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Social Media, “Likes”, and their Affects on Individuals

It is 2015 and social media has quite literally taken over the world. At the tips of our fingers we hold access to not only unlimited amounts of information, but unlimited connections with other human beings. With the rise of social media and new technology comes incredibly positive societal changes, like the ability for citizens of Africa to hear about what is happening to citizens of Japan within moments and at the touch of a button. This unprecedented level of connectedness via social media is an amazing development, but with it comes new, potentially harmful advances, the most notable of which is the concept of a “like”. Be it Facebook’s “like”, Instagram’s “heart”, or Twitter’s “favorite”, almost every form of relevant social media provides a way for one user to validate another with the click of a button. On the other hand, it also provides a way for one user to invalidate another by choosing not to click said button. Born of social media’s inherently “social” nature, the development of the concept of a “like” as an interaction between two people has drastically changed the way individuals view themselves and each other.

Because “likes” are a relatively new development, and because they are intangible and thus a bit ambiguous, it is hard to define what a “like” is and what its implications are. Facebook defines a “like” quite simply by saying, “clicking ‘like’ below a post on Facebook is an easy way to let people know you enjoy it without leaving a comment” (Facebook). Many experts argue that the concept of a “like” is in fact much more complex than an easy means by which to convey enjoyment. In fact, “likes” have developed into a way for people to seek and express approval more so than enjoyment. In a study conducted with college students in Chicago, those who admitted to using social media sites on a daily basis agreed that “likes” are very highly valued, explaining that a high number of likes is used as a “tool of verification or acceptance within their group of peers” (Tolly). Many also explained that if a tweet, picture, or status did not receive what they considered to be enough likes, they would remove it. Many have begun to notice a direct correlation between number of likes and self-esteem. One college student explained, “I feel if people post selfies where they’re all dressed up and don’t get any likes, it makes them feel unattractive. The more likes someone gets, the higher their self-esteem is, because they feel liked by other people” (Perez). It is not new information that an individual’s self-esteem is often determined, or at least influenced, by the way others feel about them. What is new about this idea, though, is that social media users understand a “like” as an expression of how someone feels about them. What may seem like a simple click carries much more weight; each “like” or “non-like” is perceived as a statement of opinion, a validation or invalidation. This phenomenon has led to a more detailed study of social media and its potential effects on users.

To further understand the true meaning of this new way of expressing approval or enjoyment, researchers have begun studying what can basically be understood as the psychology of likes. What does a like really mean, and why does it matter? First of all, scientists have found a correlation between brain activity and the release of oxytocin and dopamine with social media “likes”. Dopamine, which is labeled by scientists a pleasure chemical in the brain, creates feelings of desire, want, and pleasure. “Dopamine is stimulated by unpredictability, by small bits of information, by reward cues – pretty much the exact conditions of social media” (Seiter, 2015). These “reward cues” are what society knows as “likes”- a so called reward for posting something that others deem appropriate, and they have a very real affect on the brain. Chicago University’s Booth Business School gathered research on the issue, and concluded that people quite literally crave social media. In fact, data suggests that tweeting may be harder to resist than drugs and alcohol (Meikle, 2015). Similarly, oxytocin, known as the “cuddle chemical” by many, is the chemical released in the body and brain when you kiss or hug someone. The release of this chemical leads to feelings of calmness, trust, and lowered stress levels. A study of social media users found that this chemical is released when posting on social media. In just ten minutes of social media use, it was found that oxytocin release levels increased by as much as 13%. To put that in perspective, this is equivalent to the oxytocin release levels measured in people on their wedding day (Seiter, 2015). Because human beings naturally crave stress reduction and feelings of calmness, trust, and love, it makes sense that the release of these hormones are what contributes to the addictiveness of social media use and the endless pursuit of “likes” and external validation. This research may help us to understand why people post in the first place, and why they rely so heavily on the confirmation that comes with each “like” they receive; this phenomena can be explained by science.

Perhaps people are having a hard time controlling their social media use, and maybe when they do use social media they care quite a lot about “likes”, but is that a bad thing? Many scientists, researchers, and social media users alike would argue yes. In a study conducted by Rutgers University School of Communication and Information, it was concluded that the average human spends 30-40% of their time speaking talking about themselves during a face-to-face conversation. This number doubles to an alarming 80% when posting online, meaning 80% of the time that someone posts on social media, it is about themselves specifically (Naaman, *et. al.,* 2015). Understanding this in conjunction with how important number of “likes” has become to those who post, many have begun to blame “likes” and social media for an increase in selfishness or self-absorption.

The alternative to receiving a lot of “likes” is receiving no “likes”, or not enough “likes” – and then what? Studies have shown that many social media users who receive fewer likes have reported feeling as if they “go unnoticed” are “less important” or are “not well-liked” (Perez, 2015). These thoughts can often lead to feelings of envy, perhaps of other users who receive more likes, and even depression. “We found that if Facebook users experience envy of their friends on Facebook, they are more likely to report feelings of depression”, said a Professor of the University of Missouri, who conducts research on this issue and similar issues (Hurst, 2015). The way social media users, young adults in particular, perceive themselves and each other online has a huge affect on their mindset and therefore their wellbeing (Beres, 2015). Evidently, self-perception and perceptions about others are largely correlated to the amount of “likes” each user receives. If those who are not receiving as many “likes” feel invalidated, envious, and even depressed, then it follows logically that those who do rack up high numbers should have a more positive social media experience, but that is not always the case.

For those users who do receive a lot of “likes”, there is evidence that they, too, experience negative effects. Social media is all about self-presentation and the way you choose to present or brand yourself for the online world. 68% of people say they post on social media as a way to give others a sense of who they are, what they like, and what they care about (Seiter, 2015). Thus, users are presenting their friends and followers with the best, or “coolest” version of themselves. Many social media users also admitted that they are very selective in the things they choose to post on social media, opting for the moments that look most like they are having a great time, with the hopes of receiving a large amount of “likes” for their efforts (Beres, 2015). For those who have mastered the art of presenting the “perfect” person online and garnering a high number of “likes” as a result, studies show it can negatively influence their mindset and wellbeing. Twenty out of twenty three students interviewed at Columbia College claim that social media has caused anxiety or added stress to their college experience (Tolly, 2015). Maintaining an online image or persona can be harmful to the user. “I think it adds a lot of pressure to be the perfect person because that’s how we make ourselves look online” explains one avid social media user and student (Tolly, 2015). In addition, those who tend to earn a lot of likes experience what is referred to as the “reciprocity effect”. Reciprocity is basically our natural instinct to give back to those who have given to us. In order to test the strength of this instinct, one sociologist completed a study during which he sent out 600 random Christmas cards. Despite not knowing to whom he was sending them, he received 200 in return (Seiter, 2015). Clearly, reciprocity is a very strong instinct and it has carried over into the world of social media. Those who receive a lot of “likes” tend to feel obligated to return the favor, and thus end up following and liking a great deal of photos and posts that they ordinarily would not. This process has become known on social media sites like Instagram as “like for like”, and has even become a common hash tag among users looking for likes from strangers. Said users then tend to feel overwhelmed, and also experience feelings of guilt if they do not follow through with returning “likes” (Seiter, 2015).

With any advancements, technology or otherwise, comes societal changes both positive and negative. The interconnectedness of our Internet age has led to wonderful progress in terms of communication and information sharing. With that being said, it has also led us into a time where social media use is being compared to drugs and alcohol in its level of addictiveness. Alongside social media we have been introduced the new, somewhat ambiguous concept of a “like”. What may seem like a harmless aspect of social interaction has proven otherwise, and its harmful affects are not limited simply to those who do not receive them. Those who get five likes and those who get four thousand are experiencing very similar outcomes; negative mental and emotional effects that correlate directly to number of “likes” received. The data is consistent, and both researchers and social media users themselves tend to agree; a large portion of our society, especially young adults, are being negatively affected by their social media use. Social media and its affect on self-esteem and the way we perceive others is irrefutable. As society continues to trend towards using the Internet and technology as a means of communication, we inadvertently strengthen the importance and relevance of “likes” and their role as a means by which to base a person’s worth.

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