

# What's in a Like? Motivations for Pressing the Like Button

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## Abstract

Lightweight evaluations of content, such as thumbs-up, Liking, and favoriting, are an important aspect of social media interactions. Although minimal, these acts can carry a variety of meanings and implications. Prior research has revealed various motives and identified some recurring themes, but is often based on small samples or survey procedures prone to memory bias. In the present research, we asked people to view posts they had recently Liked on Facebook and report motives for each concrete post. We offer insights into the prevalence of previously hypothesized motives, and their associations with the content of posts, the relationship between sender and receiver, and the personality of the sender.

## Introduction

Social media contain lightweight ways of expressing an evaluation of a post such as the Like button on Facebook. The number of Likes on Facebook is often treated as an index of popularity (Yu, Chen, & Kwok, 2011; Giglietto, 2012; Blease, 2015) and several researchers, mainly in the domain of marketing, have tried to identify the factors predicting whether a post would receive a Like. These studies usually tracked Facebook posts and used objective criteria, such as whether the post contains a link or a picture, as predictors.

Studies focusing on users have found that a Like on Facebook or a favorite on Twitter can carry different meanings. According to a study on Twitter's Favorite button (now also called Like), identified numerous uses (Meier, Elsweler, & Wilson, 2014). Hayes, Carr, and Wohn (2016) conducted focus group interviews to examine Liking/favoriting across platforms. They found that especially on Facebook Likes are often almost automatically given. Literal interpretation (i.e., Liking the

content of the post), acknowledgement of viewing, social support, utilitarian reasons (e.g., acknowledge viewing, personal archiving) among the main motives for Liking posts. Lee, Hansen, and Lee (2016) conducted a survey on the motives for Liking content. However, they assessed the motives in general and did not focus on the motives for Liking a specific post. These are promising first studies on different reasons for Liking posts on Facebook, but they are either based on small samples or assessed motives for Liking in general.

In the present research we seek to combine these approaches with an in-depth survey of Liking motives in a sample, which is fairly large and diverse.

## Present research

The aim of the present research is to use a larger sample to examine the prevalence of different motives for Liking posts on Facebook. Moreover, we want to extend prior studies by looking at the role of content of posts, relationship with the poster and personality of the user. Previous research has often assessed general motives, relying on participants' memories. The results might suffer from biased recall. For example, if people are more aware of a certain motive, they might recall and report this particular motive, without realizing the full variety of reasons for giving a Like. Instead of assessing motives in general, we asked participants to view their most recently given Likes and answer questions about these particular posts. This method reduces the problem of biased recollection. It also allowed us to investigate how motivations and encoded meaning correspond to characteristics of the Liked post, such as its content, and the person who posted it.

In addition to the relationship between motives to Like a given post and properties of the post and its sender, we explored the role of individual differences in tendencies towards certain motives.

## Method

### Participants and procedure

The survey was conducted online. We had a convenience sample with participants recruited from a UK-based online participant pool and a mailing list of German university. The questionnaire was completed by 341 participants, 310 of which passed the primary attention check (52% female). The majority of participants were from the UK (32%) followed by Germany (18%) and the USA (17%).

Participants were instructed to open Facebook, view and briefly describe each of their 8 most recently Liked posts. A set of questions was repeated for each of the 8 likes. Personality, demographics, and media use were measured.

### Measures

#### Motivation

Motivation for Liking a post was assessed with six items (Table 1) on a scale from 1 to 100. Two additional items assessed whether Liking the post was deliberate (pressed almost automatically and thought carefully) and whether the participant felt obliged to Like the post.

#### Content and poster

Participants indicated whether a post was an original status update and whether it contained text, a photo, or a video. To describe the content of posts, participants could select all applicable categories from a list of categories (e.g., *hobbies, career*). Each post was evaluated on the dimensions of *negative-positive, non-intimate-intimate, boring-entertaining*. Participants were asked about the person who posted the update (poster): the poster's gender; how close participants are to the poster; how often they Like posts by this person, and vice versa.

#### Personality

We measured self-esteem, self-monitoring, and need to belong. All items were measured on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

#### Analysis

Likes were nested within participants. We therefore analyzed the data using linear mixed-effects models (lme, from R package "lme4"; Bates, Maechler, Bolker, & Walker, 2014) with random intercepts for participant and all factors of interest considered as fixed effects.

## Results

### Motives

Averaged across all Liked content ( $n = 2479$ ), literal interpretation was the highest-rated motive. Descriptives can be seen in Table 1. An exploratory factor analysis (maximum-likelihood with oblimin rotation) and chose a

3-factor solution. The 3 factors, labelled literal interpretation, relational motives, and social motives, explained 48% of the variance (Table 1). Bartlett factor scores were calculated and used as dependent variables.

Items	Descr.	Factors		
		M (SD)	REL	LIT
Liked this post because of its content (e.g. find the post funny, interesting, relatable, etc.)	78 (27)		1	
Liked this post mainly because of the person who posted it	49 (36)	0.46		.21
Liked this post in order to maintain or strengthen relationship with the poster	40 (34)	0.91		
Liked this post to show support (e.g., congratulations, good wishes, condolences)	52 (39)			0.4
Liked this post mainly because many other people Liked it.	16 (25)			0.56
Liked this post mainly in order to signal/acknowledge that you have seen or read the post.	42 (37)			0.52
Range		-1.7:2.1	-3:0.9	-2.3:4.2
Eigen value		2.28	1.03	0.88
Variance explained		.25	.17	.11

Notes. REL: Relational; LIT: Literal, SOC: Social. Coefficients < .2 are suppressed.

Table 1. Summary of raw motives items and factor scores.

### Deliberateness and obligation

The deliberateness of action was not associated with any of the motives. Feeling of obligation was positively related to relational ( $\beta = .1, p < .001$ ) and social motives ( $\beta = .18, p < .001$ ) and negatively to literal motives ( $\beta = -.15, p < .001$ ).

### Content type

The most common categories were posts related to hobbies and interests, entertainment, current experiences, and social and major life events.

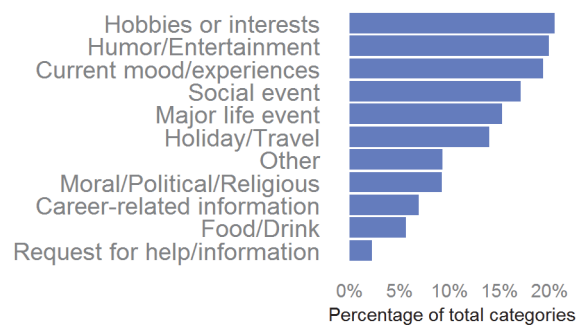


Figure 1. Frequencies of reported content categories.

Relationships between motives and content type can be seen in Figure 3. Entertaining posts were Liked because of content (literal interpretation) rather than social reasons. Literal interpretation was also dominating over social motives for moral/political posts, but for such posts people tended to think more deliberately. Life events were Liked for social reasons and because people felt obliged to do so.

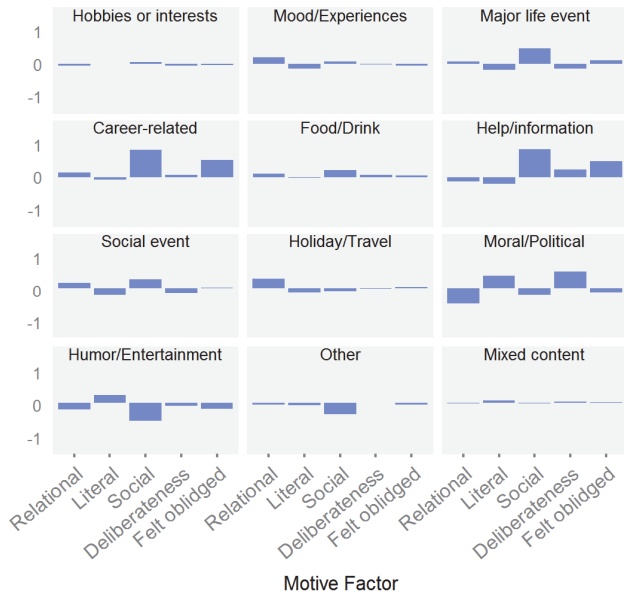


Figure 2. Motives as a function of content

### Content valence

Posts evaluated as intimate were Liked due to relational and social motives and positively associated with feelings

of obligation (Table 2a). Entertaining posts were Liked primarily for their content (literal interpretation) and less due to social motives and feelings of obligation. Similarly, the positivity of posts was positively related to relational and literal motives. Positive posts were more likely to be Liked automatically, without careful consideration.

### Relationship with poster

Results can be seen in Table 2b. The closer participants felt to another user, the more they Liked his/her post out of relational motives, such as desire to maintain the relationship, and less because of the content or social reasons. However, they also perceived Liking these posts as more obligatory. Liking the posts of people who frequently Liked participants' own posts on the other hand was associated with social motives, which likely reflects a form of reciprocity.

### Personality

Perhaps not surprisingly, need to belong was associated with Liking for the sake of relational maintenance (Table 2c). Individuals with high need to belong seek to maintain and continuously reaffirm their relationships. Our findings suggest that they adopt Liking as a relationship maintenance strategy. Self-monitoring is a trait linked to greater adherence to norms and strategic social behavior. Indeed, participants high on self-monitoring Liked content for social purposes, such as acknowledging viewing and adhering to norms. Interestingly, they did not report higher levels of deliberation. Self-esteem was neither related to the motives for Liking content nor the way of Liking posts.

Dependent variable	Relational	Literal	Social	Deliberateness	Felt obliged
<b>a. Content</b>					
Superficial–Intimate	0.13 (0.02)***	-0.02 (0.02)	0.14 (0.02)***	-0.01 (0.02)	0.13 (0.02)***
Boring–Entertaining	-0.03 (0.02)	0.29 (0.02)***	-0.07 (0.02)***	0.01 (0.02)	-0.13 (0.02)***
Negative–Positive	0.07 (0.02)***	0.08 (0.02)***	0.04* (0.02)	-0.14 (0.02)***	0.04 (0.02)*
Log Likelihood	-3,192.26	-3,209.41	-2,833.45	-2,938.31	-2,991.59
<b>b. Relationship to poster</b>					
Closeness to poster	0.22 (0.02)***	-0.10 (0.03)***	0.04 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	0.10 (0.02)***
Habit	0.12 (0.03)***	0.11 (0.03)**	0.02 (0.03)	-0.07 (0.03)*	0.01 (0.03)
Reciprocity	0.06 (0.03)	-0.003 (0.04)	0.10 (0.03)***	-0.05 (0.03)	0.06 (0.03)
Log Likelihood	-3,033.00	-3,338.08	-2,843.76	-2,949.19	-3,013.82
<b>c. Personality</b>					
Factor: Need to belong	0.11 (0.04)**	0.04 (0.04)	0.04 (0.05)	-0.03 (0.05)	-0.02 (0.04)
Factor: Self-esteem	0.08 (0.04)*	-0.01 (0.04)	0.11 (0.05)*	0.08 (0.05)	0.06 (0.05)
Factor: Self-monitoring	0.09 (0.04)	-0.10* (0.04)	0.21 (0.05)***	0.04 (0.05)	0.22 (0.05)***
Log Likelihood	-3,213.66	-3,342.75	-2,871.42	-2,969.22	-3,035.65
Observations in each model: 2,479					*p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001

Table 2. Summaries of multilevel models.

## Discussion

This research contributes to the understanding of the motivations behind pressing Facebook's Like button. Together with addressing some limitations of prior research, the present design allowed for detailed, systematic account of how different motives relate to the content of posts, the relationship between a poster and a Liker, as well as the personality of the Liker.

We find evidence for different motives to Like content on Facebook. Interestingly, Liking the content of the post, i.e., literal meaning of a Like, was the most common motive. This is the original meaning intended by Facebook, but it has often been claimed that people use the Like button in many different ways. Our further results are consistent with this idea, revealing that people Like posts in order to show support, as a reaction to the person who shared the content, to maintain their relationships, acknowledge seeing content, and, to a lesser extent, because of social norms (other people Liking the post).

Three distinct factors emerged from these separate motives, distinguishing content-based Liking (literal interpretation) from relational motives and social functions, such as acknowledgment and expressing support. These factors are consistent with theoretical speculation and insights from qualitative research with limited samples. Our work offers empirical support for these previously proposed motives from a diverse sample of users. A major advantage is that participants reported their motives for specific content they had previously Liked, which makes their answers less prone to recall biases, such as availability of information and lay theories of behavior. The design allowed us to explore the role of what was Liked (content), the relationship with the poster and the personality of the Liker. We found meaningful relationships between the different motives to Like a post and the post's content type and valence. We also found that the relationship with the poster and the personality of the Liker also mattered.

Before closing, we would like to note some limitations of the research. We used convenience sample, which limits the generalizability of our findings and prevents us from drawing valid conclusions about demographic differences. The contribution of our work thus lies rather in showing that in a large, diverse sample, and with a method that reduces the problem of biased recall, we identify themes in people's motives to use the Like button, similar to what has been proposed by qualitative research done with very small samples. Together with this prior research, we build towards better categorization and measurement of the different uses of the Like button, which can then be adopted in research employing representative samples.

In this paper, we consider and report only first exploratory analyses, without going in depth. It would be

important to consider interactions between the variables we explored, as well as additional factors, such as the sentiment of posts and the way different uses of the Like button contribute to relational maintenance. Some of these questions can already be informed by the data we have collected, whereas others would require further research.

Another notable research direction comes from the recent introduction of Facebook reactions (Facebook, 2016). The reactions now offered by Facebook represent different emotions and do not map onto the uses we and others have identified, but it will be interesting to compare which reactions are used for which motives.

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