

The Currency of Likes | A Pitfall inside Social Media

There's no denying that social media is intricately woven into the fabric of our culture. From Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Vine, and the list goes on, it is clear that (at least for the foreseeable future) social media is here to stay.

Like any medium, social networking is simply a tool that can be both positive and negative in its impact. There are many pros and cons associated with each tool. There is incredible power in our ability to connect with others, but also many pitfalls inside the vast web of connectivity. And just when you think you understand one medium, you learn that you're already a year behind the shift to the next popular development. Inside a rapidly-advancing technological age, it seems impossible to keep up with the ever-changing landscape of social media trends.

It's easy to look at social media and be overwhelmed. Recent news has highlighted the many pitfalls, such as online bullying, child predator grooming, gossiping, human trafficking, sexting, etc. These issues are real and valid problems faced inside social media and should be dealt with.

I am reminded, however, that there is an underlying problem that existed long before the invention of social media. The truth is, our sin struggles dwell deep in the core of who we are. The tools that exist on the surface are inherently neither good nor bad. How we choose to use those tools, however, is reflective of the greater condition of our hearts.

For instance, a hammer can be used to build a house or to break a window. The existence of extremely negative issues inside social media is not the product of social media, but the product of our choices made inside it. Are some tools more dangerous than others? Absolutely. But the tool should never be held responsible for the action taken with it.

The Currency

A trend has emerged inside our student culture that exemplifies the underlying "heart issue" particularly well.

Instagram is one of the most popular social media apps amongst our students (at least for the moment.) The photo-sharing app is a haven for documenting and sharing life together and is a fun way to stay in touch with the people and world around you. Like many social media sites, Instagram has a simple way to "like," or acknowledge one's photo in the form of giving a heart. Similar to the iconic Thumb's Up "Like" of Facebook or the Star "Favorite" of Twitter, these likes are attributed to posted photos, statuses, tweets, etc.

While each of these mechanisms is technically different, they serve the same purpose across these social media platforms: affirmation.

I recently had a conversation with a small group of our high school students about the notion of likes on Instagram. The students candidly shared that, when posting a picture to Instagram, if they didn't receive 10-20 likes in one minute, they would delete the picture. When I asked why, their answer was simple: "it's embarrassing!"

Across social media, a currency has developed. It is a currency rooted deep in the human condition: our needs of affirmation, acceptance, relevance, and recognition. Our students place intrinsic value on the number of likes their posts receive. In an economic sense, students are applying tangible (numerical) value to the intangible commodity of affirmation.

According to Merriam-Webster, “currency” can be defined as “*the quality or state of being used or accepted by many people.*” In our social media culture, “likes” have value because of the value we attribute to them. Students will track the value of their posts based on the number of likes, hearts, and favorites because it is generally accepted that those forms of affirmation are valuable.

The currency of likes is further “economically backed” by students’ willingness to trade. In the same conversation I had with them, our high school students discussed how “there’s an unspoken rule on Instagram, that if you like someone’s photo, they’ll like yours back.” One high school girl said that she recently had a fight with a friend over the drama created by “not trading likes.”

Several students discussed how important the *type* of picture is when posting. These students shared that “certain types of pictures will get more likes,” such as selfies, vacation shots, and sometimes even pictures of food. This would indicate that for many students, the decision behind posting certain photos is a calculated one.

The concept of “Followers” is also a big deal to students. One student shared that “your follower to following ratio is super important. You want to have lots more followers than the number of people you’re following.” This student explained that you would “appear desperate, and that you’re trying too hard” if you follow more people than the number following you.

The currency of likes is so valuable that companies exist solely to provide social media users with followers, likes, and comments...for a price. A quick google search of “pay for Instagram likes” reveals dozens of options and price ranges for “real comments, likes, and followers!” When it comes to purchasing social status, it is clear that while the value of this currency is not artificial, the affirmation is.

It’s Nothing New

It’s easy to pick on one potential pitfall in social media. The truth is, however, the value we attribute to affirmation is not a new struggle. In fact, this struggle is as old as sin, since it rests in the notion of identity: what defines me?

Over 15 years ago, long before the young Internet had matured into mainstream, author and preacher Max Lucado wrote a children’s book called *You Are Special*.

You Are Special tells the story of the Wemmicks, a community of wooden people carved by the woodworker named Eli. The Wemmicks spent their days applying stickers to their neighbors: to talented, pretty Wemmicks they would stick golden stars; to Wemmicks who could do little or whose wooden bodies were rough and chipped, they would stick dots.

In the story, we are introduced to one Wemmick in particular named Punchinello, who lacked any talent or feature worthy of a golden star. “‘He deserves lots of dots,’ the wooden people would say.”

One day, Punchinello meets “a different kind of Wemmick” named Lucia, who had neither dots nor stars. When other Wemmicks attempted to stick a star on Lucia, it would simply fall off. Others attempted to stick dots on her, since she had no stars. Even still, the dots would fall off.

When Punchinello cannot understand why Lucia is immune to stars and dots, she takes him to their maker, Eli. In the arms of the woodworker, Punchinello asks “why do I matter to you?”.

Eli answers, “Because you’re mine. That’s why you matter to me.”

Eli explains that Lucia is sticker-free because “the stickers only stick if they matter to you.” Eli asks Punchinello to come see him every day, so that Punchinello can be reminded of how much Eli cares for him. In that process, we see that the dots that once covered Punchinello begin to fall off.

Devaluing the Currency

It is our hearts which give value to the currency of likes. The deepest desires of our heart--love and affirmation--can only be fulfilled by the love of our Creator.

We must learn that our true identity and value is found in God, and we must continually seek His presence to be reminded of who we are in Him. We are not defined by the golden stars or dots of the world—nor the likes, thumbs ups, hearts, or retweets.

I love how The Message translates Galatians 6:14: “For my part, I am going to boast about nothing but the Cross of our Master, Jesus Christ. Because of that Cross, I have been crucified in relation to the world, set free from the stifling atmosphere of pleasing others and fitting into the little patterns that they dictate.”

My challenge for parents is to encourage and teach your students to devalue the currency of likes by:

1. Having intentional conversations. Talk to your kids about how they use social media. Ask about these struggles. Do they place their value in affirmation? What is the underlying cause? How can we pursue the truth of our identities daily? How can parents be supportive and encouraging?
2. Demonstrate your student’s value. Speak love and encouragement based on who they are at their core. Avoid associating their talents and abilities with their identity. Affirm who they are in Christ, and share with them how you see God in and through them.
3. Don’t over-react and completely shut off social media outlets without addressing the heart issues. While access to certain apps and social networks should have boundaries, those boundaries should exist to help enable your students in the pursuit of truth. Boundaries help manage the external symptoms of an internal problem, but they do not solve the problem itself. It is the work of the Cross and our identities in Christ that transform the heart.

In all things, submit to Christ and point your students towards Him in your actions. #NoLikeNecessary