Platform MFN Clauses: Why should online sellers want fair trade?

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Dirk Auer & Geoffrey Manne



Three important features of online retail

• Innovation

- Fast-moving sector
- Important business model innovation
- Visibility
 - Both brands and platforms seek it
 - Ubiquity of two-sided markets with potential feedback loops:
 - Brands (retailers, hotels, etc.) can turn to platforms to boost sales (access new users)
 - Platforms need to acquire strong retailers to attract users
- Multiple distribution channels
 - Brands need to decide where to sell

Innovation in online retail (i)



amazon

Google

- Imagine I want to purchase some running shoes
 - Similar reasoning could apply to apps, hotels, insurance, etc.
- There are multiple <u>online</u> places where I could start looking:



Innovation in online retail (ii)

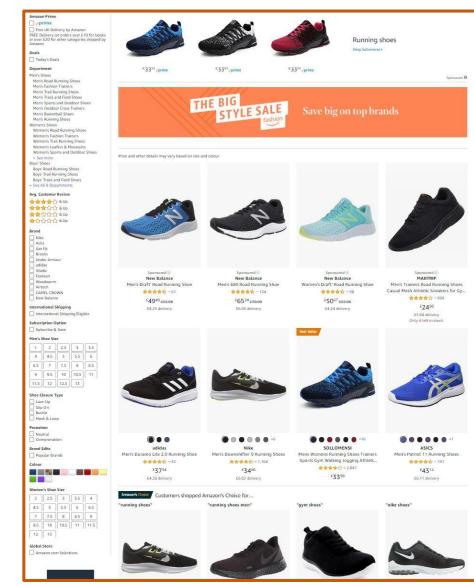
- Prices are important!
- <u>But</u> differentiation/innovation is also key
 - "In-store" experience
 - User-friendly GUIs, targeted recommendations, investments in certain brands, reviews, ad support, virtual assistant ordering (e.g. Alexa), virtual try-on, etc.
 - After-sales services
 - Return policies, return-ready packaging, etc.
- Especially in the online space, firms are still searching for a winning paradigm







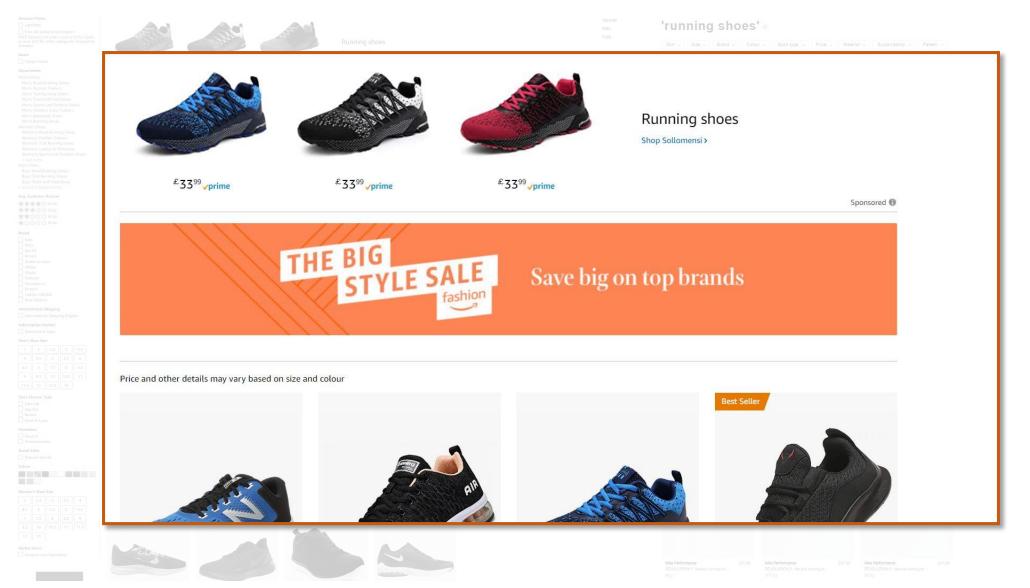
Retail platform GUIs (i)



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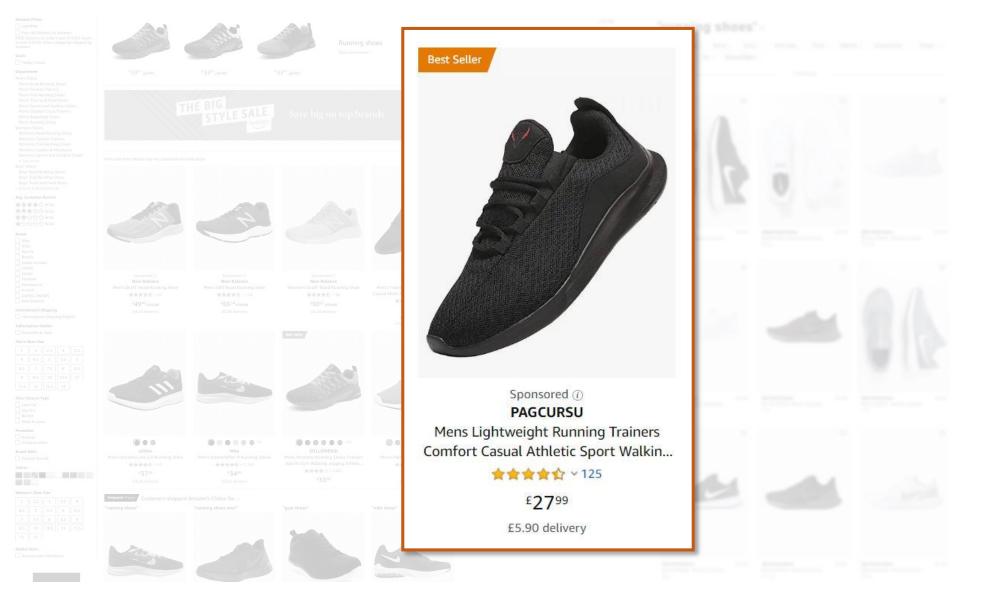
Retail platform GUIs (ii)



Retail platform GUIs (iii)

Amazon's Choice +6 Nike Men's Downshifter 9 Running Shoes **★★★★☆** ~ 1,165 £3545 £6.02 delivery

Retail platform GUIs (iv)



Retail platform GUIs (ii)

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Visibility & distribution channels (i)

- What are retailers' options?
 - Online platforms
 - Can connect retailer with their users (two-sided markets)
 - But creating this userbase requires investments that the platform needs to recoup => Platform fees
 - Numerous platform business models: retail, agency fees, ad placement fees, etc.
 - Direct channel
 - Lose access to platform's exclusive users
 - But retailer can earn higher return on "loyal" consumers (if its costs are competitive)
 - Intermediate solutions (e.g. Shopify) => Outsource part of the retail process
 - (And of course Brick & Mortar)

Visibility & distribution channels (ii)

running shoes

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The ultimate guide to running shoes from Runner's World. Shoes for every type of runner, budget, fit and more.

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Visibility & distribution channels (ii)

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Visibility & distribution channels (iii)



Business **Nike Pulling Its Products From Amazon in E-Commerce Pivot**

By Eben Novy-Williams and Spencer Soper November 13, 2019, 1:48 AM GMT+1 Updated on November 13, 2019, 3:52 PM GMT+1

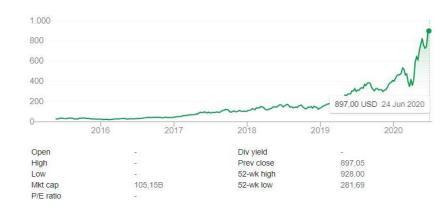
| • | Move follows naming of ex-EBay CEO as Nike's next chief |
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| | Athletic brand will continue to use Amazon's web services |





Pre-market 894,00 -3,00 (0,33%)

YTD 5 years Max 1 day 5 davs 1 month 6 months 1 year





Online retail: Problems & reactions

- Free-rider problem
 - Users might use platforms with best interface to choose product, but then make purchase via direct channel or rival platform. This may undermine platform investment/innovation
 - Retailers might encourage this (undercutting, steering, etc.)
- Potential reactions
 - Steering
 - Retailers/brands: steer users towards alternative channels (*Amex*; *Apple/Spotify*, *Basecamp*, etc.), attract them with lower prices, etc.
 - Platforms: steer users towards brands that do not undercut them on other channels
 - Delisting
 - Brands might quit platform
 - Platform might refuse to carry brands that are involved in free-riding
 - Most-favored-Nation ("MFN") clauses (or other vertical restraints)
 - Wide: Retailer agrees not to undercut platform in any other channel
 - Narrow: Retailer agrees not to undercut platform in its direct channel

Our paper

- Does MFN-related competition enforcement (as well as legal & economic literature) account for these features?
 - Reviewed 38 law & economics papers on MFNs (empirical, theoretical & normative); 15+ decisions and laws (work still in progress)
- Short answer:
 - Overall: Lack of focus on investments/innovation/entry
 - Econ: Empirical & theoretical literature suggest MFNs have highly ambiguous effects
 - Normative: Literature largely recommends case-by-case analysis of MFNs
 - Authorities: Have sometimes overstepped the mark by prohibiting MFNs (wide and/or narrow) "by object", most notably via legislation

Economic literature

- Empirical
 - Investment: 0 out of the 10 papers we studied look at effect of MFNs on innovation, investments or entry of competitors
 - **Price:** Limited evidence of MFNs –wide or narrow– leading to higher *overall* prices (de Los Santos et al. 2017; Larrieu 2019)
 - Welfare: Effects unknown because innovation, investments & entry unexamined
 - Some other noteworthy results: Strong direct channels constrain platform fees in presence of MFNs (Cazaubiel et al. 2020). Removal of MFNs increases price discrimination between channels (Hunold et al. 2018; Ennis et al. 2020)
- Theoretical
 - Overall: Most papers find ambiguous effects on prices/investment/welfare
 - Price: The papers that *do* find unambiguous negative price effects (for wide MFNs), do not look at innovation/investments (Boik & Corts 2016; Carlton & Winter 2018; Calzada et al. 2019; Wang et Wright 2020)

Normative & decisional practice

• Normative literature

- Wide MFNs: 3 papers (out of 16) *can be construed* as recommending *per se* prohibition (Ezrachi 2015; Fletcher & Hviid 2017; Cremer et al. 2019). Others recommend case-by-case analysis
- Narrows MFNs: All papers recommend case-by-case analysis (some suggest that authorities should also implement some safe harbors, *e.g.* Gurakaynak et al. 2016)
- Decisional practice
 - Most authorities have stopped short of applying by object prohibitions
 - Many have accepted commitments that remove wide MFNs in favor of narrow ones: France (2015), Italy (2015), Sweden (2015)
 - But legislators have gone further: France (2015), Italy (2017), Belgium (2018), Austria (2018) banned MFN clauses (even narrow) in hotel sector.

Some closing thoughts (i)

- Law & economics literature on MFNs points towards highly ambiguous effects
- Relatively little focus on investments, innovation and the entry of competitors
 - Ignored in empirical literature
 - Theoretical literature suggests that MFN effect on innovation/investment/entry is ambiguous (Gans 2012, Boik & Corts 2016, Wang & Wright 2016)
 - Reduced entry? Main intuition is that wide MFNs *may* deter low-type rivals that would undercut incumbent platform
 - <u>But</u> two problems:
 - Entry effect overplayed by some normative papers (e.g. Baker & Scott Morton, 2018)
 - What type of entry is most likely in digital space: lower price versus differentiated business model?

Some closing thoughts (ii)

- Some other parameters that authorities should look at in effects analysis:
 - Competition from other distribution channels (ex: Johansen & Vergé, 2017)
 - Balance of bargaining power between platform/retailer (Larrieu, 2019)
 - Are consumers more loyal to brands or to platforms (Cazaubiel et al. 2020) ?
 - Would consumers know about brand/hotel without platform (Calzada et al. 2019)?
 - Are search costs important ?
 - Sunk investments? Risk of holdup (Gans, 2012)
- Focusing solely on price (without also looking at product quality) is misleading
 - One of the main justifications for MFNs is that they might boost investments in ancillary services that might not be reflected in price (Telser, 1960)
- Free-riding is a game of cat and mouse, what is the counterfactual to MFN clauses? Is it less costly (Demsetz, 1969)

Thank you!

