

Understanding Likes on Facebook: An Exploratory Study

Anita Basalingappa, MICA, Ahmedabad, India

M S Subhas, Karnatak University, India

Ms Rashmi Tapariya, MICA, Ahmedabad, India

Abstract

This study focuses on understanding ‘likes’ on facebook. It is important to understand this phenomenon by studying how users would react to a post that is posted by a ‘friend’. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to understand what does it mean to ‘like’ a post on facebook? Is there a preference for a picture post in a status update than the written word? Are there distinctive types of ‘likes’ that can be useful to understand ‘likes’ on facebook? This is an exploratory study. Data was collected through Depth interviews and observing Facebook profiles. Twelve depth interviews were conducted and thirty nine facebook profiles’ data was observed from August 2013 to August 2014. The results show that profile pictures get maximum likes followed by status updates and then cover photos. The respondents indicated a pattern in the likes on each post.

Keywords: social media, Facebook, like

Introduction

Social media has become a power house as it provides for a democratic relationship. There is a need to understand this medium and its users on a continuous basis. Every new invention is a boon and a bane. Likewise, social media is one such powerful tool in marketing that is a boon and bane. Social media is clearly a boon because it is cheaper, faster and wider in its reach with added real time interactions. Everything is instant and it is enticing, new and generates excitement: whereas the same social media can be utilised cleverly to mislead masses. The speed at which one can be informed/misinformed, persuaded, impressed and form opinions through social media is scary. One can only repent later if there are no checks and balances.

Two most popular social media tools, ‘Facebook’ and ‘Twitter’ were launched in February 2004 and July 2006 respectively. There were 1.28 billion facebook users in 2013 (Facebook statistics, 2014) and 0.65 billion twitter users in 2014 (Twitter statistics, 2014) worldwide. India has the second highest number of facebook users in the world according to Smith (2014) with 100 million facebook users and fifth largest twitter user (33 million twitter users) according to an exhaustive study on twitter user across the world (2012).

There is a lot of attention on number of likes and favourites, shares and retweets for celebrities and their comments and status updates in social media. Do more likes and favourites indicate higher value, popularity, success and vice versa? There seems to be such a perception, rather conviction among users. Number of likes on facebook is an important metric. There are formulae to calculate value of a ‘like’. There are papers on why does one ‘like’ a post. Most of these are in the context of brands and corporate where the facebook accounts are moderated and promoted by designated employees or outsourced.

Each user on facebook is an influencer for other users. There is a need to understand liking of facebook users’ posts by other users on facebook. For brands, higher the volume of likes, higher is the value (O’Connor, 2013). Is it the same for a user who is an influencer? Is the facebook user, who gets more ‘likes’ for his/her posts, more influential than a person who gets fewer ‘likes’? Are there other factors dominating the value of a ‘like’ of each user?

This paper focuses on Facebook ‘likes’ between friends on facebook. It is important to understand why ‘like’ a post. It is important to understand this phenomenon by first studying

how users would react to a post that is posted by a ‘friend’. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to understand what does it mean to ‘like’ a post on facebook? Is there a preference for a picture post in a status update than the written word? Are there distinctive types of ‘likes’ that can be useful to understand ‘likes’ on facebook?

Literature Review

‘Friend’ (n.d.) as a noun is a person known well to another and regarded with liking, affection, and loyalty; an intimate; an acquaintance or associate; an ally in a fight or cause; supporter; a fellow member of a party, society, etc; a patron or supporter: a friend of the opera; be friends, to be friendly (with); make friends, to become friendly (with). As a verb, ‘friend’ (n.d.) to add (a person) to one's list of contacts on a social-networking website; befriend. Facebook glossary of terms, defines friends as people you connect and share with on Facebook.

‘Like’ (n.d.) is used as a noun, verb, and adverb on social mediato indicate one’s enjoyment of, agreement with, or interest in. noting or pertaining to a feature used to like specific website content: a Like button. The glossary of terms on facebook help center includes the words: **profile**, **profile picture**, **cover photo**, and **timeline**. These key words will be used in this paper. A facebook user can post pictures and comment on his/her **profile**. A facebook user’s **profile** is a collection of the photos, stories and experiences that tell his/her story. **Timeline** is where the user can see his/her posts or posts where he/she has been tagged in, displayed by date. Timeline is also part of the user’s profile. **Profile picture** is the main photo of the facebook user on his/her profile. The profile picture appears as a thumbnail next to the user’s comments and other activity on Facebook. **Cover photo** is the large picture at the top of the user’s profile, right above the profile picture.

‘Like’ button feature on facebook was introduced to ‘like’ status updates, photos, shares and comments of friends (Kincaid, 2009). This feature, with an option to the user to like or not like was introduced to express ‘like’ or support the post. The number of ‘likes’ and the identity of each user who has liked the post are visible for each facebook post. When the user clicks the ‘like’ button, that post appears in the user’s newsfeed, and is visible to user’s friends. According to Glossary of terms on facebook, clicking **Like** is a way to give positive feedback and connect with things you care about.

Every page visited on internet is stored in cookies. Number of ‘click throughs’ has been a metric used to assess ‘reach’ on social media. Facebook ‘likes’ data is richer than ‘click throughs’ as it indicates positive feedback of the users who have liked the post. Definitely, ‘share’ option and ‘comments’ are richer than ‘likes’ since it captures users’ intention more than a ‘like’. It is seen that it is easiest to hit the ‘like’ button for a post or a comment than the other options apart from not doing anything. Could the responses be any different if facebook had a semantic differential scale instead of just a ‘like’ option? It is useful to understand why most users like a post or a comment.

There have been many studies on why users like facebook pages/posts of brands. Common shared values with brand and to keep a check on recent updates/products of a brand as it would appear in news feed once its page has been liked (Pelletier & Horkey, 2013); Genuine preference for the brand or brand loyalty towards the brand (Wallace et al., 2014); Satisfactory performance of the brand though not being brand loyalist (Bunker et al., 2013); Interest in discounts offered, freebies, special offers (Murthy et al., 2013); Image Building – Engaging in image development by letting others know that one follows/ prefers a particular brand which would not have been possible to showcase in offline manner. More often such people are concerned about others viewpoint (Bunker et al., 2013); Brand being promoted by favourite actor/actress (Budhiraja & Mhatre, 2011); Liking a post as it has been liked by one of the friends who shares common belief system (Lipsman et al., 2012); TV Channels promoting online chat shows/ online videos / content (Budhiraja & Mhatre, 2011) are some of the reasons why people tend to like facebook posts/ pages of brands.

Users also tend to like facebook posts of other users if the post/ content carries similar brand/ personal experience, for social acceptance as the post has been liked by some of the members of the social group one belongs to, or just displaying belongingness - to let them know that one is concerned about others and their lives (Shoenberger & Tandoc, 2014). A study published in Communication Briefings (2013) showed that users who post content on facebook that is humorous, exciting, engaging, and/ or thrilling will receive more likes. It is also evident that, inspiration as content, showcasing brave, real life stories of real persons, increased number of likes. Liking a post as it has been liked by like-minded people in one’s facebook friend list (Lipsman et al., 2012) is also another reason. Mariani and Mohammed (2014) found that the convenient facebook like button is a social endorsement influencing brand recall and future

purchase intentions. Therefore, the studies above establish that a facebook like is an important metric for brands and marketers. Studies have shown different types of fan behaviour on facebook (Wallace et al., 2014).

The engagement of users on facebook is key to success of a like. The engagement of facebook users is through consumption of the social space on facebook. Why do facebook users post pictures and comment on facebook? What generates more likes - profile picture, cover photo, pictures on timeline or text on timeline?

Therefore, research questions for the paper are:

- 1) Why does one 'like' a profile picture, cover photo or a post on timeline/ status update on facebook?
- 2) What gets more 'likes': profile picture, cover photo, or post on timeline/ status update? And why?
- 3) What are the different types of likes? Are there a standard proportion of types of likes for each post?

Methods

This is an exploratory study to understand 'likes' on profile picture, cover page and status update of individual facebook users. Each respondent in this study is a facebook user below 35 years age, who has been active on facebook in the last two years and is a graduate with more than 200 friends on facebook. "Active on facebook" is defined by frequency of posts and time spent on facebook every week. Respondents for this study were recruited if they posted 3 to 4 posts every week and spent an average of 20 minutes everyday on facebook.

Methodological triangulation is used to crosscheck information to produce accurate results for certainty in data collection. Data collection was through two methods. Twelve depth interviews were conducted. Thirty nine facebook profiles were monitored for a period of one year from August 2013 to August 2014. The facebook profiles of respondents were monitored through 'Liken Tweet', a facebook profile created to study the posts and likes of friends. Facebook users with at least 200 facebook friends, below the age of 35 years were invited to volunteer to be respondents. The respondents were invited by sending out inbox requests to friends on facebook and via email to the student group of a post graduate management institute. Thirty

nine respondents become friends with Liken Tweet. The thirty nine facebook profiles were accessed to collect data on posts and likes on their profile posts, cover photo posts and status update on timeline from August 2013 to August 2014. Of the twelve respondents who were interviewed, six respondents were not friends on Liken Tweet. Therefore, total of 45 respondents were interviewed and observed (with six of respondents who were both interviewed and profiles monitored on Liken Tweet).

The respondents' profile is as in the table below:

Table 1. Profile of respondents

	Depth Interviews	Friends on Liken Tweet
Number of respondents	12	39
Total Respondents	45*	
Age		
16-20	0	1
21-25	9	26
26-30	3	12
Marital Status		
Single	11	35
Married	1	4
Occupation		
Employed	7	18
Home maker	0	2
Student	5	19
Gender		
Man	5	20
Woman	7	19
Education		
Undergraduate	2	6
Postgraduate (completed/studying)	10	33
Year of joining facebook		
2007-2010	10	38
2011-2013	2	1
Number of facebook friends		
upto 1000	9	15
1000-2000	3	10
>2000	0	1
Data not available	0	13

*6 of the respondents Depth Interviewed were not friends on Liken Tweet

The average age of respondents was 25 years. Most of them were single. Fifty percent of the respondents were students and the rest were employed. All of them were at least undergraduates. There was a fair representation of men and women in the sample. Some of the respondents had blocked their facebook joining date and number of facebook friends through their privacy settings.

Findings

Research Question 1:

Why does one 'like' a profile picture, cover photo, or a post on timeline/ status update on facebook?

A post on facebook asking users: “What does one indicate through a like on a facebook post? Acknowledge? Like (verb)? Fan? Love? Advocate? Friend? share on newsfeed? wants to keep a tab?” got the following responses:

- ☞ Quid pro quo! You dint like my post, I won't like yours
- ☞ All of the above
- ☞ Approve, have been through that, appreciation, jealousy (since you are trying so hard let me give you one 'like')
- ☞ Approval, personal preference or endorsement
- ☞ A great discovery for the linguistically challenged
- ☞ It is for the post-er to decipher
- ☞ Many likes as a way to get more likes in return and feel great about one's self. ☞ Say 'you are connected' without actually bothering to see/read what the other person has posted
- ☞ I'm there
- ☞ I like YOU
- ☞ Younger crowd may also use it as a gesture of group affiliation reinforcing affiliation and friendship
- ☞ 'main hu na' meaning - I am there for you.

From the literature, facebook likes indicate the following:

- ☞ Following someone seriously and making presence felt
- ☞ More likes ,more loved /recognized the person is
- ☞ Respect/Love for the person who has posted

- ☞ Oblige the person who has posted (friends/ Relatives)
- ☞ Time pass i.e. like the pictures which comes across once one is logged in
- ☞ Motivate/ appreciate the person to repeat the activity
- ☞ Appreciate someone else's sense of humor
- ☞ Reciprocation/ Mutual admiration
- ☞ Way to stay connected to the person/ social belongingness
- ☞ Like reveals one's interests to other friends in the friend list
- ☞ Repeatedly the post comes in notification box
- ☞ Supporting the cause/ shared content even when the person who has shared is not a close friend or acquaintance
- ☞ When the content is Unique/ interesting/ Social cause/ emotionally appealing/ cultural issues/ religious issues
- ☞ Considered a replacement of face to face meeting i.e. when a person is unable to meet an old friend on a regular basis then liking a post of them means the person still follows and is in the loop.

From the depth interviews:

- ☞ To stay connected to person, to avoid commenting so hit like to show that I like the person, if other person has liked then even I will like, Feel good factor for others
- ☞ Good videos, interesting ads, good intelligent articles, related to personal likes/ dislikes
- ☞ Out of courtesy, Reciprocity, Interesting(funny), different or something unusual, news getting married, birthdays, events; mandatory/out of courtesy for close friends/colleagues
- ☞ Profile picture like; something related to personal taste eg. bikes; related to mood and emotions; marriage; awards; achievements
- ☞ If I can relate to what is there in status then I would like their status; or if I can emotionally attach myself be it a picture or status.

The reasons for likes on facebook can be explained using need for association. Liking a post might satisfy safety needs, belonging needs and/or self esteem needs from hierarchy of needs, Maslow (1943). Liking posts on facebook does not follow the sequence as in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Nain (2013) explain a series of needs that can be used to understand the reasons for liking posts from the findings of this study.

Research Question 2:

What gets more 'likes': profile picture, cover photo, or post on timeline/ status update? And why?

Most of the respondents said that profile picture gets more likes compared to cover photo and status updates on timeline. The **Table 2** below has a list of types of posts across profile picture, cover photo and status updates. **Table 3** shows possible reasons why these posts get likes according to respondents interviewed.

Table 2. Types of posts across profile picture cover photo and status updates

Profile Pictures	Cover Photos	Status Updates
Personal pictures	Personal Events	Personal Activities
Adventurous	Professional Events	Professional Achievements
likes/dislikes	Personal tastes	Favourite Brand Posts
Posing differently	Likes/Dislikes	Interesting
Life Updates	Poster type pictures	Funny
Marriage pictures	Family pictures	Posts with Pictures
Travelling	Personality Linked	Politics
Awards	Adventurous	Travel Updates
Fashionable	Scenic Beauty	Emotions
Emotional	Motivational	Knowledgeable
Child Birth	Aspirational	Catchy /precise activities
Sentimental Posts	Leadership	Socio Political
Close Friends picture	Long Shot	Controversial Updates
Interesting	Colorful	
Unique	Cartoons	
Sweet Click	Quotes	
Funny	Themes	
Exclusive		
Beautiful/Handsome		
Current Clicks		
Close-up		
Scenic Beauty		

Table 3. Reasons for liking a post

Image Change
Reciprocity
Genuinely liking me
Unexpected picture
Obligated to like
Feel Good Factor
To Stay Visible
Out of Boredom
People with few friends
Close Friends/Relatives/People interacting daily
Emotional Connect
Attractive/Appealing
Beautiful
Strong Bonding
Trip Related
Recently like friend

Table 4. The types of posts that get maximum likes in descending order

Posing Differently
Funny
Close Friends/Relatives/People interacting daily
To stay Visible/ connected
Interesting
Likes/Dislikes
Genuinely liking me
Reciprocity
Unexpected/something unusual
Marriage Clicks
Feel Good Factor
Emotional Connect
Scenic Beauty
Fashionable
Appealing
Travelling
Scenic Beauty
Knowledgeable
Personal Activities
Professional Achievements
Obligation

Table 4a shows types of posts that get maximum likes according to the respondents who were interviewed and their facebook profiles observed through Liken Tweet.

Table 4a. Per cent of likes for types of posts

Types of Posts	Maximum Likes in %
Popular	58
Influencial	48
Interesting	42
Intelligent	41
Unique	35
Funny	26
Trivial	25
Pretty	22
Emotional	14

The data from facebook profiles:

The **Table 5** below shows average posts, standard deviation, average maximum likes and average minimum likes across profile pictures, cover photos and status updates per user. Most of the facebook users get maximum likes for profile pictures, followed by status updates and cover photos. The number of posts by facebook users is highest for status updates followed by profile pictures and cover photos.

Table 5. Number of posts and likes per user across profile picture, cover photo and status update

	Average	Standard deviation	Maximum	Minimum
Profile pictures per user	12	18	100	0
Average profile pictures per user%	11	15	74	0
Maximum likes	120	76	272	0
Minimum likes	36	52	272	0
Likes as a % of friends	13	9	33	0
Cover photos per user	7	8	43	0
Average cover photos per user %	6	7	30	0
Maximum likes	63	67	248	0
Minimum likes	7	17	100	0
Likes as a % of friends	7	7	20	0
Status updates per user	136	115	594	4
Average number of updates per user %	84	20	100	13
Maximum likes	93	55	241	7
Minimum likes	0	2	8	0
Likes as a % of friends	11	5	23	1

Research Question 3

What are the different types of likes? Are there a standard proportion of types of likes for each post?

Each of the facebook users interviewed could identify a pattern of likes on posts. Table 6 shows some of the responses of respondents.

Table 6. Generalisable types of likes identified by facebook users across profile picture, cover photo and status update posts

Amongst the likes on your facebook posts, can you differentiate between likes on various posts? How?? Is there a pattern of like seen on each post?? Is it the same or different?
Reciprocity, Feel good factor, attracted towards me, Genuinely like you, Family friends
New picture then batch mates would like more. If post carries intelligent ad/ article then random people would like because of genuine reasons, just to stay connected There is a difference in liking pictures and difference in posting ads/articles
Same proportion. Reasons are family members; close friends, colleagues; acknowledgment; sort of connect/stay connected
Same pattern. It is different in the case when profile picture includes someone else also i.e. tagged photograph
Same Proportion (Likes from Close friends, To stay connected)
Yes I feel the proportion is same. 20 % likes are from family (Out of compulsion and love), 50% likes are from friends with whom I talk regularly and the rest 30 % is from the teachers/ mentors

Conclusions

Research Question 1

Why does one 'like' a profile picture, cover photo or a post on timeline/ status update on facebook?

The reasons why a facebook user likes a post are exhaustive in this study. A facebook user likes a post to justify need for association through liking emotional and rational posts of facebook profiles/friends. A survey will be carried out to identify clusters and validate the types of likes across hierarchy of need for association.

Research Question 2

What gets more 'likes': profile picture, cover photo, or post on timeline/ status update? And why?

From the depth interviews and facebook profiles, it is evident that pictures posts garner more likes than textual posts. Among the profile picture, cover photo and status update, the profile picture catches maximum attention and gets maximum likes, followed by status update pictures, status update texts and then cover photos. The facebook user who posts plays a significant role in eliciting likes from friends on facebook. The reasons and number of likes are mostly based on multiple factors and could be generalisable based on need for association types

via emotional and rational content. The responses are an interplay of emotion and reason that could vary with each situation.

Research Question 3

What are the different types of likes? Are there a standard proportion of types of likes for each post?

Each facebook user can identify a pattern among the types of likes across posts. A survey to validate the broad pattern will be carried out. Thus emerging pattern will be useful for marketers to assess the value of likes.

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