Content Analysis of Scarcity Promotional Messages

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  Background and Purpose. Scarcity refers to the limited supply of a commodity, a fundamental concept in economics (Lynn, 2008). Scarcity promotions have been frequently utilized in the marketplace, and their persuasive power has been acknowledged by both practitioners and academics (Gierl & Huettl, 2010). According to the commodity theory (Brock, 1968), a limited availability of goods, services, or opportunities influences consumers‟ perceived scarcity and results in purchase intention by influencing consumer value perceptions (Lynn, 1989). However, the relative effectiveness of scarcity promotions may differ depending on various factors, such as scarcity wordings (i.e., wordings used in scarcity promotional messages), scarcity formats (i.e., what is limited), and scarcity contexts (i.e., marketing environments in which the limited offering is presented) used in the promotions. Therefore, scarcity promotions must be planned and applied with careful consideration of the potential factors influencing their relative effectiveness. However, little systematic research has been conducted to identify factors that impact the scarcity promotion effectiveness. As a first step to address this gap in the literature, the purpose of this study is to identify scarcity wordings, formats, and contexts used in existing scarcity promotional messages through content analysis of scarcity promotions featured in one fashion magazine, *Vogue,* and one apparel trade publication, *Woman's Wear Daily* (WWD).

  Method. Vogue and *WWD* were selected for the content analysis because they are one of the most representative fashion magazines and trade publications, respectively, with long histories, many subscribers, and good reputations. The (1) advertisements, (2) editorial pages, (3) short news clips, and (4) featured news articles containing scarcity promotions published in *Vogue* (monthly) and *WWD* (daily) issues of four months (March, June, September, and December) of each of the last five years (2008 through 2012) were content-analyzed. Through a preliminary examination of these issues, three major coding themes were developed including „scarcity wordings,‟ „scarcity formats,‟ and „scarcity contexts.‟ Three words or phrases were used in conveying a limitation of an offering coding categories (i.e., scarcity wording), which included "limited edition," "exclusive (or exclusively)," and "only." The scarcity format theme had four coding categories: "time limit," "quantity limit," "place limit," and "unspecified." Finally, the scarcity context theme consisted of six categories: "co-branding," "celebrity endorsement," "expert endorsement," "cause-related marketing (CRM)," "special events," and "unspecified." A total of 331contents were collected and coded including 88 and 0 advertisements, 7 and 2 editorial pages, 11 and 55 news clips, and 3 and 165 featured news articles from *Vogue* and *WWD*, respectively. Two coders independently coded the contents using the coding scheme. The initial inter-coder reliability was 88.3%. Through negotiation between the two coders, all disagreed-upon codes were reconciled.

Results. In *Vogue*, scarcity messages were found mostly in advertisements (80.7%), followed by short news clips (10%), editorial pages (6.5%), and featured news articles (2.8%). In *WWD*, most scarcity messages were found in featured news articles (74.3%), followed by short news clips (24.8%) and editorial pages (0.9%). No scarcity messages were found in advertisements in *WWD*. In both publications, „only" was the least utilized scarcity wording (12.9% in *Vogue* and 0.9% in *WWD*). *"Exclusive (exclusively)"* (55%) was the most frequently utilized scarcity wording in *Vogue*, whereas the most used scarcity wording in *WWD* was „limited-edition" (64%). In terms of scarcity formats, place limits (limiting the marketing location; 56.9% in *Vogue* and 53.2% in *WWD*) were more frequently used than limiting the duration of promotion (i.e., time limit; 9.2% in *Vogue* and 4.1% in *WWD*) or available product quantity (i.e., quantity limit; 12.8% in *Vogue* and 10.8% in *WWD*). Regarding scarcity contexts, many scarcity messages were operated in general marketing contexts (*Vogue*: 61%, *WWD*: 25.2%). Among those that identified special promotion contexts, scarcity messages were utilized most frequently for co-branding promotions (*Vogue*: 25.7%, *WWD*: 45.5%), followed by sponsoring special event (*Vogue*: 14.7%, *WWD*: 24.3%), artists/experts endorsement (*Vogue*: 6.4%, *WWD*: 7.2%), celebrity endorsement (*Vogue*: 2.8%, *WWD*: 8.1%), or CRM (*Vogue*: 3.7%, *WWD*: 5.9%) promotions. It should also be noted that scarcity messages were not always used for a single marketing context. For instance, scarcity messages might be used in a co-branding context in which a social cause was promoted through a CRM activity through the endorsement of a particular celebrity or artist.

Conclusions. Existing scarcity promotion literature has focused on quantity- and time-based scarcity, ignoring the sales location-based scarcity (place limit), which was the most-frequently utilized scarcity format revealed in this study. Therefore, future studies are needed to address this gap. Additionally, the complexity of the scarcity promotional contexts revealed through this content analysis indicates that scarcity effects cannot be understood without considering potential effects of the interactions between the context and other factors such as the scarcity format and wording used in the scarcity promotions, recommending further research on this topic. Findings of this study can benefit marketers by providing them with practical insights on potential characteristics of scarcity promotions, which must be carefully planned and applied in developing a scarcity promotion and a scarcity promotional message.

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