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Asymmetric Effects of Shipping and Return Policies: Evidence from a Randomized 2×2 Factorial Experiment

Caterina Rauh[1], **Eric Sucky**[1]

[1]Chair of Operations Management and Logistics, University of Bamberg, Germany.

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Abstract

E-tailers face a strategic dilemma balancing lenient shipping and return policies that stimulate demand with restrictive measures aimed at reducing costs and environmental impact. Drawing on Signaling Theory and Mental Accounting, this study causally disentangles the effects of shipping and return policy configurations on consumer purchase and return motivation. We conducted a randomized vignette-based 2×2 factorial experiment. Departing from traditional Factorial Survey Experiments (FSE), our approach employs a between-subjects structure with orthogonal manipulation and random assignment (n=1061). This design ensures balanced experimental cells and enables a precise decomposition of consumer evaluations into the part-worth utilities of shipping and return attributes while eliminating potential carry-over effects. Our results show that both shipping and return fees significantly reduce purchase and return motivation. However, return fees trigger a substantially stronger negative reaction. This asymmetry highlights the distinct psychological impact of return-related costs.

Keywords: *Causal Inference, Randomized Controlled Trial, Signaling Theory, Mental Accounting, Shipping and Return Policy, Consumer Behavior.*

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