Click to Share If You Dare: the Impact of the Mere Presence of Social Media Share Icons on Product Evaluation

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In three studies we find that the mere presence of social media share icons increases public self-consciousness which in turn influences product evaluation. Specifically, the presence of such icons improves consumer response to products they want others to see them use, while decreasing evaluation of products consumers find embarrassing.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Online retailers (e.g. Amazon and Target) display on product pages buttons for sharing on social media, offering consumers the ability to instantly announce their interest or purchase of a product to their social media network via Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram. Applications are readily available allowing any online merchant to easily add this feature to their website (e.g. apps.shopify.com). Prior academic work offers numerous reasons why this type of sharing benefits the brand’s relationship with both the sharer and his social media network. However, most consumers do not engage in this sharing behavior. Thus, it is worth considering how the mere presence of such icons on a webpage may influence consumer behavior, in a manner apart from their intended use.

Research shows that “we are what we post”; consumers use the web as a conspicuous form of self-presentation (Schau and Gilly 2003; Wilcox and Stephen 2013). Because conversation via social media is written and thus more asynchronous than oral conversation, it offers greater opportunity to selectively self-present (Walther 2007, 2011). Moreover, this has been shown to have an impact on the products people discuss, with self-presentation having a greater impact online than offline (Bagger and Iyengar 2013). On some level consumers are aware of the self-presentational nature of social media. Our prediction is that the mere presence of social media share buttons on a product description page may change the salience of self-presentation and thus product evaluation. Specifically, if the social media environment is one highly associated with self-presentation, then the presence of share buttons may put consumers in a more self-presentation-focused frame of mind. In other words, consumers may feel more publicly self-conscious or aware of how one is viewed by others (Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss 1975). We predict this increased focus on presentation to others will influence product valuation and related behavior. Indeed, prior work has found that increasing the public nature of a setting influences consumer behavior (Ariely and Levav 2000; Ratner and Kahn 2002). Moreover, there is work revealing that embarrassment influences purchase behavior (e.g. coupon use, Bonnici, et al. 1996), that purchase, alone, can elicit embarrassment (Lau-Gesk and Drolet 2008) and that public self-consciousness influences purchase behavior with respect to embarrassing products (Blair and Rose 2013). Thus, we predict that depending on whether the product is one the consumer would be proud of or embarrassed to have others see him use, the presence of social media icons may benefit or harm product evaluation.

Study 1 tested the hypothesis that adding social media icons to a product page would either increase or decrease product response depending on whether the product is one consumers would (athletic pants, popular body spray deodorant) or would not (compression shaper underwear, acne cream) be proud to show others. Participants were presented with the product based on condition on a screen mimicking popular online shopping sites. For participants in the social media icons present condition, there were Facebook and Twitter share icons at the bottom of the screen. An analysis of three product interest measures (α(3) = .90) revealed no main effect of the presence of icons (M_present = 2.0, SE = .13, M_absent = 2.1, SE = .12, F(1, 142) = .16, p = .69) a marginal effect of presentation desirability M_desirable = 2.2, SE = .12, M_undesirable = 1.9, SE = .13, F(1, 142) = 3.1, p = .08), and a significant two-way interaction of iconsXdesirability F(1, 142) = 5.77, p = .02). Estimated marginal means reveals that for products for which social display is desirable, the presence of social media icons only directionally increased interest (M_present = 2.4, SE = .18, M_absent = 2.0, SE = .16, F(1, 142) = 2.2, p = .14). However, for products for which social display is undesirable, the presence of social media icons significantly decreased interest (M_present = 1.6, SE = .18, M_absent = 2.1, SE = .19, F(1, 142) = 3.64, p = .059). This supports our prediction. Additionally, in support of the automatic nature of this effect, we found the effect held regardless of whether people recall seeing the icons or not.

Study 2 replicated these results (interaction of iconsXdesirability F(1, 434) = 8.46, p = .004) with a different subject population, a different dependent measure of product valuation, and revealed moderated mediation. Specifically public self-consciousness (Scheier and Carver 1985) mediated the relationship between the presence of icons and valuation. Then the type of product, whether desirable or undesirable for display, moderated this effect. The effect of increased self-consciousness on product valuation was positive with products where presentation is desirable (1.65; 95% CI: .79 to 2.85) and negative with products where presentation is undesirable (-.84; 95% CI: -1.96 to -.24).

Study 3 controlled for all aspects of the product while manipulating whether it was one consumers would or would not want others to see them use. Specifically, the product was a book about personal finance, described as targeting an aspirational group, those who are financially well off, or an embarrassing group, those who are bankrupt. Again the results replicated (interaction of iconsXdesirability F(1, 204) = 4.51, p = .04) and again we found moderated mediation.

This research makes several contributions. First, by identifying how the mere presence of icons can influence behavior, our findings reveal the strong inherent meaning of social media in our culture – how the ubiquity of social media has increased focus on self-presentation and decreased privacy. Second, prior research considering social media’s influence on consumer behavior has focused primarily on how consumers use social media. In contrast, in these studies we consider how social media icons influence behavior outside of the context of Facebook, Twitter, etc. and even without engagement. Third, prior work on self-presentation online has focused on product engagement, we find a stronger effect for product avoidance. Fourth, our findings offer an unexpected warning to managers, that the presence of social media icons may not always benefit a brand. Thus this research draws connections between theory around self-presentation, the practice of online marketing, and consumers.

REFERENCES


