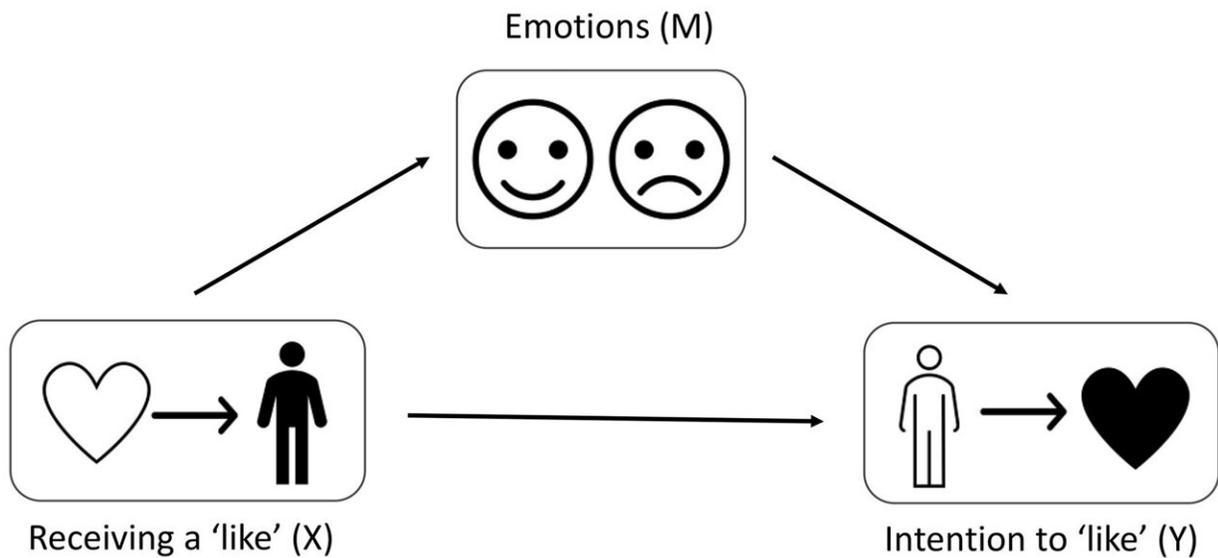


# Relationships matter more than emotion when it comes to 'likes' on Instagram

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Simple parallel mediation of the effects of Receiving a Like on the Intention to Like by Emotions. Credit: *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* (2023). DOI: 10.1093/jcmc/zmac036

The emotional buzz of receiving a like to an Instagram post can leave people more disposed to return a like in the future, but it's the status of the relationship that is the overriding factor in determining the tap of approval, according to a study from the University of Bath.

Close friends can expect a like from one another to an Instagram post

regardless of their reaction to a previous post, but for acquaintances the behavior is reciprocal.

"People who are good friends give likes to each other as a way of keeping the relationship going—it's something they'll do whether the other person has liked their last post or ignored it," said Dr. Kseniya Stsiampkouskaya from the University's School of Management. "The action of giving a like can be seen as a small building block that supports the friendship and strengthens the bond between two people. This means that [social media users](#) engage in 'social grooming'—behavior aimed at maintaining [social structures](#) and relationships."

The researchers say the excitement and enthusiasm generated by receiving a like is a big driver of intention to like somebody's posts in the future, but good friends don't need this—it's their attachment that prompts them to like a post.

"If you share something on social media, you can expect a like from your close friend even if you missed their previous post," says Stsiampkouskaya. "Liking between close friends is not about direct reciprocity, it is about the bigger picture—their friendship and connection.

"For acquaintances, however, the situation is different. Acquaintances do not have the same social obligations towards each other as close friends, so they tend to mirror each other's behaviors. Receiving a like from an acquaintance triggers our norm of reciprocity, so we are more likely to return the kindness and give a like back. However, if this acquaintance didn't like our previous post, we will probably do the same and just ignore their future posts."

The research, published in the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, explores the direct reciprocation of social media likes

via an online experiment. 201 participants from the UK, US, Ireland, Australia, Canada and New Zealand (71 percent women) were allocated to one of four groups: receiving a like from a close friend, not receiving a like from a close friend, receiving a like from an acquaintance, and not receiving a like from an acquaintance.

They completed a questionnaire-based simulation of Instagram in which they had the choice to return or not return a like to a [friend/acquaintance](#), with researchers using statistical modeling techniques to assess participants' emotional reactions.

The researchers acknowledge that while relational closeness influences liking behaviors it is not the sole predictor—previous research points to a variety of factors including demographics, [personality traits](#), enjoyment, personal brand management and information sharing.

However, they say the study is "an important stepping-stone" in understanding how user behavior changes across different levels of relational closeness. Insights can help [social media platforms](#) optimize [user experience](#) by fulfilling their original purpose of connecting people and providing ample opportunities for relationship building and maintenance.

"Understanding how relational closeness affects user behavior can help brands and businesses create effective engagement strategies, fostering the culture of cooperation and co-creation on social [media](#)," said Stsiampkouskaya.

"Last but not least, the knowledge of why and how people give likes on [social media](#) can ease the pressure of social comparison, increase users' self-awareness, and help them engage with platforms in a more mindful way."

**More information:** Kseniya Stsiampkouskaya et al, To Like or Not to Like? An Experimental Study on Relational Closeness, Social Grooming, Reciprocity, and Emotions in Social Media Liking, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* (2023). [DOI: 10.1093/jcmc/zmac036](https://doi.org/10.1093/jcmc/zmac036)

Provided by University of Bath

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