

Living With Everyday Evaluations on Social Media Platforms

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The Like button is simultaneously a means of social interaction and a tool to evaluate social media content. Likes are built into the infrastructure of platforms, fueling personalized searches, recommendations, and targeted advertisements while contributing to the economic valuation of platforms and users alike. Working at the intersection of infrastructure and practice, we analyze the experience of everyday evaluations on social media to understand how platforms shape what people care about. Based on in-depth interviews with 25 artists who use Instagram, we identify three overlapping orientations to the Like button: affective, relational, and infrastructural. We show how the flexibility of the button creates ambiguity around the meaning of a Like which drives practices of metaevaluation, and argue that the platform architecture incentivizes an economic approach to evaluation that crowds out other value schemas, shaping how artists use the platform, make art, and even understand themselves. We conclude with a discussion of the broader implications of everyday evaluations, algorithms, and platforms.

Keywords: algorithmic culture, evaluation, Instagram, Like button, platform studies, social media, valuation, values

How are you feeling? What do you think about this? Would you like to see more? Questions a close friend might ask have been incorporated into the very infrastructure of online platforms. We are invited to review products purchased and services received, to rate the latest television show or blockbuster movie, and to Like posts on social media with the click of a button or the tap of a screen.² Such solicitous systems

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² Throughout the article, we capitalize "Like" when referring to the button to differentiate it from general uses of the term.

channel our affective and evaluative responses into stars, hearts, arrows, thumbs-up signs, emojis, and numerical scores. At the same time, the opportunity to evaluate is bound up with the obligation to be evaluated. Whether selling services or creating content, your online actions are subject to quick, easy, and quantifiable modes of evaluation that influence visibility and support human decision making (Masum & Tovey, 2012). And, with social life, political organizing, and creative expression increasingly taking place on and through platforms, ratings and reviews are not restricted to the realm of consumer decisions. As the most ubiquitous proxy for preference, Likes fuel personalized searches, recommendations, and advertisements while contributing to the economic valuation of platforms and users alike. Platforms thus operate as infrastructures of valuation that infer preferences and personalize experiences to give worth or value to that which passes over the Web.

The resulting mode of intermediation operates under an assortment of names including the reputation society, algorithmic culture, and platformization, each emphasizing different aspects. The reputation society highlights how sociotechnical systems facilitate evaluations of people, creating new, often commercialized, ways of interacting with strangers such as sharing one's home or means of transportation (Masum & Tovey, 2012). Algorithmic culture foregrounds the role of computational technologies in processes of evaluation, transforming the assessment of cultural goods and, in so doing, the very meaning of culture (Hallinan & Striphas, 2016; Striphas, 2015). Finally, platformization draws attention to the situatedness of algorithms and evaluations within large-scale commercial operations that extract monetary value and create path dependencies for design (Helmond, 2015; van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018). Together, these complementary concepts attest to the centrality of platforms in the intermediation of everything from commerce to culture itself.

While this theoretical work makes a compelling case for the partisan nature of platforms, privileging particular values by design and accident alike, it risks overdetermining the power of platforms and overlooking the agency of people. Conversely, empirical studies of how people use and interpret social media risk valorizing individual agency while ignoring infrastructural determinants. Following the tendency to separate structure from agency, infrastructure from experience, research on the Like button has typically focused either on the practices and sense-making of users or the platform's extraction of economic value. Despite the implicit connections between the two lines of inquiry, the relationship is presumed rather than explored. Mapping the "concrete impact of digital systems across social contexts" (Christin, 2020, p. 1128) requires an integrative approach that brings broad theoretical and political considerations to bear on conceptually generalizable cases. Consequently, the present study takes place at the intersection of infrastructure and practice, valuation and values, analyzing the experience of everyday evaluations on social media to understand how platforms shape what people care about.

To investigate how the infrastructural functions of the Like button shape the values and practices of social media users, we conducted in-depth interviews with 25 artists who use Instagram to share their art. In the article that follows, we survey literature on the Like button, organized around user practices of evaluation and infrastructures of valuation. Next, we present the methodology of the interview study and make a case for the theoretical salience of artists as a subset of social media users. We then analyze how artists on Instagram relate to the Like button as a technology of evaluation, identifying three overlapping orientations: affective, relational, and infrastructural. We show how the flexibility of the button creates

ambiguity around the meaning of a Like, which drives practices of metaevaluation, and we argue that the platform architecture incentivizes an economic approach to evaluation that crowds out other value schemas, shaping how artists use the platform, make art, and even understand themselves. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the broader implications of everyday evaluations, algorithms, and platforms.

The Like Button as a Technology of (E)valuation

Facebook has a Like button, Instagram has a Like button, and, since 2015, Twitter has a Like button. Similar feedback mechanisms exist across social media platforms, websites, mobile applications, and even the built environment with the installation of reaction buttons in airports, post offices, smart cities, and so on (Davies, 2017), demonstrating the importance of the relationship between information technology, expertise, and evaluation (Lamont, 2012). But what *is* the Like button? Despite the seeming obviousness of the question, the literature offers little consensus. Is a Like a “form of virtual endorsement” (Lee, Hansen, & Lee, 2016, p. 332) or a “currency for self-esteem and belonging” (Reich, Schneider, & Heling, 2018, p. 100)? A “paralinguistic digital affordance” for interpersonal communication or a “status affordance” (Marwick, 2013, p. 75) that marks social difference? Perhaps the Like button is a form of affective processing (Gehl, 2014, p. 42), an “automated feedback” mediator (Hearn, 2010, p. 431), or a lightweight action with social value (Scissors, Burke, & Wengrovitz, 2016). The answer most commonly invoked—a social button (e.g., Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013)—is also the most ambiguous. Each characterization identifies different functions, collectively suggesting that there is more to the Like button than meets the eye.

The corporate discourse around Facebook’s introduction of the button in 2009 offers yet another answer: The Like button is a technology of evaluation. On the Facebook blog, Pearlman (2009) explained the button is

similar to how you might rate a restaurant on a reviews site. If you go to the restaurant and have a great time, you may want to rate it 5 stars. But if you had a particularly delicious dish there and want to rave about it, you can write a review detailing what you liked about the restaurant. We think of the new “Like” feature to be the stars, and the comments to be the review. (para. 4)

Technologies of evaluation facilitate the assessment of someone or something, even as the assessment criteria can vary widely. What makes a good restaurant, let alone a good status update, depends on the person and the context, even as the design of the Like button renders all responses formally equivalent. Such commensurability enables quantified evaluations to power personalized recommendations of people and content, as well as set standards for the digital advertising market (Andrejevic, 2011). However, the intended purpose and structural function of the Like button provide no guarantees for how people actually interact with the technology.

Indeed, the use of the Like button far exceeds its design as a tool to express “positive evaluations” of content (Eranti & Lonkila, 2015, para. 1). From surveys and focus groups, researchers have found that people tap the Like button for different reasons. While people *do* use the button to evaluate content, Liking

is also bound up in social interaction (Eranti & Lonkila, 2015; Hayes, Carr, & Wohn, 2016b; Lee et al., 2016; Lowe-Calverley & Grieve, 2018; Sumner, Ruge-Jones, & Alcorn, 2018). As with any technology, there are both faithful and ironic appropriations (Hayes, Carr, & Wohn, 2016b). Beyond its importance for social interaction, users employ the Like button for instrumental ends such as bookmarking and information retrieval practices (Hayes, Carr, & Wohn, 2016b) or receiving coupons and discounts (Lee et al., 2016).

The diverse uses of the Like button mirror the diverse explanations of what it means to receive a Like. Researchers agree that social media users do not count Likes equally and instead draw on different assessment criteria to determine their value such as their relationship to the sender (Carr, Wohn, & Hayes, 2016; Reich et al., 2018; Scissors et al., 2016), the sender's patterns of social media behavior (Carr et al., 2016), and knowledge of system factors such as recommendation algorithms (Hayes et al., 2016a, p. 2108). People also develop expectations around the volume of social media feedback and report disappointment when posts do not meet this threshold (Grinberg, Kalyanaraman, Adamic, & Naaman, 2017; Hayes, Wesselmann, & Carr, 2018). Further, psychological factors such as self-esteem levels and self-monitoring behaviors can influence how much someone cares about receiving social media feedback (Scissors et al., 2016). Although most of the research on receiving Likes focuses on interpretations and gratifications, Dumas, Maxwell-Smith, Davis, and Giulietti (2017) have shown that expectations about feedback shape how people use social media. Overall, this body of research substantiates Peyton's (2014) claim that the "Like button is a chimera, meaning multiple things to many people," while overlooking the subsequent contention that such meanings are bound up in the "neoliberal economic practices of information consumption in which it is embedded" (p. 116).

On the other hand, critical researchers have devoted significant attention to the meaning of the Like button for the infrastructure of social media and the wider Web. This work approaches the Like button as a tool of valuation rather than evaluation—that is, as a mechanism for determining market value. Hearn (2010), for example, argues that rankings, ratings, and feedback represent new sites of cultural production that "feeling-intermediaries" such as platforms, social media intelligence agencies, and advertisers are able to monetize (p. 428). Similarly, Gehl (2014) characterizes the use of the Like button as "affective processing," a mode of distributed computing that is essential to the business model of commercial social media (p. 42). In perhaps the most prominent account, Gerlitz and Helmond (2013) situate the button within a larger Like economy where "user affects are instantly turned into valuable consumer data and enter multiple cycles of multiplication and exchange" (p. 1349). The flows of data connect social and economic value, resulting in evaluative systems that not only measure but also create particular feelings and relationships—a point emphasized by the enduring absence of a dislike button or other tools for critique. Although these accounts presume the mutual shaping between user and infrastructure, the experience of this process is inferred rather than studied directly. It is to the gap between infrastructure and practice, evaluation and valuation, that this project turns.

Method

To investigate how the infrastructural functions of the Like button shape the values and practices of social media users, we conducted in-depth interviews with 25 self-identified artists who actively use Instagram to share their art. While artists are not representative of ordinary or everyday social media users,

the idea of the ordinary user is a fraught construction that papers over differences in ability, race, class, gender, and geography (Baumer & Brubaker, 2017; Hamraie, 2017). Artists offer a theoretically useful case to explore the blurred boundaries between economic valuation and social interaction because art is simultaneously a form of self-expression (Baym, 2015), the foundation for a community of interest (Halpern & Humphreys, 2016), and a substantial market (Kang & Chen, 2017). Artists have historically been early adopters and power users of social media (Baym, 2018; Duffy, 2017; Senft, 2008), and the longstanding tradition of art critique enhances their ability to make sense of new modes of evaluation (Suhr, 2015). In consideration of these factors, we argue that artists are uniquely positioned to experience and reflect on the opportunities, challenges, and consequences of everyday evaluations on social media.

We recruited artists via posts to social media and snowball sampling. Interviewees varied in age ($M = 26.2$, $SD = 2.9$), and while most participants were located in the United States ($n = 19$), we also interviewed artists based in Canada, Belgium, Australia, Greece, and Poland. The majority of our participants identified as White ($n = 14$), but participants also identified as Mixed Race Native/White, Filipino, Chinese, Polish, Greek, Puerto Rican, Cuban American, Egyptian/African American, Italian, Black, and Hispanic. In terms of gender, 12 participants identified as women, 11 as men, one as a trans man, and one as a nonbinary cis woman. Reflecting a range of professional status, participants reported engaging in art exclusively as a hobby ($n = 5$), a source of supplemental income ($n = 12$), and as a primary career ($n = 6$).

Our interview protocol covered questions about the participant's approach to art, experiences with Instagram, and relationship to the Like button. General questions about art and Instagram established the context against which to consider the particularities of each participant's experience with the Like button and Liking. To explore social media practices, we asked participants to walk us through their use of the platform and the process of sharing art online. To examine normative judgments, we asked questions about what constitutes a "good" or "successful" use of social media, the types of content they would never Like, and their ideal social media platform. The lead author conducted the interviews, drawing on multiple years of experience sharing illustrations on Instagram to ask follow-up questions and examine shared assumptions. The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two hours ($M = 71$, $SD = 19.3$) and took place primarily over video calling services. Participants received a US\$15 Amazon gift card for their participation. We then transcribed and anonymized interviews for analysis. However, because the research deals with experiences of creative work, for which artists may wish credit or recognition (Bruckman, Luther, & Fiesler, 2015), we asked participants how they would like to be referred to and, following participant preferences, use a combination of names, pseudonyms, and social media handles to identify direct quotes.

Experiencing Infrastructure

Living with everyday evaluations on social media encompasses and exceeds direct interaction with Likes and the Like button. In the following analysis, we describe how artists use the Like button, identifying three primary orientations toward evaluations that we name affective, relational, and infrastructural. Next, we show how these overlapping orientations create interpretative challenges that make it difficult to know the meaning—and thus value—of a Like, and prompt practices of metaevaluation. Finally, we argue that the

role of evaluative metrics in the interaction design and business model of Instagram fundamentally shapes how users themselves understand and enact evaluations online.

Tapping the Button

The Like button is deceptively simple: tap the button, a bright red fills in the outline of the icon, and the count of Likes increases by one. Despite the visual uniformity, we know from prior research that people push the same button for very different reasons, including as a response to content and a means of social interaction (Lee et al., 2016; Sumner et al., 2018). We found similar explanations among Instagram artists, along with a third cluster of reasons primarily concerned with using the infrastructure of social media platforms to cultivate personalized recommendations and influence the visibility of content.

Affective Evaluations

How do you use the Like button? During our interviews, this question often prompted confusion or surprise, with participants assuming the answer was obvious. Basically, you Like what you like. As illustrator, painter, and tattoo artist Emma Steele put it, "I usually just double-tap the pictures that I like." This sense of what the Like button is supposed to be used for aligns with the name of the button, the positive connotations of its visual design, and the explanation offered on help pages and public statements. The formulation of *Like* = *like* was by far the most common response and appeared in every interview. At the same time, the seemingly obvious answer begs the question: What do you like and why? Our discussions with artists surfaced the importance of subject matter, message, style, form, taste, mood, and so on. These criteria reflect an affective orientation toward evaluations, where a Like is a personal response to a post, usually indicating enjoyment, appreciation, or approval.

Liking what you like is also supported by strong social norms on the platform, evidenced by the way that some participants felt the need to explain or apologize for failing to tap the button. For example, Ryan Bly (@pvpptsart), a tattoo artist specializing in blackwork designs, explained that he would often "forget" to Like posts while scrolling through his feed. It was not a lack of appreciation for the images—indeed, he found his Instagram feed a regular source of artistic inspiration—but rather the volume of content and the ease of scrolling which made it hard to focus on individual images. Ryan Bly was not the only artist who described the design of the feed as lulling or distracting. As an impediment to engagement and violation of the norm of positivity, distraction emerges as a problem to be overcome with greater attentiveness and personal effort (Hayes et al., 2016a). In these accounts, the affective orientation crosses from a descriptive register to a prescriptive one: People *should* Like posts they enjoy. After all, it only takes a click or tap.

Relational Evaluations

On streaming media platforms, evaluation buttons are closely tied to matters of content and taste, since clicking on such buttons primarily communicates with the platform itself (Gilmore, 2020). However, on social media, clicking the Like button also communicates with other users through notifications and the public display of Likes. The relational orientation toward Liking privileges social interaction, treating the Like button as a means to build or maintain relationships and create community. Participants explained that

Likes can serve as the start of a relationship, the first step to other modes of interaction, such as Comments or Direct Messages. For existing relationships, the Like button can provide a phatic gesture of acknowledgment, akin to nodding one's head at someone in passing—a practice that has been documented in the content of Facebook (Eranti & Lonkila, 2015; Sumner et al., 2018). However, the use of the Like button to initiate relationships is absent from the literature, likely reflecting differences in how the two platforms structure relationships. On Facebook, connections primarily take the form of Friendships, which are mutual and often reflect preexisting relationships. On Instagram, connections take the form of Followships, which can but need not be mutual. The prevalence of asymmetrical connections on Instagram changes the imagined affordances of the button (Nagy & Neff, 2015).

Artists also framed the platform as a way to join or create a community, with the Like button playing a key role in this process. Indeed, the language of community appeared frequently in our data, with participants describing their social networks on Instagram as “family” (Zuzu), an “online community” (Lydia), and an “art community” (Claudia Durand), characterized by interactivity, support, and mutuality. From this perspective, the Like button provides a means to support members of the community. As self-taught painter Zuzu explained, “I believe that if you spread positivity it does come back Whether it be through a comment or through Liking someone's picture or through following them or through becoming good friends with them.” With a community focus, showing support for artists and their work takes precedence over evaluating its quality. In other words, someone might Like a post as a form of encouragement even if they do not like the art.

In addition to acknowledging effort and encouraging interest, some of the artists we spoke with explained that they consider the size of the account and the amount of existing engagement when deciding whether to Like a post. A smaller account or a post with little engagement was perceived as more likely to need and appreciate support. Although what counts as a “small” account varied widely, participants shared an aversion to engaging with popular content creators. As hobby artist PMcats noted,

If I see stuff on my Instagram feed that's already from a popular person, then I'm just like they don't really need me to engage with their stuff. I like it, but I'd rather support the people who don't have as much engagement or followers.

Here, the Like button acts as an evaluation of someone's social needs rather than an affective response to content. Because there is only so much support and attention to go around, some community-oriented artists try to prioritize those most in need, at least as measured by visible platform metrics.

Infrastructural Evaluations

In addition to expressing approval and socializing with others, participants framed the Like button as a tool to shape personalized recommendations and influence the visibility of content and people on the platform. The infrastructural orientation toward evaluation positions Liking as a strategic response that uses platform affordances to interact directly with “the algorithm.” For some of the artists we spoke with, this was primarily a matter of using Likes to influence the recommendations of the main Instagram feed or the Discover feed toward desirable content. Webcomic creator Piotr Kosinski explained that he strategically

chooses who to follow and what to Like to carve out a space of his own on the platform where he only sees the kind of content he enjoys. Piotr uses the Like button to curate an Instagram experience that reflects his artistic sensibilities. Similarly, illustrator and designer @pastforms told us that he really needed to stop Liking memes on Instagram because memes dominate his feed and he would like to see more art. Whether actively given or withheld, both Piotr and @pastforms understand Likes as a way to influence personalized recommendations that should be used with care—even as it can be difficult to put this belief into practice.

Beyond recommendations, the infrastructural approach to Liking is concerned with shaping the distribution of attention on the platform. In a world of functionally infinite content, people compete for attention through the content that they create and their use of the platform (Baym, 2018). As self-described lowbrow artist Lard Humungus admitted, “I have that constant fear of being lost in the shuffle of like a sea of amazing artists.” The Like button represents one of the most tangible features of the platform and gets enrolled in a number of competitive strategies to give or withhold attention; in other words, to generate buzz. Using the Like button to influence visibility can be self-directed or other-directed.

Self-directed efforts to increase visibility include getting noticed by someone in particular, getting noticed by as many people as possible, and generally generating engagement on a post. From our data, we identified the following strategies: Like-bomb a page (Like many posts from a single user in quick succession), Like older posts (find and Like an older post from a particular account, also known as a “Deep Like”), Like all posts (Like every single post they encounter, regardless of user or content), and Like all comments (Likes every comment you receive on your posts). These strategic actions bleed into other Like-seeking behaviors (Dumas et al., 2017), including paid promotions, hashtag use, and scheduling posts for optimum visibility.

Highly strategic Likes can also be other-directed, a way to boost someone else’s visibility. Inversely, choosing not to Like something can be understood as a way of denying visibility to a post or account. As Emma Steel explained, choosing not to Like something can come from “a position of no-platforming. I feel like for me it’s important that I don’t allow them into my space. . . . I feel like that is limiting their platform.” In our interviews, the strategy of no-platforming almost always came up as a political response to objectionable messages or conduct. A systematic understanding of how Likes work and what they can do cuts across the concerns with personalized recommendations, popularity, and political platforms. In each case, the infrastructural orientation toward Liking involves social norms such as noticing and reciprocating Likes, and technical affordances predicated on folk theories about how the algorithm works (Eslami et al., 2015; Klawitter & Hargittai, 2018; Siles, Segura-Castillo, Solís, & Sancho, 2020).

While affective, relational, and infrastructural orientations toward Liking can be distinguished theoretically, in talk—and almost certainly in practice—they are fuzzy and overlapping (see Figure 1). People shift their orientation depending on the context, and all three orientations can operate simultaneously, as @cagetheape demonstrates:

Let’s say I’m going through the feed, there’s certain artists that get an automatic Like no matter what because I like that person and I like everything that they are doing. Even if

it's something that I'm not really interested in, if I see it, I definitely Like it because I know that is going to help.

Here, affective reactions are bound up in social interactions, social interactions are bound up in infrastructural considerations, and strategic responses are driven by affective preferences. People may Like what they like, but that is certainly not all that is going on.



Figure 1. Orientations toward Liking. Each segment of the Venn diagram features a definition and typical explanation for tapping the Like button.

Interpreting Ambiguous Evaluations

Likes, while standardized in form, are multivalent in significance. The same signal can indicate aesthetic appreciation, social support, the desire for attention, or even nothing at all. This ambiguity prompted many of our participants to further authenticate the meaning of Likes through practices of metaevaluation

(Lampe, 2011). In determining the value of a Like, artists considered an assortment of contextual information. A Like from a friend is certainly appreciated but may be treated with a degree of skepticism due to concern that friends are motivated by social obligation rather than aesthetic appreciation. PMcats, for example, explained that while she appreciated the Likes from her friends, she wondered if they were just being nice. A Like from an admired artist, on the other hand, was consistently interpreted as an indication of artistic merit and valued highly. Overall, Likes from “random” accounts were the hardest to interpret and the least valuable. Still, the lack of contextual information did not stop people from trying to separate the wheat from the chaff. Common heuristics for assessing Likes from strangers include assessing the subject matter of the account, the follow-to-follower ratio of the account, and the recent behavior of the account on the platform (e.g., the total number of posts Liked or the presence of an accompanying Comment).

The discovery of a clear hierarchy of value for Likes received aligns with Facebook-based research (Carr et al., 2016; Reich et al., 2018; Scissors et al., 2016). However, where prior work found that tie strength was the most significant criterion, meaning that people consider a Like from a close friend or partner most valuable, artists on Instagram reported different evaluative criteria. Likes from close friends were typically valued more than Likes from strangers, but Likes from an admired artist were valued above all. The very category of Likes from strangers is absent from research on Facebook, for perhaps obvious reasons given how the platform structures relationships. As these distinctions suggest, Instagram is not only a personal network to share photos with friends, but is also a professional reputation network. For the artists that we talked with, aesthetic appreciation and prestige were more important than personal support. Some Likes count more than others, but which and why depend on platform design and community dynamics.

Despite shared procedures for evaluating evaluative signals on Instagram, some artists remained distrustful of the Likes they received and others were frustrated by the process of metaevaluation. Assessing contextual information can be time-consuming and is ultimately inconclusive. The deep-seated ambiguity of Liking can generate significant frustration, as horror and sci-fi artist Joel’s story illustrates:

The only thing that drives me nuts is like, taking the time, Liking someone’s art, and then not following them; it’s weird, it’s part of being a little bit neurotic, is what it is. You want to understand why they are doing it and you just don’t know. It’s like watching a documentary where there is no outcome whatsoever. It is just up in the air. It’s the million-dollar question. Why? Why does this happen? And it’s on a smaller level, of course. But it’s still like, I need to know the motive behind this.

The behavioral traces of everyday evaluations on social media raise questions but directly talking about the practice is taboo, as evidenced by Joel’s characterization of his interest as “a little bit neurotic” and his insistence that it would be wrong to ask people to explain this kind of behavior. Even with satisfactory explanations lacking, the ambiguity around Liking does not prevent most people from finding some value in the Likes they receive. As Piotr Kosinski summarizes, “I think quite highly of the art community on Instagram, so when I see those clicks, those Likes, those hearts, I think people actually like it. It is not bots for popularity, usually.”

Values Versus Valuation

Quantified evaluations are ubiquitous on Instagram. If you use the application, there is no avoiding metrics, including the total number of Likes and Comments on a post, the number of followers, and the number of accounts followed. Instagram users can also opt in to receive more detailed analytics by switching to a business account or creator account, something that nearly half of the artists we spoke with had tried. Regardless of account type, Instagram is designed in such a way as to solicit evaluations and act on the information generated to deliver recommendations and targeted ads. Even if someone were to find a way to avoid seeing the metrics by modifying the application or as the result of the platform's experiments with hiding the public display of Likes, the fundamental connection among Likes, visibility, and valuation would remain. Together, this infrastructure gives users a clear reason to care about engagement metrics, even if they would prefer not to:

Every single time I see one picture get more Likes than the other, I'm kind of like okay what did I do wrong? And where did I fuck up? . . . And then like my inner self is like "Girl calm down what are you doing? Stop tripping over numbers, relax, no big deal. . . ." At the end of the day, numbers aren't important. (Zuzu)

Despite participants' repeated assertions that numbers do not matter, the careful attention to numbers across the interviews and the affective responses generated by such numbers (validation, confusion, frustration, excitement, etc.) tell a different story. Numbers *are* important, even if that importance is mercurial, contested, and uncomfortable.

Our interviews surfaced a widespread assumption that, despite the varied ways that people can use the Like button, on aggregate, Likes are an indication of merit. By implication, a post with a lot of Likes is a good post. To receive high levels of engagement, artists should create and share quality content which is circularly defined as that which receives a lot of engagement. Consequently, if a lot of Likes equals merit, then the failure to receive Likes either implies a lack of merit or requires additional explanation. Indeed, during our interviews, many artists grappled with perceived exceptions to the rule such as the talented artist struggling to receive recognition or the popular hack reposting and profiting off the work of others. To preserve the association of metrics with merit, participants explained away these exceptions in vague terms, appealing to dumb luck, fate, arcane engagement strategies, and other mysterious forces.

The aggregate number of Likes matters as an indicator of a post's quality and also as part of a larger pattern of feedback. We were consistently told that the number of Likes received per post should be on an upward trajectory—or, at the very least, remain constant. Any dip in the level of measured engagement thus presents a problem necessitating explanation and action. Explanations for decline varied and included attributions of personal failure (e.g., I must have done something wrong), along with blaming other people (e.g., people have bad taste) and the platform itself (e.g., the algorithm only shows stuff that is already popular). Artists also developed theories about the kind of content likely to receive a lot of Likes. For example, multimedia artist Emma Rose (@oneeyeddeathstare) explained that photos of her textile art consistently received fewer Likes and Comments than photos of her illustration work. While this observation led Emma Rose to focus exclusively on illustration, other participants expressed ambivalence and anxiety

around such feedback loops. Such anxiety can be explained, in part, by the close relationship between identity and artistic practice.

On Instagram, you are what you post. When posts perform well, meeting or exceeding expectations, the experience can be affirming and even exhilarating. According to Claudia Durand and Ash Caissie, Likes can validate not only your art but also your sense of self. Other artists characterized the rush of positive feedback in biochemical terms, using the language of dopamine or drugs. However, when posts perform poorly, the experience can be quite negative. Given the blurred boundaries between personal and professional identities in creative fields, and between social and professional interactions on Instagram, the idea that “people don’t like my art” can easily slip into “people don’t like me.” Not feeling Liked hurts and the feeling of alienation is compounded by social prohibitions against admitting to caring about numbers. Cut off from social support and unable to alter the infrastructure of social media, many artists turned to highly individualized strategies for dealing with negative experiences of evaluations such as meditation or taking a break from the platform, in line with the general push to use social media “mindfully” (Baym, Wagman, & Persaud, 2020, p. 3).

Beyond individual consequences, participants expressed concerns about the influence of affective information on the culture of the platform. Some participants theorized that the visibility of metrics incentivizes competition and leads people to prioritize personal success over community building. Crafter and doll maker Ash Caissie complained about the publication of Like and Follower counts, comparing it to publishing someone’s bank account balance, and argued that the numbers enable people to judge others. Oil painter Lydia talked about how artists on Instagram can be a little stand-offish, which she attributed to an emphasis on status:

Online sometimes it feels like other artists are kind of aloof. Especially if they have more followers than you . . . And sometimes won’t even follow you back, I guess? Even if they like your work? . . . Why wouldn’t you want to converse with them? Uplift them? Be friends with them and establish that?

Lydia found her desire for community in tension with the importance of status, popularity, and visibility on Instagram. In other words, there was a disconnect between Lydia’s personal values and what was valued on the platform. This disconnect cropped up again and again, especially around desires for community, authenticity, and individuality.

Data-driven decisions are not just for big businesses. Within social media’s infrastructure of valuation, individual artists make data-driven decisions based on quantified evaluations. Our participants observed patterns of feedback, formed theories about the likely performance of different types of content, and tried to figure out what to do with that information—often individually, due to discomfort with the idea of being influenced by numbers. Even for social media users uninterested in celebrity, visibility remains a prerequisite for interacting with others and building community on the platform, thus creating an indirect incentive to pursue popularity. All social media users, including artists, now have access to the same kinds of audience feedback as celebrities, brands, and the media industries. However, institutions typically have goals and values that contextualize how metrics are used and evaluated (Nelson, 2019). Lacking institutional

context and established norms, users either adopt the logic of the platform where, with respect to data, more is more, or struggle to articulate personal goals and values.

Problematizing Technologies of Evaluation

The Like button is problematic—not in the sense of a multisyllabic synonym for bad, but rather as something that generates problems. From the perspective of the platform, all Likes may be formally equal, but some are more equal than others when it comes to suggesting content and targeting ads. For recommendation systems, a Like is most useful when it signals that someone enjoys a post and would like to see similar content in the future. Alternative uses of the Like button also present problems for the long-term viability of engagement metrics as a currency for the digital advertising market (Confessore, Dance, Harris, & Hansen, 2018). Additionally, there are growing concerns about the kinds of content valued by social media, including hate speech and conspiracy theories, and the addictive nature of social media feedback (Vincent, 2017). In response to these problems, Instagram and other social media platforms have pursued a range of technological solutions, including experiments with making evaluations less prominent (e.g., hiding the public display of the total number of Likes on posts), the introduction of additional evaluation buttons (e.g., Facebook Reactions), content moderation strategies that reduce the circulation of certain types of highly engaging content (e.g., the demotion of “borderline” content on Facebook and Instagram), and the metaevaluation of engagement metrics (e.g., the automated detection and removal of “fake” Likes).

However, the problems associated with the Like button depend significantly on whom you ask and where you look. Where technological solutions have focused on ensuring the authenticity of engagement metrics and disambiguating Likes from other affective responses, our interviews with artists indicate that questions of values and visibility are also important. Despite its seeming simplicity, the Like button is a complex tool deployed for very different kinds of evaluation: affective, relational, and infrastructural. In short, an affective Like is a response to content, a relational Like is an interaction with others, and an infrastructural Like is a strategic engagement with the design of the platform. The flexibility of the button drives ambiguity around its use, making it difficult to interpret Likes received from others. As a result of the ambiguity, many of our participants mimicked the practice of the platform and developed strategies of metaevaluation, considering contextual information such as the source of the Like, even as contextual information proves ultimately inconclusive.

Zooming out from the immediate context of tapping a button or interpreting a heart, social media users are grappling with the more general, and more challenging, question of what it means to live with everyday evaluations. Our participants were actively trying to figure out what the patterns of feedback they received on Instagram implied for their work, their sense of self, and their relationships with others. Although many professed to not care about metrics and even defined success as being free from external influence, the structural relationship between Likes and visibility creates a powerful incentive to caring that proves hard to resist. On social media platforms, that which is not Liked is liable to be left behind. As a result, everyday evaluations have a conservative effect, nudging people to care about platform-specific markers of popularity and pursue safer bets. For artists, this involved privileging particular mediums, art styles, and subject matter at the expense of others. Yet these dynamics are not restricted to the realm of art. Evaluative metrics cross

platforms and communities of interest, simultaneously shaping the experiences of seeking support and debating politics, although the implications for other domains need to be studied rather than assumed.

While these developments are emergent and ongoing, our study lays the groundwork for cautious skepticism concerning the ability of policies and design changes concerned with authenticity and ambiguity to address the challenges posed by everyday evaluations. The introduction of new buttons, such as Facebook Reactions, has the potential to disambiguate affective and relational orientations toward Liking, but does little to account for infrastructural considerations. So long as there is a connection between evaluations and visibility, people will respond strategically, regardless of whether that response is a heart or a sad face. Efforts to distinguish “authentic” and “fake” Likes address strategic considerations directly, primarily by defining attempts to influence visibility as inappropriate and subject to removal. Although the Like button was designed to facilitate affective evaluations, its operation is profoundly bound up in relational and infrastructural uses, and each of these orientations toward Liking can feasibly be authentic in terms of reflecting the intentions of the user. Distinguishing different evaluations is less a matter of authenticity than motivation, an open-ended question of authentically *what* rather than a binary evaluation of authentic/inauthentic. Furthermore, commercial social media platforms are predicated on the manipulation of visibility; this is, by definition, how targeted advertisements and sponsored posts work. Acceptable manipulation is thus a matter of economics rather than principle, an instantiation of “platform paternalism” (Petre, Duffy, & Hund, 2019, p. 2).

Technological solutions that focus on the immediate use of the button and the interpretation of Likes—for both human and algorithmic audiences—do not address the broader problem of how people should live with everyday evaluations. On social media platforms, the obsession with evaluative metrics is no longer restricted to the realm of institutions and has become an individualized and potentially generalized concern. Yet the institutional dilemma of effective evaluations remains relevant. As Strathern (1997) puts it, “When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure” (p. 308). Likes, as a measure of interest, approval, or merit, have certainly become targets for many social media users, a visible marker of success or failure, even as there is disagreement over the metaphorical size, placement, and significance of the target. Still, like any target, Likes orient strategic action, ranging from officially sanctioned strategies such as posting regularly and striving for quality content to more illicit attempts to “game the system” (Petre et al., 2019, p. 7). Likes also orient affective responses, providing a channel for expression and a source of strong feelings, positive and negative. As a result, the Like button acts both as a technology of evaluation, facilitating the application of preexisting standards, and also as the central component of a larger system of valuation that generates new standards. The personal values that people bring with them to social media, such as community, creativity, and authenticity, must eventually contend with what is valued by the infrastructure of social media.

Conclusion

Social media platforms act as infrastructures of valuation, coordinating the actions of humans and algorithms to determine what is good, relevant, worthy, and significant—and what is not. Yet the normative commitments encoded into infrastructures do not directly determine the situation of social media users. Through in-depth interviews with artists who use Instagram to share their art, we investigated how

infrastructures of valuation shape what people care about. In accounting for the evaluative practices of artists, our participants articulated three orientations toward Liking: affective, relational, and infrastructural. The different orientations simultaneously attest to the flexibility of the button and generate significant ambiguity around the meaning of a Like. Accordingly, the artists we spoke with consider contextual information and subject the Likes they receive to practices of metaevaluation, resulting in a hierarchy of engagement preferences. Beyond the challenges of interpreting individual Likes, we also found that artists grapple with quantified patterns of feedback. Social media metrics exert inescapable if indirect pressure to create certain kinds of content, which can even blur into pressures to be a certain kind of person—a situation our participants consistently commented on in interviews even as they indicated it was taboo to talk about socially with others. We concluded with a discussion of the problems that technologies of evaluation such as the Like button generate for the design of platforms and the conduct of social and political life.

Despite the important role that people play in sharing, consuming, and interacting on social media, such participation does not extend to direct engagement with the logics and values that undergird the assessment of human activity on platforms. Guided by the platform's commercial and institutional imperatives and encoded into algorithmic processes, these values are neither transparent to a platform's users nor subject to contestation. Instead, people are left to make inferences about how the process of valuation works and individual decisions about what that means for their use of the platform. Although strategic engagements with social media might seem small, silly, or selfish, such critiques speak to the limits of participation within participatory culture and the platform society. At the same time, algorithmically mediated processes of valuation depend on the participatory actions of social media users around the globe, rendering the substance of what is valued an emergent property, manifested in practice and unknowable in the abstract. Paying close attention to that which is valued, developing shared norms for relating to everyday evaluations, and potentially challenging systems of valuation all become more important as the Like button and other technologies of evaluation are integrated into the infrastructures of our lives.

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