

The Effect of Like Counts on Social Behavior

Sravya Boppuri

The University of Southern California

DSM 510

10/14/19

Introduction

With over 7.7 billion people in the world, 3.5 billion of these people are on social media. This online population has been increasing each year. This online social environment is run by user interactions, communications and relationships. Built on the foundation of sharing social lives and interests, social giants such as Facebook and Instagram have influenced how people behave online. People comment, like and share content with close friends or even to thousands of followers. But one main question has risen over the years. What makes people want to post and like content? This social behavior of wanting to share is evident in real-life, but now has taken form online. Sharing based on the number of likes and only liking a post because a friend also liked the same post have been one of many characteristics displayed by avid social media users. Most of these behaviors center around the concept of “like count.” This is what differentiates social media platforms from commercial websites: the ability to interact with users and react to content. The ease of reacting to a post within seconds has changed the way people build relationships online. Although likes make it easier to show appreciation for a post, it has introduced issues like social anxiety, self- comparison and depression especially in those who are intrinsically motivated by “the number of likes.” Since its inception, discussed later in the paper, the like button stirred up a new controversy. Social media giants are now reconsidering the value like counts has on these platforms. Like counts have established itself not only as a way to measure a user’s success but a way to express their emotions. This paper will discuss how the current controversy of the like feature is affecting social behavior and relationships online.

History

From its inception in 2004, Facebook has become the social media giant reaching over 2.3 billion users. It has revolutionized how people connect online and has blurred the lines between reality and online for the younger generation where they have access to everything in one place: friends, news, etc (Eranti, V. & Lonkila, M., 2015). The increased use of this platform is partially due to the introduction of the iconic “like” button introduced in 2009. This simple act of “liking” a post as a form of interaction has shifted peoples’ mindsets. This shift focuses on a numerical-based success that motivates behavior online.

First, we will discuss how social media has changed and what led to the “like count” hungry mindset society has today. In the early 2000s, “Facebook reached global dominance through a combination of three core concepts — the social graph, the news feed, and the “like” button” (Locke, 2018). By intertwining these 3 concepts, Facebook started off as a website to connect people and form social relationships. It mainly benefited the user through photo sharing and later led to communities interconnecting.

The thrill of forming relationships online drove early platforms. Users were more inclined to share content because networks became close knit within communities. There was more focus on meeting common friends or reconnecting with old acquaintances. Because the communities were more intimate than what is known today, there was less pressure for people to focus on like counts.

The shift occurred when Mark Zuckerberg in 2007 decided to change the meaning of social media. He mentioned that “until now, social networks have been closed platforms...social graph as a new way of connecting everyone on the internet” (Locke, 2018). This change broke

the barriers leading to formation of social relationships outside of their known communities. Users were intrigued to find people with “similar interests” and even find commonalities with likes of brands. Networks started to grow larger and larger. With this came anxiety pushing for more online awareness on what was being shared.

Another factor adding to the shift in social behavior was the creation of the newsfeed. The original model for social media prior to the newsfeed was user focused. In this model, “users were creators, and so they focused on making it easy for users to publish their own content” (Locke, 2018). This left little room for interaction on content. Users posted but didn’t expect “likes” or any numerical success on their content. They posted purely to get their content out on the web. People were less inclined to react to a post due to the time-consuming factor, which was done through comments. The only way to view content was to go to that user’s profile. But now the newsfeed closes that gap allowing for people to view content directly on their social media page. “Instead of publishing to a site that you had complete control over, your content was aggregated into a never-ending stream that was personalized for the reader, not the creator” (Locke, 2018). The newsfeed was more personalized and tailored to the user’s interests. When people view things that are of interest to them, they are inclined to share their own opinion and react to content. They want to interact with the content creator directly. This excitement to share and interact with others encouraged the concept of the like button.

Before the like feature was implemented, interacting was time consuming which discouraged people from reacting to content. Social media was user heavy and wasn’t tailored to the right audience, which changed when the platform started expanding its closed

boundaries. The like button turned “audience behavior into valuable data” (Locke, 2018). This is where the controversy stems from. Like counts became numerical and social media platforms changed from being solely content sharing to “how many likes did my post get” mindset. Being built off of a numerical mindset, social behavior online has also shifted causing behavioral and mental issues in society. Instead of focusing on just content like in the early stages of social media, people are more focused on what to post and when to post to maximize the number of likes.

Social behavior and interaction

To understand how the pre and post era of the like button affects social behavior in the users, we also need to comprehend how humans interact. Human social behavior stems from the need for attention and validation; however, these are affected by the user’s network. We will reference “The Social Significance of the Facebook Like Button” research done by Eranti and Lonkila to better understand the human behavior behind content engagement.

Erving Goffman, a well-known social scientist mentioned by Eranti and Lonkila in their research, explores the micro-level interactions of humans. This is the first layer of behavior that needs to be studied in order to understand why people have the need to react or are inclined to interact. This begins on the study of how people face multiple daily encounters with each other where they are expected to give attention and be civil according to society standards. These acts of interactions also translate online such as when “we maintain that the ritual of liking someone’s new Facebook profile photo is similar to the ritual of greeting anyone who comes into your office — not mandatory in a strict sense, but it may have negative consequences if neglected” (Eranti, V., & Lonkila, M., 2015). Acknowledging a person’s presence

is seen as respectful and appreciated just like when friends “acknowledge” and appreciate a post on social media through a like. It’s gives a similar feeling of being recognized and noticed that fulfills the human need for attention. Getting attention from friends creates social relationships that encourage reciprocity- getting a like for a like on each other’s posts. People want to react to others hoping they will receive the same reaction as a sense of validation.

To move deeper into micro gestures, the like button serves as a “nano-level” gesture for online users. While in-person interactions, people smile, shake hands or make eye contact, these forms of minute gestures are paralleled as likes, emojis and pictures online with the only difference being the time factor. Online, people have time to process and think through what and how they want to react to a certain post rather than the immediate attention needed in a physical situation.

Micro and nano- level gestures characterize the interaction between users on social media. The question of what drives a user to like a post online arises. Eranti and Lonkila tackle this curiosity by touching on the notion of how “users’ behavior is likely to be influenced and constrained by the opinions of their Facebook friends” (Eranti, V., & Lonkila, M., 2015). People tend to mirror their decision on whether to like a post based on how mutual friends reacted to the same post. Eranti and Lonkila introduce the concept of “personal network audience” to encapsulate this behavior. PNA is the prime network of audience a user will interact with. Within the PNA, there are multiple relationships that influence each person’s reaction to the main user’s content. This affects the number of likes, the engagement activity and likeability of the user. This chain reaction, also depicted in figure 1 in the appendix, is best described as “if A checks — before liking B’s post — who else has liked this post, user A will observe still a third

audience, the network of previous likers (NPL), consisting of a network of specific, named individuals” (Eranti, V., & Lonkila, M., 2015). This phenomenon describes how even a simple action of liking a post goes back to how people are connected in their network. This leads to a biased reaction to a post. As mentioned earlier, behaviors seen online are mirrored to behaviors also seen in- person situations. If person A was invited to person B’s party, but person A is closer to person C who dislikes person B, then person A will wait to see if person C will go to the party before they make their own decision. This concept is universal and can be clearly illustrated in figure 1 helping us better understand why people behave the way they do online in relation to engagement and like counts.

To add onto how networks affect behavior online, a recent study done in 2017 looks deeper into “gratified usage motives” and the “underlying motives” associated with Liking behavior” (Ozanne, M., Navas, A. C., Mattila, A. S., & Hoof, H. B. V., 2017). First, to touch on the gratified usage motives, this idea highlights the motives that are obtained through the use of Facebook. The motives in this case are considered to be satisfaction of viewing content that a user resonates to. When someone finds a video or post that they find interesting, they intentionally “like the post in order to secure the satisfaction obtained” (Ozanne, M., Navas, A. C., Mattila, A. S., & Hoof, H. B. V., 2017). It’s a concrete way of showing your appreciation and making that emotion more tangible and real online. The way of making a like public ties to another theory mentioned in the research-impression management. This theory bolsters the fact that people try to influence people’s perception by manipulating their views on a person, object, etc. The motive of liking a post is to make satisfaction more concrete, but “FB user intentionally clicks on the Like to manipulate the readers’ impressions” (Ozanne, M., Navas, A.

C., Mattila, A. S., & Hoof, H. B. V., 2017). When someone from your PNA sees your like on a post, their perception on the issue will be altered or biased. They will be inclined to open the video or article to see why you liked that post. This digs deeper into the person's own interests and thoughts highlighting the "idea that the Like is part of the online communication richness that provides more information on the one who likes than just the conceptual idea of Liking" (Ozanne, M., Navas, A. C., Mattila, A. S., & Hoof, H. B. V., 2017). Liking behavior online is all interconnected with networks influencing the behavior of others.

Pros/Cons

In recent years, the controversy of if the like count is adding value to their users has been in question. With this, social media giants are deciding whether making like counts private will alleviate pressure in society. In this section, pros and cons of the removal of the like count will be discussed along with what affect each will have on social interaction and behavior.

The pros of hiding like counts will result in a higher posting frequency, eliminates biased interaction online, diminishes the idea of "Instagram perfect" standards to get more likes. To begin, if like counts were not visible, people will be inclined to post more frequently. Without the stress of worrying about how many likes a post will get, individuals will feel more comfortable sharing content that truly interests them. Like counts will not be the motivation but rather the individual's interests, which builds on social media's true intentions. Posting one picture online is built off of anxiety, self-comparison, and depression. The anxiety stems from whether the picture is worthy of being posted and if it is of good quality to receive lots of likes. Next, self-comparison is evident after the post is online. It is instinctive to compare your likes to those of your peers, especially since the newsfeed provides an outlook to all the people you

follow. Without thinking, you will be inclined to look back at a friend's post to see if your like ratio is matching with his or hers. This leads to the next behavior, depression. People always want the highest like count to validate their "popularity" online. However, if this number is not up to their standards, they will start to feel depressed leading to a lower self-esteem. This is a cycle that social media promotes leading to destructive behavior. However, if this cycle can be removed by hiding like counts, there will be less pressure on the outcomes, thereby encouraging more posts to be shared.

Elimination of biased interaction is another positive outcome of the removal of like counts. Biased interaction as described earlier in the paper highlights how likes are given based on the user's personal network. The visibility of likes not only showcases the number of likes but also who liked a certain post. Other users are able to view this data influencing their decision on whether to react to a piece of content. This creates unnecessary conflicts between groups of friends within a network. Without this information public, users will be able to like content without a predisposed bias on the content. This reveals the real intention of the like promoting genuineness online. The interactions online will be more direct and concrete, due to fewer external factors interfering. The like will be only visible to the user who posted, so it will spark a real conversation directly with the person strengthening friendships online.

Lastly, the most recent concept of "Instagram perfect" in society will diminish as a result of hiding likes. As mentioned before, the main motivation for posting online nowadays has been to achieve the highest count of likes. But these likes are surrounded around a concept recently introduced called "Instagram perfect." This idea is not only for Instagram posts but can be applied to all social media platforms. Society has created these standards for content to be

highly edited to promote a lifestyle that is “perfect” to the viewers even if reality says otherwise. This is achieved through filters, editing, lighting, etc. “Instagram perfect” pictures have a trend of getting large amount of likes due to their highly polished aesthetic. However, these standards are distorting reality. People constantly are pressured to post something that reaches these standards in order to get likes. This doesn’t accurately reflect an individual’s life, so they face self- doubt in real life that they are not able to live these “Instagram perfect” lives in reality. Without like counts, the positive outcome results in there being less pressure to edit a picture or pose a certain way to achieve likes. People will be more open to posting raw selfies or hardships, because their main focus won’t be to get likes rather it will be to share their thoughts and emotions. By hiding likes, this concept will slowly diminish and promote a culture that appreciates the rawness in life.

With every pro, there is always a flip side. The con of removing the like count will affect engagement (likes, shares, comments) on each post. Engagement is the driving force behind social media. With social media shifting towards a “like count” heavy era, the like button challenges the level of engagement and social relationships on these platforms. The higher the engagement is, the more popular the account becomes. If the like count were to be removed, it would affect how much acknowledgement a post gets. Referring back to a previously mentioned topic, people are influenced by their network’s actions. By obscuring the visibility in the likes, it makes decision-making more time consuming rather than a simple task. The like count was originally invented to make interactions online simple and quick to adapt to the fast-paced world. Commenting takes time to craft which discourages people from quickly sharing

their reaction to a friend's post. With this trend in mind, one of the cons of removing the like count will decrease engagement.

Case Study

To address the mental issues associated with self-comparison and anxiety tied to posting on social media, Facebook and Instagram have been conducting tests to remove the like count. Facebook is still in the process of conducting the test, so this section will primarily focus on Instagram's efforts.

Instagram is a subsidiary owned by Facebook that was started in 2010. Built as a photo sharing application, it has established itself as an outlet to paint a "picture perfect" version of one's life. Users are able to interact with one another through the "heart" feature similar to Facebook's like button. However, "in recent years received criticism for negatively impacting user's self-esteem and sense of purpose through these interactions" (Nunez, 2019). Starting off as a way to acknowledge a post, this feature grew to become a way to establish popularity and status based on the number of likes a post gets. With each post comes anxiety and depression as users compare the number of likes with their peers or influencers and celebrities. To address this rising issue, Instagram initiated a test to see how the removal of like count will affect a user's experience.

The test was launched in Canada in May 2019 and now expanding into 7 more countries. When users logged onto their Instagram page, a notification popped up on the top stating that the like count will be removed but the posting individual would still be able to view who and how many liked the post without this information being visible to the public (Yurieff, 2019). Specific data has not been released yet for this test since Facebook and Instagram are still in the

process of furthering their research. However, there was a mixed response initially but “affected users said they appreciated the less pressurized, more carefree version of Instagram without likes” (Leskin, 2019).

To get a better understanding from an individual’s point of view, an article written on Huffington Post shares the thoughts of users in Canada. Sarah Roberts, a writer in Canada, mentioned her initial reaction as being unsettling by having to forgo the comparison that comes with Instagram, but later on went to saying “I’ve also been more personal with the things I actually like versus what everyone else is liking” (Wong, 2019). This was a common theme presented in the individuals tested as mentioned by another reporter highlighting that the “Canadians we spoke to said they’re posting *more*, without the built-up anxiety they used to feel about how the post would perform” (Wong, 2019). This initiative pushed more users to post based on their interests rather than the numerical outcome that leads to self-comparison and self-esteem.

Testing is still continuing with Facebook also implementing a “no like count” environment. The executives behind these social media giants have acknowledged the negative consequences behind a “like count heavy” mindset. Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook, emphasized the sole reason for the start of this platform was to “to help people stay connected and bring us closer together with the people that matter to us” (Nunez, 2019). Unfortunately, over the years, this purpose has been sidelined as people are focusing more on trivial statistics on their posts. In efforts to realign users with the original intentions of social media, “Instagram Stories were created in part to alleviate the pressure of receiving likes...” (Wong, 2019). Users are able to post pictures or videos on to their stories where it will be deleted after 24 hours.

There are no likes or comments visible to the public, but users are still able to interact by reacting or commenting directly to the individual who posted. Adam Mosseri, the head of Instagram, explained the prime reason this feature was set up in order to create a “less pressurized environment where people feel comfortable expressing themselves” (Wong, 2019).

Facebook and Instagram have acknowledged the issue in society and are continuing to do their experiments before dismissing the like count. In the meantime, other means of sharing content are being introduced to promote a less pressurized and healthy social environment.

Point of View

The effects of the like button need to be addressed sooner than later. Social media has grown to be the glue that connects our networks. It has helped connect friends and family but also reignite old friendships. With positive outcomes associated with these platforms, social media will continue to be an integral part of our lives. However, the negative repercussions need to be resolved to promote a healthy environment by encouraging a positive outlook on posting and sharing.

If this issue is not tackled, it will affect social relationships leading to unnecessary conflicts and miscommunication between companions. Like counts are not just a number but an insight into a person’s personal network and who they interact with. Unless the user wants this information public, it is important to keep it private. As mentioned earlier in the paper, people tend to like content based on who else from their network liked that same post. With this type of biased interaction on social media, it can create unnecessary tension between groups of people if there are already existing issues present.

Possible solutions could be to develop a setting on the application for like counts to be visible or hidden. This puts the control back in the user's hands. Just like the option of making your account private, users will be able to make that decision on their own so "the platform feels less like a popularity contest" (Wong, 2019) so that users are not put into this "contest" blind. To expand on the settings, there will be a distinction between business and personal users. Businesses can utilize the like feature to quantify the engagement for a certain marketing strategy. This will help break the barrier between consumer and business, which can help better sales and brand's reputation. However, personal accounts will not have likes visible to the public unless they switch to a "business" profile. This emphasizes the differences in motivations for personal vs business where the "average users who use their page to share glimpses of their daily lives with family and friends" (Wong, 2019) while businesses need likes to quantify user's reaction to marketing strategies.

Eliminating the like count on social media will be a good start in diminishing mental health issues associated to self-comparison that lead to behavior changes online. Although engagement might decrease such as the frequency of likes and comments on a post, it will encourage users to post content without the pressure stemming from a detrimental "how many likes will this get" mindset. This issue needs to be handled sooner than later given that social media's trajectory and use is on the rise with no trend of slowing down. Mark Zuckerberg designed this platform "to help people stay connected and bring us closer together with the people that matter to us" (Nunez, 2019) and this should be our main focus rather than where social media has headed in the past few years- like hungry motivation.

Impact on Society

Over the years, the like button has been associated with mental issues due to the impulse to self-compare online. This issue is important to address because depression and anxiety associated with social media are on the rise. Users are more focused on posting content that will get the most likes and then compare with their peers leading to low self-esteem and low self-confidence. This affects how they view themselves online and in real life. Platforms like Facebook and Instagram have moved from being life updates to a projection of a “perfectly edited” version of someone’s life. This is encouraging an unrealistic version of life with young teenagers and kids trying to live up to these false expectations.

These expectations distort reality. These highly edited pictures give the public an inaccurate representation of one’s life. This pushes the individual to continue to post the same content because it is achieving a large number of likes. There is a lot of pressure surrounding “Instagram worthy” pictures, where people will not post if they think the picture is not good enough to get likes. Likewise, someone is more inclined to like a post if it meets all of the “perfected” qualities: lighting, filters etc. Like count is currently the main drive for posting online.

By addressing the issue of like counts, society will start to shift their mindset on social media leading to less anxiousness and pressure when posting content. People will be more encouraged to post anything they want rather than posting pictures that live up to society’s “Instagram perfect” ideals. There will be more rawness in content where users will be more likely to share the good and the bad in their lives instead of posting to make their life seem

more perfect than what reality shows. The removal of like counts will push society to be more accepting of flaws and beauty that is in our imperfect lives.

There have been actions taken place in the recent years. Instagram and Facebook posts have been using the hashtag “no filter” to emphasize the rawness behind the post. However, this is mainly evident in accounts with a larger follower platform that already receive thousands of likes. This needs to reach personal smaller accounts. The goal is to encourage people to embrace the imperfection in our daily lives and step away from an “idealized” world. This is where the pressure to be perfect to get the most likes stems from. If the like counts were not visible to the public, slowly people will want to post what genuinely interests them without having society’s ideals pressurizing them. Another form of effort of helping this issue is through the introduction of Instagram and Facebook stories. Users are able to post any content that will stay online for 24 hours. There are no likes associated to these posts along with more limited opportunity to make the image perfect. Interaction online will be more genuine knowing that someone liked a post not because their friend also liked it but because they genuinely found it interesting to them.

Lastly, the like button has become an icon in the modern society. Just the simple image of the “thumbs up” sign can be recognized all over the world encouraging the same impulse to hit it if something resonates with the user. Since its creation back in 2009, the like button has conditioned society to “hit the like the button” to show support and acknowledgment. It’s become an instinctive nature to “heart” a post and this gesture is universally recognized establishing itself as a social norm. Just as a handshake and a hug are societal accepted behaviors in real life, the like button is a societal norm online. The concept of liking is instinctive

to the point where your hand physically wants to “double tap” something that is “aesthetically pleasing.” We are conditioned to react in this form promoting expression online. If the like count were to be taken away, it would deemphasize what is now a major societal norm.

Conclusion

The like feature on social platforms has its pros and cons in society. Social media has shift from its early days of purely content sharing to a focus on numerical success. The like button has made online expression simple and less time consuming. As the feature began to become prominent, it started a new culture online altering society’s standard on what is worthy of likes. It introduced an idea that a person’s prime network of audience affects how many likes a post gets making relationships more public and complicated. Anxiety and depression associated to the number of likes increases doubt in individuals as they continue to compare their “popularity” and get bogged down when they don’t get as many likes as their peers. This self- destructive behavior has led to low self-esteem and pressure put on by society. This way of life has created a new “Instagram perfect” lifestyle promoting a highly perfected version of life. More emphasize is being placed on perfecting images rather than focusing on the true intent of social media: sharing life updates with friends and family. The shift in social media from user heavy to “like count” heavy is creating tension within individuals straining online behavior. This issue needs to be addressed through features like social media stories where likes are not highly prioritized and not visible to the public. By tackling this mindset, individuals will be relieved from the pressure promoting self- confidence and embracing the imperfections life has to offer.

Works Cited

- Eranti, V., & Lonkila, M. (2015). The social significance of the Facebook Like button. *First Monday*, 20(6). doi: 10.5210/fm.v20i6.5505
- Leskin, P. (2019, September 5). Influencers are fighting for attention as Instagram tests removing likes from its platform: 'There's no audience applause at the end of a performance'. Retrieved 2019, from <https://www.businessinsider.com/instagram-influencers-removing-likes-impact-2019-9>.
- Locke, M. (2018, April 25). How Likes Went Bad. Retrieved 2019, from <https://medium.com/s/a-brief-history-of-attention/how-likes-went-bad-b094ddd07d4>.
- Nuñez, M. (2019, September 3). Facebook Is Considering A Test That Would Hide 'Like' Counts In Your News Feed. Retrieved 2019, from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/mnunez/2019/09/03/facebook-is-considering-a-test-that-would-hide-like-counts-in-your-news-feed/#694b2ca6432e>.
- Ozanne, M., Navas, A. C., Mattila, A. S., & Hoof, H. B. V. (2017). An Investigation Into Facebook "Liking" Behavior An Exploratory Study. *Social Media Society*, 3(2), 205630511770678. doi: 10.1177/2056305117706785
- Wong, B. (2019, May 10). Instagram Is Testing A Feature That May Actually Improve

Mental Health. Retrieved 2019, from https://www.huffpost.com/entry/instagram-hiding-likes-mental-health_l_5cd092d3e4b0548b735e50bc?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuYnVzaW5lc3NpbmNpZGVyLmNvbS9pbmN0YWdyYW0taW5mbHVlbnNlcnMtcnVtb3ZpbmctbGlrZXMTaW1wYWN0LTlwMTktOQ&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAN6kcn5INUguCI8clUwrJ90RwgV1fQuWdCD0-bkL0UC7twKtlepP3u74fPaj9RVvT3qS5wASiPLZBYRrgRGrdgMNtl4Zw8SAIJRUoA2x0vIT9jrTci_0mpYjDmjGUf10OnGE8ol_oVoQOHu1rtb3S9sXzshSI_eVwFIDCxfLgQpW.

Yurieff, K. (2019, July 17). Instagram doubles down on test to hide likes. Retrieved 2019, from <https://www.cnn.com/2019/07/17/tech/instagram-hiding-likes-test/index.html>

Appendix

Figure 1- Eranti, V., & Lonkila, M. (2015)

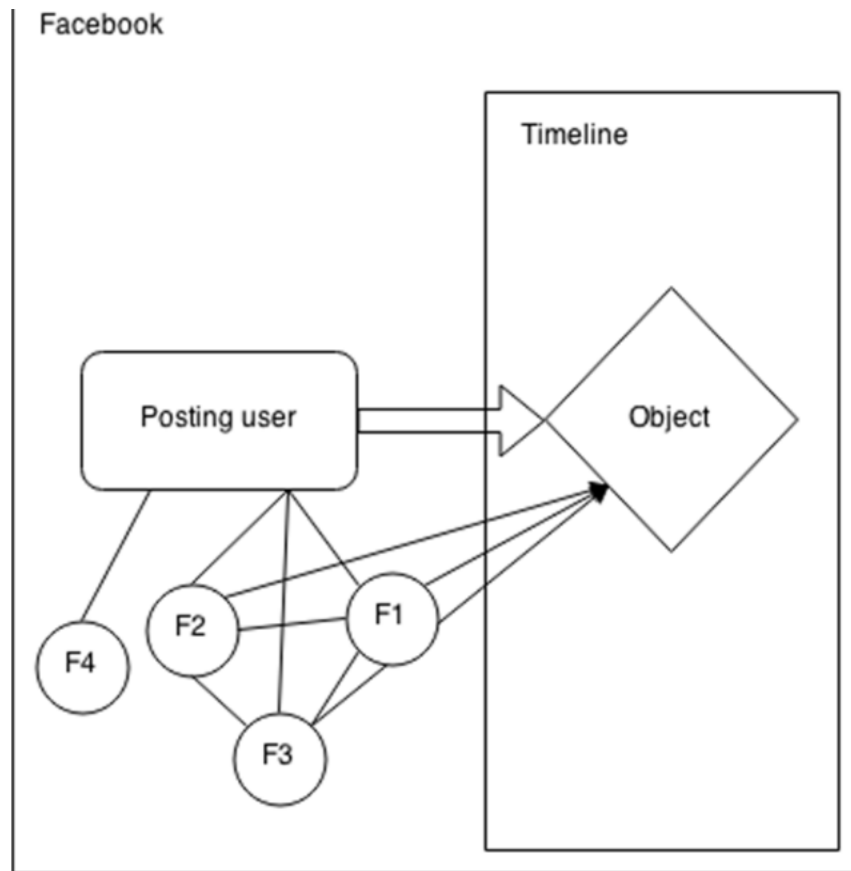


Figure 1: The potential relationships (lines) between a user posting on Facebook and her friends (F1–F4), and liking of an object (arrows).