



When Posting About Products on Social Media Backfires

The Negative Effects of Consumer Identity Signalling on Product Interest

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What we found

Many brands actively encourage consumers to post about their products on social media. They believe, as conventional wisdom suggests, that this act drives up product sales.

Research from the Oxford Future of Marketing Initiative finds this logic may be flawed. We found consumers become less interested in purchasing a product – and similar types of products – after they post about the product on social media. Notably, this occurs when the product is relevant to a consumer's identity and communicates something about their values (e.g., owning a Tesla implies that you are wealthy and tech savvy) as opposed to serving a function (e.g., 3M tape).

What we did

Our ongoing hypothesis was human beings are naturally inclined to express their identity, and purchasing an identity-relevant product is one way to fulfil this need. However, sharing an identity-relevant product on social media also satisfies this need. Posting about a product in the virtual world, therefore, obviates the need to make a purchase in the real world.

We conducted five experiments to test whether posting about products on social media can negatively affect purchase intent:

In *study 1*, an experiment with 196 students revealed participants that recently posted products to social media that represented their college identity had lower purchase intent for a backpack that prominently displayed their school name.

In *study 2*, an experiment with 281 Pinterest users found consumers were less likely to be interested in purchasing an eco-friendly bag when two conditions were met: One, they had recently posted products that showed they were a 'proud environmentalist'. Two, the posts were publicly visible. Interestingly, the same 'proud environmentalist' posts on private Pinterest boards increased purchase intent significantly.

In *study 3*, an experiment with 204 students showed a social media post must strongly signal identity to have an impact on willingness to pay (WTP). An identity-relevant post proved enough to make a group of students with low school spirit pay less for a university tote bag. But, for those with stronger school identities, the post proved insufficient; their WTP remained unchanged.

In *study 4*, an experiment with 196 students demonstrated identity-relevant postings did not have the same effect on the purchase of more functional products. Students who signalled their school identity through social media were subsequently less likely to purchase an identity-relevant backpack (e.g., a backpack featuring the school name), but just as likely to purchase a plain black backpack.

In *study 5*, an experiment with 306 Pinterest users underscored the importance of salience at the point of purchase. In the immediate aftermath of posting content that signalled they were 'proud environmentalists', participants were less likely to choose an eco-friendly bag. But, only one week later, those posts were no longer top-of-mind, and their purchase behaviour was no longer impacted.

Why it matters

As marketing is increasingly focused on using social media to encourage consumer engagement and the generation of 'earned media', understanding the consequences of consumers product posting is essential.

Our findings have several important implications for how firms conduct social-media marketing if they sell identity-relevant products. At a high level, it means that marketers need to consider whether their word-of-mouth marketing strategies are undermining consumers' intent to purchase. It also means that marketers might want to stop encouraging consumer engagement with identity-relevant products on social media, or at least revise their expectations for what these campaigns might achieve.

Actions

For marketers that want to continue engaging consumers on social media, the research suggests adopting three tactics to lessen the potential for negative consequences: reframe content, incentivise posting, and delay engagement.

- **Reframe content:** By prompting consumers to focus on the functional or practical aspects of their products, marketers can reduce the identity-signalling value that comes from posting about products on social media. This reframing tactic tends to work best in forum-based platforms that are heavy on text (e.g., Reddit), as opposed to platforms that are more visual (e.g., Instagram or Pinterest). For example, to market a Louis Vuitton handbag, marketers might prompt consumers to discuss the craftsmanship and quality of the bag, instead of encouraging them to share photos that speak to the consumers' status level. Of note: These discussions should target consumers pre-purchase, not post-purchase.
- **Incentivise posting:** Identity-signalling is stronger when it is intrinsically motivated. To dampen this effect, marketers can provide an external motivation for posting on social media, such as by offering consumers a product discount or reward for sharing a post. These incentives interfere with consumers' desire to express themselves and lessens the identity-signalling satisfaction they get from posting online.
- **Delay engagement:** Our research found that the psychological effect that consumers experience after posting about products – both the identity-signalling satisfaction and subsequent reduction in purchasing intent – is dynamic and temporary. In fact, most consumers return to their 'natural level,' so to speak, after about 1-2 weeks. Marketers can take advantage of this outcome by delaying their engagement with consumers. For example, after targeting a consumer who has posted about their product on Instagram, marketers might wait two weeks before emailing them a promotional offer. At that point, the consumer would be more likely to receive the message positively and make a purchase.

Further reading

Grewal, Lauren, Andrew T. Stephen, and Nicole Coleman (2019), "When Posting About Products in Social Media Backfires: The Negative Effects of Consumer Identity-Signaling on Product Interest" *Journal of Marketing Research*, 56 (April), 197-210.