

DIGITAL HARASSMENT AND CONSUMPTION TABOOS: THE CASE OF FAKE ORDERS IN LINGERIE STARTUPS

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Abstract

The expansion of digital commerce has created new entrepreneurial opportunities, particularly for niche and intimate product markets such as lingerie. However, alongside increased accessibility, digital platforms have facilitated novel forms of harassment and transactional abuse. This study investigates the phenomenon of fake orders within a digital-first lingerie startup and examines how such behavior intersects with consumption taboos and gendered digital harassment. Using a convergent mixed-method design, the research analyzed 1,400 transactional inquiries over a six-month period and conducted thematic analysis of communication transcripts and founder interviews. Findings indicate that 6.93% of orders were classified as fake or malicious, while 78.14% resulted in confirmed transactions. Statistical analysis revealed significant associations between cash-on-delivery payment methods, high-intimacy product categories, and increased likelihood of fake ordering behavior. Qualitative findings further demonstrate that many fake transactions were embedded within moral policing, sexualized mockery, and cultural stigma narratives. The study contributes to the literature by conceptualizing fake orders not merely as financial fraud but as a hybrid form of gendered digital harassment situated within taboo consumption markets. The findings underscore the need for platform-level safeguards and policy frameworks that recognize transactional harassment as a distinct form of digital harm affecting small, women-led enterprises.

Keywords

Digital harassment, Taboo consumption, Fake orders, E-commerce fraud, Gendered entrepreneurship, Cash-on-delivery risk, Social commerce, Transactional abuse

1. Introduction

The rapid digitization of commerce has reshaped entrepreneurial landscapes across the globe. Social media platforms, mobile payment systems, and low-cost e-commerce infrastructures have lowered entry barriers for small businesses, enabling niche markets to flourish in unprecedented ways. Among these emerging sectors, digital lingerie startups represent a distinctive category of entrepreneurship operating at the intersection of intimate consumption, gendered marketing, and culturally sensitive commerce. While digital platforms offer privacy, reach, and scalability, they also introduce new vulnerabilities, particularly in markets associated with moral scrutiny and social stigma.

Intimate apparel occupies a complex socio-cultural position in many societies. Although lingerie has become mainstream in global fashion industries, its consumption remains embedded within narratives of modesty, sexuality, and morality in more conservative contexts. Consumers often navigate secrecy, discretion, and privacy when purchasing such products. Digital platforms appear to offer solutions to these concerns by enabling private browsing and home delivery. However, the same digital affordances that provide anonymity to consumers also enable malicious actors to exploit transactional systems for purposes beyond legitimate commerce.

Recent scholarship on digital harassment highlights how online infrastructures have facilitated new forms of gendered abuse. Harassment is no longer confined to public comment threads or direct messaging; rather, it increasingly permeates economic interactions. For women entrepreneurs operating in stigmatized markets, harassment may take symbolic and transactional forms that undermine both psychological well-being and business sustainability.

Digital abuse frequently intersects with economic participation, reflecting broader structures of gender inequality embedded within technological systems.

Within this context, the phenomenon of fake orders emerges as an underexplored yet significant issue. Traditionally, fraudulent transactions in e-commerce have been conceptualized primarily in financial terms—chargeback fraud, stolen payment credentials, or identity theft. However, emerging patterns suggest that some fake transactions are not economically motivated but instead function as instruments of harassment, moral policing, or social intimidation. In taboo-based markets such as lingerie retail, fake orders can serve as mechanisms to impose financial strain, create logistical disruptions, and symbolically shame business owners.

Small digital enterprises are particularly vulnerable to such practices. Unlike large corporations with sophisticated fraud-detection algorithms and legal departments, micro and small businesses rely heavily on manual verification processes and thin profit margins. Cash-on-delivery (COD) systems, commonly used in emerging markets due to limited digital payment penetration and consumer trust issues, further increase exposure to order refusal and logistical losses. Repeated fake orders under COD models can result in inventory holding costs, courier penalties, and reputational instability.

Moreover, the socio-cultural environment surrounding lingerie consumption amplifies these vulnerabilities. In contexts where intimate apparel is morally scrutinized, perpetrators may place malicious orders to signal disapproval, embarrass recipients, or exploit community sensitivities. Such actions blur the boundaries between economic misconduct and gendered digital harassment. The transactional infrastructure becomes a vehicle for symbolic aggression, transforming routine commerce into a site of socio-cultural conflict.

Despite growing literature on digital harassment, gendered entrepreneurship, and e-commerce fraud, limited empirical research has examined their convergence. Most studies treat these domains independently: harassment research focuses on psychological and communicative abuse; fraud literature emphasizes financial loss and cybersecurity; and taboo consumption studies analyze consumer secrecy and stigma management. The intersection of these fields—specifically, how fake transactions operate as harassment within stigmatized product markets—remains insufficiently explored.

This study addresses that gap by investigating fake orders within a digital-first lingerie startup operating in a culturally conservative market. By integrating quantitative transactional analysis with qualitative thematic inquiry, the research aims to conceptualize fake orders as a hybrid phenomenon that combines elements of fraud, harassment, and moral regulation. The study does not merely quantify malicious transactions but seeks to understand their socio-cultural underpinnings and implications for gendered entrepreneurship.

The research is guided by three central questions:

- (1) What proportion of transactional inquiries in a digital lingerie startup can be classified as fake or malicious?
- (2) Are certain transaction characteristics—such as payment method or product category—associated with higher probabilities of fake ordering behavior?
- (3) How do qualitative narratives reveal the role of cultural stigma and gendered harassment in shaping such behaviors?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to theory and practice in multiple ways. Theoretically, it extends taboo consumption literature by demonstrating how third-party actors weaponize stigma through transactional systems. It also expands digital harassment frameworks to include economic mechanisms of abuse. Practically, the findings highlight the

need for platform-level policy reforms that distinguish harassment-motivated transactions from conventional fraud.

As digital entrepreneurship continues to expand within culturally sensitive markets, understanding the socio-technical risks embedded in transactional infrastructures becomes increasingly critical. Fake orders in lingerie startups are not isolated operational inconveniences; they represent a broader pattern of digital vulnerability shaped by gender norms, cultural taboos, and platform governance limitations. Recognizing and addressing this intersection is essential for fostering equitable and secure participation in digital marketplaces. The rapid expansion of digital commerce has transformed entrepreneurial ecosystems, particularly within niche and stigmatized product categories such as lingerie and intimate apparel. While digital platforms have democratized market entry, they have simultaneously enabled new forms of online harassment and transactional manipulation. Scholarship on digital harassment demonstrates that online abuse is frequently gendered, sexualized, and embedded within broader systems of power and inequality (Jane, 2014; Henry & Powell, 2018). Contemporary studies further emphasize how platform affordances amplify coordinated abuse and reputational harm (Eckert, 2021; Powell et al., 2022). Within entrepreneurial contexts, female founders operating in intimate or taboo markets often encounter moral policing, sexual objectification, and symbolic intimidation that extend beyond conventional marketplace risks (Dunn, 2023).

Research on online gender-based violence has documented the migration of harassment into commercial interactions, where digital infrastructures such as messaging systems, review mechanisms, and order placements become tools for abuse (Citron, 2014; Dragiewicz et al., 2018). Recent analyses highlight that harassment increasingly intersects with economic participation, affecting women's business sustainability and psychological well-being (Vitis & Gilmour, 2017; Eckert, 2021). The commercialization of intimate products intensifies these vulnerabilities, as lingerie sales are culturally situated within moral discourses surrounding sexuality, modesty, and gender norms.

The concept of taboo consumption provides an important theoretical lens for understanding such dynamics. Taboo products are those that evoke moral ambivalence, secrecy, or stigma within particular socio-cultural settings (Argo & Main, 2008). Consumers often employ concealment strategies and rely on discreet purchasing mechanisms to mitigate social judgment (Wilson & West, 1981). Contemporary research suggests that taboo consumption remains context-dependent, with digital environments simultaneously reducing and amplifying stigma (Larsen & Patterson, 2018; Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2022). In conservative cultural contexts, intimate apparel continues to be framed through moralized narratives that shape both demand and public perception (Rahman, 2021).

Digital marketplaces introduce a paradox: while online platforms increase privacy for consumers of stigmatized goods, they also create new avenues for surveillance, exposure, and reputational harm. Scholars examining platform governance argue that algorithmic systems prioritize fraud detection primarily as a financial threat rather than as a socio-digital weapon (Zuboff, 2019; Martin et al., 2020). Emerging research since 2021 emphasizes the hybridization of economic and social harms in online transactions, particularly within small businesses lacking institutional protection (Powell et al., 2022; Dunn, 2023).

E-commerce fraud literature traditionally conceptualizes fake orders as financially motivated activities such as chargeback fraud or payment manipulation (Button & Cross, 2017). However, newer studies suggest that not all fraudulent transactions are economically driven; some function symbolically to disrupt operations or shame targets (Leukfeldt, 2022; Cross & Kelly, 2023). Within taboo markets, fake orders may operate as mechanisms of moral intimidation.

By placing malicious orders, perpetrators exploit cultural sensitivities to impose economic costs, psychological stress, and reputational uncertainty.

Gendered entrepreneurship research demonstrates that women-owned ventures are disproportionately subjected to credibility questioning and informal harassment (Jennings & Brush, 2013; Marlow & McAdam, 2015). Recent scholarship post-2021 highlights the digital intensification of these dynamics, where harassment converges with transactional systems to produce cumulative burdens (Eckert, 2021; Powell et al., 2022). Lingerie startups, positioned at the intersection of female entrepreneurship and intimate consumption, therefore represent a uniquely vulnerable site of inquiry.

The integration of these literatures reveals a critical research gap. While digital harassment has been widely studied and taboo consumption remains a robust theoretical domain, limited empirical attention has been devoted to how fake transactional behaviors operate as a form of harassment within stigmatized markets. By examining fake orders in lingerie startups, this study bridges gendered digital violence, taboo consumption theory, and e-commerce fraud scholarship. It advances understanding of how cultural stigma can be weaponized through digital infrastructures, transforming routine commercial systems into instruments of social control.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-method research design to investigate the prevalence and socio-cultural dimensions of fake orders within digital lingerie startups. The rationale for employing a mixed-method approach was to integrate quantitative transactional analysis with qualitative thematic inquiry, thereby enabling both measurement of fake order frequency and exploration of underlying motivations associated with taboo-linked harassment behaviors.

The quantitative strand focused on systematic classification of transaction inquiries to determine the proportion of fake, confirmed, and cancelled interactions. The qualitative strand examined communication transcripts and semi-structured interviews to identify patterns of moral policing, gendered intimidation, and stigma narratives embedded within malicious transactional behavior.

Both data strands were collected during the same six-month period and analyzed independently prior to triangulation.

3.2 Research Context

The study was conducted within a digital-first lingerie startup operating primarily through social commerce platforms including Instagram storefronts, WhatsApp Business ordering systems, and a Shopify-based checkout interface. The startup serves a culturally conservative urban market in which intimate apparel consumption remains socially sensitive.

The business operates primarily through:

- Direct messaging inquiries
- Cash-on-delivery (COD) transactions
- Partial digital prepayments
- Social media engagement-driven sales

The research setting was selected due to observed high volumes of suspicious and non-genuine transactional engagement.

3.3 Quantitative Sample and Data Structure

The quantitative dataset consisted of 1,400 documented customer inquiries recorded over a continuous six-month period.

An inquiry was operationally defined as any of the following:

- Direct message requesting product details
- Order form submission
- WhatsApp checkout initiation
- Cash-on-delivery request
- Add-to-cart checkout attempt

Each inquiry was coded using transaction outcome verification and delivery confirmation data.

Classification Categories

Each case was categorized into one of four mutually exclusive groups:

1. Fake/Malicious Order
2. Confirmed Real Order
3. Cancelled Legitimate Order
4. Abandoned Inquiry

The final verified counts were:

- 97 Fake/Malicious Orders (6.93%)
- 1094 Confirmed Real Orders (78.14%)
- 306 Cancelled or Returned Orders (21.86%)

Total = 1,400 inquiries

3.4 Operational Definitions

To ensure replicability and reduce subjective bias, classification criteria were standardized.

Fake/Malicious Order:

An order demonstrating at least two of the following indicators:

- Refusal upon COD delivery
- False or incomplete address verification
- Repeated prank submissions from identical contact patterns
- Explicit sexualized or abusive messaging
- Intentional order cancellation after dispatch

Confirmed Real Order:

A successfully completed transaction verified through delivery confirmation and payment settlement.

Cancelled Legitimate Order:

An order cancelled prior to dispatch for documented personal reasons without harassment indicators.

Abandoned Inquiry:

A customer inquiry not followed by checkout confirmation.

Harassment-Motivated Order (Sub-category of Fake):

A fake order containing communication that included moral judgment, sexual commentary, intimidation, or shaming language.

3.5 Data Collection Procedures

Quantitative Data Collection

Data were extracted from:

- Order management software logs
- Payment gateway transaction reports
- Courier delivery confirmation records
- Customer service chat archives

All personal identifiers were anonymized prior to coding. Each case was assigned a numeric identifier for statistical analysis.

Qualitative Data Collection

Qualitative data were derived from:

- 14 semi-structured interviews with founders and customer service representatives
- 216 archived chat transcripts associated with fake orders
- Internal documentation of COD refusal incidents

Interviews ranged between 30–60 minutes and were audio-recorded with consent.

3.6 Quantitative Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were computed to determine:

- Fake order rate
- Conversion rate
- COD refusal ratio
- Distribution across product categories
- Time-of-day patterns

Chi-square tests of independence were conducted to assess associations between:

- Payment method (COD vs digital) and fake classification
- Product intimacy level and likelihood of fake ordering
- Time window and malicious inquiry probability

Statistical significance was assessed at $p < .05$.

A binary logistic regression model was further constructed to estimate predictors of fake classification. Independent variables included:

- Payment method
- Product intimacy category
- Order value
- Time of inquiry
- Presence of abusive language

Odds ratios were calculated to determine relative predictive strength.

3.7 Qualitative Data Analysis

Thematic analysis followed the Braun and Clarke six-phase framework:

1. Data familiarization
2. Initial open coding
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Report generation

Coding was performed manually and cross-checked by a secondary reviewer to enhance reliability.

Five dominant themes emerged:

- Moral Policing
- Sexualized Mockery
- Cultural Shame Narratives
- Gendered Economic Intimidation
- Transactional Sabotage

Triangulation was achieved by linking coded harassment indicators with quantitative transaction outcomes.

3.8 Reliability and Validity

Internal validity was strengthened through:

- Clear operational definitions
- Dual coding verification
- Cross-checking delivery confirmation records
- Maintaining an audit trail of classification decisions

Inter-coder reliability achieved 0.87 agreement rate.

Construct validity was supported by integrating fraud detection criteria with harassment indicators.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

- All customer data anonymized
- No personally identifiable information retained
- Interview consent obtained
- Harassment excerpts redacted
- Results

4.1 Transactional Overview

A total of 1,400 orders were recorded during the six-month study period. Transactional classification revealed that 97 orders (6.93%) were identified as fake or malicious. A total of 1,094 orders (78.14%) resulted in confirmed and successfully completed transactions. The remaining 306 orders (21.86%) consisted of cancelled or returned transactions.

Table 1

Classification of Inquiries (N = 1,400)

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Fake / Malicious Orders	97	6.93%
Confirmed Real Orders	1,094	78.14%
Cancelled / Returned Orders	306	21.86%
Total	1,400	100%

The results indicate that the majority of recorded orders represented genuine purchasing intent. The confirmed transaction rate was 78.14%, indicating relatively strong purchase completion compared to many social-commerce environments.

4.2 Cash-on-Delivery Risk Pattern

Of the 97 fake orders, 79 (81.7%) were cash-on-delivery (COD) requests, while only 18 (18.3%) involved attempted digital payment methods. In contrast, 74% of confirmed real orders used partial or full digital prepayment. A chi-square test of independence indicated a statistically significant association between payment method and likelihood of fake classification ($\chi^2 = 214.67$, $p < .001$), suggesting that COD preference was a strong predictor of malicious or non-genuine intent.

4.3 Product Category Analysis

Fake orders were disproportionately concentrated in higher-intimacy product categories (e.g., lace sets, bridal collections, and push-up lines). Of total fake orders:

- 58% involved high-intimacy product sets
- 27% involved mid-range coordinated sets
- 15% involved basic or neutral designs

A chi-square test confirmed a significant association between product intimacy level and fake ordering probability ($\chi^2 = 39.82$, $p < .001$).

4.4 Temporal Patterns

Time-stamp analysis revealed that 64% of fake inquiries were initiated between 10:00 PM and 2:00 AM. In contrast, confirmed real orders showed a more evenly distributed pattern across daytime and evening hours. This pattern suggests behavioral clustering consistent with harassment or prank activity rather than consumer purchase planning.

4.5 Harassment Indicators

Qualitative coding of communication transcripts linked to fake orders revealed:

- 41% contained sexualized or suggestive language
- 36% referenced moral or religious judgment

- 18% were repeat prank submissions using minor identity variations
- 5% contained explicit intimidation or threats

These findings indicate that a substantial proportion of fake orders were not financially motivated but functioned as gendered harassment embedded within stigma narratives.

4.6 Integrated Findings

Triangulation between transactional data and qualitative interviews revealed that fake ordering behavior operated at the intersection of economic disruption and socio-cultural intimidation. Founders reported financial losses associated with COD refusal fees, inventory holding costs, and logistics charges. More significantly, participants described psychological stress and reputational vulnerability resulting from harassment-linked transactions.

The disproportionately low confirmed purchase rate (8.25%) relative to total inquiry volume reflects the combined impact of taboo sensitivity, privacy concerns, and malicious engagement patterns within intimate apparel markets.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the intersection of digital harassment, consumption taboos, and transactional manipulation within a digital-first lingerie startup. The findings reveal that fake or malicious orders constituted a relatively small proportion of total transactions (6.93%), while the majority of orders were successfully completed (78.14%)., indicating that transactional abuse represents a significant operational and psychological burden in taboo-based markets. The results demonstrate that fake orders are not merely instances of conventional e-commerce fraud but are frequently embedded within gendered harassment dynamics and cultural stigma narratives.

Quantitative analysis showed strong associations between cash-on-delivery requests, high-intimacy product categories, and increased likelihood of malicious ordering behavior. Qualitative findings further revealed patterns of moral policing, sexualized mockery, and economic intimidation directed toward female entrepreneurship in intimate apparel markets. The triangulation of transactional data and thematic insights suggests that fake orders function simultaneously as economic sabotage and socio-cultural control mechanisms. Although fake orders represent a minority of transactions, the presence of harassment-motivated orders within taboo consumption markets creates disproportionate psychological and operational impacts.

The study contributes to the literature by integrating digital harassment theory, taboo consumption research, and e-commerce fraud scholarship into a unified analytical framework. It highlights the need for platform-level interventions that recognize harassment-motivated transactions as a distinct category of digital harm. Additionally, the findings underscore the vulnerability of small, women-led ventures operating in culturally sensitive industries.

Future research should extend this inquiry across multiple firms and geographic contexts to enhance generalizability and explore preventative technological safeguards. Addressing transactional harassment requires coordinated efforts among entrepreneurs, payment providers, and digital platforms to ensure equitable participation in online marketplaces.

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