Social Noise or Social Signaling? Examining consumer perceptions of organization’s display of social media icons

Kristin Stewart, PhD  
Assistant Professor of Marketing  
College of Business Administration  
California State University San Marcos  
333 S Twin Oaks Valley Rd.  
San Marcos, CA 92096  
760-750-4218

Rebeca Perren, PhD  
Assistant Professor of Marketing  
College of Business Administration  
California State University San Marcos  
333 S Twin Oaks Valley Rd.  
San Marcos, CA 92096  
760-750-8568
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An integral issue in marketing today is determining how the use of social media actually impacts business performance. According to multiple industry reports, many organizations still do not use social media for business purposes. The purpose of this research is to enhance current understanding of specific social media tactics by testing their impact on consumers. In the race to integrate social media campaigns into existing marketing programs, many small businesses set up social media accounts across multiple platforms, but fail to follow through with active engagement. In these situations, the business’s website often displays social media icons, but when customers follow the hyperlinks they may find limited or outdated social media content. We ask, how does the *mere* display of social media icons impact consumer responses?

Using signaling theory we address how information cues or actions of an organization affect consumers’ decisions. Prior research has examined how different types of IT features can act as quality indictors of an organization’s reputation and affect customer’s decisions such as trust and participation (Benlian and Hess, 2011; Cheung, Xiao and Liu, 2014). Consumers often use these cues, in fast automatic processing, to make decisions (Kahneman and Tversky, 1983; Evans and Stanovich, 2013).

Marketing literature would suggest that the mere exposure to social media icons would engender positive dispositions. On the one hand, the *mere presence* of a logo, such as when companies incorporate social media icons on their websites, may influence positive attributes because of the what the logo signals (e.g., capability, approachability, credibility), which suggests companies would benefit from displaying icons regardless of actual execution of social media campaigns. On the other hand, the display of social media icons could signal information or garner expectations about the about the amount of followers, fans, views, likes, favorites and even comments that a company has; so if consumers’ information about the quality social media
engagement (e.g., how well they use it) is also available, and incongruent with expectations (e.g., poor or low quality use) the cues interact with the mere presence of an icon to signal inactivity, which could negatively affect perceptions of the organization. Also, if the icon is incongruent with the consumer or their perception of the company, the icon, through a match-up effect, may have a negative impact (Landau, Nelson & Keefer, 2015).

In three studies the authors will examine consumers’ judgments that a company/brand is credible, connected, likable and caring, as a function of the organization display of social media icons. The first study will examine the signals that certain social media channels send to consumers and whether it differs by age. The second study will use experimental design to manipulate the presence or absence of social media logos, and the extent of engagement in such channels. The third study will investigate the influence of moderating variables (i.e., consumer age and social media icon-industry match) on purchase decisions.

It is expected the consumers will be cued by social media logos, and what they signal may influence judgments about the brand. Companies are expected to benefit from the mere exposure of a brand, but experience negative effects when the quality of use is poor. Past research suggests online shoppers need unbiased and objective information to make their judgments and product choices, yet, social media logos might signal this objectivity to consumers as they enable both peer-peer and consumer-company interactions. It is expected from the results that unknown companies or small businesses might favorably influence consumers’ judgments and decisions towards them simply by incorporating social media logos on their website. Additionally, deepening a company’s social media engagement might strengthen their perceived credibility, as deep social engagement can increase the amount of unbiased information available to consumers.
References


