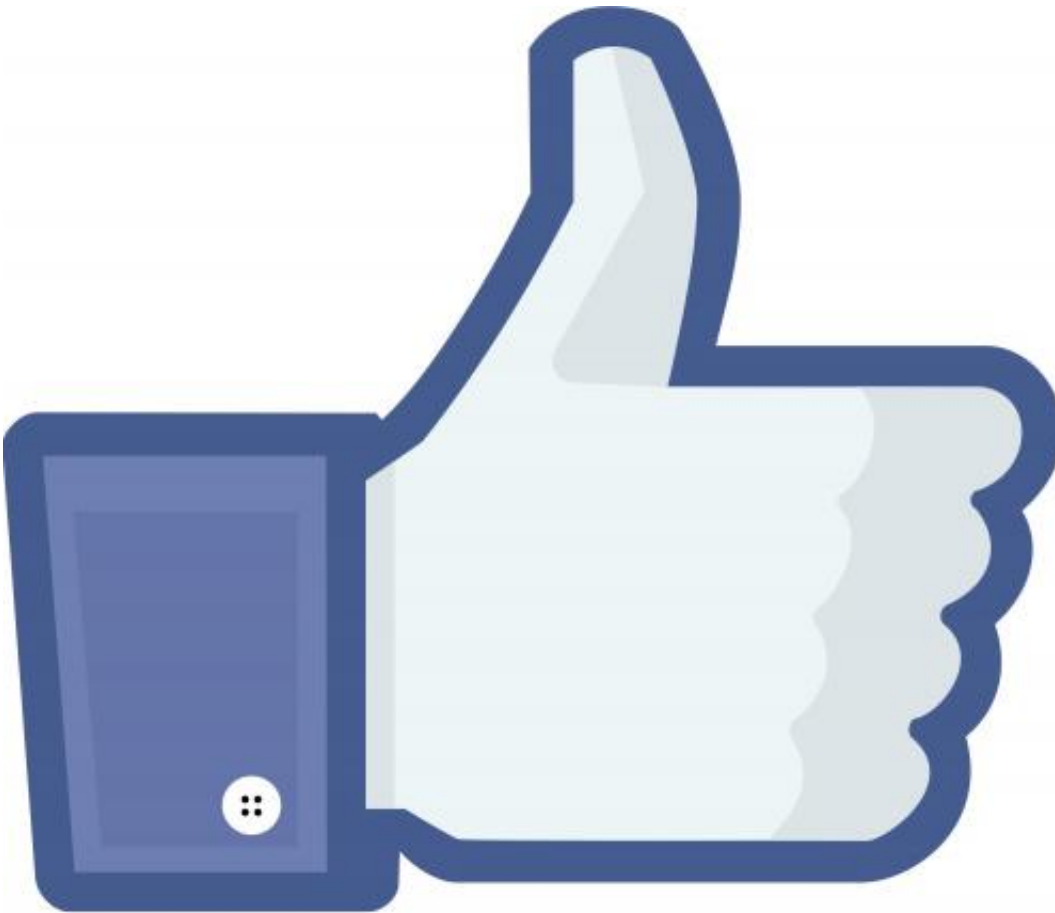


# 'Likes' less likely to affect self-esteem of people with purpose

September 21 2016, by Susan Kelley

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How many likes did I get? The rush of self-esteem that comes with the ubiquitous thumbs-up has more people asking that question, as Facebook

and other social media sites offer more ways for friends to endorse photos and posts.

But one group seems immune to that rush: people with a sense of purpose.

In the first study on the effects of purpose in the online world, Cornell researchers have found that having a sense of purpose limits how reactive people are to positive feedback on [social media](#).

"We found that having a sense of purpose allowed people to navigate virtual feedback with more rigidity and persistence. With a sense of purpose, they're not so malleable to the number of likes they receive," said Anthony Burrow, co-author of the study and assistant professor of human development. "Purposeful people noticed the [positive feedback](#), but did not rely on it to feel good about themselves."

Burrow and other researchers define a sense of purpose as ongoing motivation that is self-directed, oriented toward the future and beneficial to others. People with a strong sense of purpose tend to agree with such statements as "To me, all the things I do are worthwhile" and "I have lots of reasons for living."

While it is nice to receive compliments, online or otherwise, it may not be a good thing to base one's [self-esteem](#) on them, Burrow said.

"Otherwise, on days when you receive few likes, you'll feel worse. Your self-esteem would be contingent on what other people say and think," he said. "Over time that's not healthy, that's not adaptive. You want to show up with rigidity: 'I know who I am and I feel good about that.'"

The study, "How many likes did I get?: Purpose moderates links between positive social media feedback and self-esteem," appeared Sept. 14 in

the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

The researchers hypothesize that because purposeful people have the ability to see themselves in the future and act in ways that help them achieve their goals, they are able to inhibit impulsive responses to perceived rewards, such that they prefer larger downstream incentives to smaller immediate ones, said co-author Nicolette Rainone '16.

The researchers conducted two experiments to get these results.

In the first, they recruited nearly 250 active Facebook users from around the country. They measured the participants' self-esteem and sense of purpose, and asked how many likes they typically got on photos they posted.

The Facebook users who reported getting more likes on average also reported greater self-esteem. But those with a high level of purpose showed no change in self-esteem, no matter how many likes they got. "That is, receiving more likes only corresponded with greater self-esteem for those who had lower levels of purpose," Burrow said.

In the second study, the researchers asked about 100 Cornell students to take a selfie and post it to a mock social media site, "Faces of the Ivies." The students were told that their photo had received a high, low or average number of likes.

Getting a high number of likes boosted self-esteem – but, again, only for students who had less purpose. "In fact, those higher in purpose showed no elevation in self-esteem, even when they were told they received a high number of [likes](#)," Burrow said.

This is the first study to show purpose lowers reactivity to positive events. Most research to date on purpose has looked at it as buffer

against negative events such as stress.

Without a sense of purpose, one can act against one's own interests even when something positive happens, said Rainone, who is a program assistant for the Program for Research on Youth Development and Engagement at Cornell's Bronfenbrenner Center for Translational Research. "For example, if I'm studying for a big exam and get a good score on a practice test, that can make me think, 'Oh, I really don't need to study.' And that may ultimately decrease my final score, because I stopped persisting," she said. "Having a purpose keeps you emotionally steady which is essential for successful academic and work performance."

**More information:** Anthony L. Burrow et al. How many likes did I get?: Purpose moderates links between positive social media feedback and self-esteem., *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (2016).  
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