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# How #MeToo and Other Social Movements Sway Consumers



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## **A multinational study reveals that the #MeToo movement shook up gender stereotypes and consumer preferences.**

In the digital age, social movements increasingly transcend national and cultural borders. [#MeToo](#), for one, remains a global phenomenon seven years since it burst into the public consciousness. It has increased awareness of sexual offences and challenged traditional gender roles and stereotypes around the world. It may also have had an unexpected impact on firms.

We conducted a [study](#), now published in *Management Science*, that uncovered how #MeToo changed demand for identity-signalling products in 32 countries at a leading fashion retailer. Among other findings, we found that sales of shoes conforming to traditional femininity fell substantially six weeks after the social movement took off.

Our study flags a key concern for brands at a time when identity is a major driver of purchases. Even when they are not directly targeted, firms can be affected by social movements. Brands, especially those that peddle identity-

signalling products, should think of how they could respond to global identity dynamics.

## "Shrink it and pink it"

In the marketplace, many categories are historically gendered. Just look at products targeted at women and girls, from toys and clothes to furniture and shavers. Colours tend towards red and pink; curves predominate over angles.

This branding approach, known in the industry as “shrink it and pink it”, builds on traditional, stereotypical markers of femininity. It underlines the role of demographics in the segmentation of consumer markets. Businesses such as Victoria’s Secret and Gillette have long capitalised on such strategies, but our research suggests that they need an overhaul in a post-#MeToo world.

## Shopping cart rebellion

Our study focused on demand for footwear, a product category closely tied to gender identity expression, between January 1, 2017, and December 31, 2018. During this two-year period, the #MeToo movement snowballed as sexual assault allegations against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein unfolded.

We tracked the prices and daily size availability of an exhaustive catalogue of 1,718 women’s shoes (and 1,275 men’s shoes) at a leading fashion retailer in 32 [OECD countries](#). To determine the kinds of products most vs. least affected by #MeToo, we surveyed respondents across selected countries to determine the colours, designs and heel heights perceived as feminine. We also used Twitter (now known as X) data, news articles and Google search trends about sexual harassment to assess whether any shifts in consumer preferences would be more pronounced in markets more exposed to #MeToo.

Our analysis shows that six weeks after Oct 15, 2017, when a [tweet](#) by actor Alyssa Milano launched #MeToo into the limelight, stockouts (which indicate high demand) fell by 14.4 percent for shoes conforming to female stereotypes – think pink high-heeled pumps or red platforms – relative to non-stereotypical ones (e.g. green sneakers).

Importantly, this drop was concentrated in countries most exposed to #MeToo, such as the Nordic countries and France, where stockouts fell by 25 percent. This impact was akin to imposing an 8-percent sales tax on gendered shoes. The least exposed countries, in contrast, saw no drop in stockouts.

Interestingly, the data showed that women didn't buy more gender-neutral shoes. They simply walked away from the most feminine styles.

### **Voting with their feet**

One possible explanation may be retailers reacting to #MeToo by tweaking product prices and offerings, or other factors not related to the social movement. However, these were ruled out by further analyses. We also collected data for three women's product categories: lingerie, dresses and handbags. As with feminine shoes, we found consistent declines in stockouts for pink or red items across these categories.

What might explain this drift away from starkly feminine products? To find out, we ran an online experiment involving about 1,000 women that were representative of the United States population.

The respondents were assigned to one of three conditions: write down their feelings, thoughts and engagement with #MeToo; write about a time they felt threatened as women; or share experiences where they felt empowered. A control group of respondents were asked to write about a trip to the grocery store. All participants were also asked to choose between higher vs. lower heels.

The result? Only participants in the #MeToo group exhibited a significant drop in demand for high heels. This suggests that rebellion against stereotypes, rather than identity threat or empowerment, may be behind the effect.

We also analysed the written answers for four core emotions: happiness, sadness, fear and anger. Unlike the threat or empowerment narratives where either fear or happiness dominated, a mix of happiness and sadness infused the #MeToo narratives, accounting for 30 percent each, followed by anger at 25 percent and fear at just 5 percent. This suggests that the complex emotional landscape associated with the social movement may have been one of the drivers of the change in behaviour.

While we cannot determine how emotions ultimately influenced respondents' behaviour, our study reveals the complex imprint of social movements like #MeToo. Not only can they trigger consequential changes by challenging prevailing norms and laws, but they can also effect subtle social shifts, including those related to consumer preferences.

### **What this means for brands and consumer markets**

The message to brands is clear: relying on stereotypes can backfire, and it's time to incorporate identity dynamics into brand management.

Just ask Victoria's Secret, whose marketing campaigns were perceived as objectifying women and promoting unrealistic body standards. After #MeToo triggered a tumble in sales, the lingerie maker pivoted by [signing on a diverse lineup](#) of top athletes and celebrities to be its spokeswomen. But it may be [too far behind the curve](#) to reclaim its dominance of the American market.

Our study underscores the importance of brands and product designers keeping tabs on shifts in consumer values and identities. It's not just about staying up to date with trends but also responding to deeper shifts in what consumers feel represents them. Products that might have flown off the shelves yesterday could be gathering dust tomorrow.

Firms could adapt by adjusting their product offerings or supply. They could even decide to take a stance publicly. Done well, this could build up firms' cultural capital in the long run. In fact, managers should go one step further by conducting a brand audit. Assess how their brand DNA intersects with specific consumer identity, stereotypes or roles; how prevailing social movements may be affecting the brand value; and how shifts in social norms and values may put the brand at risk.

Our research suggests that as consumer resistance to stereotypes grows, reliance on traditional gender-based segmentation may be increasingly risky. In a post-#MeToo world, keeping a finger on the pulse of society can protect firms from becoming collateral damage in social movements.

### **Find article at**

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/marketing/how-metoo-and-other-social-movements-sway-consumers>

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## About the research

**"Do Consumers Respond to Social Movements? Evidence from Gender-Stereotypical Purchases After #MeToo"** is published in *Management Science*.