# Zelin (James) Li

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*Curriculum Vitae*

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## EDUCATION

**Massachusetts Institute of Technology** — **Cambridge, MA**
Ph.D., Quantitative Marketing — 2021 - Expected 2027
M.S., Management Research — 2025

**Stanford University** — **Stanford, CA**
M.S., Statistics — 2019 - 2021

**University of California, Berkeley** — **Berkeley, CA**
B.A., Statistics and Applied Mathematics (Double Major) — 2015 - 2019
Minor: Theater and Performance Studies

## RESEARCH INTERESTS

**Substantive:** AI in Marketing, Innovation, Sales and Channel Management, Digital Platforms, Market Signaling

**Methods:** Field Experiments, Causal Inference, Large Language Models, Machine Learning

## JOB MARKET PAPER

**Innovation Choice and Supply-Side Inference**

Zelin Li and Duncan I. Simester
*Job Market Paper*

Firms, especially early-stage innovators, often need to decide which innovation direction to pursue, a choice usually made before the market reveals the innovation's value. When its own demand-side information is thin, the firm may infer that value from the supply side by observing what competitors do. We focus on one competitive action in particular: imitation. Imitation costs real effort, serving as credible evidence that the innovation direction is valuable. Measuring how firms respond to competitor imitation causally is difficult, however, because competitors act endogenously. To address this challenge, we run a field experiment on GitHub, where we randomize competitor imitation and measure how developers respond to this supply-side action. We find that imitation on a single project leads developers to reduce development across their broader portfolio, with no gain on the imitated project. We propose a model showing that the firm rationally stays committed to its current direction even when it recognizes that imitation may reflect the competitor's strategic incentives. To show the main effect holds across different

markets and to extend the result, we conduct two additional studies: first, a tagline experiment shows verbal compliments alone have no effect, and second, observational music data reveals this impact persists in the long run.

## WORKING PAPERS

**Selling the Haggle**

Keyan Li, Zelin Li, Siqi Pei, and Feng Yang
*Major Revision at Management Science.*

**Voice, Revised: Uncovering the Effects of AI Assistance on Review Generation and Engagement**

Zelin Li and Song Lin
*Under review at Journal of Marketing Research.*

**Signaling by Saying No**

Zelin Li

**Wholesale Channel Spillovers**

Eric T. Anderson, Zelin Li, and Duncan I. Simester

**Emotion- Versus Reasoning-based Drivers of Misinformation Sharing: A Field Experiment Using Text Message Courses in Kenya**

Susan Athey, Matias Cersosimo, Kristine Koutout, and Zelin Li.

## WORK IN PROGRESS

**Salesperson Continuity in Multi-Stage Selling**

Keyan Li, Zelin Li, and Siqi Pei

**Consumer Delegation in the Context of Agentic AI**

Ingrid Koch, Keyan Li, Zelin Li, and Yuting Zhu

## PUBLICATIONS

**Artificial Intelligence and User-Generated Data Are Transforming How Firms Come to Understand Customer Needs**

John R. Hauser, Zelin Li, and Chengfeng Mao.
*Review of Marketing Research*, 2023.

**Look Who's Talking: Gender Differences in Academic Job Talks**

Amanda K. Glazer, Hubert Luo, Shivin Devgon, Catherine Wang, Xintong Yao, Steven Siwei Ye, Frances McQuarrie, Zelin Li, Adalie Palma, Qinqin Wan, Warren Gu, Avi Sen, Zihui Wang, Grace D. O'Connell, and Philip B. Stark.
*ScienceOpen Research*, 2023.

## AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS

**AMA Sheth Consortium Fellow** 2026

**ISMS Doctoral Consortium Fellow** 2024, 2026

**MIT Sloan School of Management Fellowship** 2021–2027

**Credit Suisse Holding Doctoral Fellowship in International Management** 2022–2023, 2025–2026

## PRESENTATIONS

**MIT Sloan Marketing Seminar** 2026

*Innovation Choice and Supply-Side Inference*

**ISMS Marketing Science Conference** 2025

*Voice, Revised: Uncovering the Effects of AI Assistance on Review Generation and Engagement*

**Artificial Intelligence in Management Conference (AIM)** 2025

*Voice, Revised: Uncovering the Effects of AI Assistance on Review Generation and Engagement*

**Conference on Digital Experimentation (CODE@MIT)** 2023

*Emotion- Versus Reasoning-based Drivers of Misinformation Sharing: A Field Experiment Using Text Message Courses in Kenya*

**ISMS Marketing Science Conference** 2023

*Emotion- Versus Reasoning-based Drivers of Misinformation Sharing: A Field Experiment Using Text Message Courses in Kenya*

**Advances with Field Experiments Conference** 2023

*Emotion- Versus Reasoning-based Drivers of Misinformation Sharing: A Field Experiment Using Text Message Courses in Kenya*

## RELEVANT COURSEWORK

**Massachusetts Institute of Technology**

Microeconomic Theory – Foundation
Microeconomic Theory – Game Theory
Microeconomic Theory – Mechanism Design
Industrial Organization
Statistical Methods in Economics
Applied Econometrics
Inference on Causal and Structural Parameters using ML and AI
Natural Language Processing
Spoken Language Processing
Machine Learning for Inverse Graphics
Network Science and Models

**Stanford University**

Theory of Probability
Experimental Design
Machine Learning and Causal Inference
Convex Optimization
Modern Applied Statistics: Learning
Applied Statistics
Reinforcement Learning

## TEACHING EXPERIENCE

**Teaching Assistant, MIT Sloan School of Management** **Cambridge, MA**
Introduction to Marketing and Strategy (Instructor: Prof. Duncan I. Simester) 2025, 2026

**Teaching Assistant, MIT Sloan School of Management** **Cambridge, MA**
Introduction to Operations Management (Instructor: Prof. Sean Willems) 2023

**Teaching Assistant, MIT Sloan School of Management** **Cambridge, MA**
Supply Chain: Inventory Analytics (Instructor: Prof. Sean Willems) 2023

**Project Assistant, Stanford Graduate School of Business** **Stanford, CA**
Data Driven Impact, Action Learning Program (Instructor: Prof. Susan Athey) 2021

**Teaching Assistant, Stanford Bio-X** **Stanford, CA**
Bootcamp in R and Statistical Methodologies (Instructor: Prof. Susan Holmes) 2020

## PRIOR RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

**Research Assistant, Computational Marketing Lab** 2020–2021
Prof. Harikesh Nair — *Investigating the impact of privacy policies on demand-side platforms*

**Research Assistant, Golub Capital Social Impact Lab** 2020–2021
Prof. Susan Athey — *Battling the Coronavirus Infodemic Among Social Media Users in Kenya and Nigeria*

**Research Assistant, Stanford Graduate School of Business** 2020–2021
Prof. Jann Spiess — *Welfare-Driven Power Analyses for Experiment Designs; Augmenting Pre-Analysis Plan Using Generative Adversarial Networks for Heterogeneous Treatment Effect Estimation*

**Research Apprentice, University of California, Berkeley** 2017–2018
Prof. John Harte — *Advancing and Testing Ecological Theories*

**Lab Manager / Research Apprentice, University of California, Berkeley** 2017
Naniette Coleman — *Interdisciplinary Research Group on Privacy*

**Research Apprentice, University of California, Berkeley** 2017
Joshua Kalla — *Investigating Vaccine Policies Among Pediatricians*

## PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

**Data Analyst Intern, ValueNEX** 2020

**Quantitative Research Intern, China Universal Asset Management** 2019

**Data Scientist Intern, GE Aviation** 2017

**Machine Learning Intern, Xiaomi Inc.** 2016

## SKILLS AND ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

**Programming:** Python, R, SQL, C++, Spark, MATLAB, Cython

**Language:** Chinese (Native), English (Fluent), Japanese (Intermediate), Spanish (Beginner)

**Other:** WSET Level 3 Award in Wines (Pass with Merit)
U.S. Permanent Resident

## REFERENCES

**Duncan I. Simester (Chair)**
NTU Professor of Marketing
MIT Sloan School of Management
simester@mit.edu

**Juanjuan Zhang**
John D. C. Little Professor of Marketing
MIT Sloan School of Management
jjzhang@mit.edu

**Susan Athey**
The Economics of Technology Professor
Stanford Graduate School of Business
athey@stanford.edu

## ABSTRACTS OF WORKING PAPERS

### Selling the Haggle

Keyan Li, Zelin Li, Siqi Pei, and Feng Yang.
*Major Revision at Management Science.*

Price haggling is widely viewed as a source of friction in retail markets: customers bear bargaining costs, and firms face operational complexity. This logic has motivated some firms to adopt fixed pricing. We show that in markets organized around personal selling, eliminating negotiation can backfire. Using lead and transaction data from a major automaker in China that introduced a one-price policy for one model while retaining negotiation for all others at the same dealerships, we find that the policy reduced sales of the targeted model and shifted demand toward models where negotiation remained available. Notably, although the fixed price was below the prior average negotiated price at most dealerships, the pattern persists within this subgroup. We argue that the process of negotiation serves as an effective deal closing tool for the salesperson. When this instrument is removed for one product, salespeople become less equipped to convert leads into sales and may redirect customers toward products for which negotiation remains available. Consistent with this mechanism, demand switching is larger among salespeople who relied more heavily on price discussion prior to the policy. These findings suggest that, beyond negotiation outcomes external to the firm (such as customer disutility, price dispersion, or surplus extraction), an internal organizational factor also matters when evaluating pricing regimes: the salesforce, whose ability to haggle often serves as the instrument that closes the deal.

### Voice, Revised: Uncovering the Effects of AI Assistance on Review Generation and Engagement

Zelin Li and Song Lin.
*Under review at Journal of Marketing Research.*

Online reviews are central to consumer markets, yet many consumers stay silent and posted reviews can be unrepresentative. We study how generative AI affects review contribution, composition, and downstream consumer response. Using a custom-built video platform, we test two LLM-powered assistance formats: one-click generation from user-provided keywords or prompts, and an interactive chatbot for collaborative drafting. Four findings emerge. First, AI assistance increases comment rates relative to control, but by a magnitude broadly comparable to the industry-standard Guided Prompt condition. Its distinctive effect appears in the interactive chat format, which disproportionately increases posting among users typically reluctant to review online. Second, AI-assisted comments exhibit positive sentiment bias. Third, they more closely align with users' later unaided expressions, reflecting AI's role in both amplifying user articulation and elaborating user input with video-relevant content. Fourth, AI-assisted reviews increase downstream choice probability, especially among consumers who value broader topical coverage and longer reviews. These findings highlight that AI's contribution is not captured by review volume alone: chat-style AI can make the silent majority more vocal, AI-assisted reviews reshape how reviews are composed, and these reviews increase downstream content choice, with associated platform-design risks.

**Signaling by Saying No**

Zelin Li

In many markets, buyers select providers without observing their underlying skills or experience. We propose that customization requests can serve as a screening device: experienced providers are better placed to recognize when standardized solutions dominate unnecessary customization, so their willingness to decline a request becomes informative about expertise. We develop a model in which experienced providers opt for standardization when customization has low value, while inexperienced providers customize because they cannot distinguish when customization helps. We examine these predictions in a field setting on Fiverr, where freelancers create Facebook video ads and receive an optional customization request. Freelancers who accept the request produce ads with lower click-through rates, yet their decision to customize is uncorrelated with observable platform quality metrics. The same freelancers who customized also produce ads that perform worse in a separate unrelated task, indicating that the customization decision signals persistent quality differences. A provider's willingness to say no can be a credible signal of expertise.

**Wholesale Channel Spillovers**

Eric T. Anderson, Zelin Li, and Duncan I. Simester.

When a brand expands its retail channels and allows third-party retailers to sell its products for the first time, does this result in positive spillovers or cannibalization from the brand's direct-to-consumer (DTC) business? We provide the first empirical study of the impact of a new wholesale channel on a brand's own-store sales. The findings are obtained from transaction-level data provided by a retailer that launched a new wholesale program, with staggered partner entry across U.S. markets over a five-year period. The new wholesale channel increased new customer acquisition, active customer retention, and reactivation of lapsed customers in the brand's own DTC channels. Spillovers were largest in non-urban markets with low competitive intensity. Different partner types generate distinct spillover patterns: major national retailers drive new customer acquisition, while independent specialty retailers drive active customer retention. Our findings suggest that wholesale channels complement rather than cannibalize a brand's direct business.

**Emotion- Versus Reasoning-based Drivers of Misinformation Sharing: A Field Experiment Using Text Message Courses in Kenya**

Susan Athey, Matias Cersosimo, Kristine Koutout, and Zelin Li.

Digital media literacy interventions to counter misinformation sharing have focused primarily on teaching strategies to address reasoning-based techniques that manipulate users' evaluation of the information in social media posts. Yet emotion-based techniques that manipulate how users feel when reading a post may matter more for how misinformation spreads. In a preregistered field experiment with Facebook users in Kenya (N = 8,684), a setting underrepresented in this literature, we test separate text message courses countering each technique type in a pre-post survey design. We find that only the course countering emotion-based techniques improves users' sharing discernment, the difference between non-misinformation and misinformation sharing. Notably, the emotion-based course reduces sharing across all misinformation types, even posts using only reasoning-based techniques, showing that the emotion-based course generalizes

beyond the specific technique type it targets. Treatment effects of the emotion-based course persist in a follow-up survey seven to eleven weeks later. Among users who complete the follow-up, effects on misinformation sharing decay more slowly than effects on non-misinformation sharing, leading to larger discernment gains over time. These results demonstrate the persistent and generalizable value of teaching users strategies to counter emotion-based techniques, motivating further research on how best to do so. Furthermore, our model of users' decision-making suggests that neglecting emotion-based techniques may lead researchers to underestimate the value of teaching strategies to counter reasoning-based techniques. In settings where users have not already learned strategies to counter reasoning-based techniques, teaching them may show little benefit because users share emotionally before reaching the point of applying reasoning-based strategies.