Effects of a Scarcity Message on Product Judgments: Role of Cognitive Load and Mediating Processes

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The present research examined the effect of a scarcity message in a persuasive marketing communication on consumer product judgments. Two experiments consistently showed that the effect depends on cognitive resources available at the time of message processing. In experiment 1, participants received a promotion pamphlet that contained either a scarcity or a non-scarcity message in either a cognitive distraction or no distraction conditions. The scarcity message, compared to the non-scarcity message, led to more favorable evaluations of the target product only when the cognitive resource was distracted. Experiment 2 replicated this finding and in addition, showed that the effect of the cognitive distraction was due to its influence on activation of persuasion knowledge, i.e., marketers’ manipulative intent in the scarcity message rather than its influence on discounting process based on perceptions of the manipulative intent.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The literature on the scarcity of objects has shown a generally positive effect of the scarcity in forming preferences and behaviors in diverse contexts (see Lynn 1991 for a review). Yet, the research on the effect of a scarcity message in marketing communication context (e.g., advertising) is relatively limited and provides mixed results. The present research intended to examine the effect of a scarcity message in a persuasive marketing communication and the processes that underlie the effect. While doing so, we also identified moderating conditions for the effect that have not previously been reported.

Consumers often hear a company announcing a plan for limited production of special products for a special occasion or encounter a retailer announcing the limited number of items remaining in stock. As such, consumers are frequently exposed to information about the scarcity of a product or service. A scarcity claim in a persuasive marketing context is likely to elicit positive thoughts about the product such as enhanced quality and exclusiveness. Yet, the claim can also provoke a second, negative thought, i.e., suspicion about marketers’ manipulative intent (i.e., persuasive attempt). To this extent, the effect of a scarcity message is largely dependent on whether the second thought is actively generated.

Based on the research on dispositional attribution (Gilbert and Malone 1995; Trope and Gaunt 1999) and persuasion knowledge (e.g., Ahluwalia and Burnkrant 2004; Campbell and Kirmani 2000), we expect that generating the second thought (suspicion about the persuasive intent) and acting on it is relatively an effortful and controlled process, and thus requires considerable amount of cognitive resources. Consequently, it is hypothesized that a scarcity message in marketing communication can produce a positive impact on consumer evaluations only in a situation in which the cognitive resource is limited so that inference processes regarding the marketer’s manipulative intent in using the message are unlikely to operate. When the cognitive resource is available, inferences about the manipulative intent are likely to occur, which in turn reduce or eliminate any positive consequence of the scarcity message.

These expectations were examined and confirmed in two experiments. In experiment 1, participants received a promotion pamphlet for a MP3 player that contained either a scarcity or a non-scarcity message. In addition, the cognitive resource was manipulated (high vs. low) by providing a cognitively distracting vs. non-distracting secondary task (i.e., memorizing an 8-digit vs. 2-digit number) at the time participants process the target message. A significant two-way interaction of cognitive resource and message type on evaluations indicated that the scarcity message, compared to the non-scarcity message, led to more favorable evaluations of the target product only when the cognitive resource was distracted. In addition, an analysis of participants’ perceptions about persuasive attempts also yielded a significant 2-way interaction effect, indicating that indeed participants who received a scarcity message were more suspicious about the marketers’ manipulative intent under no distraction conditions than under high distraction conditions, whereas the suspicion level in the latter conditions were comparable to the level in the non-scarcity message conditions.

Experiment 2 replicated findings from experiment 1 and in addition, examined the two alternative possibilities regarding the processes underlying the effect of the distraction task. The first, “discounting-inhibition” hypothesis posits that a distraction task inhibits discounting processes on target evaluations based on perceptions of the marketer’s manipulative intent. The second, “activation-inhibition” hypothesis posits that the distraction task inhibits activation of persuasion knowledge per se from memory that is relevant to process the scarcity message. To examine these alternative possibilities, the persuasion knowledge was either primed or not before participants received the target information. Results showed that the effect of the cognitive distraction on the effectiveness of the scarcity message relative to the non-scarcity message was evidenced only when the persuasion knowledge was not primed. This supports the “activation-inhibition” hypothesis, suggesting that the effect of the distraction task was due to its influence on activation of persuasion knowledge rather than its influence on discounting process based on perceptions of the manipulative intent.

REFERENCES


