Fake Carting: Manipulation of Consumer Observational Learning

Sungsik Park
University of South Carolina
Jinhong Xie
University of Florida
Hae Kang Lee
Korea University

Acknowledgements:
Sungsik Park

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Abstract

Observational Learning (OL) is the process by which individuals learn by observing the actions of others. Online firms (platforms or sellers) often provide statistics that serve as OL information for users (e.g., "Backer Count" in crowdfunding, "Enrollment" in online courses, "Viewership" on streaming platforms, and "Claimed Rate" in flash sales). Ideally, this firm-provided OL information, which might otherwise be unavailable to consumers, helps them make more informed decisions. However, because consumers normally have no means of verifying this information, they are vulnerable to its manipulation by firms. This paper explores the risk of such manipulation to consumers in Amazon's Lightning Deals market, where real-time OL information, specifically the "claimed rate" (i.e., the percentage of available inventory that has been claimed), is reported. Our research uncovers a manipulation tactic we term "fake carting," in which sellers inflate the "claimed rate" to mislead consumers. We provide evidence of this deceptive practice and demonstrate how it benefits sellers at the expense of consumers. Our findings highlight a significant and underexplored deceptive practice in online markets: the manipulation of OL information.

Keywords: information manipulation, observational learning, consumer protection