

Marketing & Society

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Quantitative Marketing 4: Marketing & Society

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1. **“Gender Disparity in Online Reputation: Evidence from an Online Freelance Platform”**, by **Mimansa Bairathi** (UCL School of Management), Anja Lambrecht (London Business School), and Xu Zhang (London Business School)
2. **“Do Customers Respond to Social Movements? Evidence from Gender-Stereotypical Purchases After #MeToo”**, by **Clément Bellet** (Erasmus School of Economics), David Dubois (INSEAD) and Frédéric Godart (INSEAD)
3. **“Call Me Maybe: Does Customer Feedback-Seeking Impact Non-Solicited Customers?”**, by **Rupali Kaul** (INSEAD), Stephen Anderson (Texas A&M University), Pradeep Chintagunta (Chicago Booth) and Naufel Vilcassim (London School of Economics)
4. **“Can Selling Empower? Experimental Evidence from India.** by **Iris Steenkamp** (Bocconi University), Rajesh Chandy (London Business School), Om Narasimhan (London School of Economics) and Gaurav Mehta (Dharma Life).

Note: presenting authors are printed in bold.

In the data-rich business landscape, effective decision-making hinges not just on data volume, but on the ability of firms and analysts to extract valid and actionable insights. Quantitative marketing, at the intersection of marketing, economics, statistics, and machine learning, therefore, remains pivotal in this era of data-driven decision-making. Against this backdrop, we aim to stimulate the application of advanced empirical methods and innovative quantitative marketing approaches within the EMAC community through a series of 5 special sessions.

This Special Session **Quantitative Marketing 4: Marketing & Society** focuses on the role of marketing in society, either as an outcome (i.e., consumer ratings and product design/purchase decisions) or intervention (i.e., customer feedback and sales employment). Despite the large body of work examining the impact of marketing activities on business-related outcomes, there remains a gap in our understanding of the impact of marketing on societal outcomes and hidden (gender-based) biases within marketing activities. In particular, this session focuses on societal-based gender biases and the role of marketing can play in alleviating these.

Two papers in this session use empirical methods to uncover gender disparities and gender-stereotypical actions across various consumer settings.

Paper 1 (by Mimansa Bairathi) uncovers gender-based disparity in ratings on online freelance platforms. Using private ratings as a proxy for buyer satisfaction, we find that, conditional on the same private rating, public ratings are higher for male than for female freelancers. Using three pieces of supporting evidence we propose this is a result of buyers' gender stereotypes about confrontational behavior of freelancers following a critical review. Buyers are more concerned about a threat of confrontation with male than female freelancers and, thus, give male freelancers a higher public rating.

Paper 2 (by Clement Bellet) uses #MeToo as a natural field experiment to study whether identity-based social movements challenging gender stereotypes can reduce consumer adherence to gender-stereotypical products in markets. The paper leverages high-frequency stockout and price data from a leading global fashion retailer spanning January 2017 to December 2018 in 32 OECD countries, together with online activity data around #MeToo. Causal effects are identified

above and beyond any seasonal effects through a triple difference-in-differences estimation across time, countries, and products.

The other papers in this session present results based on large-scale randomized controlled trials (RCTs) in emerging countries. RCTs are considered the golden standard for research due to their ability to deal with detrimental threats to causality. Paper 3 (by Rupali Kaul) examines the impact of customer feedback on firm learning and business improvements in Rwanda, utilizing a randomized controlled field experiment with small businesses in Rwanda. They explore gender-based heterogeneous treatment effects. Paper 4 (by Iris Steenkamp) derives the differential impact of (sales) employment on gender empowerment based on results from a field experiment involving 1,048 women in rural India.

In sum, this session highlights the positive role marketing can play in society as well as highlights the biases that may arise in typical marketing settings. Insights from this session can be directly applied by managers to alleviate address (gender-based) biases and improve customer satisfaction.

Gender Disparity in Online Reputation: Evidence from an Online Freelance Platform

Mimansa Bairathi (UCL School of Management), Anja Lambrecht (London Business School),
and Xu Zhang (London Business School)

Digital platforms are typically characterized by a large number of sellers offering a wide variety of items and users' uncertainty about quality. In order to reduce information asymmetry, platforms have implemented online reputation systems (Tadelis, 2016) such as displaying customers' reviews and ratings that inform buyers about product or service quality.

Reputation systems have been shown to build trust between buyers and sellers (Abraham et al., 2017) and to reduce discrimination (Cui et al., 2020). A concern arises, if, rather than presenting true service quality, ratings are themselves biased. Initial evidence suggests that in online freelance markets where seller identity is known to buyers, individuals from underrepresented or protected groups (e.g., racial minorities, women) receive lower ratings than others (Botelho and Gertsberg, 2022) though a common challenge is the difficulty in disentangling buyer satisfaction from factors such as race or gender directly affecting ratings.

In this paper, we ask whether buyers rate male and female freelancers differently on an online freelance platform. We use data from one of the world's largest online freelance platforms where freelancers post services (e.g., app development, translation) for buyers to purchase. To rule out the possibility that differences in ratings are caused by differences in buyer satisfaction, we rely on the fact that in addition to the public ratings available to view on the platform, the platform also elicits private ratings from buyers, which are visible only to the platform, not to freelancers or other buyers. Private ratings are a more reliable indicator of true buyer satisfaction (Filippas et al., 2022). Since freelancers can respond to public ratings and, in the case of negative buyer feedback, may do so in a confrontational or aggressive manner, buyers' fear of such confrontation can lead them to inflate public ratings. Because private ratings are not visible to the freelancer or other buyers, there is little incentive to inflate them and so they typically reflect buyer satisfaction more closely.

We use private ratings as a proxy for true buyer satisfaction and confirm that public ratings are inflated relative to private ratings. We then examine differences in public ratings for male and female freelancers, conditional on private ratings. Our results demonstrate consistently that male freelancers receive higher public ratings than female freelancers, after controlling for private ratings. We propose that male freelancers receiving higher public ratings than female freelancers, relative to their private ratings, is a result of gender stereotypes. In the context of digital platforms, previous research has demonstrated that aggressive behavior can alter rating behavior (Proserpio et al., 2021). Men are stereotypically considered to be more aggressive than women (Broverman et al., 1972; Ruble, 1983). Since people rely on stereotypes when forming expectations about others' behavior (Ridgeway, 2001), such stereotypes can shape users' ratings. If a buyer is concerned about a confrontational response when submitting a public rating for a male – but not for a female – freelancer, they would inflate a male freelancer's public rating to a greater degree than for a female freelancer. We conduct three tests to examine whether gender stereotypes cause greater rating inflation for male freelancers.

First, we rely on the fact that gender stereotypes are typically more pronounced in geographic regions with lower gender equality (Eagly and Mitchell, 2004). We use measures of gender equality from the United Nations Development Report and expect that gender differences in public ratings, after controlling for private ratings, should be more pronounced for buyers from countries with lower gender equality. Our data confirm that this is the case.

Second, we propose that within a country, the extent of gender stereotypes varies with how active women are in the labor force. We use US data on female labor force participation to proxy the extent of gender stereotypes across states. We expect gender disparity in ratings to be less pronounced for buyers from states with higher rates of female labor force participation. Indeed, conditional on private ratings, gender differences in public ratings decrease as female labor force participation increases.

Third, gender stereotypes are more salient in settings strongly associated with one gender (Eagly, 2013) and women are more likely to be treated according to gender stereotypes where they are under-represented (Kanter, 1977). In our data, 26% of orders were fulfilled by female freelancers, but there is significant variation in the share of orders fulfilled by female freelancers across service categories. If gender stereotypes are driving the disparity in ratings,

we expect gender disparity in ratings to be more pronounced in service categories where female freelancers are under-represented. Again, this is the case.

Our results demonstrate that while reputation systems are designed to reduce information asymmetry to help buyers make more informed purchase decisions, ratings that enter these systems may reflect stereotypes by those submitting them. As a result, at least in online labor markets where the rater is typically aware of the freelancer's gender, ratings may be less effective than expected in leveling the playing field between male and female freelancers and in helping buyers make informed purchase decisions.

Our findings have implications for freelancers and platforms. Ratings that disadvantage women relative to men may affect future purchases in at least three ways. First, buyers who rely on ratings to make purchase decisions may be more likely to choose a service from a male than a female freelancer if men are rated more highly than women. Second, since online ratings are often an input into ranking algorithms and an item's rank in search results directly impacts purchase probabilities, platforms relying on public ratings may inadvertently advantage male over female freelancers. Third, gender disparities in online ratings may impact the long-term retention of female freelancers and the diversity of a platform's offering. Fortunately, platforms can counter the negative effects of gender disparity in ratings in at least two ways. Platforms can solicit private ratings and ensure that ranking algorithms rely on private rather than public ratings. Platforms can further reduce buyers' concerns about confrontation with freelancers by anonymizing buyers' identity in public ratings.

Paper 2

Do Customers Respond to Social Movements? Evidence from Gender-Stereotypical Purchases After #MeToo

Clément S. Bellet (Erasmus School of Economics), David Dubois (INSEAD), Frédéric Godart (INSEAD)

Social movements, exemplified by #BlackLivesMatter or #MeToo, challenge societal norms and stereotypes through collective action, gaining heightened visibility via social media. Despite their proven impact on social beliefs and policies, their influence on consumer markets remains underexplored. This paper explores the impact of the global #MeToo movement on consumer preferences for products with stereotypical markers of femininity.

While gender stereotypes persist in education and the labor market (Coffman et al., 2021; Fischbacher et al., 2023), little attention has been given to their role in consumer markets, where firms often segment customers based on gender and employ stereotyped representations for effective communication (Berger and Heath, 2007; Matta and Folkes, 2005). However, these strategies can backfire, perpetuating harmful beliefs about vulnerable groups (Bhattacharjee et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2011). For instance, Victoria's Secret, relying on stereotypical portrayals, faced backlash during #MeToo but later revamped its image by featuring diverse female figures, highlighting the potential consequences of gender-stereotyped marketing.

We primarily focus on the footwear market. Women's shoes, when stripped of stereotypical markers, become nearly indistinguishable from men's shoes, making this category suitable for analysis. Using data from a leading global fashion retailer, we construct a unique and high-frequency panel that tracks the availability of various shoe sizes at the product level. This data provides a daily record of out-of-stock sizes for a total of 1,779 women's shoe models and 565 men's shoe models, all of which were accessible to customers in 32 OECD countries, collectively representing 89% of the total population of OECD member nations. The data spans from January 2017 to December 2018.

We categorize products as gender-stereotypical based on the presence of traditional markers of femininity and validate this definition through an international survey of customers. To gauge the level of exposure to the #MeToo movement on a country-by-country basis, we employ a combination of Twitter data, search data, and national news headlines. The primary method of analysis relies on a triple-difference estimator, which involves comparing the number of out-of-stock sizes for products with stereotypical (versus non-stereotypical) markers of

femininity in countries exposed to the #MeToo movement (versus unexposed countries) during the weeks following the movement's start (versus the period preceding it).

The findings reveal compelling evidence of a decline in the market for gender-stereotypical products in the wake of the #MeToo movement. In comparison to non-stereotypical products, we observe a substantial drop of nearly 26% in the number of out-of-stock sizes for products featuring stereotypical markers of femininity during the six weeks following October 15, 2017. In our context, this effect is akin to imposing an 8.5% "sales tax" on stereotypical products. Importantly, the results remain robust when accounting for country specific seasonality controls, different measures of country-level exposure to #MeToo, alternative approaches to operationalize stereotypical markers, and variations in the time window used to estimate the effect.

Other factors tied to consumer behavior preceding the #MeToo movement are unlikely to drive the effect. Exposed and unexposed countries exhibited similar trends in searches related to sexual harassment and in the relative frequency of stockouts for stereotypical versus non-stereotypical products before the emergence of #MeToo. Additionally, we conduct placebo tests using alternative starting points for the #MeToo movement, none of which yield significant estimates. The lack of effects when using men's products as an alternative category or when analyzing out of stock sizes from a year later confirm that it is unlikely the effect stems from more general trends in footwear. Finally, the study extends to three additional women's product categories (lingerie, dresses, and handbags), revealing consistent reductions in stockouts for pink or red items, albeit with varying effect sizes.

We explore potential behavioral mechanisms behind the observed effects of #MeToo. Firstly, while the impact could theoretically stem from both demand-side shifts (such as changes in consumer preferences) and supply-side responses (like alterations in product assortments or pricing), the findings strongly support a demand-side channel. We investigate if retailers swiftly responded to #MeToo by discontinuing stereotypical products or introducing less stereotypical items, but no evidence supports sudden changes in assortments. Unlike inventory decisions, prices can adjust rapidly, but we find no evidence of price increases for stereotypical products post-#MeToo.

Secondly, we examine whether the documented effect aligns with the timing of daily tweets related to #MeToo and subsequent increases in online searches about sexual harassment. The investigation confirms that daily tweets within a country correlate with fewer stockouts for gender-stereotypical products. Similarly, higher day-to-day searches on sexual harassment within countries show an effect only after #MeToo, indicating the effect's independence from increased awareness alone. Instead, it suggests an activated behavioral link between the salience of harmful behaviors and the perpetuation of gender stereotypes in society. Three potential mechanisms driving the observed effect are proposed. One explanation involves values alignment, suggesting

that consumers dissociating from stereotypical markers may signal support for the #MeToo movement's values in fighting sexism and deconstructing gender stereotypes.

Our research has significant implications for firms, even those not directly targeted by social movements. Brands that rely on stereotypes for gender-based market segmentation may encounter societal resistance, as evidenced by the backlash observed during the #MeToo movement. Managers and marketers should be attentive to the cultural and societal shifts triggered by such movements, as these can impact consumer preferences and brand perception. Beyond the specific context of the #MeToo movement, our findings contribute to a broader understanding of the interplay between social movements, identity expression, and consumer behavior. The study provides insights into the consequences of assortment choices made by firms, emphasizing the need for brands to align with evolving consumer identities. Firms that actively monitor changes in societal views associated with consumer identities may gain a competitive advantage in adapting their products and messaging.

Paper 3

Call Me Maybe: Does Customer Feedback-Seeking Impact Non-Solicited Customers?

Rupali Kaul (INSEAD), Stephen Anderson (Texas A&M University), Pradeep Chintagunta (Chicago Booth), Naufel Vilcassim (London School of Economics)

Academics and practitioners acknowledge the value of customer feedback in improving firm performance. Companies routinely solicit feedback from different customer subsets. However, the extent to which this feedback impacts non-solicited customers depends on whether firms implement meaningful business-level changes that resonate with customers. This paper assesses customer feedback's impact on firm learning and business improvements, as well as its spillover effects on non-solicited customers using a randomized controlled field experiment in Rwanda over twelve months. We hypothesize that feedback-seeking could operate through two broad mechanisms: (1) directly influencing solicited customers, and/or (2) prompting firms to improve their offerings, leading to spillover effects on other customers.

When a firm solicits feedback from a customer subset and acts on it by making changes, it is unclear how customers might respond -- those who are directly solicited for feedback (i.e., tapped customers) and those who are not directly asked for feedback but are nevertheless exposed to any business-level changes (i.e., untapped customers). Thus, there are two different channels through which customer feedback-seeking might have an effect.

First, solicitation itself may have an effect (Bone et al. 2017}). Seeking feedback from customers could directly affect them positively or negatively. Soliciting feedback may make customers feel valued or provide a signal that firms are of high quality because they invest in collecting customers' opinions (Morrison & Bies, 1991}). It could also remind customers of the firm and its products, leading to enhanced product recall/consideration and repeat purchases (Sara 2000). Alternatively, the solicitation could make customers critical of firms through negativity enhancement, prompting them to recall flaws in the purchase experience (Ofir & Simon 2001), or cause irritation from repeated feedback solicitation. Firms' direct response (or non-response) to individual customers on their feedback could also positively (or negatively) influence future purchase behavior. The solicitation effect, along with the firm's direct response, however, could have a potential impact only on tapped customers.

Second, firm learning may have an effect. This indirect channel is conditional upon firms uncovering gaps or opportunities through the customer feedback process and responding by making business-level changes (Ananthakrishnan et al. 2023; Berry & Parasuraman 1997; Parasuraman et al. 1991). For example, customers may share disappointment about an offering's quality or inconvenient store hours, with the firm responding through product or operational changes. The learning effect can impact not only tapped customers, but also untapped customers.

This second channel constitutes a potential spillover effect across customers driven by overall business changes (Wang et al. 2019).

Even if firms make product or customer experience changes based on feedback, it is unclear ex-ante whether spillover effects will materialize. Untapped customers might not be sensitized to or bothered by the issues emerging from the feedback. Thus, business-level changes aiming to address the issues may have no effect on untapped customer behavior. Moreover, firm changes based on feedback from a vocal minority could have a negative effect. Firms receiving negative feedback from a small group may not have a complete or representative view of customer needs. Subsequent business changes could therefore be misguided. Firms may also miss out on positive feedback from a customer majority that is satisfied with their offerings.

Our results demonstrate a 38.2% increase in recall and a 77.4% increase in purchases for customers not engaged in the feedback process. The analysis further suggests that business-level changes driven by customer feedback fuel these spillovers. Additionally, customer feedback-seeking significantly improves treatment firm performance, resulting in a 62.0% revenue increase and 54.5% profit increase compared to control firms. Our study also introduces a basic customer feedback-seeking technology for small businesses to improve performance. These findings can guide firms in leveraging customer feedback to undertake business changes and generate greater revenues/profits.

Paper 4

Can Selling Empower? Experimental Evidence from India.

Iris Steenkamp (Bocconi University), **Rajesh Chandy** (London Business School), **Om Narasimhan** (London School of Economics), and **Gaurav Mehta** (Dharma Life)

Research in marketing has traditionally focused on business or customer-related outcomes, such as market share, profits, and acquisition. However, there is a growing consensus that achieving economic benefits by firms should go hand-in-hand with achieving social outcomes (Narasimhan et al. 2015). Marketing scholars have called for greater insights into how marketing can help create a better world (e.g., Chandy et al. 2021; Moorman et al. 2018). They have noted that “marketing has the power to improve lives, sustain livelihoods, and benefit society; yet this impact has rarely been examined rigorously”.

In this research, we examine the impact of marketing on those who engage in marketing activities. We focus on female saleswomen in rural India and study the impact of selling on gender empowerment. We seek to provide causal evidence to demonstrate that engaging in sales activities can shape not just how individuals think, cope, and behave, but also how their communities behave toward them. We hypothesize that engaging in sales activities can lead to (a) psychological empowerment—in terms of personality, identity, and cognitive abilities—and (b) socioeconomic empowerment, in terms of decision making, economic independence, and leadership. In particular, we argue that in rural parts of developing economies (and perhaps beyond), sales activities can help women empower themselves.

Although there has been considerable work on policies that create gender empowerment (see Glennester et al 2018 for a review), almost none of this has a marketing focus. Our research, in contrast, approaches the problem of empowering the individual from a marketing viewpoint. We suggest that direct sales activities can transform the lives of the (female) micro-entrepreneurs engaged in these activities. Direct sales activities are especially suitable and increasingly prevalent in developing economies (Forbes 2014). From a supply perspective, rural sales forces are a crucial means to reach the 3.4 billion consumers in rural parts of emerging markets that are less connected to traditional marketing channels (Mahajan 2016). From a demand perspective, sales activities offer flexible work, thus allowing salespeople to decide themselves when and how much to work. This flexibility makes sales jobs an attractive form of employment for women, especially in rural areas of developing countries, where their roles are heavily constrained, being largely confined to engaging in household and agricultural activities (Fafchamps et al. 2011). Additionally, prior research has highlighted that earning income through employment or entrepreneurship alone may not be sufficient to ensure women's empowerment (Chang et al. 2020; Fafchamps et al. 2011). Hence, a deeper understanding of

what elements of employment enable empowerment is required. This paper represent an early attempt to study these important mechanisms of (sales) employment that facilitate empowerment beyond the monetary.

We present results from a randomized controlled trial (RCT) involving saleswomen in rural India. Together with our partner organization, Dharma Life (DL), we randomly assigned 1,048 women to either treatment or control conditions in 2019. The 378 women assigned to the treatment condition engaged in sales activities and associated marketing campaigns. The 377 women assigned to the control “market research” employment condition worked for DL as a stay-at-home product reviewer but earned equivalent amounts to those in the sales treatment condition. The 293 women assigned to the “pure” control condition did not receive any intervention or employment through DL.

In this paper, we introduce a methodological innovation to overcome some of the major challenges that have plagued the field of psychological (empowerment) testing in employment contexts, especially in less developed countries (Ludeke and Larson 2017; Laalaj et al. 2018). We introduce a unique form of data, namely video interviews, to assess the personality and related psychological empowerment dimensions. To the best of our knowledge, we are the first to introduce video interviews to measure psychological change in the context of emerging markets.

Our preliminary results show that women engaged in sales employment are more empowered than women earning equivalent amounts in the placebo employment condition, and women assigned to a no employment control condition. This paper has direct implications for managers eager to reach rural populations to access the large and relatively untapped pool of customers in rural parts of developing countries (Mahajan 2016). Creating rural sales forces is one of the most effective and commonly applied strategies for reducing the transaction costs of commerce in these rural markets (Mahajan 2016). Notably, such setups provide gainful employment to some of the most deprived members of society, e.g., rural women. In addition, sales employment can empower women and their families, multiplying the benefits. Our research therefore suggests that businesses can achieve the twin goals of “doing good” (superior sales) while “doing well” (resilient and empowered women).

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