

Understanding Ambivalent Behaviors of Social Media Users toward the 'Like' Function: A Social Capital Perspective

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Abstract : The 'Like' function in social media platforms represents the immediate responses of social media users to postings and other users. A large number of 'likes' is often attributed to fame, agreement, and support from others that many users are proud of and happy with. However, what 'like' implies exactly in social media context is still in discussion. Some argue that it is an accurate parameter of the preferences of social media users, whereas others refute that it is merely an instant reaction that is volatile and vague. To address this gap, this study investigates how social media users perceive the 'like' function and behave differently based on their perceptions. This study posits the following arguments. First, 'like' is interpreted as a quantified form of social capital that resides in social media platforms. This incarnated social capital rationalizes the attraction of people to social media and belief that social media platforms bring benefits to their relationships with others. This social capital is then conceptualized into cognitive and emotive dimensions, where social capital in the cognitive dimension represents the awareness of the 'likes' quantitatively, whereas social capital in the emotive dimension represents the receptions of the 'likes' qualitatively. Finally, the ambivalent perspective of the social media users on 'like' (i.e., social capital) is applied. This view rationalizes why social media users appreciate the reception of 'likes' from others but are aware that those 'likes' can distort the actual responses of other users by sending erroneous signals. The rationale on this ambivalence is based on whether users perceive social media as private or public spheres. When social media is more publicized, the ambivalence is more strongly observed. By combining the ambivalence and dimensionalities of the social capital, four types of social media users with different mechanisms on liking behaviors are identified. To validate this work, a survey with 300 social media users is conducted. The analysis results support most of the hypotheses and confirm that people have ambivalent perceptions on 'like' as a social capital and that perceptions influence behavioral patterns. The implication of the study is clear. First, this study explains why social media users exhibit different behaviors toward 'likes' in social media. Although most of the people believe that the number of 'likes' is the simplest and most frank measure of supports from other social media users, this study introduces the users who do not trust the 'likes' as a stable and reliable parameter of social media. In addition, this study links the concept of social media openness to explain the different behaviors of social media users. Social media openness has theoretical significance because it defines the psychological boundaries of social media from the perspective of users.

Keywords : ambivalent attitude, like function, social capital, social media

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