



FlashReport

How many *likes* did I get?: Purpose moderates links between positive social media feedback and self-esteem.

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ABSTRACT

Sociometer theory asserts that self-esteem is calibrated to one's perceived relational value. Accordingly, positive feedback should boost self-esteem because it signals acceptance by others. Yet, the extent to which self-esteem is sensitive to positive feedback may depend on individuals' sense of purpose. In two studies ($N = 342$), we tested purpose in life as a source of self-directed and prosocial motivation and predicted that having greater purpose would lessen sensitivity to social media feedback. Study 1 revealed that the number of likes individuals received on their Facebook profile pictures was positively associated with self-esteem. Study 2 replicated these findings experimentally by manipulating the number of likes individuals received on self-photographs posted to a mock Facebook site. In both studies, links between likes and self-esteem were diminished for those with greater purpose. Implications for purpose as a moderator of the self-esteem contingencies of positive social feedback are discussed.

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Facebook, the world's largest online social network, allows users to "like" the content they view with the click of a button. The simplicity of liking posted material has made doing so extraordinarily popular, with nearly 4.5 billion likes generated daily and half of all users liking at least one post they view every day (Pew Research Center, 2014). But what impact does this proliferation of likes have on those receiving them? On one hand, accumulating evidence suggests a positive influence: receiving affirmation on content posted virtually corresponds positively with self-esteem and subjective well-being and negatively with loneliness (Bazarova, Choi, Schwanda Sosik, Cosley, & Whitlock, 2015; Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2010; Oh, Ozkaya, & LaRose, 2014; Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006). On the other hand, relying on affirmation from others in order to feel good about oneself may signal contingent self-worth, which can undermine well-being over time (Kernis, Paradise, Whitaker, Wheatman, & Goldman, 2000). Adjudicating between these possibilities is important as seeking attention and acknowledgement from others are reported as primary drivers of Facebook use (Sung, Lee, Kim, & Choi, 2016; Stefanone, Lackaff, & Rosen, 2011).

A central aim of the current research was to examine the extent to which virtual likes influence how individuals feel about themselves. We based our examination on sociometer theory (Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Leary & Downs, 1995), which holds that self-esteem is calibrated to cues of inclusion or rejection within the social environment. From this perspective, how individuals feel about themselves is a dynamic

and self-regulatory gauge of one's relational value. Several experiments and field studies confirm that self-esteem is elevated when individuals are (or imagine being) included, accepted, or deemed popular by others (Denissen, Penke, Schmitt, & van Aken, 2008; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995; Reitz, Motti-Stefanidi, & Asendorpf, 2015). Notably, having Facebook friends who are more responsive can satisfy psychological needs above and beyond the number of Facebook friends one has (Greitemeyer, Mügge, & Bollermann, 2014). Because receiving positive feedback can signal acceptance within one's social environment, we predicted that self-esteem would increase as a function of the number of likes one received on their personal photographs.

It should be noted, however, the extent to which self-esteem relies on perceptions of one's relational value can be limited by other factors. For example, among individuals driven by strong personal goals and motivations, social inclusion is a much weaker predictor of self-esteem (Guay, Delisle, & Fernet, 2008). Thus, we also predicted that having a sense of purpose in life – or a "self-organizing life aim that organizes and stimulates goals, manages behaviors, and provides a sense of meaning" (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009, p. 242) would moderate the effect of likes on self-esteem. Specifically, this effect should manifest primarily for those lacking purpose, but should have little to no influence for those with a greater sense of it because the self-esteem of purposeful individuals should be less contingent on social approval. In addition, because purpose is conceptualized as a prosocial motivation, whereby purposeful individuals strive to accomplish goals that are both personally meaningful and relevant to the world beyond the self (Damon, Menon, & Cotton Bronk, 2003), those scoring higher in purpose should be expected to show less sensitivity to positive social media feedback

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because they are already guided by a sense of connection with and service to others. This hypothesis is further supported by previous studies that have found that individuals with strong civic and prosocial orientations tend to use Facebook for informational reasons rather than status enhancement or socialization (Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009), and emotional consequences of Facebook use are most pronounced when people lack a sense of meaning (Sagioglou & Greitemeyer, 2014). Thus, evoking one's sense of personal motivation and prosocial goals (i.e., purpose; Damon et al., 2003) may more reliably decouple self-esteem from social feedback.

While prior research has consistently found that purposeful individuals have higher self-esteem (Scheier et al., 2006), a conceptual distinction can be drawn between the two constructs. Whereas self-esteem refers to one's appraisals of her or his value (Leary & Baumeister, 2000), purpose represents a prospective life aim that is already valued. Thus, the current study provides an initial test of purpose as a resource for disrupting the positive feedback contingencies of self-esteem. Evidence in favor of this capacity would be significant for two main reasons. First, the buffering effects of purpose, to date, have only been demonstrated in contexts of stress reactivity. Confirmation that purpose also attenuates reactivity to *positive* stimuli (receiving likes) would broaden understanding of purpose as a source of psychological self-regulation and homeostasis. Second, it would situate purpose as an arbiter of when self-esteem operates as a sociometer; thus supporting purpose theories that claim that purpose involves pursuing aims that one believes are of value to others. Finally, provided the widespread exposure to likes and other virtual expressions of affirmation common on social media sites, purpose enhancement might offer an accessible point of intervention for promoting more adaptive outcomes among users.

1. Study 1

1.1. Methods

1.1.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 300 adults (49% women) between the ages of 18 and 69 ($M_{age} = 32.63$, $SD = 10.20$) recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk. Because past studies have relied on much smaller sample sizes to detect moderating effects of purpose in life on ratings of self-relevant attitudes and satisfaction (sample sizes ranging from 49 to 151; Heisel & Flett, 2004; Steger, Oishi, & Kesebir, 2011), we sought to utilize a much larger sample to test our predictions. Data collection did not depend on any analysis of results. Respondents were only included in analyses if they reported having (a) an active Facebook account, (b) at least 20 friends in their virtual network, and (c) received fewer than 200 likes on their average profile picture in order to ensure that the sample reflected the average Facebook user. Based on these criteria, 246 respondents were retained. All measures used in this study are reported below.

1.1.2. Measures

1.1.2.1. Purpose in life. Purpose in life was assessed using the six-item Life Engagement Test (Scheier et al., 2006). Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with statements such as, "There is not enough purpose in my life" (reverse scored), "To me, the things I do are all worthwhile" and "I have lots of reasons for living". Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

1.1.2.2. Self-esteem. Self-esteem was assessed using the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965; $\alpha = 0.92$). Participants reported the extent to which they agreed with each item (i.e. "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself") using a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

1.1.2.3. Facebook information. Participants with active Facebook accounts reported the total number friends in their network, how many likes their current profile picture has received, and how many likes their profile pictures tend to receive on average.

1.1.2.4. Covariates. Because individual differences in Big Five personality traits, narcissism, and positive mood may contribute to variance in self-esteem (Erdle & Rushton, 2011; Robins, Hendin, & Trzesniewski, 2001), and are known correlates of purpose (e.g. Scheier et al., 2006), we included these factors as covariates in our analyses. Big Five personality traits were assessed using the 20-item Mini-IPIP (Donnellan, Oswald, Baird, & Lucas, 2006). Sample items and scale reliabilities were: "I am the life of the party" (extraversion; $\alpha = 0.80$), "I sympathize with others' feelings" (agreeableness; $\alpha = 0.81$), "I get chores done right away" (conscientiousness; $\alpha = 0.73$), "I have a vivid imagination" (openness; $\alpha = 0.67$), and "I have frequent mood swings" (neuroticism; $\alpha = 0.71$). Four additional items assessed narcissism (i.e. "I like to look at myself in the mirror"; $\alpha = 0.90$). Responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). General mood was assessed using 10-discrete ($\alpha = 0.90$) items from the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they generally felt each emotion ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*).

1.2. Results and discussion

Descriptive statistics for study variables are provided in Table 1. To test our hypothesis, a multivariate regression examined whether the average likes participants received on their profile photos, sense of purpose, and their interaction predicted self-esteem (see top of Table 2). These predictors explained 65% of the variance in self-esteem, $F(3, 244) = 158.92$, $p < 0.001$. A significant main effect detected for purpose ($\beta = 0.80$, $p < 0.001$) was qualified, however, by its interaction with average number of photo likes received, $\beta = -0.13$, $p = 0.001$.

To further test whether this effect persisted after adjusting for our covariates, we conducted a separate regression including demographic variables, personality traits, narcissism, positive mood, total number of Facebook friends, average likes received on their profile photos, and sense of purpose in life as predictors of self-esteem (see bottom of Table 2). Together, these predictors explained 73% of the variance in self-esteem, $F(13, 245) = 57.67$, $p < 0.001$. A main effect detected for purpose ($\beta = 0.49$, $p < 0.001$) was qualified by its interaction with average number of photo likes received, $\beta = -0.09$, $p = 0.002$. As illustrated in Fig. 1, simple-slopes tests indicated that receiving a greater number of likes was positively associated with self-esteem for those scoring low (-1 SD) in purpose ($\beta = 0.14$, $p = 0.002$), but was unrelated to self-esteem for those scoring high ($+1$ SD) in purpose ($\beta = -0.04$, $p = 0.337$). Overall, results supported the prediction that at lower levels of purpose, the number of likes individuals received were more strongly associated with levels of self-esteem.

2. Study 2

In Study 1, individuals self-reported the number of likes they typically receive on their Facebook profile pictures. However, such reporting is susceptible to bias due to social desirability and recall limitations, potentially leading to faulty estimates. In addition, the correlational nature of the data obscured evidence of the directionality of the demonstrated effects. To address these limitations in Study 2, we used an experimental manipulation to inform participants that they received either a low, average, or high number of likes on self-photographs ("selfies") prior to completing measures of self-esteem. All measures, manipulations, and excluded participants are reported below.

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