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James

Goodyear, Victoria; Wood, Hannah; Armour, Kathleen

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Likes

*Victoria A. Goodyear, Hannah Wood,
and Kathleen M. Armour*

Chapter overview

This chapter introduces, illustrates, and analyses the finding that 'likes' act as a form of endorsement and/or affirmation on the health-related information young people access and use on social media. 'Likes' mobilise health-related information and have a powerful influence on young people's health-related knowledge and behaviours. This chapter argues that adults need to better understand the complex ways in which health-related content is mobilised on social media in order to be able to offer support that will be effective. Social media surgeries are key spaces where adults and young people can learn about responsible social media use.

A digitally animated case study video of the evidence presented in this chapter can be accessed from: http://epapers.bham.ac.uk/3060/

Chapter structure and underpinning evidence

This chapter is organised into three main sections. In Section One a narrative of a young person – James – is presented to tell the story, from young people's perspectives, of how likes act as a form of endorsement and/or affirmation. The narrative was constructed from an extensive data set (as detailed in Chapter 1) and illustrates the voices and experiences of over 1,300 young people in the UK. Direct quotes from the data are shown in quotation marks. In Section Two – the stakeholder response – an interpretation of the narrative and recommended actions for research, policy, and practice are provided. The profile of the stakeholder group was international, multi-sector, and multi-disciplinary and included teachers, international academics (UK, Ireland, Sweden, Netherlands, Spain, Australia, China), and trusts/organisations in the UK (such as the NHS, Youth Sport Trust) that have a focus on youth health and wellbeing. The stakeholder group watched a digital animated video of the case study narrative[1] and collaborated to produce the response during a one-day workshop (as detailed in Chapter 1). In Section Three, the key messages that emerge from the narrative and the stakeholder response are summarised.

Section One: young person's narrative – James

'Feeling popular' on Instagram and Snapchat is really important to James. He says 'it feels nice to get a good amount of likes on your picture' and to have a 'high number of followers'. The way James talks about likes suggests that they act as a form of peer endorsement. James says that getting a like means a person literally 'likes' your post. In addition to likes, followers are also important and act as another form of peer endorsement. James says that having a high number of followers mean that people are interested in what you post to social media. *Likes and followers* act as a form of endorsement and gaining likes and followers makes James **feel good** about himself.

To find out whether he has any new *likes* or *followers*, James is on Instagram 'all the time'. 'After every hour he'll check Snapchat'. James checks his account 'every time he gets a notification'. He'll 'check it even if he doesn't have a notification', because sometimes there's a message and it doesn't tell you – it can be 'glitched'. So, James is tethered to social media. He is on Snapchat and Instagram before school, during school, and after school. Likes and followers are important to *James so he **constantly checks** Instagram and Snapchat for notifications of **new likes or followers***.

James' engagement with social media for health

James has recently started to have 'competition type things' with his friends. The competitions are focused on 'who can get the most' likes or followers. So he bases his posts on what he 'thinks people would like to see', rather than 'what he likes'. He says that to get a high number of likes and followers he has to ensure that his posts 'please the fans'. So James took a 'nice-looking selfie' the other day, as apparently these get the most likes. He thought about taking 'a group photo' but these always seem to get 'liked less'. *Likes can be part of peer competitions and James has started to **post nice-looking selfies** to get **more likes or followers than his friends***.

The 'like' competition has started to get a bit serious. James' mates stepped it up a level. They keep posting pictures and they 'like it themselves'. They also 'beg for them', saying 'like my recent post and I'll like it back'. Sometimes they even 'buy an app' to get likes from a random generator, so they are not even from real people. He also found out that 'most people make an account and then when their followers are getting active, they make another one to get all the other active followers to follow them, and they just keep making new accounts'. *James' friends **tactically manipulate** the **functions** of **social media** to get the most likes or followers.*

James didn't want to lose the 'competition', but he didn't want to beg for likes. He also couldn't afford the app. So he has started liking other people's pictures at school, even though liking their posts was a bit 'fake' and he was just 'laughing at' some of them. But liking other people's posts is also a 'risk'. James worries when people don't 'like you back'. He says that they might look at your

posts and not 'like you back because you might not be as skinny as they want you to be', 'but you don't actually know'. *James started employing **different tactics** to his friends to get the most likes and followers, **even though tactics he used were a risk** as to how he feels about himself.*

James' tactics of liking other people's posts all went a bit wrong. James liked a picture of a girl at school. She had been 'really fat' but had 'lost loads of weight'. James thought she looked really good. But people had started commenting that she had 'taken it too far' and they started 'skinny shaming her'. When James liked her post he didn't realise that this would be interpreted as him re-enforcing her 'weight loss'. He also didn't realise that by liking it 'someone else could see it' with all the comments. Now more people could see it, and they were all 'laughing at' her. He didn't mean to do this, he just wanted to win the competition. He also didn't realise that she was in a state of 'depression' because of all the comments that were 'skinny shaming her'. James has seen people post about 'taking a break' from 'social media because they're depressed'. He has also heard about people becoming 'suicidal' because of body comparisons on social media. But he had never thought that his 'competition' could cause anyone any harm. *The **tactics** James used to get the most likes and followers could result in **harm** for other people's **physical and emotional wellbeing**.*

People perceive things in different ways on social media. Some 'people get offended by something that someone else won't find offensive'. 'Context is quite hard', you just 'don't know how other people will feel'. Some people will post 'to see what people think of you'; for others, it's just a game. For James, his game turned out badly. *The way James used social media was **focused on himself** and this behaviour had **negative consequences** for other people's health and wellbeing.*

Narrative summary

Likes and followers act as a form of endorsement and gaining likes and followers makes James feel good about himself. Likes and followers are important to James, so he **constantly checks** Instagram and Snapchat for notifications on **new likes or followers**. Likes can be part of peer competitions and James has started to **post nice-looking selfies** to **get more likes and followers than his friends**. James' friends tactically manipulate the functions of social media to get the most likes or followers. James started employing different tactics to his friends to get the most likes and followers, even though the **tactics he used were a risk for how he feels about himself**. The tactics James used to get the most likes and followers **could result in harm** for other people's **physical and emotional wellbeing**. The way James used social media was **focused on himself** and this behaviour had **negative consequences for other people's health and wellbeing**.

Section Two: stakeholder response

Young people can become addicted to gaining likes and followers. On the one hand, young people can become addicted to social media itself and the access to constant social interaction. On the other hand, young people can become addicted to feelings of being popular. In this respect, social media is a powerful resource that can be used to support young people's social and emotional needs. The theoretical framework of social capital can be helpful in explaining how social media is a resource; for example, social media can be considered as a currency which young people use. To support young people, adults need to better understand the complex ways in which young people use social media and how they manipulate the functions of social media. Youth-centric understandings of social media will enable adults to offer appropriate support. Social media surgeries and local health and wellbeing organisations are important spaces in which young people and adults could learn more about the interactive functionalities of social media and the related impacts.

Addiction

One reading of James' behaviour is that he is addicted to social media. James constantly checks his social media accounts and is permanently tethered to his mobile device. Given that time spent on social media is strongly associated with mental health challenges, the way in which James is using social media is concerning. The time he is investing in being on social media has the potential to lead to symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression.

Another reading of the narrative is that James is addicted to feelings of being popular. James appears to be fixated on gaining attention through social media via likes. In many respects, ensuring that he gains a high number of likes has become a habitual behaviour and offers an explanation as to why James was not aware of how his actions could result in harm for others. It was also evident that James' friends were buying likes, and this appeared to be a compulsive act to fulfil their needs to feel popular. The way James and his friends used social media could therefore be interpreted as a symptom of an underlying social or emotional problem. Although extreme, James' behaviour could be likened to the understanding that acts of criminality are often associated with underlying problems related to – for example – drug addiction.

Both of the readings of James' behaviour suggest that he is using social media to support his social and emotional wellbeing. Social media is a space for him to socially interact and 'likes' act as a pathway for James to feel socially accepted. Questions, however, must be raised in relation to James' offline social support networks. The extreme ways in which James uses social media suggests that he requires social media to fulfil other needs that are not being met offline. To support James, further evidence is required about his social and emotional wellbeing. The narrative provides an outsider's view of James' uses of social media, and researchers, schools/teachers, and parents/guardians need to be cautious

about making assumptions about young people's health and wellbeing based solely on evidence about how young people use social media.

Social capital

The ways in which young people use and manipulate likes and followers is an example of building and deploying social capital. Through likes and followers, young people have created a currency within which to position themselves within a vast social network. Likes and followers, in this sense, act as a social and emotional resource for young people.

   Young people's awareness of how to capitalise on social media to attract attention and gain influence should be respected. Through participating in social media, young people have learned key components of advertising literacy and marketing strategies. James, for example, learnt of the types of posts that are required to attract attention. He also learnt of the importance of interacting with others in order to gain influence. These are key skills relevant to society, and social media was helping James to learn how to engage with public audiences and in public spaces. In one sense, it could be argued that James was employing a sound marketing strategy.

   Despite social media providing opportunities for broadening young people's social networks (as also seen in Chapter 2), there are two key issues of concern related to social capital and James' behaviour. First, it could be argued that young people are manufacturing their wellbeing through social media and this can have negative consequences. The currency of likes does not adequately replace the interpersonal nature of interaction, with followers and likes failing to replace the characteristics of friendship or belonging to a social group. As stated by James, likes were also fake and could be illustrative of ridicule rather than social support. The second issue relates to the content young people are creating to gain likes or followers. Given that 'polished', 'perfect', and 'idolised' posts have a powerful influence over young people's wellbeing (as seen in Chapter 4), young people may not be acting in ways that are socially responsible. By going to extreme measures to gain likes, as was evident in James' behaviour, the content of posts could attract unwanted attention. If posts are driven by the desire for affirmation and are used as a tool for social positioning, young people become vulnerable to self-doubt, potentially leading to the development of lower levels of self-worth and self-esteem.

Considerations

Young people should be treated as 'expert' users of social media and
their experiences and opinions should be sought to help adults better
understand the complex ways in which social media is used

There is an urgent need to develop youth-centric understandings of the ways in which young people use social media. Currently, parents/guardians lack the understandings they require to engage effectively in the digital/online environ-

ments inhabited by young people, and they also lack the digital skills required to engage with, navigate, and appreciate digital youth culture. Schools/teachers and parents/guardians, therefore, require a much more detailed understanding of the ways in which young people use social media, the nature of any impacts on health and wellbeing, and evidence-based examples of good practice. Young people's own discourses of risk and their perspectives on how they negotiate and navigate digital environments can provide schools/teachers and parents/guardians with deeper understandings of digital spaces and cultures that are often far removed from adult experiences.

Support needs to be provided by local organisations and social media companies

Local health and wellbeing organisations and social media companies are well placed help young people to learn how to use social media responsibly, and to empower them to engage with the potentially positive opportunities of digital media for their health and wellbeing. Social media surgeries are useful spaces in which young people and adults can gain support on how to navigate social media and how to act responsibly online. Social media companies, such as YouTube, are increasingly leading workshops to support safe and ethical social media practice. Local health and wellbeing organisations are also an important space for young people to access social and emotional support. Adults need to increase young people's awareness of these forms of support in order to encourage socially responsible behaviour and young people's wellbeing.

Section Three: key messages from the case

This case has illustrated that likes act as a form of endorsement and/or affirmation on the health-related information young people access and use on social media. The case suggests that adults require a better understanding of the complex ways in which health-related content is mobilised on social media, in order to be able to offer support to young people that will be effective. Social media surgeries and local health and wellbeing organisations are spaces where adults and young people can learn about the different ways in which social media can be used. A summary of the key messages of the case can be found in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1 Key messages about likes

Characteristics of Young People's Uses of Social Media for Health	A high number of likes or followers can make some young people feel good about themselves. Some young people carefully select the type of content that they post to ensure that they receive a high number of likes. Some young people also tactically manipulate the functions of social media to get the most likes or followers. This behaviour is highly self-focused. This self-focused behaviour and the tactics that young people use to get a high number of likes and followers can result in harm for other people's physical and emotional wellbeing.
Stakeholder Response Focused on Young People's Uses of Social Media for Health	Young people display addictive behaviours in terms of interactions and becoming 'popular'. Some media is a powerful resource that meets these needs. Social media can therefore play a positive role in young people's health and wellbeing. However, if young people have poor social networks, the addictive behaviour can have further negative impacts on their wellbeing. Social media relationships based on likes insufficiently replaces the characteristics of offline feelings of friendships and belonging.
Considerations for Research, Policy, and/or Practice	Young people should be treated as 'expert' users of social media and their experiences and opinions should be sought to help adults better understand the complex ways in which social media is used.
	Support needs to be provided by local organisations and social media companies.

Note

1 The digital animated case study narrative video of James can be accessed here: http://epapers.bham.ac.uk/3060/