What Does a "Like" on Social Media Mean? Understanding the Motivations and Interpretations of Likes on Instagram

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This study explores the motivations behind "liking" an image on Instagram and the frames of reference that shape what a "like" signifies. It also examines the process of "liking" through the lens of relationship development theory. Our findings reveal that key motivations for liking images on Instagram include reciprocity, relationship-based motivations (such as starting, strengthening, and maintaining connections), and the desire to increase offline interactions. Conversely, participants identified several reasons for not liking images, including negative feelings toward others, a lack of interest in connecting with users, changes in life goals, and a desire to redefine their relationships. We also found that gender plays an important role in people's liking behavior on Instagram. Finally, our study suggests that, due to its phatic nature, the like feature should be considered a form of metacommunication. In conclusion, the process of "liking" extends beyond individual interactions to encompass interpersonal, social, and corporate contexts, emphasizing its significance for both interpersonal and business communication.

Keywords: Like, Instagram, motivation, relationship development, social media influencers

Social media is fundamentally reshaping the way society communicates every day. Some specific features enable this transformative communication through activities such as liking, sharing, posting, following, tagging, poking, bookmarking, favoriting, commenting, replying, retweeting, and reposting (Paßmann & Schubert, 2021). Social media users engaged with these features for various reasons, including socializing, giving feedback, seeking attention, showing interest in particular content, and offering endorsements (Dhir et al., 2019). The phenomenon of social media "liking" has seen significant growth in recent years. Facebook introduced the "like" feature in 2009, followed by Instagram in 2011, which allowed users to express

approval by double-tapping on posts. In March 2022, Instagram further expanded this feature to stories, enabling users to interact with ephemeral content without needing to send direct messages. These developments reflect a broader trend toward more immediate and effortless forms of interaction on social media platforms. Research shows that "like" function is used billions of times each day. Despite its widespread usage, little is known about what a "like" means and what motivates users to like an image on one of the largest social media platforms like Instagram (Dhir et al., 2019; Jang et al., 2015). Therefore, it is important to investigate the interconnectedness of relationship development and this new form of communication (e.g., liking), particularly the role that relationship plays in "liking" an image/visual on Instagram.

Research suggests that users share photos and videos, creating an environment where they can glimpse others' everyday lives, interact, and express their feelings through "liking"— accomplished by clicking the empty heart icon located at the bottom left of the image or by double tapping the image—or "commenting" on images (boyd & Ellison, 2008). Unlike verbal communication, where users can articulate their feelings about an image, the option to simply "like" opens a discussion about its true meaning and purpose on social media platforms like Instagram.

Over the past one and a half decades, Instagram has become one of the fastest-growing social media platforms, currently boasting over 1.6 billion monthly active users (MAUs), positioning itself as one of the largest social media platforms globally (Kemp, 2024). Importantly, 70% of Instagram users use the platform to share photos and videos (Kemp, 2024). The United States alone accounts for 169.65 million users, making it as the second-largest audience worldwide. Demographic data reveals that 75% of users aged 18-24 use the platform, followed by 57% of those aged 25-30. Additionally, gender representation on Instagram is nearly equal, with 50.6% of users identifying as male and 49.4% as female. On average, users in the US spend 33 minutes per day on Instagram (Kemp, 2024).

Despite the immense popularity and frequent use of the Instagram "like" as an online activity, the factors influencing users' intentions to click the "like" button, along with its underlying motivations, remain largely unknown. We contend that understanding these factors is important for several reasons. First, this study hopes to offer new insights

into user motivations for interacting with others online through the "like" feature. Second, the "like" represents as a form of symbolic communication, which can, in some cases, be more impactful than verbal communication. Third, from a sales, marketing, and public relations perspective, it can influence the reach of a product, advertisements, and campaigns message, impact pricing for specific products, determine engagement with content, and define the popularity of posts on social media platforms like Instagram. Fourth, in terms of relationship development, it can either strengthen or weaken connections among couples, families, and friends. Finally, this study hopes to contribute to the scholarly debate surrounding the various factors that influence engagement on social media platforms (Baker & White, 2010; Dhir et al., 2019; Jang et al., 2015). To achieve this, we conducted in-depth interviews with Instagram users in the US and interpreted our results by using relationship development model (Knapp 1978; Knapp & Vangelisti, 2009).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication is continuous and evolving process of sending and receiving messages across various mediums and platforms (Seiler & Beal, 2005; Velten & Arif, 2016). With the advent of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as the internet, social networking sites (SNS), and artificial intelligence (AI), human communication is taking new shapes and forms. Instagram serves as platforms for sharing photos and videos, significantly transforming the communication landscape in the online world (Rogers, 2021). Instagram is also a platform where individuals come together to create online communities and build relationships. As a result, communication scholars have attempted to describe the communication process, specifically how it relates to relationship building (Conville, 1991; Johnson et al., 2014; Knapp, 1978; Knapp & Vangelisti, 2009; Rawlins, 1996; Tripathi & Verma, 2018; Velten & Arif, 2016).

In the communication process, relationships are developed and maintained through interactions between the sender and receiver. On Instagram, the relationship is defined by the sending user, who creates content or messages intended to be *liked*, and the receiving user, who performs the *liking*. Therefore, understanding the relationship between users can explain how the meaning of a like may influence engagement with content on

Instagram. Studies also suggest that the platform connects celebrities and influencers who post content and followers engage with the content through liking and commenting which eventually generate income and engagement as scholars called it "war of eyeballs" (Abidin, 2014, p. 119).

To study this, we first examined how the sender and receiver interact, specifically whether there is a relationship between the sender's content and the receiver's motivation to "like" it. We also considered the sender's interpretation of the "like" and explored how different dynamics between the sender and receiver influence emotional expression norms on social media within various cultural, interpersonal, and social contexts. Lastly, we investigated how motivations for "liking" a picture on Instagram vary by age and account classification.

Knapp's Relationship Development Model

Knapp's (1978) relational stage model serves as a foundational theory in interpersonal communication, explaining why relationships act as reference points that influence whether a receiver will respond to a sender. While this stage model has been used to explore romantic relationship development online, its fundamental principles also extend to culture, corporate, and social classifications contexts (Fox et al., 2013). Stage models operate within a social exchange framework, positing that individuals in romantic relationships "seek to maximize their rewards and minimize their costs" (Fox, et al., 2013, p. 773).

Knapp's (1978) model examines how relationships intensify, stabilize, and descend over time through communication (Fox et al., 2013). Communication and psychology scholars have wrestled with conceptualizing the life cycle of relationships (Conville, 1991; Johnson, et al., 2004; Knapp 1978; Knapp & Vangelisti, 2009; Rawlins, 1996) and have identified a cyclical series of stages in this developmental process. These five distinct stages are categorized as *initiating*, *experimenting*, *intensifying*, *integrating*, and *bonding* (Fox et al., 2013; Velten & Arif, 2016). Conversely, when a relationship digresses, individuals move through the downward stages of *differentiating*, *circumscribing*, *stagnating*, *avoiding*, and *terminating* (Knapp, 1978; Velten & Arif, 2016). Importantly, individuals are not bound to follow these stages in a particular order; they can move back and forth between them (Velten & Arif, 2016). Identifying and analyzing these stages in

relationship development can help define a receiver's relationship with a sender and what motivates users to "like" the images on Instagram.

Initiating stage is the first interaction between two individuals (Fox et al., 2013). This stage occurs offline when people meet or make a first impression, and online when someone follows a new account or likes or comments on content, encountering the sender's image or message for the first time. *Initiating* is often influenced by social norms, with both verbal and nonverbal messages being sent and received (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2009; Velten & Arif, 2016). For example, a sender might share an image on Instagram, and the receiver decodes this message for the first time, deciding whether to like it.

The second stage of Knapp's relational stage model, known as *experimenting*, which seek more in-depth information to determine whether a more intimate relationship should be pursued. *Experimenting* includes asking each other questions, liking, or commenting on images (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Fox et al., 2013). The receiver engages cognitively, decoding the image and considering the potential outcomes of "liking" it. This suggests interactions with advertising accounts or friends fall into this type of relationship due to their lack of intimacy and interpersonal relationship. If this is proven true, it may also predict future loyalty habits of receivers interacting with the brand or an individual on Instagram (Carrotte et al., 2016; De Vries, 2019; Sedera et al., 2017; Seo et al., 2019).

During the *intensifying* stage, users express their feelings toward one another through verbal and nonverbal expressions means (Adler & Proctor, 2011; Velten & Arif, 2016). In this stage, a "like" serves as validation that the relationship is mutual (Mattke et al., 2020).

In the final stage, called *integration,* couples develop shared public identity (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2009; Lowe-Calverley & Grieve, 2018; Stsiampkouskaya et al., 2021). During this stage, people are less likely to rely on social norms to define their relationship and instead focus on connection. They begin to refer to themselves as "we", establishing interdependence, making a "like" a public announcement of their relationship (Fox et al., 2013). Users may also share images of themselves or each another to formalize the relationship, reflecting the bonding stage of Knapp's model (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2009). Liking someone's image publicly displays the strength of their relationship to others, both online and offline, establishing a social norm that guides behavior in this stage.

"Liking" Phenomenon on Social Media

Prior research indicates that when relationship closeness is low, social media users tend to engage in reciprocal behavior, such as liking each other's posts in a "likes-for-likes" manner. However, when users are involved in "interchange-oriented social grooming," they will like posts from their close friends regardless of whether they have received likes in the past (Stsiampkouskaya et al., 2021, p. 1). Generally, individuals prioritize relationship maintenance over reciprocity in close friendships. Users often like the content (e.g., posts, images, stories) of close friends and family even if those friends haven't liked their content in return. Some studies suggest that the "like" button on Instagram serves to evaluate relationships between users, influencing the content displayed through algorithms (McLachlan & Mikolajczyk, 2022). Therefore, a like not only reflects the popularity of a post but also signifies the level of connection between users. A consistent exchange of likes on Instagram can thus indicate an existing relationship between users. Overall, it is reasonable to conclude that people like content to communicate with others and to build and maintain relationships online.

Social media platforms create an intimate environment that enhances the relationship between the sender and the receiver. Since likes and other feedback influence impression formation and are publicly displayed aspect of one's online presence, users with certain personality traits may perceive and value likes differently than others (Scissors et al., 2016). To some users, feedback through liking is important. For instance, Sánchez-Hernández et el. (2021) found that adolescents with high tendencies toward social comparison and feedback-seeking (SCFS) are more emotionally impacted by the number of likes they receive. Specifically, receiving many likes increases positive emotions, while receiving few likes triggers negative emotions in these individuals. Other studies have indicated that personality traits and demographics are linked with like giving and like receiving. Hong et al. (2017) used gift giving and impression management concepts to examine liking and being liked phenomenon on Facebook. Their findings suggest that frequency of giving "likes" was positively associated with both interpersonal generosity and public self-consciousness, but frequency of receiving "likes" was not significantly related to the examined personality traits. Age and gender were significantly associated with frequencies of both giving and receiving "likes." Therefore, it is important

to study the various aspects of relationship building and maintenance that could influence a user's decision to engage with a photo by liking it.

A "like" only takes one click to produce, making it an easy way for acquaintances and more distant friends to maintain relationships without requiring significant effort or context (Scissors et al., 2016). Through the communication process, users share specific content, such as images that showcase themselves or their brands, effectively communicating who they are and what is happening in their lives and organizations. Consequently, a follower's understanding of their relationship with the user or account can influence whether they engage with the image, regardless of its context.

Research on relationship development has centered around the communication processes involved in both face-to-face interactions and SNS. However, the literature has not adequately addressed how Instagram's "like" button could convey a variety of messages affecting the communication process and relationship development, and what these implications are for offline interactions. Exploring the relationship stages can reveal the factors that lead people to "like" content on Instagram. A qualitative approach allows participants to share their perspectives, reflecting their attitudes, beliefs, and interpretations of a "like," which helps the researcher identify underlying motivations. No uniform image from Instagram was selected for analysis because (a) not all users engage with the same individuals, accounts, or images; (b) each person derives meaning from their unique experiences and emotional connections to the images they encounter; and (c) the researcher wanted participants to provide candid responses about how their relationships with users, accounts, or images inform their understanding of a "like" and whether they choose to engage with that content.

Technology has significantly changed the way relationships can be developed and maintained through social media sites (Xu et al., 2020). Xu et al. (2020) investigated the relationship between interpersonal characteristics and moral obligation, as well as how moral obligation influences the intention to "like" content on WeChat. Their study found that perceived authority, perceived closeness, and peer reference are positively associated with a sense of moral obligation, which, in turn, positively affects users' intentions to click the like button on their friends' social media posts. Research on mediated communication suggests that Instagram can be viewed as a "place" where users experience a virtual

environment as if it were real (Westerman & Skalski, 2010). Through interactive engagement with shared images, people feel they are communicating in the real world rather than through an online platform. This understanding sheds light on how genuine relationships between users are cultivated and sustained on the platform.

Zell and Moeller (2018) examined the importance of likes and comments on social media. Their study revealed that people tend to remember their status updates that received more likes, and satisfaction is closely linked to the number of likes a status update receives. Users who received more likes reported feeling happier than those who received only comments. Additionally, those who only received comments viewed Facebook as an interesting and caring community. This highlights how likes and comments can significantly impact the happiness of social media users, either enhancing or diminishing their overall satisfaction. Stsiampkouskaya et al. (2021) studied the emotional responses of social media users to engagement received, and how these responses might influence photo sharing. Their findings indicated that users post more frequently when they feel excited after receiving likes and comments. Additionally, likes and comments have direct effects on both posting frequency and changes in content.

Another line of research examines how SNS contribute to body image concerns, particularly on Instagram. Tiggemann et al. (2018) investigated the impact of the number of likes accompanying Instagram images on women's body dissatisfaction. They found that exposure to thin-ideal images resulted in greater body and facial dissatisfaction compared to images depicting average body types. While the number of likes did not affect overall body dissatisfaction or appearance comparison, it did have a positive impact on facial dissatisfaction. In recent years, the growing popularity of social media sites for sharing content publicly has become a keyway to form social connections, express oneself, and seek feedback on images. This trend is particularly pronounced among adolescents, who are typically early adopters of new technologies (Spies Shapiro & Margolin, 2014). In this context, Lee et al. (2020) examined the effects of receiving fewer signs of positive feedback (e.g., likes) compared to others on social media. They found that individuals who received fewer likes felt a strong sense of rejection and reported increased negative affect and negative self-perceptions. Furthermore, users who experienced negative responses related

to receiving fewer likes were associated with greater depressive symptoms, both on a day-to-day basis and at the end of the school year.

Social media sites facilitate communication through the posting and liking of content. Research indicates that photos receive more likes than any other type of status update (Lowe-Calverley & Grieve, 2018). Platforms like Instagram, which is dedicated solely to image-based content, billions of users interact with images every day. However, most research to date has focused on Facebook to understand the phenomenon of likes, leaving a significant gap in the literature regarding other platforms like Instagram. Ozanne et al. (2017) explored users' motives for using the like feature on Facebook. Utilizing uses and gratifications theory (UGT), their study found that the like button serves to acknowledge the gratifications obtained from using Facebook, share information with others, and manage impressions. They identified four categories that gratify usage motives: entertainment, information/discovery, bonding, and self-identification. In another study, Sumner et al. (2018) employed a functional approach to conceptualize the Facebook like button as a social cue that allows users to convey various meanings while fulfilling multiple interpersonal functions. Their findings revealed that "like" convey multiple meanings related to both the content and the relationships involved. Importantly, the like button primarily conveys content-based messages, so interpretations of its meaning should be approached with caution. The authors argue that the like button facilitates fundamental relational processes within interpersonal communication and is therefore an important social cue for scholars to examine as they seek to understand relationships in the digital age (p. 1466).

As mentioned earlier, the like button serves multiple functions and conveys various meanings in digital communication. While much of the existing literature focuses on social media sites like Facebook, this study explores the factors that motivate users to engage with the like button on Instagram and how relationships can influence the interpretation of a like among users.

Instagram

Headquartered in Menlo Park, California, Instagram was launched in 2010 by cofounders Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger. A Stanford graduate, Systrom initially started the project under the name Burbn, before renaming it Instagram and focusing on

its photo-sharing feature. The app was released to the public on October 6, 2010, in Apple's App Store and gained 25,000 users on its first day. Within less than three months, it reached one million users—a remarkable achievement (Eldridge, 2024). In 2012, less than two years after its launch, Meta Inc. acquired Instagram for one billion dollars. Today, Instagram boasts over two billion monthly active users, making it the fourth-largest social media platform in the world. According to a recent report, more than 100 million people watch Instagram Live every day (Bagadiya, 2024), and over 1.3 billion photos are shared on the platform daily. The top three countries with the highest number of Instagram users are India (388.3 million), the United States (168.75 million), and Brazil (137.15 million) (Kemp, 2024). Demographically, users aged 18 to 24 represent the app's most active demographic, accounting for over 31% of its total user base, highlighting its strong connection with Millennials and older Generation Z users. In 2023, 80% of global marketers utilized Instagram to advertise their businesses, making it the second most popular social media platform for advertising. According to the Pew Research Center, most users turn to Instagram for entertainment, to connect with family and friends, to engage with others who share similar interests, to stay updated on sports and pop culture, and to view product reviews (McClain et al., 2024). Based on the above discussion, we answer the following research questions.

RQ1: What motivates people to "like" images on Instagram?

RQ2: How do relationships influence what a "like" means on Instagram?

METHODS

The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews ranging from 30 to 50 minutes with 30 Instagram users. Given Instagram's large user base and the study's geographical focus, a convenience sample was used. The participants included 10 participants in their pre-teens to early teens, 10 in their late teens to early twenties, and 10 in their early twenties to late thirties, all residing in the United States. Consent was obtained from interviewees under 18.

Participants took part in in-depth interviews that included a series of open-ended questions about their interactions with other users, accounts, and images they encountered. To thoroughly explore each aspect, the interview questions were categorized

into three areas: (a) the nature of their relationships with other users, (b) how these relationships shape their understanding of what a "like" means, and (c) the dynamics that motivate individuals to "like" an image.

To protect participants' identities, random names were assigned to ensure their anonymity. Participants were informed about their anonymity and given access to their audio recordings and transcribed interviews for clarification, correction, or amplification. The post-interview questionnaire collected information about participants' gender, age, average hours spent on Instagram per week, and the average number of accounts they follow. It also asked participants to describe their "liking" patterns on a five-point scale, where "1" indicates that they typically do not "like" any images and "5" indicates that they "like" almost all images they encounter.

Data Analysis

Two researchers conducted the interviews, transcribed them, and coded the responses. In the first round, we used NVivo 12 to generate initial codes, coding all responses from various participants to the same question. In the second round, we compared these codes to identify similarities and differences. In the third round, we created broad categories and assigned illustrative names to them. In the final round, we achieved thematic saturation after coding the responses from all 30 participants. This analysis technique is commonly referred to as the constant comparative method for qualitative data analysis (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021; Ittefaq, 2024). An intercoder reliability Cohen's kappa of .92 indicated a high degree of coder agreement (Ozanne et al., 2017). Themes were identified by using categorical determinants to explore how relationships with users or accounts influence the meaning associated with a "like" and the underlying motivations for "liking" an image on Instagram. The researchers discussed further about their disagreements and reached an agreement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Motivations for Liking an Image on Instagram

In this study, participants exhibited a clear understanding of the complexities surrounding their feelings toward liking images on Instagram, attributing various meanings to the like button. As one participant explained, if a picture on Instagram has

already received thousands of likes, it can influence her own liking patterns. This user emphasized the impact of the number of likes a picture receives on encouraging others to like it as well. To address our first research question, we employed a constant comparison approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to analyze all the open-ended answers participants provided regarding their motivations for liking. Overall, our analysis revealed several motivations to like an image on Instagram. Below, we shed light on them one by one.

Relational-based Motivations to Like an Image

Participants frequently shared a variety of motivations for liking images on Instagram. Many expressed a desire to communicate something meaningful to others, particularly to family members and loved ones with whom they have established offline relationships. Additionally, when interacting with strangers, participants indicated they wanted to convey their sentiments toward those who posted images. For example, one participant noted, "I like an image to start a new relationship." Similarly, another participant summarized that if someone likes an image on Instagram, it could be interpreted as "wanting to develop a relationship."

These instances reveal that when users like someone else's image, they signal a desire to initiate a relationship with that person or their content. Conversely, when someone else likes their images, participants interpret it as an indication that others want to develop a relationship with them or their content. This perspective is intriguing, as previous research suggests that when users convey the relational meaning of a like, it reflects care, support, and appreciation for others (Sumner et al., 2018).

Participants indicated that motivations for liking an image extend beyond simply starting a new relationship; in established relationships, the frequency of likes tends to be higher. For instance, one participant noted, "I do look at their account, their messages, their images, and I envision what it would be like to have a relationship with that person or product... and if I do, then I'm more inclined to like the image" (Keith, 27, Male). Similarly, some participants highlighted the connection between strengthening relationships and liking behavior. One stated, "If a person likes my picture and I haven't met them, I don't really think much of it. But when we've had some sort of prior interaction, or we continually like each other's pictures, then we have an established connection. When they like my pictures, it further strengthens the relationship." This

suggests that while a like may not hold significant meaning in certain contexts, prior interactions can influence Instagram users' liking behavior. Consistent liking can contribute to building long-term relationships.

Participants overwhelmingly expressed that liking an image of a partner or friend conveys love, affection, care, and gratitude. They aim to communicate these feelings not only to their loved ones but also to a wider audience, particularly those in intimate relationships. For example, one participant explained, "I like them [boyfriend's pictures] because I want people to think we are good…" (Caroline, 19, Female). Similarly, another participant noted that liking a friend's photo signifies staying connected and publicly acknowledging their friendship. This participant remarked, "I just scroll through my feed but will stop if I see it's one of my friends and like the picture because everyone knows we are friends, and it would be weird if I didn't" (Brock, 25, Male). These responses suggest a shared understanding that liking a partner's or friend's photo is expected behavior, as it helps maintain a public image of the relationship and demonstrates its significance. The motivation to like an image is also influenced by the message the receiver believes it will convey to others.

Beyond intimate relationships, some participants explained that they like their clients' images to demonstrate their engagement with the clients' businesses. This behavior can potentially increase offline interactions and enhance professional connections. For example, one participant stated, "I like my clients' pictures to connect on a personal level... I feel it opens conversations with some clients; the personal relationship we've built online carries over into how we interact offline" (Madi, 28, Female). The interpretation of a "like" varies depending on the type of account users typically interact with. For instance, one participant noted, "When accounts like 'showmeyourmumu' or credible bloggers whom I've liked a thousand times like my photos, it means they've gone beyond just me initially liking their photos... It suggests they've looked at my content and might want to do business with me" (Hannah, 26, Female). Although users perceive the meaning of a "like" differently, participants' interpretations are influenced by their relationship with the user. They understand that this is a new yet established relationship, where a "like" signals a potential for further development both online and offline.

Participants in this theme also expressed that their motivation to like images on Instagram stems from its impact on their offline relationships. Research indicates that most Instagram users seek to fulfill emotional needs rather than informational ones. Consequently, participants noted that they like images to convey their support in real life. One participant, Jenna (22, Female), explained, "If I know we both see the potential to progress our relationship, or if I'm trying to maintain a relationship with someone I know, I like to show how much I care. It reflects what I would do in real life to support them on Instagram." Similarly, participants indicated that their likes not only reflect relationship progression but also consider the implications for offline interactions. Jessica (26, Female) summarized this sentiment by stating, "If I didn't like their image, they would probably question the status of our relationship offline, and I feel that could really hinder our ability to move forward." These responses highlight the complexity of relationship between online engagement and real-world interactions.

Gender Dynamics of Like on Instagram

The act of liking on social media is often considered "phatic communication" (e.g., saying "hey" or waving) (Hayes et al., 2016; Malinowski, 1972), but its nature is complex and open to interpretation. Participants in this study noted that liking patterns often depend on the gender of the user who posted the image on Instagram. They expressed that they are careful with their likes and think before clicking the button.

Andrew, a 21-year-old male, explained, "When I'm talking to a girl, her 'likes' actually mean something special to me." Similarly, Olivia (13, Female) echoed this sentiment, stating, "If I had a boyfriend and he liked my pic, I would interpret his like as a sign that he's still interested in me and wants everyone to know that I'm taken." These responses suggest that likes in intimate relationships are more concerned with their public implications than with their meaning to the individual of the opposite gender. Prior research in this area suggests that female users demonstrated a higher frequency of giving "likes" than male users (Hong et al., 2017).

Reasons for Not Liking an Image on Instagram

Many past studies have explored the underlying motivations for liking images on social media. These studies have employed various approaches, including a functional perspective (Sumner et al., 2018), paralinguistic digital affordances (Hayes et al., 2016),

the relational and maintenance functions of likes (Bryant et al., 2011), game mechanics and theory of planned behavior (Dhir et al., 2019), and social interaction cues on social media (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). However, it is important to note that most of these studies used Facebook as a platform, leaving a significant gap in the literature regarding the use of Instagram to investigate various factors and motivations behind likes. Importantly, in this study, a significant theme emerged from the data regarding the act of *not liking* an image on Instagram. Several participants raised this topic during our conversations, prompting us to include it as a separate theme in this study. We believe this theme represents a valuable contribution to the scholarship on social media interactions, liking phenomenon on social media, self-disclosure, relationship maintenance, parasocial relationship, click economy (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013), paralinguistic digital affordances, and metacommunication.

The reasons for not liking a picture can be explained in several ways. Individuals engage with the users they follow on Instagram as a reflection of their own life experiences and qualities. During the *regression stage*, consumers may negotiate their self-perceptions and personal goals in relation to the idealized images presented. In this stage, individuals might experience negative feelings toward others based on real-life interactions with the user. Previous research suggests that individuals often present a favorable image of themselves in online spaces. As a result, receiving likes on photos can provide users with self-affirmation and social feedback, which can be either positive or negative (Toma & Hancock, 2013). Not liking an image can also signal disinterest in connecting with other users or organizations. As one participant noted, "We are best friends and have a lot in common, so we follow and like some of the same things. However, when I found out he liked me, I stopped liking those posts and started to disagree with him because I wanted to distance myself from him" (Kayden, 15, Female). Kayden's reasoning for not liking another user's image can be categorized as a form of *differentiation*, as not liking the images communicates that they have little in common and would not be a good match for a more intimate relationship.

Another participant shared that if the content on Instagram does not align with their life goals and aspirations, they choose not to engage with it. Scott (23, Male) noted, "When I followed Gym Shark on Instagram, I was really into working out and doing

everything I could to immerse myself in a fit and athletic culture. I liked all the pictures they posted. However, as time went on, that world just isn't for me anymore. I don't notice their pictures, and I really don't like them anymore because my goals have changed." This perspective highlights how interests can evolve; Scott stopped liking the content from an influencer or organization he once followed. It also suggests that liking behavior can change over time as people pursue different interests. Additionally, not liking an image may indicate that the content is inconsistent with a person's desired self-image.

Another reason for not liking an image is related to reciprocity and expectations. Participants shared that some users choose not to like the images of their partners or loved ones to convey a lack of interest. Sarah (16, Female) mentioned that she stopped liking her boyfriend's pictures to see if he still wanted to stay in the relationship. She explained, "I was really motivated to not like his pics or even talk to him, just to see if it would make a difference." Similarly, Grant (28, Male) expressed, "I thought this girl and I were talking, so I would obviously like her pics for several reasons, but apparently, she didn't see us as anything more than friends. I felt like an idiot... so I just stopped liking her pics." Another participant, Keisha (27, Female), stated, "My best friend and my now ex-boyfriend are dating, so obviously, I'm not going to like any of their pics."

These participants indicated that their decision not to like images stemmed from a desire to redefine their relationships or to test their level of bonding. Their motivations reflect the impact of real-world situations and what not liking an image can communicate, contrasting with how they present themselves through their content and the number of likes they receive.

Like as Metacommunication

Metacommunication refers to "communication about communication" and involves the use of situational and contextual cues to convey unarticulated meanings (Bateson, 1956; Ruesch & Bateson, 1951). Bryant et al. (2011) highlighted the metacommunication function of SNS, noting its significance in the role of the like button.

In this theme, participants shared various interpretations of the "like" feature on Instagram. Many users click the like button impulsively, engaging in metacommunication by expressing appreciation without considering the content or the person behind it. This action serves as a low-effort way to initiate communication, allowing users to acknowledge

the content while providing a nonverbal response. Many participants highlighted different meanings and interpretations of the like button. One participant emphasized the importance of the follower-to-like ratio in deciding whether to like a post, stating, "I always check the number of likes before I decide to like an image. My decision is largely influenced by how many likes a photo has received." Another participant mentioned that seeing both the image and the identity of the person who shared it is crucial before liking it. Additionally, participants noted that a high number of likes on an image can signal users' feelings toward that content, especially for accounts that are relatively new to them. Instagram displays the total number of likes beneath the heart, comment, and send icons. When participants have not previously interacted with a user, their interpretation of an image is often guided by the feedback it has received from others. Research indicates that seeking feedback is a key function of the like feature (Dhir et al., 2019; Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2021).

Interestingly, several participants mentioned that they liked images from social media influencers due to the inspiration and positivity they derived from those accounts. One participant remarked, "I like images because they inspire me and have changed my life. By liking them, I send a message to the account owner that I appreciate them and want to show my gratitude." While influencers may not be aware of all their followers, their content often prompts reflection on personal life experiences. This suggests that, in the context of metacommunication, the act of liking on Instagram can sometimes resemble a parasocial relationship, where followers feel compelled to like their influencers' posts. In this one-sided relationship, the influencer remains unaware of the connection and the feelings their followers hold for them (Flinchum et al., 2024).

Conversely, participants who used business or brand accounts to explain their motivations for liking were indifferent to these accounts not liking their photos. Brock (25, Male) stated, "These accounts aren't going to like your pics unless you're famous, so it really doesn't mean anything when they don't like my pictures. I'd be more surprised if they did." The like button on Instagram provides nonverbal feedback on users' images. These likes not only indicate popularity and the relationships between users but also serve as a form of social validation (Guadagno et al., 2013). Additionally, likes can initiate interactions and reflect community norms that shape personal engagement.

CONCLUSION

This study presents several conclusions and contributions to the literature on liking behavior in social media. We found that liking is a seemingly simple yet complex process in which Instagram users engage daily. While it may appear to be just a click, it conveys different meanings to various users. Additionally, the use of likes is significantly influenced by users' personal relationships, serving as a motivation for initiating, maintaining, and sustaining connections on social media platforms. Our findings align with previous research on liking behavior (see Bryant et al., 2011; Carrotte et al., 2016; De Vries, 2019; Dhir et al., 2019; Hayes et al., 2016; Jang et al., 2015; Sumner et al., 2018). By examining the phenomenon of liking on Instagram, this study addresses an important gap identified in earlier research, such as that by Dhir et al. (2019). We also found that gender plays a significant role in liking behavior on Instagram. Moreover, not liking someone's image can have repercussions for the relationship as well. We argue that a like should be considered a form of metacommunication, as it conveys meaning about the underlying communication occurring through this feature.

The present study offers both theoretical and practical implications for scholars and practitioners engaged in the interdisciplinary fields of computer-mediated communication (CMC), new media, human–computer interaction (HCI), social media, adolescent psychology, youth studies, technology and behavior studies, interpersonal communication, and visual studies. Theoretically, we utilized Knapp's relationship development model (1978), which is suitable for explaining how relationships influence liking behavior. Previous studies have employed various theoretical frameworks, including paralinguistic digital affordances (Hayes et al., 2016), uses and gratification theory (Ozanne et al., 2017), functional approaches (Sumner et al., 2018), adolescent social-affective learning models and need-threat models (Lee et al., 2020), social comparison theory (Tiggemann et al., 2018), relationship maintenance frameworks (Stsiampkouskaya et al., 2021), motivational theory (Lowe-Calverley & Grieve, 2018), capitalization processes models (Zell & Moeller, 2018), stimuli-organism-response (SOR) models (Xu et al., 2020), herd theory (Mattke et al., 2020), and expectation confirmation theory (Sedera et al., 2017), among others.

This study investigates the dynamics motivating individuals to "like" and the varied interpretations of the meaning of a "like," providing insights into interpersonal, social,

cultural, and corporate contexts. We found that "likes" symbolize validation of relationship status, making the act of liking crucial to relationship dynamics. Our research identifies users' attitudes toward liking in terms of hedonic motivation, reciprocal benefit, and social presence, like findings in previous studies conducted on different platforms (Dhir et al., 2019). This study represents the first known empirical application of Knapp's relationship development model in the context of the Instagram like feature.

Moreover, our study has practical implications for marketing companies. Our findings can guide social media managers aiming to generate audience engagement through likes. Indeed, a like represents active engagement with content, and users utilize this feature to appreciate relationships by liking images on Instagram. The act of giving or receiving likes can positively influence future content creation. These insights may also benefit public service organizations (PSOs) seeking to garner likes from existing and prospective users. Additionally, the findings can enhance the operations of social media-based brand communities (e.g., Instagram pages), helping organizations build mutually beneficial relationships with users.

Limitations & Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, it is exploratory in nature and focuses solely on the act of giving likes, neglecting the phenomenon of receiving likes on social media. Future research should examine both giving and receiving likes across multiple platforms. A second limitation is that this study adopts a user-centric perspective and does not incorporate an organizational approach to understanding liking behavior. Future studies should consider both perspectives to provide a more comprehensive view of liking on visual platforms such as Snapchat or YouTube. Additionally, while we utilized Knapp's relationship development model to interpret our findings, future research should include alternative frameworks, such as the like economy, to better understand liking among individuals. Lastly, future studies should investigate the impact of *not liking* images on Instagram and how this behavior affects interpersonal relationships offline.

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Funding and Acknowledgements

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