Chapter 12
The Effects of Virtual Likes on Self–Esteem:
A Discussion of Receiving and Viewing Likes on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Social networking sites offer opportunities for users to express themselves and receive immediate feedback in the form of virtual likes. Adolescents place a great deal of value on the number of likes, regarding them as indicators of peer acceptance and support. Since peer feedback and social comparison are integral to adolescents' self-evaluations, the aim of the current chapter is to determine whether self-esteem is sensitive to the number of likes associated with their own (peer feedback) and others' posts (social comparison). The synthesis of literature indicates that self-esteem is responsive to indicators of one's value to others as well as the value of others, supporting the sociometer and social comparison theories. Indications of liking online serve to enhance self-esteem, whereas rejection deflates it. In addition, seeing others get many likes negatively impacts viewers' self-esteem. The gaps in the literature are discussed and future research is suggested.

INTRODUCTION

Social media has become ubiquitous in the daily life of adolescents and young adults, providing a forum for youths to interact and make connections with peers, practice social skills, observe others, and to provide and receive feedback (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat are consistently among the top social networking sites in North America (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016; McKinnon, 2015; Smith, & Anderson, 2018). Users create online profiles containing personal information about the self, in the form of images and/or textual content, that are broadcasted to other social networking members. Not only do users share information with a much larger audience compared to interactions in real life, but they also are open to immediate feedback from the larger audience in the form of quantitative (virtual likes which are represented as a thumbs up symbol or heart) and qualitative (comments) remarks. Overall, social networking sites have the potential to influence psychosocial functioning.

As adolescence is characterized as a developmental period of increased focus on the self, peer feedback and social comparison become integral to adolescents' self-evaluations (Harter, 1999). In effect, adolescents' self-esteem may be sensitive to the number of likes they get in response to their social media posts as well as the number of likes that their peers may acquire. Therefore, the primary objective of the current chapter is to outline research regarding the potential enhancing and adverse effects one's own virtual likes as well as other posters' virtual likes may have on users' self-esteem. First, the chapter will describe theoretical perspectives of self-esteem to support the potential influence of liking indicators on self-esteem. Second, a description of the virtual like is provided, including what likes may stand for, and the types of images that are most likely to elicit a greater number of likes. Third, the author will synthesize the literature that examines (1) the relationship between self-esteem and the number of likes users receive for their information shared on social networking sites, and then (ii) the relationship between self-esteem and seeing how many responses others have received for their posts. Finally, the gaps in the literature will be discussed and future research suggested. Overall, this chapter may aid in the advancement of research, increase public awareness, facilitate policy development, and expand clinical applications related to protecting or enhancing self-esteem among social media users.

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