The Dark Side of Marketing Tactics: Scarcity Promotions Induce Aggressive Behavior
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Scarcity promotions emphasize limited availability. The current research proposes that such promotions increase feelings of threat (towards others), leading to increased aggressive behavior. Four studies using actual video games demonstrate the number of shots fired, punches thrown and games chosen are higher in response to such promotions.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Each year, violent incidents are reported on Black Friday and other shopping-crazed holiday events. In fact, a website called Black Friday Death Count has been created to tally and detail the injuries and deaths that occur directly from Black Friday promotional sales (http://blackfridaydeathcount.com/). The current research contributes by showing that aggressive tendencies from scarcity not only occur in such contexts, but more importantly that aggression can originate from exposure to scarcity promotion advertising.

This research centers its investigation on scarcity promotions, a marketing tactic that emphasizes limited availability of a specific product or event (Ku, Kuo and Kuo 2012), and explores three research questions. We seek to empirically test the hypothesized relationship between scarcity promotions and consumer violence, a link previously confined to mass media observation and speculation. Specifically, we examine not only whether exposure to scarcity promotions leads consumers to behave more aggressively, but also whether this aggression can actually originate from exposure to a promotional ad. We also explore the underlying psychological mechanism that determines why scarcity promotions lead (or do not lead) to such aggressive behavior. This research is the first to show that exposure to a scarcity promotion can lead to increased aggressive behavior among consumers (studies 1-3). Importantly, we find that this unfortunate and costly outcome occurs not because one is competing for scarce goods to ensure one’s survival (e.g., food, water), but merely for desirable non-necessities (e.g., electronics, luxury goods). Importantly, we also uncover the underlying process driving this aggression and find that exposure to scarcity promotions lead consumers to perceive others as threats to obtaining the desirable focal good. This increased interpersonal threat, in turn, leads consumers to draw on established aggressive behavioral responses to mitigate this threat (studies 2-3). Finally, we also identify a boundary condition to the proposed effects: the ability to participate in the promotion (study 4).

In study 1, one hundred forty undergraduates were randomly assigned to one of two conditions in a 2 (Promotional Ad: Scarcity, Control) between-participants design. Participants reviewed one of two promotional ads for an iPhone 5S from the home university’s bookstore that served as our scarcity manipulation. To manipulate scarcity, we varied the quantity of iPhone 5s available to consumers via the promotion. In the scarcity (control) promotion, only 3 (3,000+) iPhones were available to consumers. Pretesting confirmed the efficacy of the manipulation. After reviewing the bookstore’s promotional ad, participants answered cover story questions before moving to our measure of aggression, ostensibly described as a separate study on classic video games. Specifically, participants were told that marketing researchers were investigating the recent trend among video game players towards classic video games (e.g., Super Nintendo), and that they would be randomly assigned to play a classic game and report on their experience. In actuality, all participants were directed to play an online first-person shooting game called “DeadEye” for 1-2 minutes. In this game, participants use the mouse to aim a gun to shoot at moving targets. We operationalized aggression as the shooting behavior of participants; specifically, we recorded and measured the number of bullets participants fired. As predicted, participants exposed to the scarcity promotion fired significantly more bullets than participants exposed to the control promotion.

Study 2 sought to provide process evidence and to use a more direct measure of aggression. One hundred and seven undergraduates participated in this study in a 2 (Promotional Ad: Scarcity, Control) between-participants design. Upon arrival, participants completed the scarcity manipulation from study 1. Upon completion, participants were given the same classic video game cover story as study 1, but were instead assigned to play the Wii boxing game. Participants physically assaulted a defenseless human opponent. Sessions were recorded and coded for punches thrown. Participants then completed the following question to measure perceived interpersonal threat on a scale from 1 (not at all threatening) to 7 (very threatening): “How much do you perceive other people as a threat to you obtaining the product in the promotion?” Replicating study 1, participants threw significantly more punches at the defenseless opponent and perceived other consumers as higher threats to obtaining the product after exposure to the scarcity promotion than after exposure to the control promotion. The indirect effect of scarcity promotion on aggressive behavior through perceived threat was significant.

Study 3 manipulated perceived threat to further support our process claim using a different sample and aggression dependent variable. One hundred sixty participants from an online sample were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2 (Promotional Ad: Scarcity, Control) x 2 (Perceived Threat: High, Low) between-participants design. Before viewing the promotional ad, in the high (low) threat condition, participants identified two ways in which they were different (similar) to people from their city. Upon completion, they viewed one of the two scarcity ads, then read a scenario about lining up to participate in the sale and being positioned near the front of the line to rush inside once the doors opened. After completing cover story questions, participants then completed a measure of perceived interpersonal threat: preference for violent classic video games. ANOVA revealed the predicted interaction: when perceived threat was high, scarcity participants choose significantly more violent games than control participants; however, when perceived threat was low no differences emerged.

Study 4 examined a boundary condition of our effects. Two hundred thirty-nine undergraduates were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (Promotional Ad: Scarcity, Control) x 2 (Ability to Participate: High, Low) between-participants design. We manipulated scarcity using the same ads used in studies 1 and 2. To manipulate ability to participate, we varied the bookstore location (close vs. far). Aggressive behavior was assessed as in study 1. ANOVA revealed the predicted interaction: participants in the high ability to participate conditions fired significantly more bullets after reviewing the scarcity versus control promotion. However, in the low ability to participate conditions, no effects emerged.

In conclusion, our research demonstrates merely exposing consumers to a scarcity (versus control) promotional ad leads to increased aggressive behavior, even outside the direct consumption domain when there are no other individuals present to compete and aggress against, and when the scarce item itself is not attainable. We
find that this outcome results after exposure to scarcity promotion advertising because consumers perceive a potential threat of other consumers trying to obtain the desired product. To mitigate this perceived threat, consumers resort to aggression.

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