Competitive Algorithmic Targeting and Model Selection[*]

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Abstract

We consider competition between firms that design and use algorithms to target consumers. Firms first choose the design of a supervised learning algorithm in terms of the complexity of the model or the number of variables to accommodate. Each firm then appoints a data analyst to estimate demand for multiple consumer segments by running the chosen design of the algorithm. Based on the estimates, each firm devises a targeting policy to maximize estimated profit. The firms face the general trade-off between bias and variance in model selection. We show that competition may induce firms to choose algorithms with more bias leading to simpler (less flexible) algorithmic choice. This implies that complex (more flexible) algorithms such as deep learning that show greater variance in the estimates are more valuable to firms with greater monopoly power.

Keywords: *targeting, algorithmic competition, model simplicity, data analytics, model selection, supervised learning*

1 Introduction

The digital economy has made available unparalleled amounts of consumer data to firms. Over the past decade firms are increasingly delegating the tasks of reaching and targeting consumers to machine learning algorithms which use large amounts of data on consumer characteristics and behavior. One of the defining characteristics of big data environments is the rich and high dimensional information on consumer characteristics, attitudes, opinions and behaviors. Often the number of variables and aspects of consumer behavior that is present can be comparable to the size of the dataset.

Consequently, in designing targeting algorithms firms have to not only be concerned about predictive accuracy, but also about selecting the most relevant variables to include in the model. Specifically, big data environments might confront the firms with the classic over-fitting problem in statistical learning: The algorithm may use a large number of available consumer predictor variables and more complex functions to map the data onto targeting predictions, but this increases the variance of the estimated predictions. Alternatively, the algorithm can be regularized wherein the more complex functions can be penalized leading to the selection of only the most relevant variables. This would reduce the variance of the estimated predictions but then may introduce bias in the estimates. This paper considers the optimal algorithmic design by firms in competitive markets which trades-off model selection, namely, the selection of the most relevant predictor variables and the predictive accuracy of consumer targeting. In other words, firms face a bias-variance trade=off in algorithmic design. Under competition the success of a firm's algorithmic technology depends not only on its predictive ability and its strategic choice of variables, but also on the choices made by its competitors.

In the model, we represent the algorithmic design problem of model selection and predictive accuracy using the running example of a basic model like the LASSO which adds a cost function to the standard regression analysis and penalizes non-zero predictor variable coefficients. Thus the procedure accommodates both model selection (selecting which variables will enter the prediction algorithm) as well as the estimation of the selected variables' coefficients.

We consider a market in which firms compete by targeting consumers who are heterogeneous in some characteristic. Firms observe consumer characteristics (in their data) but are uncertain about the profitability of different consumer types. They have access to data which they use to estimate the profit. Given the specialized expertise needed to deploy predictive algorithms, firms delegate the task of implementing them to a data analyst. However, the firm makes the strategic design choices on the complexity of the algorithms and the number of dimensions of consumer behavior that the algorithm should consider. To capture this we construct a two stage simultaneous move game. In the first stage prior to getting the data each firm chooses the tuning or regularization parameter for the algorithm. This is the design choice of algorithmic complexity. In the second stage each firm is endowed with a private dataset which is available to its data analyst to run the predictive algorithm to generate the profit estimates. Based on these estimates the firms choose their targeting strategy to maximize profits.

We first analyze the monopoly benchmark and show that it is optimal for the firm to choose zero penalization. In other words, a monopoly firm prefers a more complex or flexible algorithmic design which admits more variance but has lower bias. This enables the firm to achieve greater market coverage in the sense that it allows it to target the more profitable consumer segment with greater likelihood. Then, we proceed to analyze the competitive market and find that it can be an equilibrium for both firms to choose positive penalization which introduces bias while reducing variance. Positive penalization leads to shrinkage of the estimated model involving the selection of fewer predictor variables. In other words, competition favors simpler models for targeting in equilibrium. Under competition the firms have two incentives: i) to correctly target the more profitable segment and ii) avoid competition and the overlap in targeting. Allowing for bias helps to soften competition by reducing the equilibrium overlap in targeting. Overall, the suggestion of our analysis is that more flexible and complex algorithms such as deep learning are likely to be of higher value and be used by firms with greater monopoly power.

2 Related Research

Our paper is broadly related to the emerging research literature which examines strategic interactions and incentives with algorithms. One strand of research tackles the problem of algorithmic design for a principal when faced with rational and strategic agents who can manipulate the information that is provided to the algorithm. For example, Björkegren et al. (2020) considers individuals who may observe the rules of the machine learning algorithms and strategically manipulate their behavior to get desired outcomes. The paper derives an equilibrium estimator that is robust to manipulation given the costs of manipulating different behaviors. Another paper by Eliaz and Spiegler (2019) studies a statistical algorithm faced with an agent who strategically self-reports her personal data and they highlights the role of model selection and the incentive issues that it creates. Our paper examines the model selection problem in a competitive market where firms choose the equilibrium design of their consumer targeting algorithms. Thus in our paper the extent to which firms choose more or less flexible algorithms and the associated trade-off between model selection and predictive accuracy is governed by the equilibrium consumer targeting incentives of the firms.

There is a recent emerging literature on competitive interactions between multiple algorithms. Salant and Cherry (2020) consider statistical inference in games, where each player obtains a small random sample of other players' actions, uses statistical inference to estimate their actions, and chooses an optimal action based on the estimate. Liang (2020) considers games of incomplete information in which the players have data and use algorithms to derive their beliefs. Olea et al. (2019) study a game between agents competing to predict a common variable, and where agents obtain the same data but differ in the algorithms they utilize for prediction. In all these papers, the algorithms under consideration are fixed exogenously. This paper, in contrast, focuses on the strategic choice of algorithms in competitive environments.

There is also a growing literature on algorithmic pricing in repeated oligopoly to understand whether algorithms can consistently learn to charge supra-competitive prices. For example, Calvano et al. (2020) examine firms endowed with Q-learning algorithms in repeated interactions to show that they can robustly learn to cooperate with communicating with each other. Lastly, we contribute to the traditional literature on competitive targeting strategies (e.g., Shaffer and Zhang 1995; Chen et al. 2001; Iyer et al. 2005; Bergemann and Bonatti 2011) by introducing the algorithmic design and decisions on model selection to the consumer targeting strategies of firms.

3 Model Setup

Consider a market consisting of consumers who are heterogeneous in a characteristic $x \in \{1, 0\}$. A fraction ϕ of consumers have $x = 1$ and the remaining $1 - \phi$ fraction have $x = 0$, where $\phi \in (0, 1)$. For example, x_i may represent consumer i's demographics (1 for men and 0 for women), or past consumer behaviors (1 for those who have visited some website and 0 otherwise), etc. This case of a single characteristic offers the simplest setup for the development of the idea.

There are two firms competing for consumers in the market, indexed by $j = 1, 2$. Firms can observe each consumer i's characteristic x_i and decide which type(s) of consumers to target. Each firm has the ability to reach and target $\theta \in (0, 1)$ fraction of the consumer population in the market. Targeting can therefore be also interpreted as a form of costly informative advertising that informs consumers of the existence of the product (Butters 1977). If consumer i is only targeted by firm j, the consumer will only buy from the firm, and the firm earns a monopolistic profit of $\pi_j(x_i)$; on the other hand, if the consumer is targeted by both firms, she will randomly choose a firm to make a purchase, and thus firm j's expected profit is $\pi_j(x_i)/2$. Lastly, if a consumer is not targeted by either of the two firms, she will not make a purchase from the two firms. To focus the exposition on the effects of algorithmic targeting, we have abstracted away the firms' decisions on prices.[1]

Given that x is binary, it is without loss of generality to write down $\pi_j(x)$ as the following linear function,

$$\pi_j(x) = \alpha_j + \beta_j x.$$

Firm j does not know α_j, β_j a priori. We assume a common prior for α_j, β_j, which follow differentiable distribution functions A and B respectively. A is supported in $[\underline{\alpha}, \overline{\alpha}]$, and B is a symmetric distribution around zero, supported in $[-\overline{\beta}, \overline{\beta}]$. α_1, β_1, α_2 and β_2 are independently distributed. The firm is interested in estimating α_j and β_j given the available data. It delegates the task of estimation and prediction to a data analytics department which is equipped with the technology of running prediction and model selection algorithms. Specifically, assume that the analyst uses the technology of running Lasso regressions and that a complete contract between the firm and the data analyst is not possible. Rather, the firm can only specify the tuning parameter of the Lasso regression. Then given the tuning parameter specified by the firm, the analyst runs the Lasso regression on the data to generate an estimate of α_j and β_j.

It is assumed that each firm j and its data analyst have a private access to a dataset with two observations. The l-th observation contains a pair of (x^l, y_j^l) for $l = 0, 1$, where, $x^0 = 0$, $x^1 = 1$ and

$$y_j^l = \pi_j(x^l) + \varepsilon_j^l = \alpha_j + \beta_j x^l + \varepsilon_j^l.$$

The error term, ε_j^l is i.i.d. across j and l and follows a differentiable distribution function G, which is symmetric around zero and supported in $[-\overline{\varepsilon}, \overline{\varepsilon}]$. We further define $\Delta\varepsilon_j \equiv \varepsilon_j^1 - \varepsilon_j^0$, which follows distribution function $\widetilde{G}$, where $\widetilde{G}(e) = \Pr(\varepsilon_j^1 - \varepsilon_j^0 \leq e) = \int_{-\overline{\varepsilon}}^{\overline{\varepsilon}} G(e' + e)dG(e')$. We make the following assumption.

Assumption 1. *$\widetilde{G}'$ is single-peaked; that is, $\widetilde{G}'(e)$ weakly decreases (increases) with e for $e > 0$*

[1] If price discrimination based on targeting outcomes is allowed, we can endogenize prices in a trivial way. If a consumer is targeted by only one firm, the firm sets the monopoly price and still earns a monopoly profit; on the other hand, if a consumer is targeted by two firms, they engage in a Bertrand competition, which drives the price to be the marginal cost and each firm's profit to be zero. This setting will generate qualitatively the same result as in the model without explicit consideration of prices.

($e < 0$).

Based on the data, the analyst runs a Lasso regression, which is represented by the following minimization problem:

$$\left(\hat{\alpha}_j(\lambda_j), \hat{\beta}_j(\lambda_j)\right) = \arg\min_{(a_j, b_j)} \sum_{l=0}^{1} \left(y_j^l - a_j - b_j x^l\right)^2 + \lambda_j |b_j|, \tag{1}$$

where $\lambda_j \geq 0$ is the tuning parameter specified by firm j that measures the degree of penalization on $\hat{\beta}_j(\lambda_j)$. The choice of λ_j indicates the model selection decision of the firm: At the one extreme when $\lambda_j = 0$, this corresponds to the case of a standard ordinary least square (OLS) regression and in this setup this is equivalent to the firm deciding on the maximum model flexibility and choosing all the available predictor variables. In contrast when λ_j is large and the penalization is large, then the model would shrink and have lower flexibility with fewer admitted predictors.

From the corresponding first- and second-order optimality conditions, we can solve the data analyst's estimation problem in equation (1):

$$\hat{\alpha}_j(\lambda_j) = \frac{1}{2}\left(y_j^1 + y_j^0 - \hat{\beta}_j(\lambda_j)\right), \tag{2}$$

$$\hat{\beta}_j(\lambda_j) = \begin{cases} \max\{y_j^1 - y_j^0 - \lambda_j, 0\}, & \text{if } y_j^1 - y_j^0 \geq 0, \\ \min\{y_j^1 - y_j^0 + \lambda_j, 0\}, & \text{otherwise.} \end{cases} \tag{3}$$

The expression of $\hat{\alpha}_j(\lambda_j)$ in equation (2) is the same as the standard OLS estimator, because there is no penalization on $\hat{\alpha}_j(\lambda_j)$. It is assumed that $\underline{\alpha}$ is large enough so that the realization of $\hat{\alpha}_j(\lambda_j)$ is always positive for any $\lambda_j \geq 0$. Formally,

Assumption 2. $\underline{\alpha} > \overline{\beta}/2 + \bar{\varepsilon}$.

This guarantees that firm j always prefers to target as many consumers as possible in the market. That is, the constraint of a total number of θ consumers to target will always be binding so that the firm's targeting decision boils down to which type(s) of consumers to target. To understand the expression of $\hat{\beta}_j(\lambda_j)$ intuitively, notice that if $\lambda_j = 0$, we have $\hat{\beta}_j(\lambda) = y_j^1 - y_j^0$, which is the OLS estimator. When $0 < \lambda_j < |y_j^1 - y_j^0|$, then $\hat{\beta}_j(\lambda_j)$ will have the same sign with $y_j^1 - y_j^0$ but is penalized toward zero. Finally, if $\lambda_j \geq |y_j^1 - y_j^0|$, the penalization is so severe that $\hat{\beta}_j(\lambda_j) = 0$.

We consider a simultaneous-move game between the two firms in two periods. First, each firm j chooses the tuning parameter λ_j, which remains private for the entire game. Second, each firm j is endowed with a private dataset (x^l, y_j^l) for $l = 0, 1$, based on which, firm j's analyst generates the estimates $\hat{\alpha}_j(\lambda_j)$ and $\hat{\beta}_j(\lambda_j)$ by running a Lasso regression. Lastly, each firm devises the targeting strategy to maximize the estimated profit. Figure 1 summarizes the timeline of the game. Before we proceed to analyze the game, we elaborate on the rationale and interpretation of our modeling choices.

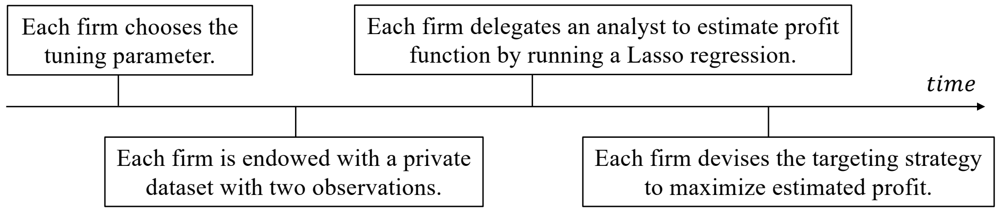

Figure 1: Timeline of the competitive algorithmic targeting game.

First, the reader may wonder that the simple setup above with a data set of just two observations and a binary characteristic ($x \in (1, 0)$) is a far cry from the big data situations confronting firms. Machine learning models are typically high dimensional and complex involving numerous dimensions available in big data. Nevertheless, the model is designed to handle the crucial aspects of the so-called "over-fitting" problem encountered in algorithmic decision making by firms, namely, that the potential number of explanatory variables may be large and comparable to the sample size. So unless there is a method for model selection and shrinkage of the number of explanatory variables there is a risk of over-fitting. For example, an unpenalized regression estimator may perfectly fit the data-set but would have high variance and poor predictive performance compared to an estimator with shrinkage. However, a model with shrinkage may potentially be subject to the introduction of bias in the estimated coefficients. The model with the Lasso regression above with the endogenous choice of the tuning parameter λ_j helps to capture the essence of the trade-offs underlying the over-fitting problem, and in doing so, endogenizes the model selection to the equilibrium incentives of the firms.

Second, in our model, the firms choose the tuning parameters before getting the data. This is also consistent with the statistical learning literature which prescribes that the tuning parameter should not be determined based on the training data per se in order to avoid over-fitting. In practice, multiple batches of data may arrive over time and the firms may dynamically adjust the tuning parameters based on the new data in a naive manner without taking an explicit consideration of the impact of competition. However, notice that the data is an outcome of market competition, and therefore in the long run, firms' trial and error approach will be consistent with our model setup where they choose the tuning parameters to maximize expected profit under competition.

Third, while we use the Lasso regression as a specific estimation procedure, our results are more general in the sense that λ_j determines the general trade-off between bias and variance in any supervised learning method, where higher values of λ_j is associated with lower the variance but higher bias. Therefore, firm j's choice of λ_j can be interpreted as choosing between different statistical learning models that differ in bias-variance trade-off. Thus the problem can be viewed as the strategic choice of the bias-variance trade-off in algorithmic design of the firm's targeted advertising strategy.

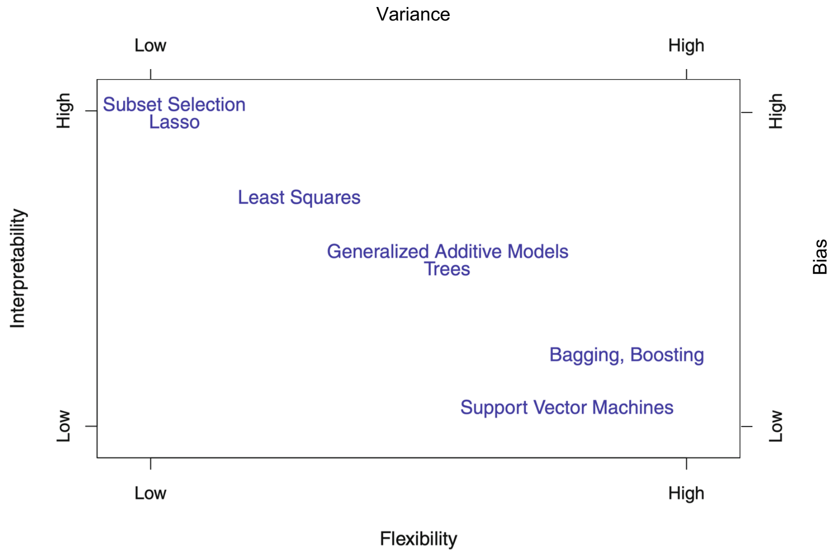

Figure 2: Tradeoff between flexibility and interpretability and tradeoff between bias and variance across different statistical learning methods (excerpted from James et al. (2013) page 25 and adapted).

Furthermore, different statistical models differ in their flexibility and their degree of interpretability, as shown by Figure 2. Typically, those with higher flexibility (and lower interpretability) have lower bias but higher variance. Here we will focus on the comparison between Lasso and OLS, where OLS has higher flexibility and lower bias, while Lasso with some level of regularization has lower flexibility and higher bias and may be more easily interpretable when compared to OLS. Therefore, the choice of λ_j may also represent the relative complexity versus interpretability of the algorithm. Also by this understanding, the Lasso regression does not necessarily need to represent a "machine-learning" algorithm while OLS a traditional algorithm. In fact, in practice, a firm may decide whether to adopt a very flexible machine-learning algorithm like neural networks compared with a less flexible benchmark algorithm, in which case, the neural networks will correspond to OLS in our framework.

Finally, it has been assumed that the firms do not have the analytical capability themselves and rely on data analysts for the estimation procedure; moreover complete contracts are not available between a firm and its analyst. This assumption maps onto common practices in companies where managers rely on analysis by data analytics groups to make strategic decisions. This has two important implications:

1. In the last stage of the game, instead of performing a Bayesian update based on the data to calculate the posterior belief of α_j and β_j, each firm relies on the data analyst to run the Lasso regression on the data to get point estimates of $\hat{\alpha}_j(\lambda_j)$ and $\hat{\beta}_j(\lambda_j)$; correspondingly, instead of maximizing the expected profit based on the posterior belief, each firm makes the targeting decision by maximizing the "estimated profit" based on the estimate, $\hat{\alpha}_j(\lambda_j)$ and $\hat{\beta}_j(\lambda_j)$. The standard rational economic model for this problem would involve fully Bayesian decision making with common priors for all agents. However, as argued below the reality of data based algorithmic decision making in firms does not reconcile with the standard approach as machine learning algorithms like Lasso which are based on the minimization as in (1) are non-bayesian procedures. By separating the estimation problems from the decision-maker (firms), and delegating it to agents (analysts), we are able to rationalize the reality of data-driven decision making in firms. Methodologically this feature of our framework is a representation of algorithmic decision making in firms.[2]

2. Because it is the data analyst instead of the firm that performs the estimation procedure, this implies the minimization of mean squared error instead of profit maximization as the objective in estimating the parameters in the second stage. This makes our results directly comparable with the standard statistical learning literature. This is also consistent with the industry practice due to several considerations. First, minimization of mean squared error is available and used by com-

[2]In an alternative setting in absence of the data analysts, we can assign a Laplace prior distribution to each firm j's prior belief of β_j, with the probability density function $f(\beta_j) = \lambda_j/2 \cdot \exp(-\lambda_j|\beta_j|)$. Then, based on the data (x^l, y_j^l) for $l = 0, 1$ and assuming ε_j^l follows a standard normal distribution, firm j forms a posterior belief of α_j and β_j by Bayes' rule, which can be shown to be equivalent to running the Lasso regression in equation (1) (Tibshirani 1996). However, there are two caveats to this Bayesian approach. First, the tuning parameter λ_j is not firm j's choice but rather, a model primitive that is exogenously given. The endogenous firm choice of λ_j would be equivalent the firm choosing its prior distribution. Second, the point estimates generated by the Lasso regression, $\hat{\alpha}(\lambda_j)$ and $\hat{\beta}(\lambda_j)$ in equations (2) and (3) are mode instead of mean of the posterior belief of α_j and β_j (Hastie et al. 2009). However, to calculate expected profit, we will be mostly concerned with the posterior mean instead of the mode. Due to these two caveats, we do not adopt the Bayesian approach for Lasso regressions.

panies in standard ready-to-use statistical packages while profit maximization requires customization, which could be costly for the firms. Second, information pertaining to the profit function may be scattered in silos within the organization so that even if the data analyst in charge of the estimation task wants to use profit maximization as the objective, she may fail to gather all relevant information.

We begin with the analysis of the monopoly setting with only one firm in the market as the benchmark, and then proceed to study the main model with competition.

4 Monopoly Benchmark

Given only one firm, we will drop the subscript j. We solve the game by backward induction. Suppose the firm decides to target $k \in [0, \phi]$ consumers with $x = 1$ and $\theta - k \in [0, 1 - \phi]$ consumers with $x = 0$, which imply that

$$\max\{0, \theta + \phi - 1\} \leq k \leq \min\{\theta, \phi\}.$$

Given $\hat{\alpha}(\lambda)$ and $\hat{\beta}(\lambda)$, we have the estimated profit from a targeted consumer to be $\hat{\pi}(x) = \hat{\alpha}(\lambda) + \hat{\beta}(\lambda)x$. The firm chooses k to maximize the estimated profit. If $\hat{\beta}(\lambda) > 0$, it is optimal for the firm to target as many consumers with $x = 1$ as possible, so we have the firm's optimal choice of k as $k^* = \min\{\theta, \phi\}$. Similarly, if $\hat{\beta}(\lambda) < 0$, it is optimal for to target as many consumers with $x = 0$ as possible, and thus, $k^* = \max\{0, \theta + \phi - 1\}$. Lastly, if $\hat{\beta}(\lambda) = 0$, the firm is indifferent between the two types of consumers, and it is assumed that it will target $k \in [0, \theta]$ consumers with $x = 1$.

A priori, before obtaining the dataset, the firm chooses λ to maximize the expected profit from all consumers:

$$\begin{aligned}
\Pi(\lambda) =& \mathrm{E}[\theta\alpha + k^*\beta] \\
=& \theta\mathrm{E}[\alpha] + \min\{\theta, \phi\} \Pr(\hat{\beta}(\lambda) > 0)\mathrm{E}[\beta|\hat{\beta}(\lambda) > 0] \\
& + \max\{\theta - (1 - \phi), 0\} \Pr(\hat{\beta}(\lambda) < 0)\mathrm{E}[\beta|\hat{\beta}(\lambda) < 0] \\
& + k \Pr(\hat{\beta}(\lambda) = 0)\mathrm{E}[\beta|\hat{\beta}(\lambda) = 0] \\
=& \theta\mathrm{E}[\alpha] + \min\{\theta, \phi\} \Pr(\beta + \Delta\varepsilon > \lambda)\mathrm{E}[\beta|\beta + \Delta\varepsilon > \lambda] \\
& + \max\{\theta - (1 - \phi), 0\} \Pr(\beta + \Delta\varepsilon < -\lambda)\mathrm{E}[\beta|\beta + \Delta\varepsilon < -\lambda] \\
=& \theta\mathrm{E}[\alpha] + \min\{\theta, \phi\} \int_{-2\bar{\varepsilon}}^{2\bar{\varepsilon}} d\widetilde{G}(e) \int_{\lambda - e}^{\overline{\beta}} b dB(b)
\end{aligned}$$

$$
\begin{aligned}
&+\max\{\theta-(1-\phi),0\}\int_{-2\overline{\varepsilon}}^{2\overline{\varepsilon}} d\widetilde{G}(e)\int_{-\overline{\beta}}^{-\lambda-e} bdB(b)\\
=&\theta \mathrm{E}[\alpha]+\min\{\theta,1-\theta,\phi,1-\phi\}\int_{-2\overline{\varepsilon}}^{2\overline{\varepsilon}} d\widetilde{G}(e)\int_{\lambda-e}^{\overline{\beta}} bdB(b).
\end{aligned}
$$

To get the third equation above, notice that $\hat{\beta}(\lambda) > 0 \Leftrightarrow \beta + \Delta\varepsilon > \lambda$, $\hat{\beta}(\lambda) < 0 \Leftrightarrow \beta + \Delta\varepsilon < -\lambda$, and $\hat{\beta}(\lambda) = 0 \Leftrightarrow |\beta + \Delta\varepsilon| \le \lambda$, which, combining with the fact that B and $\widetilde{G}$ are symmetric distributions around zero, further implies that $\mathrm{E}[\beta|\hat{\beta}(\lambda) = 0] = \mathrm{E}[\beta||\beta + \Delta\varepsilon| \le \lambda] = 0$. Therefore, the choice of k has no impact on firm profit and thus the tie-breaking rule has no bite on the result. To get the last equation, we have again utilized the symmetry of $\widetilde{G}$ and B.

Given $\widetilde{G}'$ is single-peaked, one can show that $\Pi(\lambda)$ decreases with λ, so we have the following proposition.

Proposition 1. *Under monopoly, the firm chooses the tuning parameter $\lambda^M = 0$.*

Proof.

$$
\Pi'(\lambda) = -\min\{\theta, 1-\theta, \phi, 1-\phi\}\int_{-2\overline{\varepsilon}}^{2\overline{\varepsilon}} (\lambda - e)B'(\lambda - e)\widetilde{G}'(e)de.
$$

If $\lambda \ge 2\overline{\varepsilon}$, obviously, $\Pi'(\lambda) \le 0$. Otherwise, if $\lambda < 2\overline{\varepsilon}$, we have

$$
\begin{aligned}
\Pi'(\lambda) \propto& -\left(\int_{-2\overline{\varepsilon}}^{2\lambda-2\overline{\varepsilon}} + \int_{2\lambda-2\overline{\varepsilon}}^{\lambda} + \int_{\lambda}^{2\overline{\varepsilon}}\right)(\lambda - e)B'(\lambda - e)\widetilde{G}'(e)de\\
=& -\int_{-2\overline{\varepsilon}}^{2\lambda-2\overline{\varepsilon}} (\lambda - e)B'(\lambda - e)\widetilde{G}'(e)de - \theta\int_{0}^{2\overline{\varepsilon}-\lambda} zB'(z)\left(\widetilde{G}'(\lambda - z) - \widetilde{G}'(\lambda + z)\right)dz\\
\le& \, 0,
\end{aligned}
$$

where, to get the second equality above, we have changed the variable $e = \lambda - z$ for the second integral from $2\lambda - 2\overline{\varepsilon}$ to λ, and $e = \lambda + z$ for the third integral from λ to $2\overline{\varepsilon}$; moreover, we have utilized $B'(z) = B'(-z)$. To get the last inequality, notice that given $\widetilde{G}'$ being single-peaked and symmetric around zero, we have $\widetilde{G}'(\lambda - z) \ge \widetilde{G}'(\lambda + z)$ for any $z \ge 0$ and $\lambda \ge 0$. To summarize, we have shown that $\Pi'(\lambda) \le 0$, so the optimal λ should be $\lambda^M = 0$. □

Proposition 1 implies that a monopoly firm within the setup of the model prefers the OLS regression to a Lasso. The intuition is that the OLS estimator is unbiased and thus enables the firm to target the more profitable segment correctly in expectation. The qualitative implication is that a monopolist optimally prefers a more flexible or complex algorithmic design which accommodates all the variables (in our case one) and which may risk over-fitting the data. In other words, the monopoly prefers low algorithmic bias but at the expense of increased variance. This result serves as benchmark and motivates our analysis below of the competitive incentives for algorithmic targeting.

5 Competitive Targeting

Now we analyze the main model with competition between two firms and solve for the equilibrium by backward induction.

5.1 Targeting Decision

Given firm j's choice of the tuning parameter as λ_j and its private dataset, the firm's analyst's estimates, $\hat{\alpha}(\lambda_j)$ and $\hat{\beta}(\lambda_j)$ are given by equation (3). Suppose firm j decides to target k_j consumers with $x = 1$ and $\theta - k_j$ consumers with $x = 0$ for $j = 1, 2$. Similarly, we have $\max\{0, \theta + \phi - 1\} \leq k_j \leq \min\{\theta, \phi\}$.

Firm j does not observe the rival's choice of the tuning parameter nor its dataset. Denote firm j's expectation of the other firm's choice of the tuning parameter as λ^*_{-j}. Furthermore, from firm j's perspective, the other firm's equilibrium choice of k^*_{-j} depends on the realization of its private dataset and thus is a random variable, which is denoted as $\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}$. Let's calculate firm j's estimated profit:

$$\begin{aligned}
\Pi_j(k_j, \widetilde{k}^*_{-j}) =& k_j \left(\frac{\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}}{\phi} \cdot \frac{1}{2} + 1 - \frac{\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}}{\phi} \right) \left(\hat{\alpha}_j(\lambda_j) + \hat{\beta}_j(\lambda_j) \right) \\
&+ (\theta - k_j) \left(\frac{\theta - \widetilde{k}^*_{-j}}{1 - \phi} \cdot \frac{1}{2} + 1 - \frac{\theta - \widetilde{k}^*_{-j}}{1 - \phi} \right) \hat{\alpha}_j(\lambda_j) \\
=& \theta \left(1 - \frac{\theta - \widetilde{k}^*_{-j}}{2(1 - \phi)} \right) \hat{\alpha}_j(\lambda_j) \\
&+ k_j \left(\frac{\phi\theta - \widetilde{k}^*_{-j}}{2\phi(1 - \phi)} \hat{\alpha}_j(\lambda_j) + \left(1 - \frac{\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}}{2\phi} \right) \hat{\beta}_j(\lambda_j) \right). \qquad (4)
\end{aligned}$$

To understand the first equation above, notice that firm j targets k_j consumers with $x = 1$, each of whom is also targeted by the other firm $-j$ with probability $\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}/\phi$. If this happens, firm j gets an estimated profit of $\left(\hat{\alpha}_j(\lambda_j) + \hat{\beta}_j(\lambda_j) \right)/2$; otherwise, with probability $1 - \widetilde{k}^*_{-j}/\phi$, this consumer is not targeted by firm $-j$, and firm j's estimated profit is $\left(\hat{\alpha}_j(\lambda_j) + \hat{\beta}_j(\lambda_j)\right)$. Similarly, we can perform the same calculation to get firm j's estimated profit from $\theta - k_j$ consumers with $x = 0$.

Firm j chooses $k_j \in [\max\{0, \theta + \phi - 1\}, \min\{\theta, \phi\}]$ to maximize the expected estimated profit, $\mathrm{E}\big[\Pi_j(k_j, \widetilde{k}^*_{-j})\big] = \Pi_j(k_j, \mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}])$, where we have utilized the observation that $\Pi_j(k_j, \widetilde{k}^*_{-j})$ is linear in $\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}$.[3] Furthermore, notice that $\Pi_j(k_j, \mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}])$ is linear in k_j with

$$\frac{\partial \Pi_j(k_j, \mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}])}{\partial k_j} = \underbrace{\frac{\phi\theta - \mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}]}{2\phi(1-\phi)}\hat{\alpha}_j(\lambda_j)}_{\text{to avoid competition}} + \underbrace{\left(1 - \frac{\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}]}{2\phi}\right)\hat{\beta}_j(\lambda_j)}_{\substack{\text{to target the more} \\ \text{profitable segment}}} \equiv \eta_j(\lambda_j). \tag{5}$$

The expression of $\partial_{k_j}\Pi_j(k_j, \mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}])$ in equation (5) consists of two terms. The second term plays a similar role with the counterpart under the monopoly benchmark—the firm wants to target consumers with $x = 1$ when $\hat{\beta}_j(\lambda_j) > 0$, and $x = 0$ when $\hat{\beta}_j(\lambda_j) < 0$. The first term introduces incentives for the two firms to coordinate so as to avoid competition. Particularly, firm j wants to target consumers with $x = 1$ when $\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}]/\theta < \phi$, that is, when the other firm would target proportionally more consumers with $x = 0$; similarly, firm j wants to target consumers with $x = 0$ when $\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}]/\theta > \phi$, that is, when the other firm would target proportionally more consumers with $x = 1$.

$\Pi_j(k_j, \mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}])$ being linear in k_j immediately implies that the firm's optimal targeting decision takes corner solutions. Specifically, if $\eta_j(\lambda_j) > 0$, firm j should set $k^*_j = \min\{\theta, \phi\}$ to target as many consumers with $x = 1$ as possible; if $\eta_j(\lambda_j) < 0$, the firm should set $k^*_j = \max\{0, \theta + \phi - 1\}$ to target as many consumers with $x = 0$ as possible. Lastly, from an ex-ante perspective before the realization of firm j's private dataset, $\hat{\alpha}_j(\lambda_j)$ follows a continuous distribution and thus as long as $\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}] \neq \phi\theta$, $\eta_j(\lambda_j) = 0$ is a knife-edge case that happens with zero probability; consequently, the tie-breaking rule for which consumer to target at $\eta_j(\lambda_j) = 0$ has no consequence. On the other hand, if $\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}] = \phi\theta$, we have $\eta_j(\lambda_j) = 0 \Leftrightarrow \hat{\beta}_j(\lambda_j) = 0$, at which, we have shown for the monopoly case above, the tie-breaking rule has no consequence either.

[3] Notice that as α_1, β_1, α_2 and β_2 are independently distributed, firm j's private dataset provides no information on α_{-j} and β_{-j}. Therefore, $\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}|\text{firm } j\text{'s dataset}] = \mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}]$.

5.2 Model Selection

Let's first introduce the following notation. From firm, j's perspective, the probability that the other firm $-j$ will set $\widetilde{k}^*_{-j} = \min\{\theta, \phi\}$ is:

$$
\begin{aligned}
p_{-j} \equiv & \Pr\left(\widetilde{k}^*_{-j} = \min\{\theta,\phi\}\right) \\
= & \Pr\left(\frac{\phi\theta - \mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_j]}{2\phi(1-\phi)}\hat{\alpha}_{-j}(\lambda^*_{-j}) + \left(1 - \frac{\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_j]}{2\phi}\right)\hat{\beta}_{-j}(\lambda^*_{-j}) > 0\right) \\
= & \Pr\left(\frac{\phi\theta - (\max\{0,\theta+\phi-1\} + p_j\min\{\theta,1-\theta,\phi,1-\phi\})}{2\phi(1-\phi)}\hat{\alpha}_{-j}(\lambda^*_{-j})\right. \\
& \left. + \left(1 - \frac{\max\{0,\theta+\phi-1\} + p_j\min\{\theta,1-\theta,\phi,1-\phi\}}{2\phi}\right)\hat{\beta}_{-j}(\lambda^*_{-j}) > 0\right), \quad (6)
\end{aligned}
$$

where, to get the last equality in (6), we have utilized that

$$
\begin{aligned}
\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_j] &= p_j\min\{\theta,\phi\} + (1-p_j)\max\{0,\theta+\phi-1\} \\
&= \max\{0,\theta+\phi-1\} + p_j\min\{\theta,1-\theta,\phi,1-\phi\},
\end{aligned}
$$

which is firm j's expectation of firm $-j$'s expectation of firm j's equilibrium choice of k^*_j, and thus $\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_j]$ depends on λ^*_j (via p_j) instead of λ_j. By combining equation (6) for $j = 1, 2$, we should be able to solve p_1 and p_2, which depend on λ^*_1 and λ^*_2 (but not on λ_1 or λ_2).

Next, we determine λ^*_j by calculating firm j's expected profit before obtaining the private dataset, which takes the same form as the firm's estimated profit $\Pi_j(k^*_j, \widetilde{k}^*_{-j})$ in equation(4) except that we need to replace $\hat{\alpha}_j(\lambda_j)$ and $\hat{\beta}_j(\lambda_j)$ by α_j and β_j respectively and then take expectation.

$$
\begin{aligned}
\Pi_j(\lambda_j) \equiv & \mathrm{E}\left[\theta\left(1 - \frac{\theta - \widetilde{k}^*_{-j}}{2(1-\phi)}\right)\alpha_j + k^*_j\left(\frac{\phi\theta - \widetilde{k}^*_{-j}}{2\phi(1-\phi)}\alpha_j + \left(1 - \frac{\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}}{2\phi}\right)\beta_j\right)\right] \\
= & \theta\left(1 - \frac{\theta - \mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}]}{2(1-\phi)}\right)\mathrm{E}[\alpha_j] \\
& + \min\{\theta,\phi\}\Pr(\eta_j(\lambda_j) > 0)\,\mathrm{E}\left[\frac{\phi\theta - \mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}]}{2\phi(1-\phi)}\alpha_j + \left(1 - \frac{\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}]}{2\phi}\right)\beta_j \middle| \eta_j(\lambda_j) > 0\right]
\end{aligned}
$$

$$+\max\{0,\theta+\phi-1\}\Pr\left(\eta_j(\lambda_j)<0\right)\mathrm{E}\left[\frac{\phi\theta-\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}]}{2\phi(1-\phi)}\alpha_j+\left(1-\frac{\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}]}{2\phi}\right)\beta_j\middle|\eta_j(\lambda_j)<0\right]. \tag{7}$$

In the calculation, we have utilized the independence between α_j, β_j and $\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}$. $\Pi_j(\lambda_j)$ depends on λ_j via $\eta_j(\lambda_j)$ and depends on λ^*_{-j} via $\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}$. That is, at the model selection stage, firm j has an expectation of firm $-j$'s choice of the tuning parameter, λ^*_{-j}, which will influence firm $-j$'s targeting decision later and thus in turn influences firm j's expected profit. In expectation, each firm's choice should be consistent with the other firm's expectation:

$$\lambda^*_j=\arg\max_{\lambda_j}\Pi_j(\lambda_j),\ \text{for } j=1,2. \tag{8}$$

To summarize, the equilibrium will be pinned down by the two sets of equations (6) and (8), where we have four equations to determine four variables: p_1, p_2, λ^*_1 and λ^*_2. The main result of this paper is the following proposition.

Proposition 2. *If a pure-strategy equilibrium exists, $\phi\neq 1/2$, $\theta\neq 1/2$, and $\overline{\varepsilon}$ is sufficiently high, then, we must have $\lambda^*_j>0$ for at least one of $j=1,2$.*

Proposition 2 does not provide an explicit condition on when a pure-strategy equilibrium exists, which would require additional assumptions on distribution functions, A, B and G. Nevertheless, notice that if pure-strategy equilibria do not exist, Nash's celebrated theorem immediately implies that there must exist a mixed-strategy equilibrium, where trivially, we must have $\Pr(\lambda^*_j>0)>0$ for at least one of $j=1,2$ (otherwise, we have $\lambda^*_j=0$ for $j=1,2$, which is not a mixed-strategy equilibrium). Therefore, even if a pure-strategy equilibrium does not exist, we will end up with a result of similar spirit with Proposition 2. Let's prove Proposition 2 next. Without loss of generality it is assumed that $\phi\in(0,1/2)$. The other case with $\phi\in(1/2,1)$ can be obtained by symmetry.

Proof. Let's first argue that given any λ^*_1 and λ^*_2, there must exist a solution of (p_1,p_2) to equation (6) for $j=1,2$. In fact, the right-hand side of equation (6) for $j=1,2$ is a continuous map on a convex compact set $[0,1]^2$ to itself, and by Brouwer fixed-point theorem, a fixed point must exist. Next, we calculate $\Pi_j(\lambda_j)$ in equation (7). There are three cases to consider.

(i) $\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}]<\phi\theta$, given which, there are two observations. First, $\hat{\beta}_j(\lambda_j)\geq 0$ implies $\eta_j(\lambda_j)>0$ by the definition of $\eta_j(\lambda_j)$ in equation (5) and $\hat{\alpha}_j(\lambda_j)>0$ implied by Assumption 2. Second, $\hat{\beta}_j(\lambda_j)<0$ implies that $\hat{\beta}_j(\lambda_j)=\beta_j+\Delta\varepsilon_j+\lambda_j$ and $\hat{\alpha}_j(\lambda_j)=\alpha_j+\varepsilon^0_j-\lambda_j/2$

by equations (2) and (3), based on which, we have

$$\eta_j(\lambda_j) < 0 \Leftrightarrow \alpha_j < -C\lambda_j + F(\beta_j, \varepsilon_j^0, \varepsilon_j^1), \text{ where}$$
$$C \equiv \frac{2\phi(1-\phi)}{\left|\phi\theta - \mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}]\right|}\left(1 - \frac{\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}]}{2\phi} - \frac{\phi\theta - \mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}]}{4\phi(1-\phi)}\right),$$
$$F(\beta_j, \varepsilon_j^0, \varepsilon_j^1) \equiv \frac{(1-\phi)(2\phi - \mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}])}{\phi\theta - \mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}]}\left(\beta_j + \varepsilon_j^1 - \varepsilon_j^0\right) + \varepsilon_j^0.$$

C is well defined given $\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}] \neq \phi\theta$. It is easy to show that

$$C > 0 \Leftrightarrow 1 - \frac{\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}]}{2\phi} - \frac{\phi\theta - \mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}]}{4\phi(1-\phi)} > 0 \Leftrightarrow (1-2\phi) + (1-\theta) + \mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}] > 0,$$

which always holds regardless of the comparison between $\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}]$ and $\phi\theta$.

Putting the two observations above together, we have

$$\begin{aligned}
&\Pr\left(\eta_j(\lambda_j) < 0\right)\mathrm{E}\left[\alpha_j|\eta_j(\lambda_j) < 0\right] \\
&= \Pr\left(\eta_j(\lambda_j) < 0 \text{ and } \hat{\beta}_j(\lambda_j) < 0\right)\mathrm{E}\left[\alpha_j\middle|\eta_j(\lambda_j) < 0 \text{ and } \hat{\beta}_j(\lambda_j) < 0\right] \\
&\quad + \Pr\left(\eta_j(\lambda_j) < 0 \text{ and } \hat{\beta}_j(\lambda_j) \geq 0\right)\mathrm{E}\left[\alpha_j\middle|\eta_j(\lambda_j) < 0 \text{ and } \hat{\beta}_j(\lambda_j) \geq 0\right] \\
&= \Pr\left(\alpha_j < -C\lambda_j + F(\beta_j, \varepsilon_j^0, \varepsilon_j^1)\right)\mathrm{E}\left[\alpha_j|\alpha_j < -C\lambda_j + F(\beta_j, \varepsilon_j^0, \varepsilon_j^1)\right] \\
&= \int_{-\overline{\varepsilon}}^{\overline{\varepsilon}}\int_{-\overline{\varepsilon}}^{\overline{\varepsilon}}\int_{-\overline{\beta}}^{\overline{\beta}}\int_{\underline{\alpha}}^{\min\left\{\max\left\{-C\lambda_j + F(\beta_j, \varepsilon_j^0, \varepsilon_j^1), \underline{\alpha}\right\}, \overline{\alpha}\right\}} \alpha_j dA(\alpha_j)dB(\beta_j)dG(\varepsilon_j^0)dG(\varepsilon_j^1),
\end{aligned}$$

where to get the first equality above, we have used the definition of conditional probabilities and the law of total probability. Moreover, we have argued $\Pr\left(\eta_j(\lambda_j) = 0\right) = 0$ above, which implies that,

$$\Pr\left(\eta_j(\lambda_j) > 0\right)\mathrm{E}[\alpha_j|\eta_j(\lambda_j) > 0] = \mathrm{E}[\alpha_j] - \Pr\left(\eta_j(\lambda_j) < 0\right)\mathrm{E}[\alpha_j|\eta_j(\lambda_j) < 0].$$

Similarly, we can write down the expressions for $\Pr(\eta_j(\lambda_j) > 0)\mathrm{E}[\beta_j|\eta_j(\lambda_j) > 0]$ and $\Pr(\eta_j(\lambda_j) < 0)\mathrm{E}[\beta_j|\eta_j(\lambda_j) < 0]$. By substituting these back to $\Pi_j(\lambda_j)$ in equation (7), we find:

$$\Pi_j(\lambda_j) = \theta\left(1 - \frac{\theta - \mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}]}{2(1-\phi)}\right)\mathrm{E}[\alpha_j] + \min\{\theta, \phi\}\left(\frac{\phi\theta - \mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}]}{2\phi(1-\phi)}\mathrm{E}[\alpha_j] + \left(1 - \frac{\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}]}{2\phi}\right)\mathrm{E}[\beta_j]\right)$$

$$
\begin{aligned}
&- \min\{\theta, 1-\theta, \phi, 1-\phi\} \frac{\phi\theta - \mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}]}{2\phi(1-\phi)} \\
&\times \int_{-\overline{\varepsilon}}^{\overline{\varepsilon}} \int_{-\overline{\varepsilon}}^{\overline{\varepsilon}} \int_{-\overline{\beta}}^{\overline{\beta}} \int_{\underline{\alpha}}^{\min\left\{\max\left\{-C\lambda_j + F(\beta_j, \varepsilon_j^0, \varepsilon_j^1), \underline{\alpha}\right\}, \overline{\alpha}\right\}} \alpha_j dA(\alpha_j) dB(\beta_j) dG(\varepsilon_j^0) dG(\varepsilon_j^1) \\
&- \min\{\theta, 1-\theta, \phi, 1-\phi\} \left(1 - \frac{\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}]}{2\phi}\right) \\
&\times \int_{-\overline{\varepsilon}}^{\overline{\varepsilon}} \int_{-\overline{\varepsilon}}^{\overline{\varepsilon}} \int_{-\overline{\beta}}^{\overline{\beta}} \int_{\underline{\alpha}}^{\min\left\{\max\left\{-C\lambda_j + F(\beta_j, \varepsilon_j^0, \varepsilon_j^1), \underline{\alpha}\right\}, \overline{\alpha}\right\}} \beta_j dA(\alpha_j) dB(\beta_j) dG(\varepsilon_j^0) dG(\varepsilon_j^1).
\end{aligned}
$$

Let's compute the derivative of $\Pi_j(\lambda_j)$ at $\lambda_j = 0$:

$$
\begin{aligned}
\Pi_j'(0) =& \min\{\theta, 1-\theta, \phi, 1-\phi\} C \\
&\times \iiint_{\underline{\alpha} \le F(\beta_j, \varepsilon_j^0, \varepsilon_j^1) \le \overline{\alpha}} \left(\frac{\phi\theta - \mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}]}{2\phi(1-\phi)} F(\beta_j, \varepsilon_j^0, \varepsilon_j^1) + \left(1 - \frac{\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}]}{2\phi}\right) \beta_j \right) \\
&\times A'(F(\beta_j, \varepsilon_j^0, \varepsilon_j^1)) dB(\beta_j) dG(\varepsilon_j^0) dG(\varepsilon_j^1) \\
\ge& \min\{\theta, 1-\theta, \phi, 1-\phi\} C \left(\frac{\phi\theta - \mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}]}{2\phi(1-\phi)} \underline{\alpha} - \left(1 - \frac{\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}]}{2\phi}\right) \overline{\beta} \right) \\
&\times \iiint_{\underline{\alpha} \le F(\beta_j, \varepsilon_j^0, \varepsilon_j^1) \le \overline{\alpha}} A'(F(\beta_j, \varepsilon_j^0, \varepsilon_j^1)) dB(\beta_j) dG(\varepsilon_j^0) dG(\varepsilon_j^1).
\end{aligned}
$$

When $\overline{\varepsilon}$ is sufficiently large, Assumption 2 implies that $\underline{\alpha}$ is sufficiently large so that

$$
\frac{\phi\theta - \mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}]}{2\phi(1-\phi)} \underline{\alpha} - \left(1 - \frac{\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}]}{2\phi}\right) \overline{\beta} > 0;
$$

moreover, $F(\beta_j, \varepsilon_j^0, \varepsilon_j^1)$ by definition is symmetrically distributed around zero and when $\overline{\varepsilon}$ is sufficiently large, $\Pr(\underline{\alpha} \le F(\beta_j, \varepsilon_j^0, \varepsilon_j^1) \le \overline{\alpha}) > 0$. Therefore, we have $\Pi_j'(0) > 0$, which implies that $\lambda_j^* > 0$.

(ii) $\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}^*_{-j}] > \phi\theta$, given which, there are similarly two observations. First, $\hat{\beta}_j(\lambda_j) \le 0$ implies $\eta_j(\lambda_j) < 0$. Second, $\hat{\beta}_j(\lambda_j) > 0$ implies that $\hat{\beta}_j(\lambda_j) = \beta_j + \Delta\varepsilon_j - \lambda_j$ and $\hat{\alpha}_j(\lambda_j) = \alpha_j + \varepsilon_j^0 + \lambda_j/2$ by equations (2) and (3), based on which, we have

$$
\eta_j(\lambda_j) > 0 \Leftrightarrow \alpha_j < -C\lambda_j + F(\beta_j, \varepsilon_j^0, \varepsilon_j^1),
$$

the same as that in case (i). Putting the two observations together, we have that

$$
\Pr\left(\eta_j(\lambda_j) > 0\right) \mathrm{E}\left[\alpha_j | \eta_j(\lambda_j) > 0\right]
$$

$$
\begin{aligned}
&= \Pr\left(-C\lambda_j + F(\beta_j, \varepsilon_j^0, \varepsilon_j^1)\right) \mathrm{E}\left[\alpha_j \middle| -C\lambda_j + F(\beta_j, \varepsilon_j^0, \varepsilon_j^1)\right] \\
&= \int_{-\overline{\varepsilon}}^{\overline{\varepsilon}} \int_{-\overline{\varepsilon}}^{\overline{\varepsilon}} \int_{-\overline{\beta}}^{\overline{\beta}} \int_{\underline{\alpha}}^{\min\left\{\max\left\{-C\lambda_j + F(\beta_j, \varepsilon_j^0, \varepsilon_j^1), \underline{\alpha}\right\}, \overline{\alpha}\right\}} \alpha_j dA(\alpha_j) dB(\beta_j) dG(\varepsilon_j^0) dG(\varepsilon_j^1), \\
&\Pr\left(\eta_j(\lambda_j) < 0\right) \mathrm{E}[\alpha_j | \eta_j(\lambda_j) < 0] = \mathrm{E}[\alpha_j] - \Pr\left(\eta_j(\lambda_j) > 0\right) \mathrm{E}[\alpha_j | \eta_j(\lambda_j) > 0].
\end{aligned}
$$

Similarly, we can write down $\Pi_j(\lambda_j)$:

$$
\begin{aligned}
\Pi_j(\lambda_j) =& \theta \left(1 - \frac{\theta - \mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}_{-j}^*]}{2(1-\phi)}\right) \mathrm{E}[\alpha_j] + \min\{\theta, \phi\} \left(\frac{\phi\theta - \mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}_{-j}^*]}{2\phi(1-\phi)} \mathrm{E}[\alpha_j] + \left(1 - \frac{\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}_{-j}^*]}{2\phi}\right) \mathrm{E}[\beta_j]\right) \\
&- \min\{\theta, 1-\theta, \phi, 1-\phi\} \frac{\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}_{-j}^*] - \phi\theta}{2\phi(1-\phi)} \\
&\times \int_{-\overline{\varepsilon}}^{\overline{\varepsilon}} \int_{-\overline{\varepsilon}}^{\overline{\varepsilon}} \int_{-\overline{\beta}}^{\overline{\beta}} \int_{\underline{\alpha}}^{\min\left\{\max\left\{-C\lambda_j + F(\beta_j, \varepsilon_j^0, \varepsilon_j^1), \underline{\alpha}\right\}, \overline{\alpha}\right\}} \alpha_j dA(\alpha_j) dB(\beta_j) dG(\varepsilon_j^0) dG(\varepsilon_j^1) \\
&+ \min\{\theta, 1-\theta, \phi, 1-\phi\} \left(1 - \frac{\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}_{-j}^*]}{2\phi}\right) \\
&\times \int_{-\overline{\varepsilon}}^{\overline{\varepsilon}} \int_{-\overline{\varepsilon}}^{\overline{\varepsilon}} \int_{-\overline{\beta}}^{\overline{\beta}} \int_{\underline{\alpha}}^{\min\left\{\max\left\{-C\lambda_j + F(\beta_j, \varepsilon_j^0, \varepsilon_j^1), \underline{\alpha}\right\}, \overline{\alpha}\right\}} \beta_j dA(\alpha_j) dB(\beta_j) dG(\varepsilon_j^0) dG(\varepsilon_j^1).
\end{aligned}
$$

Similarly, we can compute:

$$
\begin{aligned}
\Pi_j'(0) =& \min\{\theta, 1-\theta, \phi, 1-\phi\} C \\
&\times \iiint_{\underline{\alpha} \le F(\beta_j, \varepsilon_j^0, \varepsilon_j^1) \le \overline{\alpha}} \left(\frac{\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}_{-j}^*] - \phi\theta}{2\phi(1-\phi)} F(\beta_j, \varepsilon_j^0, \varepsilon_j^1) - \left(1 - \frac{\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}_{-j}^*]}{2\phi}\right) \beta_j\right) \\
&\times A'(F(\beta_j, \varepsilon_j^0, \varepsilon_j^1)) dB(\beta_j) dG(\varepsilon_j^0) dG(\varepsilon_j^1) \\
\ge& \min\{\theta, 1-\theta, \phi, 1-\phi\} C \left(\frac{\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}_{-j}^*] - \phi\theta}{2\phi(1-\phi)} \underline{\alpha} - \left(1 - \frac{\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}_{-j}^*]}{2\phi}\right) \overline{\beta}\right) \\
&\times \iiint_{\underline{\alpha} \le F(\beta_j, \varepsilon_j^0, \varepsilon_j^1) \le \overline{\alpha}} A'(F(\beta_j, \varepsilon_j^0, \varepsilon_j^1)) dB(\beta_j) dG(\varepsilon_j^0) dG(\varepsilon_j^1).
\end{aligned}
$$

The same argument as in Case (ii) shows that when $\overline{\varepsilon}$ is sufficiently large, $\lambda_j^* > 0$.

(iii) $\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}_{-j}^*] = \phi\theta$. If $\lambda_j^* > 0$, we have proved the proposition; otherwise, suppose $\lambda_j^* = 0$. We have $p^j = \Pr(\hat{\beta}_j(\lambda_j^*) > 0) = \Pr\left(\beta_j + \Delta\varepsilon_j > 0\right) = 1/2$. Correspondingly,

$$
\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}_j^*] = \frac{1}{2}\left(\min\{\theta, \phi\} + \max\{0, \theta + \phi - 1\}\right) \neq \theta\phi.
$$

In fact, for $0 < \phi < 1/2$, $\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}_j^*] = \theta\phi$ if and only if $\theta = 0, 1/2, 1$, which we have excluded by assumption. Therefore, it must be that $\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}_j^*] < \theta\phi$ or $\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}_j^*] > \theta\phi$. In either case, we can repeat the proof above with j and $-j$ switched to conclude that $\lambda_{-j}^* > 0$. □

Compared with Proposition 1, Proposition 2 shows that competition drives at least one firm to choose positive penalization. In other words, competition favors simple algorithmic design that reduces variance but introduces bias. We provide some intuition for this result.

Because the two consumer segments are of different sizes (by the assumption that $\phi \neq 1/2$), the one of a smaller size will be ex-ante more competitive because when both firms target this segment, there is a higher expected overlap of targeted consumers. Compared with the OLS estimator which induces a firm to concentrate targeting in one consumer segment (the one with higher estimated profitability), the penalization in the Lasso regression tends to induce the firm to target all consumers from the two segment more evenly. When $\theta = 1/2$, OLS and Lasso will generate the same targeting outcome, because it amounts to the same 50% targeting probability on every consumer regardless of whether the firm targets two consumer segments evenly or targets all consumers evenly. Therefore, as long as $\theta \neq 1/2$, the penalization in Lasso regression will reduce a firm's concentration of targeting on one particular consumer segment, which reduces the expected overlap between the two firms' targeted consumers and thus softens competition. This can also be seen from equation (5), where a higher λ_j penalizes $\hat{\beta}_j(\lambda_j)$ towards zero and consequently, the competition avoidance incentive as captured by $(\phi\theta - \mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}_{-j}^*])/(2\phi(1-\phi))$ plays a relatively bigger impact on $\eta_j(\lambda_j)$, the determinant of firm j's targeting decision. In fact, the competition avoidance incentive for firm j is present whenever $\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}_{-j}^*] \neq \phi\theta$—that is, when the competitor does not target all consumers equally. In the proof of Proposition 2 above, we have shown that as long as $\mathrm{E}[\widetilde{k}_{-j}^*] \neq \phi\theta$, firm j will choose $\lambda_j^* > 0$ to lessen competition.

Lastly, we also require $\overline{\varepsilon}$ to be sufficiently high. With enough noises in the data, the risk of over-fitting becomes consequential. Moreover, a higher $\overline{\varepsilon}$ implies a higher $\underline{\alpha}$ by Assumption 2, which translates into a higher incentive to avoid competition by equation (5). Both considerations make a positive penalization in the Lasso regression more desirable.

Given our symmetric setup, it is natural to consider the symmetric equilibrium with $\lambda_1^* = \lambda_2^* = \lambda^*$. The corollary below follows from Proposition 2 immediately.

Corollary 1. *If a symmetric pure-strategy equilibrium exists, $\phi \neq 1/2$, $\theta \neq 1/2$ and $\overline{\varepsilon}$ is sufficiently high, then, we must have $\lambda^* > 0$.*

6 Conclusion

In this paper, we examine how competitive firms employ algorithms to estimate demand and based on the estimates, make strategic consumer targeting decisions so as to maximize expected profit. Different algorithms essentially mean different model selections, which involve different bias and variance trade-offs under the general framework of supervised learning. This bias-variance trade-off also implies the extent of model flexibility that the firm would like to optimally use for targeting. From this perspective, our paper essentially studies firms' competition with model selection for algorithmic targeting and explores how competition moderates individual firms' bias-variance trade-off choices through the degree of complexity of the algorithm that is adopted. The central finding is that competition favors simpler models that reduce variance but introduce bias. There is therefore the suggestion that more flexible algorithms like deep learning are more likely to be valuable for firms with monopoly power.

We focus on one specific decision of the firms—targeting. Historically, this is mostly done through market research. Recently, partly thanks to large advertising platforms such as Facebook, there is an ongoing trend that targeting decisions have been automated by algorithms in real time based on rich customer behavioral data on browsing, purchase, sharing, observed social connections, etc. Moreover, it has been the focus of several recent studies to develop new research designs that combine machine learning algorithms and randomized experiments for targeting (e.g., Hitsch and Misra 2018; Simester et al. 2020; Rafieian and Yoganarasimhan 2021). Therefore, we consider targeting to be a natural starting point to study algorithmic competition. Building on this research, it would be interesting to explore a general class of strategic decisions of the firms, such as pricing, advertising and product design, etc. The implications may depend on whether the firms' decisions are strategic substitutes or complements (Bulow et al. 1985).

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