Liking What You See:
A Study on the Motives Behind Instagram Likes

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ABSTRACT

The world has never been more connected than it is today and one key contributor to that fact is the growth of social networking sites. With the sum of about 4.2 billion active users, more than half of the human population, social networking sites have become a highway for information. From holding private conversations to appreciating others' posts, social media users leave crumbs of information – one of which is a "Like". 'Like' carries a plethora of information, and decoding it offers invaluable insight. This research aims to study the motives behind the act of 'Liking' an Instagram post. Following the data collection, an analysis using Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory will be carried out. With it, the researcher concluded that the motives behind 'Liking' an Instagram posts are to manage relationship, form an identity, state affinity, provide support, and prompt similar behavior.

Keywords: *Social media, Instagram, Instagram Like, Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), Motives*

INTRODUCTION

Social networking sites have seen an outstanding growth in prominence, as well as the number of active users. Based on a report published on January 2021, social networking sites have collectively accumulated 4.2 billion active users (Kemp, 2021). These users browse through social media for a number of reasons, such as keeping themselves updated with the latest happenings or their circle's social activities, both of which may involve the 'Like' function. This function, often represented by the symbol of an approving thumbs-up gesture, is present in practically every social media accessible today. However, this has not always been the case. Although Facebook, the most popular and widely used social networking site to date, has existed since 2004, it was not until 2009 that the 'Like' button made its first appearance. It is important to note that in 2019, Facebook Inc., the company which currently owns Instagram, was opening discussions regarding the possibility of hiding the amount of 'Like' in a post from everyone but the account owner. An argument was made that the removal of the 'Like' counter could reduce the dissatisfaction that users experienced due to the comparison of 'Likes' received from peers.

It is true that scholars have kept a great interest on how a 'Like' affects the receiver's self-esteem (Burrow & Rainone, 2017) and wellbeing (Coulthard & Ogden, 2018). Similarly, other studies explored the possible connection between social networking sites and depression (Blease, 2015), as well as other influence that social media might possess. In contrast, studies about the motive behind 'Liking' a social media post are scarce. Hence, the situation warrants further research that will expand and refine present studies of the subject—a research which questions the motives behind the act of 'Liking' and whose purpose is to reveal them.
This research investigates the motives behind the act of 'Liking' on Instagram so as to avoid redundancy from focusing on already researched social networking sites such as Facebook (Ozanne et al., 2017) and explore different motives that might arise from the different nuances that the two possess. One of those nuances is Facebook's sharing aspect of its 'Like' function.

When a Facebook user 'Likes' a post, the post will be automatically shared in his/her friends' 'Wall'. This setting is not applicable on Instagram. Consequently, research findings on Facebook 'Like', such as impression management, is also not utilizable in analyzing Instagram 'Like'. This research will use four Indonesian Instagram users from the age of 18-34 years as research informants. This study is also limited to a six-month research period under social-distancing restrictions. As such, all observations and interviews will be conducted online. There is a great disproportion between the number of research that studied the effects of social media 'Like' and the motives that prompt a user to 'Like' a post. This fact makes the proposed research a novel one—one that has very little to go on and can lay the groundwork for future studies. A research which, in fact, endeavored to study a similar topic, however, was the one carried out by Marie Ozanne and her colleagues in 2017, titled "An Investigation Into Facebook "Liking" Behaviour: An Exploratory Study." Using grounded theory approach, which was introduced by Glaser in 1978, the researchers set out to answer three research questions: the gratified usage motives, Facebook 'Like' as an expression, and desired impression. After conducting their initial coding, further category refinement, data collection, and analysis, they identified that the gratified usage motives were entertainment, information/discovery, self-identification, and bonding. This means that the 'Like' function was used to acknowledge the gratification obtained from witnessing something funny or amusing, learning new information, defining oneself through one's relation with the content of the post, and supporting communities which include friends, family members, or locals.

In relation to the second research question, the researchers also discovered that more than 3 out of 10 posts were consciously 'Liked' to share information. This behavior became a subject of interest because it meant that social media users, at times, opted for the 'Like' function instead of the 'Share' function to share information. The third research question focused on the reason behind this phenomenon, which was impression management. On Facebook, when a person hits the 'Like' button, the site will share the 'Liked' post to that person's friends, making them aware of what he/she likes. This quirk has a huge implication on the 'Like' button usage. It becomes a way to give information to others about one's hobby, view on certain matters, and what represents a person's extended-self without being necessarily explicit. A bad impression can be made when a person uploads a post that is self-promotional in nature, projecting a sense of grandiose and narcissism. 'Likes', however, are seen as less committal while still representing the person's extended-self.

This research will employ Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), formerly known as Social Learning Theory. It proposes that a great deal of learning and behavioral changes happen through observation (Bandura, 1977). To illustrate, an understanding of Albert Bandura's triadic reciprocal causation model between a person, its behavior, and the environment is crucial. He posited that the three affect one another reciprocally. When a certain displayed behavior is accepted and rewarded by the environment, the person internalizes it and will perform said behavior more often in the future. What separates this occurrence with operant conditioning and classical conditioning is that it can happen to an individual, and be learnt by another person. It means that learning does not only occur when experiencing feedback firsthand, but also through observing models. Similarly, however, Social Cognitive Theory holds that behavioral learning involves outcome expectation and expectancy. Outcome expectation is what one believes would result of one's action, meanwhile expectancy is more focused on how one values that outcome. Another determinant for behavior is self-efficacy. Self-efficacy, often confused with the aforementioned outcome expectation, is in actuality, "the individual's conviction that he or she can execute the behavior needed to produce the desired outcome" (Landry, 2003). Outcome expectation, the prediction of what comes after an action, coupled with expectancy or how one values that outcome and self-efficacy, the belief of how capable one is in performing the action necessary to produce the expected outcome, makes up a chunk of the rationality behind a behavior. Lastly, habit also affects behavior. If outcome expectation, expectancy, and self-

efficacy sound very intentional and deliberate, habit undermines them. The consolidating of a set of practices over a long course of time lowers the amount of thought given behind them, or as one article studying a similar topic put it, "On the other side, giving Likes can also happen out of habit or 'aimlessly'" (Rosenthal-von der Pütten et al., 2019. p. 78).

METHODOLOGY

The data collection stage of the research employs ethnographic approach, which seeks to study human behavior, motive, and social interaction within a specific cultural context (Dharamsi & Charles, 2011) in their "naturally occurring settings" (Cassell et al., 2014) with minimum amount of obstruction from the researcher while a constant note-taking takes place. Following the observation, the researcher will also conduct interviews for further data collection and clarify the reasoning behind the informants' actions. An operating recorder will be present throughout the interview to document the questions asked and the answers given, the recording of which will be transcribed. This approach eliminates one potential factor that might affect the validity of the gathered data—the researcher's engagement—allowing the researcher to take on the perspective of the informants. Two men and women will be selected as research informants. The first informant selection criterion is people from the age of 18-34 years. This age group represents the biggest age group of Instagram users (Tankovska, 2021). A second criterion is Instagram users who open their Instagram on daily basis to upload a post and/or check their feed/Story. Active Instagram users are chosen due to their engagement and interaction frequency. The third and last criterion is 'Liking' behavior. Two informants (a man and a woman) are chosen for their 'generous Liking' behavior, which means they tend to like almost every post that appears on their timeline. Meanwhile, the other two informants (a man and a woman) are chosen for their 'selective' Liking behavior, which suggests that they only 'Like' certain posts. The selection of the two existing types, along with the first two criteria, ensures the inclusion of the relevant aspects of this research. The researcher will refer to the informants as generous male informant (GMI), generous female informant (GFI), selective male informant (SMI), and selective female informant (SFI). The informants will each present no less than 25 of their most recently 'Liked' posts, which will be used as the basis of the interviews. Once the data is collected, an analysis using Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory will be performed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

After carrying out six separate interviews, several recurring answers have arisen from different informants, signaling the universality of some motives. These motives include:

Managing Relationship
One of the most widespread motive between the informants is relationship management. Relationship management is comprised of several courses of action. They include vicarious conditioning, building commonality and connectedness, and asserting stances. First, a 'Like' can help condition a positively perceived relationship. This is caused by vicarious expectancy learning—the concept of behavioral learning through observation of model responses, or as Bandura (1977, p. 65) put it, "In vicarious expectancy learning, events become evocative through association with emotions aroused in observers by the affective expression of others." This means that a person might feel encouraged to behave in a certain way to reproduce a wanted response in others because of past observation. Contextually, the informants have observed that others responded positively when receiving a 'Like.' This, in turn, promoted amiable treatment and pleasurable effects. However, the opposite is equally true, especially when external reinforcement is introduced into the calculation. Multiple informants stated that another person had directly requested that they 'Like' certain posts. This external reinforcement

to 'Like' a post foretells a potential crack in relationship if the opposite, not 'Liking' the post, is done. Another example of a similar circumstance in which a person avoids damaging a relationship based on others' expectation is given GFI, who believes that the head of an organization she once worked together with who also manages the organization's Instagram account expects that account's posts to be Liked by all of its members.

Secondly, a 'Like' also serves as a mean to build commonality and connectedness. Commonality (what one shares with others) and connectedness (the ties linking them together) are prerequisites for groupness (Leppänen et al., 2014, p. 3). To create and sustain a sense of groupness, which is a sense of belonging to a group, individuals must share similarities and ties between them. A 'Like,' thus, becomes an easily employed means of signaling what people have in common. In one interview, when asked why he'd 'Liked' a post promoting an upcoming musical performance, SMI answered with, "Because I saw that my friends also 'Liked' it." He added that, "I saw them had left a 'Like,' so I also left a 'Like' so that they knew I was looking forward to it as well." Not only did it led to the informant initiating a conversation which sees him acting surprised that they share a commonality, but also watching the performance together out of a newly forged sense of groupness.

Third, a 'Like' asserts where two individuals stand in relation to one another. The health of a relationship fluctuates. It can flourish, but it can also wilt depending on the actions of those involved. Furthermore, there is a necessity for an individual to internalize their relationship's health while also sending a message to the other party of how they see it. A 'Like' can serve as a tool to achieve that. One informant, the SFI, stated that as long as the person uploading a post knows each other well enough and are in good terms, she would 'Like' the post, reassuring each other that their relationship is safe. However, if her relationship with one of her friend gets "heated," as she put it, she claimed she might not 'Like' her posts. Moreover, during SMI's freshman year of university, when establishing a support group is paramount, the especially selective informant 'Liked' a post primarily because the uploader was a friend, possibly to cement their relationship status. He mentioned, "Back then, we were already friends," and added that "if we weren't, I wouldn't possibly 'Like' his post."

Identification
Aside from identifying oneself through one's alignment with groups of people, individuals also form their identity through external objects. Possessions and public figures among others can be attributed to individuals and, in the process, become that individual's extended-self (Belk, 1988). Thus, the process of identification becomes a recurrent and active one. In Instagram, users exemplify this by 'Liking' posts made by their favorite artists, authors, etc. One might say that they 'Liked' a post because they like the uploader in the conventional sense. However, reason differs from motive, and one does not 'Like' a post to fancy the uploader. Instead, the 'Like' becomes a proof for the giver themselves that it is something that they admire and identify with.

Thus, as SFI concurred, Instagram users 'Like' certain posts to consolidate their identity through texts that serve as their extended self. In addition, the behavior of 'Liking' or not 'Liking' itself can forge an identity. This process owes its existence to an online social media norm which discourages individuals from 'Liking' their own posts. When the researcher presents the topic of 'Liking' one's own post to each of the four informants, every one of them acknowledges the norm's existence. They realize that others are likely to think poorly of them if they were to 'Like' a post they made themselves and, for the most part, they conformed to it. This already establishes their identity as a norm-abiding social media users. Thus, going against the norm not only risks persecution from other social media users, but also violate an individual's image of themselves. SFI, however, found a way to circumvent this. She does so by 'Liking' her own post, with a different account. It is important to note that the account which

'Likes' her posts, albeit not the one which uploaded the original posts, are run by her and does not conceal her identity. The act, nonetheless, is enough to distance and detach herself from the post that she wouldn't feel guilty in 'Liking' the post.

On the other side, a lone informant consciously decided to oppose the norm. When asked if he had ever 'Liked' his own post, GMI answered with "I have; almost all the time, and I'm not ashamed of admitting it." He mentioned that in senior high school, his peers had ridiculed him for 'Liking' his own post. Another one expressed that a person should, at least, avoid being the first one to 'Like' their own post. The comments made against him did not stop GMI from 'Liking' posts he make to this day. This is significant, because the presupposition of freedom is what gives power's relation to subjectivity—how one relates with oneself—meaning. Michel Foucault stated that "Where there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault, 1978). In recognizing the list of possible options, in regards to conforming to any given societal norm, one can define one's own identity. As the Foucauldian scholar Judith Butler put it, "There is a recognition that power is involved in the very making of who we are" and that to a man, power "attaches him to his own identity" (Butler, 2002).

Stating Affinity

An Instagram 'Like' also represents the giver's affinity. What this achieves is it encourages the creation of posts that are similar to the previously 'Liked' one. In Bandura's triadic reciprocal causation term (Bandura, 1977), the environment affects the person (uploading a desirable post) and, in turn, the behavior ('Liking' the post) affects the environment (uploading similarly attractive posts). This is exemplified by the answer given from SMI. One Instagram account that he followed uploads humorous posts in Mandarin, which the informant liked greatly. When asked why he 'Liked' them, the informant answered that the posts are enjoyable and that the 'Like' lets others know that he enjoyed it. Further enquiry uncovered that "others" does not refer to acquaintances who follow both the humorous account and the informant, resulting in those acquaintances being notified what the informant likes, as there were none, but rather, it refers to the uploader. The function of the 'Like' is to signal what people want to see more from the uploader and what contents work. This is also the case with physical products that are promoted through Instagram posts, as proven by SFI, who selectively 'Liked' posts that feature products she's purchased and enjoyed in the past.

Providing Support

One of the more altruistic motive behind the bestowing of a 'Like' is to provide support. How individuals came to recognize giving a 'Like' as a way to provide support has its roots in the triadic reciprocal causation model and outcome expectation. GFI noted that she thinks what her 'Like' would achieve is making the receiver happier. When asked why, she pointed at the 'Like' counter; she thinks that seeing a high 'Like' count can make the uploader feel a sense of joy. This is due in large part to the environment affecting the person in the past. The informant added that, "If I post something, and I see that the post has garnered quite a bit of 'Like,' I'll feel a little happier," she continued with, "that's why I did the same thing to them." This means that because the informant has been subjected to the situation herself, she can expect what outcome might occur because of her action. The other form of support is a monetary one. SFI claimed to have always 'Liked' collaborative posts made by her idol and various brands. After being enquired why, she stated that she had a feeling that a considerable portion of income that her idol receives comes from brand deals. Additionally, a friend of her, who is also a social media influencer, had explained to her about the concept of engagement in Instagram which is measured by dividing the sum of 'Likes' and comments an account gets by the amount of its followers. An Instagram account with high level of engagement makes for a great target of advertisements, which is why the informant thought her 'Likes' would help the idol.

Prompting Similar Behavior

Lastly, handing out a 'Like' is also used to amass some for oneself. That a 'Like' holds value is undisputable. This results in people feeling indebted after receiving them. One of the easiest way to "repay" that debt is to give a 'Like' back. However, rearranging the order of action also works. Individuals can initiate the feedback loop by 'Liking' another's post first, expecting the other would do the same. SFI exemplifies this when she decisively mentioned that she 'Liked' the posts, because the uploader would 'Like' her posts back, and that she'd stop doing so if the other party did the same, which has happened in the past. GFI shared the same sentiment, though the lack of 'Like' received from others would only lower the amount of 'Like' she gave and not stop it altogether. This is in line with Bandura's triadic reciprocal causation model, where a person's behavior affects the environment, and in turn, the environment alters the person's behavior (Bandura, 1977).

Account Creation, Habit Formation, and Expectancy Decrease

Albeit minor, one noteworthy finding has also been discovered during the interview. As mentioned in the related theory section of the introduction, habit plays a part in shaping behavior. It lends its existence to the duration of one's exposure to the subject, in this case being Instagram. Thus, it is interesting to note that both of the generous informants' oldest accounts have outlived the selective informants' oldest accounts by three years. GMI created his account in 17th February 2014. GFI created her account on April 19th, 2014. SMI created his account on March 2nd, 2017. Lastly, SFI created her account on January 26th, 2017. It suggests that, the longer an individual uses Instagram, the more their 'Liking' habit develops, and the less they produce outcome expectations, resulting in them appearing more "generous" in terms of their 'Liking' behavior. This is in line with the previously observed phenomenon of 'Liking' aimlessly because of the consolidation of a set of practices (Rosenthal-von der Pütten et al., 2019. p. 78).

CONCLUSION

A 'Like' carries with it a plethora of information, one of it being the often subconscious motives behind its bestowing. Through Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory did the researcher discovered that the motives behind 'Liking' an Instagram posts are to manage relationship, form an identity, state affinity, provide support, and prompt similar behavior. The rationale behind them can be traced back to the triadic reciprocal causation model, outcome expectation, expectancy, and self-efficacy which, to some degree, can be counteracted by the formation of habit throughout the Instagram user's life. In attempting to refine this novel study, future researchers can employ a bigger number of informants whose cultural background are more diverse, make a live observation of the informants Instagram usage, define generosity and selectiveness more clearly, and collaborate with a team of researcher to reduce individual bias among other things. On another note, one potential topic one could pursue in light of this research is the effects of receiving an Instagram 'Like.'

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