Thumbs up: A thematic analysis of image-based posting and liking behaviour on social media

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the thoughts that social media users have prior to posting or 'liking' images on social media; particularly exploring the presence of egoistic, self-presentation considerations. Responses to two open-ended questions regarding considerations prior to posting ($n = 203$) and 'liking' ($n = 195$) images on social media were analysed using thematic analysis. Egoistic motivations influenced both posting and 'liking' an image on social media; suggesting an awareness that self-presentation can be affected (and therefore manipulated) through image posting and 'liking'. Users also considered who would see their content or behaviour, and the effect this might have on others. Finally, 'liking' actually represents liking, with enjoyment and image value considered prior to providing public, online appreciation.

1. Introduction

Social networking sites have become central to current day social interactions. Social networking sites including Facebook and Instagram facilitate communication through the posting and 'liking' of content, for example, the images that users post on their social media accounts. Photos receive more "likes" on Facebook compared to any other kind of status update (Kapin, 2012), and 4000 photos are uploaded to Facebook per second (Aslam, 2018). However, little research has examined the thoughts and considerations that influence and underpin these commonplace, image-centred social media behaviours. Notably, numerous social media platforms (e.g. Instagram, Snapchat, and Pinterest) are now dedicated solely to image-based content; thus a large number of social media users interact with images regularly. Exploring these image-based forms of social media, and the behaviours of individuals as they post and engage with images, is therefore of growing importance. With images emerging as a key communicative tool on social media (Katz and Crocker, 2015), an increased understanding of the way that intentions and meaning are ascribed to users' image based behaviours will help users to transmit their ideas and interpret each other more effectively. The aim of the current study was to explore the considerations social media users have prior to posting as well as 'liking' image-based content on social networking sites, and to analyse the way in which self-presentation appears in considerations related to both behaviours.

1.1. The power of images in social media

The sharing of images is a central behaviour on social networking sites. The Internet is increasingly visual, with photos as the primary currency for online social transactions (Oeldorf-Hirsch and Sundar, 2016). For example, a photograph or picture can be seen as "the receipt of experience"; a key form of evidence of a life lived (Silverman, 2015). For social media users, this can culminate in

the belief: if there are no pictures, did the event even happen? (Silverman, 2015). Indeed, photos on social media appear to be associated with a level of credibility that text-based posts can lack; perhaps contributing to their success in impression-management and self-presentation (Marwick, 2015).

The posting of pictures online mimics the function of 'private memorialisation' performed by traditional photographs (Gye, 2007), but with social media, images are now displayed for wider consumption on a more public platform, with the ability to manipulate exactly what is memorialised (Le Moignan et al., 2017). The images that users post on social media help to tell their story, construct their identity, and may even reveal deeper insights into the user's life and character. For example, romantic-selfie posting frequency appears to correspond with aspects of love toward romantic partners (Sabiniewicz et al., 2017). For males, the number of romantic selfies per month was positively related to measurement of their overall love, passion, and commitment. For females, posting more romantic selfies was linked to feelings of commitment (Sabiniewicz et al., 2017).

The way users pictorially express their lives and identity may also be influenced by the large audience associated with social media use. Posts with photos tend to attract more audience response than those with videos, links, or textual status updates (Strekalova and Krieger, 2017). If users are aware of the popularity of image-based content they may experience more pressure when deciding what to post or 'like'. Conversely, users may use this knowledge to carefully craft the way they are perceived by others.

Though pictures can be shared across most social media platforms, the shift toward image-based communication is evident through the emergent popularity of image-based social platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat. As highlighted in research looking specifically at Instagram, posting images appears to be heavily driven by self-promotion and validation ('like') seeking; with over 90% of users admitting to engaging in at least one 'like'-seeking behaviour (Dumas et al., 2017). Two forms of 'like'-seeking behaviour were delineated within that study, normative (e.g., the use of hashtags and filters) and deceptive (e.g., dishonest actions such as buying 'likes'/followers or changing one's appearance using software); with those possessing higher levels of narcissism more likely to engage in deceptive like-seeking behaviours (Dumas et al., 2017). The notable prevalence of deceptive 'like'-seeking behaviours (12–55%; Dumas et al., 2017) speaks to the essential role of images in current-day self-presentation and personal validation.

1.2. Uses and gratifications of image-sharing

Understanding why people use social media delivers insight into the nature of specific social networking behaviours. Uses and Gratifications Theory posits that audiences actively choose media to meet their needs. Motivations are elucidated by asking why users become involved in social media, and what gratifications they derive from its use (Ruggiero, 2000).

Broadly, social media use is driven by emotional, social, cognitive and habitual needs (Wang et al., 2012). Wang et al. (2012) also noted that ungratified needs can accumulate and drive heavier future social media use. The use of Facebook specifically, is driven by the need for self-presentation and the need to belong (Nadkarni and Hofmann, 2012). Through the content that they choose to post, users engage in a cycle of continuous impression-management. This cycle is likely encouraged by the positive feedback that is associated with positive online self-presentation (Metzler and Scheithauer, 2017).

Use of image-based social media is related to decreased loneliness, and increased happiness and satisfaction with life, as a function of the increased intimacy facilitated by communication through images (Pittman and Reich, 2016). In that study, participants were asked to produce words and phrases that related to why they and others use a particular social media platform. For image-based platforms, analysis with VOSviewer density visualisation suggested that sharing photos of or with friends gratifies the needs for affection, attention, and close familiarity. Engagement with text-based platforms also had a social component, but mostly gratified the desire to 'kill time' or to collect news from around the world, lacking the intimacy that users associated with image-based communication. No relationship was present between text-based social media and psychological wellbeing.

While the key point of Pittman and Reich's (2016) study was to determine how text versus image-based platforms affect loneliness, it also established the idea that image-based communication stands apart from other social media uses, with distinctly different gratifications. Those authors suggested that an image may be worth a thousand words on social media. This intimate, communicative use of images may be best demonstrated on Snapchat. There, users exchange selfies as a form of picture-based conversation (Katz and Crocker, 2015). Snapchat users place great importance on social connectedness (Grieve, 2017), and report that communicating via images allows for more accuracy in the communication of emotional context than text based messages (Vaterlaus et al., 2016). For many users Snapchat is viewed as a platform for enhancing close interpersonal relationships via the sharing of 'everyday moments' (Bayer et al., 2016; Vaterlaus et al., 2016). With the development of 'story' sharing on Instagram, now both image-based platforms facilitate intimate, ephemeral, pictorial storytelling (Goode, 2018).

Additional evidence from Oeldorf-Hirsch and Sundar (2016) supports the social and self-presentation needs that are met through photo-sharing online. Those authors identified four classes of gratifications: Firstly, participants indicated the desire to seek, showcase and exchange their personal experiences. Secondly, technological affordances, such as the ease with which photos can be shared, was an important factor in the motivation to share photos online. Finally, social connection (maintaining close and intimate relationships) and reaching out (interacting with a broad audience) were the third and fourth identified gratifications, respectively (Oeldorf-Hirsch and Sundar, 2016). With the exception of technological affordances, the gratifications outlined by Oeldorf-Hirsch and Sundar (2016) support the social functions related to image-based platforms identified by Pittman and Reich (2016). Relatedly, Treem and Leonardi (2012) highlighted the technological affordance of visibility; social media's ability to enable users to effortlessly see information that would have previously been invisible to others. Both Oeldorf-Hirsch and Sundar (2016), and Treem and Leonardi (2012) highlight the ease with which users can share and access information on social media; with fast and minimal actions required, technology affords users with an ideal environment for maximum impression-management impact. Opportunities for self-presentation are readily available in all aspects of SNS use, from the obvious; for example, status updates and the development of a personal