

Seven years on, INSEAD study reveals #MeToo's unexpected impact

Submitted by: BlueSky Education

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Seven years after actor Alyssa Milano's tweet launched the #MeToo movement into the global consciousness, attitudes towards sexual harassment and assault have shifted in many countries. A new study shows that the movement's impact doesn't stop there.

INSEAD professors Frédéric Godart and David Dubois, alongside Clément Bellet of Erasmus University Rotterdam, found that #MeToo triggered far-reaching changes in consumer behaviour. Sales of stereotypically feminine shoes like high heels dropped significantly weeks after the #MeToo movement swept the media in October 2017.

The researchers analysed data from a leading fashion retailer across 32 OECD countries, focusing on women's footwear purchases between January 2017 and December 2018. They observed a 14.4 percent decrease in stockouts for stereotypically feminine shoes, such as pink high-heeled pumps or red platforms, compared to more neutral styles.

This average effect is driven by markets more exposed to the #MeToo movement - in particular the Nordic countries and France - where stockouts of such products fell by 25 percent.

That's not all. The team also found consistent declines in stockouts for pink or red items for three women's product categories: lingerie, dresses and handbags.

To explore the underlying reasons for this shift in preferences, the researchers surveyed approximately 1,000 women in the United States.

Their results indicate that exposure to #MeToo-related content led to a significant decrease in demand for high-heeled shoes. This finding suggests a rebellion against traditional gender stereotypes, rather than a response to feelings of threat or empowerment turned women off starkly feminine products.

The study's implications extend far beyond the fashion industry, highlighting the potential for social movements to impact consumer markets in unexpected ways.

The researchers recommend that brands that rely heavily on gender-based marketing strategies – “pink it or shrink it” in industry speak – reassess their approach. Brands need to be more attuned to shifts in social norms and values, as these can quickly influence consumer preferences. The authors also recommend that companies conduct brand audits to assess how their products intersect with consumer identities and stereotypes, and how social movements may affect their brand value.

The research was published in *Management Science*, in September 2024. It provides valuable insights for businesses operating in an era where consumer identity is a major driver of purchasing decisions. As social movements continue to shape public discourse and consumer preferences, firms that adapt quickly to these changes may find themselves better positioned for long-term success.

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