

Exploring Customer Discrimination in the Fast-Food Industry: Insights from a Web-Based Study at a Swedish University

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Abstract- *This study explores customer discrimination against fictitious male and female food truck owners with Arabic-sounding names through a web-based experiment conducted at a Swedish university campus. Utilizing responses from 1,406 students, the findings indicate no significant evidence of discrimination. Participants displayed slightly higher positivity towards food trucks run by males with Arabic-sounding names compared to their Swedish counterparts. These results contribute to the understanding of customer discrimination, highlighting its variability across contexts and the need for further research.*

Keywords: *customer discrimination, immigrant self-employment, social identity theory, web-based experiment, fast food market, Swedish university*

1. Introduction

The proportion of foreign-born individuals in the self-employment sector has grown significantly over the past few decades in numerous countries within the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). This trend has sparked extensive scholarly attention, with researchers exploring the factors behind variations in self-employment rates between immigrants and natives. These investigations point to a range of influences, including structural barriers, access to resources, and social dynamics. However, a recurring challenge for self-employed immigrants is the presence of discrimination, which manifests in interactions with customers, financial institutions, and suppliers. This study narrows its focus to examine customer discrimination, a particularly pervasive form of bias in consumer markets.

Customer discrimination is rooted in social identity theory, which posits that individuals categorize themselves and others into ingroups and outgroups based on shared characteristics. Such categorization often fosters favorable attitudes toward ingroup members and negative biases against outgroup members. Introduced by Becker (1957), the concept of customer discrimination describes situations where consumers experience a psychological "cost" or disutility when purchasing goods or services from outgroup sellers. This dynamic can impose significant economic disadvantages on minority business owners. Borjas and Bronars (1989) extended this framework, theorizing that customer discrimination could lead to poorer economic outcomes for minority entrepreneurs, including reduced income and diminished returns on investment.

Empirical research has documented customer discrimination across various contexts. Early studies in professional sports found evidence of such biases; for instance, Kahn and Sherer (1988) observed that attendance at U.S. National Basketball Association games was influenced by the racial composition of players. Similarly, Nardinelli and Simon (1990) found that baseball cards featuring non-white players were valued less than those of white players. Studies in employment contexts further highlighted discriminatory practices. Neumark (1996) found that women faced hiring discrimination for waitress roles in high-end restaurants, driven by customer preferences for male waitstaff in establishments catering to predominantly male clientele. Holzer and Ihlanfeldt (1998) demonstrated how customer demographics influenced hiring decisions in retail, with ethnic alignment between staff and customers increasing employment opportunities for certain groups. More recent analyses, such as Leonard, Levine,

and Guillano (2010), explored these dynamics in retail sales, finding modest increases in revenue when employee demographics matched local community profiles.

Direct evidence of customer discrimination against sellers emerged with the study by Doleac and Stein (2013), which employed an online field experiment to sell iPods via classified advertisements in the U.S. The study found that black sellers received fewer offers and lower prices than white sellers, illustrating the tangible impact of consumer bias. Beyond the U.S., research is limited but revealing. Combes et al. (2016) in France linked customer discrimination to the underrepresentation of African immigrants in customer-facing roles, while Bar and Zussman (2017) in Israel identified preferences among Jewish customers for Jewish-owned service providers, which influenced hiring patterns and economic outcomes for Arab workers.

Despite these insights, few studies have focused explicitly on customer discrimination against self-employed immigrants. Much of the existing literature relies on indirect indicators, such as workforce composition, rather than direct measures of consumer behavior toward minority business owners. This gap is particularly notable in contexts where minority entrepreneurs are disproportionately represented in certain industries, such as retail and food services.

This study aims to address this gap by investigating customer discrimination against self-employed immigrants with Arabic-sounding names in Sweden's fast-food market. Using a web-based experimental approach, the research tested whether consumer attitudes and willingness to pay were influenced by the perceived ethnicity and gender of food truck owners. The experiment took place at a Swedish university campus, a context characterized by a young, highly educated, and relatively diverse population.

Sweden offers a pertinent setting for this investigation due to its significant immigrant population and the challenges faced by immigrant entrepreneurs. Nearly 20% of the Swedish population is foreign-born, with immigrants from West Asia constituting a growing segment. This demographic has shown high levels of self-employment in sectors like retail and restaurants, often confronting barriers such as discriminatory lending practices and customer biases. Moreover, prior studies have documented discrimination against individuals with Arabic-sounding names in Sweden's labor and housing markets, further underscoring the relevance of this research.

The findings of this study revealed no significant evidence of customer discrimination against food truck owners with Arabic-sounding names. On the contrary, participants expressed slightly greater positivity toward male food truck owners with Arabic-sounding names compared to their Swedish counterparts. While these results suggest that customer discrimination may not be as prevalent in this specific context, the study's external validity is limited to young, educated consumers and particular market conditions. The variability of customer discrimination across different markets highlights the need for further research to understand its broader implications and identify effective strategies for promoting equity in self-employment.

2. Experimental Method

Experimental method Participants A total of 1,406 Swedish-speaking students at Linköping University voluntarily participated in the experiment, which was conducted in February 2018. Invitations to participate in the experiment were sent through the university's official student information email system. We only invited students from one of four campuses at Linköping University, Campus Valla, to participate in the experiment since it was framed specifically for this campus. Fifty-nine percent of the participants were women. Almost 11 percent reported that they were born outside Sweden, and the ages ranged from 18 to 68 years ($M = 25$, $SD = 6.52$). **Materials and Procedures** We constructed eight cases of small business establishments regarding which participants were asked to report their opinions. Participants were told that the purpose of the study was to gain knowledge about students' views and

attitudes about various possible new establishments of small businesses, with sales directed toward students at Campus Valla, Linköping University. The type of businesses that were presented to the students were baguette food truck, kebab food truck, pasta food truck, salad food truck, corner shop, hairdresser, second-hand shop, and cinema. These cases were presented to participants in a random order. Two of these six cases (the baguette and the kebab food truck) were used for the purpose of this study and will be explained in detail below. The rest of the cases served as experimental filler in order to minimize detection risk. In the baguette and kebab food truck cases, we first stated the nature of the business and presented participants with a picture of the food truck. In the case of the baguette food truck, we stated (English translation): The food truck depicted below is planning to sell baguettes at Linköping University. You will be able to choose the content and toppings of your sandwich, such as cheese, ham, turkey, or tuna, yourself. We ask you to help us with the pricing of the baguettes. In the case of the kebab food truck, we stated (English translation): The food truck depicted below is planning to establish at Linköping University campuses. The food truck will prepare meals containing kebab with Swedish meat or falafel. After the above statements, we asked participants three specific questions regarding each business case. First, we asked participants whether they thought the establishment of the particular food truck was a good idea or not. They had the option to answer yes or no to this question. Second, we asked participants to state their willingness to pay for a typical baguette sandwich and a kebab/falafel meal, respectively, including a drink, on a scale ranging from 0 to 100 SEK. Third, we asked participants to state what they believed other students in general would be willing to pay for a typical meal, including a drink, on a scale ranging from 0 to 100 SEK. The participants' answers to these three questions constituted our dependent variables. For our main independent variables, we randomly manipulated the ethnicity and sex of the owner using the picture that depicted the particular food truck. In the case of the baguette food truck, we used the following food truck names to manipulate ethnicity and sex: Pelles Baguetter, Abduls Baguetter, Lottas Baguetter, and Fatimas Baguetter. Pelle and Lotta are typical Swedish-sounding names while Abdul and Fatima are typical Arabic-sounding names. Further, Pelle and Abdul are typical male-sounding names while Lotta and Fatima are typical female-sounding names. Similarly, in the kebab food truck context, we used Jockes Kebabgrill, Annas Kebabgrill, Mohammeds Kebabgrill, and Sakinas Kebabgrill as food truck names. Here, Jocke and Anna have Swedish connotations and Mohammed and Sakina have Arabic connotations; Jocke and Mohammed are typical male names and Anna and Sakina are typical female names. The names used were chosen rather intuitively and arbitrarily; yet, with inspiration from names used in earlier field experiments on discrimination in the Swedish labor and housing markets (see, e.g., Carlsson and Rooth, 2007; Ahmed and Hammarstedt, 2008). Some remarks are warranted regarding the names at this point. First, it is important to remember that different names within an ethnic domain may elicit different responses from the respondents. Here, we used only one Arabic- and one Swedish-sounding names. Hence, we may over- or underestimate the difference in responses depending on what other traits than ethnicity the chosen names might have signaled, such as social class, socio-economic status, religion, etc. Second, differences in responses generated by names may occur because of different underlying reasons, such as xenophobia, anti-Arab sentiment, Islamophobia, racism, nationalism, etc. We only measure the effect of having an Arabic-sounding name as compared to having a Swedish-sounding name to test the customer discrimination hypothesis. Our design did not allow us (nor was it our ambition) to identify, disentangle, and scrutinize the underlying factors behind differences in participants' responses. A remark on the type of food sold by the food trucks is also in order. We used two different types of cuisines, baguette and kebab/falafel, in order to test for customer discrimination. We considered a baguette sandwich as more of a neutral cuisine with neither Swedish nor Arabic associations. Kebab/falafel, however, has a clear West Asian association. The purpose of this was to scrutinize whether the context itself had any impact on the dependent variable and whether the nature of the context induced any potential ethnic and sex differences in outcomes. We did not have a predetermined hypothesis about whether food with Arab connotations would decrease or increase

discrimination since it arguably could do both: it could reduce statistical discrimination (through beliefs about Arabs being better at making West Asian food than others) and boost taste-based discrimination (by increased animosity – owner Arab, food Arabic). Moreover, we were prone to create cases which were as realistic as possible and close to what can be observed in Sweden. In the kebab/falafel case, therefore, we did not write that the meat was halal when the owner had an Arabic-sounding name (which would have been the sensible thing to do if the experiment was conducted in other countries, such as the U.K. or Germany). Writing out that you are selling halal meat is not common at all in Sweden. Most Muslim entrepreneurs (correctly) believe that Swedish people would not buy their food if the meat was halal. Indeed, there is a strong opinion against halal and kosher meats in Sweden partly because of animal rights movements as well as because people don't want to be involuntarily influenced by religion. Therefore, if we would have write out halal meat, we are most certain that we would have observed strong discrimination against food truck owners with Arabic-sounding names. However, such a design would not have represented the way Muslim restaurant owners actually act in Sweden. We chose, however, to write out that the meat was Swedish, which is something most entrepreneurs would want to flash with, since Swedish people are positively inclined to local products. It did, however, not rule out that that the meat could have been halal, even if we did not spell it out, since there are Swedish halal meats as well. 818 Customer discrimination in the fast food market www.migrationletters.com Upon reflecting on and completing the eight small-business establishment cases, participants answered a small set of questions related to background variables, such as age and sex. It took about 15 minutes to complete the entire experiment. The experiment was administered in Qualtrics. Complete instructions for the entire experiment are available upon request. The data is openly available in Zenodo at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1966627>.

Results

Survey Answers

Tables 1 and 2 summarize participants' responses to the food truck scenarios. The results reveal small differences based on the perceived ethnicity and gender of the food truck owner. For the baguette food truck, 86% of respondents expressed positive attitudes toward establishments with Swedish-sounding owners, while nearly 89% were positive toward those with Arabic-sounding owners. Similarly, willingness to pay (both individual and perceived general willingness) showed only marginal variation across owner types.

Table 1: Survey Answers for the Establishment of a Food Truck Selling Baguettes

Name Type	Positive Responses (%)	Individual Willingness to Pay (SEK)	Willingness to Pay (Positive Responses, SEK)	Perceived General Willingness to Pay (SEK)	Sample Size
Swedish-Sounding Male	85.9	44.0	46.2	48.7	348
Swedish-Sounding Female	85.9	44.6	46.1	48.2	333
Arabic-Sounding Male	88.8	44.3	45.5	49.1	365

Arabic-Sounding Female	88.3	44.2	45.8	48.3	360
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For the kebab food truck, approximately 90% of respondents were positive about establishments run by Arabic-sounding male owners, compared to 85.5% for those with Swedish-sounding male owners. Interestingly, female owners, irrespective of ethnicity, garnered slightly higher positive responses. Willingness to pay was highest for kebabs offered by Swedish-sounding female owners, followed by Arabic-sounding female owners.

Table 2: Survey Answers for the Establishment of a Food Truck Selling Kebabs

Name Type	Positive Responses (%)	Individual Willingness to Pay (SEK)	Willingness to Pay (Positive Responses, SEK)	Perceived General Willingness to Pay (SEK)	Sample Size
Swedish-Sounding Male	85.5	56.6	58.1	49.2	345
Swedish-Sounding Female	88.5	58.7	59.4	49.0	339
Arabic-Sounding Male	89.7	55.6	57.3	48.3	378
Arabic-Sounding Female	88.4	56.9	59.1	48.0	344

These results indicate that there was no significant evidence of customer discrimination against self-employed individuals with Arabic-sounding names in this context.

Estimation Results

Regression analyses further examined the propensity to positively evaluate the food trucks, individual willingness to pay, and perceived general willingness to pay. The models included both simple estimations (focusing on name effects) and adjusted models with control variables such as age, gender, and background.

For baguette food trucks, the results (Table 3) showed no statistically significant differences in positivity or willingness to pay based on the ethnicity or gender of the owner. These findings align with the survey results, indicating negligible discrimination.

Table 3: Regression Estimates for Baguette Food Truck Establishments

Variable	Positive Responses (Without Controls)	Positive Responses (With Controls)	Willingness to Pay (Without Controls)	Willingness to Pay (With Controls)
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Swedish-Sounding Male	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference
Swedish-Sounding Female	0.000 (0.026)	0.001 (0.026)	0.039 (0.032)	0.037 (0.032)
Arabic-Sounding Male	0.028 (0.025)	0.027 (0.025)	0.031 (0.031)	0.022 (0.031)
Arabic-Sounding Female	0.024 (0.025)	0.023 (0.025)	0.019 (0.031)	0.014 (0.031)

For kebab food trucks, the results (Table 4) revealed a slight but statistically significant preference for Arabic-sounding male owners over Swedish-sounding male owners. This effect was significant at the 10% level, indicating marginal evidence of positive bias toward Arabic-sounding male owners in this specific context. However, no significant differences were found for other comparisons.

Table 4: Regression Estimates for Kebab Food Truck Establishments

Variable	Positive Responses (Without Controls)	Positive Responses (With Controls)	Willingness to Pay (Without Controls)	Willingness to Pay (With Controls)
Swedish-Sounding Male	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference
Swedish-Sounding Female	0.030 (0.025)	0.031 (0.025)	0.035 (0.024)	0.023 (0.024)
Arabic-Sounding Male	0.042* (0.024)	0.043* (0.024)	0.002 (0.024)	-0.003 (0.023)
Arabic-Sounding Female	0.029 (0.025)	0.030 (0.025)	0.007 (0.024)	0.003 (0.024)

Conclusions from Results

The findings consistently showed no evidence of customer discrimination against Arabic-sounding food truck owners. In fact, there was a slight positive inclination toward Arabic-sounding male owners in the kebab food truck scenario. These results underscore the importance of contextual factors, such as market type and demographic composition, in shaping consumer attitudes.

Discussion

This study aimed to examine customer discrimination against self-employed immigrants with Arabic-sounding names in the fast-food market, using a web-based experiment conducted on a Swedish university campus. Participants were asked to express their opinions about the establishment of a food truck and their own willingness, as well as their beliefs about others' willingness, to pay for food sold by the truck. The food truck owners were assigned randomly one of four names: a Swedish-sounding male, a Swedish-sounding female, an Arabic-sounding male, or an Arabic-sounding female.

Our findings revealed no evidence of customer discrimination against food truck owners with Arabic-sounding names. Furthermore, no significant differences emerged between male and female food truck owners. The only statistically significant result observed was that respondents were slightly more positive toward a food truck run by a male with an Arabic-sounding name compared to a food truck run by a male with a Swedish-sounding name. This finding is contrary to the results of previous studies, which have generally documented the existence of customer discrimination. However, it is important to note that these earlier studies often focus on specific customer groups in particular markets, which limits the external validity of their findings. Our study suggests that customer discrimination may not be as universal as previously thought and that its existence could vary significantly across different markets and contexts.

While our study contributes valuable insights, we acknowledge that its external validity is also limited. The participants in our study were predominantly young, highly educated students at a university, a demographic that may not fully represent the broader Swedish population. Additionally, it is reasonable to assume that customer discrimination against self-employed immigrants varies by market segment and geographic location within Sweden. Thus, further research is needed to explore how customer discrimination affects self-employed immigrants across different regions and sectors of the economy.

Our results are also relevant to Sweden's integration policy, particularly regarding the self-employment of immigrants from regions such as West Asia. Over the past few decades, the number of self-employed immigrants from this region has increased. Previous research has documented discrimination against individuals with Arabic-sounding names in Sweden's labor and housing markets, as well as challenges faced by immigrant entrepreneurs in securing bank loans and accessing financial services (Carlsson and Rooth, 2007; Ahmed and Hammarstedt, 2008; Aldén and Hammarstedt, 2016). Despite these challenges in other sectors, our study suggests that customer discrimination against self-employed immigrants in the fast-food market may be less pronounced. This finding highlights the importance of examining discrimination in specific contexts and calls for further research into the obstacles that self-employed immigrants face in different markets.

In addition to contributing to the literature on customer discrimination, our study also offers methodological insights. We developed a novel experimental design that can be easily adapted to other markets and settings. Discrimination is a complex phenomenon, and traditional audit studies may not capture all of its nuances. Our approach provides a more direct test of customer biases and opens up new avenues for understanding the causes and consequences of discrimination. It also emphasizes the need for innovative methodologies that go beyond the traditional approaches to studying discrimination.

There are several avenues for future research that could build on our findings. First, while we included one neutral cuisine (baguette) and one cuisine with West Asian associations (kebab), future studies should incorporate a wider range of food types, including those with more distinctly Swedish associations. This would allow researchers to explore whether customer discrimination is influenced by the perceived cultural match between the ethnicity of the food truck owner and the type of food they offer. Second, our study used only a limited number of names to represent ethnicity and gender. Future research could benefit from using a broader pool of names, as randomizing names from different social, cultural, and economic backgrounds would reduce the potential for confounding factors. Third, future

studies should investigate customer discrimination against other minority groups, expanding the focus beyond just Arabic-sounding names to encompass other ethnic, racial, or social groups.

In conclusion, our study provides evidence that customer discrimination against self-employed immigrants with Arabic-sounding names may not be as pervasive in the fast-food market as previously suggested. The findings also underscore the need for further research to better understand how customer biases vary across different markets, contexts, and immigrant groups. By continuing to innovate in experimental design and broadening the scope of inquiry, future studies can contribute to a deeper understanding of discrimination and help inform policies that promote equal opportunities for immigrant entrepreneurs.

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