

For the Love of Being 'Liked'

For Some Social-Media Users, an Anxiety From Approval Seeking

By **BRUCE FEILER** MAY 9, 2014

Walking through an airport newsstand this year, I noticed a novelty. The covers of Inc., Fast Company and Time all had female executives on the covers: Sara Blakely, Angela Ahrendts and Janet L. Yellen. I quickly snapped a photo and sent out a tweet to my modest list of followers: "Women on the cover. Not just for girlie magazines anymore."

Then I waited for the love. I checked the response before passing through security. Nothing. I glanced again while waiting for the plane. Still nothing. I looked again before we took off. Nobody cared. My little attempt to pass a lonely hour in an airport with some friendly interaction had turned into the opposite: a brutal cold shower of social isolation.

A few days later, I mentioned this story to my wife. "What a great tweet!" she said. She then retweeted it to her larger list of followers. Within seconds, it scored. Some Twitter bigwigs picked it up, and soon hundreds of people had passed it along, added their approval and otherwise joined in a virtual bra burning. Though I should be above such things, my wisp of loneliness was soon replaced with a gust of self-satisfaction. Look, I started a meme!

We are deep enough into the social-media era to begin to recognize certain patterns among its users. Foremost among them is a mass anxiety of approval seeking and popularity tracking that seems far more suited to a high school prom than a high-functioning society. Mark Zuckerberg said recently that he wants Facebook to be about "loving the people we serve," but too often his site and its peers seem far more interested in helping the people they serve seek the love they crave. ABC has also embraced the madness by picking up a comedy for the coming season called "Selfie," about a woman in her 20s who is more concerned

with her followers than her friends.

It's one thing for teenagers to gauge their self-worth by the number of likes, favorites, retweets or L.M.A.O.s, but when someone who ought to know better, like your boss, your grandmother or your Oscar host, starts to boast of reaching popularity milestones, it all begins to seem a bit, well, desperate.

And I'm clearly not alone in this feeling. In February, the Thai government psychiatrist Dr. Panpimol Wipulakorn warned that young people who don't get approval on social media risk destabilizing society. "If they feel they don't get enough likes for their selfie as expected," she said, "they decide to post another, but still do not receive a good response." She added, "This could affect the development of the country in the future as the number of new-generation leaders will fall short."

Time for a rewrite, Mr. Shakespeare. This above all: to thine others be true.
So what's behind this craze?

Julie DeNeen, a social-media consultant in Clinton, Conn., posted an article on her blog entitled "31 Confessions of a Social Media Addict." Entries included "I can tell whether I'm getting Tweeted, FB messaged, or Google hangouted by the sounds my phone makes" and "I pick out what I wear based on the Instagram selfie I'm going to take that day." She uses Favstar and SocialBro to monitor her Twitter feedback, she told me, utilizes Viraltag to track her two Pinterest accounts, and scans HootSuite to audit remarks about her blog.

"In a lot of ways, the addictive part is in the anticipation," Ms. DeNeen said. "It's in the moment before you open the account when you hear the phone ding." By contrast, the feedback itself is often a letdown. "If it's your mom liking your Facebook update, then it's, like, 'Oh, great,'" she said. "If it's Ellen DeGeneres, then it's a whole different ballgame."

Janelle Hanchett, a mother of three in Northern California, said the compulsion to monitor feedback on her blog, Renegade Mothering, had affected her writing. "I noticed I get in this puppet situation," she said. "I get bored, and there's something compelling about being able to put something online, and all of a sudden there's instant gratification of 'They like me!'"

But there's a flip side. If people don't like her, she feels humiliated. "I find this difficult as a writer," she said, "because I'm often inclined to reach for these

likes instead of being authentic.” She’s had to set rules like turning off notifications and only checking Facebook 20 minutes a day.

Many, though, are unabashed in their love of feedback. Rachel Neel, a crochet artist in Knob Noster, Mo., told me she enjoys counting the stars, shares and retweets she gets. “When I was a kid, I was one of those who wanted to be an actress, a model, a singer,” she said. “I wanted to have my name in lights.” Social media is her chance to be a celebrity. “This is my very small-scale name in lights,” she said.

Maybe Warhol needs a rewrite, too: Today, everybody can be famous for 15 retweets.

A growing body of research indicates how deeply our brains are wired to seek social approval. A study out of Harvard in 2012 showed that humans devote up to 40 percent of our time to self-disclosure, and doing so is as pleasurable as having food or sex. Diana Tamir and Jason Mitchell gave people small cash rewards for answering factual questions and lower rewards for offering their own views about a subject. Despite the financial incentive, people preferred to talk about themselves and willingly gave up money to do so.

Matthew D. Lieberman, a professor of psychology at U.C.L.A. and the author of “Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect,” told me that this need for positive social interaction is hardly new. “It’s been there in one form or another since before the dinosaurs 250 million years ago,” he said. What social media exacerbates is the satisfaction of feeling part of a group, and the pain associated with feeling excluded from a group.

In a study he did with his wife, Naomi Eisenberger, Mr. Lieberman monitored subjects’ brains while having them play a video game in which they tossed a ball with two others. But the two others were avatars, and they quickly stopped sharing the ball with the subject. The pain the subjects felt at being cut out was devastating, on par with breaking a leg.

His conclusion: While getting lots of likes or retweets feels great, the feeling of rejection from not getting them is often greater. People’s fear of being excluded is so intense, he said, that “even if someone gets on an elevator and the other person steps away, that is enough to make the normal person get all wrinkled up and say: ‘What the heck? Is that person doing that to me?’ ” In other

words, while that warm kiss from my friends in the airport may have been nice, it was hardly worth the risk of what happened: feeling kicked in the face because I was ignored.

Few have learned that lesson better recently than Rameet Chawla, the founder of the mobile app company Fueled. Mr. Chawla was so busy last year that he didn't have time to like his friends' photos on Instagram. As a result, he felt ostracized. "To my friends, their feed was their life," he said.

So he designed a program to automatically like every photo. Suddenly, his popularity soared. Friends gave him high fives on the street; his follower count surged; the number of likes that appeared on his photos doubled. One friend he had alienated texted: "Ah, it's fine, you've been giving my photo lots of life. I forgive you."

Did he feel guilty for all this fake love? I asked. After all, wasn't it the equivalent of faking an orgasm? "But sometimes faking an orgasm is good," he said. "It makes the other person feel nice."

Instagram didn't feel nice, however, and shut him down. His takeaway? "Any drug you take has a negative association with it," Mr. Chawla said. "But with social media, the barrier to entry is so light that everyone has access to the drug. And some people are going to get addicted." It's nothing to be ashamed about, he said. Everyone wants to be liked: "It's just a phase you've got to get through before you can get over it."

Bruce Feiler's latest book is "The Secrets of Happy Families." "This Life" appears monthly.

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