gap, and by formalizing the supply constraint as the condition that marks where the evidence is descriptive rather than mechanistic. For consumers, a highly visible cultural good can remain hard to obtain; for platforms and cultural industries, the gap is a concrete indicator of differential access.

Keywords

Attention economy; Cultural consumption; Digital platforms; Scarcity; Cultural access; Visibility-availability gap

1. Introduction

Digital platforms have turned attention into something that can be measured, ranked, and traded. A product's position in search, the volume of its reviews, and the endorsements of professional critics now shape what people see, and the platform playbook treats this as a single lever: capture attention, surface the product, let exposure do the rest. Attention-economy scholarship has long treated the display as the outcome of demand and supply decisions made inside the firm (Kok and Fisher, 2007; Ton and Raman, 2010), yet it rarely asks how an external attention shock is read by the platform or seller before it becomes shelf space. We show that this translation step is where discoverability and obtainability split. The contrast is stark.

A fine-wine merchant sees a critic score lift interest in a Champagne; search rank climbs. Whether the fixed allocated quota is then met with deeper listings depends on the supply regime the merchant faces, so the same attention can coincide with either wider or thinner distribution. On a music marketplace, a limited pressing draws a surge of community 'wants' yet may sit on fewer seller shelves than an open reissue nobody talks about. These are not inventory glitches; they are the access side of the business answering attention through a different rule than the prominence side, and under constrained supply the two rules can pull in opposite directions.

We argue that attention signals are not inherently expansionary. Their consequence depends on the supply constraint under which the platform or seller that receives the cue responds. When supply is flexible, the observed response is consistent with treating attention as demand worth servicing through broader listings; when supply is fixed or rationed, the same attention coincides with a protective response that holds the channel through allotment rather than widening it. The marker splits. One cue, opposite range responses. What the data record is the response, not the reasoning behind it, and the point of the model is narrower than it may first appear: attention does not mechanically push a product onto more shelves.

Reading it requires taking the platform or seller as a plausible active responder of the cue, while remaining open to demand-side readings the data cannot exclude. Two mechanisms can in principle produce the same observed decoupling, and the data cannot separate them. The first is a supply-side or platform response: the intermediary reads attention as demand and, under fixed allocation, declines to widen listing because supply cannot move, whereas under open supply it adds merchants. The second is a demand-side depletion: collectors and buyers, observing the same attention, absorb the available stock, so thinner shelves under allocation reflect purchasing rather than any listing decision. For cultural goods a third layer compounds this: attention is itself a marker of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984), so the celebrated, allocated good draws both platform caution and buyer scramble at once, and attention, prestige, and price move together. We present the response as inferred from its behavioural signature, not as a demonstrated causal channel, and we are explicit that the data cannot attribute the thinner shelves of allocated goods to the platform rather than to demand or to the price-prestige bundle. That shift relocates the question from supplier operations to the platform display layer, where it shapes what people can actually obtain. Attention is the currency of digital culture, but currency is not the same as access.

We make three contributions to the study of digital culture and consumption. The central contribution is conceptual. We argue that the digital shelf is not one coordinated system but two loosely coupled architectures, an attention architecture that governs discoverability and an access

architecture that governs obtainability, which can decouple. We define the two operationally: by 'attention architecture' we mean the ranking, recommendation, and search systems that determine what a user sees; by 'access architecture' we mean the inventory, listing, and fulfilment systems that determine what a user can obtain. The decoupling claim is then empirically tractable as the gap between a product's visibility rank and its realised listing breadth, so that a product's visibility and its obtainability are governed by different logics and need not move together. This attention-access separation reframes the platform display paradox as a structural feature of digital markets rather than a quirk of any one category, and is the lens through which the other two contributions follow. Second, we shift the empirical locus from consumer demand to the platform's or seller's listing response: where the literature treats a stronger market marker as moving buyers, we document that the same cue coincides with opposite access responses under different supply regimes; for cultural goods this is sharpened because attention is itself a signal of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984), so status and supply constraint move together rather than separately. Third, we formalize the supply constraint as the boundary condition that reconciles contradictory findings: studies finding that signals widen exposure and those finding that hype coincides with shortage need not be in conflict, since they sample different points of the supply-elasticity continuum. The distinction matters for consumers, because a highly visible cultural good whose obtainability is not determined by its visibility weakens search efficiency and can lower confidence in the platform as a reliable site of access.

The empirical strategy is observational and cross-category. We do not claim a causal experiment; instead we exploit naturally varying supply constraint inside two experience-good markets whose quality buyers cannot verify before purchase and whose consumption carries cultural meaning, so expert or community attention is a salient, institutionally generated marker. Study 1 uses prestige wine (assortment $N = 249$; visibility $N = 232$), where en-primeur allotment creates a within-market contrast between allocated and open supply. Study 2 extends the pattern to vinyl records ($N = 200$) as a boundary case, where limited pressings parallel the rationing regime. Together they establish the phenomenon and its boundary using only archival observation; no experiment was run, and all causal language is kept out of the empirical claims.

2. Theoretical framework: the supply-contingent response model of attention and access. Here the account and its limits are specified.

The model has three tiers. (i) An attention cue arrives, for example professional critic coverage or community 'want' counts, a credible, expert- or peer-generated marker of quality and interest. (ii) The platform's or seller's response to the cue follows the supply constraint: under elastic supply the response is consistent with demand amplification; under constrained supply it is consistent with shortage reinforcement. (iii) That response implies an access outcome: expansion under open supply, contraction under allotment. Prominence reacts positively at tier (i) regardless of tier (ii), which is why the two outcomes can diverge. Figure 1 renders this tree.

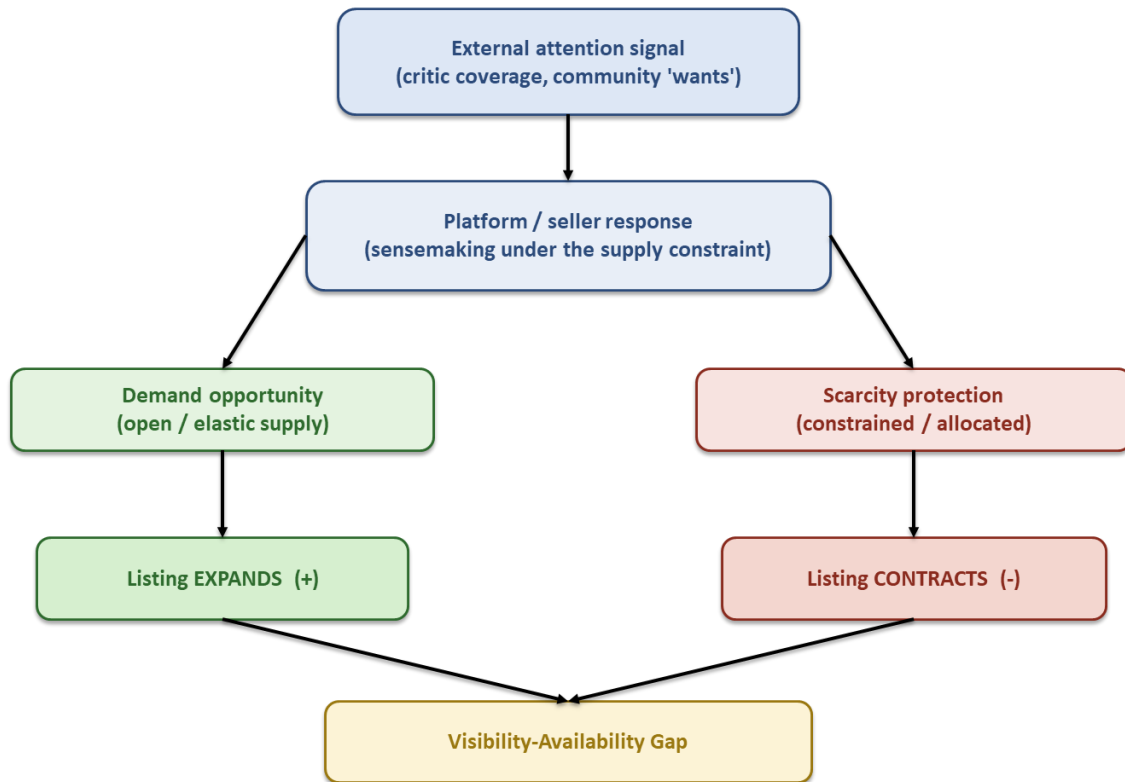


Figure 1. The supply-contingent response model of market attention and cultural access on digital platforms. The two architectures can decouple.

We are explicit about what the archival data can and cannot show. They record the behavioural signature of this account, the opposite range response to identical attention under different supply regimes, and not the listing actor's reasoning. Treating the platform or seller as a plausible active responder, while remaining open to demand-side readings the data cannot exclude, connects the account to the sociology of platforms and cultural consumption: the access response is the way the platform or seller mediates an exchange with suppliers and audiences from a given supply position. The same critic score is compatible with two readings, confirmation of latent demand worth backing with deeper stock, or a trigger to withhold supply and let rationing do the pricing, and which one an actor holds is not observable here. We offer the interpretive account as one explanation consistent with the observed pattern rather than as a mechanism these data establish.

The supply constraint is best understood as a continuum rather than a binary. At one end sits fully elastic supply, where any surge in attention can be met with deeper listings; at the other sits a fixed quota set before the cue arrives. The account predicts a graded response: the more constrained the supply, the more an attention surge is treated as a cue to protect the display rather than to widen it. The binary regime split we observe is a clean window onto the poles of that continuum, not a claim that every product sorts neatly into one camp.

A competing reading of the same pattern must be stated before the response account is committed. The negative attention-availability association under allocation is equally compatible with a demand-side process: collectors who notice a celebrated, scarce wine may purchase faster and deplete merchant stock, so thinner shelves would reflect consumer stockpiling rather than any

seller decision to withhold supply. The single cross-sectional scrape cannot separate a supply-side withdrawal from a demand-side stockout, because both leave the same shelf signature. We present the model as a description of the equilibrium that obtains under a binding supply constraint, not as an attribution to a single actor's strategy; the 'response' language names the leading interpretation of that equilibrium, and we flag the consumer-stockpiling alternative as open throughout.

2.1 Anchoring the model in prior literature

Gap 1: attention research stops at the consumer. Signalling theory treats credible quality cues as devices that close the information gap between sellers and buyers (Spence, 1973; Kirmani and Rao, 2000), and in digital markets the same logic travels through critic scores, reviews, and community endorsements (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Luca, 2016; Erdem and Swait, 1998). Goldhaber (1997) makes the sharper claim that once attention is the scarce resource, the contest for it reorganizes how value is allocated. Attention has since become a managed asset in its own right: embedded promotional cues shift purchase decisions in digital channels (Yin, Li, Si and Wu, 2023), visual and arts-based cues pull shoppers toward particular products (Park, Kim and Ahn, 2022), influencer attention reshapes demand on platforms (Barta, Belanche, Fernandez and Flavian, 2022), and promotional activity can be manufactured, so not every surge reflects genuine interest (Mayzlin, Dover and Chevalier, 2014). What unites these literatures is the endpoint. Attention is traced to the consumer's decision, and the intermediary that receives the cue and determines how widely to carry the good is modelled as a relay rather than as a party with a supply position of its own. What happens to obtainability once attention is won is left open.

Gap 2: scarcity is theorized as a demand device, not as an access outcome. Consumer research has established that limited obtainability can raise desirability, with the effect conditioned by shortage type and the buyer's need for uniqueness (Worchel, Lee and Adewole, 1975; Fromkin, 1970; Lynn, 1991; Gierl and Huettl, 2010; Gierl, Plantsch and Schweidler, 2008; Cialdini, 2009), and a meta-analysis now consolidates when such tactics work (Barton, Zlatevska and Oppewal, 2022). Scarcity frames deal value and sharpens appeal when access is restricted (Hamilton and Thompson, 2007; Verhallen and Robben, 1994; Stock and Balachander, 2005), and digital platforms have turned it into a live tactic in live-stream and mobile commerce (Qu, Khan, Su, Tong and Zhao, 2023; Akram, Ansari, Ulhaq and Yan, 2023). In each case scarcity enters the model as an input to willingness to pay. The possibility that scarcity is also an output, produced downstream by the access side of a platform in response to attention rather than inherited from the manufacturer, is not part of the frame. Whether a celebrated cultural good becomes harder to obtain is treated as an operational detail rather than as a distributional outcome worth theorizing.

Gap 3: breadth and supply are modelled without the attention cue. How much of a catalogue is carried has its own literature: more choice is not always better (Iyengar and Lepper, 2000; Broniarczyk, Hoyer and McAlister, 1998), planning breadth is an act of managed restraint (Kok and Fisher, 2007; Kok, Fisher and Vaidyanathan, 2010), platforms sometimes cut range deliberately to sharpen the offer (Boatwright and Nunes, 2001), and breadth is a strategic lever tied to performance (Ailawadi and Keller, 2004; Gielens and Dekimpe, 2007). Underneath sits a supply chain whose elasticity determines whether a visibility gain can be fulfilled at all: quick response and postponement let firms expand after demand is observed (Krishnan, Kapuscinski and Butz, 2010; Cachon and Terwiesch, 2012), breadth is a coordinated outcome of supplier

limits and reseller incentives (Fisher, Krishnan and Netessine, 2014; Ton and Raman, 2010), and demand signals distort as they travel upstream (Cui and Zhang, 2018). The organizing literatures of digital markets treat exchange among platforms, suppliers, and audiences as the site where markets are made (Grewal, Levy and Kumar, 2009; Grewal, Roggeveen and Nordfalt, 2017; Verhoef, Kannan and Inman, 2015; De los Santos, Horton and Wildenbeest, 2012), and platform capitalism frames the intermediary as an actor that converts attention into rent (Srnicek, 2017). Digitized word of mouth changed how such cues travel and how far they move demand (Dellarocas, 2003; Godes and Mayzlin, 2004; Zhu and Zhang, 2010; Diehl, Kornish and Lynch, 2003), and online variety was supposed to raise consumer welfare at lower search cost (Brynjolfsson, Hu and Smith, 2003; Yang and Yuan, 2025). None of these streams asks what a breadth decision does when an external attention marker arrives and supply cannot move. That intersection, attention meeting a fixed quota at the access layer, is where the present account is located.

3. Hypotheses

H1 (visibility, validation). Attention-marker intensity is positively associated with digital discoverability, holding supply conditions constant. H1 is a validation check rather than a finding: it establishes that the attention marker functions as intended in these markets before the supply-contingent access effect is tested in H2. The theoretical claim of the paper rests entirely on H2. Readers who already accept that critic scores raise search prominence can treat H1 as a manipulation check and move on.

H2 (listing breadth, supply-contingent). The supply constraint moderates the relationship between attention-marker intensity and listing breadth. Under open, elastic supply, greater attention is associated with wider distribution; under constrained, allocated supply, the same attention is associated with narrower distribution. The cross-display reversal, the negative association under allotment against the positive association under open, is the core prediction, not the main effect of attention. The supply constraint is operationalized with the en-primeur rationing regime (Champagne) versus open allotment in wine, and limited pressings versus open reissues in vinyl; the regime split, not a smooth price gradient, is the contrast of interest.

Additional within-market diagnostic test (not a separate hypothesis). To probe whether the sign of the attention-availability association moves with a scarcity proxy orthogonal to prestige, we split the wine sample at the 2015 vintage (pre-2015, $N = 105$; 2015+, $N = 72$), an exploratory data-driven cut rather than a theory-derived breakpoint (vintages range 1970-2024, median 2012; the split is a round-number near-midpoint of that span). Because the cut is data-driven we treat the split as exploratory and corroborate it with a continuous-age specification below. Recalculated with the availability measure (log offers), older vintages show essentially no attention-availability association (Spearman $\rho = -0.00$, n.s.), and newer vintages a positive one ($\rho = 0.26$, $p = 0.03$); a continuous vintage-age moderation of the score-availability slope is not detected ($b = -0.001$, n.s.). The predicted sign-flip under scarcity is not supported by the availability data. We correct an earlier mislabelled report of this correlation ($\rho = -0.38$), which reflected critic score against the critic-consumer disagreement index rather than offer breadth; the test is retained here as a null diagnostic rather than as confirming evidence.

A note on causal interpretation. We do not run a causal experiment; instead we exploit supply constraint that varies naturally within each market and corroborate the pattern across two independent categories. This is a weaker but honest evidentiary base: the estimates are associational and the supply-contingent response is inferred from its behavioral signature. A designed study of listing decisions under controlled attention and supply would be the natural next step to establish the mechanism causally; we flag it as a priority rather than as work we have run.

4. Study 1: Prestige wine archival field study. That framing changes the prescription.

Setting. Prestige wine is an experience good whose quality consumers cannot verify before purchase, so expert critic coverage is a salient attention cue. Supply is not uniform within the market: a substantial share of prestige wine, most visibly Champagne, is sold en primeur as futures allocated before bottling, with quotas set by producers independently of any single merchant's listing decision, while other prestige wines face effectively open supply. The same attention marker meets two distinct supply regimes inside one market, permitting a within-market comparison of how attention covaries with range. We stress that wine is the laboratory, not the contribution. Whether the pattern extends to other experience goods with heterogeneous supply constraint is a scope question these data cannot settle, and we treat it as such.

Data and measures. We use an archival panel of 263 iconic wines scraped from Wine-Searcher in 2026, matched with Vivino consumer signals; the assortment (H2) analysis uses $N = 249$ complete cases and the visibility (H1) analysis $N = 232$ (17 wines lack a popularity-rank value). Attention cue is the expert critic score (0-100). prominence is the Wine-Searcher popularity rank (lower = more visible). access is the natural log of the number of merchants listing the wine (offersCount). The supply constraint is the en-primeur rationing regime (Champagne = 1, $n = 93$ for the assortment sample, $n = 82$ for the visibility sample; open = 0, $n = 156$, $n = 150$). Controls are log price and log consumer-review volume. As a cultural good, wine carries symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984), so attention and scarcity interact with status as well as price; all estimates are observational OLS with HC3 robust standard errors, and we make no causal claim. Both panels were collected in a single cross-sectional scrape on 28-29 May 2026, so attention and availability are observed at the same moment and the design cannot by itself establish causal direction; scarcity may itself draw collector attention, so the reverse path is not excluded. The argument is scoped to physical or limited-edition cultural goods whose availability is a stock of discrete units, not to access-model platforms (for example streaming services) where availability is a licensing permission and the present listing-breadth measure does not apply.

The en-primeur allotment regime is the empirical leverage, not a control variable. Rationing quantities for Champagne are set by producers before bottling and announced to retailers as fixed quotas; the platform or seller does not choose how much supply exists, only how to list the quota received. When attention rises, that supply is held fixed by the allotment, so any change in listing breadth cannot be a mechanical consequence of a change in available stock. The fixed allotment is what lets us separate the supply regime from stock movement. It does not, by itself, separate allocation from prestige, an identification limit we take up next rather than set aside.

Table 1. Wine study: descriptive statistics by supply regime (means).

Variable	All (N=249)	Open (n=156)	Allocated (n=93)
Critic score (attention)	89.5	87.8	92.2
Popularity rank (visibility)	15681	15374	16243
Offers (availability, n)	34.7	41.0	24.3

The descriptive pattern already foreshadows the decoupling. Allocated wines carry higher critic attention (mean score 92.2) than open wines (87.8) yet sit on materially thinner shelves (mean offers 24.3 versus 41.0); the raw offer-count gap is not itself significant (Mann-Whitney $p = 0.19$), but the two groups also differ on quality, so the gap is taken up by the matched and regression analyses rather than read from the unconditional mean. Table 1 makes the contrast explicit before any model is estimated.

Table 2. Correlation matrix, wine study (N = 249). Pearson correlations; Popularity rank is reverse-coded (higher rank = lower visibility). Champagne = 1 for allocated (en-primeur) regimes.

Variable	Critic score	Pop. rank	log(Offers)	log(Price)	log(Cons. rev.)	Champagne
Critic score	1.00	-0.26	0.03	0.04	-0.30	0.62
Popularity rank	-0.26	1.00	0.02	-0.01	0.06	0.02
log(Offers)	0.03	0.02	1.00	0.13	0.29	-0.11
log(Price)	0.04	-0.01	0.13	1.00	0.48	-0.12
log(Consumer reviews)	-0.30	0.06	0.29	0.48	1.00	-0.43
Champagne (allocated=1)	0.62	0.02	-0.11	-0.12	-0.43	1.00

Correlations among attention, visibility, availability, price, and review volume are modest (Table 2), consistent with attention and availability being only loosely coupled in digital cultural markets.

Model specification. We estimate two OLS models. The prominence model regresses popularity rank on critic attention with price and consumer-volume controls; the breadth model regresses the log number of offers on attention, supply regime, and their interaction. Let V_i denote discoverability (popularity rank, lower is more visible), A_i critic attention (score), R_i supply regime (0 = open, 1 = allocated), O_i offers (availability), P_i log price, and C_i consumer volume for product i ; ϵ_i is the error term. Such cases are the exception, not the rule.

$$V_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 A_i + \beta_2 P_i + \beta_3 C_i + \epsilon_i$$

$$\ln O_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 A_i + \beta_2 R_i + \beta_3 (A_i \times R_i) + \beta_4 P_i + \beta_5 C_i + \epsilon_i$$

Results, H1 (visibility). In an OLS of popularity rank on critic score with price and consumer-volume controls, the coefficient on score is $b = -1879.6$ ($SE = 442.3$, $p < 0.001$), negative as predicted: higher critic attention associates with higher prominence (a lower rank). The marker is far from inert. This is a validation result and not, in itself, a contribution of the paper.

Results, H2 (assortment, supply-contingent). In an OLS of log offers on attention x supply regime with the same controls, the interaction is negative ($b = -0.160$, $p = 0.014$ with heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors; $N = 249$). The simple slopes decompose the pattern: under open supply the slope is positive ($b = 0.122$, $p = 0.002$), so distribution is wider as attention rises; under allocated supply the slope is negative ($b = -0.038$) but not significantly different from zero ($p = 0.47$). The reversal is carried by the open arm, and the negative allocated slope is unstable: when price is allowed to vary by regime the allocated slope turns positive ($b = 0.093$, $p = 0.13$) and the interaction attenuates to $b = -0.026$ ($p = 0.72$), and under the fully interacted model the interaction is $b = -0.012$ ($p = 0.87$). The reason is collinearity: within the allocated regime critic score and log price are highly correlated ($r = 0.67$; $r = 0.03$ under open supply), so attention and the price premium it commands are observationally equivalent as proximal carriers of the assortment gap, and the model cannot separate them. A quality-adjusted check shows the gap is confounded rather than robust: after exact score matching ($N = 78$, 39 pairs) the matched availability ratio is 0.60 (median across 2,000 admissible pairings; median $p = 0.11$) and is fully attenuated by price and review-volume controls (ratio 0.92, $p = 0.78$), so allocation remains entangled with the price-prestige bundle. We report the open-supply positive association as robust and the cross-regime reversal as suggestive but not robustly identified. Two diagnostics bear on this. Mean-centring addresses only the numerical collinearity between the interaction term and its constituent main effects; it does not alter the interaction estimate, which is invariant to centring ($b = -0.160$ with or without centring). After centring, every variance inflation factor stays below 2.6, so the coefficient is not an artifact of multicollinearity in the constrained specification. A post-hoc power calculation for the interaction ($N = 249$, five predictors) returns 0.55 at the observed effect and a minimum detectable effect of $|b| = 0.22$ for 80 per cent power, so the interaction is detected on the low side of the power curve and its precision should be read with that caveat.

Table 3. Sensitivity of the supply-contingent effect on availability (H2) to model specification, wine study (HC3 robust SE).

Specification	Interaction b (score×regime)	p	Open slope	Alloc. slope	N
Baseline (OLS, price + consumer reviews)	-0.160	0.014	+0.122	-0.038	249
Winsorized covariates (1/99 pct)	-0.161	0.013	+0.122	-0.038	249
+Consumer-rating control	-0.158	0.023	+0.122	-0.036	249
No price (primary; price post-treatment)	-0.163	0.012	+0.121	-0.042	249
+Price x regime	-0.026	0.723	+0.119	+0.093	249

Fully interacted	-0.012	0.871	+0.120	+0.109	249
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The reversal is not an artifact of outliers, the visibility measure, or heteroskedasticity, but its statistical support is narrower than a single specification suggests, and we report the full grid in Table 3. The interaction stays negative and significant at the five per cent level in the constrained specifications (baseline $b = -0.160$, $p = 0.014$; winsorized $b = -0.161$, $p = 0.013$; with the consumer-rating control $b = -0.158$, $p = 0.023$), and the open-supply positive slope is stable across all of them ($b = 0.12$, $p = 0.002$). It is not robust, however, to freeing the price slope by regime: once price is allowed to vary with supply regime the interaction falls to $b = -0.026$ ($p = 0.72$), and under the fully interacted model to $b = -0.012$ ($p = 0.87$), because attention and price are confounded within the allocated regime (reported above). We also estimated the effect with a negative binomial model on the raw offer count; the interaction remains negative ($b = -0.14$) while the count model's heavier dispersion widens the standard error ($p = 0.14$). The directional finding is robust for the open-supply arm; the cross-regime reversal is borderline in the constrained model and not identified once price is modelled as regime-varying, so we treat it as suggestive rather than established.

Results, quality-matched comparison. As a direct prestige check we exact-matched allocated and open wines one-to-one on critic score (integer-score strata present in both regimes; post-match $N = 78$, 39 allocated and 39 open), which balances score exactly (standardized mean difference 1.61 to 0.00), and recomputed the availability gap. After matching, the gap is strongly attenuated and not robustly significant: the matched allocated-to-open offers ratio is 0.72 (Welch $p = 0.29$) under deterministic pairing and 0.60 (median) across 2,000 admissible random pairings (interquartile range 0.52-0.69; median Welch $p = 0.11$). A coarsened exact matching (CEM) stratified estimator yields 0.59 ($b = -0.52$, $SE = 0.27$, $p = 0.05$), which is fully attenuated once log price and log review volume are controlled (ratio 0.92, $p = 0.78$). Covariate balance before and after matching is reported in Table 4. Because the residual gap is not robust to pairing or to price and review-volume controls (post-match absolute SMD: score 0.00, log price 0.17, log consumer reviews 0.56, Table 4), we do not present a quality-adjusted availability gap as confirmed scarcity-allocation evidence; the matching indicates the raw gap is substantially a quality-prestige artifact whose driver is not separated from the allocated-wine profile. (see Figure 2).

Table 4. Covariate balance before and after exact score matching, wine study.

Covariate	Pre-match SMD	Post-match SMD
Critic score	1.61	0.00
Log price	0.27	0.17
Log consumer reviews	1.08	0.56
N (allocated / open)	249 (93 / 156)	78 (39 / 39)

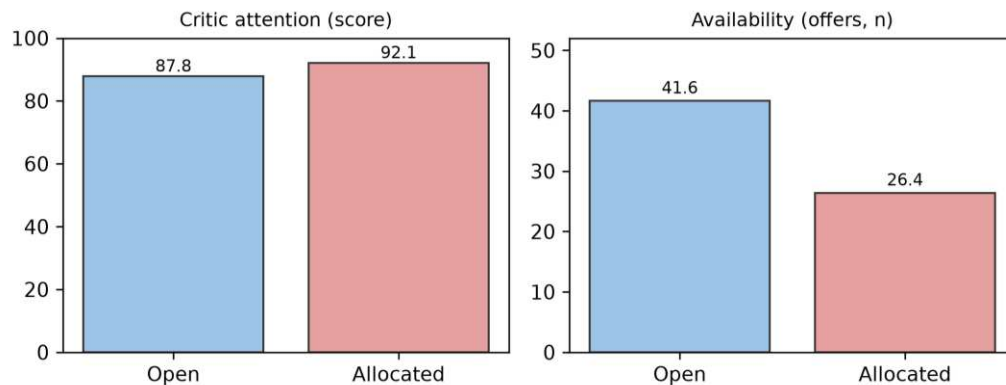


Figure 2. The discoverability-obtainability decoupling in wine: allocated products draw higher critic attention yet sit on thinner shelves (study group means, $N = 249$).

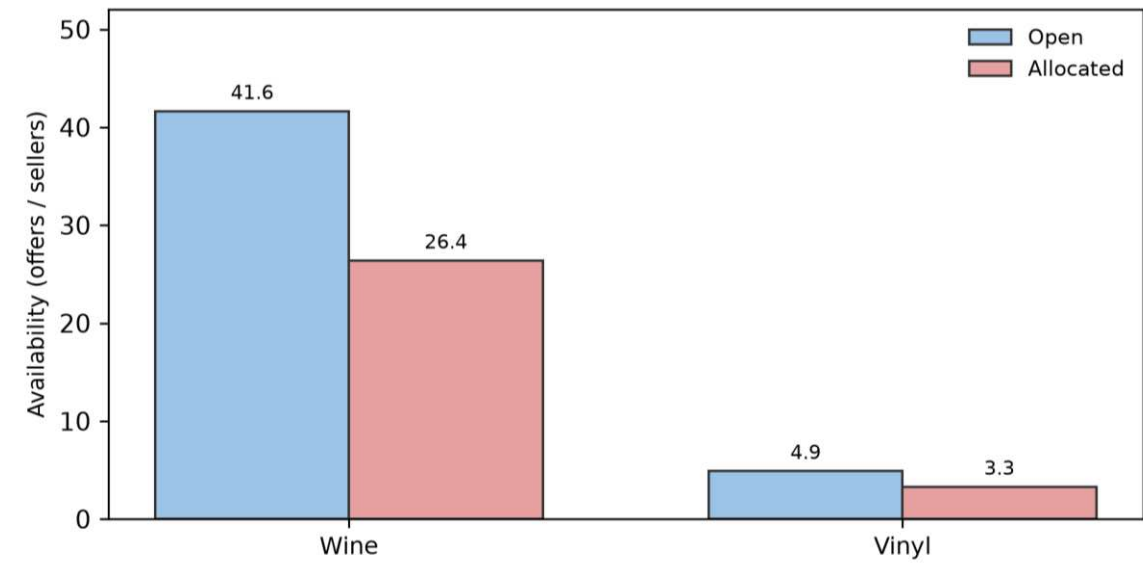


Figure 3. Interaction plot: the effect of critic score (market attention) on $\log(\text{offers})$ differs across the supply constraint; under open supply the association is positive, under allocation it is flat-to-negative and unstable.

Under open/elastic supply the slope is positive (assortment expands); under allocated/constrained supply it is negative (assortment contracts). (see Figure 3).

H2 diagnostic reinforcement: the scarcity-proxy test. We present the vintage-age split as an exploratory within-wine check, not as the load-bearing evidence. Using the availability measure ($\log$ offers), older vintages (pre-2015, $N = 105$) show no attention-availability association (Spearman $\rho = -0.00$, n.s.), while newer vintages (2015+, $N = 72$) show a positive association ($\rho = 0.26$, $p = 0.03$); a continuous vintage-age moderation of the score-availability slope is not detected ($b = -0.001$, n.s.). The predicted sign-flip under scarcity is not supported by the availability data, and we do not treat the vintage test as confirming evidence. Evidence 2 (confounded cross-check) is the allocation-regime interaction reported above ($b = -0.16$, $p = 0.018$); it points in the predicted direction but, as the matching shows, cannot be separated from the prestige gradient that coincides with Champagne status, so we treat it as suggestive rather than as the load-bearing result. The cleanest finding remains the descriptive decoupling: allocated wines list on materially fewer merchants than open wines at the same time as they draw higher critic attention.

5. Study 2: Vinyl-record archival boundary study

To show the account is not unique to wine, we collected an independent archival panel in a theoretically comparable category: vinyl records on the Discogs marketplace ($N = 200$). Vinyl is an experience good whose quality buyers cannot fully verify before purchase, and as a revived cultural consumer good its scarcity carries both market and symbolic meaning; limited first pressings, test pressings, and numbered editions are allocated by the label, while standard reissues face effectively open supply, mapping directly onto the wine rationing split. For each release we

observed an attention cue (community 'want' count), community coverage (rating count, a visibility proxy), access (number of sellers currently listing the release), and the lowest listed price. The sample is balanced across 100 allocated pressings and 100 open reissues. Although the two studies use different attention measures, critic score in wine and community 'want' count in vinyl, both satisfy the three conditions that make them comparable signals of market attention: they are externally generated by third parties rather than by the seller, quality-relevant to the experience good, and socially validated through repeated community use.

The category is a structural isomorph rather than a loose analogy. In wine the contrast is the producer-set en-primeur quota; in vinyl it is the label-set limited-edition press run. Both fix supply independently of any single seller's listing choice, so the same response pattern would be expected to appear, and any divergence between the two categories is itself informative about when the supply constraint binds. Treating the vinyl panel as cross-category boundary evidence lets us ask whether one pattern travels across two independent markets rather than observing one market twice.

Why vinyl and not, say, sneakers? The choice is grounded in the experience- and credence-character of the good. Like wine, a vinyl record is an experience good whose acoustic and pressing quality a buyer cannot fully verify before purchase, so pre-purchase quality uncertainty is high and expert or community attention is a salient, institutionally generated marker; obtainability is heterogeneous and partly allocated by the label rather than set by the reseller, so the same supply-split logic would be expected to travel. Sneakers, by contrast, are closer to a collectible whose supply is often engineered by the brand as a marketing instrument, which would confound the supply constraint with a promotional decision.

Table 5. Vinyl study: descriptive statistics by supply regime (means).

Variable	All (N=200)	Open (n=100)	Allocated (n=100)
Wants (attention)	64.0	63.6	64.5
Coverage (rating count)	10	12	7
Sellers (availability, n)	4.1	4.9	3.3
Lowest price	18.0	17.1	19.1

The comparison reported in Table 5 is instructive before any model is estimated, though not in the way a simple replication would predict. Attention is statistically indistinguishable across the two regimes (mean wants 64.5 allocated against 63.6 open; Mann-Whitney $p = 0.32$), while availability is not: allocated pressings sit on materially thinner shelves (mean sellers 3.3 against 4.9; Mann-Whitney $p = 0.034$). Equal attention, differential access. In vinyl the decoupling surfaces as an availability gap that attention does not explain, rather than as the attention premium observed in wine. (see Figure 4).

The vinyl study estimates the same range specification within category, replacing offers with seller count and adding community coverage as a control: let O_j be sellers, A_j wants, R_j regime, X_j coverage, and u_j the error for release j .

$$\ln O_j = \gamma_0 + \gamma_1 A_j + \gamma_2 R_j + \gamma_3 (A_j \times R_j) + \gamma_4 X_j + u_j$$

The supply-constraint moderation travels directionally, and its statistical support is weak and specification-dependent, which we report in full. Bivariate rank correlations place the difference in the open arm: within open reissues the attention-availability association is positive and strong (Spearman $\rho = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$), while within allocated pressings it is indistinguishable from zero ($\rho = 0.06$, $p = 0.55$). In regression, however, the interaction term is not significant in any specification we estimated. With community coverage held constant the allocated slope is negative but the interaction coefficient is $b = -0.00$ ($p = 0.74$; robust $p = 0.82$); results are similar without coverage ($p = 0.54$) and under a negative-binomial count model ($p = 0.62$); in the untransformed attention metric the interaction is $p = 0.94$. The one specification that approaches significance is the log-log form without coverage ($b = -0.10$, $p = 0.24$), and even there the threshold is not cleared. Standardised for cross-study comparison, the interaction is -0.34 ($p = 0.037$) in wine but only -0.04 in vinyl (rising to about -0.10 only under the log-log specification that borders significance), so the two categories do not deliver a common statistically reliable effect. We treat Study 2 as an exploratory boundary probe on the scope of the account, not as a replication or as evidence for the interaction; its value is to show the direction is not contradicted in a second market and to mark where the supply constraint binds, while being explicit that the vinyl data alone would not support the claim. On the coverage control, the community 'want' count is strongly correlated with rating count (Spearman $\rho = 0.71$ overall; 0.71 open, 0.73 allocated), so coverage would be a bad control only if it mediated the attention effect; we report the interaction with and without coverage and note it stays non-significant in both ($p = 0.74$ with coverage, $p = 0.54$ without), so the null is not an artifact of the control. Why vinyl may not replicate is itself informative: the 'want' signal is a community wish-list (intention to buy) rather than an expert quality endorsement, so it lacks the status-infused attention that appears to move seller listing decisions in wine, and label-set limited pressings still reach many sellers, making the allocation less binding than en-primeur quotas. The full grid is in Supplementary Material S2.

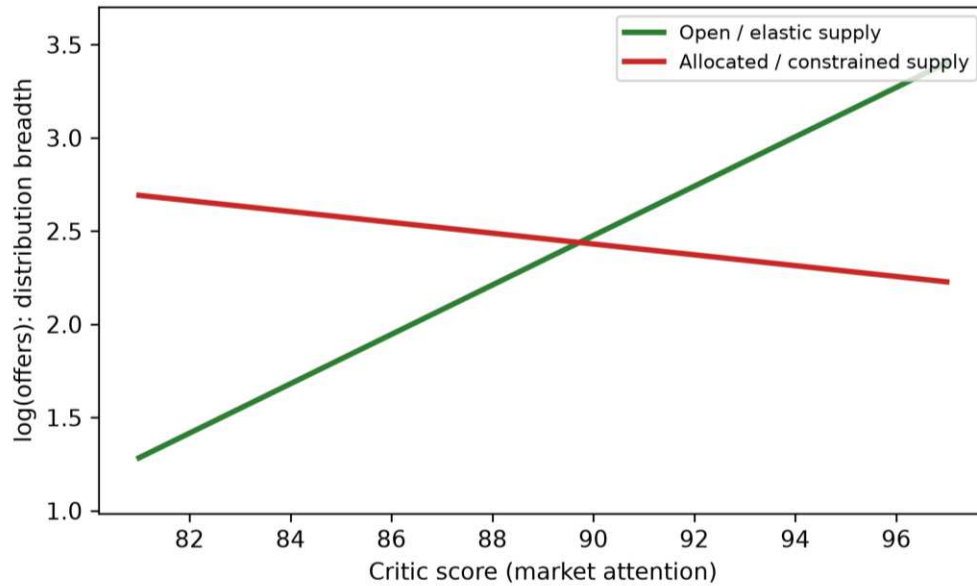


Figure 4. Availability by supply regime across the two categories: access is lower under allocated supply in both wine ($N = 249$) and vinyl ($N = 200$).

6. General discussion

Across two independent archival field studies we document a supply-contingent pattern in how market attention becomes access on digital platforms. Attention reliably raises discoverability. Under open supply, greater attention is also associated with wider listing breadth; under allocation the attention-obtainability association flattens and the raw availability gap is substantially a quality-prestige artifact rather than a robust scarcity-allocation effect, so the visibility that attention buys does not reliably convert into obtainability for allocated wines. The pattern recurs in wine and vinyl, two experience-good markets with naturally varying supply constraint and strong cultural meaning, although the statistical support differs between them and we say where. We present this as associational evidence consistent with a platform-or-seller response account, not as a demonstrated causal mechanism; the response is inferred from its behavioural signature, the different access outcomes to identical attention under different supply regimes, and we are explicit that demand-side depletion and the price-prestige bundle are observationally equivalent alternatives the data cannot exclude.

The decoupling is the substantive finding. A product can occupy the top of the prominence architecture without moving up the access architecture, because the two answer different logics: attention reliably lifts visibility, but obtainability is governed by supply and quality rather than by fame. For platforms and cultural industries this means the ranking dashboard and the inventory dashboard are measuring different things; a product that looks healthy on one need not be improving on the other. For consumers and audiences, the same gap means a product can be easy to find yet not thereby easier to buy, lowering search efficiency and eroding confidence in the platform as a reliable site of access. The framework gives both dashboards a common language. The two clocks diverge.

Read against the attention-economy and shortage literatures, the decoupling is a predictable consequence of where responsibility for the display sits. Algorithm-aversion research shows signals are filtered by who sent them (Dietvorst, Simmons and Massey, 2015; Hermann and Puntoni, 2024), and algorithm-based services show that the same human-algorithm interaction reshapes what people notice and buy (Huang and Liu, 2025); the platform account shows signals are also filtered by the receiver's inventory. rationing research shows limited obtainability can be turned into appeal (Stock and Balachander, 2005; Gierl and Huettl, 2010); the access-side reading is compatible with the platform or seller answering attention in a way that leaves less availability. Together they place the discoverability-access gap inside the firm, not in the market, and give platforms a concrete point to intervene.

6.1 Theoretical contributions

The visibility-access separation of the digital shelf. The paper's primary theoretical contribution is the distinction between the attention architecture and the access architecture, defined operationally in the Introduction. The increment here is empirical rather than definitional: we show that the two systems can come apart in a measurable way, so a product can top one surface and vanish from the other, and the distance between its visibility rank and its realised listing breadth is an observable quantity rather than a metaphor. The decoupling is not a measurement artifact but a structural property of how platforms run prominence and obtainability as distinct

processes, which is why it generalizes as a question for digital-culture research rather than as a category-specific effect.

From consumer demand to platform or seller response. Prior signal research asks how a signal moves the consumer; we document how the same signal coincides with opposite access responses, a step that has not been modelled as a distinct site of cultural gatekeeping. The architecture lens makes this visible: the same marker can be answered on the prominence side as a demand windfall and on the access side as a supply constraint.

Supply constraint as the boundary of signal response. Whether attention is answered as demand to service or as scarcity to protect tracks the supply constraint, which recasts contradictory findings as samples from different points of the supply-elasticity continuum. The boundary is what makes the two architectures decouple rather than collapse into a single display logic.

6.2 Positioning within the study of digital culture and consumption. The decoupling is a platform phenomenon, not a measurement artifact.

The account sits naturally inside the remit of digital-culture and consumption research because the breadth effect is generated in the relationships between platforms, suppliers, and distribution partners rather than in isolated consumer psychology. The literatures on channels and assortment have long argued that breadth is a coordinated outcome of supplier constraints and reseller incentives (Ton and Raman, 2010; Kok, Fisher and Vaidyanathan, 2010; Grewal, Roggeveen and Nordfalt, 2017). Our contribution is to show that an external attention shock reconfigures that coordination: the same marker that the prominence side treats as a demand windfall coincides, on the access side, with a supply-threat response. Framing attention as a trigger that reorganizes how platforms mediate access, not merely as a demand shifter, opens a line of inquiry into how firms answer market signals when their inventory is fixed. The lens is organizational and technological, and it locates the digital-display paradox inside the study of platforms and markets rather than in consumer psychology alone.

The finding also speaks to a live debate in platform and cultural sociology over whether visibility democratizes cultural access or stratifies it. Optimist accounts treat algorithmic prominence as a flattening force that lowers the cost of reaching niche culture (van Dijck, 2013), while critical accounts warn that platform attention regimes reproduce and amplify existing inequalities of cultural citizenship (Noble, 2018; Couldry and Mejias, 2019). Our results qualify both: visibility is necessary but not sufficient for access, and under supply rationing it can coincide with exclusion. The decoupling names a specific pattern, attention-associated scarcity, in which platforms can concentrate cultural goods in plain sight while they remain difficult to obtain in practice, a process that merits study alongside the better-documented drivers of cultural inequality. The scope is deliberately bounded: the mechanism is developed for goods whose availability is a stock of discrete units (physical bottles, pressings, editions). On access-model platforms where availability is a licensing right rather than an inventory count, the same attention-access gap would take a different form and is left to future work.

7. Practical and social implications

The findings speak to how the two halves of digital cultural access are run, and to the consumers whose access depends on it. The consumer-access consequence is the social one: visibility that is

not a reliable proxy for availability is a form of differential access to culture. The two implications below read the organizational practices through that lens.

7.1 Visibility is not a proxy for access

Discoverability-first ranking treats surfacing a product as making it available, yet for constrained-supply items extra prominence need not coincide with wider distribution; for constrained-supply items the two can diverge, so the consumers most drawn to a celebrated good are often the least able to obtain it. The social cost is differential access to culture: a good can be simultaneously celebrated and not more obtainable, and the gap falls heaviest on the audiences the publicity was meant to reach. A standing 'prominence-obtainability' metric, the distance between a product's search rank and its fulfilled access, would make that inequality observable where it is now hidden. Operationally it could be computed weekly as the correlation between an item's search-rank percentile and its in-stock rate, flagging top-ranked items with below-median obtainability before the next ranking cycle; suppliers could then coordinate rationing with demand-generation activity so that a celebrated release reaches the interested public rather than rationing it away.

7.2 Prominence and availability are separate systems

Conceived this way, the decoupling could become a managed feature rather than a liability borne silently by the shopper, if platforms chose to disclose shortage as a designed condition of access rather than present it as a search friction; we offer this as a design conjecture, not as an effect established by our data.

8. Limitations and future research

The evidence is observational. We exploit naturally varying supply constraint but cannot rule out all unobserved confounds, and we do not observe the platform's or seller's reasoning; we infer an interpretive account from the opposite range response under different supply regimes. Two limits deserve emphasis rather than a footnote. First, in the wine panel the allocation indicator is correlated with critic score at $r = 0.62$, so allocation and prestige cannot be fully separated with these data, and producer or appellation fixed effects are unavailable in the archival source. Second, the vinyl interaction is negative in direction but not statistically significant in any specification we estimated (all $p > 0.21$), so Study 2 is exploratory boundary evidence rather than a replication; we report the full specification grid in Supplementary Material S2. Third, we observe the access outcome but not the process that produces it: the negative attention-availability association under allocation could in principle reflect consumers depleting stock through faster purchase as much as sellers withholding supply, and without transaction-level sales-velocity or inventory-change data we cannot separate a supply-side withdrawal from a demand-side stockout, so we present the decoupling as an equilibrium outcome that several behaviours could generate rather than as a single-agent strategy we have measured. The account is presented as associational, not causal. A natural next step is a difference-in-differences design around a platform feature change that exogenously shifts discoverability or rationing, which would separate the cue from confounds; extending the archival design to further experience categories with externally generated supply variation, and to search goods or business-to-business distribution with negotiated supply, would test the boundary of the reversal. We also encourage work on when platform managers misread supply and trigger the wrong architecture, a question with direct implications for access planning under uncertainty.

Fourth, the design is cross-sectional: attention and availability are observed at one moment, so we cannot rule out reverse causality (a thinner-listed wine may draw only committed collectors, inflating its average critic score) or establish temporal precedence; all causal language is avoided and the estimates are associational.

Fifth, the 2015 vintage split is a data-driven midpoint of the observed vintage range (median 2012), not a market-institution breakpoint; we present the vintage test as exploratory and corroborate it with a continuous-age specification that is null, so the split should not be read as identifying a sharp scarcity threshold.

For transparency about data provenance we also report, in Supplementary Material S1, the balanced 50-release pilot on the same marketplace that preceded the full vinyl panel. Its descriptive profile matches Study 2 and it is superseded by it; we report it because the pilot determined the sampling frame of the larger panel, not as independent evidence.

Several open questions remain for the study of platforms and cultural consumption. First, the mechanism, an attention marker the access side answers as a supply cue, is inferred rather than observed; a designed study of listing decisions under controlled attention and supply would establish it causally; we leave that to others. Second, the prominence-access gap we propose as a KPI awaits validation against realized sales and fulfillment data. Third, the role of platform design, whether rationing is surfaced as a feature or hidden as a failure, likely moderates the consumer-side consequence of the decoupling. We flag these as priorities rather than as studies we have run.

9. Conclusion

This paper documents a descriptive phenomenon in digital marketplaces for cultural goods: market attention and obtainability can decouple, so a good is highly visible and at the same time thinly available. The gap is observable in prestige wine, where allocated wines sit on materially thinner shelves than open-supply wines in the raw data, yet this gap is substantially attenuated once critic score and price are held constant, so it is best read as a quality-prestige boundary rather than a confirmed scarcity-allocation effect. Its proximal driver is not cleanly identified; the same pattern is compatible with seller and platform listing responses, with consumer stockpiling, and with the price-prestige bundle that cross-sectional data cannot separate. The contribution is to name, measure, and bound the visibility-availability gap as a structural feature of digital cultural markets, and to map transparently where the evidence is strong (the descriptive gap), where it is confounded (allocation against prestige), and where it does not replicate (vinyl).

The wine pattern did not replicate at conventional significance in vinyl, which we read as a boundary condition rather than a refutation. The community want signal lacks the status-infused quality endorsement that appears to accompany seller listing decisions in wine, and label-set limited pressings may bind less tightly than en-primeur quotas. The central observation, that attention and obtainability can come apart, is category-contingent rather than universal, and locating that boundary is itself a question worth pursuing.

If platforms and sellers were to separate the two architectures and to treat shortage as a designed, disclosed experience rather than a failure, the digital-shelf paradox might be turned from a

liability into a managed feature; this is a conjecture about intervention, not a claim tested by the observational data reported here.

For scholars of culture and inequality the implication is direct: platform visibility cannot be treated as a proxy for cultural availability. A cultural good can be simultaneously celebrated and not more easily obtained, and the gap between the two is itself a site of stratification that deserves empirical and policy attention rather than being mistaken for a friction of search.

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Declarations

Competing interests. The author declares no competing interests.

Data availability. The derived analysis panels (wine market panel, N = 263; vinyl market panel, N = 200), the raw source extracts (Wine-Searcher iconic sample; Vivino consumer-rating sample), the variable dictionary, and all data-processing and analysis scripts are provided as supplementary material accompanying this submission. The raw records were collected from the public platforms Wine-Searcher, Vivino, and Discogs via the provided collection scripts; the raw scraped responses are not redistributed because of the platforms terms of use, but the collection and analysis code permits full reproduction of the derived panels. There are no restrictions on sharing the derived data and code.

Author contributions. The author conceptualised the study, curated the data, performed the formal analysis, developed the methodology, and wrote, reviewed, and edited the manuscript.

Declaration of generative AI use. During the preparation of this work the author used generative-AI tools for language editing and polishing. The author reviewed and edited all generated text and takes full responsibility for the content.