Optimal discoverability on platforms*

Andrei Hagiu† and Julian Wright‡

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Abstract

Choosing how easy to make it for buyers to discover new sellers is a key design decision for platforms. On the one hand, enabling more discoverability generates more transactions and can be more attractive for sellers because they anticipate being discovered by new buyers. On the other hand, discoverability can make sellers more reluctant to participate because they anticipate their existing buyers will discover and purchase from other sellers. We model this fundamental tradeoff and study how the platform's optimal level of discoverability depends on various factors: the degree of substitutability between the sellers' products, the standalone value of the platform's tools, the size of the platform's installed base of buyers, the nature of the platform's fees including its ability to charge differential fees depending on whether a transaction is with a seller's existing buyers or not, the number of sellers, and asymmetries between sellers' sizes.

1 Introduction

A key issue for the design of platforms is how much discoverability to enable. Some platforms are primarily aimed at providing tools for sellers to serve their existing buyers, and offer no or limited ability for buyers to discover new sellers or content providers they did not know about (e.g. Shopify, Substack, Teachable). Others are buyer-focused, and in addition to seller tools, offer search tools and recommendations that make it easier for buyers to discover new sellers or content providers (Amazon, Medium, Udemy).

We study a platform's optimal choice of how much it wants to enable such discoverability. Enabling more discoverability generates a fundamental tradeoff for platforms. On the one hand, it creates more transactions by inducing buyers to purchase from new sellers, thereby

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†Boston University Questrom School of Business, E-mail: ahagiu@bu.edu

‡Department of Economics, National University of Singapore, Singapore, E-mail: jwright@nus.edu.sg

increasing the platform's revenue for any given transaction fee it sets. This can also potentially increase the transaction fees sellers are willing to pay because it allows them to be found by new buyers. On the other hand, it also commoditizes sellers, by making it easier for a seller's otherwise captive buyers to find and purchase from competing sellers. This means some sellers may be reluctant to participate on platforms that enable too much discoverability, potentially decreasing the transaction fees sellers are willing to pay. Indeed, it is this fear of commoditization at the hands of large platforms that has created an opportunity for new platforms to emerge that promise to only enable limited discoverability in order to attract sellers.

To analyze this tradeoff, we build a model in which a platform offers seller tools and attracts sellers, each of whom brings its own initially captive buyers. By its design choices (e.g. how easy it is for buyers to search and compare across the listed sellers), the platform determines what fraction of these buyers also see other sellers that are participating on the platform. The platform also chooses a transaction fee charged to sellers. Taking into account its optimal choice of this transaction fee, we find that the platform's optimal level of discoverability is higher when (i) sellers' products are less substitutable, (ii) the tools the platform offers to sellers are more valuable, (iii) the platform has a larger installed base of buyers, (iv) the platform is less constrained (e.g. financially or due to moral hazard issues) in offering sellers fixed subsidies to participate, (v) the number of available sellers that can be brought onto the platform is higher, and (vi) sellers are less asymmetric in terms of the number of buyers they bring to the platform. We also show that when the platform can charge differential fees, it would want to charge a lower fee for transactions from a seller's initial captive buyers and a higher fee for transactions from buyers that discover the seller through the platform. In this case, partial discoverability is optimal over a broader range of parameters. And when there are more than two asymmetric sellers, the platform may find it optimal to "drop" the largest sellers and focus instead on the smaller sellers by setting a higher level of discoverability.

It may be useful for readers to have a few examples in mind as they go through our model and results. These examples also help illustrate that platforms do not necessarily want to enable maximum discoverability:

- Both Shopify and Amazon.com attract third-party e-commerce sellers. Both offer tools which allow these sellers to have a web presence. On Amazon.com, sellers are exposed to intense competition amongst themselves (focusing on cases where Amazon does not sell its own first-party products). Buyers can easily compare sellers against each other and sort by price. Moreover, Amazon often selects a single seller to recommend to buyers from among the competing sellers via its Buy Box, and sellers compete to win the Buy Box. By contrast, Shopify has been very deliberate in not creating a similar marketplace that enables full discovery for buyers, and in emphasizing to sellers that they can maintain full control over their buyers and that these buyers would not be “shopped around” to other sellers. Its buyer-facing Shop.app (launched in 2020) offers some limited discoverability, but for now it is still mainly focused on enhancing the transactions between sellers and their existing buyers.

- Both Teachable and Udemy are platforms connecting instructors that offer courses on a wide range of topics with learners. Udemy is essentially a version of the Amazon marketplace for online courses, where learners can browse and discover instructors and courses, complete with a recommendation system based on the learners' interests and courses they have previously taken. By contrast, Teachable solely focuses on providing instructors the tools they need to offer their courses online, without any marketplace enabling discovery of courses for learners. In 2019, Teachable did experiment with Discover, a dedicated sub-domain created for students to browse, preview or enroll in courses from Teachable instructors. Teachable instructors could opt in to appear on the discovery site. Importantly, Teachable went out of its way to make it clear to instructors that Discover was not a full-fledged marketplace (like Udemy and others) which commoditizes instructors.[1] However, since late 2022 the Discover site is no longer active: Teachable seems to have decided to abandon the Discover experiment.

- Both Medium and Substack are platforms connecting independent writers with readers. While it does offer tools for writers to publish their writings online, Medium is very focused on making it easier for readers to discover posts and writers, and it rewards writers when their articles are read by readers. By contrast, Substack is primarily focused on providing writers the tools they need to create and manage newsletters: each author must build their own reader audience, without much (if any) help from Substack. Recently, Substack has created a centralized website where readers can bookmark posts and authors they like, and potentially discover new ones. However, most authors still obtain the majority of their audience through their own efforts (e.g. social media, etc.).

And there are many other examples, either of firms making contrasting choices with respect to discoverability, or of firms changing their positioning over time (e.g. Open Table starting off as a pure provider of software tools to restaurants for keeping track of reservations, and only later adding the consumer-facing website that enables discoverability).

[1] See https://teachable.com/blog/discover-by-teachable

Motivated by these examples, after fully analyzing the choice of discoverability by a monopoly platform, we also explore what happens when there are competing platforms, showing that competition between symmetric platforms reduces the level of discoverability platforms choose. Moreover, we illustrate how discoverability can be an endogenous way for otherwise identical platforms to differentiate, with one platform offering maximum discoverability and attracting smaller sellers, and the rival platform focusing only on seller tools (i.e. no discoverability) to attract larger sellers.

1.1 Related literature

The paper fits within the burgeoning literature on platform design, with other authors exploring how platforms optimally design consumer search (Hagiu and Jullien, 2011; White, 2013; de Corniere, 2016; Dukes and Liu, 2016; Casner, 2020; Jiang and Zou, 2020; Teh, 2022; and Zhong, 2023), their media content or product recommendations (Barach et al, 2020; Casner and Teh, 2023; Zhou and Zou, 2023), and their reputation system (Shi et al, 2023). Teh (2022) and Choi and Jeon (2023) explore how such optimal design choices are affected by platform business models and how this can lead to misalignment with welfare objectives. Hagiu and Wright (2023) explore how different design choices can be used by platforms to limit leakage or disintermediation. From this literature, our paper is closest to those works focused on search design, and in particular papers showing that the platform may want to add frictions to consumer search in order to relax seller competition, thereby allowing the platform to extract more revenue from sellers (if it charges an ad-valorem or fixed fee). Meanwhile, our focus is on how the extent of discoverability affects sellers' participation incentives given sellers can always sell to their buyers directly without the platform. Indeed, the key distinction relative to the existing literature is that in our setting each seller brings its own captive buyers, so discovery arises from one seller's buyers discovering another seller via the platform, whereas in the existing literature the platform directly attracts buyers which then discover one or more third-party sellers. As a result, and in contrast to the existing literature, the platform in our setting may optimally choose no discoverability at all. This is despite the fact we focus on the platform charging per-transaction fees, which in standard settings imply the platform will choose its design to maximize the volume of transactions, for example, by making search as easy as possible (see Teh, 2022).

Our paper is also related to the four key strategies that can be used to turn product firms into platforms (Hagiu and Altman, 2017). Previous work has only analyzed one of these strategies formally. Specifically, Hagiu et al. (2020) explore the possibility of a multiproduct firm becoming a platform by inviting rivals to sell products or services to the buyers of its core product. The current paper considers one of the other key strategies proposed in Hagiu and Altman, which is "reaching out to customers' customers". Here the firm in question is initially a business-to-business (B2B) software provider. Its original customers are sellers who buy its software tools, and their customers are the initial set of buyers they each have. By offering discovery for these buyers, the B2B software provider turns itself into a platform with network effects that helps each seller's buyers discover other sellers.

Finally, our paper is part of an emerging literature that focuses on the downside of participating on platforms from the perspective of sellers. In our paper, the downside is a form of commoditization: sellers bring their buyers to the platform, which then allows those buyers to discover other, possibly competing, sellers. In a sense, by participating on platforms, sellers can lose control over their relationship with their own buyers, something which has been widely discussed in the popular press (see, Hagiu and Wright, 2021 for a discussion). Other related work exploring the downside of participating on platforms include recent work on possible imitation and self-preferencing by hybrid marketplaces like those offered by Amazon and Apple (Anderson and Bedre-Defolie, 2022; Hagiu et al., 2022; and Madsen and Vellodi, 2022). In a similar vein, Mayya and Li (2022) show empirically how participating on food-delivery platforms may commoditize restaurants.

2 Baseline model with two sellers

We start with a simple baseline model, which we will later extend in various directions. Suppose there are two symmetric sellers, each of which sells a product that buyers value at v. Both sellers have marginal cost $c < v$. Each seller $i = 1, 2$ starts with a measure λ of captive buyers (buyers who only know about the seller). Thus, all buyers are initially captive, half belonging to each seller.

The platform offers B2B tools for participating sellers and possibly discoverability, but not any product of its own. We formalize the B2B tools for sellers (which we will call "tools" for brevity) as a reduction in sellers' marginal costs by b. This could be software and other infrastructure that more efficiently handles payments, delivery, customer service, record-keeping and receipts, and so on. If this is the only thing the platform does, the platform can be thought of as just a B2B software-as-a-service company, though we will still refer to it as a "platform", for convenience.

When both sellers participate, the platform can choose to make a fraction x of buyers aware of both sellers (i.e. make them discover the seller they were not initially aware of), so that the remaining fraction $1 - x$ of buyers are still only aware of the seller they were initially captive to. If $x > 0$, we say that the platform offers discoverability. With probability

θ buyers view sellers' products as perfect substitutes, while with probability $1-\theta$ buyers view them as independent. Of course, this only matters for buyers who are aware of both products, in which case provided both sellers participate, with probability θ they buy only one product and with probability $1-\theta$ they buy both.

Finally, the platform charges each participating seller a non-negative per transaction fee of f, so the effective marginal cost for a seller on the platform is $c+f-b$.

The timing is natural. In period 1 the platform chooses its level of discoverability x and transaction fee f.[2] In period 2, after observing x and f, each seller decides whether to join the platform. Then in period 3, each seller sets its price, and demands and payoffs are realized.

In period 2, when a seller decides whether or not to join the platform, its outside option is to sell to its captive buyers in its direct channel, where it does not benefit from b. However, once a seller has decided to participate on the platform in period 2, we assume that it abandons its direct channel, so in period 3 buyers can no longer purchase from it in its direct channel. This assumption is made to simplify the analysis so that we do not need to worry about sellers trying to induce consumers to switch and buy in the direct channel. It can also be justified by viewing each seller's decision to participate on the platform or to develop its direct channel in period 2 as a long-term commitment—so the seller commits to and invests in one channel or the other. Nevertheless, in Online Appendix A.2 we show that the optimal level of discoverability derived below for the baseline model remains unchanged if we allow each seller to maintain its direct channel and buyers to costlessly switch between buying through the platform and buying from each seller's direct channel.

Furthermore, for certain choices of f and x, it is possible that there are multiple equilibria in sellers' decisions in period 2, one in which all sellers join given they expect the other seller(s) to join, and one where no sellers join given they expect the other seller(s) not to join. In such cases, we select the equilibrium in which all sellers join, which is sometimes referred to as "favorable beliefs" on the part of sellers.[3]

Some comments about our modelling assumptions are in order. First, to interpret x, one could think of a more elaborate setting in which buyers are heterogeneous in their search cost. There is some cutoff level such that all buyers with search cost below the cutoff discover the rival seller (this is the fraction x) and all those with search cost above the cutoff (i.e.

[2] For a monopoly platform, it is irrelevant whether discoverability x is set before or after (or the same time as) its transaction fee f. The timing of these decisions will matter when we consider competing platforms.

[3] In Section A.2 of the Online Appendix we redo the baseline analysis in case sellers hold "unfavorable beliefs," so that they coordinate on the equilibrium in which none of them join whenever that equilibrium exists. As we show there, while the platform's profit is lower in the face of unfavorable beliefs, the baseline characterization of optimal discoverability remains unchanged.

$1-x$ of buyers) do not search, i.e. they just know their original seller.[4] In this context, one can interpret the platform's choice of x as representing its ability to shift everyone's search cost up or down by its design of the search process. Examples of a platform's design choices that affect x include how prominent they make buyer search, the ability to search based on price or to do side-by-side comparisons, and whether the platform recommends a particular seller to buyers based on price and other factors (e.g. Amazon's Buy Box).

Furthermore, our model is compatible with an alternative interpretation of x, which moves some of the heterogeneity from buyers to sellers. Namely, instead of viewing x as the fraction of buyers aware of both sellers, we could assume that x is the probability with which any given seller is exposed to all buyers. Thus, with probability $1-x$ each seller remains only exposed to its initially captive buyers. And symmetrically for the other seller. In the Online Appendix, we show that this alternative interpretation leads to exactly the same analysis and results as the one provided in Section 3.

Second, there are two features of the model that are necessary to obtain an interesting tradeoff when choosing discoverability. Specifically, discoverability must result in more transactions in total, but it must also make some transactions contested. Our stark formulation of buyer demand has these properties: with some probability, buyers are interested in both products, so view them as independent, and with the complementary probability they are just interested in one product, so they view competing products as identical. A more realistic but less tractable setting is to have buyers always interested in both products and with downward-sloping demand for each, so that when they are exposed to both products, they buy more in total than if they are just exposed to one. How much more depends on the degree of substitutability buyers perceive between the products. We will show the robustness of our main results to this alternative formulation.

Third, a key assumption implicit in our timing is that the platform commits to its choice of x and sellers can observe its choice. This captures that it is harder for the platform to change its design choices (e.g. due to technological commitments in designing its search, as well as possibly brand or reputation concerns) than it is for sellers to list (or delist). Without commitment to x, since the sellers' platform participation decisions would be treated as fixed, the platform would always choose maximum discoverability ($x=1$) given that doing so maximizes the number of transactions facilitated.[5]

Finally, we assume sellers each set a single price, so we rule out price discrimination across their different buyers (i.e. those that are initially captive to the seller, and with some

[4] When there are more than two sellers, this same interpretation works if we consider buyers engaging in simultaneous search, so they search all sellers provided their search cost is below some cutoff.

[5] We have redone our analysis of the baseline setting without commitment in Section A.3 of the Online Appendix.

discoverability, those that are initially captive to the other seller(s)). This reflects that sellers may find it difficult to distinguish between buyers. Indeed, buyers could be able to disguise their identity to obtain the more attractive offer in case sellers tried to price discriminate.[6]

3 Analysis and results

If neither seller joins the platform, then each makes profits

$$\lambda\,(v-c)\,. \tag{1}$$

If only one seller joins the platform, that seller's marginal cost is $c-(b-f)$, instead of c for the non-joining seller. Each seller just faces its captive buyers and prices at v. Thus, the joining seller's profit is

$$\lambda\,(v+b-f-c)$$

while the profit of the non-joining seller is still $\lambda\,(v-c)$.

Finally, consider the case both sellers join the platform. Given the sellers are symmetric and face equal fees, to determine each seller's expected profit, we just need to determine the measure of captive buyers each seller has after the platform's choice of x. This reflects that given sellers have some fraction of captives and some fraction of buyers who compare the two identical sellers, prices are determined by a mixed strategy pricing equilibrium. In such an equilibrium, each seller's expected profit will equal the profit it can guarantee by just selling to its captives.[7]

Seller i's captive buyers are now made up of seller i's initial captives that did not discover seller j (measure $\lambda\,(1-x)$), seller i's captives that discovered seller j but view the two sellers' products as independent (measure $\lambda x\,(1-\theta)$) and seller j's initial captives that discovered seller i but view the two sellers' products as independent (measure $\lambda x\,(1-\theta)$). Thus, each seller's expected profit is

$$(v+b-f-c)\,(\lambda\,(1-x)+2\lambda x\,(1-\theta))\,. \tag{2}$$

[6] In Online Appendix A.4, we extend the baseline analysis to the case sellers can effectively price discriminate between their "own" initially captive buyers and those coming from the rival seller after discovery via the platform. This does not change the optimal level of discoverability in a systematic way.

[7] This is a special case of the more general result from Proposition 1 in Myatt and Ronayne (2023) which characterizes the expected profits of two or more sellers in a mixed strategy pricing equilibrium allowing sellers to be asymmetric (either in their costs or in their measure of captives). We summarize their more general characterization in Online Appendix A.5. Their results imply our results are robust to a variety of other pricing games that yield the same expected profit.

This is increasing in the extent of discovery x if and only if $\theta < \frac{1}{2}$, i.e. if and only if the two sellers' products are not too substitutable. This makes sense: sellers want to join a platform that induces discovery only if the other participating sellers are not too close substitutes.

The condition for both sellers joining the platform to be an equilibrium is that (2) is no less than (1), or equivalently

$$f \leq b + (v - c) \frac{x (1 - 2\theta)}{1 + x (1 - 2\theta)}. \tag{3}$$

When $x = 0$, this constraint reduces to $f \leq b$. Without discoverability, there are no interactions between the sellers and no network effects, so the platform just provides tools: each seller adopts it if and only if it offers more value than it charges.

When $x > 0$, if the two sellers' products are not too substitutable ($\theta < \frac{1}{2}$), then the platform can charge $f > b$ and still get both sellers to join given we have assumed sellers coordinate on the equilibrium in which they both join (i.e. they hold "favorable beliefs").[8] In this case, the maximum fee the platform can charge to get both sellers to join is increasing in the amount of discoverability x. On the other hand, when $x > 0$ and the products are sufficiently substitutable ($\theta \geq 1/2$), the platform must charge $f < b$ if it wants both sellers to join. Furthermore, more discoverability now decreases the maximum fee the platform can charge to get both sellers to join.

The platform's demand when it attracts both sellers consists of the $2\lambda (1 - x)$ buyers who are informed of only one product (and who buy that product only), the $2\lambda x (1 - \theta)$ buyers who are informed of both products and view them as independent (they buy both), and the $2\lambda x\theta$ buyers who are informed of both products and view them as substitutes (they buy one product only). Thus, the platform's profit when both sellers join is

$$\Pi (f, x) = f (2\lambda (1 - x) + 4\lambda x (1 - \theta) + 2\lambda x\theta) = 2\lambda f (1 + x (1 - \theta)). \tag{4}$$

Clearly, the platform's profit is always increasing in the extent of discovery, holding f and the participation of both sellers fixed. This is natural: discovery expands the number of transactions on the platform.

Substituting in the maximum fee the platform can charge while ensuring the sellers still

[8] If the sellers' beliefs were unfavorable, then the platform would face the additional constraint $f \leq b$ (which is binding only if $\theta < \frac{1}{2}$), since otherwise the sellers would coordinate on the equilibrium with neither joining. Similarly, if the sellers maintained their respective direct channels even after joining the platform, and buyers could costlessly switch between purchasing in either channel, then the platform would face the same additional constraint $f \leq b$. Nevertheless, in Online Appendix A.2, we show that the optimal level of discoverability remains the same in these two cases as in Proposition 1 below.

participate from (3) and defining

$$\mu = \frac{b}{v-c}$$

as the ratio of the value provided by tools to the value provided by the underlying product being sold, we obtain the platform's maximum profit as a function of x only[9]:

$$\Pi(x) = 2\lambda \left(\mu + \frac{x(1-2\theta)}{1+x(1-2\theta)} \right) (1+x(1-\theta))(v-c). \tag{5}$$

When products are not too substitutable ($\theta < \frac{1}{2}$), since both the platform and the participating sellers benefit from discovery, Π is increasing in x and the platform will naturally set $x^* = 1$, the maximum amount of discovery. However, when products are more substitutable ($\theta > \frac{1}{2}$), the platform faces a trade-off when choosing the amount of discovery x: on the one hand, a higher x increases the number of transactions, but on the other hand it lowers the participating sellers' profits, so it also lowers the maximum transaction fee f that the platform can extract from the sellers. This can lead to the optimal level of discovery to be set less than one. Relegating the remaining analysis to the appendix, we obtain the following proposition.

Proposition 1. *Suppose each seller starts with a measure λ of captive buyers. The platform always finds it optimal to induce both sellers to join and its optimal level of discovery is given by*

$$x^* = \begin{cases} 1 & if \quad 0 < \theta \leq \theta_1(\mu) \\ \frac{1-\sqrt{\frac{\theta}{(\mu+1)(1-\theta)}}}{2\theta-1} & if \quad \theta_1(\mu) \leq \theta \leq \frac{\mu+1}{\mu+2} \\ 0 & if \quad \theta \geq \frac{\mu+1}{\mu+2} \end{cases}, \tag{6}$$

where $\theta_1(\mu) \in \left(\frac{1}{2}, \frac{\mu+1}{\mu+2}\right)$ is the unique solution in θ to

$$\frac{\theta}{(1-\theta)^3} = 4(\mu+1).$$

The optimal level of discoverability x^* is decreasing in θ and increasing in μ.

The proposition fully characterizes the platform's optimal choice of discoverability, which is just a function of the underlying parameters θ and μ. A greater level of substitutability between products (i.e. higher θ) induces the platform to choose a lower level of discoverability

[9] It is straightforward to confirm that the platform always prefers to have both sellers join. Indeed, the platform's profit with one seller joining is half of what it could get with both sellers joining and setting $x = 0$, which is always an option it could choose when it induces both sellers to join.

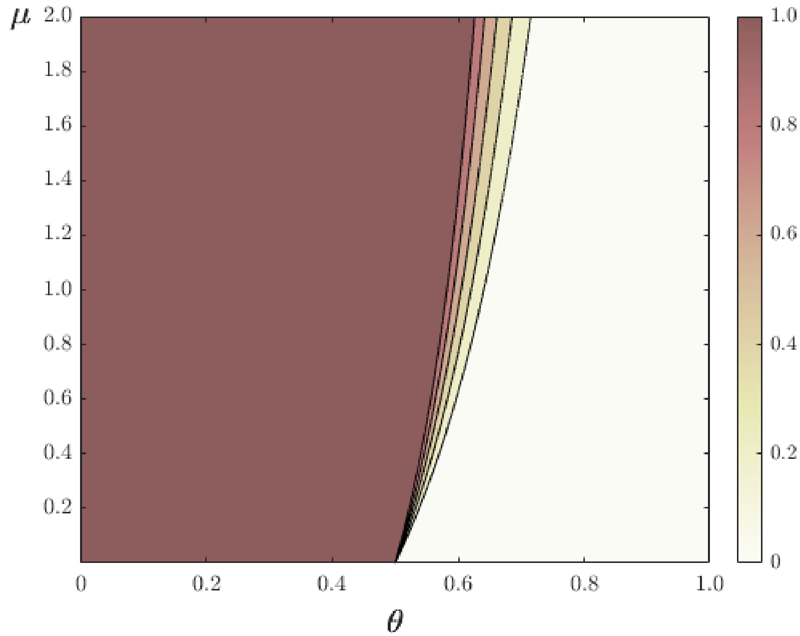

Figure 1: The platform's optimal level of discoverability x^*

x^*, because discoverability leads to more intense competition between the sellers, and so makes it harder to attract the two sellers to join the platform.

Meanwhile, an increase in the value offered by the platform's tools for sellers (i.e. higher μ) means the platform can charge a higher fee per transaction while keeping sellers willing to participate. This in turn make it more profitable to increase the number of transactions enabled, which the platform does by increasing discoverability. This is why x^* is increasing in μ. In short, the platform's investment in tools and provision of discoverability are mutually reinforcing. Note, however, that even if $\mu = 0$, the platform will set $x = 1$ and derive positive profits if and only if $\theta < \frac{1}{2}$. In other words, provided the sellers' products are not too substitutable, the platform can create positive value for sellers via discoverability and extract positive profits.[10]

In Figure 1, we have mapped out the optimal x^* when θ is on the horizontal axis and μ is on the vertical axis. The figure shows levels of x^* from $x^* = 0$ (lightest colour) to $x^* = 1$ (darkest colour). The upward sloping relationship seen in the figure reflects that with higher θ, one would require a higher μ to leave the level of x^* unchanged.

One feature of the unit demand setting we used is that the lower prices resulting from seller competition do not lead to an increase in overall demand. In Online Appendix A.7 we

[10]More generally, in Online Appendix A.6 we show that the platform can derive positive profits when its tools are worth less than seller tools that are available competitively in the outside market.

use a less tractable elastic demand setting in which this effect is accounted for, and show that the main comparative static results are very similar.

4 Extensions

In this section we explore several interesting extensions of the baseline model.

4.1 Platform brings in buyers

Often platforms attract buyers directly: these could be buyers obtained via the platform's own marketing efforts or they could be buyers that bought other products through the platform in the past (from other sellers or from the platform itself if it acted as a reseller at some point). It is therefore interesting to explore how optimal discoverability changes when the platform attracts buyers directly. To be clear, we will not model the platform competing with the sellers by offering first-party products.

Suppose the platform starts with a measure $\eta\lambda$ of buyers, where $\eta > 0$ is the ratio of the platform's buyers to each seller's captive buyers. We assume the platform's buyers are initially uninformed of the two sellers. By choosing x, the platform also determines the fraction x of the platform's buyers that discover the two sellers.

The effect of these platform buyers is to increase each seller's captives by $\eta\lambda x(1-\theta)$, since a fraction $1-\theta$ of the platform's buyers that become informed of both sellers will buy from both sellers. (The remaining fraction θ of the platform's buyers purchase from the seller with the lower price, and so are not captive to either.) Thus, modifying (3), the condition for each seller to join given that the other does becomes

$$f \leq \left(b + (v-c)\frac{x(1-2\theta+\eta(1-\theta))}{1+x(1-2\theta+\eta(1-\theta))}\right). \quad (7)$$

The platform's demand when it attracts both sellers is the same as before, plus an additional $\eta\lambda(\theta + 2(1-\theta))x$ buyers that come directly from the platform. Thus, the platform's profit when both sellers join is now

$$\Pi(f,x) = (2\lambda(1+x(1-\theta)) + \lambda\eta x(2-\theta)) f. \quad (8)$$

Combining (7) and (8), and using the definition of μ, implies the platform's problem is to choose x to maximize

$$\Pi(x) = \lambda(2(1+x(1-\theta)) + x\eta(2-\theta))\left(\mu + \frac{x((1-2\theta)+\eta(1-\theta))}{1+x((1-2\theta)+\eta(1-\theta))}\right)(v-c). \quad (9)$$

Relegating the maximization problem to the appendix, we obtain the following results.

Proposition 2. *Suppose each seller starts with a measure λ of captive buyers and the platform starts with $\eta\lambda$ buyers of its own. The platform always finds it optimal to induce both sellers to join and its optimal level of discovery is given by*

$$x^* = \begin{cases} 1 & if \quad 0 < \theta \leq \theta_1(\eta,\mu) \\ \frac{1-\sqrt{\frac{(2+\eta)\theta}{(2(1-\theta)+\eta(2-\theta))(\mu+1)}}}{2\theta-1-\eta(1-\theta)} & if \quad \theta_1(\eta,\mu) \leq \theta \leq \theta_2(\eta,\mu) \\ 0 & if \quad \theta \geq \theta_2(\eta,\mu) \end{cases}$$

where

$$\theta_2(\eta,\mu) = \frac{2(1+\eta)(\mu+1)}{(2+\eta)(\mu+2)} > \frac{1+\eta}{2+\eta}$$

and $\theta_1(\eta,\mu) \in \left(\frac{1+\eta}{2+\eta}, \theta_2(\eta,\mu)\right)$ is the unique solution in θ to

$$\frac{\theta}{(1-\theta)^2(2(1-\theta)+\eta(2-\theta))} = (2+\eta)(\mu+1).$$

The optimal level of discoverability x^* is decreasing in θ, increasing in μ and increasing in η.

Proposition 2 shows that the larger the installed base of buyers the platform starts with (relative to the measure of the sellers' initial captives), the higher the level of discoverability it will choose. This can be seen from the fact that when $\eta = 0$, we are back to the solution from the baseline (Proposition 1), and that $\theta_1(\eta,\mu)$, $\theta_2(\eta,\mu)$ and x^* are all increasing in η. Put differently, the darkest area in Figure 1 (with highest x^*) expands to the right as η increases.[11] The rationale for this result is that informed platform buyers are a net benefit for the sellers, and they create more transactions for the platform. Furthermore, this increases the willingness of sellers to pay to participate (i.e. the fee that the platform can charge), thereby increasing the value of further expanding demand, which the platform does by increasing discoverability. Thus, we expect platforms that already have a lot of buyers coming to them directly, will be more likely to offer maximum discoverability. This also suggests that, over time, as sellers' initially captive buyers keep coming back to the platform to discover potentially new sellers, the platform will want to increase discoverability.

[11] Apart from this feature, the figure remains qualitatively the same. This assumes η is not too large. When η is high enough, $\theta_2(\eta,\mu) > 1$, and the platform always chooses a positive level of discoverability.

4.2 Two-part tariffs

We are interested in studying whether the platform would be better off charging sellers a fixed fee instead of, or in addition to, variable transaction fees. To model this, suppose that in addition to the transaction fee f, the platform can also charge each seller a fixed fee F. The remainder of the baseline model setup remains unchanged.

The sellers' payoffs are as in the baseline model except if they join the platform they also pay the fixed fee F. Thus, for both sellers joining the platform to be an equilibrium, we must have

$$F + \lambda (f - b) (1 + x (1 - 2\theta)) \leq \lambda (v - c) x (1 - 2\theta) \tag{10}$$

and the platform's profit with both sellers joining is

$$2F + 2f\lambda (1 + (1 - \theta) x) . \tag{11}$$

The platform maximizes (11) over (F, f, x) subject to the constraint (10) above. It is easily seen that the constraint must be binding. Using that to write F as a function of f and x, we obtain that the platform maximizes

$$2\lambda ((v - c) x (1 - 2\theta) + b (1 + x (1 - 2\theta)) + f\theta x)$$

with respect to f and x. Clearly, the last expression is increasing in f, so the platform will set

$$f^* = v - c + b,$$

which then leads to

$$x^* = 1.$$

This implies

$$\begin{aligned} F^* &= \lambda ((v - c) x^* (1 - 2\theta) - (f^* - b) (1 + x^* (1 - 2\theta))) \\ &= -\lambda (v - c) . \end{aligned}$$

Thus, with unrestricted two-part tariffs, the platform chooses maximum discoverability and charges the maximum transaction fee. It extracts the entire margin of each seller's product, and subsidizes the participation of sellers by paying each seller the value of their outside option, which is equal to $\lambda (v - c)$.

At first glance, one may think that with inelastic demand both transaction fees and fixed fees work like transfers, so it should not matter which is used by the platform. However, this is not the case, because an increase in f is just passed through by the sellers to the extent they compete, so it doesn't impact their profit as much as an equivalent increase in a fixed fee that generates the same revenue for the platform. Specifically, in our model, each seller's net profit only reflects transactions with buyers for whom it doesn't compete (initially captive buyers and buyers who view the two sellers' products as independent), whereas the platform derives the transaction fee f from all transactions. Thus, the two sellers do not internalize all transactions they generate on the platform when making their participation decisions, which is why, provided there is some discovery, it always makes sense for the platform to load up on the transaction fee and offset it with a fixed subsidy to the maximum extent possible.

A problem with the solution above is that it involves the platform paying each seller their outside option as a fixed subsidy upfront. The sellers then derive zero net revenues from their participation. In practice, this is unrealistic since it would lead to moral hazard problems (e.g. sellers participate just to collect the subsidy but then not doing anything to serve buyers) and the platform may also face a budget constraint. So it is reasonable to assume that the subsidy the platform can offer to sellers is limited by some exogenously given amount $K \geq 0$, which means we have the additional constraint

$$F \geq -K. \tag{12}$$

The platform maximizes (11) over (F, f, x) subject to the constraint (10) above and the additional constraint (12). Relegating the rest of the analysis to the appendix, we obtain the following result.

Proposition 3. *Suppose each seller starts with a measure λ of captive buyers, and the platform can charge a two-part tariff: a transaction fee f and a fixed fee F, subject to $F \geq -K$. The platform always finds it optimal to induce both sellers to join. If $0 \leq K < \lambda(v-c)$, then $F^* = -K$, $f^* < v - c + b$ and the optimal level of discovery is given by*

$$x^* = \begin{cases} 1 & if \quad 0 < \theta \leq \theta_1(\mu, \lambda, K) \\ \frac{1-\sqrt{\frac{\theta}{(\mu+1)(1-\theta)}\left(1-\frac{K}{\lambda(v-c)}\right)}}{2\theta-1} & if \quad \theta_1(\mu, \lambda, K) \leq \theta \leq \theta_2(\mu, \lambda, K) \\ 0 & if \quad \theta \geq \theta_2(\mu, \lambda, K) \end{cases}$$

where

$$\theta_2(\mu, \lambda, K) = \frac{\mu+1}{\mu+2-\frac{K}{\lambda(v-c)}} \in \left[\frac{1}{2}, 1\right]$$

and $\theta_1(\mu,\lambda,K) \in \left(\frac{1}{2}, \theta_2(\mu,\lambda,K)\right)$ *is the unique solution to*

$$\frac{\theta}{(1-\theta)^3} = \frac{4(\mu+1)}{1-\frac{K}{\lambda(v-c)}}$$

The optimal level of discoverability x^* *is decreasing in* θ *and* λ*, and increasing in* μ *and* K*.*

It is easily verified that setting $K = 0$ leads to the results in Proposition 1. The platform wants to offer a subsidy, but if it cannot, it optimally chooses no fixed fee. This means our baseline results still apply even if the platform can use two-part tariffs, provided moral hazard (or some other constraint) prevents the platform offering sellers fixed subsidies.

The reason the platform always chooses a subsidy here, if it can, reflects that the platform wants to push the final price charged by the two sellers up to the monopoly price v, thereby maximizing joint profit. The platform then extracts this profit subject to leaving each seller only with their outside option. Since in this Bertrand setting, the only way to achieve the monopoly price is to charge a transaction fee equal to the monopoly price, this leaves sellers with zero profit, which given their positive outside option, implies sellers must receive a subsidy to keep them willing to participate.[12]

The larger K, i.e. the more the platform can subsidize seller participation via a negative fixed fee, the higher the optimal level of discoverability (until $K \geq \lambda(v-c)$, at which point full discoverability is optimal). This makes sense: fixed subsidies are a way to compensate sellers for the individual downside of discoverability, and maximum discoverability is better from a joint profit perspective. Another way to understand the result is in terms of the usual tradeoff in setting discoverability: a higher fixed subsidy allows the platform to charge a higher transaction fee, which increases its profits from expanding the number of transactions, and shifts the tradeoff towards a higher level of discoverability.

4.3 Differential fees

The logic of two-part tariffs, in which the platform increases the transaction fee so as to increase seller prices, but then offers a fixed subsidy to sellers to make them willing to join, suggests that the platform can also do better if it can raise the fee it charges for transactions on which sellers compete and lower the fee it charges for transactions on which sellers do

[12] In more general models with imperfect competition, the platform may be able to induce the monopoly price while still leaving sellers with positive profits. Then whether the fixed fee is positive or negative depends on how these profits compare to the outside option, which is positive here. This is in contrast to traditional vertical relationship models, where it is never necessary to subsidize via the fixed fee given the outside option is typically assumed to give zero profits.

not compete. Indeed, in our model, charging $f_1 = b + v - c$ for transactions generated by buyers who are aware of both sellers but choose only one, and $f_2 = b + (v - c)\frac{1-2\theta}{2-2\theta} < f_1$ for all other transactions (such that the sellers are just willing to participate), would replicate the same outcome as with the optimal two-part tariff.

The problem with such a mechanism is that it requires the platform to distinguish between buyers for whom the sellers must compete more intensely from buyers for whom the sellers compete less (either because such buyers are only aware of one seller or because they view the products as independent rather than substitutes). But even if the platform can implement such a mechanism, each seller has no way to verify which of its own initial captive buyers become aware of the rival seller, and so is subject to manipulation by the platform which could overstate the fraction of transactions for which it earns a higher fee.

Taking into account these practical limitations, we focus on a more realistic second-best mechanism which is only based on what the seller can also verify. We allow the platform to charge each seller different transaction fees for selling to the buyers they brought to the platform (their initially captive buyers) vs. for selling to buyers that discovered the seller through the platform (the other seller's initially captive buyers). Since each seller should know which buyers it brings onto the platform, it can in principle monitor the fees it pays are correct. This is indeed a practice that has been used. For example, Teachable, when experimenting with its Discover marketplace, charged instructors a lower fee for students that came via their own Teachable-powered sites and a higher fee for students that came via Teachable's discovery page (3-13% vs. 30%).[13] More broadly, large marketplaces (e.g. Amazon.com, Etsy) increasingly derive revenues from per-click advertising fees, in addition to transaction fees. This means that a seller will pay a higher fee when transacting with buyers that discover it via ads on the marketplace than when selling to buyers who deliberately search for and come straight to the seller.

Intuitively, charging each seller a lower fee for transactions with buyers they brought to the platform vs. buyers that discovered them through the platform should make sellers more willing to participate and therefore allow the platform to increase the level of discoverability in order to increase the number of transactions enabled. As we will see, this intuition does not always hold.

To proceed, we allow the platform to charge each seller a transaction fee f_0 for transactions with the seller's initial captive buyers and a potentially different transaction fee f_1 for transactions with buyers that are not part of the seller's initial captive base.

Suppose both sellers join the platform (the payoffs from not joining are the same as in the baseline). The set of captive buyers for a seller is made up of three components:

[13]See https://teachable.com/blog/discover-by-teachable

- $\lambda(1-x)$ buyers on whom the seller incurs a marginal cost of $c+f_0-b$ and who only consider that seller
- $\lambda x(1-\theta)$ buyers on whom the seller incurs a marginal cost of $c+f_0-b$ and who consider both sellers
- $\lambda x(1-\theta)$ buyers on whom the seller incurs a marginal cost of $c+f_1-b$ and who consider both sellers.

Each seller's profit is then

$$(v+b-f_0-c)(\lambda(1-x)+\lambda x(1-\theta))+(v+b-f_1-c)\lambda x(1-\theta).$$

Indeed, the two sellers are symmetric, so each seller's expected profit from setting any other price in the support of its mixed strategy would have to be the same as what it can obtain simply by serving its captive buyers (which here incur different marginal costs).

The sellers' profits are increasing in x for given fees if and only if

$$\theta<\frac{v+b-c-f_1}{(v+b-c-f_0)+(v+b-c-f_1)}.$$

Compare this with the baseline, where sellers' profits were increasing in x if and only if $\theta<\frac{1}{2}$. The platform's ability to charge different fees makes it less likely for discoverability to be good for sellers' profits whenever $f_0<f_1$. The reason is that when $f_0<f_1$, each seller makes a higher margin on its own initially captive buyers (for whom it prefers less discoverability) vs. on buyers that discovered it through the platform (for whom it prefers more discoverability), so overall each seller prefers less discoverability.

To determine the platform's revenue, consider the λ buyers that are initially captive to seller i. Out of these buyers, $\lambda(1-x)$ remain captive to seller i and buy from that seller only, so the platform makes $f_0\lambda(1-x)$ on them. Another fraction $\lambda x(1-\theta)$ are informed of both products and view them as independent, so they buy both and the platform makes $(f_0+f_1)\lambda x(1-\theta)$ on them. And the remaining fraction $\lambda x\theta$ are informed of both products and view them as substitutes, so they buy one product only. Given that the sellers are symmetric and therefore have the same price distributions in equilibrium, half of these buyers will buy from seller i and half will buy from seller j, so the platform makes $\frac{(f_0+f_1)\lambda x\theta}{2}$ on these buyers. Thus, in total, the platform's profit when both sellers join is

$$\begin{aligned}&\lambda(2f_0(1-x)+2(f_0+f_1)x(1-\theta)+(f_0+f_1)x\theta)\\=\;&\lambda(f_0(2-x\theta)+f_1x(2-\theta)).\end{aligned}$$

The platform's problem is to set x, f_0 and f_1 to maximize the above expression, subject to the following three constraints:

$$0 \leq f_0 \leq v + b - c$$
$$0 \leq f_1 \leq v + b - c$$

$$(v + b - f_0 - c)(1 - x + x(1 - \theta)) + (v + b - f_1 - c)\, x(1 - \theta) \geq v - c.$$

The first two constraints rule out negative transaction fees[14] and ensure that buyers want to participate at the competitive price. The third constraint ensures that each seller wants to participate on the platform.

Relegating the calculations to the appendix, we obtain the following proposition.

Proposition 4. *Suppose the platform can charge each seller a fee f_0 for transactions with its initially captive buyers and f_1 for transactions with buyers it gains through discovery on the platform. Then the platform always finds it optimal to induce both sellers to join and to set $f_1 > f_0$. The optimal level of discovery is given by*

$$x^* = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if} \quad 0 < \theta \leq \frac{1}{2} \\ \frac{\mu}{(\mu+1)\theta} & \text{if} \quad \frac{1}{2} \leq \theta \leq \frac{2}{3+\mu} \\ \frac{1-\sqrt{\frac{\theta}{2(\mu+1)(1-\theta)}}}{\theta} & \text{if} \quad \frac{2}{3+\mu} \leq \theta \leq \frac{2(\mu+1)}{2(\mu+1)+1} \\ 0 & \text{if} \quad \theta \geq \frac{2(\mu+1)}{2(\mu+1)+1} \end{cases} \tag{13}$$

when $\mu \leq 1$, and by

$$x^* = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if} \quad 0 < \theta \leq \theta_0(\mu) \\ \frac{1-\sqrt{\frac{\theta}{2(\mu+1)(1-\theta)}}}{\theta} & \text{if} \quad \theta_0(\mu) \leq \theta \leq \frac{2(\mu+1)}{2(\mu+1)+1} \\ 0 & \text{if} \quad \theta \geq \frac{2(\mu+1)}{2(\mu+1)+1} \end{cases} \tag{14}$$

when $\mu \geq 1$, where $\theta_0(\mu)$ is the unique solution to

$$\frac{\theta}{(1-\theta)^3} = 2(\mu + 1).$$

Again, the optimal level of discoverability is decreasing in the degree of substitutability θ between the sellers' products. In terms of fees, the key result is that the platform always finds

[14] Indeed, negative transaction fees are seldom used in practice because they create arbitrage-type problems (e.g. some sellers might join just to buy from themselves and thereby collect the subsidy).

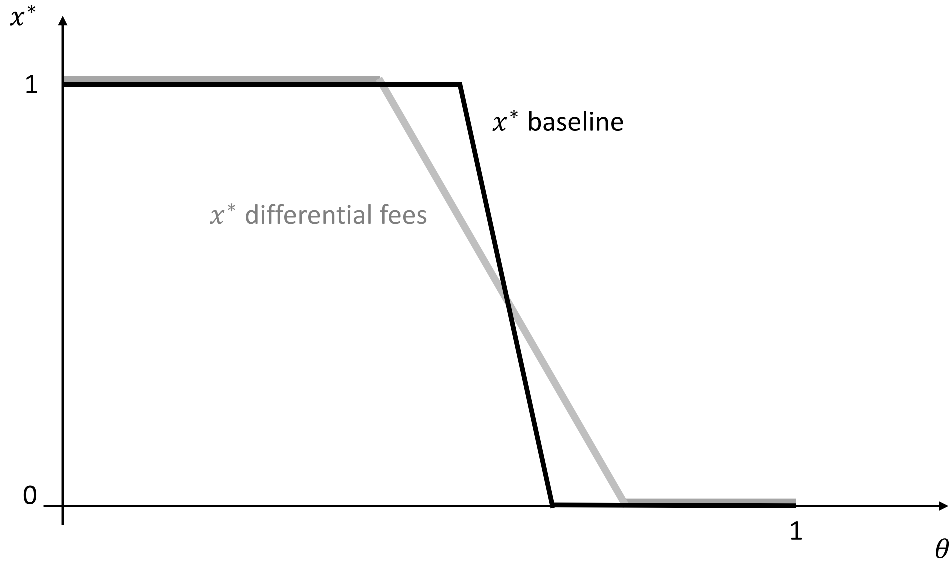

Figure 2: The platform's optimal level of discoverability x^*

it optimal to charge each seller a higher fee for transactions with buyers that are not part of the seller's initial captive base (f_1) than for transactions with the seller's initial captive buyers (f_0). The reason for this is that provided $0 < x < 1$, a larger share of a seller's transactions that come from the rival seller's buyers involve head-to-head competition (and therefore do not contribute to the seller's expected profit), relative to the seller's transactions that come from its own initially captive buyers. Indeed, the share of "discovery transactions" (i.e. transactions generated by the rival seller's buyers) that result in head-to-head competition is $\frac{x\theta}{x-\frac{x\theta}{2}}$, whereas the share of transactions with a seller's own buyers that result in head-to head competition is $\frac{x\theta}{1-\frac{x\theta}{2}} < \frac{x\theta}{x-\frac{x\theta}{2}}$. As a result, the platform prefers to set a higher fee for discovery transactions, because it is more likely to get passed through by the sellers.

It is important to emphasize that this differential fee strategy only works if $0 < x < 1$.[15] For this reason, the range over which partial discoverability is optimal (i.e. $0 < x^* < 1$) is now larger than in the baseline model where the platform could only charge a single fee. The platform prefers partial discoverability because it allows it to exploit this profitable differential fee strategy. This is illustrated in Figure 2, which is constructed with $\mu = 1$: the black line represents $x^*(\theta)$ in the baseline and the gray line represents $x^*(\theta)$ with differential fees.

This also leads to the following corollary, which compares the optimal level of discover-

[15] If $x = 0$ or $x = 1$, then the platform does not gain anything from charging differential fees. Indeed, if $x = 0$, then there is no discovery so f_1 is irrelevant, whereas if $x = 1$, then all buyers are equivalent, so only $f_0 + f_1$ matters.

ability here to the one from the baseline.

Corollary 1. *Denote by x_b^* the optimal level of discoverability from the baseline, given by (6), and by x_{df}^* the optimal level of discoverability with differential fees, given by (13) when $\mu < 1$ and by (14) when $\mu > 1$. For every $\mu > 0$, there exists a unique $\theta_3 \in \left[\theta_1(\mu), \frac{\mu+1}{\mu+2}\right]$ such that $x_{df}^* \leq x_b^*$ if $\theta \leq \theta_3$ and $x_{df}^* \geq x_b^*$ if $\theta \geq \theta_3$.*

Corollary 1 implies that being able to set different fees leads to less discoverability when θ is less than some threshold (denoted θ_3 in the Corollary) and leads to more discoverability when θ is more than that threshold. Moreover, the threshold always arises in the range where there is partial discoverability in the baseline, as can be seen from Figure 2.

4.4 More than two sellers

So far we have focused on the case with only two sellers. Suppose now there are $n \geq 2$ sellers: each seller brings a measure λ of buyers who are informed of the particular seller they are captive to, but are not informed of any of the other sellers.

Things are very similar to before, except now, a seller's expected profit from joining when it expects $m - 1 \geq 1$ other sellers to join is

$$((1-x)\lambda + m\lambda x(1-\theta))(v-c+b-f). \tag{15}$$

To understand this, note first that $1-x$ of a seller's λ initial captives do not discover other sellers, so remain captive. The remaining fraction λx discover all other $m-1$ sellers, with a fraction $1-\theta$ of these viewing all sellers' products as independent, so $\lambda x(1-\theta)$ also remain captive from each seller's perspective. Finally, each seller also sells to the $\lambda x(1-\theta)$ buyers it gets exposed to from each of the other $m-1$ sellers' initial captives. So each of the m sellers who join ends up with

$$(1-x)\lambda + \lambda x(1-\theta) + (m-1)\lambda x(1-\theta)$$

captives, thus leading to the result in (15).

Comparing (15) with the payoff $\lambda(v-c)$ from not joining, a seller will want to join the platform when it expects $m-1$ other sellers to do so if and only if

$$f \leq b + \frac{x(m(1-\theta)-1)}{x(m(1-\theta)-1)+1}(v-c). \tag{16}$$

As is clear from (15), there are positive network effects across sellers. The more sellers join, the higher the payoff from joining for each seller (and therefore the higher f the platform can charge). Note that we continue to assume favorable beliefs, in that sellers always coordinate on the highest number of available sellers joining that is an equilibrium, given the fee f charged by the platform.[16]

Suppose the platform attracts m sellers in total. Each of these sellers has $\lambda(1-x)$ captive buyers who are only informed of one product and buy that product only, so the platform demand generated by these buyers is $m\lambda(1-x)$. Meanwhile, a total measure of $m\lambda x$ buyers discover all sellers on the platform. Out of these, a fraction $1-\theta$ view all products as independent so buy all of them, while the remaining fraction only buy one product. The platform demand generated by these informed buyers is $m\lambda x((1-\theta)m+\theta)$. Total demand for the platform when m sellers join is thus

$$m\lambda(1+x(m-1)(1-\theta)). \tag{17}$$

Since (16) and (17) are both increasing in m, the platform obtains its maximum payoff by inducing all sellers to join ($m=n$) and setting f so (16) is binding when $m=n$. The resulting platform profit is

$$\Pi(x)=\left(b+\frac{x(n(1-\theta)-1)}{x(n(1-\theta)-1)+1}(v-c)\right)(n\lambda(1+x(n-1)(1-\theta))). \tag{18}$$

Relegating the optimization problem over x to the appendix, we obtain the following proposition.

Proposition 5. *Suppose each of n sellers starts with a measure λ of captive buyers. The platform always finds it optimal to induce all sellers to join and its optimal level of discovery is given by*

$$x^*=\begin{cases} 1 & if \quad 0<\theta\leq\theta_1(\mu,n) \\ \frac{1-\sqrt{\frac{\theta}{(\mu+1)(1-\theta)(n-1)}}}{1-n(1-\theta)} & if \quad \theta_1(\mu,n)\leq\theta\leq\theta_2(\mu,n) \\ 0 & if \quad \theta\geq\theta_2(\mu,n)\end{cases}, \tag{19}$$

where $\theta_1(\mu,n)\in\left(1-\frac{1}{n},\theta_2(\mu,n)\right)$ is the unique solution in θ to

$$\frac{\theta}{(1-\theta)^3}=n^2(n-1)(\mu+1)$$

[16] In Online Appendix A.8, we explore less favorable beliefs. These lower the platform's profit, as it has to set a lower fee to attract all sellers to join, but as was the case for the baseline setting with two sellers, such beliefs have no effect on the platform's optimal choice of x^*.

and $\theta_2(\mu, n) = \frac{(\mu+1)(n-1)}{(\mu+1)(n-1)+1}$.

It is straightforward to confirm that the comparative statics with respect to θ and μ remain the same as in the baseline. The extent of discoverability x^* is decreasing in θ and increasing in μ.

The new result is that θ_1 and θ_2 are increasing in n, and so is x^* for the interior solution. More sellers always increase the amount of discoverability the platform chooses. In part this reflects that our model over-emphasizes the positive network effect across sellers due to discoverability and de-emphasizes the negative substitution effect that can arise as more and more sellers are added. Indeed, the only thing that matters for a seller's expected profit is the profit from captives, which always increases when more sellers join the platform. Meanwhile, the number of sellers that compete for contested buyers turns out not to affect a given seller's equilibrium profit. With a more general demand function, each seller's profits from contested buyers would be decreasing in the number of participating sellers, so that adding more sellers can lower each seller's equilibrium profit. In Online Appendix A.9 we use a less tractable setting with elastic demand, and show that adding more sellers can reduce the optimal level of discoverability.

One way to interpret these different results is that our baseline demand specification captures that each additional seller serves a unique product category, with buyers sometimes only wanting to buy from one such product category (and viewing them as perfect substitutes), and other times wanting to buy from all of them. The result says the platform should increase the level of discoverability as it adds more product categories. In contrast, the alternative elastic-demand specification captures the idea of adding more sellers within a given product category. In that case, we find the platform should decrease the level of discoverability as it adds more sellers within a given product category.

Moreover, it is important to recall that in our model discoverability involves buyers seeing all listed sellers. In an alternative formulation, discoverability would involve buyers seeing a fixed number of sellers, say $j \geq 2$ out of a total n participating sellers, where $j < n$. In this case, $1 - x$ of a seller's λ initially captive buyers do not get to see any other seller, and x of them get to observe $j - 1$ other randomly selected sellers. In Online Appendix A.10 we show that the optimal level of discoverability x^* in this case is the same as above in the case there are j sellers on the platform to start with. Thus, for instance, if buyers only look at most at two sellers, then the optimal level of discoverability is the same as in the baseline setting no matter how many sellers join the platform.

4.5 Heterogeneous sellers

So far we have assumed all sellers are identical, each starting with the same measure λ of captive buyers. In this section we analyze two different cases where the sellers are not symmetric: in the first case we explore how asymmetry changes the optimal level of discoverability, and in the second case we illustrate the possibility that a platform may choose to only attract smaller sellers and leave larger sellers out by setting a high level of discoverability.

4.5.1 Two asymmetric sellers

Consider first the case with two sellers, where seller i has measure λ_i of initially captive buyers, and assume $\lambda_1 \geq \lambda_2$.

If seller i does not join the platform, then its profit is $\lambda_i (v - c)$. If only seller i joins the platform, its profit is $\lambda_i (v + b - f - c)$, while the profit of the non-joining seller is still $\lambda_j (v - c)$. If both sellers join the platform, then seller i and seller j will compete with different measures of captive buyers. The analysis in this case turns out to be more complicated, given that the seller with fewer captives will act more aggressively and its profit will be higher than what it can obtain by just charging the monopoly price on its captives. Despite this, as we show in the proof of Proposition 6 below, it is still the seller with more captives (seller 1) that turns out to constrain the fee the platform can set to induce the two sellers to participate in case $x > 0$. This is intuitive: that seller has a better outside option, and discoverability brings more of its buyers to the other seller, than vice-versa.

The captive buyers for seller 1 are now made up of seller 1's initial captives that did not discover seller 2 (measure $\lambda_1 (1 - x)$), seller 1's captives that discovered seller 2 but view the two sellers' products as independent (measure $\lambda_1 x (1 - \theta)$) and seller 2's initial captives that discovered seller 1 but view the two sellers' products as independent (measure $\lambda_2 x (1 - \theta)$). Thus, seller 1's profit is

$$
\begin{aligned}
& (v - c + b - f) (\lambda_1 (1 - x) + (\lambda_1 + \lambda_2) x (1 - \theta)) \\
= \; & (v - c + b - f) (\lambda_1 + \lambda_2) (\beta_1 (1 - x) + x (1 - \theta)),
\end{aligned}
$$

where

$$
\beta_1 = \frac{\lambda_1}{\lambda_1 + \lambda_2} \geq \frac{1}{2}
$$

is seller 1's relative market share of initial captives. Comparing this with seller 1's profit if it doesn't join, the platform must set

$$f \leq b + (v-c)\left(1 - \frac{\beta_1}{\beta_1(1-x) + x(1-\theta)}\right), \tag{20}$$

to ensure seller 1 participates, which as shown in the proof of Proposition 6 below, also ensures seller 2 participates.

The platform's demand when it attracts both sellers consists of the $(\lambda_i + \lambda_j)(1-x)$ buyers who are informed of only one product (and so only buy that product), the $(\lambda_i + \lambda_j)x(1-\theta)$ buyers who are informed of both products and view them as independent (they buy both), and the $(\lambda_i + \lambda_j)x\theta$ buyers who are informed of both products and view them as substitutes (they buy one product only). Thus, the platform's profit when both sellers join is

$$\begin{aligned} & f\left((\lambda_1+\lambda_2)(1-x) + 2(\lambda_1+\lambda_2)x(1-\theta) + (\lambda_1+\lambda_2)x\theta\right) \\ = \ & f(1+x(1-\theta))(\lambda_1+\lambda_2). \end{aligned}$$

Note that the platform can set $x = 0$ and $f = b$ to obtain $b(\lambda_1+\lambda_2)$, which is strictly higher than $b\lambda_1$, the maximum profit it can achieve by attracting one seller only. Thus, it is optimal for the platform to attract both sellers.

The platform will therefore set f and x to maximize the last expression above subject to (20), which ensures both sellers participate.

Relegating the rest of the analysis to the appendix, we obtain the following proposition.

Proposition 6. *Suppose seller i starts with a measure λ_i of captive buyers, where $\lambda_1 \geq \lambda_2$. The platform always finds it optimal to induce both sellers to join and the optimal level of discovery is given by*

$$x^* = \begin{cases} 1 & if \quad 0 < \theta \leq \theta_1(\mu,\beta_1) \\ \frac{1-\sqrt{\frac{2-\theta-\frac{1-\theta}{\beta_1}}{(\mu+1)(1-\theta)}}}{1-\frac{1-\theta}{\beta_1}} & if \quad \theta_1(\mu,\beta_1) \leq \theta \leq \theta_2(\mu,\beta_1) \\ 0 & if \quad \theta \geq \theta_2(\mu,\beta_1) \end{cases},$$

where

$$\theta_2(\mu,\beta_1) = \frac{\mu + \frac{1}{\beta_1} - 1}{\mu + \frac{1}{\beta_1}} \in [1-\beta_1, 1]$$

and $\theta_1(\mu,\beta_1) \in (1-\beta_1, \theta_2(\mu,\beta_1))$ is the unique solution to

$$\frac{2 - \frac{1}{\beta_1} + \left(\frac{1}{\beta_1} - 1\right)\theta}{(1-\theta)^3} = \frac{\mu+1}{\beta_1^2}.$$

The comparative statics of x^* with respect to μ and θ remain the same as before. The new result is that x^* is decreasing in β_1, the larger seller's market share of initial captives. Thus, the bigger the difference in initial market shares of captives, the less discoverability the platform will provide. The reason is that the binding participation constraint that the platform's fee and level of discoverability must respect is that of the larger seller. And the larger seller necessarily prefers less discoverability since it brings more buyers to the platform than it stands to gain from discoverability. It is indeed easily verified that seller 1's profits are decreasing in discoverability whenever $\beta_1 > 1-\theta$, which must be the case for the interior solution x^* to hold.

4.5.2 Why a large seller may not participate on the platform

As shown in Proposition 6, with two sellers, even if asymmetric, it is always profitable for the platform to attract both of them. With more than two sellers, if they are symmetric, the platform also wants to attract all of them (as we saw in Section 4.4). However, with more than two sellers, if they are heterogeneous, the platform may be better off setting its transaction fee and level of discoverability such that not all sellers participate.

In particular, the previous analysis with asymmetric sellers shows that it is the larger seller (in terms of their initial captives) that constrains the platform's transaction fee because it benefits less from joining the platform. This is consistent with real world observations: larger and more established brands are the ones least likely to participate on large marketplaces (e.g. Amazon.com), preferring to sell through their own channels instead.[17]

In what follows we confirm that in a setting with three sellers, such that $\lambda_1 > \lambda_2 = \lambda_3$, it may be optimal for the platform to set its fee and level of discoverability such that the larger seller does not participate in equilibrium. Denote

$$\beta = \frac{\lambda_1}{\lambda_1 + 2\lambda_2}.$$

First, it can never be optimal for the platform to induce only one seller to join because that implies no discovery, so the most the platform could obtain is $b\lambda_1$. The platform could do strictly better setting $x = 0$ and the same $f = b$, so all sellers are willing to join, yielding $b\left(\lambda_1 + 2\lambda_2\right)$ for the platform. Second, it can never be optimal to induce the large seller to join together with only one small seller. We prove this result as part of Proposition 7 below. The reason is essentially the same as above. The large seller is the least likely to wish to participate on the platform when other sellers are present, and given Bertrand competition for buyers who view the products as substitutes, having two small sellers join is

[17] See for example https://www.cnbc.com/2019/11/13/nike-wont-sell-directly-to-amazon-anymore.html

actually better for the large seller than having just one small seller due to the possibility of discovery. So if the large seller participates, then the second small seller is even more willing to participate, and the platform certainly benefits from having three rather than two sellers via an increased number of transactions.

Taking these two results into account, the platform's optimal strategy is either to induce all three sellers to join, or to only induce the two small sellers to join. If the platform induces all three sellers to join, the binding constraint on the platform's optimal fee is once again the participation of the large seller (we show this in the proof of Proposition 7 below), so the platform's profits in this case are

$$\begin{aligned} & \max_x \left\{ f\left(\lambda_1 + 2\lambda_2\right)\left(1 + x\left(1-\theta\right)\right)\right\} \\ \text{subject to } \lambda_1\left(v-c\right) \quad \leq & \quad \left(v-c+b-f\right)\left(\lambda_1\left(1-x\right) + \left(\lambda_1+2\lambda_2\right)x\left(1-\theta\right)\right), \end{aligned}$$

which is equal to

$$\max_x \left\{ \left(\lambda_1 + 2\lambda_2\right)\left(v-c\right)\left(\mu + 1 - \frac{1}{1 - x + \frac{x(1-\theta)}{\beta}}\right)\left(1 + x\left(1-\theta\right)\right)\right\}.$$

Meanwhile, if the platform only induces the two small sellers to join, then the analysis is the same as in the baseline model, so the platform's profits in this case are

$$\max_x \left\{ 2\lambda_2\left(v-c\right)\left(\mu + 1 - \frac{1}{1 + x\left(1-2\theta\right)}\right)\left(1 + x\left(1-\theta\right)\right)\right\}.$$

Consider the tradeoff between these two options. The total number of buyers is larger when attracting all three sellers ($\lambda_1 + 2\lambda_2$ instead of $2\lambda_2$), but the transaction fee can be higher when attracting just the two small sellers:

$$\left(v-c\right)\left(\mu + 1 - \frac{1}{1 + x\left(1-2\theta\right)}\right) > \left(v-c\right)\left(\mu + 1 - \frac{\lambda_1}{1 - x + \frac{x(1-\theta)}{\beta}}\right)$$

which is true if and only if

$$\beta > \frac{1}{2}.$$

Thus, the large seller has to be at least as large as the two small sellers combined in order for the maximum transaction fee that can be charged with two small sellers to be higher than that charged with all three sellers. In this case, the size disparity between the large seller and the two small sellers is so big that for the same level of discoverability, the platform must charge a lower transaction fee if it wants to attract all three sellers than when it wants to attract only the two small sellers.

By contrast, if the large seller is close in size to each of the small sellers ($\frac{1}{2} < \beta \leq 1$), then there is no tradeoff and the platform always prefers to induce all three sellers to join, consistent with the results from Section 4.4 with multiple sellers: profits are increasing in the number of (equal) sellers that join.

The following proposition confirms this by focusing on the specific case when tools have no value ($b = 0$), so the only valuable service that the platform can provide is discovery.

Proposition 7. *Suppose there are three sellers, one large of size λ_1 and two identical smaller sellers, each of size $\lambda_2 < \lambda_1$. Suppose also $b = 0$. When $\theta \geq \frac{1}{2}$, the platform strictly prefers to induce all three sellers to join if $\beta < 1 - \theta$ and is indifferent between two or three sellers joining (with zero resulting profits) when $\beta \geq 1 - \theta$. When $\theta < \frac{1}{2}$, the platform prefers to induce all three sellers to join if $\beta \leq \frac{1}{1+2\theta}$ and prefers to induce only the two small sellers to join if $\beta > \frac{1}{1+2\theta}$. If it is optimal to induce only the two small sellers to join, the optimal level of discoverability is as in the baseline. If it is optimal to induce all three sellers to join, the optimal level of discoverability is higher than in the baseline, strictly so if $\frac{1}{2} \leq \theta < 1 - \beta$.*

The proposition shows that when $\mu = 0$, for any θ, there exists a threshold such that the platform prefers to induce all three sellers to join when β is below that threshold and prefers (strictly only if $\theta < \frac{1}{2}$) to induce only the two small sellers to join when β is above that threshold. This is an artifact of the assumption that $\mu = 0$, so the platform has no valuable tools to offer aside from discovery. Indeed, this implies that when the large seller becomes sufficiently large relative to the two small sellers (i.e. β becomes large), the platform prefers to drop the large seller because attracting it means choosing almost no discovery and therefore vanishingly small profits in the absence of valuable tools.

In general however, with $\mu > 0$ so the platform offers valuable tools, if the large seller becomes sufficiently big relative to the small sellers, then the platform once again strictly prefers inducing all three sellers to join (which it can always do by setting x equal or close to zero), for the simple reason that the large seller is too big to leave out and it can be served profitably with tools. For the platform to prefer inducing only the two small sellers to join, λ_1 has to be in some intermediate range relative to λ_2 (given θ). This is confirmed in Figure 3, which shows the platform's optimal choice of sellers (either all three sellers, or the two small sellers only) as a function of θ and β when $\mu = 0.1$.

As μ increases, the region in Figure 3 where the platform prefers to only induce the two sellers to join shrinks, and we note that for any $\mu \geq 0.2$, there is no θ and β for which the platform ever prefers only selling to the two small sellers.

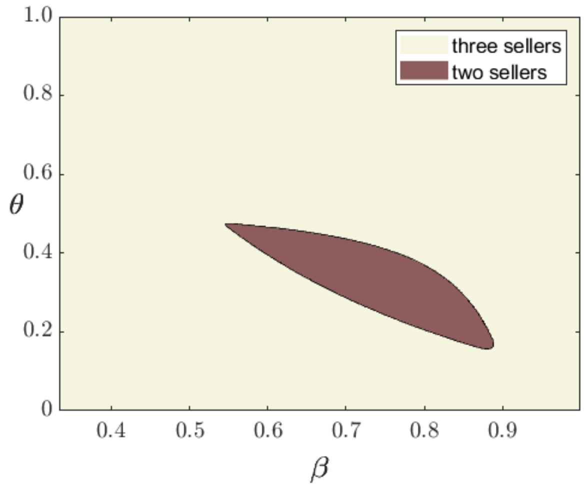

Figure 3: Parameter region where two sellers join and where three sellers join

4.6 Competing platforms

So far we have assumed there is a single monopoly platform. In this subsection we consider two extensions to handle competing platforms. The first provides the simplest and more direct extension of our baseline setting to competing platforms, and the second illustrates how it is possible to sustain an equilibrium where the platforms endogenously differentiate themselves by offering different levels of discoverability, and thereby attracting different sellers. In each case, the model will have two identical platforms, who first determine if they want to invest in offering some level of discoverability (which incurs some arbitrarily small fixed costs to provide). Then, after observing each other's choice of x, the platforms simultaneously set their fees f_1 and f_2. The sellers, then decide which platform to join, if any. Note if platform i chooses not to invest in any discoverability, then by default it has $x_i = 0$.

4.6.1 Symmetric platform competition

Suppose there are two platforms 1 and 2, and two symmetric sellers with $\lambda_1 = \lambda_2 = \lambda$.

Proposition 8. *If $\theta < \frac{1}{2}$, then the only possible equilibrium is that both sellers join the same platform i, and in this equilibrium we have $x_i = 1$, $x_j = 0$, $f_i = (v + b - c)\left(\frac{1-2\theta}{2(1-\theta)}\right)$, $f_j = 0$. If $\theta \geq \frac{1}{2}$, then in equilibrium we have $f_1 = f_2 = 0$, $x_1 = x_2 = 0$, and each seller joins either platform.*

Comparing this to the baseline with a monopoly platform and two symmetric sellers, the equilibrium level of discoverability is lower under platform competition. The reason is that when platforms compete, they focus on maximizing the payoff to sellers in order to attract them, and sellers generally prefer less discoverability than the platforms.

4.6.2 Endogenous platform differentiation

Consider the seller configuration from Section 4.5.2 and Proposition 7, but now allow for competing platforms. We obtain the following result.

Proposition 9. *Suppose there are three sellers, one large, of size* λ_1*, and two identical smaller sellers, each of size* $\lambda_2 < \lambda_1$*. Suppose also* $b = 0$*. When* $\theta < \frac{1}{2}$ *and provided* $\lambda_1 > \frac{2(1-\theta)\lambda_2}{\theta}$*, there is an equilibrium where platform 1 attracts the two small sellers, setting* $f_1^* = (v - c)\left(1 - \frac{1}{2(1-\theta)}\right)$ *and* $x_1^* = 1$*, and platform 2 attracts the large seller, setting* $f_2^* = 0$ *and* $x_2^* = 0$*. (There is another equivalent equilibrium with the roles of the two platforms reversed).*

This result shows the possibility for the co-existence of two competing platforms, one that attracts the larger seller by not offering discoverability, and one that attracts the two smaller sellers by offering maximum discoverability.

5 Managerial implications

Discoverability is an essential feature of marketplaces and multi-sided platforms. It is a key driver of the strength and defensibility of their network effects. Buyers come to the platform either because they know the platform or via a seller they are familiar with, and then they discover other sellers on the platform, which leads to more transactions. More discoverability means stronger and more defensible network effects. This is why established platforms (e.g. Amazon, eBay, Etsy, DoorDash, Udemy) prioritize buyers discovering as many new sellers as possible.

However, it is important to realize that discoverability creates a tradeoff by making it harder to attract sellers that have their own installed base of buyers. Thus, our analysis is particularly relevant for (a) established platforms trying to attract branded/established sellers, (b) emerging platforms seeking to solve the chicken-and-egg problem by attracting sellers that have their own installed base of buyers, (c) B2B providers of tools (e.g. Shopify, Substack, Teachable) that need to decide how much (if any) discoverability to enable in order to generate network effects.

For such platforms, our analysis delivers a few useful implications.

First, discoverability only creates a problem for sellers of competing products, but is welcomed by sellers of complementary or independent products. Thus, platforms should maximize the discoverability of complementary or independent products/sellers and only tread carefully with respect to competing products/sellers. Furthermore, in general, the more distinct product categories are available on the platform, the more discoverability the platform should enable. However, the more close competitors within the same product category, the less discoverability should be enabled.

Second, the more established a platform becomes in terms of how many buyers are loyal to it, relative to buyers loyal to individual sellers, the more discoverability it can afford to enable, so as to maximize transactions. This is what most of today's large established platforms have done over time—once their respective sellers are dependent on them because they have the buyers these sellers want to reach, the platforms have taken steps to commoditize the sellers. Still, once sellers realize what is happening, they may want to jump ship, to a platform that doesn't commoditize them (i.e. with less or no discoverability). That's why Shopify has been thriving despite the apparent dominance of Amazon in the U.S. and some other markets, and why Olo and others can thrive despite the presence of several large online food delivery platforms (e.g. DoorDash, Grubhub, Uber Eats). Committing not to commoditize sellers via public statements (e.g. Shopify's "arm the rebels",[18] Teachable's "escape the algorithm"[19]) can then be part of a strategy to attract sellers and differentiate from large, established marketplaces.

Third, if feasible, the best way to mitigate the fundamental tradeoff created by discoverability is to charge sellers differential transaction fees for buyers they brought to the platform vs. buyers that discovered them through the platform. This is intuitively fairer and when implemented well, can help the platform incentivize sellers to bring more buyers to the platform, while still enabling a high level of discoverability—so the platform can have its cake and eat it too. The problem is that to implement this differential pricing, platforms need to reliably distinguish buyers that were brought to the platform by a given seller from buyers that discovered the seller via the platform, which may be difficult in some cases. One practical way to address this is to give sellers specific registration links to share with their buyers and/or create a separate website or app where buyers can find the platform directly (e.g. Shopify's Shop.app). Another solution is to charge sellers an additional per-click fee when buyers are searching in a seller's product category as opposed to when they search the seller's name or go straight to its listings.

Fourth, discoverability is more attractive to sellers with small installed bases of loyal

[18]https://blakeir.medium.com/arming-the-rebels-of-the-future-d61b3fe30515

[19]https://teachable.com/

buyers and less attractive to sellers with large bases of loyal buyers. This is why large established platforms like Amazon.com have trouble attracting larger brands which can afford to avoid commoditization at the hands of a platform that enables too much discoverability. This means that in general platforms face a choice between two broad options: they can serve all types of sellers, large and small, with tools but limited discoverability (implying weaker network effects), or they can mostly focus on smaller sellers while enabling high levels of discoverability. Which also means discoverability can be a source of endogenous differentiation among platforms: if an established platform enables high levels of discoverability (e.g. Amazon or DoorDash), then a new entrant can focus on tools and credibly commit to keep discoverability low (e.g. Shopify or Olo) in order to attract sellers that have or can attract their own buyers.

6 Conclusion

We have provided a framework for analyzing to what extent platforms want to allow buyers who are brought in by participating sellers to discover rival sellers. While we explored many different extensions of the simple baseline setting in the paper, there remain many more avenues to explore in future work.

Further analysis of competing platforms seems warranted, although this remains challenging. For instance, it would be interesting to explore other types of heterogeneity between sellers, to understand how different seller characteristics drive their preferences over platforms that offer different levels of discoverability. In our analysis of competing platforms, we assumed a seller would only go to one platform or the other, bringing all its buyers onto the chosen platform. Another possibility would be to allow the seller to determine the portion of its initially captive buyers it brings onto each platform, or possibly to both.

Extending our analysis to allow the platform to offer first-party products would be another interesting avenue to pursue. The presence of first-party products should make third-party sellers more reluctant to participate, which may require the platform to dial back discoverability.

Finally, considering a dynamic setting where the sellers' initial captives become loyal to the platform after some time would possibly provide a rationale for platforms to increase the extent of discoverability they offer over time. This dynamic inconsistency problem creates a role for credible commitments by the platform.

7 Appendix

We provide the remaining details for the proofs of each proposition.

7.1 Proof of Propositions 1 and 2

We prove directly Proposition 2, which is more general. The proof of Proposition 1 follows immediately by setting $\eta = 0$ (i.e. the platform starts with no buyers of its own).

Factoring out the constant term $\lambda(v-c)$, the derivative of (9) with respect to x is

$$(2(1-\theta)+\eta(2-\theta))(\mu+1)-\frac{(2+\eta)\theta}{(1+x((1-2\theta)+\eta(1-\theta)))^2}. \tag{21}$$

If $\theta \leq \frac{1+\eta}{2+\eta}$, then (21) is increasing in x and is non-negative when evaluated at $x=0$, so we must have $x^* = 1$. If $\theta > \frac{1+\eta}{2+\eta}$, then (21) is decreasing in x, so the second-order condition (SOC) holds. Setting (21) equal to zero and solving for x implies the unconstrained solution

$$x(\theta)=\frac{1-\sqrt{\frac{(2+\eta)\theta}{(2(1-\theta)+\eta(2-\theta))(\mu+1)}}}{2\theta-1-\eta(1-\theta)}.$$

Given $x(\theta)$ is decreasing in θ for $\theta > \frac{1+\eta}{2+\eta}$, and given $x\left(\frac{1+\eta}{2+\eta}\right) > 1$ and $x(\theta) < 0$ for θ sufficiently high, the constrained solution is given by x^* in Proposition 2, where $\theta_1(\eta,\mu)$ is the unique solution to $x(\theta)=1$ and where $\theta_2(\eta,\mu)=\frac{2(1+\eta)(\mu+1)}{(2+\eta)(\mu+2)} > \frac{1+\eta}{2+\eta}$ is the unique solution to $x(\theta)=0$. It is easily verified that $\frac{1+\eta}{2+\eta} < \theta_1(\eta,\mu) < \theta_2(\eta,\mu)$.

Setting $\eta = 0$, we obtain the results in Proposition 1. Note that $\theta_2(0,\mu)=\frac{\mu+1}{\mu+2} < 1$, but with $\eta > 0$, we can have $\theta_2(\eta,\mu) > 1$.

7.2 Proof of Proposition 3

Recall the problem is to maximize (11) over (F, f, x) subject to the constraints (10) and (12). Since platform profits are increasing in F and f, we must have

$$F+\lambda(f-b)(1+x(1-2\theta))=\lambda(v-c)x(1-2\theta).$$

Using this to replace F in the platform's profits and (12), the problem becomes to choose f and x to maximize

$$2\lambda((v-c+b)x(1-2\theta)+b+f\theta x)$$

subject to

$$\lambda\left(v-c\right)x\left(1-2\theta\right)-\lambda\left(f-b\right)\left(1+x\left(1-2\theta\right)\right)\geq -K.$$

If the constraint is not binding, then $f^{*}=v-c+b$ and $x^{*}=1$, which is valid iff $\lambda\left(v-c\right)\leq K$. So assume $0\leq K<\lambda\left(v-c\right)$, and the constraint is binding. Solving the binding constraint for f implies

$$f=\left(v-c\right)\frac{x\left(1-2\theta\right)}{\left(1+x\left(1-2\theta\right)\right)}+\frac{K}{\lambda\left(1+x\left(1-2\theta\right)\right)}+b.$$

Substituting this into the platform's profit, after factoring out the constant $2\lambda\left(v-c\right)$, the problem is to choose x to maximize

$$\frac{x\left(1-2\theta\right)\left(1+x\left(1-\theta\right)\right)}{1+x\left(1-2\theta\right)}+\frac{\theta xK}{\lambda\left(v-c\right)\left(1+x\left(1-2\theta\right)\right)}+\mu\left(1+x\left(1-\theta\right)\right).$$

It is easily verified that if $\theta\leq\frac{1}{2}$, this is increasing in x, so the platform sets $x^{*}=1$ regardless of K. Assume therefore $\theta>\frac{1}{2}$. The derivative in x is

$$\frac{\left(1-2\theta\right)\left(1+2x\left(1-\theta\right)+x^{2}\left(1-\theta\right)\left(1-2\theta\right)\right)+\mu\left(1-\theta\right)\left(1+x\left(1-2\theta\right)\right)^{2}+\frac{\theta K}{\lambda\left(v-c\right)}}{\left(1+x\left(1-2\theta\right)\right)^{2}},$$

which is decreasing in x for $\theta>\frac{1}{2}$, so the SOC holds. This derivative is zero when the numerator equals zero, which gives the unconstrained solution

$$x\left(\theta\right)=\frac{1-\sqrt{\frac{\theta}{\left(\mu+1\right)\left(1-\theta\right)}\left(1-\frac{K}{\lambda\left(v-c\right)}\right)}}{2\theta-1}.$$

This is the same as $x\left(\theta\right)$ in the baseline except $\mu+1>1$ is replaced by $\frac{\mu+1}{1-\frac{K}{\lambda\left(v-c\right)}}>1$, with the expressions for the cutoffs adjusted accordingly.

7.3 Proof of Proposition 4

The sellers' participation constraint can be rewritten as

$$f_{1}x\left(1-\theta\right)+f_{0}\left(1-x\theta\right)\leq\left(v-c\right)x\left(1-2\theta\right)+b\left(1+x\left(1-2\theta\right)\right).$$

Suppose the sellers' participation constraint is not binding at the optimum. Then we must have

$$f_{0}=f_{1}=v+b-c,$$

otherwise the platform could profitably increase either f_0 or f_1. But then the sellers' participation constraint is equivalent to

$$v - c \leq 0,$$

which is not possible.

So the sellers' participation constraint must be binding at the optimum, i.e. we must have

$$f_1 x (1-\theta) + f_0 (1 - x\theta) = (v-c) x (1-2\theta) + b (1 + x (1-2\theta)).$$

We can use this to express f_1 as a function of f_0. After factoring out the constant λ, the platform's profits can then be written as

$$-f_0 \frac{\theta (1-x)}{1-\theta} + \frac{(2-\theta)}{1-\theta} ((v - c + b) x (1-2\theta) + b),$$

which the platform maximizes over (f_0, x) subject to

$$0 \leq f_0 \leq v + b - c$$

and

$$0 \leq (v-c) \frac{1-2\theta}{1-\theta} + b \frac{1 + x (1-2\theta)}{x (1-\theta)} - f_0 \frac{(1 - x\theta)}{x (1-\theta)} \leq v + b - c.$$

Since the last expression of platform profits is decreasing in f_0, we must either have

$$f_0 = 0$$

or

$$(v-c) \frac{1-2\theta}{1-\theta} + b \frac{1 + x (1-2\theta)}{x (1-\theta)} - f_0 \frac{(1 - x\theta)}{x (1-\theta)} = v + b - c.$$

Suppose first $f_0 = 0$. Then the platform is maximizing profit

$$\frac{(2-\theta)}{1-\theta} ((v - c + b) x (1-2\theta) + b)$$

over x subject to

$$0 \leq \frac{(v-c) x (1-2\theta) + b (1 + x (1-2\theta))}{x (1-\theta)} \leq v + b - c.$$

Clearly, the platform will set x such that $(v - c + b) x (1-2\theta) + b > 0$. So the only relevant constraint is

$$\frac{(v-c) x (1-2\theta) + b (1 + x (1-2\theta))}{x (1-\theta)} \leq v + b - c,$$

which is equivalent to

$$\frac{\mu}{1+\mu} \leq x\theta$$

where $b = \mu(v-c)$. There are three cases:

1. If
$$\theta < \frac{\mu}{\mu+1},$$
then the constraint cannot be satisfied, so we can't have $f_0 = 0$.

2. If $\frac{\mu}{\mu+1} \leq \theta \leq \frac{1}{2}$, then $x^* = 1$ and the platform's maximum profits conditional on $f_0 = 0$ are
$$\begin{aligned} & \frac{(2-\theta)}{1-\theta}\left((v-c+b)(1-2\theta)+b\right) \\ = & \frac{(2-\theta)(1-2\theta)}{1-\theta}(v-c) + 2(2-\theta)b. \end{aligned}$$

3. If $\theta \geq \max\left\{\frac{\mu}{\mu+1}, \frac{1}{2}\right\}$, then $x^* = \frac{\mu}{(\mu+1)\theta}$ and the platform's maximum profits conditional on $f_0 = 0$ are
$$\begin{aligned} & \frac{(2-\theta)}{1-\theta}\left((v-c+b)\frac{\mu(1-2\theta)}{(\mu+1)\theta}+b\right) \\ = & b\frac{2-\theta}{\theta}. \end{aligned}$$

Now suppose $f_0 > 0$, so we must have

$$f_1 = (v-c)\frac{1-2\theta}{1-\theta} + b\frac{1+x(1-2\theta)}{x(1-\theta)} - f_0\frac{(1-x\theta)}{x(1-\theta)} = v+b-c,$$

which is equivalent to

$$f_0 = b - (v-c)\frac{x\theta}{1-x\theta} < v-c+b.$$

The platform's profits as a function of x are then

$$\begin{aligned} & -\left(b-(v-c)\frac{x\theta}{1-x\theta}\right)\frac{\theta(1-x)}{1-\theta} + \frac{(2-\theta)}{1-\theta}\left((v-c+b)x(1-2\theta)+b\right) \\ = & (v-c)\left(-\left(\mu - \frac{x\theta}{1-x\theta}\right)\frac{\theta(1-x)}{1-\theta} + \frac{(2-\theta)}{1-\theta}\left((1+\mu)x(1-2\theta)+\mu\right)\right) \\ = & (v-c)\left(1+2\mu+2(1+\mu)x(1-\theta) - \frac{1}{1-x\theta}\right). \end{aligned}$$

The platform maximizes these profits subject to $f_0 \geq 0$ (all other constraints are satisfied), which is equivalent to

$$x \leq \frac{\mu}{\theta(1+\mu)}.$$

The derivative of the last expression of platform profits above with respect to x is

$$(v-c)\left(2(1+\mu)(1-\theta)-\frac{\theta}{(1-x\theta)^2}\right),$$

so the second derivative is clearly negative, which means the SOC holds. The unconstrained optimal x is then

$$x^* = \frac{1-\sqrt{\frac{\theta}{2(1+\mu)(1-\theta)}}}{\theta}.$$

There are three cases.

1. If $\frac{\theta}{2(1+\mu)(1-\theta)} \geq 1$, which is equivalent to

$$\theta \geq \frac{2(\mu+1)}{2(\mu+1)+1},$$

then the optimal solution conditional on $f_0 > 0$ is $x^* = 0$, which implies $f_0 = b$ and the platform's profits are $2b$.

2. If

$$0 \leq \frac{1-\sqrt{\frac{\theta}{2(\mu+1)(1-\theta)}}}{\theta} \leq \min\left\{1, \frac{\mu}{\theta(1+\mu)}\right\},$$

which is equivalent to

$$\frac{\theta}{(1-\theta)^3} \geq 2(\mu+1) \text{ and } \frac{2}{3+\mu} \leq \theta \leq \frac{2(\mu+1)}{2(\mu+1)+1},$$

then the optimal solution conditional on $f_0 > 0$ is

$$x^* = \frac{1-\sqrt{\frac{\theta}{2(\mu+1)(1-\theta)}}}{\theta},$$

which implies $f_0 = b-(v-c)\frac{x^*\theta}{1-x^*\theta}$ and the platform's profits are

$$(v-c)\left(1+2\mu+2(1+\mu)x^*(1-\theta)-\frac{1}{1-x^*\theta}\right).$$

3. If
$$\frac{1-\sqrt{\frac{\theta}{2(\mu+1)(1-\theta)}}}{\theta} \geq \min\left\{1, \frac{\mu}{\theta(1+\mu)}\right\},$$
which is equivalent to
$$\frac{\theta}{(1-\theta)^3} \leq 2(\mu+1) \text{ or } \theta \leq \frac{2}{3+\mu},$$
then the optimal solution conditional on $f_0 > 0$ is
$$x^* = \min\left\{1, \frac{\mu}{\theta(1+\mu)}\right\},$$
which implies $f_0 = b - (v-c)\frac{x^*\theta}{1-x^*\theta}$ and the platform's profits are
$$(v-c)\left(1+2\mu+2(1+\mu)x^*(1-\theta)-\frac{1}{1-x^*\theta}\right).$$

The platform compares the best solution conditional on $f_0 = 0$ to the best solution conditional on $f_0 > 0$. We distinguish two cases: $\mu \leq 1$ and $\mu \geq 1$. Let $\theta_0(\mu)$ denote the unique solution to
$$\frac{\theta}{(1-\theta)^3} = 2(\mu+1).$$

Suppose first $\mu \leq 1$. Then we have
$$\frac{\mu}{\mu+1} \leq \theta_0(\mu) \leq \frac{1}{2} \leq \frac{2}{3+\mu} \leq \frac{2(\mu+1)}{2(\mu+1)+1}.$$

So:

- if $\theta \leq \frac{\mu}{1+\mu}$, then there is no solution with $f_0 = 0$, so the optimal solution is
$$\begin{aligned} x^* &= 1 \\ f_0 &= b-(v-c)\frac{\theta}{1-\theta} \\ f_1 &= v+b-c \end{aligned}$$
and yields platform profits
$$(v-c)(2-\theta)\left(2(1+\mu)-\frac{1}{1-\theta}\right).$$

- if $\frac{\mu}{\mu+1} \leq \theta \leq \frac{1}{2}$, then the solution with $f_0 > 0$ has $x^* = \frac{\mu}{\theta(1+\mu)}$, which implies $f_0 = 0$. So this is weakly dominated by the solution conditional on $f_0 = 0$, which has

$$\begin{aligned} x^* &= 1 \\ f_1 &= \frac{(v-c)(1-2\theta)}{1-\theta} + 2b \end{aligned}$$

and yields platform profits

$$(v-c)(2-\theta)\left(2(1+\mu) - \frac{1}{1-\theta}\right)$$

- If $\frac{1}{2} \leq \theta \leq \frac{2}{3+\mu}$, then the solution with $f_0 > 0$ has $x^* = \frac{\mu}{\theta(1+\mu)}$, which implies $f_0 = 0$. So this is weakly dominated by the solution conditional on $f_0 = 0$, which has

$$\begin{aligned} x^* &= \frac{\mu}{(\mu+1)\theta} \\ f_1 &= \frac{b(\mu+1)}{\mu} \end{aligned}$$

and yields platform profits

$$(v-c)\mu\frac{2-\theta}{\theta}.$$

- if $\frac{2}{3+\mu} \leq \theta \leq \frac{2(\mu+1)}{2(\mu+1)+1}$, then the solution with $f_0 > 0$ has

$$\begin{aligned} x^* &= \frac{1-\sqrt{\frac{\theta}{2(\mu+1)(1-\theta)}}}{\theta} \\ f_0 &= b - (v-c)\frac{x^*\theta}{1-x^*\theta} \\ f_1 &= v - c + b \end{aligned}$$

and yields platform profits

$$(v-c)\left(1 + 2\mu + 2(1+\mu)x^*(1-\theta) - \frac{1}{1-x^*\theta}\right).$$

We know that $x^* = \frac{1-\sqrt{\frac{\theta}{2(\mu+1)(1-\theta)}}}{\theta}$ maximizes this last expression, so it must be higher than when it is evaluated at $x^* = \frac{\mu}{(\mu+1)\theta}$, where it is equal to $(v-c)\frac{(2-\theta)\mu}{\theta}$. The latter is the optimal platform profit that can be obtained conditional on $f_0 = 0$ (because $\theta \geq \frac{2}{3+\mu} > \frac{1}{2}$). So the optimal solution is the one above, with $f_0 > 0$.

- if $\theta \geq \frac{2(\mu+1)}{2(\mu+1)+1}$, then the solution conditional on $f_0 > 0$ is

$$\begin{aligned} x^* &= 0 \\ f_0 &= b, \end{aligned}$$

with indeterminate f_1 and yielding platform profits

$$2b.$$

This dominates the solution with f_0, which yields $\frac{(2-\theta)b}{\theta}$, because $\theta \geq \frac{2(\mu+1)}{2(\mu+1)+1} > \frac{2}{3}$.

Now suppose $\mu \geq 1$. Then we have

$$\frac{2}{3+\mu} \leq \frac{1}{2} \leq \theta_0(\mu) \leq \frac{\mu}{\mu+1} < \frac{2(\mu+1)}{2(\mu+1)+1}.$$

So:

- if $\theta \leq \theta_0(\mu)$, then there is no solution with $f_0 = 0$, so the optimal solution has

$$\begin{aligned} x^* &= 1 \\ f_0 &= b - (v-c)\frac{\theta}{1-\theta} \\ f_1 &= v + b - c \end{aligned}$$

yielding platform profits

$$(v-c)(2-\theta)\left(2(\mu+1) - \frac{1}{1-\theta}\right).$$

- if $\theta_0(\mu) \leq \theta \leq \frac{\mu}{\mu+1}$, then there is no solution with $f_0 = 0$, so the optimal solution has

$$\begin{aligned} x^* &= \frac{1 - \sqrt{\frac{\theta}{2(\mu+1)(1-\theta)}}}{\theta} \\ f_0 &= b - (v-c)\frac{x^*\theta}{1-x^*\theta} \\ f_1 &= v + b - c \end{aligned}$$

yielding platform profits

$$(v-c)\left(1 + 2\mu + 2(1+\mu)x^*(1-\theta) - \frac{1}{1-x^*\theta}\right).$$

- if $\frac{\mu}{\mu+1} \leq \theta \leq \frac{2(\mu+1)}{2(\mu+1)+1}$, then the optimal solution with $f_0 > 0$ is

$$\begin{aligned} x^* &= \frac{1-\sqrt{\frac{\theta}{2(\mu+1)(1-\theta)}}}{\theta} \\ f_0 &= b-(v-c)\frac{x^*\theta}{1-x^*\theta} \\ f_1 &= v+b-c, \end{aligned}$$

  yielding platform profits

$$(v-c)\left(1+2\mu+2(1+\mu)x^*(1-\theta)-\frac{1}{1-x^*\theta}\right).$$

  We know that $x^* = \frac{1-\sqrt{\frac{\theta}{2(\mu+1)(1-\theta)}}}{\theta}$ maximizes this expression, so it must be higher than when it is evaluated at $x = \frac{\mu}{(\mu+1)\theta}$, where it is equal to $(v-c)\,\mu\frac{(2-\theta)}{\theta}$. The latter is the optimal profit that can be obtained conditional on $f_0 = 0$ (because $\theta \geq \frac{\mu}{\mu+1} \geq \frac{1}{2}$). So the optimal solution is the one above, with $f_0 > 0$.

- if $\theta \geq \frac{2(\mu+1)}{2(\mu+1)+1}$, then the solution conditional on $f_0 > 0$ is

$$\begin{aligned} x^* &= 0 \\ f_0 &= b, \end{aligned}$$

  with indeterminate f_1 and yielding profits

$$2b.$$

  This dominates the solution with f_0, which yields $\frac{(2-\theta)b}{\theta}$, because $\theta \geq \frac{2(\mu+1)}{2(\mu+1)+1} > \frac{2}{3}$.

7.4 Proof of Corollary 1

Recall the optimal level of discoverability in the baseline is

$$x_b^* = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if} \quad 0 < \theta \leq \theta_1(\mu) \\ \frac{1-\sqrt{\frac{\theta}{(\mu+1)(1-\theta)}}}{2\theta-1} & \text{if} \quad \theta_1(\mu) \leq \theta \leq \frac{\mu+1}{\mu+2} \\ 0 & \text{if} \quad \theta \geq \frac{\mu+1}{\mu+2} \end{cases},$$

with $\theta_1(\mu) \in \left(\frac{1}{2}, \frac{\mu+1}{\mu+2}\right)$ the unique solution in θ to

$$\frac{\theta}{(1-\theta)^3} = 4(\mu+1).$$

Consider first the case $\mu \geq 1$, so the optimal level of discoverability with differential fees is

$$x_{df}^* = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if} \quad 0 < \theta \leq \theta_0(\mu) \\ \frac{1-\sqrt{\frac{\theta}{2(\mu+1)(1-\theta)}}}{\theta} & \text{if} \quad \theta_0(\mu) \leq \theta \leq \frac{2(\mu+1)}{2(\mu+1)+1} \\ 0 & \text{if} \quad \theta \geq \frac{2(\mu+1)}{2(\mu+1)+1} \end{cases},$$

where $\theta_0(\mu)$ is the unique solution to

$$\frac{\theta}{(1-\theta)^3} = 2(\mu+1),$$

so

$$\theta_0(\mu) < \theta_1(\mu)$$

Note that

$$\frac{1-\sqrt{\frac{\theta}{2(\mu+1)(1-\theta)}}}{\theta} > \frac{1-\sqrt{\frac{\theta}{(\mu+1)(1-\theta)}}}{2\theta-1}$$

is equivalent to

$$\frac{1-\left(2-\sqrt{2}\right)\theta}{1-\theta}\sqrt{\frac{\theta}{2(\mu+1)(1-\theta)}} > 1.$$

The LHS is increasing in θ. Furthermore, it is easily verified that the inequality holds for $\theta = \frac{\mu+1}{\mu+2} < \frac{2(\mu+1)}{2(\mu+1)+1}$ and does not hold when $\theta = \theta_1(\mu)$. Thus, there exists $\theta_3 \in \left[\theta_1(\mu), \frac{\mu+1}{\mu+2}\right]$, such that the inequality holds for $\theta > \theta_3$ and does not hold for $\theta \leq \theta_3$. This implies the result for this case.

Now consider the case $\mu \leq 1$, so the optimal level of discoverability with differential fees is

$$x_{df}^* = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if} \quad 0 < \theta \leq \frac{1}{2} \\ \frac{\mu}{(\mu+1)\theta} & \text{if} \quad \frac{1}{2} \leq \theta \leq \frac{2}{3+\mu} \\ \frac{1-\sqrt{\frac{\theta}{2(\mu+1)(1-\theta)}}}{\theta} & \text{if} \quad \frac{2}{3+\mu} \leq \theta \leq \frac{2(\mu+1)}{2(\mu+1)+1} \\ 0 & \text{if} \quad \theta \geq \frac{2(\mu+1)}{2(\mu+1)+1} \end{cases},$$

Note that

$$\frac{\mu}{(\mu+1)\theta} > \frac{1-\sqrt{\frac{\theta}{(\mu+1)(1-\theta)}}}{2\theta-1}$$

is equivalent to

$$\frac{\theta\left(1-\mu\right)+\mu}{\theta\sqrt{\frac{\theta}{(\mu+1)(1-\theta)}}}<\left(\mu+1\right),$$

and the LHS of the last inequality is decreasing in θ. Furthermore, we still have

$$\frac{1-\sqrt{\frac{\theta}{2(\mu+1)(1-\theta)}}}{\theta}>\frac{1-\sqrt{\frac{\theta}{(\mu+1)(1-\theta)}}}{2\theta-1}$$

iff

$$\frac{1-\left(2-\sqrt{2}\right)\theta}{1-\theta}\sqrt{\frac{\theta}{2\left(\mu+1\right)\left(1-\theta\right)}}>1$$

and the LHS of the last inequality is increasing in θ. And

$$\frac{\mu}{\left(\mu+1\right)\theta}=\frac{1-\sqrt{\frac{\theta}{2(\mu+1)(1-\theta)}}}{\theta}$$

when $\theta=\frac{2}{3+\mu}$. Define

$$f\left(\theta\right)=\begin{cases}\frac{\mu}{(\mu+1)\theta} & \text{if} \quad \theta\leq\frac{2}{3+\mu}\\ \frac{1-\sqrt{\frac{\theta}{2(\mu+1)(1-\theta)}}}{\theta} & \text{if} \quad \theta\geq\frac{2}{3+\mu}\end{cases}.$$

We have

$$f\left(\theta\right)<\frac{1-\sqrt{\frac{\theta}{(\mu+1)(1-\theta)}}}{2\theta-1}=1$$

when $\theta=\theta_1\left(\mu\right)$ and

$$f\left(\theta\right)>\frac{1-\sqrt{\frac{\theta}{(\mu+1)(1-\theta)}}}{2\theta-1}$$

when $\theta=\frac{\mu+1}{\mu+2}$.

So we can conclude there exists $\theta_3\in\left[\theta_1\left(\mu\right),\frac{\mu+1}{\mu+2}\right]$ such that $f\left(\theta\right)>\frac{1-\sqrt{\frac{\theta}{(\mu+1)(1-\theta)}}}{2\theta-1}$ iff $\theta>\theta_3$, which implies the result for this case as well.

7.5 Proof of n-firm case

To show the result, we can define the function $X\left(\theta\right)=n^2\left(n-1\right)\left(1-\theta\right)^3\left(1+\mu\right)$, which is strictly decreasing in θ with $X\left(1-\frac{1}{n}\right)>1-\frac{1}{n}$. This implies $1-\frac{1}{n}<\theta_1$ and $X\left(\theta_2\right)<\theta_2$, implying $\theta_2>\theta_1$.As a result for $\theta\leq\theta_1$, $x^*=1$ and for $\theta>\theta_2$, $x^*=0$.

7.6 Proof of Proposition 6

Let the measure of captives that seller i obtains be denoted λ_i'. To handle this case we use the result in Proposition 1 of Myatt and Ronayne (2023) to determine each seller's expected profit.[20] Their result covers the case of two sellers i and j with $\lambda_i' > \lambda_j'$ captives and the same marginal costs c. Seller i is the less aggressive seller as it has more captives, meaning $p_i^+ > p_j^+$ in their notation. Then seller j's expected profit is

$$\left(\lambda_j' + \phi\right)\left(p_i^+ - c\right) = \frac{\lambda_j' + \phi}{\lambda_i' + \phi}\lambda_i'\left(v - c\right) > \lambda_j'\left(v - c\right),$$

while seller i's expected profit is $\lambda_i'\left(v-c\right)$, where ϕ is the measure of buyers informed of both sellers and view them as substitutes.

Following the same logic for the measure of captives of seller 1 in the main text, the captive buyers for seller i in general are

$$\lambda_i' = \lambda_i\left(1-x\right) + \lambda_i x\left(1-\theta\right) + \lambda_j x\left(1-\theta\right).$$

Given $\lambda_1 > \lambda_2$, we have $\lambda_1' > \lambda_2'$. Moreover, $\phi = \left(\lambda_i + \lambda_j\right)x\theta$.

Thus, seller 1's profit is

$$\begin{aligned} & \left(v-c+b-f\right)\left(\lambda_1\left(1-x\right) + \left(\lambda_1+\lambda_2\right)x\left(1-\theta\right)\right) \\ = \; & \left(v-c+b-f\right)\left(\lambda_1+\lambda_2\right)\left(\beta_1\left(1-x\right) + x\left(1-\theta\right)\right) \end{aligned}$$

and seller 2's profit is

$$\begin{aligned} & \left(v-c+b-f\right)\frac{\lambda_2\left(1-x\right) + \left(\lambda_1+\lambda_2\right)x}{\lambda_1\left(1-x\right) + \left(\lambda_1+\lambda_2\right)x}\left(\lambda_1\left(1-x\right) + \left(\lambda_1+\lambda_2\right)x\left(1-\theta\right)\right) \\ = \; & \left(v-c+b-f\right)\left(\lambda_1+\lambda_2\right)\frac{\left(1-\beta_1\right)\left(1-x\right)+x}{\beta_1\left(1-x\right)+x}\left(\beta_1\left(1-x\right) + x\left(1-\theta\right)\right), \end{aligned}$$

where $\beta_1 \in \left[\frac{1}{2}, 1\right]$ is defined in the main text.

Seller 1 participates iff (20) and seller 2 participates iff

$$f \leq b + \left(v-c\right)\left(1 - \frac{\left(1-\beta_1\right)\left(\beta_1\left(1-x\right)+x\right)}{\left(\left(1-\beta_1\right)\left(1-x\right)+x\right)\left(\beta_1\left(1-x\right)+x\left(1-\theta\right)\right)}\right).$$

[20] For completeness, we've restated the relevant part of Proposition 1 of Myatt and Ronayne in the Online Appendix A.4, which is much more general than the result stated here.

Since $\beta_1 \geq \frac{1}{2}$, we have

$$\frac{\beta_1}{\beta_1(1-x)+x(1-\theta)} \geq \frac{(1-\beta_1)(\beta_1(1-x)+x)}{((1-\beta_1)(1-x)+x)(\beta_1(1-x)+x(1-\theta))},$$

so the binding constraint is (20) of seller 1. Clearly f will be set at the maximum value allowed by the constraint, so the platform maximizes

$$(\lambda_1+\lambda_2)(v-c)\left(\mu+1-\frac{1}{1-x+\frac{x(1-\theta)}{\beta_1}}\right)(1+x(1-\theta)).$$

over x.

If $\theta \leq 1-\beta_1$, then $1-x+\frac{x(1-\theta)}{\beta_1}$ is increasing in x, so the profit expression above is increasing in x, which means $x^*=1$. Now suppose $\theta > 1-\beta_1$. The derivative of the profit expression above in x is

$$(\lambda_1+\lambda_2)(v-c)\left((\mu+1)(1-\theta)-\frac{2-\theta-\frac{1-\theta}{\beta_1}}{\left(1-x+\frac{x(1-\theta)}{\beta_1}\right)^2}\right).$$

Since $2-\theta-\frac{1-\theta}{\beta_1} \geq 0$ and we have assumed $\theta > 1-\beta_1$, the last expression above is decreasing in x, so the SOC holds. From this, we directly conclude:

- If
$$\theta \geq \frac{\mu+\frac{1}{\beta_1}-1}{\mu+\frac{1}{\beta_1}},$$
then $x^*=0$.

- If
$$\frac{\mu+1}{\beta_1^2} \geq \frac{2-\frac{1}{\beta_1}+\left(\frac{1}{\beta_1}-1\right)\theta}{(1-\theta)^3}$$
then $x^*=1$.

- Otherwise,
$$x^*=\frac{1-\sqrt{\frac{2-\theta-\frac{1-\theta}{\beta_1}}{(\mu+1)(1-\theta)}}}{1-\frac{1-\theta}{\beta_1}}$$

7.7 Proof of Proposition 7

As argued in the main text, it can never be optimal for the platform to induce only one seller to join. Furthermore, it can never be optimal for the platform to induce the large seller to join together with only one small seller. Indeed, if this was the case, the large seller must prefer joining together with a small seller than its outside option, i.e. we would have

$$(v - c + b - f)\left((1-x)\lambda_1 + (\lambda_2 + \lambda_1)\, x\,(1-\theta)\right) \geq (v - c)\,\lambda_1$$

Meanwhile, the condition for the second small seller to prefer not joining when the other two sellers have joined is

$$(v - c + b - f)\left((1-x)\lambda_2 + (\lambda_1 + 2\lambda_2)\, x\,(1-\theta)\right) < (v - c)\,\lambda_2.$$

It can be easily verified that these two conditions are incompatible, so there cannot be an equilibrium with one large seller and one small seller joining for any (f, x). Nor would the platform want to force the outcome in which only one large seller and one small seller join. Indeed, from the analysis above, the maximum transaction fee it could charge would be

$$f = b + (v - c)\left(1 - \frac{1}{(1-x) + x\,(1-\theta)\,\frac{\lambda_2+\lambda_1}{\lambda_1}}\right).$$

At this fee, we know that the second small seller would also be willing to join. The platform's profits with one large seller and one small seller are

$$f\,(\lambda_1 + \lambda_2)\,(1 + x\,(1-\theta)),$$

whereas with all three sellers participating, the platform would make

$$f\,(\lambda_1 + 2\lambda_2)\,(1 + x\,(1-\theta)),$$

which is strictly larger.

Thus, there are only two possibilities for the platform's optimal strategy: either all three sellers join the platform or only the two small sellers join.

In the case where only the two small sellers join, the platform sets x as in the baseline, except here we have assumed $b = \mu = 0$, so

$$x_2^* = \begin{cases} 1 & if \quad 0 < \theta \leq \frac{1}{2} \\ 0 & if \quad \theta \geq \frac{1}{2} \end{cases},$$

The platform's optimal fee and resulting profits for this case are

$$
\begin{aligned}
f_2^* &= \begin{cases} (v-c)\frac{1-2\theta}{2(1-\theta)} & if \quad 0<\theta\leq\frac{1}{2} \\ 0 & if \quad \theta\geq\frac{1}{2} \end{cases} \\
\Pi_2^* &= \begin{cases} \lambda_2\,(v-c)\frac{(1-2\theta)(2-\theta)}{1-\theta} & if \quad 0<\theta\leq\frac{1}{2} \\ 0 & if \quad \theta\geq\frac{1}{2} \end{cases} .
\end{aligned}
$$

In the case where all three sellers join the platform, the large seller's profit is

$$(v-c-f)\left(\lambda_1\,(1-x)+(\lambda_1+2\lambda_2)\,x\,(1-\theta)\right),$$

while the two small sellers each make a profit equal to

$$(v-c-f)\left(\lambda_2\,(1-x)+(\lambda_1+2\lambda_2)\,x\,(1-\theta)\right).$$

For the large seller to participate we must have

$$f\leq(v-c)\left(1-\frac{\lambda_1}{\lambda_1\,(1-x)+(\lambda_1+2\lambda_2)\,x\,(1-\theta)}\right)$$

For the small sellers to participate we must have

$$f\leq(v-c)\left(1-\frac{\lambda_2}{\lambda_2\,(1-x)+(\lambda_1+2\lambda_2)\,x\,(1-\theta)}\right).$$

Since $\lambda_1>\lambda_2$, the binding constraint must be that of the large seller, so for f to be optimal, it must be that

$$f=(v-c)\left(1-\frac{1}{1-x+\frac{x(1-\theta)}{\beta}}\right).$$

Platform profits are then

$$
\begin{aligned}
& f\,(\lambda_1+2\lambda_2)\,(1+x\,(1-\theta)) \\
= & \;(\lambda_1+2\lambda_2)\,(v-c)\left(1-\frac{1}{1-x+\frac{x(1-\theta)}{\beta}}\right)(1+x\,(1-\theta))
\end{aligned}
$$

In this case, the optimal level of discoverability is

$$x_3^*=\begin{cases} 1 & \text{if} \quad 0<\theta\leq 1-\beta \\ 0 & \text{if} \quad \theta\geq 1-\beta \end{cases} .$$

And the platform's profits are

$$\Pi_3^* = \begin{cases} (\lambda_1 + 2\lambda_2)(v - c)\frac{(1-\beta-\theta)(2-\theta)}{1-\theta} & \text{if} \quad 0 < \theta \leq 1 - \beta \\ 0 & \text{if} \quad \theta \geq 1 - \beta \end{cases}.$$

Thus, when $\theta \geq \max\left\{\frac{1}{2}, 1 - \beta\right\}$, we have $\Pi_3^* = \Pi_2^* = 0$, and when $\theta \leq \min\left\{\frac{1}{2}, 1 - \beta\right\}$, we have $\Pi_3^* \geq \Pi_2^*$ iff $\lambda_2 \geq \theta\lambda_1$. If $1 - \beta \leq \theta < \frac{1}{2}$ (which can only happen when $\beta > \frac{1}{2}$), then $\Pi_2^* > \Pi_3^*$. And if $\frac{1}{2} \leq \theta < 1 - \beta$ (which can only happen when $\beta > \frac{1}{2}$), then $\Pi_3^* > \Pi_2^*$. From this we can conclude:

- If $\theta \geq \frac{1}{2}$, then $\Pi_3^* > \Pi_2^*$ for all $\beta < 1 - \theta$ and $\Pi_3^* = \Pi_2^* = 0$ for all $\beta \geq 1 - \theta$.
- If $\theta < \frac{1}{2}$, then $\Pi_2^* > \Pi_3^*$ iff $\beta > \frac{1}{1+2\theta}$.

7.8 Proof of Proposition 8

Let's first look for an equilibrium in which both sellers join the same platform, say platform 1 (the same analysis applies with the roles of the two platforms reversed). The payoff to each seller when they both join platform i is

$$(v + b - f_i - c)(\lambda(1 - x_i) + 2\lambda x_i(1 - \theta)).$$

This payoff is increasing in x_i if $\theta \leq \frac{1}{2}$ and decreasing in x_i if $\theta > \frac{1}{2}$. Thus, for platform 1 to attract the two sellers in the fee-setting stage, we must have $x_1 \geq x_2$ if $\theta \leq \frac{1}{2}$ and $x_1 \leq x_2$ if $\theta > \frac{1}{2}$. And working backwards to the discovery-setting stage, if $\theta \leq \frac{1}{2}$, then we must have $x_1 = 1$ (otherwise platform 2 could profitably deviate to $x_2 = 1$ and attract the two sellers in the second stage) and $x_2 = 0$ (otherwise platform 2 would make negative profits). And if $\theta > \frac{1}{2}$, then by a similar logic we must have $x_1 = x_2 = 0$.

So the equilibrium with both sellers joining platform 1 always exists. It entails

$$(x_1, x_2) = \begin{cases} (1, 0) & \text{if} \quad \theta \leq \frac{1}{2} \\ (0, 0) & \text{if} \quad \theta > \frac{1}{2} \end{cases}$$

and

$$(f_1, f_2) = \begin{cases} \left((v + b - c)\left(\frac{1-2\theta}{2-2\theta}\right), 0\right) & \text{if} \quad \theta \leq \frac{1}{2} \\ (0, 0) & \text{if} \quad \theta > \frac{1}{2} \end{cases}$$

Now let's look for an equilibrium in which the two sellers are split between the two platforms, say seller 1 is on platform 1 and seller 2 is on platform 2. Seller i's profits are then

$$\lambda\left(v+b-f_i-c\right)$$

and platform i's profit is λf_i.

Suppose first $\theta \geq \frac{1}{2}$. Then for platform i, setting $x_i > 0$ is a dominated strategy because the payoff to each seller when both join platform i is $\left(v+b-f_i-c\right)\left(1-x_i+2x_i\left(1-\theta\right)\right)$, which is decreasing in x_i. So there is no advantage to set $x_i > 0$, and indeed there is a disadvantage given the fixed cost ε involved in doing so. This implies in equilibrium we must have $x_1 = x_2 = 0$ in the first stage. Which in turn implies that in the second stage the only possible equilibrium is $f_1 = f_2 = 0$.

Now suppose $\theta < \frac{1}{2}$. In this case, the payoff to each seller when both join platform i is $\left(v+b-f_i-c\right)\left(1-x_i+2x_i\left(1-\theta\right)\right)$, which is increasing in x_i. Thus, if $x_i \geq x_j$, the only possible equilibrium in the fee-setting stage is that both sellers join platform i. This means there is no possible equilibrium in which the two sellers split across the two platforms in this case.

So the equilibrium with the two sellers splitting between the two platforms exists iff $\theta \geq \frac{1}{2}$. If it exists, it involves $x_1 = x_2 = 0$ and $f_1 = f_2 = 0$.

7.9 Proof of Proposition 9

Consider the proposed equilibrium in Proposition 9. The first thing to note is if the large seller ever joins the same platform as the other two sellers, the highest expected profit it can get on a platform charging f with discoverability x is $\left(\lambda_1\left(1-x\right)+\left(\lambda_1+2\lambda_2\right)x\left(1-\theta\right)\right)\left(v-c-f\right)$. When the condition in the proposition holds (i.e. $\lambda_1 > \frac{2(1-\theta)\lambda_2}{\theta}$), the amount the large seller gets is decreasing in x, and so is strictly less than what it gets with $x = 0$, i.e. $\lambda_1\left(v-c-f\right)$, which is less than $\lambda_1\left(v-c\right)$, the amount the larger seller gets if it doesn't join either platform. Thus, there is no way for either platform to attract the large seller together with the two small sellers other than to set $x = 0$ and $f = 0$. This is what platform 2 does in the proposed equilibrium.

The payoff for a small seller on platform 1 when the other small seller also joins is $\left(\lambda_2\left(1-x_1\right)+2\lambda_2 x_1\left(1-\theta\right)\right)\left(v-c-f\right)$. Note this is increasing in x_1 provided $\theta < \frac{1}{2}$, so platform 1 can charge the most when it sets $x_1 = 1$. In this case, each small seller gets expected profit of $2\lambda_2\left(v-c-f_1\right)\left(1-\theta\right)$. This compares to its next best alternative which is $\left(v-c\right)\lambda_2$ if it goes to platform 2 or does not join either platform. So we require

$$2\lambda_2\left(v-c-f_1\right)\left(1-\theta\right) \geq \left(v-c\right)\lambda_2$$

or

$$f_1 \leq \left(1 - \frac{1}{2(1-\theta)}\right)(v-c) = f_1^*.$$

We require $\theta \leq \frac{1}{2}$ so that $f_1^* \geq 0$. Under this condition, platform 2 cannot attract the small sellers even though it sets $f_2 = 0$ given it sets $x_2 = 0$. Thus, given $x_1 = 1$ and $x_2 = 0$ in the first stage, the equilibrium in the second stage is indeed $f_1 = f_1^*$ and $f_2 = 0$, with the two small sellers going to platform 1 and the large seller going to platform 2.

If platform 1 were to set some lower (still positive) x_1 in the first stage, it would earn strictly lower profit given the amount the small sellers are willing to pay to join is increasing in x and the large seller does not join unless $x_1 = 0$ and $f_1 = 0$.

Lastly, we need to rule out that platform 2 could make a positive profit by incurring the small fixed cost ε in order to set some $0 < x_2 \leq 1$, and competing. As discussed above, with $0 < x_2 \leq 1$, platform 2 cannot attract all three sellers. Also, because $x_2 \leq 1$ and $\theta < \frac{1}{2}$, it cannot attract the two sellers and make positive profits to cover ε. And it also can not attract the larger seller only and make positive profits because it offers no tools so cannot charge $f_2 > 0$.

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Online Appendix: Optimal discoverability on platforms

Andrei Hagiu[1] and Julian Wright[2]

A Introduction

In this Online Appendix we consider a number of extensions of the baseline setting which are referred to in the main text.

A.1 Alternative interpretation of x

Suppose x is now interpreted as the probability with which a given seller is exposed to all buyers. Thus, with probability $1-x$ that seller remains only exposed to its initially captive buyers. And symmetrically for the other seller.

The case where neither or only one seller joins is the same as in our baseline model. Consider then the case both sellers join the platform. With probability $(1-x)^2$ all buyers are only exposed to the seller they were initially captive to. In this case, each seller gets $\lambda(v+b-f-c)$. With probability $x(1-x)$ all buyers are exposed to seller 1, which means only seller 2's initially captive buyers learn of it. In this case, seller 1's captives are its own λ initial captives (who do not know about seller 2) and a fraction of $1-\theta$ of seller 2's captives who are now aware of both products but view them as independent. Meanwhile, seller 2's captives are the fraction $1-\theta$ of its initial captives who view the products as independent (they are all aware of both products). So seller 1's profit is $(\lambda+\lambda(1-\theta))(v+b-f-c)$ and seller 2's profit is $\lambda(1-\theta)(v+b-f-c)$. With the same probability $x(1-x)$, we have the symmetric case in which all buyers are exposed to seller 2, whereas seller 1 only remains exposed to its initially captive buyers. In this case, seller 1's profit is $\lambda(1-\theta)(v+b-f-c)$ and seller 2's profit is $(\lambda+\lambda(1-\theta))(v+b-f-c)$. Finally, with probability x^2 all buyers are exposed to both sellers, so both sellers get $2\lambda(1-\theta)(v+b-f-c)$.

Summing up across these four cases, each seller's expected profit given x is

$$\begin{aligned} & \left((1-x)^2\lambda+x(1-x)(\lambda+\lambda(1-\theta))+(1-x)x\lambda(1-\theta)+x^2(2\lambda(1-\theta))\right)(v+b-f-c) \\ = \; & \lambda(1+x(1-2\theta))(v+b-f-c), \end{aligned}$$

which is the same as expression (2) in our baseline setting.

[1]Boston University Questrom School of Business. E-mail: ahagiu@bu.edu
[2]Department of Economics, National University of Singapore, E-mail: jwright@nus.edu.sg

The platform's demand when it attracts both sellers is therefore

$$\begin{aligned}\Pi(f,x) &= f\left(2\lambda(1-x)^2 + 2(\lambda + 2\lambda(1-\theta) + \lambda\theta)x(1-x) + (4\lambda(1-\theta) + 2\lambda\theta)x^2\right)\\ &= 2\lambda f(1 + x(1-\theta)),\end{aligned}$$

which is the same as expression (4).

Thus, this alternative interpretation of x leads to the exact same analysis as the one presented in the paper.

A.2 Leakage and unfavorable beliefs

Throughout the paper, we have assumed that once a seller decides to join the platform in stage 2, it abandons its direct channel, so that in stage 3 there is no possibility of leakage, where buyers from the platform switch to purchase from the sellers' direct channels if it is cheaper to do so. Suppose instead that each seller maintains its direct channel even after joining the platform and that in stage 3 every seller that joins the platform can set different prices for buyers to purchase via the platform or via the direct channel. All buyers that are aware of a seller observe its prices in both channels. In this case, if $f > b$, then there would be no sales conducted via the platform in stage 3. Indeed, a seller that made positive sales via the platform could increase profits by setting the price in its direct channel at the level it is currently charging on the platform and increasing its price on the platform to ensure all its sales are in its direct channel (at the same price but a strictly lower cost). Thus, if the platform sets $f > b$, it makes no profits, and so it must set $f \leq b$.

Similarly, in the baseline setting, and for most of the paper, we have assumed favorable beliefs. This means that for any given fee f, if there is an equilibrium where all sellers join, this equilibrium is selected. Consider instead unfavorable beliefs. This means that for any given fee f, if there is an equilibrium where no sellers join, that equilibrium is selected. The platform will therefore have to set its fee with this equilibrium selection in mind, to make sure for the given fee that each seller wants to join even if the other does not. Thus, the plaform can never set $f > b$, otherwise there is always an equilibrium in which no seller joins and that equilibrium prevails. Which means that once again, the platform faces the constraint $f \leq b$.

Consequently, with either costless leakage or unfavorable beliefs, we have to add an additional constraint to the platform's optimization problem, namely $f \leq b$. This means that in the baseline setting, the maximum fee that the platform can charge is

$$f=\min\left\{b+(v-c)\,\frac{x\,(1-2\theta)}{1+x\,(1-2\theta)},b\right\}.$$

If $\theta\leq\frac{1}{2}$, then the maximum fee that the platform can charge to get both sellers to join is $f=b$. The platform's profit is then $2\lambda b\,(1+x\,(1-\theta))$ (from expression 4), which is maximized by setting $x=1$.

If $\theta>\frac{1}{2}$, then the maximum fee the platform can charge to get both sellers to join is

$$f=b+(v-c)\,\frac{x\,(1-2\theta)}{1+x\,(1-2\theta)}<b,$$

which is the same as in the baseline model. Platform profits are therefore the same as in the baseline, and so will be the optimal x^*.

Thus, in all cases the optimal level of discoverability x^* is the same, regardless of whether sellers maintain their direct channels and can induce leakage or not, and regardless of whether expectations are favorable or unfavorable. For $\theta>\frac{1}{2}$, f^* and Π^* are also unchanged, whereas for $\theta\geq\frac{1}{2}$ we now obtain

$$\begin{aligned}f^* &= b\\ \Pi^* &= 2\lambda b\,(2-\theta)\,.\end{aligned}$$

A.3 Commitment

Consider the baseline setting but assume the platform cannot commit to its choice of x. The timing is: the platform chooses its fees, sellers decide whether to join or not, and then the platform decides how much discoverability to induce. Given the platform's fee and with both sellers participating, and assuming $\theta<1$, the platform always does best by setting maximum discoverability ($x=1$) since that expands the number of transactions which it earns its fee on—this is easily seen from the expression of platform profits (4) in the baseline.

Given sellers expect $x=1$, it is an equilibrium for both to join the platform iff

$$2\,(v+b-f-c)\,(1-\theta)\geq(v-c)\,.$$

Taking this constraint into account, the platform will set $f=\max\left\{v+b-c-\frac{v-c}{2(1-\theta)},0\right\}$, and so will obtain a profit of

$$\Pi^* = 2\lambda \left(b + (v - c) \frac{(1 - 2\theta)}{1 + (1 - 2\theta)} \right) (2 - \theta)$$

if $\theta < 1 - \frac{v-c}{2(v-c+b)}$, and otherwise will obtain zero profit.

Compared to the platform's profit in the baseline, this is the same in the range of $0 < \theta \leq \theta_1(\mu)$ where $x^* = 1$ in the baseline, and otherwise is lower since its choice of x will no longer be ex-ante profit maximizing.

A.4 Price discrimination across buyer groups

Let's suppose the sellers can price discriminate, so each seller can set one price for its own initially captive buyers and a potentially different price for the rival seller's initially captive buyers. This means we can think of there being two separate markets in which the sellers compete: one for seller 1's initially captive buyers and the other for seller 2's initially captive buyers. Each seller's profit will be the sum of its profits from these two markets.

Consider the competition for seller i's initially captive buyers. Seller i will have $\lambda_i = \lambda(1-x) + \lambda x(1-\theta)$ captives among these buyers while seller j will have $\lambda_j = \lambda x(1-\theta)$ captives. Moreover, the two sellers would compete over the measure $\phi = \lambda x\theta$ of seller i's buyers who are exposed to both sellers and view them as identical substitutes. Given the competing sellers have different measures of captives in this market, the more aggressive seller's profit (the one with fewer captives) is no longer just equal to its profits from captives. The sellers' expected profits can be obtained by applying Proposition 1 from Myatt and Ronayne (2023).[3] We can conclude that seller i's expected profit in this market is

$$(\lambda(1-x) + \lambda x(1-\theta))(v + b - f - c) = \lambda(1 - x\theta)(v + b - f - c),$$

while seller j's expected profit in this market is

$$\left(\frac{\lambda x(1-\theta) + \lambda x\theta}{\lambda(1-x) + \lambda x(1-\theta) + \lambda x\theta} \right) \lambda(1 - x\theta)(v + b - f - c) = \lambda x(1 - x\theta)(v + b - f - c).$$

The same logic applies in the market for seller j's buyers, and we obtain a symmetric result. Therefore adding the expected profit from the two markets together, each seller's

[3] For the reader's convenience, we have summarized the relevant results from Myatt and Ronayne (2023) in Online Appendix A.4 below.

expected profit from participating on the platform is

$$\lambda (1 - x\theta) (1 + x) (v + b - f - c) .$$

This is higher than each seller's profit in the case without price discrimination, which was

$$\lambda (1 + x - 2x\theta) (v + b - f - c) .$$

Indeed, each seller's expected profit is higher by $\lambda\theta x (1 - x) (v + b - c - f)$ as a result of price discrimination, reflecting the fact price discrimination makes them asymmetric competitors in their respective markets. This suggests that an intermediate level of discovery (i.e. $x = \frac{1}{2}$) will lead to the largest increase in the sellers' profits from price discrimination, while when $x = 0$ or $x = 1$ price discrimination will have no effect on their profits. Note also that a seller's profit from participating on the platform is now single-peaked in x: increasing in x if $x \leq \frac{1-\theta}{2\theta}$ and decreasing in x if $x \geq \frac{1-\theta}{2\theta}$.

For both sellers joining the platform to be an equilibrium, we need to have

$$f \leq b + \frac{(1 - x\theta) (1 + x) - 1}{(1 - x\theta) (1 + x)} (v - c) ,$$

so the platform's profit when both sellers join is

$$\begin{aligned} \Pi &= 2\lambda f (1 + x (1 - \theta)) \\ &= 2\lambda (v - c) \left(1 + \mu - \frac{1}{(1 - x\theta) (1 + x)}\right) (1 + x (1 - \theta)) . \end{aligned}$$

After dropping the constant $2\lambda (v - c)$, the derivative with respect to x is

$$\frac{d\Pi_{pd}}{dx} = (1 + \mu) (1 - \theta) - \frac{x\theta (2 + (1 - \theta) x)}{(1 - x\theta)^2 (1 + x)^2}.$$

By analyzing this, we can characterize x^*. First note $\frac{d\Pi_{pd}}{dx} > 0$ when $\theta = 0$, implying $x^* = 1$ if $\theta = 0$. By continuity, this derivative remains strictly positive for θ close enough to zero, so $x^* = 1$ for θ below some positive threshold. Also note that if $x = 0$, then for any $\theta < 1$, $\frac{d\Pi_{pd}}{dx} > 0$, implying $x^* > 0$ for $0 \leq \theta < 1$. And $\frac{d\Pi_{pd}}{dx} = 0$ iff $\theta = 1$, implying $x^* = 0$ iff $\theta = 1$. Next we show the solution $\widetilde{x}$ to the FOC $\frac{d\Pi_{pd}}{dx} = 0$ is decreasing in θ. Totally differentiating the FOC with respect to θ and x implies

$$-\left(1 + \mu + \left(\frac{x (2 + x + \theta x^2)}{(1 - x\theta)^3 (1 + x)^2}\right)\right) d\theta - \left(\frac{2\theta (1 + 3x^2\theta + x^3\theta (1 - \theta))}{(1 - x\theta)^3 (1 + x)^3}\right) dx = 0$$

so

$$\frac{dx}{d\theta} = -\frac{1+\mu+\left(\frac{x\left(2+x+\theta x^2\right)}{(1-x\theta)^3(1+x)^2}\right)}{\frac{2\theta(1+3x^2\theta+x^3\theta(1-\theta))}{(1-x\theta)^3(1+x)^3}} < 0$$

implying $\widetilde{x}$ is strictly decreasing in θ. Taken with the results already stated, this implies there is a cutoff $\theta_1(\mu)$, such that $x^* = 1$ for $0 \leq \theta \leq \theta_1(\mu)$, and $0 < x^* < 1$ is strictly decreasing in θ for $\theta_1(\mu) < \theta < 1$ reaching $x^* = 0$ when $\theta = 1$. This also implies $\theta_1(\mu)$ is defined by the point where $\frac{d\Pi_{pd}}{dx} = 0$ when $x = 1$. I.e. $\theta_1(\mu)$ is defined by

$$\frac{\theta}{(1-\theta)^3}(3-\theta) = 4(\mu+1),$$

where the LHS is increasing in θ. Comparing this to the threshold level of θ

$$\frac{\theta}{(1-\theta)^3} = 4(\mu+1)$$

with uniform pricing, this means $\theta_1(\mu)$ is now lower (closer to zero). Putting these results together with our characterization in the uniform pricing case implies the x^* curve here crosses over the curve for x^* in the uniform pricing case.

To summarize

$$x^* = \begin{cases} 1 & if \quad 0 < \theta \leq \theta_1(\mu) \\ \widetilde{x} & if \quad \theta_1(\mu) < \theta < 1 \\ 0 & if \quad \theta = 1 \end{cases},$$

where

$$\mu = \frac{b}{v-c}$$

and $\theta_1(\mu) \in (0,1)$ is the unique solution in θ to

$$\frac{\theta}{(1-\theta)^3}(3-\theta) = 4(\mu+1)$$

and $0 < \widetilde{x} < 1$ is given by the unique solution to

$$(1+\mu)(1-\theta) = \frac{x\theta(2+(1-\theta)x)}{(1-x\theta)^2(1+x)^2}$$

in the range $\theta_1(\mu) < \theta < 1$.

A.5 Useful results on mixed strategy pricing

We will make use of the following results on mixed strategy equilibrium pricing from Proposition 1 in Myatt and Ronayne (2023).

Suppose there are n identical sellers and measure one of buyers who want to buy one unit of product from one of the sellers which gives them value v. There are $n+1$ types of buyers: λ_i are informed of seller i only for $i = 1, 2..., n$ and $\phi = 1 - \sum_{i=1}^{n} \lambda_i$ are informed of all sellers. Assume $\lambda_i > 0$ for all i, and $\phi > 0$. Seller i has marginal cost $c_i < v$.

Define the critical price p_i^+ such that

$$(\lambda_i + \phi) \left(p_i^+ - c_i\right) = \lambda_i (v - c_i).$$

If a seller sold to all buyers that are informed of its product at this price, it would earn the same as setting the monopoly price and just selling to its captive buyers. Therefore, $c_i < p_i^+ < v$ for all i.

Suppose sellers are ordered so $p_1^+ \geq p_2^+ \geq ... \geq p_n^+$. Seller n is considered the most aggressive seller (it has a combination of a low marginal cost and/or a low number of captives). Then in their Proposition 1, Myatt and Ronayne show that there is a mixed strategy equilibrium where seller n obtains expected profit

$$(\lambda_n + \phi) \left(p_{n-1}^+ - c_n\right)$$

and all other sellers obtain

$$\lambda_i (v - c_i).$$

Note this most aggressive seller obtains greater expected profit than it would obtain by setting $p_n = v$. This is because

$$(\lambda_n + \phi) \left(p_{n-1}^+ - c_n\right) \geq (\lambda_n + \phi) \left(p_n^+ - c_n\right) = \lambda_n (v - c_n),$$

with the inequality in the equation above being strict if $p_{n-1}^+ > p_n^+$.

A few special cases follow:

1. If the sellers are all symmetric because $\lambda_i = \lambda$ for all i and $c_i = c$ for all i, then this equilibrium still applies, and seller n in this case obtains $(\lambda + \phi) \left(p_{n-1}^+ - c\right) = (\lambda + \phi) (p_n^+ - c) = \lambda (v - c)$, so all sellers obtain the same expected profit $\lambda (v - c)$.

2. If there are just two sellers with $\lambda_1 = \lambda_2 = \lambda$ and $c_1 > c_2$ so $p_1^+ > p_2^+$, then seller 2's

expected profit is

$$(\lambda + \phi) \left(p_1^+ - c_2\right) = \phi (c_1 - c_2) + \lambda (v - c_2) > \lambda (v - c_2),$$

while seller 1's expected profit is $\lambda (v - c_1)$.

3. If there are just two sellers with $\lambda_1 > \lambda_2$ and $c_1 = c_2 = c$, so $p_1^+ > p_2^+$, then seller 2's expected profit is

$$(\lambda_2 + \phi) \left(p_1^+ - c\right) = \frac{\lambda_2 + \phi}{\lambda_1 + \phi} \lambda_1 (v - c) > \lambda_2 (v - c),$$

while seller 1's expected profit is $\lambda_1 (v - c)$.

4. If there are n sellers such that $\lambda_1 \geq \lambda_2 \geq ... \geq \lambda_n$ but all with the same marginal cost c, then seller n makes

$$\frac{\lambda_n + \phi}{\lambda_{n-1} + \phi} \lambda_{n-1} (v - c)$$

and all sellers $i \leq n - 1$ make

$$\lambda_i (v - c).$$

A.6 Outside option includes benefits

So far we have assumed that the outside option does not involve any transaction benefits (i.e. tools) for sellers. Suppose instead the outside option is actually a competitive fringe of B2B providers that offer some tools for sellers with transaction benefit b_0. In other words, a seller that does not join the platform makes profits $\lambda (v - c + b_0)$ and let $\mu_0 = \frac{b_0}{v-c}$. We can generalize the results from Proposition 1 to this case.

Proposition *Suppose the platform offers sellers transaction benefit b, while the outside option offers sellers transaction benefit b_0. The platform is viable iff*

$$\frac{1 + \mu_0}{1 + \mu} \leq \max \{2 (1 - \theta), 1\}$$

and the platform's optimal choice of discoverability is

$$x^* = \begin{cases} 1 & if \quad 0 < \theta \leq \theta_1 (\mu, \mu_0) \\ \frac{1 - \sqrt{\frac{\theta(1+\mu_0)}{(1-\theta)(1+\mu)}}}{2\theta - 1} & if \quad \theta_1 (\mu, \mu_0) \leq \theta \leq \frac{\mu+1}{\mu+2+\mu_0} \\ 0 & if \quad \theta \geq \frac{\mu+1}{\mu+2+\mu_0} \end{cases},$$

where $\theta_1(\mu, \mu_0)$ is the unique solution in θ to

$$\frac{\theta}{(1-\theta)^3} = \frac{4(1+\mu)}{1+\mu_0}.$$

The platform's maximum attainable profits are

$$2\lambda(v-c)(1+(1-\theta)x^*)\left(1+\mu-\frac{1+\mu_0}{x^*(1-2\theta)+1}\right).$$

The viability of the platform (i.e. its ability to make profit) depends on μ_0 not being too high. When $\theta > \frac{1}{2}$, so with relatively high substitutability, the viability of the platform depends on it offering tools that are at least equal to the outside fringe supplying B2B tools. On the other hand, when $\theta < \frac{1}{2}$, the platform may be viable even when its tools are worse than those offered by the outside fringe. Specifically, this happens when

$$1 < \frac{1+\mu_0}{1+\mu} \leq 2(1-\theta).$$

In this range, the platform's ability to enable discoverability allows it to create more value relative to its inferior tools.

Proposition A.6 shows that the optimal level of discoverability is decreasing in the value offered by the outside fringes' tools (as captured by μ_0). This implies that as the generic B2B tools offered to sellers in the market get better, and assuming the platforms' tools don't equally improve (perhaps because the generic B2B tool providers are catching up), platforms will choose less discoverability (assuming they remain viable).

Proof of Proposition A.6:

A seller that does not join the platform makes profits

$$\lambda(v+b_0-c).$$

A seller that joins the platform alone makes profits

$$\lambda(v+b-f-c).$$

If both sellers join the platform, then each seller makes profits

$$(v+b-f-c)(\lambda(1-x)+2\lambda x(1-\theta)).$$

For both sellers joining the platform to be an equilibrium, we need

$$(v + b - f - c)\left(\lambda (1 - x) + 2\lambda x (1 - \theta)\right) \geq \lambda (v - c + b_0),$$

which is equivalent to

$$(v - c)\, x (1 - 2\theta) - b_0 \geq (f - b)\left(1 + x (1 - 2\theta)\right)$$

Then, assuming favorable expectations, sellers will both join iff

$$\begin{aligned} f &\leq \frac{(v - c + b)\, x (1 - 2\theta) + b - b_0}{x (1 - 2\theta) + 1} \\ f &\leq v - c + b - \frac{v - c + b_0}{x (1 - 2\theta) + 1} \end{aligned}$$

For the platform, attracting both sellers dominates attracting only one of them, since it can always set $x = 0$ and double the profits from attracting just one seller.

The platform's maximum attainable profits with two sellers are

$$2\lambda (v - c)\left(1 + (1 - \theta) x\right)\left(1 + \mu - \frac{1 + \mu_0}{x (1 - 2\theta) + 1}\right),$$

where

$$\begin{aligned} \mu &= \frac{b}{v - c} \\ \mu_0 &= \frac{b_0}{v - c}. \end{aligned}$$

If $\theta \leq \frac{1}{2}$, then the expression above is increasing in x, so it is maximized for $x^* = 1$. In this case, the platform's maximum profits are non-negative iff

$$\frac{1 + \mu_0}{1 + \mu} \leq 2 (1 - \theta).$$

Otherwise, the platform is not viable. Note in particular we can have

$$1 < \frac{1 + \mu_0}{1 + \mu} \leq 2 (1 - \theta),$$

so the platform can be viable even if the outside option offers more value added than the platform. The platform's viability comes from its ability to offer discovery.

Suppose $\theta > \frac{1}{2}$. In this case, $1 + \mu - \frac{1+\mu_0}{x(1-2\theta)+1}$ is decreasing in x, so the platform is viable (i.e. can obtain non-negative profits) iff $\mu \geq \mu_0$. So now the platform can no longer be viable if the outside option offers more value added.

Then the derivative of the platform's profit expression with respect to x is

$$2\lambda (v-c)\left((1+\mu)(1-\theta) - \frac{\theta(1+\mu_0)}{(x(1-2\theta)+1)^2}\right),$$

so SOC holds. The solution is

$$x^* = \begin{cases} 1 & if \quad 0 < \theta \leq \theta_1(\mu,\mu_0) \\ \frac{1-\sqrt{\frac{\theta(1+\mu_0)}{(1-\theta)(1+\mu)}}}{2\theta-1} & if \quad \theta_1(\mu,\mu_0) \leq \theta \leq \theta_2(\mu,\mu_0) \\ 0 & if \quad \theta \geq \theta_2(\mu,\mu_0) \end{cases},$$

where $\theta_1(\mu,\mu_0)$ is the unique solution in θ to

$$4\frac{1+\mu}{1+\mu_0} \geq \frac{\theta}{(1-\theta)^3}$$

and

$$\theta_2(\mu,\mu_0) = \frac{1}{1+\frac{1+\mu_0}{1+\mu}}.$$

A.7 Representative buyer specification

Suppose buyers have utility from two goods, which are provided by two different sellers. We adopt a standard quadratic specification:

$$U(q_1,q_2) = v(q_1+q_2) - (1-\theta)\left(q_1^2+q_2^2\right) - \frac{\theta}{2}(q_1+q_2)^2,$$

where θ represents the degree of substitutability between the products, so $\theta = 0$ means goods are independent and $\theta \to 1$ captures goods being homogenous (highly substitutable).

When buyers can choose both sellers

$$\begin{aligned} q_1 &= \frac{v-p_1}{2} - \frac{\theta(p_1-p_2)}{4(1-\theta)} \\ q_2 &= \frac{v-p_2}{2} - \frac{\theta(p_2-p_1)}{4(1-\theta)}. \end{aligned}$$

And when they can just choose seller i because that is the only one they are informed of, then $q_j = 0$, and their demand for seller i is given by

$$q_i = \left(\frac{1}{2-\theta}\right)(v - p_i).$$

Note for the same prices ($p_1 = p_2 = p$), a buyer's demand expands from $q_1 = \left(\frac{1}{2-\theta}\right)(v-p)$ to $q_1 + q_2 = (v-p)$ in case the buyer is informed of both sellers rather than just one. Note for $\theta = 1$, there is no demand expansion, while when $\theta = 0$, so the products are independent (fully differentiated), demand expansion is 100%.

Consider seller i without a platform. It comes with an initial measure of λ buyers, all of whom only know about it but not its rival, and so its profit is

$$\pi_i = \lambda (p_i - c)\left(\frac{1}{2-\theta}\right)(v - p_i).$$

This is maximized by setting the monopoly price $p_i = \frac{v+c}{2}$, leading to a profit of

$$\pi_i = \lambda \left(\frac{1}{2-\theta}\right)\left(\frac{v-c}{2}\right)^2.$$

One difference with the baseline setting is that the profit a seller gets when it doesn't participate still depends on θ, since the total demand is less when the goods are fully differentiated but only one is available.

Now suppose only one seller joins the platform. Since the platform just provides a transaction benefit to sellers, so their marginal cost becomes $c - b$, but charges a per-unit fee f, and doesn't help expand the number of customers for the seller, it will get a profit of

$$\pi_i = \lambda \left(\frac{1}{2-\theta}\right)\left(\frac{v-c+b-f}{2}\right)^2,$$

and a seller will therefore join the platform if it expects the other seller not to iff $f \leq b$.

Suppose when both sellers join, the platform informs a fraction x of each seller's participating customers about the existence of the rival seller. Consider when each seller would join given the expectation that the other will also join. Each seller faces a fraction $1 - x$ of its λ initial customers who are only informed of itself and x who are also informed of the other seller. It also enjoys being able to sell to a fraction x of the other seller's λ initially captive buyers.

Demand for seller i is made up of three components:

- seller i captives that remain captive, which generate demand $\lambda (1-x)\left(\frac{1}{2-\theta}\right)(v - p_i)$

- seller i captives that are now buying from both sellers, which generate demand $\lambda x\left(\frac{v-p_i}{2}-\frac{\theta(p_i-p_j)}{4(1-\theta)}\right)$
- seller j captives that are now buying from both sellers, which generate demand $\lambda x\left(\frac{v-p_i}{2}-\frac{\theta(p_i-p_j)}{4(1-\theta)}\right)$

So seller i's profit is

$$\pi_i=(p_i+b-c-f)\left(\lambda\left(1-x\right)\left(\frac{1}{2-\theta}\right)(v-p_i)+2\lambda x\left(\frac{v-p_i}{2}-\frac{\theta\left(p_i-p_j\right)}{4\left(1-\theta\right)}\right)\right).$$

From the FOCs, the equilibrium prices are:

$$p^*=p_1=p_2=\frac{2\left(x+\frac{1}{1-\theta}\right)\left(v+c-(b-f)\right)+\frac{\theta(2-\theta)}{(1-\theta)^2}x\left(c-(b-f)\right)}{4\left(x+\frac{1}{1-\theta}\right)+x\frac{\theta(2-\theta)}{(1-\theta)^2}}.$$

Note the equilibrium price is always decreasing in x when $\theta>0$ and provided $f<v-c+b$ as we would expect. We also need $v>p^*$, which is easy to confirm given $v>c$. A seller's equilibrium profit when it joins is

$$\pi^*=2\lambda\left(\frac{1-\theta}{2-\theta}\right)\left(1+x\left(1-\theta\right)\right)^2\frac{\left(2\left(1+x-\theta\right)-x\theta\left(2-\theta\right)\right)}{\left(4\left(1+x-\theta\right)-3x\theta\left(2-\theta\right)\right)^2}\left(v-c+b-f\right)^2.$$

Let $b=\mu\left(v-c\right)$. So we can determine a cutoff level f^c such that the seller's profit is higher when it joins than when it doesn't provided $f\leq f^c$, assuming the other seller joins. This is determined by

$$f^c=\left(1+\mu-y\left(x,\theta\right)\right)\left(v-c\right)$$

where

$$y\left(x,\theta\right)=\frac{4\left(1+x\left(1-\theta\right)\right)+x\frac{\theta(2-\theta)}{(1-\theta)}}{2\left(1+x\left(1-\theta\right)\right)\sqrt{4\left(1+x\left(1-\theta\right)\right)+2x\frac{\theta(2-\theta)}{(1-\theta)}}}.$$

Thus, there is an equilibrium where both sellers join provided $f\leq f^c$. Here f^c can be greater or less than b.

Note $y\left(0,\theta\right)=1$. The platform will set f and x such that both sellers join and the platform's resulting profit is

$$\begin{aligned}\Pi\left(x,f\right) &= f\left(2\lambda\left(1-x\right)\left(\frac{1}{2-\theta}\right)+2\lambda x\right)\left(v-p^*\right)\\ &= 2\lambda\frac{\left(1+x\left(1-\theta\right)\right)}{2-\theta}\frac{2\left(1+x\left(1-\theta\right)\right)+x\frac{\theta(2-\theta)}{(1-\theta)}}{4\left(1+x\left(1-\theta\right)\right)+x\frac{\theta(2-\theta)}{(1-\theta)}}f\left(\left(1+\mu\right)\left(v-c\right)-f\right).\end{aligned}$$

The platform's problem is to set f and x to maximize $\Pi(x, f)$ subject to

$$0 \leq f \leq (1 + \mu - y(x, \theta))(v - c).$$

Note the unconstrained optimal fee equals

$$f^u = (1 + \mu) \frac{v - c}{2}.$$

Then define $f^* = \min\{f^c, f^u\}$. Then can normalize $v - c = 1$ since that just scales up the platform's profit but doesn't affect the optimal choice of x. So the problem becomes to choose $x \in [0, 1]$ to maximize

$$\Pi(x) = 2\lambda \frac{(1 + x(1 - \theta))}{2 - \theta} \frac{2(1 + x(1 - \theta)) + x\frac{\theta(2-\theta)}{(1-\theta)}}{4(1 + x(1 - \theta)) + x\frac{\theta(2-\theta)}{(1-\theta)}} f^* ((1 + \mu) - f^*)$$

where

$$f^* = \min\left\{\frac{1 + \mu}{2}, 1 + \mu - \frac{4(1 + x(1 - \theta)) + x\frac{\theta(2-\theta)}{(1-\theta)}}{2(1 + x(1 - \theta))\sqrt{4(1 + x(1 - \theta)) + 2x\frac{\theta(2-\theta)}{(1-\theta)}}}\right\}.$$

Note it will never be optimal to set x such that $f^* < 0$ because that would yield negative profits and the platform can always guarantee positive profits by setting $x = 0$.

Unlike our baseline setting, there is no longer a closed-form solution for x^*. But in Figure 4 we have mapped out the optimal x^* where θ is on the horizontal axis and μ is on the vertical axis. The figure shows levels of x^* from $x^* = 0$ (lightest colour) to $x^* = 1$ (darkest colour), and it is qualitatively similar to the corresponding figure for the baseline setting (Figure 1 in the main paper).

A.8 Proof with less favorable beliefs

In the setting with n sellers, we can consider the role of different "beliefs" to see whether they matter given there are positive network effects: the willingness of a seller to join increases in the number of other sellers since their expected payoff of joining is increasing in the number of other sellers.

We define m-beliefs with $m \geq 2$ as follows. Whenever $\theta \leq 1 - \frac{1}{n}$, each seller believes all other sellers will join if $f \leq \max\left\{b, b + \left(\frac{x(m(1-\theta)-1)}{x(m(1-\theta)-1)+1}\right)(v - c)\right\}$ and believes no other seller will join otherwise. When $\theta > 1 - \frac{1}{n}$, there is a unique equilibrium for any fee f so there is no role for beliefs for this range of θ.

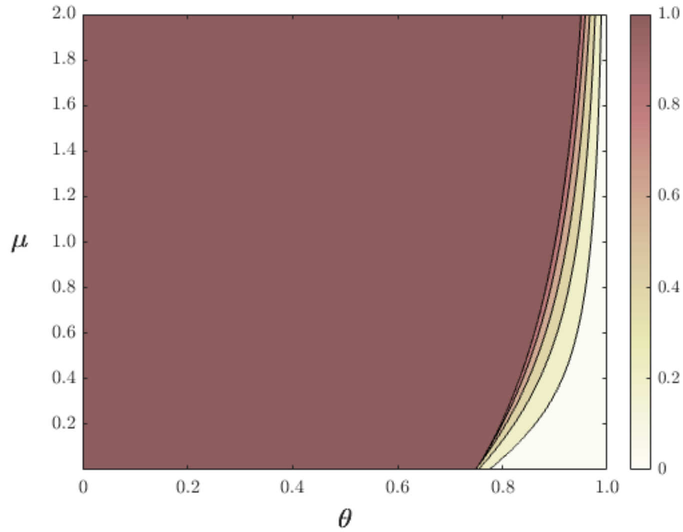

Figure 4: The platform's optimal level of discoverability x^*

Focusing on the case $\theta \leq 1 - \frac{1}{n}$ where the beliefs are defined, these beliefs imply that as long as $f \leq b$, the equilibrium where all sellers join will be selected. That's a reasonable way to select equilibrium given that if $f \leq b$, sellers will still want to join even if they think no other sellers will join. But m-beliefs restrict how much higher than this the platform can set f before sellers will coordinate on the equilibrium where no sellers join because they expect no other sellers to join (this equilibrium always exists when $f > b$).

To show the resulting equilibrium and ensure these beliefs always select a valid equilibrium, let $\theta_k = 1 - \frac{1}{k}$. Suppose first $\theta_n < \theta \leq 1$. This implies $b + \left(\frac{x(n(1-\theta)-1)}{x(n(1-\theta)-1)+1}\right)(v-c) < b$. Thus, if $f > b$, then no seller joins. If $b + \left(\frac{x(n(1-\theta)-1)}{x(n(1-\theta)-1)+1}\right)(v-c) < f \leq b$, then the only equilibrium is for exactly one seller will join. And if $f \leq b + \left(\frac{x(n(1-\theta)-1)}{x(n(1-\theta)-1)+1}\right)(v-c) \leq b$, then the only equilibrium is for all n sellers to join. As noted, for this range of θ, beliefs play no role.

Next suppose $\theta_m < \theta \leq \theta_n$. This means we have $b + \left(\frac{x(m(1-\theta)-1)}{x(m(1-\theta)-1)+1}\right)(v-c) < b < b + \left(\frac{x(n(1-\theta)-1)}{x(n(1-\theta)-1)+1}\right)(v-c)$. This implies as long as $f \leq b$, the only equilibrium is all sellers join, because even if they believe no other seller joins they will want to join. This is consistent with m-beliefs. If $b < f \leq b + \left(\frac{x(n(1-\theta)-1)}{x(n(1-\theta)-1)+1}\right)(v-c)$, then there are only two possible equilibria: no seller joins (because each seller believes no other sellers will join) or all sellers join (because each seller believes enough other sellers will join). The stated m-beliefs select the equilibrium where no sellers join. And if $f > b + \left(\frac{x(n(1-\theta)-1)}{x(n(1-\theta)-1)+1}\right)(v-c) > b$, then the only equilibrium is no sellers join, consistent with m-beliefs.

Finally, suppose $\theta \leq \theta_m$. Then $b + \left(\frac{x(m(1-\theta)-1)}{x(m(1-\theta)-1)+1}\right)(v-c) > b$, so if $f \leq b$, then the only equilibrium is for all sellers to join, while if $b < f \leq b + \left(\frac{x(n(1-\theta)-1)}{x(n(1-\theta)-1)+1}\right)(v-c)$, there are only two possible equilibria: no seller joins (because each seller believes no other sellers will join) or all sellers join (because each seller believes enough other sellers will join). Then the stated m-beliefs select the equilibrium where all sellers join if $f \leq b + \left(\frac{x(m(1-\theta)-1)}{x(m(1-\theta)-1)+1}\right)(v-c)$ and select the equilibrium where no sellers join if $b + \left(\frac{x(m(1-\theta)-1)}{x(m(1-\theta)-1)+1}\right)(v-c) < f \leq b + \left(\frac{x(n(1-\theta)-1)}{x(n(1-\theta)-1)+1}\right)(v-c)$. Finally, as before, if $f > b + \left(\frac{x(n(1-\theta)-1)}{x(n(1-\theta)-1)+1}\right)(v-c) > b$, then the only equilibrium is no sellers join, consistent with m-beliefs.

With m-beliefs, the platform's profit-maximizing fee is

$$f_m(\theta) = \begin{cases} b + \frac{x(m(1-\theta)-1)}{x(m(1-\theta)-1)+1}(v-c) & if \quad 0 \leq \theta \leq \theta_m \\ b & if \quad \theta_m < \theta \leq \theta_n \\ b + \frac{x(n(1-\theta)-1)}{x(n(1-\theta)-1)+1}(v-c) & if \quad \theta_n < \theta \leq 1 \end{cases}.$$

Indeed, at this fee, all sellers participate in all cases, so there is no reason to charge anything less. Furthermore, when $\theta \leq \theta_n$, charging more than $\max\left\{b, b + \left(\frac{x(m(1-\theta)-1)}{x(m(1-\theta)-1)+1}\right)(v-c)\right\}$ results in no sellers participating and therefore zero sales. And when $\theta_n < \theta \leq 1$, charging f such that $b + \frac{x(n(1-\theta)-1)}{x(n(1-\theta)-1)+1}(v-c) < f \leq b$ results in exactly one seller joining, so platform profits of at most λb, which is clearly dominated by charging $f = b + \frac{x(n(1-\theta)-1)}{x(n(1-\theta)-1)+1}(v-c)$, getting all sellers to join and setting x very close to zero, which yields close to $n\lambda b$ for the platform.

The platform's maximum profit is therefore

$$\Pi = f_m(\theta)\, n\lambda \left(1 + x(n-1)(1-\theta)\right).$$

When $0 \leq \theta \leq \theta_n$, this profit is easily seen to be increasing in x, so the platform will prefer full discoverability, i.e. $x^* = 1$, regardless of beliefs. And when $\theta > \theta_n$, the profit-maximizing fee $f_m(\theta)$ is also unaffected by beliefs (it does not depend on m), and is equal to the profit-maximizing fee for the case with favorable beliefs, resulting in the same x^* as in the main analysis with n sellers.

Thus, different beliefs do not change the platform's optimal choice of x^*. Note this is also consistent with the result we found when looking at the effect of beliefs with just two sellers. Note, however, that less favorable beliefs (lower m) do lower the platform's profits, as expected. Lower m lowers θ_m, so the range where the platform can set $f > b$ shrinks, and moreover even where $0 < \theta \leq \theta_m$, the fee $f(\theta)$ is increasing in m, so would also decrease.

A.9 Representative buyer with n sellers

Define utility as

$$U = v\sum_{i=1}^{n} q_i - (1-\theta)\sum_{i=1}^{n} q_i^2 - \frac{\theta}{2}\left(\sum_{i=1}^{n} q_i\right)^2$$

so

$$q_i = \frac{v-p_i}{2(1-\theta)} - \frac{\theta}{2(1-\theta)}\left(\frac{v - \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n} p_i}{n}}{\theta + \frac{2(1-\theta)}{n}}\right).$$

Note can rewrite demand as

$$q_i = \frac{v-p_i}{2(1-\theta)+n\theta} - \frac{\theta\left(p_i - \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n} p_i}{n}\right)}{2(1-\theta)\left(\theta + \frac{2(1-\theta)}{n}\right)}.$$

In case of a single seller selling to its captives, it would face

$$q_i = \frac{v-p_i}{2-\theta},$$

which is the same as in the model with two sellers. A seller's profit in this case is

$$\pi_i = \lambda(p_i - c)\left(\frac{1}{2-\theta}\right)(v-p_i).$$

This is maximized by setting the monopoly price $p_i = \frac{v+c}{2}$, leading to a profit of

$$\pi_i = \lambda\left(\frac{1}{2-\theta}\right)\left(\frac{v-c}{2}\right)^2.$$

Consider pricing when $m-1$ other sellers are expected to join the platform, so seller i sets p_i to maximize

$$\pi_i = (p_i + b - c - f)\left(\lambda(1-x)\left(\frac{1}{2-\theta}\right)(v-p_i) + m\lambda x\left(\frac{v-p_i}{2(1-\theta)+m\theta} - \frac{\theta\left(p_i - \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{m} p_i}{m}\right)}{2(1-\theta)\left(\theta + \frac{2(1-\theta)}{m}\right)}\right)\right).$$

To understand this, note that a given seller brings some captive buyers λ to the platform to begin with. A fraction $1-x$ of these buyers remain captive to the seller that brought them, so we get the demand faced when the seller is the only seller buyers can buy from. The platform then exposes the remaining fraction x to all other $m-1$ sellers, which means all m sellers compete for this fraction λx of buyers. At the same time, a fraction x of the λ buyers brought by every other seller is now exposed to all sellers, including the one we started with.

The FOC at the symmetric equilibrium is

$$\begin{aligned}
& \lambda(1-x)\left(\frac{1}{2-\theta}\right)(v-p_i)+m\lambda x\left(\frac{v-p_i}{2(1-\theta)+m\theta}\right) \\
& -(p_i+b-c-f)\left(\lambda(1-x)\left(\frac{1}{2-\theta}\right)+\frac{m\lambda x}{2(1-\theta)+m\theta}+\frac{m\lambda x\theta\left(1-\frac{1}{m}\right)}{2(1-\theta)\left(\theta+\frac{2(1-\theta)}{m}\right)}\right) \\
= \;& 0.
\end{aligned}$$

This implies

$$p^*=\frac{(v-(c+f-b))\left(\frac{(1-x)(2(1-\theta)+m\theta)}{2-\theta}+mx\right)}{\frac{2(1-x)(2(1-\theta)+m\theta)}{2-\theta}+2mx+\frac{mx\theta(m-1)}{2(1-\theta)}}+(c+f-b).$$

A seller's profit in equilibrium is then

$$\pi^*=\lambda(p^*+b-c-f)(v-p^*)\left(\frac{(1-x)}{2-\theta}+\frac{mx}{2(1-\theta)+m\theta}\right).$$

Let $b=\mu(v-c)$. So a seller will join if $f\leq f^c$, assuming the other $m-1$ sellers join. This is determined by

$$f^c=(1+\mu-y(x,\theta))(v-c)$$

where

$$y(x,\theta)=\frac{\left(\frac{(1-x)(2(1-\theta)+m\theta)}{2-\theta}+mx+\frac{mx\theta(m-1)}{4(1-\theta)}\right)}{\left(\frac{(1-x)}{2-\theta}+\frac{mx}{(2(1-\theta)+m\theta)}\right)\sqrt{(2(1-\theta)+m\theta)\left(\begin{array}{c}(1-x)(2(1-\theta)+m\theta)\\ +mx(2-\theta)+\frac{mx\theta(2-\theta)(m-1)}{2(1-\theta)}\end{array}\right)}}.$$

The platform's profit provided $f\leq f^c$ is

$$\Pi(x,f)=fm\left(\lambda(1-x)\left(\frac{1}{2-\theta}\right)+m\lambda x\left(\frac{1}{2(1-\theta)+m\theta}\right)\right)(v-p^*).$$

The platform's problem is to set f and x to maximize $\Pi(x,f)$ subject to

$$f\leq(1+\mu-y(x,\theta))(v-c).$$

Figure 5 shows the optimal x^* for the case where $n=10$, where θ is on the horizontal axis and μ is on the vertical axis. Relative to figure 4, the darker regions in figure 5 have shrunk, indicating a reduction in the optimal level of discoverability. We have also confirmed that as n increases, the darker regions continue to shrink, indicating more sellers lead to a lower optimal level of discoverability.

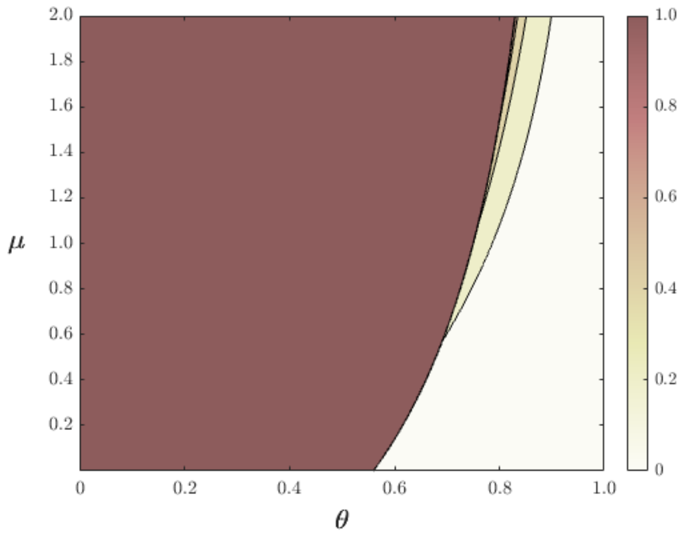

Figure 5: The platform's optimal level of discoverability x^*

A.10 Proof with a fixed consideration set

Suppose instead of buyers seeing all sellers when the platform makes sellers discoverable to x buyers, these x buyers instead see a fixed number $j-1$ of other randomly selected sellers. As in our baseline, θ of the time these other sellers will be identical substitutes with the buyers buying only once from the lowest cost seller and $1-\theta$ of the time these other sellers will be independent and lead to j sales from these buyers for a given seller. Given sellers are symmetric, all sellers obtain the same expected profit from charging the monopoly price v to their captive buyers, which are expected to be

$$(1-x)\,\lambda + x\lambda j\,(1-\theta)\,.$$

The analysis will be the same as if exactly j sellers are on the platform.