

The Association of the 'Hide Like and View Counts' Feature with Disordered Eating, Self Esteem, and Self Image

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ABSTRACT: The 'hide like and view counts' feature is a recently implemented feature on the Instagram app, designed to depressurize people's experience and give users more control. This cross-sectional survey study examines if the use of this feature is associated with higher levels of self-esteem and body satisfaction and lower levels of disordered eating symptoms. We conducted a survey (N=116) to analyze if there was a significant difference between the self-esteem, self-image, and disordered eating risk of Instagram users who use the feature and users who do not. The participants that used the feature demonstrated significantly lower scores on the Eating Attitudes Test, thus at a lower risk for developing an eating disorder. This is consistent with our hypothesis.

Contrary to our hypothesis, the two groups had no significant difference in self-esteem and body dissatisfaction. Our findings show that the feature is indeed associated with some positive psychological outcomes. Future research should study how the social media experience can be altered to suit one's needs and support positive health.

KEYWORDS: Social Psychology; Clinical Psychology; Social Media; Disordered Eating; Self-Esteem.

■ Introduction

The popularity of social media has escalated massively in recent years.¹ In 2022, social networking sites are estimated to reach 3.96 billion users, and these numbers are expected to increase as mobile device usage, and social networks gain more attention.² Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, social media use has grown immensely to stay in touch with friends and family in the face of lockdown restrictions and social distancing measures. According to a survey of U.S. social media users, 29.7 percent of respondents used social media for 1-2 additional hours per day during the pandemic.³ Instagram is a particularly popular social networking site. A forecast from October 2020 estimates that there will be nearly 1.2 billion Instagram users worldwide in 2023.⁴ Media use is constantly changing, and the Internet and social networking sites are quickly becoming the primary media source young adults use.^{5,6} In 2015, 90% of all young adults used social media, compared with 12% in 2005, a 78-percentage point increase.⁷ It is evident that social media significantly impacts many people, so it is crucial to study its effects on users.

There is much-mixed research on social media and mental health. The use of social networking sites (SNS) comes with many risks. Some studies show that online technologies have harmful effects like increased exposure to social isolation, depression, and cyberbullying.⁸⁻¹⁰ One study showed that limiting social media usage on a mobile phone to 10 minutes per platform per day for a full three weeks significantly impacted well-being and decreased loneliness and depression.¹¹ Additionally, more time spent using social media is significantly associated with more significant symptoms of anxiety.¹² On the other hand, some studies show that communication through

platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat provides ways to keep in touch with family and friends and other social interactions that can mitigate depression and anxiety.^{13,14} Social media is vital to the lives of many people. We use it to communicate, spread awareness, socialize, collaborate, and share content. Owing to the mixed research, there is no clear association between social media use and well-being.

Social media can heavily influence body dissatisfaction and disordered eating. According to the DSM-5, eating disorders include intense fear of gaining weight even though underweight, body image disturbance, recurring inappropriate compensatory behavior (vomiting, laxatives, exercise, diet pills), and restriction of energy intake, leading to significantly low body weight.¹⁵ Eating disorders can cause significant health consequences and may even result in death if left untreated. Up to 13% of youth may experience at least one eating disorder by the age of 20.¹⁶ Eating disorders can cause unhealthy eating habits to develop. They might start with an obsession with food, body weight, or body shape. Those with eating disorders can have various symptoms like severe food restriction, food binges, or purging behaviors like vomiting or over-exercising.¹⁷ It was found that some patients with severe eating disorders report dissociative symptoms, including depersonalization, trance-like states, out-of-body experiences, and amnesias.¹⁸ In one meta-analysis, it was found that the crude mortality rate due to all causes of death for subjects with anorexia nervosa was 5.9% (178 deaths in 3,006 subjects). The aggregate mortality rate was estimated to be 0.56% per year or approximately 5.6% per decade.¹⁹ Several studies show that social media use is consistently and positively associated with negative body image.²⁰⁻²¹ Mass media is considered the most influential and

prevalent cause of body dissatisfaction.²² Spending more time on social networking sites (SNS) like Facebook is positively associated with disordered eating, increased body surveillance, and obsessing over one's appearance.²³ A study showed that young girls with more Facebook friends reported higher levels of body surveillance, and sharing more photos on Facebook led to a greater likelihood of basing self-worth on appearance.²³ Mass media is filled with images of the thin ideal, which is highly unrealistic for most women. Research has shown that mass media contributes to developing and maintaining eating disorders.²⁴ However, research has also shown that online worlds can be mindfully constructed to support positive health and well-being. In one study, social media actually aided female weightlifters during their recovery from eating disorders. It was able to offer opportunities to feel connected to the outside world from a distance that felt safe and manageable.²⁵ The social media experience can be altered to suit one's needs via 'Digital Pruning,' unfollowing triggering or unhelpful content.²⁵

Social Media is pervasive and omnipresent in society. Since SNS are here to stay, instead of focusing on the various negative impacts of SNS on well-being, we should try to understand how to use them effectively. Research should focus on how technology can adapt depending on user needs and how SNS can be changed to provide a better user experience. Instead of promoting the thin ideal, it may be beneficial if social media conveys positive and self-esteem-building messages to counteract the harmful effects of SNS and improve body satisfaction and self-esteem.

Giving and receiving feedback and 'likes' is a fundamental part of users' experiences on social media. A 2017 study showed that receiving a more significant number of likes reliably predicted greater self-esteem.²⁶ Research shows that the intensity of positive social feedback experienced (increased number of likes received) from users' audience is positively associated with current happiness and increased self-esteem. Receiving likes can boost self-esteem and consequently produce a state of happiness.²⁷ In another study, adolescents reported significantly greater feelings of rejection when they were randomly assigned to receive few likes relative to when they received many likes.²⁸ Women placing greater importance on receiving "likes" are more likely to compare their photos to friends' posted photos and report the highest levels of disordered eating symptoms.²⁹ It is apparent that the number of likes a user gets can impact their well-being significantly, and thus, it is essential to conduct future research on this aspect.

In May 2021, Instagram introduced a new feature to the app: the 'hide like and view counts' feature. Instagram announced that this feature was to help depressurize people's experience on Instagram and give users more control over their experience.³⁰ This feature enables users to hide the number of likes they get on any images shared. Users are still able to see the number of likes they themselves receive. This feature is optional, allowing users to alter their Instagram experience according to their own needs.

Hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Use of the "Hide Like and View Counts" Feature will be associated with higher levels of self-esteem.

Hypothesis 2: Use of the "Hide Like and View Counts" Feature will be associated with higher levels of body satisfaction.

Hypothesis 3: Use of the "Hide Like and View Counts" Feature will be associated with lower levels of disordered eating symptoms.

■ Methods

Procedure:

We used an online survey to collect data to specifically examine the association between the 'hide like and view counts' feature on the Instagram app and behaviors and cognitions associated with disordered eating, body dissatisfaction, and self-esteem. Following approval of our study procedures by an Ethics Board, the optional survey was administered electronically to all participants via Amazon Mechanical Turk. The survey was made on Google Forms and took about 5-7 minutes to complete. All participants provided informed consent at the onset of the study. The date of collection of the data is 1st March 2022. All participants were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk.

Participants:

Participants (N=116) were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk and were paid 25 cents for completing the survey. The criteria for inclusion of participants included using Instagram at least once a week and being between the ages of 15 and 25. We chose this age range as we believed that social media use is the most common.

Measures:

The survey incorporated five key measures:

1. RSES (Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale): The 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)³¹ was used to measure global trait self-esteem (SE). Items are measured on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree), with reverse scoring when appropriate and then summed. Higher scores indicate more excellent global trait SE. A sample question is, "I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others." Cronbach's alpha for the ten items was acceptable ($\alpha = .75$).

2. BSQ-8d (Body Shape Questionnaire): The 8-item Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ-8d)³² measured body shape pre-occupations typical of bulimia nervosa and anorexia nervosa. Each item is scored 1 to 6 with "Never" = 1 and "Always" = 6, and the overall score is the total across the 8 items, a theoretical score ranging from 8 to 48. Higher scores indicate greater body dissatisfaction. A sample question is, "Have you avoided situations where people could see your body (e.g., communal changing rooms or swimming baths)?" Cronbach's alpha for the eight items showed excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .95$).

3. EAT-26 (The Eating Attitudes Test): The 26-item Eating Attitudes Test (EAT-26)³³ was used to measure self-reported symptoms and concern characteristics of eating disorders. Items were scored on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (always) to 6 (never). For questions 1-25, points 1-3 have a

score of 0, while point 4 has a score of 1, point 5 has a score of 2, and point 6 has a score of 3. The scoring is reversed for question 26. Items are then summed to obtain a total score, with any score of 20 or higher considered at risk. A sample question is, "I particularly avoid food with a high carbohydrate content (bread, rice, potatoes, etc.)." Cronbach's alpha for the 27 items demonstrated acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = .75$).

4. Instagram Usage: Participants were asked to fill in the number of days on average they use Instagram per week. This item was scored on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (once a week) to 7 (every day).

5. Hide Like and View Counts' Feature Usage: Participants were asked if they knew the feature and if they used it. Both questions were answered yes/no.

Analysis:

Analyses were conducted using Google Sheets and R. We used Welch's t-test to account for unequal group sizes and variances. The Welch's t-test is a nonparametric adaptation of a Student's t-test, which measures group mean differences. The nonparametric test allows us to conduct analyses on unequal sample sizes. Any missing values in data were considered null values.

■ Results and Discussion

The average participant age was 22.73 years ($SD = 3.11$). 48.28% of participants were male, while 51.72% were female. On average, participants used Instagram 6.13 times per week.

Self-Esteem Comparison:

There was no significant effect for self-esteem, $t(37.56) = 0.96$, $p = 0.35$, despite the group that does use 'hide like and view counts' feature ($M = 26.50$, $SD = 4.48$) attaining higher scores than the group that does not use the feature ($M = 24.97$, $SD = 8.63$). Figure 1 compares the mean self-esteem score of the two groups.

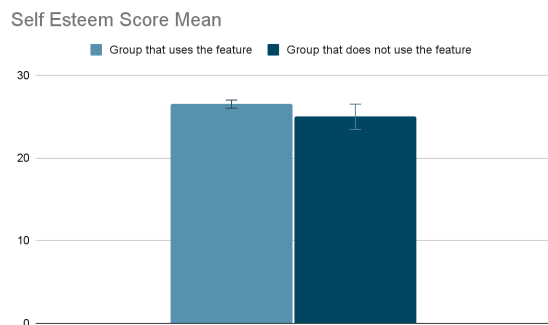


Figure 1: Mean self-esteem score of the two groups.

Body Dissatisfaction Comparison:

There was no significant effect for body dissatisfaction, $t(51.64) = 1.85$, $p = 0.07$, despite the group that does use 'hide like and view counts' feature ($M = 33.58$, $SD = 10.47$) attaining higher scores than the group that does not use the feature ($M = 29.25$, $SD = 11.53$). Figure 2 compares the mean body dissatisfaction score of the two groups.

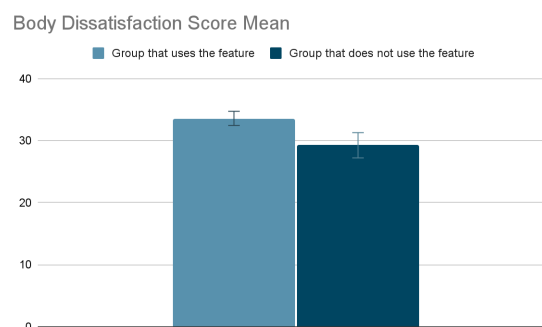


Figure 2: Mean body dissatisfaction score of the two groups.

Eating Disorder Risk Comparison:

The 84 participants in the group that did use the 'hide like and view counts' feature ($M = 26.08$, $SD = 4.48$) compared to the 33 participants in the group that did not use the feature ($M = 34.44$, $SD = 8.63$) demonstrated significantly lower scores on the EAT, thus being at a lower risk for developing an ED, $t(60.41) = -2.06$, $p = 0.04$. Figure 3 compares the two groups' mean risk of developing an eating disorder score.

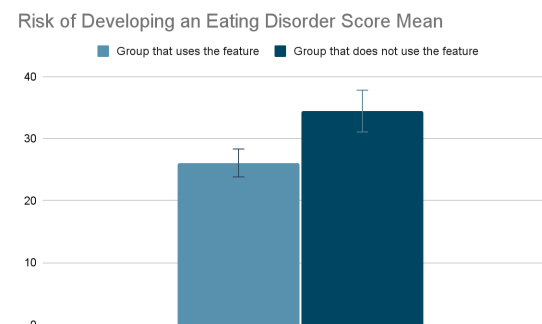


Figure 3: The mean risk of developing an eating disorder score of the two groups.

Gender-Based Comparison:

After we found these significant results, we decided to do an exploratory analysis based on gender differences. Since disordered eating is more common in women, we thought this would be beneficial.

There were no significant differences in males and females, using and not using the feature for the Body Shape Questionnaire and the Self Esteem Scale. However, there was a significant difference for the Eating Attitudes Test in males only.

The 38 male participants in the group that did use the 'hide like and view counts' feature ($M = 25.13$) compared to the 18 male participants in the group that did not use the feature ($M = 38.33$) demonstrated significantly lower scores on the EAT, thus being at a lower risk for developing an ED, $t(36.87) = -2.46$, $p = 0.019$. Figure 4 compares the two male groups' mean risk of developing an eating disorder score.

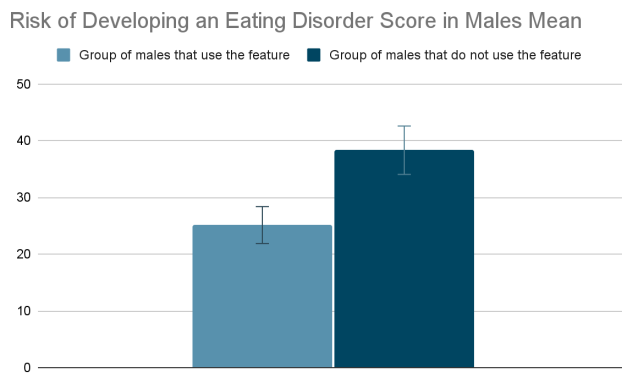


Figure 4: The mean risk of developing an eating disorder score of the two male groups.

Discussion

This study sought to determine whether the ‘hide like and view counts’ feature is associated with the self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, and disordered eating of Instagram users. The group that used the feature scored significantly lower on the EAT-26, indicating a lower risk of developing an eating disorder than the group that did not. This suggests that the feature may be related to positive rather than negative psychological outcomes. This finding is consistent with our predictions. Contrary to our predictions, the two groups had no significant difference in self-esteem and body dissatisfaction. A subsidiary finding is that 71.79% of the participants, a vast majority, said that they use the ‘hide like and view counts’ feature, indicating that this feature is slowly gaining popularity.

There could be several reasons why the use of this feature is linked to disordered eating behavior. Someone at a lower risk for developing an eating disorder could be more drawn toward using the feature for reasons currently unknown and requiring further exploration. On the other hand, using the feature may lead individuals to experience fewer triggers for disordered eating.

While we do not know for sure, people could have the notion that the number of likes they receive is a measure of their beauty. For instance, if someone posts a picture of themselves and does not receive many likes, they may think they look ugly, too fat, or too thin in the picture they posted. This could make them more likely to indulge in unhealthy eating patterns. However, if they can’t see the number of likes they received, they would not have the opportunity to feel bad about the picture at all. This could be associated with people who use the “hide likes and view counts” feature experiencing lower levels of disordered eating behavior. On the other hand, someone who is already at a lower risk for developing an eating disorder may be more inclined to use the feature. These individuals may place less emphasis on receiving external validation for their appearance and may feel indifferent toward their number of likes, making them more likely to use the feature.

Several other factors could influence the link between the use of this feature and disordered eating behavior. One example could be the number of followers a user has. An instance of this could be someone having a large following feeling more pressured to look perfect on social media. They may feel the need to live up to unrealistic beauty standards and receive many

likes. They may compare the number of likes they are getting with others and feel the need to get more. These unhealthy expectations could, in turn, be related to an increase in disordered eating behavior. They may feel that looking a certain way or having a perfect body would help them get more likes. However, if they decide to hide their likes and use the feature, then they could be rid of that stress. Once they cannot see the number of likes they receive, they would not be able to compare themselves with others or be unsatisfied with their likes. This could ease the pressure they may feel from having a flawless body, which could be related to lower levels of disordered behavior. Another factor that could influence the link between the feature and disordered eating is anxiety. In one study, social appearance anxiety predicted body dissatisfaction, bulimic symptoms, shape concern, weight concern, and eating concern.³⁴ Someone with anxiety may feel judged by others based on the number of likes they receive, so they could decide to hide their likes. Their use of the feature could be related to lower levels of disordered eating.

Interestingly, we did not see any relationship between the feature and self-esteem or body dissatisfaction. One reason for this could be because having the choice of whether to use the feature or not is more beneficial than actually using it. They have the freedom to make this choice could be helpful in many ways. Some users may feel that likes create a competitive environment and feel less anxious when they do not know how many likes they receive on a post. However, other users may want to see the number of likes so they can get a sense of what is ‘trending’ or popular. Having the option to pick and choose between these alternatives allows a variety of Instagram users to tailor the experience to their needs.

While we did not see a significant difference in females, it was surprising to see a significant difference in males who use the feature and males who do not. The prevalence of eating disorders is more commonly seen in women, so this was interesting. Future research should consider gender differences to find more concrete results.

Limitations and Future Research:

Since this is a correlational study, determining the causality of results is uncertain. Since we could not assign groups, one limitation is the significant difference in the sample sizes of the two groups: the group that uses the feature ($n = 84$) and the group that does not ($n = 33$). Future research should try an experimental manipulation study and randomly assign participants to test the causation.

Future research should also consider other influential factors that could affect the impact of the feature on mental health. The content that the user's posts could be a factor. Someone who posts pictures and videos of themselves rather than images of others, their surroundings, or their pets may be more conscious of the number of likes they get. So, they may choose to have their likes hidden. Other factors, like the amount of time they spend on Instagram, could also affect if they decide to use the feature or not. Future directions could include intervention studies. One such study could measure mental health before and after the study, after having participants use the feature for a certain period of time.

Since we used MTurk to recruit our participants, we cannot be sure if each participant actually read every question asked or if they randomly chose any answers. One aspect of our data that denotes concern is that the mean score on the EAT-26 was 26.08 (SD= 4.48) for the group that uses the feature and 34.44 (SD= 8.63) for the group that does not use the feature. The mean scores of both groups fall above the clinical cutoff of 20. This suggests that most sample participants are considered at risk for an eating disorder, which is surprising given the prevalence of eating disorders in the general population. This makes the validity of the results questionable. However, to minimize this risk, we asked participants to manually fill in the words 'I am not a robot' in the answer box to ensure that they read the questions asked. The responses of the 2 participants who incorrectly answered this question were discarded.

■ Conclusion

The popularity of social media has escalated massively in recent years,¹ with Instagram being particularly popular. Several studies have found that social media positively correlates with depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem.⁸⁻¹² Studies have shown that it is apparent that the number of likes a user gets can impact their well-being significantly.²⁶⁻²⁹ Instagram recently introduced a new feature to the app to help counteract the ill effects of social media: the 'hide like and view counts' feature. This feature enables users to hide the number of likes they receive on shared images. Instagram announced that the feature was to depressurize users' experiences on the app.³¹ This study sought to examine whether the feature was indeed associated with positive psychological factors. We hypothesized that using this feature is associated with higher self-esteem and body satisfaction levels and a lower risk of developing an eating disorder. We used a survey to collect data to specifically examine the association between the 'hide like and view counts' feature on the Instagram app and behaviors and cognitions associated with disordered eating, body dissatisfaction, and self-esteem.

While we found no significant differences between the self-esteem and body dissatisfaction of the group that uses the feature and the group that does not, a significantly lower risk of disordered eating was found for the group that uses the feature, which indicates that this feature is associated with positive factors, however, we cannot determine causality; our results suggest that the 'hide like and view counts' feature may be a step in the right direction. What one person wants from their Instagram experience is different from the next. Instagram has recently used several other features to help create a benevolent community and make users feel satisfied with their time on the Instagram app. For instance, Instagram has announced new tools to allow people to filter offensive content and give people ways to control what they see on the app. These efforts are vital in making social media a place where users are welcome to alter their experience to support positive health. Future research should study how technology use can adapt depending on user needs and how social media sites can make conscious interface changes to promote well-being.

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