

The Impact of Social Media “Likes” on Social Distancing Behaviors in Adolescents

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Abstract. American psychologist Arthur Aron found in a landmark 1997 study that sensitive questioning that encourages reciprocal self-disclosure greatly increases interpersonal intimacy between strangers. In order to evaluate linguistic intimacy, a data annotation approach and measurement paradigm were later introduced by research presented at EMNLP 2020. By examining possible differences in teenage reactions to people at a range of social distances, the current study seeks to further this line of research. The experiment, which was carried out in a field environment, featured 50 volunteers who answered an online questionnaire measuring their affective reactions to various people endorsing their social media posts. The results suggest that teenagers are more sensitive to positive reinforcement from people with whom they have stronger social ties.

Keywords: Social distance, Adolescent, Self-esteem, Intimacy, Social media

1. Introduction

In a 1997 study, American psychologist Arthur Aron and colleagues [1] discovered that eliciting intimate self-disclosure between unfamiliar individuals can foster interpersonal closeness. In 2020, an EMNLP study proposed a data annotation method and measurement model for quantifying language intimacy [2]. The study investigated the influence of variables such as gender, social distance, and anonymity on interpersonal communication. The results indicated that social distance impacts linguistic intimacy, with the most intimate exchanges occurring between users with the smallest or largest social distances. These findings offer a foundation for examining social distance within the context of social media interactions.

Social distance is an individual's subjective sense of distance from others. It's a core mediating variable through which power affects psychology and behavior. It encompasses the perception of self-other distinctions, the differentiation of group identity, a lack of familiarity with others, and the presence of intimacy with others [3]. A close relationship entails a high degree of interdependence among chains of events. It encompasses four dimensions: the frequency of interaction, the intensity of thoughts, the diversity of the fields of activity engaged in during the interaction, and the duration of the interaction [4]. To understand adolescents' social distances, a field experiment employing an online questionnaire appears to yield more ecologically valid responses. The questionnaire utilized in this experiment involves 50 participants. By answering the questions therein, it is theoretically possible to assist parents, teachers, and even individuals unfamiliar with one another in

comprehending how to influence or provide affirmation to adolescents in real-life situations, and in identifying a more appropriate approach for their education.

2. Literature review

Social intimacy and distancing have been investigated for many years. Therefore, predictions regarding the results of this experiment can be made based on various findings concluded by adults. RCI assesses the degree of relational closeness by evaluating the frequency, variety, and strength of interactions, and these quantitative findings essentially reflect the extent of social distance between individuals—greater intimacy corresponds to reduced social distance, and vice versa [5]. Adolescents maintain a relatively short social distance with friends and family members. They place emphasis on trust, empathy, and self - disclosure. This is particularly evident in friendships, where the quality of communication significantly influences the social distance. Conversely, interactions with external adults are characterized by a significant social distance. The lack of trust and empathy leads to less meaningful and more perfunctory communication, making it challenging to overcome this divide [6]. In the structure of interpersonal intimacy, strangers occupy a relatively low position. Due to the lack of understanding and interaction, their social distance is substantial, and their scores on the Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale are typically low. The social distance is relatively small among acquaintances who have had specific experiences of getting along and establishing emotional connections, and the scale scores are comparatively high [7]. The "social intimacy" measured by the scale is inversely proportional to the social distance - the higher the intimacy, the smaller the social distance [8]. Heightened intimacy correlates with diminished social distance and a reduced sensation of loneliness [9,10].

Hypothesis: Based on the research mentioned above, it can be reasonably concluded that individuals maintain a shorter social distance with more intimate ones.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample

50 participants recruited from volunteer sampling. The distribution spans all age groups. Those aged 12 and under account for 10%, those aged 13 account for 16%, those aged 14 account for 14%, those aged 15 account for 10%, those aged 16 account for 10%, those aged 17 account for 24%, and those aged 18 account for 16% (Figure 1).

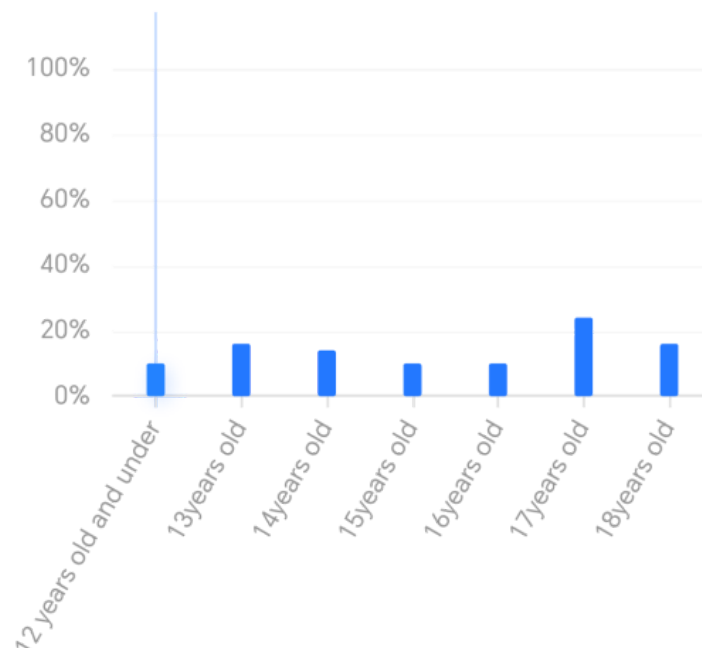


Figure 1. The percentages of participants in different age groups

This study adheres to the ethical principle of valid consent. The objectives of the study were clearly stated prior to all the questions. Nevertheless, this may lead some participants to alter their responses due to demand characteristics and social desirability, rendering the study less valid.

The study also complies with the ethical principle of privacy. As indicated together with the study's objectives, all responses provided by participants will be solely utilized for academic research purposes and will not be made public.

If feasible, the questionnaire could be converted into an interview format. Additionally, some irrelevant questions can be incorporated to obfuscate the purpose, preventing the subjects from conjecturing the study's aim and ensuring that the responses are more realistic.

3.2. Procedure

To create a social media posting environment, 4 mock social media (WeChat) posts were made, two from strangers and two from acquaintances or people you know. The content of the 4 Moments posts is different, but the simulated 'Me' profile picture is the same. Use the same lead-in:

'Imagine this is a Moments post you made, and those who like it are strangers (acquaintances, people you know) you're not familiar with. Please choose: After seeing the people who liked your Moments post, what is your sense of pleasure (whether you're happy)? Or based on the group of people who liked it (strangers), what is your satisfaction with this Moments post? 10 points means very happy, 0 means extremely unhappy, and 5 means okay, normal.

Participants were also asked to answer some of the open questions in the questionnaire, for example, 'Explain why you give this score of happiness to strangers liking your post?' and 'Explain

why you give this score of happiness to friends liking your post?’. There are also closed questions like, 'Who would you block when posting? No block/block family members/block peers/block strangers. Do you think it is better for familiar people to like your posts or strangers to like them? Familiar ones/strangers for the analysis.

4. Results& discussion

Analysis of the dyadic affinity networks reveals a preponderance of high-valence sentiment scores (8-10 points), with a mean score of 8.0. This suggests a generalized state of positive affect and contentment among adolescents when engaging with content shared by known social contacts on social media platforms. (Figure 2)

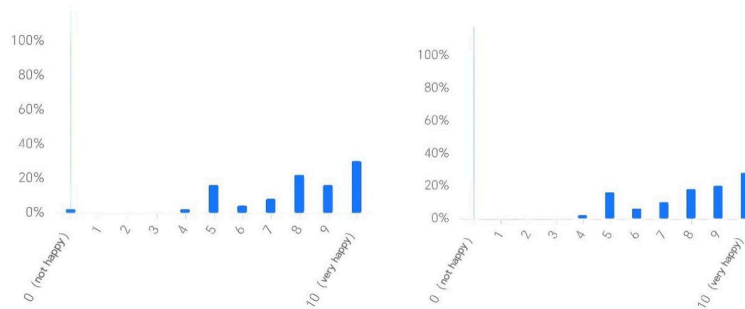


Figure 2. The percentages of the happiness levels of the participants when acquaintances like their posts

Teenagers mainly react positively to acquaintances liking their social media posts, but there are also specific differences and complexities. Positive emotional responses (60%): Most teens are happy and satisfied when acquaintances like their social media posts. This comes from recognition of attention, support, and feeling understood. Social validation and affiliation (20%): Certain adolescents interpret "likes" from acquaintances as an endorsement of their social presence and connections, thereby enhancing their sense of community and self-assurance. Emotional value & support (10%): Some teens say acquaintances offer emotional value and support, making them feel their sharing is responded to. Neutral/indifferent attitude (10%): A few teens are neutral or indifferent, seeing likes as casual or not caring about the number/source, focusing more on self-expression.

However, the two analytic graphs for strangers show an average satisfaction score of 5.7. The proportion of the 5-point option is the highest at 26%, and most scores are concentrated in the range of 4 - 8 points. (Figure 3)

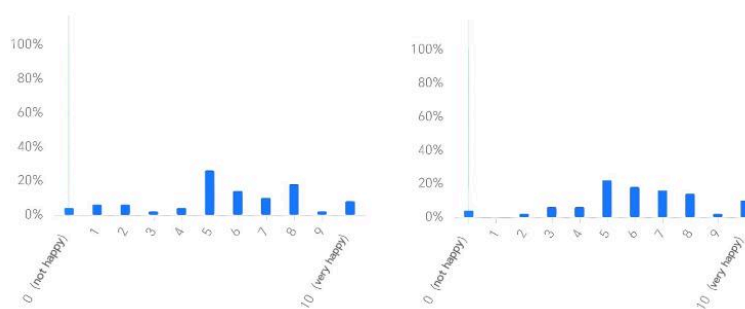


Figure 3. The percentages of the happiness levels of the participants when strangers like their posts

Teenagers have diverse attitudes towards strangers' likes on social media, but overall, they hold a neutral attitude towards the act of liking. Actively accept and feel happy (40%): Most teens are glad for strangers' likes, seeing it as an affirmation of their Moments content and a friendly gesture. Neutral or indifferent (40%): Some teens are neutral, seeing likes as everyday daily interactions with little emotional impact. Prefer likes from acquaintances (10%): Some teens prefer familiar people's likes on Moments, feeling more meaningful.

Worry about privacy leakage (10%): A few teens worry that strangers' likes could lead to privacy or detail leaks.

Most teenagers believe that the number of likes and comments on Moments is significant. 50% of the respondents believe that the number of likes and comments on Moments is important, which accounts for the highest proportion. The proportion of other options is relatively low. (Figure 4(a))

Most teenagers believe receiving a higher proportion of likes from acquaintances on their WeChat Moments is preferable. Among 50 valid questionnaires, 90% of the respondents said having more likes from acquaintances is desirable, whereas only 10% chose likes from strangers. (Figure 4(b))

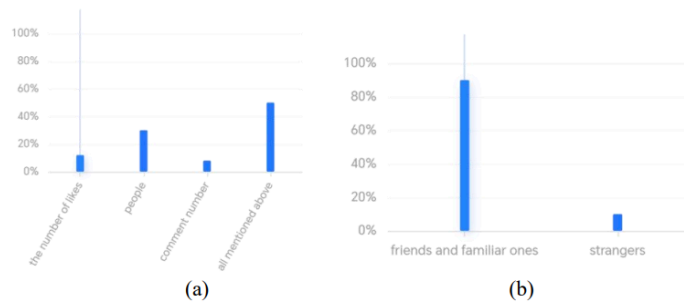


Figure 4. (a) The percentage of different aspects that participants value in WeChat. (b): The percentage of participants who post on WeChat with the expectation of receiving likes from

5. Conclusion

An average score of 8 indicates that teenagers generally feel happy and satisfied with the Moments liked by their acquaintances. An average satisfaction score of 5.7 means that adolescents usually feel neutral about posts liked by strangers.

Data indicates that teenagers experience significantly greater pleasure when content likes come from acquaintances (friends, classmates, schoolmates) versus strangers. Specifically, 67% of teenagers reported high happiness scores (≥ 7) when liked by acquaintances, compared to only 33% when liked by strangers, suggesting a stronger positive emotional impact from familiar sources. This result is significantly similar to the conclusion from many pilot studies. From the perspective of costs and rewards, if an individual perceives that the rewards in a relationship are greater than the costs incurred, then this relationship is more likely to develop in the direction of intimacy and closer social distance [11]. In public, Strangers' excessive self-disclosure may violate social norms and reduce liking (negative effect). In relationship-based surveys, the positive correlation between self-disclosure and liking is stronger (larger effect size). In long-term acquaintance interaction, three effects (recipient's liking, self-disclosing to a liked person, increased liking after self-disclosure) cycle, meeting both parties' expectations and narrowing social distance [12]. Active use of social media can enhance social connections and social support, reducing feelings of loneliness. Essentially, increasing the frequency and depth of interaction narrows the social distance between

teenagers and others, thus enhancing their sense of well-being [13]. Accordingly, the findings of this study have been corroborated.

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