



Apple's Hunger Marketing Strategy and Consumer Psychology Research

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Abstract. With the rapid development of electronic technology, more and more new electronic brands have emerged in the market. However, among these brands, Apple Company has stood out among the numerous competitors through its “hunger marketing” strategy. The main topic of this research aims to explore Apple's hunger marketing strategy and consumer psychology. Additionally, this study adopted process tracing to track and observe the release cycle of the iPhone 16 series, and described and analyzed the phenomenon. Moreover, this study also combined the scarcity principle with consumers' "ritual sense" and proposed a three-drive model of “scarcity perception - ritual participation - purchase decision”. It was found that during the sales period of iPhone 16, a large number of consumers were driven to purchase iPhone 16 by the joint drive of scarcity sense and awareness sense, thus reaching the conclusion that scarcity sense and ritual sense can jointly drive consumers to make purchase decisions.

Keywords: Apple Inc., Hunger Marketing, Scarcity, Sense of Ritual.

1 Introduction

With the increasingly developed market of electronic products, more and more digital brands are beginning to stand out. Consumers' choices are also gradually diversifying. How a brand can stand out in this evenly matched competition has become the core issue of brand marketing. Among numerous competing brands, Apple has been able to maintain the loyalty of consumers and the brand's popularity over the long term precisely because of its distinctive “Hunger Marketing” strategy. Hunger marketing means that manufacturers and sellers deliberately control and cut product supply to create a false sense of market demand. This strategy helps stabilize product prices, secure high profit margins, and raise end-market prices by regulating the balance between supply and demand [1]. Every time Apple releases a new product, it triggers extremely high attention and consumption enthusiasm among its users: a large number of consumers are willing to pay extra prices and queue up to purchase the product. Research indicates that Apple's marketing success is not only due to the outstanding performance and unique ecosystem of the product itself, but also because it artificially creates the scarcity and consumption urgency of the product, thereby strengthening consumers' purchase

motivation. For instance, When placing its 2017 order for the iPhone X, Apple instructed component vendors to produce roughly 40 percent of the initial shipment [2]. Therefore, this strategy successfully transforms consumers' demand for the product into an emotional experience with a sense of participation, ritual, and superiority.

2 Literature Review

The current research on hunger marketing mainly focuses on the "Scarcity Marketing" Strategy and the "psychological reactions of consumers".

From the perspective of operational logic, the core mechanism of hunger marketing is to artificially set supply restrictions, thereby creating the scarcity of the product. Researchers have pointed out that the hunger marketing strategy often stimulates consumers' arbitrage mentality: the product is not only a consumer good, but may also become a sought-after asset with appreciation potential [3].

From the psychological mechanism angle, hunger marketing triggers the competitive behavior tendency of consumers towards scarce resources. The classic experiment by Stephen Worcheletal. shows that when the product is marked as limited, its appeal significantly increases, and this psychological process is called "Enhancement of Perceived Scarcity Value" [3]. In other words, the limited quantity not only affects the supply and demand structure, but also profoundly reshapes consumers' perception of the product.

Furthermore, some scholars have pointed out that consumers' thoughts and attitudes can be influenced by their sense of ritual, and Ritual Marketing can stimulate their purchasing desires. The renowned sociologist Randall Collins stated in his book "Interaction Ritual Chains" that sharing common expectations or emotional experiences is what is called an interaction ritual. This has also formed a kind of ritual dissemination that combines emotional experience and collective sharing [4]. For example, behaviors such as queuing, opening boxes, and live sales all constitute a kind of ritual consumption, enhancing users' sense of belonging and satisfaction.

Although existing literature has revealed the basic mechanism and psychological effects of scarcity marketing, in current research, there is a lack of systematic analysis on the specific mechanism of "ritual" in driving scarcity marketing. Especially as an intermediate variable that drives emotional connection and community identification among users, and how the sense of ritual interacts with purchasing behavior still deserves further in-depth study.

3 Case Description

Every September, Apple holds its annual Apple Event, during which it presents the design and performance improvements of its iPhone series of new products. After the event, through methods such as limited reservations, staggered releases, and pre-order queues, the scarcity atmosphere of the products is created. Therefore, every year, consumers' rush to purchase the new iPhone series has become a trend culture. In 2024, several months before the release of the iPhone 16 series, a large number of online

bloggers on platforms such as Douyin, Bilibili, and Xiaohongshu began to predict and expose the appearance and performance of the new iPhone series. Some of them claimed to have obtained the appearance images of the new iPhone series in advance, which created a buzz on the internet and aroused consumers' curiosity about the new iPhone series. And this curiosity gradually intensified as the date of the autumn event approached.

After the Apple annual fall launch event on September 10th, the Apple website began product pre-sales on September 13th and set inventory limits for the products. By creating a sense of tight supply for the iPhone 16 series, it further stimulated consumers' purchasing desire, resulting in an exaggerated phenomenon where all the initial products were snapped up within the first hour of the pre-sale. Ten days after the event, the iPhone 16 series was officially launched. Many users on social media immediately posted live queuing scenes, unboxing videos, and first-release order sharing after the new phones arrived, further spreading the popularity of the iPhone 16 series and attracting more consumers to purchase the product.

Many users rushed to the Apple website to pre-order the iPhone as soon as the pre-sale period began. Some even went to platforms like Tmall, JD Self-run Store and Idle Fish to make purchases. Those who failed to get the new product had to purchase it at higher prices through other channels. Users who managed to get the new model would post pictures and release opening video clips on platforms such as WeChat Moments, Douyin and Red Star Book, demonstrating a strong sense of participation and identification. Some users also said, "Even if it's not a necessity, I'm willing to spend more to get the first release model."

4 A Sense of Ritual and Scarcity Combine to Motivate Purchasing Behavior

The implementation of the hunger marketing strategy is based on the principle of scarcity. According to the scarcity principle, the scarcity of a product will cause consumers to rush to purchase it at a higher price. The scarcity theory holds that the scarcity of a product triggers competition, and the value of the product stems from its precise pricing. The relative scarcity of a product can be measured by price. When a certain product meets the needs of consumers, they will develop a strong demand for it [5]. In addition, When no obvious quality gap exists between rare and mainstream products, consumers are inclined to opt for scarce commodities. Gaining access to things out of reach for others helps boost people's feelings of superiority [6].

Apple has created a situation of high demand through limited releases. This not only leads to scarcity in market supply but also causes consumers' time anxiety and opportunity anxiety: Some consumers are afraid that they won't be able to successfully secure the product upon learning about the limited quantity. Meanwhile, according to the cookie scarcity experiment of Stephen Worchel, this scarcity not only increases the perceived value of the product in consumers' minds but also gives it a symbolic social capital.

The behaviors involved in the rush to purchase the new iPhone, such as queuing, making reservations, sharing reviews, live streaming, and opening the box, constitute a complete set of “ritualized consumption” behaviors. Rituals originated from religious and witchcraft activities, while ritualization refers to a patterned and fixed behavior that is similar to but not strictly a ritual. Throughout history, many people have used a certain behavior to convey symbolic meanings. When the expressiveness and communicability of this behavior exceed its own functionality and practicality, it becomes a ritualized behavior. And the so-called sense of ritual is the emotional experience that people have during ritualized behaviors [7]. For Gen Z users, Apple's sales model has unconsciously formed a sense of rush to purchase as a ritual. This ritualized behavior not only enhances their sense of participation but also becomes a part of their social capital, strengthening their identity [8]. This gradually makes users develop enthusiasm and dependence on the sense of ritual.

In contrast, although the “fan marketing” strategies of some brands have a superficial similarity to the hunger marketing strategy, their core lies in analyzing the inner needs of their fan base and using high-quality cost strategies to make fans develop faith and follow the brand concept, thereby triggering emotional resonance psychologically and forming brand loyalty [9]. However, the driving force of fan marketing on consumers' purchasing desire is far less than that of hunger marketing strategy. Because this brand focuses on analyzing users' inner demands, its users' purchase of the product is more out of cost consideration rather than identity recognition, so its fan base is more likely to be lost due to dissatisfaction with its price, and thus the user stickiness is relatively poor.

FOMO refers to a persistent anxiety that occurs when a person is worried about losing or missing out on information [10]. The hunger marketing strategy and the scarcity atmosphere created by controlling the supply of products have stimulated consumers' FOMO emotions, making consumers worry that they might miss the opportunity to purchase the first release of new products, thereby prompting consumers to choose to purchase in advance even in non-essential situations, thereby enabling consumers to gain satisfaction and a sense of belonging by joining the first release group. Apple's hunger marketing strategy has effectively exploited this consumer psychology, causing consumers to experience FOMO due to the fear of missing the release of the new iPhone series. This emotion also prompts consumers to make purchasing decisions more quickly, resulting in the phenomenon of the product going on pre-sale and being sold out within a very short period of time.

5 Theoretical Refinement and Case Analysis

This study combines case tracking of the iPhone 16 series, as well as analysis of the hunger marketing strategy and the sense of ritual. It proposes a three-stage driving model: “Perceived Scarcity - Ritual Participation - Purchase Decision”. I will conduct a dissection and analysis of the behaviors at each stage based on Apple's marketing model for its products, combined with this model.

The hunger marketing strategy takes advantage of the scarcity principle. By limiting the supply, conducting pre-sales, and increasing the price of the products, it creates a perception of urgency among users, stimulating their desire and impulse to purchase. Apple has extremely effectively utilized this principle. Firstly, Apple has established a brand image symbolizing luxury and high-end through its high pricing, unique ecosystem, and minimalist and exquisite design in front of consumers, and has made a large number of users feel a strong sense of belonging. Even an apple fan culture has emerged among the user group. Therefore, the brand loyalty of Apple users has further strengthened the scarcity atmosphere created by the hunger marketing strategy, and this is the stimulation of consumers' desire and impulse to purchase. Therefore, when the iPhone 16 series was launched for pre-sale, consumers would experience Fomo emotions due to its limited inventory setting and the extremely high popularity of the iPhone itself, thus fearing that they would miss the opportunity to purchase the new series of iPhone 16. Under the joint drive of high brand loyalty and scarcity effect, consumers' desire to purchase was greatly stimulated.

There are many consumers who enhance their sense of pleasure and emotional experience by participating in a series of ritualized behaviors when purchasing products, such as making reservations, the process of purchasing goods, and sharing and spreading the photos or videos of successfully purchased products. This also increases their sense of participation, thereby generating enthusiasm for the purchasing process of the products. During the pre-sale of the iPhone 16 series, a large number of consumers, driven by the ritualistic nature of the process, posted screenshots of their purchase receipts and the process of purchasing iPhones on platforms like Douyin and Xiaohongshu. After receiving views and likes from others, they would experience a strong sense of pleasure, which further enhanced the emotional experience during the purchase process. After the phones were delivered and delivered, many consumers would enjoy the process of opening the box of the iPhone, as this is also an important part of ritualized consumption behavior. This behavior would also bring them a sense of pleasure. Subsequently, people would take photos of the iPhone and even shoot opening box videos, and then post the videos and photos on social platforms, further enhancing the emotional experience of the purchase through receiving likes and comments from others.

When consumers complete the ritualistic consumption process, their sense of identity is greatly enhanced. Due to the scarcity principle employed by the hunger marketing strategy, it generates a strong desire to purchase, along with the sense of ritualism of the consumers themselves. The dual drive of the pleasure and satisfaction resulting from this entire set of ritualized purchasing behavior, coupled with the strong sustainability, leads to irrational or non-essential purchasing behaviors by consumers. Therefore, whenever the iPhone series is newly launched each year, it attracts a large number of consumers to go and purchase.

Therefore, it is demonstrated that the three-drive model proposed in this study can be effectively applied in the process of product marketing, thereby providing a theoretical basis for the marketing strategies of products in the subsequent market. This model integrates the scarcity effect in behavioral economics and the ritual consumption theory

in consumer sociology, revealing how non-functional value drives behavior. It also supplements the theory and replaces the “traditional marketing strategy of scarcity = scarcity-driven,” highlighting the role of the emotional mechanism in the driving path. Moreover, this model emphasizes that marketing strategies should not only focus on creating scarcity, but also need to stimulate consumers' emotional value through content and experience design.

6 Conclusion

This study is based on Apple's implementation of the hunger marketing strategy. Through case tracking and analysis of the release cycle of the iPhone 16 series, as well as the construction of the model, it was discovered that the state of insufficient supply created by the hunger marketing strategy, together with the consumers' sense of ritual, jointly contributed to the consumers' purchase behavior of the iPhone 16 series. Thus, the research conclusion drawn is that the product scarcity and the consumers' sense of ritual have a dual driving effect on their purchase decisions. The hunger marketing strategy not only externally attracts a large number of consumers, but also gives consumers an identity recognition and social value, thereby achieving efficient conversion and having high sustainability.

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