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Dean S. Karlan
Yale University

Jonathan Zinman
Dartmouth College

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Credit Elasticities in Less-Developed Economies: Implications for Microfinance

By DEAN S. KARLAN AND JONATHAN ZINMAN*

Policymakers often prescribe that microfinance institutions increase interest rates to eliminate their reliance on subsidies. This strategy makes sense if the poor are rate insensitive: then microlenders increase profitability (or achieve sustainability) without reducing the poor's access to credit. We test the assumption of price inelastic demand using randomized trials conducted by a consumer lender in South Africa. The demand curves are downward sloping, and steeper for price increases relative to the lender's standard rates. We also find that loan size is far more responsive to changes in loan maturity than to changes in interest rates, which is consistent with binding liquidity constraints. (JEL G21, O16)

Microcredit fights poverty by expanding access to credit. Some microfinance institutions (MFIs) focus on maximizing profits, and do so while lending to the poor. Others seek to maximize access for the poor subject to a budget constraint. Regardless, nearly all MFIs face pressure from policymakers, donors, and investors to eliminate their reliance on subsidies.

Economic modeling, policy, and practice suggest that loan pricing is critically related to reliance on subsidies, and to the functioning of credit markets more generally. Yet existing research offers little evidence on interest rate sensitivities in MFI target markets,¹ and little methodological guidance on how to derive optimal rates.² Instead, MFIs and policymakers rely heavily on descriptive evidence and intuition. Policymakers often presume that the poor are largely insensitive to interest rates, and then prescribe that MFIs should increase rates without fear of reducing

* Karlan: Department of Economics, Yale University, PO Box 208209, New Haven, CT 06520 (e-mail: dean.karlan@yale.edu); Zinman: Department of Economics, Dartmouth College, HB6106, Hanover, NH 03755 (e-mail: jzinman@dartmouth.edu). Previous title: "Elasticities of Demand for Consumer Credit." Thanks to the Lender for financing the loans and generously providing us the data from their experiment. Thanks to the National Science Foundation (SES-0424067 and CAREER SES-0547898), BASIS/USAID (CRSP), and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for funding research expenses. Most of this paper was completed while Zinman was at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York (FRBNY); he thanks the FRBNY for research support. Views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, the Federal Reserve System, the National Science Foundation, or USAID. Thanks to Mary Arends-Kuenning, Abhijit Banerjee, Rajeev Dehejia, Jonathan Morduch, Doug Staiger, Chris Udry, two anonymous referees, and the editor for comments on the paper. Thanks to Jeff Arnold, Jonathan Bauchet, Tomoko Harigaya, and Karen Lyons for excellent research assistance.

¹ The most comparable study is Rajeev Dehejia, Heather Montgomery, and Jonathan Morduch (2005), which exploits quasi-experimental variation from a pricing policy change by a Bangladeshi nonprofit MFI, and finds full-sample elasticities ranging from -0.73 to unity. There has been similarly little work on estimating the price elasticity of demand for credit in developed countries. Exceptions include Rob Alessie, Stefan Hochguertel, and Guglielmo Weber (2005) on consumer loan borrowers in Italy; David B. Gross and Nicholas S. Souleles (2002) on credit card holders in the United States; and Orazio P. Attanasio, Pinelopi K. Goldberg, and Ekaterini Kyriazidou (forthcoming) on car loan borrowers in the United States. Each of these studies exploits quasi-experimental variation from government or business policy rules.

² Randomized controlled trials are standard practice among many US credit card companies, but the results of these experiments are rarely made public (George S. Day 2003). Lawrence M. Ausubel (1999) is the only exception we know of, and it focuses largely on repayment effects, not on net profits and optimal pricing implications.

access.³ Thus, the assumption of price inelastic demand for credit by microcredit clients has fueled support for strategies where MFIs attempt to wean off subsidies by increasing interest rates.

Here, we test hypotheses of inelastic demand for microcredit using data from a field experiment in South Africa. A for-profit South African lender in a high-risk consumer loan market worked with us to randomize individual interest rate direct mail offers to over 50,000 former clients, conditional on the client's prior rate. We find demand curves with respect to price that are gently downward sloping throughout a wide range of rates below the Lender's standard ones. But demand sensitivity rises sharply at prices above the Lender's standard rates. Higher rates also reduce repayment. Taken together, the results suggest that the Lender's standard rates were (short-run) profit-maximizing. Loan pricing can also be used for targeting if price elasticities are heterogeneous, and our results suggest that price cuts produced more borrowing by poor females in our sample, at a cost of few foregone profits.

Loan price is not the only contracting parameter that might affect demand, and hence MFI profits and targeting. Liquidity constrained individuals may respond to *maturity* as well, since longer maturities reduce monthly payments and thereby improve cash flows. So maturity may be a critical policy parameter for MFIs, and may actually be more influential than price in determining demand for credit if individuals are more concerned with monthly cash flows than interest expenses. Yet despite its potential importance, maturity has been largely ignored by practitioners, policymakers, and academics.⁴

We examine maturity elasticities of demand using exogenous variation in maturities engineered by a randomly assigned, nonbinding example maturity (four, six, or twelve months) presented in some direct mailers. The randomly assigned example maturity powerfully predicts the actual maturity chosen, and hence provides an instrumental variable. We find that loan size is far more responsive to instrumented changes in maturity than to changes in the interest rate, which is consistent with binding liquidity constraints. We also find some evidence that only relatively poor borrowers are sensitive to maturity, whereas for price sensitivity we do not find such heterogeneity.⁵ A practical implication is that some MFIs should consider using maturity rather than (or in addition to) price to balance profitability and targeting goals. But much work remains to be done: we do not have the sample size to estimate the impacts of extending maturities on repayment (and hence on profits), and more generally of course it is not clear whether our parameter estimates apply to other populations and markets of interest.

In particular, our experimental design, its implementation using direct mail, and the market setting raise several important external validity questions. Do our results apply to nonborrowers? We present some *within sample* results suggesting that they do, but our sample of prior borrowers sheds little direct light on the elasticities of the truly marginal (first-time) borrowers who are often the targets of MFI efforts to expand access. Do elasticities to direct mail solicitations apply to other loan offer technologies? Not necessarily. But our data and results suggest that most

³ See Beatrice Armendariz de Aghion and Morduch (2005) for an overview. A common argument is that many poor individuals borrow from moneylenders at very high rates and thus must not be too price sensitive. There are several problems with this argument, discussed in detail in Morduch (2000). Individuals may be sensitive on the intensive margin, with respect to loan size. Individuals may be sensitive on the extensive margin, with respect to the willingness to incur the additional transaction costs associated with borrowing from an MFI, and with respect to the frequency of borrowing. Many individuals targeted by MFIs do *not* borrow from moneylenders, or do so infrequently (hence their marginal cost of moneylender borrowing is high, but the total cost is low). And increasing numbers of MFIs face some competition from other institutions offering rates substantially below the those of the moneylenders. See also Robert Peck Christen (1997) and Richard Rosenberg (2002) for more details.

⁴ An important exception is Attanasio, Goldberg, and Kyriazidou (forthcoming), which shows formally that liquidity constrained consumers may borrow more when offered longer maturities.

⁵ Our results on maturity elasticities parallel those found in Attanasio et al. on US car loan borrowers during the 1984–1995 period. See also F. Thomas Juster and Robert P. Shay (1964).

clients did read the letter, and that readers and nonreaders have similar elasticities. Lastly, do results from a market served by for-profit firms offering individual liability consumer loans apply to more “traditional” microcredit settings where nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) target female microentrepreneurs with joint liability loans? Not necessarily, although it bears mentioning that our setting is becoming increasingly representative: many for-profit lenders are entering MFI markets with consumer products, adding to the growing number of MFIs that do not target on demographics or use of funds.⁶

In the end, of course, our results are more provocative than definitive. Our primary contribution is methodological. Randomized-controlled trials can and should be used to help MFIs pin down their optimal contracting strategies. The findings and methods in this paper highlight some specific directions for future research, policy, and practice.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section I describes the Lender and its market. Section II details our experimental design and implementation. Section III maps the experiment into our empirical strategy. Section IV presents our main results on price elasticities. Section V calculates the Lender’s profit-maximizing pricing strategy and illustrates how pricing could be used to expand and target access. Section VI presents our estimates of maturity elasticities. Section VII concludes with some directions for related research that would further inform credit market practice and policy in developing countries.

I. The Market Setting

A. Overview

Our cooperating consumer Lender operated for over 20 years as one of the largest, most profitable micro-lenders in South Africa.⁷ It did not have an objective of expanding access or targeting per se, but did have a client base that was almost entirely working poor. The Lender competed in a “cash loan” industry segment that offers small, high-interest, short-term, uncollateralized credit with fixed monthly repayment schedules to the working poor population. Aggregate outstanding loans in the cash loan market segment equal about 38 percent of nonmortgage consumer debt.⁸ Estimates of the proportion of working-age population currently borrowing in the cash loan market range from below 5 percent to around 10 percent.⁹

The next subsection provides additional details on the market setting for the interested reader. Subsection C then compares the cash loan market to other microcredit markets.

B. Additional Details on Market Participants, Products, and Regulation

Cash loan borrowers generally lack the credit history and/or collateralizable wealth needed to borrow from traditional institutional sources such as commercial banks. Data on how borrowers use the loans is scarce, since lenders usually follow the “no questions asked” policy common to consumption loan markets. The available data suggest a range of consumption smoothing and

⁶ This shift away from targeting is motivated in part by evidence that many households use “entrepreneurial” credit for consumption purposes (Nidhiya Menon 2003).

⁷ The Lender was merged into a bank holding company in 2005 and no longer exists as a distinct entity.

⁸ Cash loan disbursements totaled approximately 2.6 percent of all household consumption and 4 percent of all household debt outstanding in 2005 (sources: reports by the Department of Trade and Industry, Micro Finance Regulatory Council, and South African Reserve Bank).

⁹ Sources: reports by Finscope South Africa, and the Micro Finance Regulatory Council. We were not able to find data on the income or consumption of a representative sample of cash loan borrowers. We do observe income in our sample of cash loan borrowers; if our borrowers are representative, then cash loan borrowers account for about 11 percent of aggregate annual income in South Africa.

investment uses, including food, clothing, transport, education, housing, and paying off other debt.¹⁰

Cash loan sizes tend to be small relative to the fixed costs of underwriting and monitoring them, but substantial relative to a typical borrower's income. For example, the Lender's median loan size of 1,000 rand (\$150) was 32 percent of its median borrower's gross monthly income (US\$1 \approx 7 rand during our experiment). Cash lenders focusing on the highest-risk market segment typically make one-month maturity loans at 30 percent interest *per month*. Informal sector moneylenders charge 30–100 percent per month. Lenders targeting lower risk segments charge as little as 3 percent per month and offer longer maturities (12 + months).¹¹

Our cooperating Lender's product offerings were somewhat differentiated from those of competitors. It had a "medium-maturity" product niche, with a 90 percent concentration of four-month loans (Table 1A), and longer loan terms of 6, 12, and 18 months available to long-term clients with good repayment records.¹² Most other cash lenders focus on 1-month or 12+-month loans. The Lender's standard 4-month rates, absent this experiment, ranged from 7.75 percent to 11.75 percent *per month* depending on assessed credit risk, with 75 percent of clients in the high-risk (11.75 percent) category. These are "add-on" rates, where interest is charged up front over the original principal balance, rather than over the declining balance. The implied annual percentage rate (APR) of the modal loan is 200 percent. The Lender did not pursue collection or collateralization strategies such as direct debit from paychecks, or physically keeping bank books and ATM cards of clients, like some other lenders in this market. The Lender's pricing was transparent and linear, with no surcharges, application fees, or insurance premiums.

Per standard practice in the cash loan market, the Lender's underwriting and transactions were almost always conducted in person, in one of over 100 branches. Its risk assessment technology combined centralized credit scoring with decentralized loan officer discretion. Rejection was common for new applicants (50 percent) but less so for clients who had repaid successfully in the past (14 percent). Reasons for rejection included unconfirmed employment, suspicion of fraud, credit rating, and excessive debt burden.

Borrowers had several incentives to repay, despite facing high interest rates. Carrots included decreasing prices and increasing future loan sizes following good repayment behavior. Sticks included reporting to credit bureaus, frequent phone calls from collection agents, court summons, and wage garnishments. Repeat borrowers had default rates of about 15 percent, and first-time borrowers defaulted twice as often.

Policymakers and regulators encouraged the development of the cash loan market as a less expensive substitute for traditional "informal sector" moneylenders. Since deregulation of the usury ceiling in 1992, cash lenders have been regulated by the Micro Finance Regulatory Council (MFRC). Regulation required that monthly repayment could not exceed a certain proportion of monthly income, but no interest rate ceilings existed at the time of this experiment.

¹⁰ Sources: data of questionable quality from this experiment (from a survey administered to a sample of borrowers following finalization of the loan contract); household survey data from other studies on different samples of cash loan market borrowers (FinScope 2004; Karlan and Zinman 2008a).

¹¹ There is essentially no difference between these nominal rates and corresponding real rates. For instance, South African inflation was 10.2 percent *per year* from March 2002–March 2003, and 0.4 percent *per year* from March 2003–March 2004.

¹² Market research conducted by the Lender, where employees or contractors posing as prospective applicants collected information from potential competitors on the range of loan terms offered, confirmed this niche. These exercises turned up only one other firm offering a "medium-maturity" at a comparable price (three-month at 10.19 percent), and this firm (unlike our Lender) required documentation of a bank account. ECI Africa and IRIS (2005) find a lack of competition in the cash loan market. We have some credit bureau data on individual borrowing from other formal sector lenders (to go along with our administrative data on borrowing from the Lender), which we consider in Sections IVB and VA.

TABLE 1—SUMMARY STATISTICS

| | Sample: | All (1) | Applied (2) | Borrowed (3) | Eligible for maturity suggestion randomization (4) |
|---|---------|----------------------|------------------------|------------------------|--|
| <i>Panel A: Experimental variables</i> | | | | | |
| Interest rate | | 8.029 (2.472) | 7.410 (2.371) | 7.345 (2.354) | 6.440 (1.721) |
| Dynamic repayment incentive: rate valid for one year | | 0.425 (0.494) | 0.466 (0.499) | 0.470 (0.499) | 0.440 (0.496) |
| Example loan term = 4 months | | 0.506 (0.500) | 0.520 (0.500) | 0.522 (0.500) | 0.506 (0.500) |
| Example loan term = 6 months | | 0.254 (0.435) | 0.239 (0.427) | 0.233 (0.423) | 0.254 (0.435) |
| Example loan term = 12 months | | 0.241 (0.428) | 0.241 (0.428) | 0.245 (0.431) | 0.241 (0.428) |
| Borrowed | | 0.072 (0.259) | 0.856 (0.351) | 1.000 | 0.163 (0.370) |
| Applied | | 0.084 (0.278) | 1.000 | 1.000 | 0.176 (0.381) |
| Loan size | | 103.351 (506.430) | 1224.956 (1290.813) | 1430.744 (1285.177) | 269.025 (880.112) |
| <i>Panel B: Demographic characteristics</i> | | | | | |
| Female | | 0.476 (0.499) | 0.487 (0.500) | 0.487 (0.500) | 0.809 (0.997) |
| Married | | 0.439 (0.496) | 0.450 (0.498) | 0.457 (0.498) | 0.471 (0.500) |
| Age | | 41.174 (11.594) | 40.819 (11.235) | 40.843 (11.260) | 42.206 (10.966) |
| More educated | | 0.388 (0.487) | 0.409 (0.492) | 0.416 (0.493) | 0.401 (0.490) |
| Rural | | 0.158 (0.365) | 0.152 (0.359) | 0.149 (0.356) | 0.194 (0.396) |
| Number of dependents | | 1.547 (1.732) | 1.835 (1.742) | 1.866 (1.739) | 2.220 (1.748) |
| Gross monthly income (000s of rand) | | 3.410 (20.496) | 3.372 (2.115) | 3.405 (2.164) | 3.549 (4.709) |
| Number of loans with the lender | | 4.200 (3.850) | 4.820 (4.233) | 4.790 (4.231) | 5.960 (4.184) |
| Number of months since last loan with lender | | 10.640 (6.823) | 6.720 (6.177) | 6.305 (5.980) | 2.911 (1.578) |
| Low risk | | 0.119 (0.324) | 0.252 (0.434) | 0.273 (0.445) | 0.559 (0.497) |
| Medium risk | | 0.091 (0.288) | 0.188 (0.391) | 0.192 (0.394) | 0.441 (0.497) |
| High risk | | 0.790 (0.408) | 0.560 (0.497) | 0.535 (0.500) | |
| Number of observations | | 53,810 | 4,540 | 3,887 | 3,096 |

Notes: Standard deviations reported in parentheses. “More educated” equals one if the number of years of education is in highest 40 percentiles. Gross monthly income was reported by the client at time of last loan. Sample size varies slightly (between 52,594 and 53,180) for demographic variables based on data availability.

C. The Cash Loan Market versus “Traditional” Microcredit

The cash loan market has important differences and similarities with “traditional” microcredit (e.g., the Grameen Bank, or government or nonprofit lending programs). In contrast to our setting, most microcredit has been delivered by lenders with explicit social missions that target groups of female entrepreneurs, sometimes in group settings. On the other hand, the industrial

organization of microcredit is trending steadily in the direction of the for-profit, more competitive delivery of individual credit that characterizes the cash loan market (David Porteous 2003; Marguerite Robinson 2001). This push is happening both from the bottom up (nonprofits converting to for-profits) and from the top down (for-profits expanding into microcredit segments).

II. Experimental Design and Implementation

We identify demand curves for consumer credit by randomizing both the interest rate offered to each of more than 50,000 past clients on a direct mail solicitation, and the maturity of an example loan shown on the offer letter (Figure 1 shows a sample letter).¹³ This section details the experimental design and implementation, and validates the integrity of the random assignments using several statistical tests. We begin with an overview for readers who may wish to skip the finer details covered in IIB through IIE.

A. Design Overview

First, the Lender randomized the interest rate offered in “pre-qualified,” limited-time offers that were mailed to 58,168 former clients with good repayment histories. Most of the offers were at relatively low rates. Clients eligible for maturities longer than four months also received a randomized example of either a four-, six-, or twelve-month loan. Clients wishing to borrow at the offer rate then went to a branch to apply, per the Lender’s standard operations. Final credit approval (i.e., the Lender’s decision on whether to offer a loan after updating the client’s information) and maximum loan size and maturity supplied were orthogonal to the experimental interest rate by construction. Figure 2 shows the experimental operations, step by step.

B. Sample Frame

The sample frame consisted of all individuals from 86 predominantly urban branches who had borrowed from the Lender within the past 24 months, were in good standing, and did not currently have a loan from the Lender as of 30 days prior to the mailer. The experiment was implemented in three mailer “waves” of mailer/start dates that grouped branches geographically, for logistical reasons.¹⁴ We pilot-tested in three branches during July 2003 (wave 1), and then expanded the experiment to the remaining 83 branches in two additional waves that started with mailers sent in September 2003 (wave 2) and October 2003 (wave 3).¹⁵

Table 1 presents summary statistics on the total sample frame (column 1), those who applied (column 2), those who borrowed (column 3), and those who were eligible for the randomized maturity suggestion (column 4).

C. Interest Rate Randomization

The offer rate randomization was stratified by the client’s pre-approved risk category because risk determined the loan price under standard operations. The standard schedule for four-month loans was: low-risk = 7.75 percent per *month*; medium-risk = 9.75 percent; high-risk = 11.75

¹³ Thus, we estimate elasticities for a particular sample (prior clients of this particular Lender), using a particular solicitation technology (direct mail). We discuss the related external validity issues in Sections VA and VII.

¹⁴ The sample frame includes branches and clients from four of South Africa’s nine provinces: Kwazulu-Natal, Eastern Cape, Western Cape, and Gauteng.

¹⁵ See Appendix 1 for a reconciliation of the sample frame used here and in two companion papers.

the trusted way to borrow cash

30 October 2003

Shop 8
12 Market Street
Krugersdorp 1730
Tel: 011 990 2944

| EVENTS | |
|-----------|---------------|
| MON - FRI | 10:00 - 14:00 |
| SAT | 09:00 - 11:00 |

A low rate for you.

Congratulations! As a valued client, you are now eligible for a low interest rate on your next cash loan from [redacted]. This is a limited time offer, so please come in by 30 November 2003 to take advantage of this offer.

You can use this cash to pay for school, or for anything else you want.

➤ Enjoy low monthly repayments with this offer! Here is one example of a loan you can get under this offer:

| Interest Rate | Loan Amount | Loan Term | Monthly Repayment |
|---------------|-------------|-----------|-------------------|
| 10.50% | R2000.00 | 4 Months | R710.00 |

LOAN AVAILABILITY SUBJECT TO TERMS & CONDITIONS

Loans available in other amounts. There are no hidden costs. What you see is what you pay.

If you borrow elsewhere you will pay R360.00 more in total on a R2000.00, 4 month loan.

How to apply:

Bring your ID book and latest payslip to your usual branch, by **30 November 2003** and ask for **Mrs. Veno Naidoo**.

Mrs. Veno Naidoo
Area Manager

P.S. Unfortunately, if you have already taken a loan since the date this letter was issued, you do not qualify for this offer. Comparison based on a competitor's interest rate of 15% per month.




FIGURE 1. SAMPLE LETTER

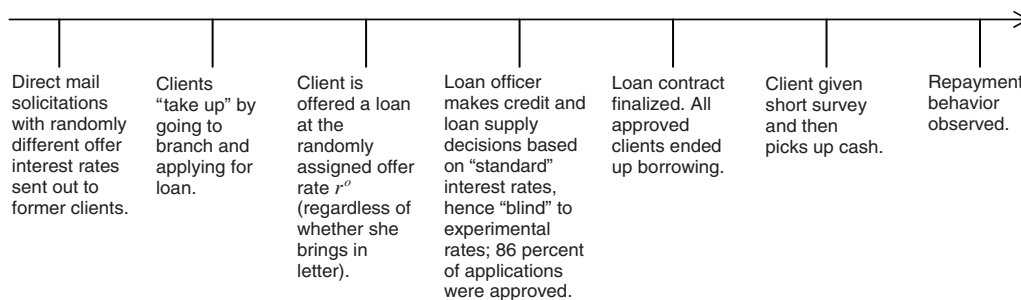


FIGURE 2. OPERATIONAL STEPS OF EXPERIMENT

percent. The randomization program established a target distribution of interest rates for four-month loans in each risk category¹⁶ and then randomly assigned each individual to a rate based on the target distribution for her category.¹⁷ Appendix Table 2 shows the resulting distribution of rates. Rates varied from 3.25 percent per month to 14.75 percent per month. At the Lender's request, 96 percent of the offers were at lower-than-standard rates, with an average discount of 3.1 percentage points on the monthly rate (the average rate on prior loans was 11.0 percent). Slightly more than 1 percent of the offers were at a higher-than-standard rate (with a 1.9 percentage point increase on average), and the remaining offers were at the standard rate.

At the time of the randomization, we verified that the assigned rates were uncorrelated with other known information, such as credit report score. Table 2, column 1, shows that the randomizations were successful, *ex ante*, in this fashion; i.e., conditional on the risk category, the offer rate was uncorrelated with other observable characteristics.

D. Maturity Suggestion Randomization

A subset of borrowers in waves two and three received mailers containing a randomized maturity suggestion as well. The suggestion took the form of a nonbinding "example" loan showing one of the Lender's most common maturities (four, six, or twelve months), where the length of the *maturity* was randomly assigned. This randomization was orthogonal to the interest rate randomization. All letters clearly stated that other loan sizes and maturities were available. The example loan *size* presented was not randomized; it was the client's last loan size. Only low- and medium-risk borrowers were eligible to receive the suggestion randomization, since high-risk borrowers could not obtain maturities greater than four months under the Lender's standard

¹⁶ Rates on other maturities in these data were set with a fixed spread from the offer rate conditional on risk, so we focus exclusively on the four-month rate.

¹⁷ Actually, *three* rates were assigned to each client, an "offer rate" (r) included in the direct-mail solicitation and noted above, a "contract rate" (r^c) that was weakly less than the offer rate and revealed only after the borrower had accepted the solicitation and applied for a loan, and a dynamic repayment incentive (D) that extended preferential contract rates for up to one year, conditional on good repayment performance, and revealed only after all other loan terms had been finalized. This multitiered interest rate randomization was designed to identify specific information asymmetries (Karlan and Zinman 2008b). Forty percent of clients received $r^c < r$, and 47 percent obtained $D = 1$. Since D and the contract rate were surprises to the client, and hence did not affect the decision to borrow, we exclude them from most analysis in this paper and restrict the loan size sample frame to the 31,231 clients who were assigned $r = r^c$ for expositional clarity. In principle, r^c and D might affect the intensive margin of borrowing, but in practice adding these interest rates to our loan size demand specifications does not change the results. Mechanically what happened was that very few clients changed their loan amounts after learning that $r^c < r$ (Karlan and Zinman 2008b).

TABLE 2—EXPERIMENTAL VALIDATION REGRESSIONS

| Estimator: | OLS | Probit | Probit |
|---|--|--|------------------|
| Dependent variable: | Interest rate (00s of basis points) | 1 = Borrowed after deadline, and not before deadline | 1 = Rejected |
| Mean (dependent variable): | 8.03 (1) | 0.15 (2) | 0.14 (3) |
| Monthly interest in percentage points (e.g., 8.2) | | -0.0001 (0.0007) | 0.002 (0.002) |
| Number of months since last loan with lender | 0.001 (0.003) | | |
| Number of prior loans with lender, log | 0.00 (0.01) | | |
| Female | 0.02 (0.02) | | |
| Number of dependents | 0.00 (0.01) | | |
| Married | 0.02 (0.02) | | |
| Age, log | -0.00 (0.05) | | |
| Rural | 0.02 (0.03) | | |
| More educated | -0.01 (0.02) | | |
| External credit bureau score, log | 0.01 (0.01) | | |
| Record exists in external credit bureau | 0.04 (0.10) | | |
| Internal credit score, log | -0.06 (0.13) | | |
| (Pseudo-) <i>R</i> -squared | 0.11 | 0.05 | 0.05 |
| | Sample: | All | Applicants |
| Number of observations | All with nonmissing 53,554 | 53,810 | 4,540 |

Notes: Probit results are marginal effects. Robust standard errors reported in parentheses are clustered within branch where the loan was processed. Interest rate coefficients show the change in proportion from a 100-basis-point increase in the monthly interest rate. “More educated” equals one if the number of years of predicted education is in highest 40 percentiles. All specifications include controls (not shown) for the client’s credit risk category and mailer wave.

operations. Of low- and medium-risk clients (of whom 493 borrowed), 3,096 received a suggestion (51 percent four-month, 25 percent six-month, 24 percent twelve-month).

Loan officers were instructed to ignore any example loan(s) featured in the letter. In both training and ongoing monitoring, the Lender’s management and the research team stressed to branch personnel that the mailers were for marketing and pricing purposes only, and should not have any impact on the loan officer’s underwriting of the loan application.

E. The Offer and Loan Application Process

Each mailer contained a deadline, ranging from two to six weeks, by which the client had to respond in order to be eligible for the offer rate.¹⁸ Table 2, column 2, corroborates that offer rates

¹⁸ The deadlines were randomly assigned and orthogonal to the interest rate and any maturity suggestion by construction. The mailers also incorporated randomized decision frames and cues designed to test whether product presentation features found to be important psychology and marketing literatures affect loan demand (Marianne Bertrand et al., 2008). These treatments were also orthogonal to the interest rate and maturity suggestion.

at or below the standard ones did not influence take-up *after* the deadline, which makes sense since clients who borrowed after the deadline faced the Lender's standard rate schedule. The Lender routinely mailed teasers to former borrowers but had never promoted specific interest rate offers before this experiment. A total of 1,358 mailers were returned to the Lender by the postal service and 3,000 contained atypical (i.e., nondecreasing) relationships between loan maturity and price, leaving us with a sample frame of 53,810 offers for analysis of demand elasticities.

Clients accepted the offer by entering a branch office and filling out an application in person with a loan officer.¹⁹ Applicants did not need to bring the mailer with them to get the offer rate, since each randomly assigned rate was hard-coded into the Lender's computer systems by client account number. Data collected by the Lender suggests that many clients read their letter, but this must be interpreted cautiously given that letter-reading is unverifiable.²⁰ Strong demand responses to randomly assigned marketing content treatments contained in the direct mail solicitations provide additional evidence that many did read their letter (Marianne Bertrand et al. 2008).

Loan applications were taken and assessed per the Lender's standard underwriting procedures. Specifically, loan officers: (a) updated observable information and decided whether to offer *any* loan based on their updated risk assessment; (b) decided the maximum loan size to offer the accepted applicants; and (c) decided the longest loan maturity to offer the accepted applicants. Each decision was made "blind" to the experimental rates, with strict operational controls (including software developed in consultation with the research team), ensuring that loan officers instead used the Lender's *standard* rates in any debt service calculations. This rule was designed to prevent loan supply from adjusting endogenously to a lower rate (due to debt service ratios) and thereby complicating estimation of loan size demand elasticities. Table 2, column 3, corroborates that rejection decisions were uncorrelated with the offer rate, conditional on credit risk. A total of 4,540 clients (out of 53,810) in our sample frame applied for a loan at the offered interest rate (i.e., before the deadline on the letter), an 8.4 percent application rate. Of these, 86 percent, or 3,887, were approved for a loan.

Following the loan officer's assessment, approved clients chose an allowable loan size and maturity. All clients who were approved ended up taking a loan. This is not surprising, given that the typical application process takes only 45 minutes and everyone in our sample had borrowed from the Lender before.

III. Empirical Strategy

We now map our experiment into testable predictions and identification of demand elasticities with respect to price and maturity. We specify models to produce unbiased estimates *within* our sample of prior borrowers from a particular Lender, using direct mail. We postpone discussion of how our results might apply to other solicitation technologies and settings until Sections VA and VII.

¹⁹ It was very rare for a client to inquire about the offer and not apply (the Lender tracked this systematically during the pilot and found no cases). This is not surprising given that our sample comprises prior clients who were hence familiar with the Lender, and that 96 percent of the offers were at favorable rates.

²⁰ The data on letter reading has sampling issues as well. One set of observations was collected as part of a follow-up phone call before the offer expiry deadline. The Lender called a nonrandom sample of 500 clients, of whom 35 percent were reached. Approximately 50 percent of the respondents reported reading the letter. The other set of observations comes from a short survey, administered by branch managers to a nonrandom sample, following completion of the loan contract. Of the applicants, 75 percent reported *receiving* a letter; we did not include a separate question on *reading* the letter.

Our basic model for estimating the response of loan demand to changes in price and maturity is

$$(1) \quad y_i = f(C_i, X_i),$$

where i indexes potential borrowers in our sample frame; y is a measure of extensive (take-up) or intensive (loan size) demand for debt from the Lender (we consider balance-shifting and overall demand in Sections IVB and VA); C_i is a vector of loan contract terms, including the offer rate (r_i) and/or the maturity (m_i); and X_i includes the two variables that we used to stratify the random assignment of r_i : the Lender's summary statistic for pre-approved credit risk (low/medium/high), and the mailer wave (July, September, or October). The standard errors always allow for clustering within branches.

The standard identification problem in estimating loan demand elasticities is that the loan contract terms of interest may be correlated with unobserved investment opportunities, financing alternatives, or supply decisions that are not actually functions of the interest rate or maturity per se. In the case of interest rate sensitivity, we address the identification problem by using interest rate variation created by the Lender's random assignment. The randomly assigned interest rate enables us to observe the counterfactual of interest: what happens to a consumer's borrowing behavior if we exogenously change her interest rate?

Our identification is cleanest for the price sensitivity of loan take-up, i.e., for the extensive margin of price sensitivity (see Section IVA for results and discussion). We estimate linear probability (or probit) models of the form:

$$(2) \quad a_i = \alpha + \beta r_i + \delta X_i + \varepsilon_{ib}.$$

Here, $a = 1$ if the client applied for a loan.²¹ The offer rate r is orthogonal to ε by construction and hence β is an unbiased estimate of the price sensitivity of loan take-up from direct mail solicitation.²² We also allow for nonlinearities in some specifications, since there may be kinks in the demand curve at prices where clients have outside options.²³

Almost any model of consumer intertemporal choice predicts that demand will be downward sloping with respect to price; i.e., that $\beta < 0$ (Gary Becker 1962). The degree of sensitivity may depend on outside options/liquidity constraints and returns to borrowing. The available evidence from microcredit markets suggests that liquidity constraints bind, returns to investment and consumption smoothing are high, and constraints and returns are heterogeneous.²⁴ In particular,

²¹ In principle, the application decision is a cleaner measure of loan take-up than obtaining a loan, given the possibility of application rejection and updated risk assessment that is correlated with the offer rate. In practice, neither of these was a problem: rejection was not correlated with the offer rate (Table 2, column 3), and the risk assessment was updated in fewer than 10 percent of cases. Not surprisingly, then, results for the outcome (1 = obtained a loan) are very similar to those for (1 = applied for a loan). These and all other results that are not presented in the paper in tabular form are available in an online Appendix (<http://www.aeaweb.org/articles.php?doi=10.1257/aer.98.3.1040>).

²² In principle, β could be downward biased, and/or representative of creditworthy applicants only, if the solicited clients tried to infer a signal of their application acceptance probability from the offer rate. But this is unlikely in practice, since our entire sample had borrowed from the Lender in the past, and the basic creditworthiness criteria (steady job, contactability by phone, no serious delinquencies observable in credit bureau reports) is common knowledge in the cash loan market. Moreover, the nontrivial rejection rate (14 percent), and the fact that rejection was not correlated with the offer rate (Table 2, column 3), suggest that applicants with some uncertainty about their creditworthiness did not try to use the offer rate as a signal.

²³ To see the microfoundation for potential nonlinearities, note that, in a perfectly competitive market with no supply constraints and multiple lenders, the price elasticity will be negative infinity for any interest rate that exceeds the equilibrium risk-based rate. A client offered a rate by the Lender that exceeds her best outside option (the market rate for her risk category) will not borrow from the Lender.

²⁴ See Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo (2004), Suresh de Mel, David McKenzie, and Christopher Woodruff (2007), M. Shahe Emran, A. K. M. Mahub Morshed, and Joseph E. Stiglitz (2006), Karlan and Zinman (2008a), and

as we discussed above, many MFIs target relatively poor and female borrowers on the premises that: (a) liquidity constraints are relatively severe and returns are relatively high for these individuals; and (b) price sensitivities are relatively low among these individuals. Consequently we estimate (2), and some of our other models, separately for different gender and income groups (see Section VB for results and discussion).

Of course we are also interested in the price sensitivity of loan size demand (see Sections IVC and IVD for results and discussion). We estimate the intensive margin by changing a_i in (2) to a function of loan size (l_i). Here, identification is complicated a bit by the fact that, if the β in (2) is indeed nonzero and heterogeneous, then there is selection on r_i . Specifically, the loan size and maturity demanded may be correlated with applicant characteristics other than X_i if those who choose to apply at a given r_i are different (e.g., in terms of preferences, or opportunity sets) than those who choose not to apply.

In this sense, the most straightforward interpretation of our loan size elasticity results is that they hold only for the sample of borrowers; i.e., β is unbiased only for the sample where take-up = $a_i = 1$. We also estimate loan size specifications with an additional vector of controls for demographics and credit risk characteristics. If β is unchanged after adding these controls, this provides *indirect* (and inconclusive) evidence that our results apply to nonborrowers as well as borrowers in our sample.

We postpone discussion of our estimating equations for maturity elasticities until Section VI.

IV. Price Elasticity Results

A. Extensive Margin, Initial Borrowing from Lender

We begin by estimating the extensive price elasticity of loan demand for predeadline borrowing from the Lender. As detailed above, the relevant measure of demand = 1 if client responded to the Lender's solicitation by applying for a loan before her deadline for the randomly assigned interest rate elapsed.²⁵

We start with the 99 percent of the sample frame that received offers at or below the standard rate for their risk category. Table 3, column 1, presents the probit marginal effects for this sample: a 100-basis-point increase in the monthly interest rate reduces take-up by 3/10 of a percentage point.²⁶ This is a precisely estimated but rather small effect, given that average take-up is 8.5 percent. Thus, a price decrease from the maximum (11.75 percent) to the minimum (3.25 percent) rates offered in this sample would increase take-up by only 2.6 percentage points, or 31 percent of the baseline take-up rate. Another way to scale the estimated magnitude is to calculate the take-up elasticity (i.e., multiplying the marginal effect by the ratio of the mean offer rate to mean take-up), which is -0.28 .

B. Asymmetric Elasticities for Prices Increases versus Reductions

Next, we estimate whether the average price sensitivity changed when the Lender offered rates that were greater than its standard ones.²⁷ The Lender primarily was interested in testing sensi-

Christopher Udry and Santosh Anagol (2006).

²⁵ Our results are robust to defining take-up as obtaining a loan.

²⁶ Results are robust to using OLS rather than probit, and to controlling for the contract experimental rates (see footnote 17), borrower characteristics besides risk category, and/or branch fixed effects.

²⁷ "Standard" equals the rate the client would have been charged had the experiment not taken place, which in almost all cases is the rate on the client's last loan. Our results are robust to defining the reference/kink point as either the standard rate or the rate on the last loan.

TABLE 3—THE EXTENSIVE MARGIN: PRICE SENSITIVITIES OF LOAN TAKE-UP

| Dependent variable: Mean (dependent variable) | 1 = Applied | | | 1 = (Take-up with outside lender, not with our Lender) | | | 1 = (Take-up with Lender after deadline, not before deadline) | | |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--|----------------------|-----------------------|---|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| | 0.08 | 0.08 | 0.07 | 0.22 | 0.22 | 0.28 | 0.15 | 0.15 | 0.18 |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) | (8) | (9) |
| Interest rate in pp terms (e.g., 8.2) | -0.00289*** (0.00047) | | -0.01723*** (0.00160) | 0.00106 (0.00083) | | -0.00958 (0.00660) | 0.00042 (0.00064) | | -0.01239** (0.00622) |
| 1 = (rate > standard for client's risk category) | | -0.02996*** (0.00398) | | | 0.00539 (0.00512) | | | -0.03630*** (0.00869) | |
| Pseudo R-squared | 0.045 | 0.044 | 0.055 | 0.002 | 0.002 | 0.003 | 0.048 | 0.049 | 0.056 |
| Sample: | Offer4 ≤ standard | Full | Offer4 > standard | Offer4 ≤ standard | Full | Offer4 > standard | Offer4 ≤ standard | Full | Offer4 > standard |
| Number of observations | 53,178 | 53,810 | 632 | 53,178 | 53,810 | 632 | 53,178 | 53,810 | 632 |

Notes: Each column presents marginal effects from a single probit of a measure of loan take-up on the interest rate offered to the client, and risk category and mailer wave (not shown in table). Robust standard errors reported in parentheses and are clustered within branch. Interest rate coefficients show the change in the proportion taking up from a 100-basis-point increase in the monthly interest rate.

*** Significant at, or below, 1 percent.

** Significant at, or below, 5 percent.

* Significant at, or below, 10 percent.

tivity at lower rates, and consequently made only 632 offers at higher rates.²⁸ Column 2 shows that high rates depressed the *level* of take-up: clients randomly assigned a higher-than-standard offer rate for their risk category were 3 percentage points (36 percent) less likely to apply.²⁹ Column 3 shows that the *slope* of the demand curve steepened in the region of higher rates: here take-up falls 1.7 percentage points for each 100-basis-point increase in the interest rate, on an average take-up rate of 6.6 percent. Thus, the point estimates show that the price sensitivity of take-up was six times greater at higher-than-standard rates.³⁰ This kink in the demand curve, which we show graphically in Figure 3, is consistent with several underlying (and potentially complementary) explanations.³¹

One explanation for the kink is selection based on discounting or rates of return. Since our sample consists only of prior borrowers, it could be that everyone in the experiment has a discount or return rate approximately equal to the Lender's standard rates. Hence, prior borrowers

²⁸ In contrast to the low-rate offers, the high-rate mailers did not include any "congratulations" or mentions of "special" or "low" rates.

²⁹ We focus on the extensive margin (the application decision), since our very small sample of take-up at high rates precludes estimating the intensive margin separately.

³⁰ The *elasticity* here is 12 times greater: $-0.017 \times (12.8/0.066) = -3.3$, where 12.8 is the mean offer rate and 0.066 is the mean take-up rate. Gross and Souleles (2002) find the reverse asymmetry; in their data, the price elasticity is somewhat greater in absolute value for price *decreases*. This suggests that *ex ante* indebtedness may be a key margin: many in the Gross and Souleles sample had debt outstanding at the time of rate changes, while essentially no one in our sample did.

³¹ To help check robustness, or for other nonlinearities, we estimated price sensitivities separately for each risk category, for each of four price intervals: ≤ 7.75 , $7.75 < r \leq 9.75$, $9.75 < r \leq 11.75$, and $r > 11.75$. The results confirm that price sensitivities increased for each risk category, *after that category's standard rate threshold was crossed*. So the price sensitivity shift does seem to occur at the client's most likely reference point/outside option, and not at other (less likely) reference points/outside options. The results are robust to defining the reference point based on the rate paid on the client's last loan, instead of on the standard rate for the client's risk category. There are no other plausible kink points to test; as Section IB discussed, market research suggests that the most common competitor rates were largely outside of our interest rate range: 20–30 percent monthly for one-month loans from other finance companies, and 3–4 percent monthly from banks. Almost all of our interest rate range (3.25 to 14.75), and mass, falls in between the competitor rates.

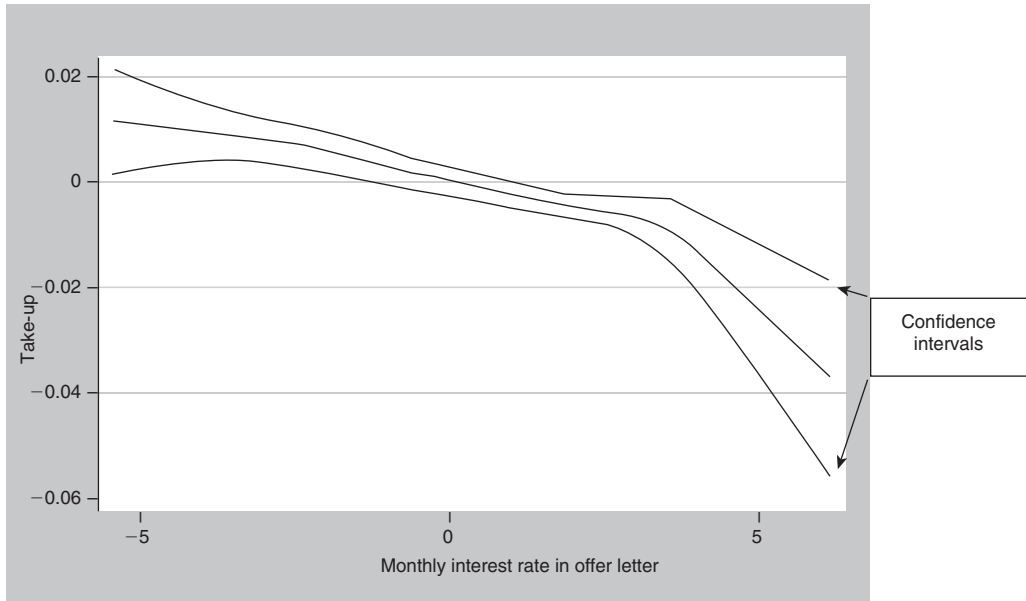


FIGURE 3. REGRESSION-ADJUSTED DEMAND CURVE FOR TAKE-UP WITH RESPECT TO PRICE

Notes: Locally weighted partial linear regression, produced with Stata 9.0 SE command `lowess`. The x -axis is the residual from a regression of the monthly offer interest rate on the conditions from the experiment (the month of the offer and the lender-defined risk level of the client prior to the experiment), and the y -axis is the residual from the regression of take-up (1 or 0) on the same conditions (month of offer and risk category of client). 95 percent confidence intervals were bootstrapped with 100 repetitions.

were roughly indifferent about borrowing at their standard rate, and a rate increase leaves them strictly unwilling to borrow. There are two problems with this explanation. First, it delivers the counterfactual prediction that *lowering* the interest rate should affect only the intensive margin, since everyone in the sample had already demonstrated a willingness to borrow at standard rates. Second, it seems likely that rates of return for potential borrowers vary over time with the severity of liquidity constraints and opportunity sets. In this case, we would not necessarily expect to find an indifference point at standard rates, and it would be unlikely that selection on rates of return is a sufficient explanation for the kink.

A second explanation is that consumers receiving high-rate offers borrowed elsewhere. Recall from Section I, however, that competition in the Lender's niche appeared to be thin, with a dearth of close substitutes. To test this, the Lender obtained credit bureau data for our sample period. Columns 4–6 of Table 3 show that high offer rates from the Lender did not induce significantly more borrowing from other financial institutions. The point estimates are positive, but the confidence intervals rule out economically large substitution (e.g., we estimate that offering a higher rate increased outside take-up by no more than 1.5 percentage points, which is only 7 percent of the mean). Note, however, that the credit bureau measures borrowing from financial institutions only. Hence, we cannot rule out substitution to informal sources (friends, family, and moneylenders).

A third explanation is that clients receiving high rates could wait for their deadlines to expire (two to six weeks hence) and then borrow at standard rates. This is testable by examining post-deadline borrowing from the Lender: if high-rate consumers wait, then they should be more likely to borrow after the high-rate offer expires. In fact, we find the opposite—high-rate offers

produce *lower* post-deadline borrowing (Table 3, column 8), and the likelihood of post-deadline borrowing decreases with the rate (column 9).

Instead, our pattern of results with respect to timing is consistent with switching costs. Table 3 shows that both pre- and post-deadline take-up decreased in price. So clients may have substituted to other (informal) lenders pre-deadline and then found it costly to switch back to the Lender post-deadline.

Our pattern of results is also consistent with two types of behavioral models. Prospect theory generates relatively strong sensitivity to price increases because consumers evaluate prices relative to their prior experience and weight losses (price increases) more heavily than gains (Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky 1979).³² Models that allow for transaction utility also generate particular aversion to higher-than-standard prices if consumers perceive the price increase as unfair (Richard Thaler 1985, 1999).³³

In all, our results on nonlinearities in price sensitivity seem to be most consistent with behavioral explanations and/or the presence of viable outside options in informal markets with switching costs.

C. Unconditional Loan Size, Initial Borrowing from the Lender

Table 4, column 1, presents our main OLS estimate of the price sensitivity of the amount borrowed, unconditional on borrowing (this is the outcome featured in both Gross and Souleles (2002) and Dehejia, Montgomery, and Morduch (2005)). The dependent variable here includes predeadline borrowing only, and we condition only on risk and mailer wave. As described in Section II, we limit the sample to clients who were randomly assigned equal offer and contract rates (see footnote 17) that were at or below the Lender's standard rate for each individual. The precisely estimated coefficient shows a R4.4 decrease for each 100-basis-point increase in the interest rate. Given the mean unconditional loan size of 106 and mean offered interest rate of 7.8, this implies an elasticity of -0.32 . This is small relative to the estimates in Gross and Souleles and Dehejia et al.

As discussed in Section III, the interpretation of this result is complicated a bit by the fact that, if price sensitivity is nonzero and heterogeneous on the extensive margin, there is selection on the offer rate r_i . Specifically, the loan size demanded may be correlated with applicant characteristics other than credit risk if someone who applies at a given r_i is different (e.g., in terms of preferences, or opportunity sets) than someone who does not apply. In this sense, the most straightforward interpretation of our loan size elasticity results is that they hold only for the subsample who borrow (see the next subsection for estimates on this subsample).

We also explore whether the unconditional loan size, price-sensitivity estimate might hold for the sample of nonborrowers as well by reestimating the model with an additional vector of controls for demographics, credit risk characteristics, and branch fixed effects. The result does not change (Table 4, column 2), which is consistent with nonborrowers having the same intensive margin price sensitivity as borrowers.

³² See also Bruce G. S. Hardie, Eric J. Johnson, and Peter S. Fader (1993).

³³ See Eric Anderson and Duncan Simester (forthcoming) for some related empirical evidence. A "price point," as discussed in Anil K. Kashyap (1995), seems an unlikely explanation for our kink, since the Lender's standard prices do not match those of competitors or feature common price-endings.

TABLE 4—PRICE SENSITIVITIES OF LOAN SIZE

| Estimator: | OLS | OLS | OLS | OLS | Tobit | OLS | OLS | Tobit |
|---|----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Dependent variable: | Loan Size | | | | | Log(Loan Size) | | |
| Mean (dependent variable): | 106 | 104 | 1,428 | 1,428 | 1,428 | | | |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) | (8) |
| Interest rate in pp terms (e.g., 8.2) | -4.368*** (1.093) | -4.394*** (1.146) | -25.876** (12.994) | -33.715*** (11.392) | -32.812*** (11.366) | | | |
| Log (interest rate) | | | | | | -0.113** (0.049) | -0.143*** (0.041) | -0.141*** (0.041) |
| (Pseudo) <i>R</i> -squared | 0.03 | 0.06 | 0.07 | 0.29 | 0.02 | 0.06 | 0.34 | 0.15 |
| Additional controls for demos and credit risk? | No | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Yes |
| Branch fixed effects? | No | Yes | No | Yes | No | No | Yes | No |
| Conditional on borrowing? | No | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Number of observations | 31,231 | 28,197 | 2,325 | 2,304 | 2,304 | 2,325 | 2,304 | 2,304 |

Notes: Loan size in rand; 7 rand \cong US\$1 at the time of the experiment. Robust standard errors clustered on branch in all but tobit specifications. All specifications include controls for risk category and mailer. Additional controls added to unconditional specifications include: quadratics in internal credit score, external credit score, and gross income at time of pre-approval (but not net income at time of pre-approval, since this is available only for wave 3 individuals), months since last loan with Lender, number of prior loans with Lender, gender, number of dependents, marital status, quadratic in age, rural residence, education, and province. Controls for conditional specifications use income measured at the time of loan approval, and include net income at the time of loan approval as well. Sample size falls for loan size demand models, relative to take-up models (Table 3), because with loan size we include only applicants who were not randomly assigned a surprise rate reduction upon applying for a loan—see footnote 17 for details.

*** Significant at, or below, 1 percent.

** Significant at, or below, 5 percent.

* Significant at, or below, 10 percent.

D. Conditional Loan Size

Columns 3 and 6 of Table 4 present our main estimates of loan size price sensitivity conditional on borrowing. OLS estimates that loan size decreases R26 for each 100-basis-point increase in the interest rate. The implied elasticity here is -0.13 . The log-log specification (column 6) yields an elasticity of -0.11 . Columns 4 and 7 add our set of additional controls for selection; these increase the elasticity estimates to -0.17 and -0.14 . Columns 5 and 8 present tobit estimates addressing the fact that loan size demand may be censored by supply constraints; many borrowers take the maximum amount offered by the loan officer. The results do not change. Figure 4 depicts the conditional loan size demand curve graphically.

In all, we again find elasticities of loan size demand that are quite low relative to comparable recent estimates obtained in other settings.

V. Pricing Strategy for Profitability and (Targeted) Access

In this section we combine our estimates of average price elasticities of demand from Section IV with additional information on revenues and repayment. This enables us to evaluate the optimal pricing strategy for our Lender. We also illustrate how pricing could be used to pursue specific poverty (or other demographic) targeting objectives.

A. Pricing for Profit Maximation

Gross Revenue and Repayment Price Sensitivities, and Short-Run Pricing Strategy.—We estimate the price sensitivity of short-run profit components in Table 5. Column 1 shows the price sensitivity of gross revenue obtained on initial, predeadline borrowing. Combining this with the repayment effects will yield a measure of short-run profitability at different interest rates.

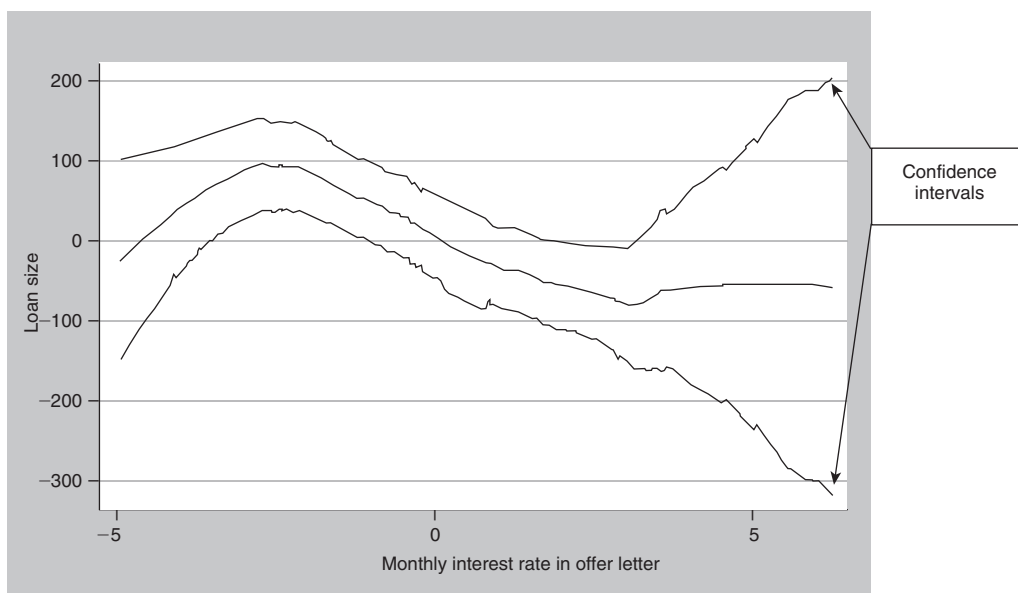


FIGURE 4. REGRESSION-ADJUSTED DEMAND CURVE FOR LOAN SIZE, CONDITIONAL ON BORROWING, WITH RESPECT TO PRICE

Notes: Locally weighted partial linear regression, produced with Stata 9.0 SE command `lowess`. The x -axis is the residual from a regression of the monthly offer interest rate on the conditions from the experiment (the month of the offer and the lender-defined risk level of the client prior to the experiment), and the y -axis is the residual from the regression of loan size on the same conditions (month of offer and risk category of client). The sample frame includes only those who took-up (i.e., had strictly positive loan sizes). 95 percent confidence intervals were bootstrapped with 100 repetitions.

Table 5, column 1, and Figure 5 show that the Lender's gross revenue curve is slightly upward sloping over the range of interest rates below its standard ones (3.25 percent to 11.75 percent). Each 100-basis-point drop in the monthly rate reduces gross revenue by R2.6.

Table 5, column 2, shows that loan defaults increase as interest rates increase. This will occur if there is adverse selection, moral hazard, and/or bad shocks that are difficult for borrowers to smooth (Karlan and Zinman 2008b). The average past-due amount falls by R12.2 for every 100-basis-point decrease in the interest rate. Our default data are censored (some loans may have defaulted after our sample period), so we present tobit estimates as well in column 3. These suggest a R18.1 decrease in average past due for every 100-basis-point decrease in the interest rate.

Accordingly, our results suggest strongly that an interest rate increase would be unprofitable for the Lender. It would produce both decreased gross revenues due to the kink in the demand curve (Table 3, column 3) and increased loan losses (Table 5, column 2). The question remained whether the Lender should cut rates. To estimate the Lender's optimal price, we aggregate the revenue and repayment results over the entire sample frame that received rates at or below the Lender's standard ones. The gross revenue result (Table 5, column 1) implies that a 100-basis-point decrease produces R2.6 less revenue per existing client. The default result (Table 5, column 2) implies that the same interest rate decrease will generate higher repayment (conditional on take-up) of R12.2. With a 7.4 percent average take-up rate, this implies R0.90 more revenue (repayment) per client offered the loan, for a net revenue decrease of R1.7 per offered client. (Using the tobit repayment estimate instead of OLS changes the net revenue decrease to

TABLE 5—GROSS REVENUE AND REPAYMENT SENSITIVITIES TO INTEREST RATES

| Estimator: Dependent variable: | OLS Gross interest revenue (1) | OLS Average past due (2) | Tobit Average past due (2) |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Interest rate in pp terms (e.g., 8.2) | 2.553*** (0.438) | 12.161*** (3.523) | 18.064*** (5.934) |
| Additional controls? | No | No | No |
| Conditional on borrowing | No | Yes | Yes |
| R-squared | 0.02 | 0.05 | 0.01 |
| Number of observations | 31,231 | 2,325 | 2,325 |

Notes: All dependent variables in rand; 7 rand \cong US\$1 at the time of the experiment. Robust standard errors reported in parentheses and clustered within branch for OLS specifications. Average past due over the first 7–12 months of the loan (this is all the we observe, hence the motivation for tobit). Controls included for risk category and wave of experiment.

*** Significant at, or below, 1 percent.

** Significant at, or below, 5 percent.

* Significant at, or below, 10 percent.

R1.3.) Thus, unless our measure of default dramatically understates the true cost of default (conversations with the Lender's senior management suggest that this is not the case),³⁴ our results show that the Lender had no incentive to cut rates in partial equilibrium.

Pricing Strategy with Competition.—The prospect of strategic responses by competitors further discourages a price decrease. Our experiment likely identifies the upper bound on the price elasticity of (short-run) demand for the Lender's credit, since the price cuts were unprecedented and short term. Permanent cuts and/or repeated short-term cuts would be more likely to provoke a response from competitors. This would make the general equilibrium revenue curve relatively steep, if in fact some of our short-term borrowers used the partial equilibrium rate cuts to pay off other debt. Lenders can estimate balance-shifting directly using credit bureau data. Our results using credit bureau data suggest that the upper bound on the extensive margin of balance-shifting to competitor financial institutions is small (Table 3, column 4), although we can not rule out nontrivial balance-shifting on the intensive margin (results not reported).

Direct-Mail Price Elasticities and Pricing Strategy.—The analysis above focuses on the short-run pricing implications for direct-mail solicitations. In the longer run, prices offered via direct mail may become common knowledge, and also be offered to walk-ins.

Consequently, when forming pricing strategy, lenders must consider what fraction of solicited clients would read the solicitation and become aware of the offered interest rate. Inattention to the letter may produce elasticities that differ from those in a steady state where new rates were common knowledge. To see how direct mail elasticities could underestimate steady-state elasticities, consider the thought experiment where no clients read their solicitation. In that case, we would find a price elasticity of zero. If 50 percent of clients read their solicitation (see footnote 20), then direct mail may underestimate the strength of common knowledge elasticities by as much as a factor of two, all else equal.

³⁴ The measure of default used here is the average amount past due over the first seven to twelve months of the loan. This will understate the true cost of higher rates on default to the extent that it fails to capture the marginal administrative cost of defaults and/or fails to anticipate future default. It will overstate costs to the extent that some defaults are eventually (partially) cured by the borrower or (partially) recovered via collection efforts.

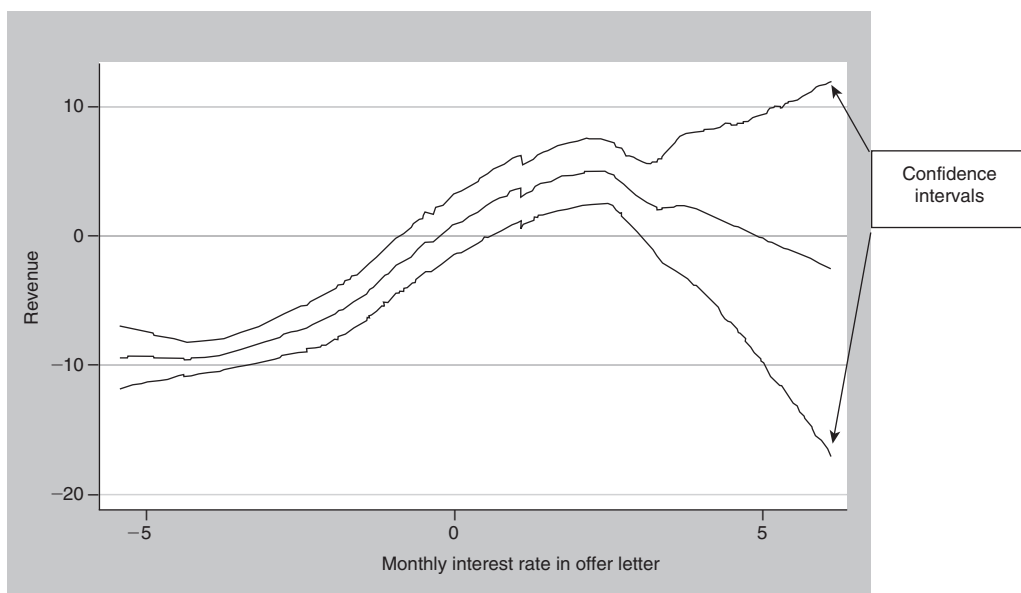


FIGURE 5. REGRESSION-ADJUSTED DEMAND CURVE FOR REVENUE WITH RESPECT TO PRICE

Notes: Locally weighted partial linear regression, produced with Stata 9.0 SE command `lowess`. The x -axis is the residual from a regression of the monthly offer interest on the conditions from the experiment (the month of the offer and the lender-defined risk level of the client prior to the experiment), and the y -axis is the residual from the regression of gross revenue for the Lender on the same conditions (month of offer and risk category of client). 95 percent confidence intervals were bootstrapped with 100 repetitions.

But all else may not be equal: letter-readers may have different elasticities than nonreaders. Thus, another issue is that direct mail may under- (over-)estimate the strength of steady-state elasticities if letter-readers are less (more) price sensitive than nonreaders.

We explore these issues by constructing client-level proxies for letter-reading probability, splitting the sample based on these proxies, and reestimating our models of price sensitivity. Our proxies for letter-reading are education, recent borrowing from the Lender, and a relatively high number of past loans from the Lender. We then test whether those with presumed higher probabilities of letter-reading exhibit different price sensitivities from the rest of the sample, conditional on our full set of demographic and risk controls. As discussed above, the predicted pattern of results is ambiguous: letter-reading increases price sensitivity of course, but letter-readers (or, more specifically, consumers with characteristics that we use to proxy for letter-reading) could have lower average price sensitivity than nonreaders.

Table 6 reports our estimated unconditional loan size price sensitivities for subsamples with presumed high probabilities of reading the letter. Column 1 reproduces Table 4, column 2, for reference. Column 2 limits the sample to those with relatively high education levels (as predicted from occupation). Column 3 limits the sample to those who borrowed from the Lender within the last nine months, and column 4 limits the sample to those with at least three prior loans from the Lender. Our presumption on these two cuts is that more recent and frequent borrowers had stronger attachments to the Lender, and consequently would be more likely to open and read the solicitation. But none of the elasticities differs by more than $|0.05|$ from that obtained in the full sample. Our results here are merely suggestive, but they provide little

TABLE 6—PRICE SENSITIVITY OF LOAN SIZE FOR GROUPS ASSUMED MOST LIKELY TO READ THE SOLICITATION

| Dependent variable: Mean (dependent variable): | Loan size | | | |
|---|----------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
| Offer rate | -4.394*** (1.146) | -5.397** (2.296) | -6.591*** (2.278) | -5.498** (2.140) |
| Implied elasticity | -0.33 | -0.31 | -0.28 | -0.33 |
| Additional controls? | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Conditional on borrowing? | No | No | No | No |
| Sample: | Full | High education | Borrowed in last 9 months | Past loans > 2 |
| Number of observations | 28,197 | 11,275 | 13,201 | 14,806 |

Notes: Loan size in rand; 7 rand \equiv US\$1 at the time of the experiment. OLS estimates with standard errors clustered on branch. Education is predicted from occupation. Borrowing in last nine months and past loans > 2 are defined based on client's history with the Lender (not outside lenders). Controls include: credit risk category, mailer wave, quadratics in internal credit score, external credit score, and gross income at time of pre-approval (but not net income since this is available only for wave 3 individuals), months since last loan with Lender, number of prior loans with Lender, gender, number of dependents, marital status, quadratic in age, rural residence, education, province, and branch fixed effects.

*** Significant at, or below, 1 percent.

** Significant at, or below, 5 percent.

* Significant at, or below, 10 percent.

evidence that longer-run elasticities would differ from our short-run elasticities due to increased awareness of lower rates.

B. Pricing with Other Objectives in Mind: (Targeted) Access

As noted at the outset, many MFIs seek to expand access and often target specific groups, e.g., female and relatively poor borrowers. Our Lender did not have such objectives. But we use our results to illustrate how an MFI can use randomized pricing to inform strategic decisions when it has multiple objectives.

The profitability results in Section VA imply that expanding access through price cuts comes at a pecuniary cost. But in the Lender's case the cost was small; each 100-basis-point rate cut retained a nontrivial number of clients (approximately 3 for every 1,000 offers), at a net profit loss of only R1.7 (25 cents) for each additional loan.

Some MFIs have more targeted objectives than merely expanding access for a poor population generally. They seek to expand access for targeted groups, such as females, micro-entrepreneurs, and the relatively poor. Whereas some MFIs try to screen out anyone who is not in their targeted group(s), many MFIs lend more broadly but retain some targeting objectives. Below we show how loan pricing can be used to further such objectives if targeted groups have different price sensitivities than nontargeted groups.

Table 7 provides the additional pieces of evidence needed to determine whether and how pricing could be used for targeting purposes. It suggests that two groups commonly targeted by MFIs have slightly stronger price elasticities than average in our sample. Here, we take our preferred specifications for take-up (Table 3, column 1), loan size (Table 4, column 1), and loan size conditional on borrowing (Table 4, column 3) and estimate them on subsamples of female, low-income, and female low-income clients.³⁵ Columns 1–3 show that the take-up elasticities for these groups (–0.33, –0.32, –0.32) are slightly stronger than in full sample (–0.28). Columns 4–6 show that loan size elasticities for these groups (–0.40, –0.40, –0.51) are somewhat stronger than in the

³⁵ We do not include additional control variables, since MFIs typically target unconditional on other characteristics.

TABLE 7—PRICE SENSITIVITIES FOR FEMALE AND LOW-INCOME CLIENTS

| <i>Dependent variable:</i> | Applied | | | Loan size, unconditional | | | Loan size, conditional | | |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| <i>Mean (dependent variable):</i> | 0.09 | 0.08 | 0.08 | 112.35 | 81.33 | 79.38 | 1,467.47 | 1,000.72 | 977.51 |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) | (8) | (9) |
| Interest rate | -0.00359*** (0.00077) | -0.00320*** (0.00084) | -0.00338** (0.00137) | -5.80435*** (1.74367) | -4.00157*** (1.15427) | -5.14672*** (1.86966) | -29.24181 (18.55180) | -28.60900*** (7.46674) | -23.92335** (10.74653) |
| Implied elasticity | -0.33 | -0.32 | -0.32 | -0.40 | -0.40 | -0.51 | -0.14 | -0.21 | -0.17 |
| Conditional on borrowing? | No | No | No | No | No | No | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Sample: | Female | Low-income | Female & low-income | Female | Low-income | Female & low-income | Female | Low-income | Female & low-income |
| (Pseudo) R-squared | 0.04 | 0.04 | 0.04 | 0.04 | 0.04 | 0.04 | 0.06 | 0.11 | 0.12 |
| Number of observations | 25,323 | 24,434 | 11,709 | 14,786 | 14,178 | 6,773 | 1,132 | 1,201 | 615 |

Notes: Loan size in rand; 7 rand \equiv US\$1 at the time of the experiment. Probit marginal effects (applied) and OLS estimates (loan size) with robust standard errors clustered on branch. All specifications include controls for risk category and mailer wave. Here we estimate our preferred models of take-up and loan size sensitivity from Tables 3 and 4 on subsamples that are motivated by the targeting practices of other MFIs. “Low-income” is below median, and based on income at time of preapproval for columns 1–6, and on income at time of application for columns 7–9.

*** Significant at, or below, 1 percent.

** Significant at, or below, 5 percent.

* Significant at, or below, 10 percent.

full sample (–0.32). Columns 7–9 show that loan size elasticities conditional on borrowing for these groups (–0.14, –0.21, –0.17) are again slightly larger than in the full sample (–0.13).³⁶

The implication is that the Lender could have used price cuts to retain more female and relatively poor borrowers in both absolute and relative (particularly debt-weighted) terms. Furthermore, the profitability calculations suggest that targeting objectives could have been achieved at very low cost in the Lender’s case.

VI. Maturity Elasticities

Lenders might also use randomized experimentation to optimize other contracting margins if they have reason to believe that demand responds to margins other than price. In this section we present some suggestive evidence that demand increases strongly with maturities. But we do not have a large enough sample to estimate the response of loan repayment to maturity changes. Hence, we cannot examine profit implications, only demand elasticities.

A. Maturity Elasticities of Demand

Attanasio, Goldberg, and Kryiazidou (forthcoming) shows that the loan demand of liquidity constrained agents may respond to loan maturity as well as loan price. The intuition for this finding is that longer maturities reduce monthly loan payments, effectively permitting more borrowing (relative to income or asset positions). Consider a client who is borrowing R1,000 to smooth consumption. With a four-month maturity, a low-risk client will face an interest rate of 7.75 percent and a monthly payment of R328. At the same interest rate and monthly payment

³⁶ Our findings by income differ in magnitude from Dehejia, Montgomery, and Morduch, who find that low-wealth MFI borrowers in Bangladesh are about three times more elastic than their higher-wealth counterparts.

under a twelve-month maturity, she could borrow R2,036.³⁷ The trade-off is that the longer maturity may reduce lifetime consumption due to larger total interest costs.

In order to estimate maturity elasticities, we engineered exogenous variation in maturity choice in conjunction with the interest rate experiment. This was done via randomly assigned maturity “suggestions” among clients eligible for longer maturities. The suggestion took the form of an example loan showing a maturity, loan size (the client’s last loan size), and monthly payment. Clients assigned to the “maturity suggestion” group received a single example loan on their mailer featuring a randomly chosen maturity of four, six, or twelve months. Those randomly chosen for the “no maturity suggestion” group received an analogous but larger table with several loans and maturities. The suggestion assignment was orthogonal to interest rates by construction. All example loans presented were nonbinding, with the letter stating beneath the example loan(s): “Loans available in other sizes and terms” (“term” refers to “maturity”). Loan officers were instructed to ignore the offer letter in underwriting loan applications.

Prior evidence on the psychology of consumer choice in product and financial markets motivated our suggestion design. Subtle cues have been shown to influence product choice in a durable goods market (Gavan Fitzsimons and Baba Shiv 2001; Vicki G. Morwitz, Johnson, and David C. Schmittlein 1993), and defaults are very powerful drivers of savings decisions (Brigette Madrian and Dennis Shea 2001).

The example maturity did powerfully predict the actual maturity chosen. Table 8A reports estimates of this first stage. All specifications are estimated using OLS:

$$(3) \quad m_i = \alpha + \beta S_i + \chi R_i + \delta X_i + \varepsilon_{ib},$$

where m is the maturity chosen (parameterized linearly), S is the maturity suggestion, R is a vector of the randomly assigned offer and contract interest rates, and X includes not only risk and wave but also the loan size presented in the offer letter’s example loan. We do not find a significant correlation between loan take-up and the maturity suggestion (results not shown), so we ignore the extensive margin below. We estimate (3) on a sample that includes only the following clients: the low- and medium-risks (since high-risks are ineligible for longer maturities) who received a randomized maturity suggestion *and* took a loan.³⁸ This reduces the sample to 493.

Columns 1 and 4 of Table 8A report our estimates of suggestion effects on the sample of 493 borrowers who received a suggestion. Column 1 uses the linear parameterization of the maturity suggestion, and implies that for each additional month of maturity suggested, the actual maturity increases by 0.12 months. Column 4 reports results obtained from the categorical parameterization of the suggestion (with four-month the omitted category). The suggestion categories are jointly significant at the 99 percent level, and it seems that the twelve-month suggestion drives the linear effect; in fact, the point estimate on this variable (0.92) implies roughly the same per-month effect (0.12) as the linear case.³⁹ Our estimates are highly significant (at the 99 percent

³⁷ In practice, the Lender’s interest rates decrease in maturities and thus amplify the extent to which longer maturities relax liquidity constraints on the margin.

³⁸ We drop those taking the relatively rare one- and eighteen-month maturities from the sample. This excludes 13 additional observations. Results are similar if we include these observations.

³⁹ We are not aware of any other “treatments” that are directly comparable to our maturity suggestion. Our maturity suggestion has the flavor of a default option, but was literally only a suggestion: it did not actually shift the status quo. Actual shifts in the status quo appear to be very powerful in influencing financial decisions. A classic citation is Madrian and Shea (2001), where shifting the default from 401(k) nonenrollment to enrollment increased enrollment by an estimated 50 percentage points (a 2.4-fold increase over the baseline participation rate of 37 percent). To facilitate comparison, we estimate two additional probits. The first implicitly assumes that the four-month maturity is the status quo (since 91 percent of borrowers in our maturity elasticity sample had this as their last maturity), and estimates that borrowers who were shown longer (six- or twelve-month) maturities were 14 percentage points more likely to choose a

TABLE 8A—MATURITY ELASTICITY FIRST-STAGE: THE POWER OF PURE SUGGESTION

| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) |
|---|---------------------|--------------------|-------------------|---------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| Maturity shown (linear) | 0.117*** (0.036) | 0.134** (0.054) | 0.096* (0.049) | | | |
| Maturity shown = 6-month 4-month is omitted category | | | | -0.041 (0.234) | -0.215 (0.350) | 0.024 (0.373) |
| Maturity shown= 12-month | | | | 0.917*** (0.289) | 1.032** (0.427) | 0.759* (0.395) |
| Interest rate, in pp (e.g., 8.2) | -0.118 (0.120) | -0.201 (0.158) | -0.007 (0.169) | -0.128 (0.121) | -0.235 (0.170) | -0.008 (0.170) |
| Log (loan amount shown) | 0.505** (0.208) | 0.772** (0.337) | 0.357 (0.319) | 0.528** (0.209) | 0.835** (0.348) | 0.367 (0.318) |
| R-squared | 0.07 | 0.09 | 0.07 | 0.07 | 0.09 | 0.07 |
| Income split? | No | Low income | High income | No | Low income | High income |
| Number of observations | 493 | 239 | 254 | 493 | 239 | 254 |

Notes: OLS estimates with a linear measure of maturity as the dependent variable, and robust standard errors clustered on branch. The sample frame includes those who received a suggestion (i.e., an example loan featuring a four-, six-, or 12-month maturity) and took up a loan with a standard maturity (so 13 loans with 1- and 18-month maturities are dropped). The “loan amount shown” was in all cases the client’s loan size on their most recent prior loan. All specifications also include controls for risk category, mailer wave, the contract interest rate, and whether it was valid for one year. High- and low-income are split on median gross income at time of loan approval.

*** Significant at, or below, 1 percent.

** Significant at, or below, 5 percent.

* Significant at, or below, 10 percent.

TABLE 8B—MATURITY ELASTICITIES OF LOAN DEMAND: OLS AND IV ESTIMATES

| | OLS | | | IV | | |
|-------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) |
| Maturity (linear) | 0.161*** (0.011) | 0.168*** (0.009) | 0.155*** (0.018) | 0.157** (0.062) | 0.214*** (0.072) | 0.050 (0.126) |
| Interest rate | -0.035 (0.027) | -0.053** (0.026) | 0.011 (0.038) | -0.036 (0.029) | -0.041 (0.038) | 0.011 (0.038) |
| Log (loan amount shown) | 0.443*** (0.047) | 0.390*** (0.056) | 0.369*** (0.069) | 0.445*** (0.061) | 0.356*** (0.076) | 0.408*** (0.113) |
| Income split? | No | Low income | High income | No | Low income | High income |
| R-squared | 0.52 | 0.59 | 0.45 | 0.52 | 0.56 | 0.32 |
| Number of observations | 493 | 239 | 254 | 493 | 239 | 254 |

Notes: Robust standard errors clustered on branch. Log (loan size) is the dependent variable; results are similar for level loan size. IV specifications use the categorical measures of suggested maturity as the instrument; results are similar if we use the linear instrument.

*** Significant at, or below, 1 percent.

** Significant at, or below, 5 percent.

* Significant at, or below, 10 percent.

level), but IV estimates may be biased toward OLS even at these significance levels (James H. Stock, Jonathan H. Wright, and Motohiro Yogo 2002). Thus, our IV estimates below are more suggestive than conclusive.

Next, we use the maturity suggestions to instrument for actual maturity in two-stage least squares (2SLS) versions of equation (1), in order to estimate the maturity elasticity of demand

longer term. This is a 1.5-fold increase over the baseline proportion of 0.09. The second probit estimates that borrowers who were shown a different maturity from their last loan were 15 percentage points more likely to actually choose a different maturity. Again, the 0.09 who had a long maturity on their prior loan is a natural baseline for comparison, which implies a 1.7-fold increase. So our suggestion effects are large, but smaller than the effects engineered by the actual shift in the status quo in Madrian and Shea.

for consumer credit. Table 8B contains related results. We report specifications using log of loan size as the outcome of interest, and our categorical suggestion instruments; results are similar for other parameterizations and with additional controls for demographics and credit risk. Column 4 suggests that each month of additional maturity increases intensive loan demand by 15.7 percent. Interpolating, these impacts on loan demand are about twice as large as in Attanasio, Goldberg, and Kryiazidou (forthcoming), where a one-year lengthening of maturity increases loan demand by 88.5 percent. This is consistent with credit constraints binding more tightly in the uncollateralized, high-risk South African cash loan market than in the collateralized, relatively low-risk US auto loan market, an intuitive proposition.

Most notably, our maturity effect is large relative to price sensitivity. Loan size responds negatively but insignificantly to price in our maturity-suggestion sample (Table 8B, column 4; Attanasio et al. also find insignificant price sensitivity in their full sample). The standard error does not rule out economically meaningful price sensitivity, but even if we take the largest price response contained in our 95 percent confidence interval ($-0.094 = -0.036 + (-0.029 \times 2)$), a one-month maturity increase has the same effect on loan size demand as a 167-basis-point ($0.157/0.094$) decrease in the monthly interest rate. The interest rate point estimate implies that a one-month maturity increase has the same effect as a 436-basis-point decrease ($0.157/0.036$).

Following Attanasio et al., we also explore whether maturity elasticities vary with ex ante liquidity constraints, as proxied by income. Columns 2, 3, 5, and 6 of Table 8A show that the maturity suggestion is a large and (marginally) significant predictor for both low- and “high”-income borrowers. High-income borrowers are not wealthy in an absolute sense, of course: we split the sample at median income. The first-stage point estimates are smaller for high-income borrowers but not significantly different than for low-income borrowers.

The IV estimates in Table 8B show highly significant maturity elasticities for low-income borrowers (column 5) but not for high-income borrowers (column 6). The effect for high-income borrowers is imprecisely estimated: the standard errors do not rule out a large maturity elasticity. But the pattern of OLS results, where low-income and high-income borrowers have almost the same maturity sensitivity (columns 2 and 3), suggests that the IV estimates may indeed be picking up a meaningful difference between low- and high-income borrowers.⁴⁰

Our small sample size for the maturity randomization is too small to get precise estimates of loan *repayment*, and hence profit, elasticities with respect to maturity.

B. Implications for Lender Strategy

Our results suggest that optimizing maturity offerings can be a critical piece of MFI profitability and targeting strategies. But future work will be needed to address whether our demand elasticities translate into higher profits, and extrapolate to other sources of variation in maturities (actual versus suggested) and to other settings.

VII. Conclusion

We use a randomized field experiment to estimate price and maturity elasticities of demand for consumer credit. The sample includes former borrowers from a major, for-profit, South African consumer microlender to the working poor.

We find downward-sloping but relatively flat demand with respect to price throughout a wide

⁴⁰ Tobit estimates that account for censoring at four- and eighteen-month maturities are nearly identical to the OLS estimates.

range of prices (50–200 percent APR) *at and below* the Lender's standard rates (which are the rates members of our sample received on their prior loans). In the Lender's case, the cost of reducing interest rates (lost gross interest revenue on inframarginal loans) slightly exceeded the benefits (increased gross revenue from marginal borrowing, increased net revenue from higher repayment rates).

Thus, our Lender, which had no social targeting objectives, had no incentive to cut rates. Many other microfinance institutions (MFIs) do have targeting objectives. So we use our results to illustrate how an MFI can use randomized experiments to evaluate the trade-off, if any, between expanding access (reaching new poor borrowers), and profitability. In the Lender's case, it could have used loan pricing to expand access cheaply: rate cuts reduced profits, but only by tiny amounts. It also could have used rate cuts to expand access in targeted fashion; e.g., its female and relatively poor borrowers were more price sensitive than average. Cutting rates increased the (debt-weighted) proportion of the Lender's book held by females and the relatively poor.

Policymakers keen on avoiding subsidies often prescribe that MFIs should *raise* rates. Our evidence shows that this would have been disastrous for our Lender. A small sample in our experiment shows that take-up elasticities of demand kinked sharply at the Lender's standard rates, rising to well above unity. Raising rates would have decreased revenue and the Lender's client base. Our results also strongly suggest that raising rates would reduce repayments as well, by exacerbating information asymmetries. In all, we find that the Lender could not have increased profits by changing rates.

We also examine maturity elasticities of demand, following Attanasio, Goldberg, and Kryiazidou (forthcoming). This margin of loan contracting may be critical when liquidity constraints bind but has been neglected by most academics, policymakers, and practitioners. We worked with the Lender to engineer exogenous variation in maturity choice by randomly assigning some nonbinding maturity suggestions (in the form of an example loan presented on a direct mailer). The suggestion strongly predicts actual maturity choice, creating an instrument that enables us to estimate maturity elasticities of demand. Our results suggest that maturity elasticities dwarf price elasticities in economic significance, *on average*. Heterogeneity may be important, however. We find significant maturity elasticities only among relatively low-income borrowers, and while the confidence intervals do not rule out important maturity elasticities for relatively high-income borrowers, the pattern is consistent with liquidity constraints that decrease with income.

Our results suggest that operationally feasible increases in maturities could have large effects on aggregate credit flows in markets where liquidity constraints bind. We estimate that a one-month increase in maturity increased intensive loan demand by about 15 percent in our sample. But our findings leave many questions unanswered, even within sample. Does extending maturities have adverse effects on repayment? Our sample is too small to shed light. Does offering longer maturities increase demand on the extensive margin (i.e., expand access)? We do not find an effect, but this could be due to the nature of the treatment: the Lender randomized suggestions, not actual maturity offers.

The biggest unanswered question with any empirical exercise, of course, is the extent to which results apply to other settings. Preferences, outside options, returns to borrowing (broadly defined), and other elements of the intertemporal optimization problem may vary across settings, producing important variation in elasticities. Or they may not. For example, our price elasticities at relatively high rates are similar to those found for more traditional microcredit in Bangladesh (Dehejia, Montgomery, and Morduch 2005), for consumer loans in Italy (Alessie, Hochguertel, and Weber 2005), and for credit cards in the United States (Gross and Souleles 2002). Our pattern of maturity elasticities is remarkably similar to what Attanasio et al. (forthcoming) find for car loans in the United States.

The external validity question is best addressed with replication studies in other markets of interest; hence, our final point is methodological. It is feasible, and in the interest of many MFIs, to use randomized-controlled trials to optimize contracting strategies with respect to profit and/or targeting objectives. Field experiments are considered best and standard practice by many leading credit card companies and other retailers. MFIs can adapt the methodology to their own marketing approaches and strategic considerations by forming partnerships with researchers. With replication and attention to theory, researchers can use such results to learn more about fundamental questions of market structure, individual decision-making models, and policy parameters.

APPENDIX 1—RECONCILIATION OF SAMPLE FRAMES

| | Frequency | Total |
|--|-----------|--------|
| Sample frame reductions for this paper: | | |
| Total letters mailed | 58,168 | 58,168 |
| Flat or upward-sloping yield curve between 4-, 6-, and 12-month loan offers | 3,000 | 55,168 |
| Mail returned by postal service | 1,358 | 53,810 |
| Offer interest rate higher than rate on prior loan | 632 | 53,178 |
| Number of observations available for analysis | | 53,178 |
| Number of loan applicants | | 4,540 |
| Number of loan applicants with offer interest rate higher than rate on prior loan | | 42 |
| Number of loan applicants with offer interest rate equal or lower than rate on prior loan | | 4,498 |
| Number of approved loan applicants | | 3,887 |
| Number of approved loan applicants with offer interest rate higher than rate on prior loan | | 32 |
| Number of approved loan applicants with offer interest rate equal or lower than rate on prior loan | | 3,855 |
| Number of individuals eligible for multiple terms and shown one and only one term suggestion | | 3,096 |
| Number of loans made to individuals eligible for multiple terms and shown one and only one term suggestion | | 493 |
| Sample frame reductions for information asymmetry paper: | | |
| Total letters mailed | 58,168 | 58,168 |
| Offer interest rate higher than rate on prior loan | 635 | 57,533 |
| Number of observations available for analysis | | 57,533 |
| Sample frame reductions for advertising paper: | | |
| Total letters mailed | 58,168 | 58,168 |
| Pilot letters excluded (did not include advertising treatments) | 4,974 | 53,194 |
| Number of observations available for analysis | | 53,194 |

Notes: Sample reductions are demonstrated sequentially (e.g., 1,423 had mail returned by the postal service, but 65 of those were already removed due to the flat or upward-sloping yield curve). Individuals with flat or upward-sloping yield curves were randomly chosen, and were removed from analysis, since for those who did not borrow it is impossible to infer which rate they rejected. The information asymmetry paper is Karlan and Zinman (2008b). The advertising paper is Bertrand et al. (2008).

APPENDIX 2—FREQUENCY OF MONTHLY OFFER INTEREST RATES

| Rate | Low Risk | | Medium Risk | | High Risk | | Total | |
|------|-----------|------------|-------------|------------|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|
| | Frequency | Percentage | Frequency | Percentage | Frequency | Percentage | Frequency | Percentage |
| 3.25 | 119 | 1.85 | 76 | 1.55 | 575 | 1.35 | 770 | 1.43 |
| 3.49 | 171 | 2.66 | 64 | 1.31 | 738 | 1.74 | 973 | 1.81 |
| 3.50 | 220 | 3.42 | 90 | 1.84 | 525 | 1.24 | 835 | 1.55 |
| 3.75 | 32 | 0.50 | 18 | 0.37 | 53 | 0.12 | 103 | 0.19 |
| 3.99 | 224 | 3.49 | 66 | 1.35 | 735 | 1.73 | 1,025 | 1.90 |
| 4.00 | 166 | 2.58 | 73 | 1.49 | 512 | 1.20 | 751 | 1.40 |
| 4.25 | 40 | 0.62 | 21 | 0.43 | 59 | 0.14 | 120 | 0.22 |
| 4.44 | 162 | 2.52 | 57 | 1.16 | 475 | 1.12 | 694 | 1.29 |
| 4.49 | 247 | 3.84 | 84 | 1.72 | 752 | 1.77 | 1,083 | 2.01 |
| 4.50 | 146 | 2.27 | 82 | 1.67 | 578 | 1.36 | 806 | 1.50 |
| 4.75 | 45 | 0.70 | 22 | 0.45 | 60 | 0.14 | 127 | 0.24 |

APPENDIX 2 CONTINUED—FREQUENCY OF MONTHLY OFFER INTEREST RATES

| Rate | Low Risk | | Medium Risk | | High Risk | | Total | |
|--------|-----------|------------|-------------|------------|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|
| | Frequency | Percentage | Frequency | Percentage | Frequency | Percentage | Frequency | Percentage |
| 4.99 | 122 | 1.90 | 73 | 1.49 | 691 | 1.63 | 886 | 1.65 |
| 5.00 | 234 | 3.64 | 96 | 1.96 | 532 | 1.25 | 862 | 1.60 |
| 5.25 | 45 | 0.70 | 19 | 0.39 | 67 | 0.16 | 131 | 0.24 |
| 5.49 | 206 | 3.21 | 90 | 1.84 | 681 | 1.60 | 977 | 1.82 |
| 5.50 | 348 | 5.42 | 77 | 1.57 | 587 | 1.38 | 1,012 | 1.88 |
| 5.55 | 265 | 4.13 | 71 | 1.45 | 497 | 1.17 | 833 | 1.55 |
| 5.75 | 46 | 0.72 | 20 | 0.41 | 74 | 0.17 | 140 | 0.26 |
| 5.99 | 307 | 4.78 | 134 | 2.74 | 689 | 1.62 | 1,130 | 2.10 |
| 6.00 | 374 | 5.82 | 108 | 2.21 | 577 | 1.36 | 1,059 | 1.97 |
| 6.25 | 49 | 0.76 | 23 | 0.47 | 74 | 0.17 | 146 | 0.27 |
| 6.50 | 325 | 5.06 | 103 | 2.10 | 595 | 1.40 | 1,023 | 1.90 |
| 6.75 | 353 | 5.50 | 122 | 2.49 | 546 | 1.29 | 1,021 | 1.90 |
| 6.99 | 294 | 4.58 | 141 | 2.88 | 755 | 1.78 | 1,190 | 2.21 |
| 7.00 | 405 | 6.30 | 186 | 3.80 | 824 | 1.94 | 1,415 | 2.63 |
| 7.25 | 325 | 5.06 | 161 | 3.29 | 810 | 1.91 | 1,296 | 2.41 |
| 7.49 | 357 | 5.56 | 167 | 3.41 | 992 | 2.33 | 1,516 | 2.82 |
| 7.50 | 337 | 5.25 | 181 | 3.70 | 827 | 1.95 | 1,345 | 2.50 |
| 7.75 | 349 | 5.43 | 169 | 3.45 | 882 | 2.08 | 1,400 | 2.60 |
| 7.77 | 0 | 0.00 | 184 | 3.76 | 801 | 1.89 | 985 | 1.83 |
| 7.99 | 0 | 0.00 | 143 | 2.92 | 1,000 | 2.35 | 1,143 | 2.12 |
| 8.00 | 4 | 0.06 | 157 | 3.21 | 866 | 2.04 | 1,027 | 1.91 |
| 8.19 | 0 | 0.00 | 152 | 3.10 | 995 | 2.34 | 1,147 | 2.13 |
| 8.25 | 6 | 0.09 | 25 | 0.51 | 73 | 0.17 | 104 | 0.19 |
| 8.50 | 4 | 0.06 | 177 | 3.62 | 808 | 1.90 | 989 | 1.84 |
| 8.75 | 13 | 0.20 | 35 | 0.71 | 82 | 0.19 | 130 | 0.24 |
| 8.88 | 0 | 0.00 | 196 | 4.00 | 787 | 1.85 | 983 | 1.83 |
| 8.99 | 0 | 0.00 | 169 | 3.45 | 1,010 | 2.38 | 1,179 | 2.19 |
| 9.00 | 5 | 0.08 | 199 | 4.06 | 848 | 2.00 | 1,052 | 1.96 |
| 9.25 | 13 | 0.20 | 202 | 4.13 | 868 | 2.04 | 1,083 | 2.01 |
| 9.49 | 0 | 0.00 | 193 | 3.94 | 1,128 | 2.65 | 1,321 | 2.45 |
| 9.50 | 5 | 0.08 | 37 | 0.76 | 88 | 0.21 | 130 | 0.24 |
| 9.69 | 0 | 0.00 | 155 | 3.17 | 1,172 | 2.76 | 1,327 | 2.47 |
| 9.75 | 9 | 0.14 | 214 | 4.37 | 866 | 2.04 | 1,089 | 2.02 |
| 9.99 | 0 | 0.00 | 0 | 0.00 | 1,217 | 2.86 | 1,217 | 2.26 |
| 10.00 | 0 | 0.00 | 1 | 0.02 | 1,211 | 2.85 | 1,212 | 2.25 |
| 10.25 | 8 | 0.12 | 3 | 0.06 | 1,239 | 2.92 | 1,250 | 2.32 |
| 10.49 | 0 | 0.00 | 0 | 0.00 | 1,451 | 3.41 | 1,451 | 2.70 |
| 10.50 | 4 | 0.06 | 6 | 0.12 | 1,242 | 2.92 | 1,252 | 2.33 |
| 10.75 | 6 | 0.09 | 4 | 0.08 | 93 | 0.22 | 103 | 0.19 |
| 10.99 | 0 | 0.00 | 0 | 0.00 | 1,364 | 3.21 | 1,364 | 2.53 |
| 11.00 | 5 | 0.08 | 2 | 0.04 | 1,347 | 3.17 | 1,354 | 2.52 |
| 11.11 | 0 | 0.00 | 0 | 0.00 | 1,308 | 3.08 | 1,308 | 2.43 |
| 11.19 | 0 | 0.00 | 0 | 0.00 | 1,463 | 3.44 | 1,463 | 2.72 |
| 11.25 | 10 | 0.16 | 2 | 0.04 | 104 | 0.24 | 116 | 0.22 |
| 11.50 | 3 | 0.05 | 0 | 0.00 | 99 | 0.23 | 102 | 0.19 |
| 11.69 | 0 | 0.00 | 0 | 0.00 | 1,392 | 3.28 | 1,392 | 2.59 |
| 11.75 | 16 | 0.25 | 5 | 0.10 | 1,349 | 3.17 | 1,370 | 2.55 |
| 12.00 | 0 | 0.00 | 2 | 0.04 | 19 | 0.04 | 21 | 0.04 |
| 12.25 | 0 | 0.00 | 4 | 0.08 | 65 | 0.15 | 69 | 0.13 |
| 12.50 | 0 | 0.00 | 2 | 0.04 | 7 | 0.02 | 9 | 0.02 |
| 12.75 | 0 | 0.00 | 2 | 0.04 | 52 | 0.12 | 54 | 0.10 |
| 13.00 | 0 | 0.00 | 5 | 0.10 | 11 | 0.03 | 16 | 0.03 |
| 13.25 | 0 | 0.00 | 8 | 0.16 | 65 | 0.15 | 73 | 0.14 |
| 13.50 | 0 | 0.00 | 3 | 0.06 | 10 | 0.02 | 13 | 0.02 |
| 13.75 | 0 | 0.00 | 15 | 0.31 | 59 | 0.14 | 74 | 0.14 |
| 14.00 | 0 | 0.00 | 0 | 0.00 | 11 | 0.03 | 11 | 0.02 |
| 14.25 | 0 | 0.00 | 0 | 0.00 | 65 | 0.15 | 65 | 0.12 |
| 14.50 | 0 | 0.00 | 0 | 0.00 | 14 | 0.03 | 14 | 0.03 |
| 14.75 | 0 | 0.00 | 0 | 0.00 | 79 | 0.19 | 79 | 0.15 |
| Totals | 6,424 | 100.00 | 4,896 | 100.00 | 42,490 | 100.00 | 53,810 | 100.00 |

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