

## The Power of Instagram ‘Like’

**Sophie Ariella Tanujaya**

English Department, Faculty of Humanities and Creative Industries, Petra Christian University,  
Siwalankerto 121-131, Surabaya 60236, INDONESIA  
Email: a11180020@john.petra.ac.id

### ABSTRACT

This study aims to find out how Instagram ‘Likes’ affect its receivers. The source of the data is in-depth interviews with four informants, two from each gender. The informants come from the age group of 18—24 because adolescents born in the late 1990s or early 2000s grew up with the emergence of social media; thus. Coincidentally, people from the aforementioned age group are also the most susceptible to mental health issues. The author implemented ethnography in data collection and analyzed it using Cooley’s ‘looking-glass self’ theories. The findings reveal that Instagram ‘Likes’ have subliminal power over the receivers through the means of self-perception, interpersonal relations, and follow-up actions.

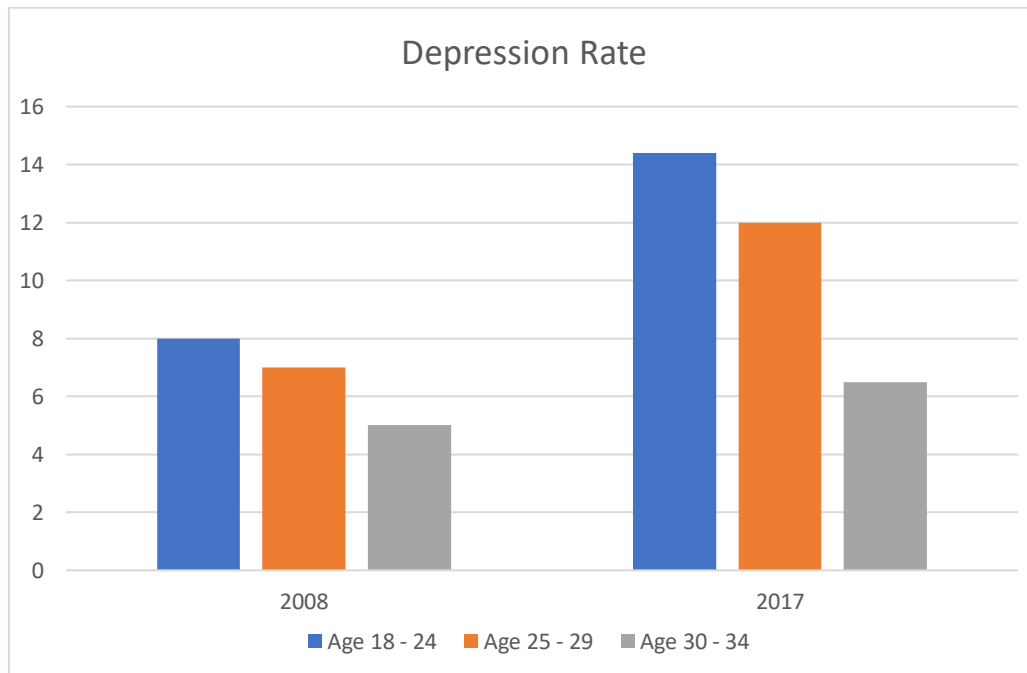
Keywords: *Instagram Like, Power relation, Looking-glass Self; Social media, Instagram*

### INTRODUCTION

When Instagram incorporated the ‘Like’ feature on the platform, they dissolved ‘power’ into a meticulously-crafted institution that impacted the lives of millions by a simple fingertip motion. An Instagram ‘Like’ is one of the most prominent yet vicious features on the platform. It is defined as ‘a clickable button to let the ‘uploader’ know that the ‘liker’ appreciates the post’ (What is an Instagram Like?, n.d.). The button comes with a hollow heart-shaped icon which will turn red when people double tap on the post or press the ‘Like’ button. Although ‘Like’ comes across as an arbitrary social construct, the abundance or drought of ‘Like’ can affect its receivers—in this case, the people who upload the posts—profoundly. Similar studies done on Instagram’s sister-platform, Facebook, have shown how people who receive a few ‘Likes’ fall into what psychologists describe as ‘Facebook depression’ (Blease, 2015).

As of August 2020, there were 77.19 million Instagram users from Indonesia. Young Indonesian people from the age of 18—24 make up the biggest share of user group on Instagram. In 2020, 36.3% of people from the aforementioned age group were believed to be the most active users on Instagram, followed closely by people from the age of 25—34 with 15.5% (Nurhayati-Wolff, 2020). These age groups also grew up with the emergence of social media, with MySpace as the pioneer and trendsetter in the early 2000s (Ortiz-Ospina, n.d.). Having spent their adolescent years surrounded by social media, these young people have become the most techno-dexterous. Unfortunately, they may also be the most prone to its negative influence because they are in an age group that is susceptible to mental health issues like depression (Brueck, 2019).

Apart from the hormone fluctuation, it is worth nothing that young adults born in the late 1990s and/or early 2000s experience more frequent depressive episodes than those of the same age group one decade prior. Hagell’s (2012) chart explains this phenomenon in more details:



(Hagell, 2012)

A major depressive episode, also known as 'clinical depression', occurs when the brain does not secrete sufficient serotonin (a hormone that induces happiness) due to one reason or another: bereavement, traumatic event, and substance abuse, to name a few (Kanter, Busch, Weeks, & Landes, 2008). The existence of Instagram and other social media platforms may add to the damage. Hence, the author wishes to study the impacts of Instagram 'Like' on the said age group.

The author's research question is, 'How does an Instagram 'Like' affect the receivers?' The purpose of this study is to understand the often-subliminal effects of Instagram 'Like' on young people using Foucault's power relation theories. The informants will include two men and two women from the age of 18—24.

## METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research employs an ethnographic approach with Cooley's looking-glass self theories as data analysis tool. Ethnography itself is "a qualitative methodology that lends itself to the study of the beliefs, social interactions, and behaviors of small societies, involving participation and observation over a period of time, and the interpretation of the data collected" (Naidoo, 2012). Another description of ethnography is the 'portrait of the people' (Dr. Erin Mayo, 2017). The researcher will act as an observer, interviewer, or participant observer. The data will be collected through observations and interviews with the informants.

The data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews with four informants. The informants consist of two female and two male from the age group of 18—24, an age group that makes up the biggest user share on Instagram. The author chose this number to include as much diversity as possible in order to gain the most generalized result. Participants in research should reflect the diversity of all culture and conditions, considering all aspects such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, among others (Diversity in research participation: Why it's important, n.d.). Due to the ongoing pandemic, the interviews were held online for safety reasons.

## FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

This article presents the three most commonly found influences Instagram 'Likes' have on the subjects: first, the form of self-perception; secondly, the indicator of interpersonal relations; and, finally, the prompt for further actions.

### i. Form of Self-Perception

Humans tend to find meaning in everything and shape their identity, whether it is from a religious belief, childhood traumas, or social acceptance. Despite its ambiguous definition, one way we could describe it is, "a predicate, which functions as an identifier, i.e. a marker that distinguishes and differentiates one object from another object (Sollberge, 2013)." One of the most famous theories revolving identity is Cooley's concept of 'looking-glass self'. In *Human Nature and the Social Order*, Cooley stated, "The concept of the looking glass self demonstrates that self-relation, or how one views oneself is not a solitary phenomenon, but rather includes others (citation)." This idea of how one views oneself from a 'looking-glass' also happens in the physical world. In order to see certain parts of ourselves, we need a looking glass, more commonly known as a mirror. Hence, to fully understand ourselves, we require external indicators as well. Through this perception, Instagram 'Likes' serve as the 'looking glass' to define one's identity, by indicating perception, pride, and social capital.

Firstly, 'Likes' can create a molded perception of oneself. This perception is a mixture of one's own perception, their preconception of how other people view them, and judgement or feedback from other people (citation). A female informant has a perception of herself as someone who values aesthetic, but has a witty side as well. Therefore, she creates a certain persona on her Instagram that she is that kind of person. The judgement (Likes) she gets later would indicate if others view her the same way as well. From those combined, she would obtain a conclusion of what kind of person she is.

Secondly, 'Likes' can encourage one's pride. Cooley's self-idea principle element is "pride" or "mortification" from how other people give feedback. For example, when a male and female informant received 'Likes' from experts on the field, they associate it as having a 'higher value' than if regular people like it. For context, the male informant does cover songs and food photography, so whenever one who works in that field likes his posts, he would feel proud. The informants also associate 'Likes' with 'acceptance' and 'popularity'. One female informant mentioned how there is a fear of "not being accepted" if her friend does not like her posts. She also added, "...because usually, people associate 'Likes' with popularity, with being liked by people."

Finally, there is this idea of 'Likes' being a social capital. Social capital is "those tangible assets [that] count for most in the daily lives of people: namely goodwill, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit (Keeley, 2007)." Unlike YouTube views and advertisement revenue that pays the creators, Instagram 'Likes' reward the original posters with exposure. A female informant, for example, likes it when her friends like her stitching account posts because she can use it as a portfolio. Another male informant also uses his account to promote his work as a social media manager. He said his portfolio page could give the impression for plausible employers that he is a social media manager that they could hire. One of the female informants reposted her post to her Instagram

Story to garner more attention. For a male informant, he would proceed to analyze what works and what not in his content.

## ii. Indicator of Interpersonal Relations

On this day and age, especially with the pandemic going on, social media becomes an efficient mode to connect with other people—or at least, social connection was one of the initial reasons people would open a social media account (Why use social media?, n.d.). There are certainly other reasons why one would open the account, but as the name itself suggests, social media presence can be an indicator of “social” life. If one person has around seven-hundred acquaintances in real life, it will be easier to keep in touch with them through social media, posting life updates using photos and captions, and appreciating others’ through likes and comments. Texting seven-hundred every day would be a chore, but liking other people’s posts only takes less than a second. There are several indicators implied by this, such as a reminder of the likers’ existence, signifier of proximity, and hierarchy of expectation.

First of all, Instagram ‘Likes’ can be the indicator of proximity. Firstly, a male informant mentioned how he notices when people who rarely or never like his posts suddenly do. He would say, “*Tumben*,” which means, “It is unusual for you to do this.” Likewise, the informants also notice people who rarely or never miss to like their posts. A female informant mentions her boyfriend, who likes all of her posts, and her close circle, who like almost all. Secondly, there is a signifier of proximity indicated by who like the original posters’ posts the most. As an illustration, in the previous point, it is mentioned that the female informants’ boyfriend never misses to like all of her posts, but her friends would rarely miss a post. A male informant who owns a poetry account mentions his friend who initially suggested him opening the account rarely misses to like the posts. She is not only the person who suggested the idea, but she is also a close friend of his in real life.

Last but not least, the informants tend to have more expectations towards some people to like their posts. According to Cooley, people tend to appropriate certain actions, especially from people they are closely connected with (p.102 PDF). Whether they act upon it or not is another matter, but one female informant said that if her close friends or significant other like her posts, it is “to be expected”. She also stated, “They do not have to, but it would be nice if they do.” It also explains why the male informant who owns a poetry account feels upset whenever his friend does not like his post. To provide some context, the friend was the person who suggested the informant to open the poetry account, and she almost never fails to like his posts. The informant said, “*Cause*, I feel like, that’s her way of showing me that she’s probably the least that my poetry can reach a wider audience. And when she stops, it feels as if she has lost her faith in me.”

## iii. Encouraging Further Actions

In essence, humans always strive for more power. Foucault defines modern power as “an interactive network of shifting and changing relations among and between individuals, groups, ... even personal relationships (including our relationships to ourselves)”. The influence attempt, successful or unsuccessful, has very likely changed both the influencing agent and the target, changed their perceptions of themselves, and changed their perceptions of the other (Raven, 2008). As a social capital, Instagram ‘Likes’ have the ability to influence its receivers.

Throughout the study, the author has found two main common reactions to receiving or not receiving Instagram ‘Likes’. The two groups are: honest, and defensive. The first group admits

the 'upset' or 'joyous' feeling they have whenever they receive or not receive 'Likes', whereas the other group tend to make up reasoning as to why certain people do not like their posts. Reasons that were mentioned are like "maybe the algorithm does not pick up the post", "maybe the friend does not open their Instagram", among others. In psychology, this response is actually studied as two methods of defense mechanism: "Denial" and "Rationalization". Denial is "... probably one of the best-known defense mechanisms, used often to describe situations in which people seem unable to face reality or admit an obvious truth (Anshori, 2011)." Similarly, rationalization is an act of "explaining an unacceptable behavior or feeling in a rational or logical manner, avoiding the true reasons for the behavior (Anshori, 2011)."

Depending on their reactions, the uploaders will take respective actions. For example, whenever one of the female informants gets 'Likes' from her followers, she would check the liker's profile in case they posted something new recently, but only if it is not more than three days. She says that there is an unwritten rule that if one likes a post older than three days, it will be considered as "stalking". Another example is evaluating the content in case they can improve on. One of the male informants who works part-time as a food photographer and social media manager often compares the number of 'Likes' he gets on his photos to that of another food photographer. After doing so, he thinks, "I would definitely reflect to myself, and evaluate myself ... 'What kind of content can I present?' So, I will not be stuck with, 'Why don't they like it?' It's more on what I can do, so they will like it."

## REFERENCES

- Anshori, A. (2011). FLEMING'S DEFENSE MECHANISMS IN STEPHEN CRANE'S THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE. *Journal of English and Education*, 5(2).
- Blease, C. R. (2015). Too Many 'Friends,' Too Few 'Likes'? Evolutionary Psychology. *Review of General Psychology*, 1.
- Brueck, H. (2019, March 21). *Depression among gen z is skyrocketing - a troubling mental-health trend that could affect the rest of their lives*. Retrieved February 21, 2021, from <https://www.businessinsider.com/depression-rates-by-age-young-people-2019-3?r=US&IR=T>
- Dr. Lorin M. Mayo. (2017, September 14). *Ethnography* [Video]. YouTube:<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aOBh8haj4E0&t=183s>
- Kanter, J., Busch, A., Weeks, C., & Landes, S. (2008). The nature of clinical depression: Symptoms, syndromes, and behavior analysis. Retrieved February 21, 2021, from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2395346/>
- Keeley, B. (2007). *Oecd insights human capital: how what you know shapes your life*. OECD.
- Naidoo, L. (2012). Ethnography: An Introduction to Definition and Method. *An Ethnography of Global Landscapes and Corridors*, 1.
- Nurhayati-Wolff, P., & 23, S. (2020, September 23). Indonesia: Share of Instagram users by age 2020. Retrieved February 21, 2021, from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1078350/share-of-instagram-users-by-age-indonesia/>
- Ortiz-Ospina, E. (n.d.). The rise of social media. Retrieved February 21, 2021, from <https://ourworldindata.org/rise-of-social-media>
- Raven, B. H. (2008). The Bases of Power and the Power/Interaction Model of Interpersonal Influence. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 8(1), 9-9. doi:10.1111/j.1530-2415.2008.00159.x
- Rousseau, N., Ed. (2002). *Self, Symbols & Society*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Sollberge, D. (2013, July 31). On identity: from a philosophical point of view. Retrieved from NCBI: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3751052/>

**Tanujaya:** The Power of Instagram 'Like'

*What is an Instagram Like?* (n.d.). Retrieved from Pixlee:

<https://www.pixlee.com/definitions/definition-instagram-like>

Why use social media? (n.d.). Retrieved from University of Cumbria:

<https://my.cumbria.ac.uk/Student-Life/it-media/Social-Media-Guidance/Why-use-social-media/>