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Facebook: How Likes and Followers Affect Users Perception and Leadership

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Facebook: How Likes and Followers Affect Users Perception of Leadership

By

Troy Johnston

A QUALITATIVE STUDY

Presented to Dr. Sharon Timberlake in Partial Fulfillment for the Degree of

Master's in Leadership Studies

Major: Master's in Leadership Studies

Class: LOS689 Master's Capstone II

Under the Supervision of Dr. Sharon Timberlake

University of Southern Maine

May 10, 2018

Acknowledgements

Abstract

The online social network, Facebook, creates a problem in which "likes", and followers give a user the appearance of leadership. The accumulation of likes in the online social network environment, such as Facebook, might offer non-legitimate leader status, similar to campaign donations contributing to the appeal of a political candidate. This appearance of Facebook popularity through likes possibly skews the other members' perspective regarding a user's leadership competence. The user often looks official, popular, and influential through the advent of likes and followers. Any opinions of a user with accumulated likes could be taken with greater weight than a user with significantly fewer likes and followers. The objective of this study finds if the accumulation of likes and followers on Facebook leads to perceived user leadership status. The data includes a Facebook user questionnaire survey and subsequent data analysis. This qualitative study may provide a useful expansion of our traditional definition of leadership. The expansion could enhance academic and leadership studies courses with a greater understanding of online social capital.

Keywords: social capital, Facebook likes, Facebook followers, Facebook leadership status, Facebook credibility, Facebook leadership, social media leadership

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Chapter I: Introduction

The traditional definition of leadership usually includes a human component, validated expertise, accepted levels of competence, credibility, and trust. In our current climate of online activity, this definition might need to be expanded to include social media activity, such as Facebook likes and followers. This paper explores the validity of perceived leadership status by the metric of accumulated likes and followers. In general, leadership is a research area and a practical skill encompassing the ability of an individual or organization to "lead" or guide other individuals, teams, or entire organizations. Pocket and Avila (2007) quoted Sun Tzu's eloquent definition of leadership as intelligence, trustworthiness, humaneness, courage, and discipline. Pocket and Avila (2007) describe reliance on intelligence resulting in rebellion and humaneness alone resulting in weakness. The authors refer to trust, courage, and discipline as inadequate if employed alone. They write that if all five virtues are used together, then one can rise to leadership.

The online social network Facebook has 1.5 billion users who may collect likes and followers. Lufken (2016) writes that Barack Obama had 45 million likes in 2015; this shows that likes are a global phenomenon. In traditional leadership, our informal workplace leaders rise without the advent of likes. Hughes (2012) writes that "traditional leaders innovate, develop, inspire, have a long-term view, ask what and why, originate ideas, and challenge the status quo" (p. 8). Incidental Facebook leaders who have accumulated likes do not necessarily have any of these qualities. As far as credibility, Borah (2018) writes that the number of likes may influence credibility perceptions on social media platforms.

Academic studies mostly examine the likes, followers, and social capital. There are only a few sources focused on perception of leadership based on the accumulation of likes. This social media perception of leadership might expand the traditional leadership definition, but research is lacking on this topic. One issue is that the social capital of likes on Facebook has no checks and balances, likes may infer leadership status with no regard to the legitimacy of that status.

Drawing tangible conclusive evidence for social capital attributing to leader perception is valuable to a greater understanding of leadership definition relating to social media influence. A survey of Facebook users is used as evidence gathering of the presence of leader perception contributing to Facebook leadership. Perception is subjective and requires a pool of responses for legitimate data gathering. This research may expand the traditional leadership theory definition to include a social network user's ability to exert influence on others due to popularity. The traditional definition of leadership might be expanded to include virtual social capital, such as likes or followers. For the purposes of this study, social media popularity will be defined as accumulated likes and followers.

Statement of the Problem

How do likes and followers affect users' perceptions of leadership? The presence of online likes can be an advantage (the advantage of perceived credibility, perceived status, and perceived trust), but this may provide unsubstantiated leader status. The online social network, Facebook, creates an environment in which "likes" give a user the appearance of leadership. The accumulation of likes offers informal leader status, similar to campaign donations contributing to the appeal of a candidate.

This appearance of Facebook popularity through likes skews the other members' perspective regarding a user's leadership competence. The user looks official, popular, and influential. Are opinions of a user with accumulated likes taken with greater weight than a user with significantly fewer likes and followers? This problem may not seem important or revolutionary enough without an example. Suppose an outside influencer purchased friends' lists, added an online computer program to a profile, and generated timeline propaganda using a targeted algorithm. This situation could create a fake leader who steers followers towards an ideology generated by a special interest group. As socially active citizens, we should be concerned about this potential algorithmic extrapolation of Facebook leader perception.

Singer (2018) writes that "machine driven communication tools, or MADCOMS—have no script at all, just the speech patterns deciphered by studying millions or billions of conversations" (p.252). Singer also reports that pitch, cadence, and intonation of a human's voice can now be reproduced by speech synthesis and entirely fake conversations can be engineered. This revelation threatens the validity of legitimate social media leadership and calls into question users' ability to vet the difference between a human user and an algorithmic presence.

Purpose of the Study

The objective of this study finds if the accumulation of Facebook likes and followers leads to perceived leadership. This study includes active Facebook users. In this research, the perception of leadership through likes and followers is defined as online social capital. The study surveys Facebook users about their perception of leadership within this social network. The study provides a greater understanding of online social

capital; specifically, the perception of leadership that is attributed to the number of

Facebook likes and followers.

Research Question

1. Do Facebook users perceive leadership status as based upon the number of

    individuals' likes and followers?

Chapter II: Literature Review

Jackson and Perry (2012) write that "leadership is like beauty – it is difficult to describe, but we certainly know it when we experience it" (p. 3). Leadership may reside in the eye of the beholder and have multiple requirements depending upon the observer. This study explores the theory that Facebook likes are a nucleus of attention, a dense location of likes and followers. The literature surrounding Facebook likes shows evidence of endorsement, perceived trust, and perceived credibility. This grass-roots, or user created effect, is the catalyst for subjective vetting on social media and in turn provides a leadership perception for multiple likes and followers.

The scholarly literature examines perceived credibility and social endorsement based upon perceived trust but does not extend this argument to perceived leadership. Examination of perceived credibility and endorsement can be found in studies such as Borah and Xiao (2018). Social media is in its infancy, and as social media matures, there will need to be a greater understanding of the impact of and creation of perceived leadership.

Currently, and historically, social media has had a virtual growth, but has not been vetted, and thrives in a "wild west style" social environment. Unvetted users (perceived social media leadership) may influence unsuspecting audiences without prior validation, unlike traditional leaders whose vetting is through life experience and contribution. Unvetted users might include machine algorithms or fake news propaganda, these are not a legitimate, trustworthy userbase.

Most current literature, such as Lee (2014) and Jahng (2016), is lacking a direct connection from accumulated Facebook likes and followers to leadership, leadership

status, and perceived leadership. Although accumulated likes create perceived credibility and social status, the current literature's body of knowledge does not extend to perceived leadership.

Hughes' (2012) definition of leadership includes the qualities of trust, credibility, and endorsement as vital to our understanding of traditional leadership. Hughes (2012) writes that traditional leaders innovate, develop, inspire, have a long-term view, ask what and why, originate ideas, and challenge the status quo (p. 8). Incidental Facebook leaders who have accumulated likes do not necessarily have any of these qualities, unlike traditional leaders, who gain credibility through experience, trust, and a proven track record of accomplishments.

This literature review traces and uses the current literature to describe the process from a posted like or additional follower, to a perception of credibility in Facebook. The body of literature examines the trust, credibility, and endorsement of a social media post. These sources were found through a University of Southern Maine library One Search using keywords such as "social capital" and "Facebook likes."

Borah and Xiao's (2018) study yielded many useful sources within its discussion and reference list regarding social media posting. The following is a logic discussion tracing the research using the current literature on social capital (likes and endorsement) and perceived credibility (a prerequisite to perceived leadership).

Qualifying perceived leadership on Facebook posts validates those users who have multiple likes. Social media is informing a greater number of the voting community and international populace. The appearance of leadership must coincide with true leadership as this social media presence continues to influence a global audience. This

practical significance (the voting community and the influence of social media on votes) informs the scholarly significance (perceived leadership on social media). As social media consumers, we must study the effects of perceived leadership and add to the ongoing body of knowledge. This research is critical as our virtual world expands.

The definition of likes is explored through the work of Lufken (2016); the definition of traditional leadership is explored through Hughes (2012). There are other social media metrics, such as perceived trust, perceived credibility, and endorsement that will be explored and offer insights. The reviewed literature in this study is included for its social media definitions and research on trust, credibility, and endorsement within the online world of social media.

Each article offers evidence of perceived credibility, but there is no current study targeting the perception of leadership through accumulated Facebook likes and followers. Borah (2018) offers a landmark quantitative analysis surrounding the effect of multiple variables on perceived credibility. Borah uses positive and negative framing, as well as expert and non-expert status to understand the effect of likes on credibility.

Borah and Xiao (2018) use 105 sources, and most technology sources are current. Some psychology sources originate as far back as the 1980s; but, contain psychology truths that remain valid today. The references offer strengths and weaknesses in a balanced comparison. Their experiment used a survey and randomizer, but overall the experiment uses a quantitative design.

Borah's (2018) experiment does not provide a correlation coefficient, so there is no test/re-test reliability factor available. There is no internal consistency reliability given as well. Borah (2018) states that the study participants' posts create internal validity and

the randomizing of the experiment create an environment of validity and reliability.

These statements seem to be assumptions by the authors, Borah and Xiao. The only

predictive criterion-related validity given is theoretical and may mislead scholarly and

academic readers. Borah (2018) used an experimental design, tested 340 students, and

used statistical procedures which were thorough but unclear.

Borah (2018) writes that the number of likes may influence credibility perceptions

on social media platforms. Borah and Xiao's (2018) study examine the likes, followers,

and social capital within Facebook, but there are few studies targeting perception of

leadership based upon the accumulation of likes and followers.

The social media credibility perception might offer insights into expanding our

leadership definition, but the research is lacking on this topic. Lee (2014) writes that

"social capital is a sociological concept that primarily refers to the value derived from

connections within and between social networks" (p. 351).

The gap in the body of literature surrounding perceived leadership through likes

on Facebook is explored in my study using a survey method. This gap will be addressed,

and the insight gained from the research may add and enrich the social media leadership

body of knowledge.

Lee (2014) notes that "the facets of social capital—social interaction ties, trust,

and shared vision—and social network information sharing can create a perceived value

(i.e., social, experiential, information, and transaction)" (p. 1). This perceived value is

created from the psychological need to share and interact in social media. This value

could be interpreted as social media addiction by non-users since it is subjective. Lee

(2014) writes that trust is a central component of social exchange theory.

Lee (2014) goes on to say that "the social implications of these communication networks are indisputable, as they are newer innovation or knowledge pools for information sharing" (p. 1). Lee (2014) follows that "social capital can be defined to encompass three distinct dimensions: structural (social interaction ties), relational (trust), and cognitive (shared vision)" (p. 1). This social connection creates a powerful environment experience for users. Lee used a survey technique for collecting data and included validity testing in his study. Lee used eight variables in his testing: social interaction ties, shared vision, trust, social network information sharing, information value, experiential value, social value, and transaction value. These variables were appropriate and examined the community relationships of social networks.

Table 1

Sample of Facebook Demographics (n = 402)

Variable	% Of *n*
Gender	Male 50% (2 0 1), female 50% (2 0 1)
Age	<20 (7.1%), 21–25 (64.5%), 26–30 (22.2%), 31–35 (3.9%), 36–40 (1.0%), 41–45 (0.5%), > 50 (0.7%)
Period of time using Facebook	<1 year (4.4%), 1–2 years (24.9%), 2–3 years (47.5), 3–4 years (14.8%), > 4 years (8.4%)
Education	Bachelor's degree (59.1%), Master's or higher degree (27.8%)
Residence	Northern part of Taiwan (69%)

Note: (Lee, Yen, & Hsiao 2014)

Social capital is a shared experience among Facebook users. The social capital phenomenon translates to perceived value through psychological fulfillment. The like

button is instrumental in creating this accumulated perceived value. Lee (2014) explains that "perceived value is a context-specific perception that may drive users' attitudes and behaviors" (p. 3). Lee (2014) further states that social capital (likes and followers) affect the perceived value. This value may create perceived status of users through multiple sharing, likes, and followers.

Eranti (2015) reveals that over 4.5 billion objects get a like each day on Facebook. Eranti (2015) emphasizes that the like button has created a "like economy" where the number of likes weighs valuation for web pages. Eranti (2015) made the connection that the like button creates ease of online use and increases participation while decreasing off-line political activity. The like button, as explained by Eranti (2015) is a binary code system but informs a very sophisticated social interaction. This like action can have very complex meanings to various groups of followers. This complexity derives from subjectivity; the eye of the beholder perceives likes and followers with different meanings, some as credibility, some as trust, and others as an endorsement. This subjective effect may explain how perceived leadership might gain credibility as real leadership.

Table 2

Social Pressures Affecting Facebook Likes.

Note: The options given to respondents were 1=never, 2=sometimes, 3=often, 4=always, 5=can't say. In the table options 2, 3, and 4 have been merged in the category 'at least sometimes'.

Survey Question	Never	At least sometimes	Can't say	Total
When you press the Like button, do you consider what your FB friends will think of your liking?	5	21	0	26

Has the fact that you know that your liking fits into your FB friends' perception of your FB behavior influenced your liking?	**9**	**15**	**2**	**26**
When you consider your FB friends' opinions, do you have some specific person/s in mind?	**9**	**16**	**1**	**26**
Before liking an object on FB, do you check who else has liked it?	**3**	**23**	**0**	**26**
Have you regretted any of your likes due to social reasons?	**16**	**10**	**0**	**26**

Note: (Eranti & Lonkila 2015).

Eranti (2015) examined social pressures affecting Facebook likes. He used a

range of likes and a survey questionnaire with university students. Eranti (2015) created a

category of frequencies of likes from never to always. His methods were appropriate and

thorough. This study reveals the many reasons that Facebook users click like, including

endorsement.

In traditional leadership theory, there exists a groupthink phenomenon, and there

is a similarly related online interaction called herding behavior. There is online peer

pressure that could influence users to perceive others as legitimate leaders and to like

them as a consequence of maintaining a positive self-image. This online peer pressure is

similar to Eranti's findings of social pressures. Sundar, Xu, and Oeldorf-Hirsh (2009)

define social endorsement as the 'likes' on Facebook posts. This endorsement, known as

the 'bandwagon effect,' refers to the susceptibility of collective endorsement, implying

that one intends to agree with and trust the information that has been endorsed by many

others. All of these effects create an online environment for perceived leadership to be

nurtured.

Borah (2018) goes on to say, "the dynamics of social media are very unique

because factors such as liking, sharing, or commenting can influence how individuals

perceive information." Borah writes "however, with the advent of the Internet, the

proliferation and unregulated flow of information from a variety of sources raises

concerns regarding the quality of information online" (Borah, 2018, p. 2). This

unregulated flow remains unchecked if users deem likes and followers to be the only

source of credibility.

Borah (2018) defines credibility "as expertise and trustworthiness... expertise

refers to a speaker's capacity or qualifications to convey the message with accuracy and

comprehensiveness; trustworthiness refers to the speaker's integrity, reputation and

motivation to tell the truth about a topic" (p. 3). Hu and Sundar (2010) write that media

credibility focuses on the credibility of the social platform or using the Internet is

perceived as equally credible as traditional forms of media and this perceived credibility

may result in trust. The popularity of social media creates perceived credibility not

encountered in prior analog leadership theory.

According to Metzger and Flanagin (2013) "social endorsement not only serves as

a 'collaborative filter' that directs individuals' attention to popular topics, but also

reduces skepticism and enhances information credibility" (as cited in Borah, 2018, p. 5).

Jahng and Littau (2016) write about the power of endorsement in social media. Jahng and

Littau also state that credibility perception is affected by several factors, especially the

intensity of a social media source's interactivity. Westerman, Spence and Van Der Heide

(2011) add that the number of connections a social media account has also influence credibility perceptions.

Furthermore, Metzger et al. (2010) attests that individuals are less likely to make judgments about credibility in isolation from one another. Metzger writes that individuals establish credibility through the process of social endorsement. He goes on to say that messages from members of a known network have increased validity and can be trusted to a greater extent. There is an automatic trust of the information and the source if that member is within a known network.

Metzger et al. (2010) may suggest that social media could improve its leadership cultivation by providing biographies, rating systems (similar to credit reporting), guarantees of human users rather than algorithms, and evidence of past leadership capabilities (resume mining). This dynamic vetting may provide users of social media with greater confidence in subscribing to those that have accumulated likes and followers. Validating users might create greater confidence in social media and give social media leaders the credibility beyond the accumulation of likes and followers.

Researcher Perspective

The researcher is a member of Facebook and a student in the master's program at the University of Southern Maine. The researcher may have biases that include such characteristics as male, Irish, Caucasian, middle class, academically biased, politically Independent, demographically unbalanced, skeptical of news and social media content. All efforts will be made to remain objective and any biases should not influence the data collection, survey, or analysis.

Chapter III: Research Methods

Qualitative Research Design

The methodology of choice is qualitatively based on the research question, *do Facebook users perceive leadership status as based upon the number of individuals' likes and followers?* The qualitative method is selected because quantitative data collection would not be appropriate for this type of study. Facebook likes are subjective to the users and contain an element of credibility, truth, and perception. Facebook users' surveys are the most appropriate data collection methods for this study. A qualitative method provides users' opinions and perceptions that are significant to the study.

Qualitative analysis provides coded data and the possibility for commonalities and themes to emerge and inform the results of the study. Branthwaite and Patterson (2011) write that philosophically, the "conversation" that gives qualitative research its validity and authenticity is the direct, interactive dialogue or conversation between consumers and researchers. Branthwaite and Patterson (2011) describe the underlying narrative which connects consumers' needs, driving forces to behavior, and the dynamic, interactive characteristics that achieve a meeting of minds to produce a shared understanding. This study emphasizes the importance of the qualitative method in this social media research.

A qualitative data collection is used as an emergent process and reveals its significance organically. Facebook leadership perception is a subjective activity, but a working definition is obtainable through well-targeted questions and an open-ended answer approach. The link between followers, likes, and the perception of leadership is just an assumption without Facebook users' opinions and insights. Every effort to obtain truthful and uncoerced answers are critical for study reliability.

Sample

The sample for this study is mined from public Facebook users who voluntarily answer the survey posted in the researcher's public Facebook feed. The survey sample consists of n = 14 Facebook users. Survey data includes answers to questions that may offer insights into trust, credibility, and perceived leadership on Facebook. Survey data is recorded first using SurveyMonkey and then transferred to Microsoft Word, Excel, and organized by mode (frequency), percentage, themes, and commonalities.

Data Collection

The site of the survey is the Facebook social media platform. The survey is posted on the online social network Facebook as a public posting. SurveyMonkey online survey tool is employed to a population of 4.5 billion Facebook users and n = 14 samples are collected. The researcher briefs the respondents with the following disclosure:

> *Survey Bias Disclosure: This is an interview of your honest and open opinion of the influence and perception of Facebook likes. Please do not allow your relationship to the researcher to influence your answers for the purposes of obtaining thoughtful and objective responses. Thank you for your participation in this academic study.*

This public survey is a representative group for this study. Any users of Facebook provide useful data for the perception of leadership through likes and followers. This phenomenon is a social media construct, and those users of social media provide the best and most accurate interpretation of this perception. These Facebook users' opinions may inform the answer to the research question, *do Facebook users perceive leadership as based upon the number of individuals' likes and followers?*

Data Analysis and Verification

Survey data is grouped by mode (frequency), as well as percentage, and codes emerge from the data. Any common codes are combined into themes. The resulting analysis of perceived leadership are aligned with the traditional definition of leadership for comparison. Conclusions are presented as to traditional definition alignment and any resulting negative alignment. Any social media insights into perceived leadership contribute to the body of knowledge regarding leadership. Any and all relevant quotes are collected and presented.

Ethical Considerations

Care is taken to follow the Institutional Review Board's (IRB) Belmont Report. Respect for persons, benevolence, and justice observed during the collection of data with human subjects. IRB approval has been applied for and granted, and this approval is made available to Dr. Sharon Timberlake of the Leadership Program. Please see *Figure 3* for the secured IRB certificate, *Figure 2* for the survey questions, and *Figure 4* for the IRB approval.

There are legitimate considerations to using SurveyMonkey. The human subject is private (not using identifying information), and the IP (Internet Protocol Computer Address) is not be disclosed. The SurveyMonkey default IP capture setting is turned off prior to posting the survey live.

The analysis phase contains researcher bias and is informed by adding additional researchers. These checks and balances help keep the analysis unbiased. Care will be taken not to jump to conclusions from the evidence collected, but there is no guarantee of objective findings. Researcher or experimental bias could remain and skew the discussion

and concluding statements. Researcher Facebook friends may provide optimistic answers to research questions to reduce friction and strife. This researcher bias may present a limitation to realistic data and objectivity.

Summary

The study reveals some qualitative insights about the perception of leadership in Facebook. Facebook users might see themselves as not being influenced by likes, but see others as having follower mentality. Most questions about perceived leadership may be subjective, but objectivity is obtained by asking about the psychological role in follower mentality. This line of questioning adds a layer of "once removed" objective status. It follows that we subjectively think that we do not get affected by likes, but that others do get affected. Our behavior is involuntarily subconscious until we stop and considers the question of perceived leadership. The objective of the data collection is to uncover Facebook users' motivation and hidden perceptions surrounding Facebook likes and followers. This objective is to answer the research question, *do Facebook users perceive leadership as based upon the number of individuals' likes and followers?*

Chapter IV: Findings and Results

Demographics, Population, and Sample Data

In order to gather participants, a public Facebook posting is created that includes recruitment information, a link to an online consent form for download, and a link to an anonymous survey on SurveyMonkey, as reflected in Figure 1 below.
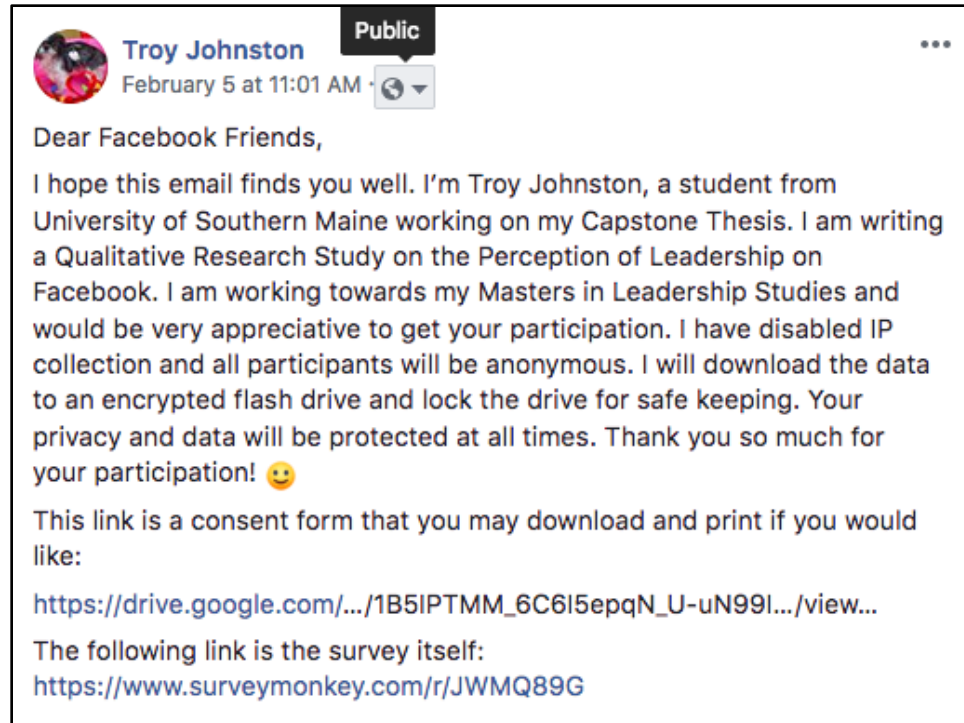

Figure 1. Recruitment Materials

This anonymous survey was posted online between Feb 5, 2019 and Feb 15, 2019. A sample of responses from fourteen participants were collected by the SurveyMonkey website and these participant responses were copied and pasted into an Excel spreadsheet file. The participants were at least 21 years of age and were users of Facebook. The ethnicity, gender identification, IP address, country of origin, occupation, race, socio-economic status, educational background, or any other identifying information was not

gathered. The samples answers to the survey questions and opinions were of the only

concern.

The survey questions were open-ended and addressed each of the online

leadership topics discussed in this paper, such as, perception of leadership, credibility,

status, trust worthiness, and experience of a Facebook leader. Other questions explored

the differences between the traditional definition of a leader and that of an online leader.

Finally, the participants were asked about their feelings towards bots and algorithms that

might be posing as Facebook leaders, as reflected in Figure 2 below.

1 What attributes of a Facebook user give the perception of leadership?

2 How would you change the definition of leadership to include online leadership?

3 What gives a Facebook leader their leadership status?

4 How do you feel about accumulated likes and followers with regard to leadership status?

5. What feelings do you have when you see a popular Facebook leader?

6. How do you define a Facebook leader?

7. How would you expand the traditional definition of leadership to include Facebook leaders?

8. What gives a Facebook leader credibility and/or trust worthiness?

9. What gives a Facebook leader status and/or experience?

10. How do you feel about the potential for algorithms that pose as Facebook leaders?

Figure 2. Survey Questions

The following figure is the required International Review Board Certification, as

reflected in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3. IRB Certificate

The following figure is the required International Review Board Approval, as reflected in
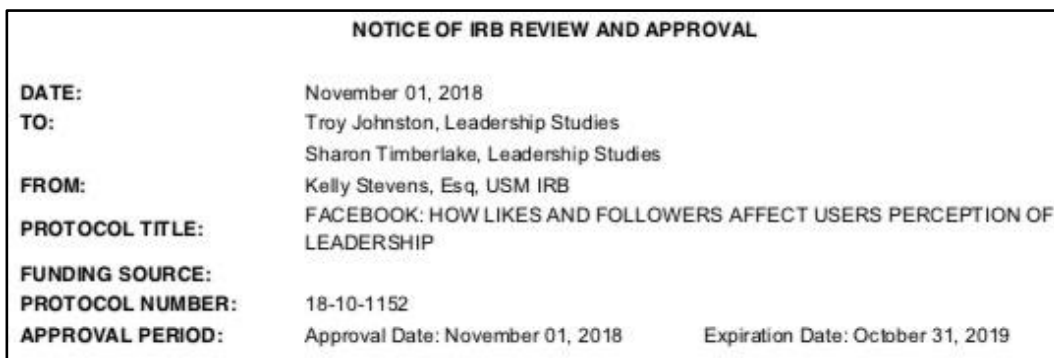
Figure 4 below.

Figure 4. IRB Approval

Question 1

The result of question one was surprising. Only one respondent considered likes

and interaction as a reason given for the perception of leadership on Facebook.

Thoughtful content, providing value, being empathetic, and compassion seem to elicit the

majority of responses, as reflected in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5. Question 1

Note: All data limitations will be explained in the limitations section.

There were a great many comments to this question as are shown below.

Respondent two wrote:

Thoughtful content from user with respectful language and content. Engagements

from others and interactions from the user that provide evidence of the listening, empathy

and communication styles between user and others.

Respondent three described:

Their posts - someone who gives value in their posts and does not "vent";

someone who gets a lot of likes and interaction on their posts; someone who shows

enthusiasm and compassion.

Respondent twelve wrote:

A Facebook leader is someone perceived as an expert at something important to

the group. That person has a lot of followers. The leader's posts are considered relevant,

perceptive, or knowledgeable. A FB leader is well liked.

Respondent thirteen wrote:

Community engagement, credentials, social and political awareness and open

mindedness. Self-care recognition and positive self-image.

Respondent thirteen was the only participant who wrote about engagement and

respondent two mentioned interaction.

Question 2

Question two appealed to the participants academic sensibilities in search for an

expanded definition of leadership to include online leadership. Again, the results showed

how we accept the online world as a seamless addition to our traditional view of

leadership and most respondents did not feel that the definition needed to change, as

reflected in Figure 6 below.

Figure 6. Question 2

Note: All data limitations will be explained in the limitations section.

The overall consensus was five participants agreed that the definition of

leadership did not necessarily need to change. One interesting finding is that two

participants defined online leadership as "ELEADERSHIP" and participant 12 was

quoted as writing:

Online leaders have a lot of influence socially and politically. Online leaders

shape society. An online leader sways both individuals and the populace.

There were many interesting quotes from participants, as in respondent two:

I wouldn't change the definition or expected qualities, however I might

understand and thus qualify the evaluation of the leader's qualities given the greater

difficulty inherent in an online domain due to the wider audience and common online

bad-behaviors.

Respondent six replied:

I am not sure that you would need to change the definition or leadership to

"include online leadership" because the concept of leadership should stand on its own

regardless of mode or environment.

Question 3

Question three asked participants what gives a Facebook leader their status. This

question received three mentions of followers, friends, and community. Followers seem

to have a greater impact than likes, similar to question one. Question three responses are
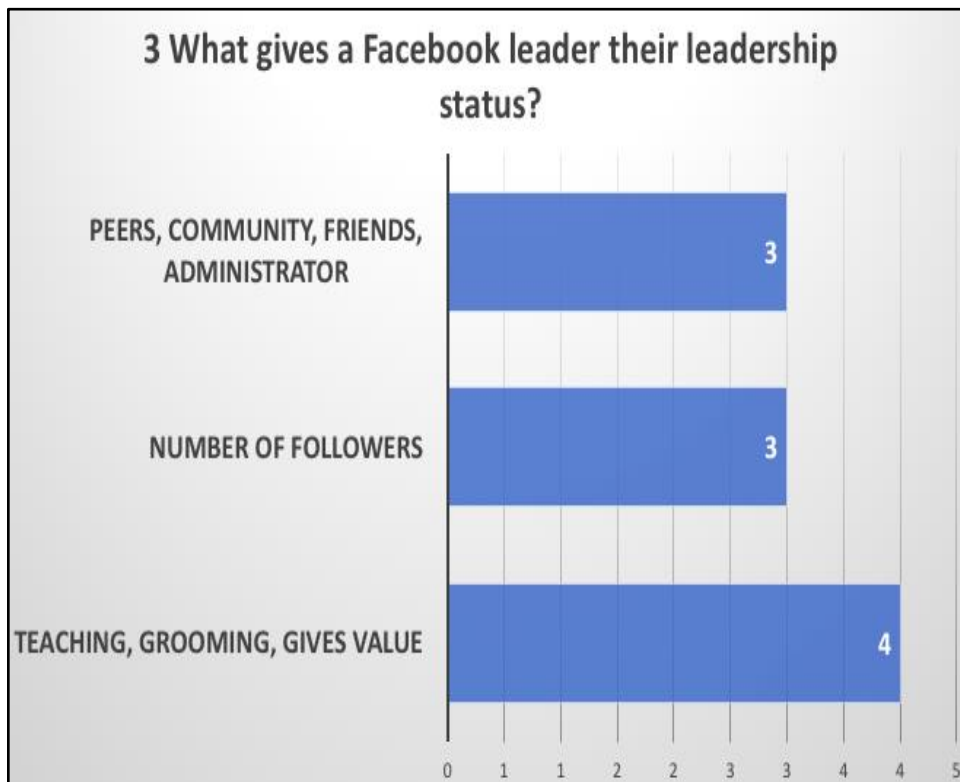
reflected in Figure 7 below.

3 What gives a Facebook leader their leadership status?

Category	Value
PEERS, COMMUNITY, FRIENDS, ADMINISTRATOR	3
NUMBER OF FOLLOWERS	3
TEACHING, GROOMING, GIVES VALUE	4

Figure 7. Question 3

Note: All data limitations will be explained in the limitations section.

Although the data commonalities and themes were scarce, the respondents did offer substantive quotes as evidence of their deep thinking of leadership status.

Respondent 12 reiterated the fact that followers were of greater importance than likes in the following quote:

A Facebook leader is one with many followers. This person has influence on others through posts and comments. People make that person influential through their support. This person gets a lot of attention online.

Respondent 13 gave an interesting perspective regarding leadership status in their quote:

Ability to remain calm and pragmatic in the face of trolling and negative social discourse.

Respondent six wrote their opinion as:

I suppose the number of followers would be the visual answer to this question but the consistent people who are following one over time may be a better indicator of a true leader including the ratio of likes and sad/angry responses?

Respondent three cut through the metrics and described an online leader:

A person who consistently, enthusiastically, gives value, shows compassion, and has a large number of friends who frequently engage on their posts in a positive fashion.

Question 4

In question four, the majority of participants did not agree that likes and followers have an impact on leader status, as reflected in Figure 8 below.
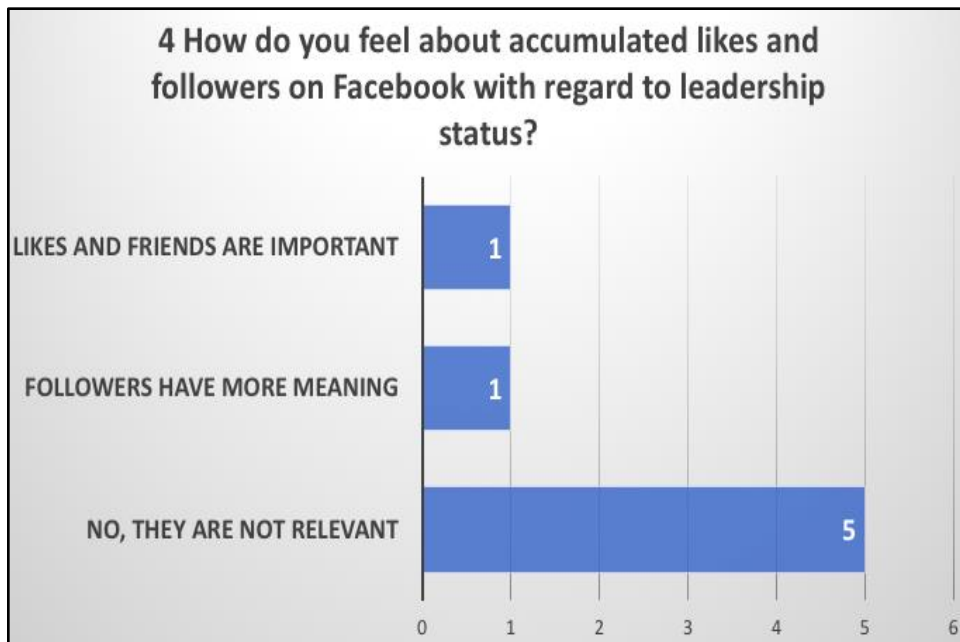

Figure 8. Question 4

Note: All data limitations will be explained in the limitations section.

This question directly asked respondents about expressing their feelings and only three answered the emotional portion. Two respondents had no emotional response and one was angry. It seems the words "feelings" are interpreted today as a cerebral condition and not an emotional one as the question asked. All other respondents disregarded the emotional directness of the question and described their cerebral point of view.

Even though the majority considered likes and followers to be a small impact, respondent 11 wrote:

I think each person with accumulated likes and followers has the potential to shape people's opinions for better or for worse. I am interested in what they have to say.

Most participants felt like respondent six:

It is not indicative of a true leader. One's skills and abilities cannot be judged solely through electronics. We cannot take the human element out of leadership and succeed.

Question 5

Question five asked participants about their feelings and emotions when confronted by a popular Facebook leader. The responses were mixed and included a surprising amount of indecision toward emotional reaction, as reflected in Figure 9 below.

Figure 9. Question 5

Note: Data percentages were used in this pie chart since responses captured fell into one of the four categories, equaling 100 percent.

Question 6

Again, four out of 14 respondents had no response to question six, but it was encouraging to get answers like "supportive", "passionate", and "cares", as reflected in Figure 10 below.
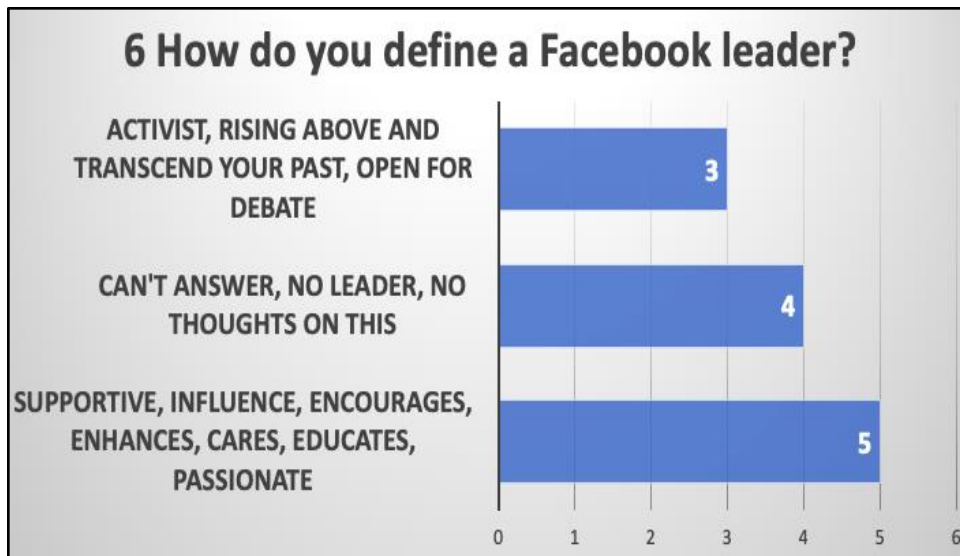

Figure 10. Question 6

Note: All data limitations will be explained in the limitations section.

Respondent 12 described influence and expertise in their statement:

A FB leader is one with influence over others, especially in a particular group. That person has expertise as evidenced by likes and by followers who are part of that group.

Respondent 12 acknowledges likes and followers as evidence of credibility and legitimacy of leadership status.

Respondent three wrote:

Someone who is able to use social media to compassionately, and enthusiastically guide and direct a group of people in a given task.

This statement offers a descriptive definition of online leadership.

Question 7

Question seven received similar responses to question two and six. These questions asked about defining and changing the definition of leadership to include Facebook leaders, as reflected in Figure 11 below.

Figure 11. Question 7

Note: All data limitations will be explained in the limitations section.

Respondent 12 described the worldwide effect of Facebook leaders:

Any leader is one with influence. FB leaders have far reaching influence on others throughout the world. This needs to be added to the traditional definition of leadership.

Respondent 10 wrote:

A new leader should cross traditional barriers.

Question 8

In question eight, respondents were asked about credibility and trust worthiness.

Transparency and integrity were important to participants, as reflected in Figure 12
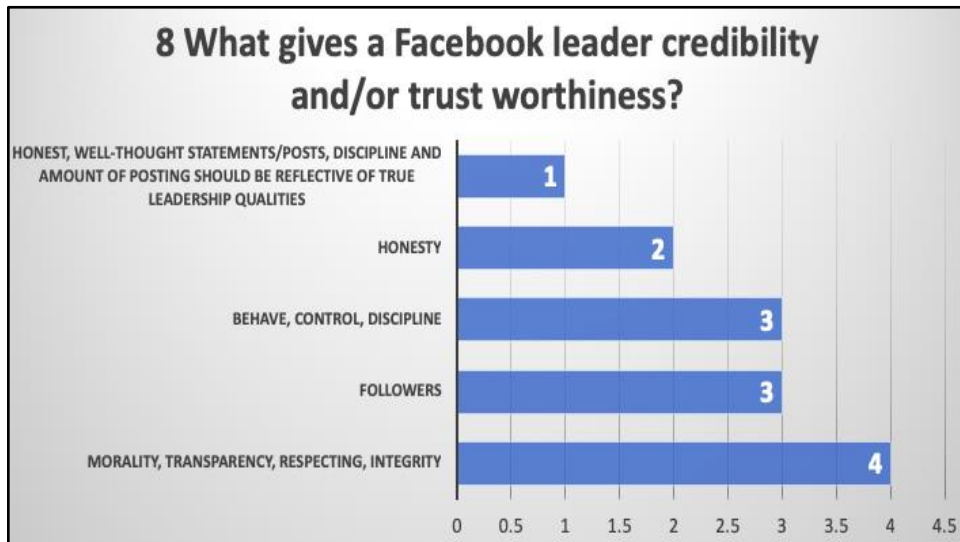
below.

Figure 12. Question 8

Note: All data limitations will be explained in the limitations section.

Respondent six made it clear what credibility and trust worthiness means by

stating:

Honest, well-thought statements and posts, discipline with posts and amount of

posting should be reflective of true leadership qualities.

Respondent three wrote:

A large number of people positively engaging in their posts and content, as well

as the value and morality of the content they post.

Respondent 12 wrote:

That person needs to give expert advice and others must view that advice as credible. Sometimes popularity is confused with credibility.

Question 9

There was an equal consensus on question nine. Asking about experience and status received an equal response of likes, followers, and consistency, as reflected in Figure 13 below.
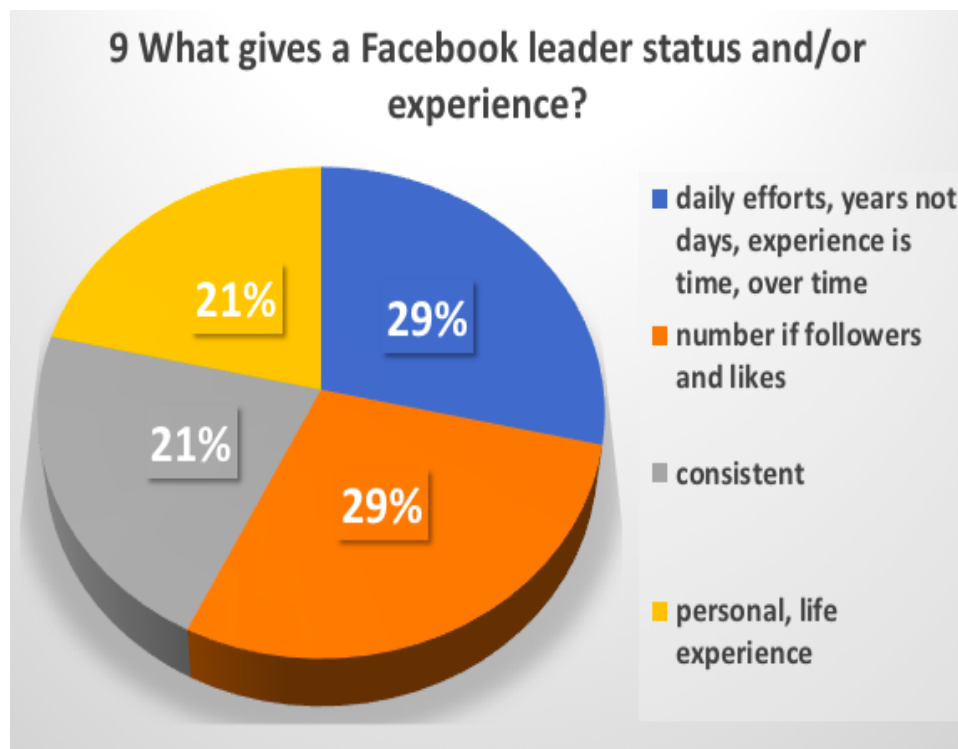

Figure 13. Question 9

Note: Data percentages were used in this pie chart since responses captured fell into one of the four categories, equaling 100 percent.

Note: Respondent thirteen mentioned proper citing of arguments and sources for questions eight and nine, this was the only reference to proper citation within the survey.

Properly citing sources and not giving in to emotionally charged debate.

Respondent fourteen wrote:

Only speak up or respond to important issues. Not necessary to comment in every situation. The less you respond, the more important it becomes.

Question 10

Question ten asked respondents about their feelings regarding robots and algorithms posing as Facebook leaders. The majority of participants did not like or approve of this activity, as reflected in Figure 14 below.
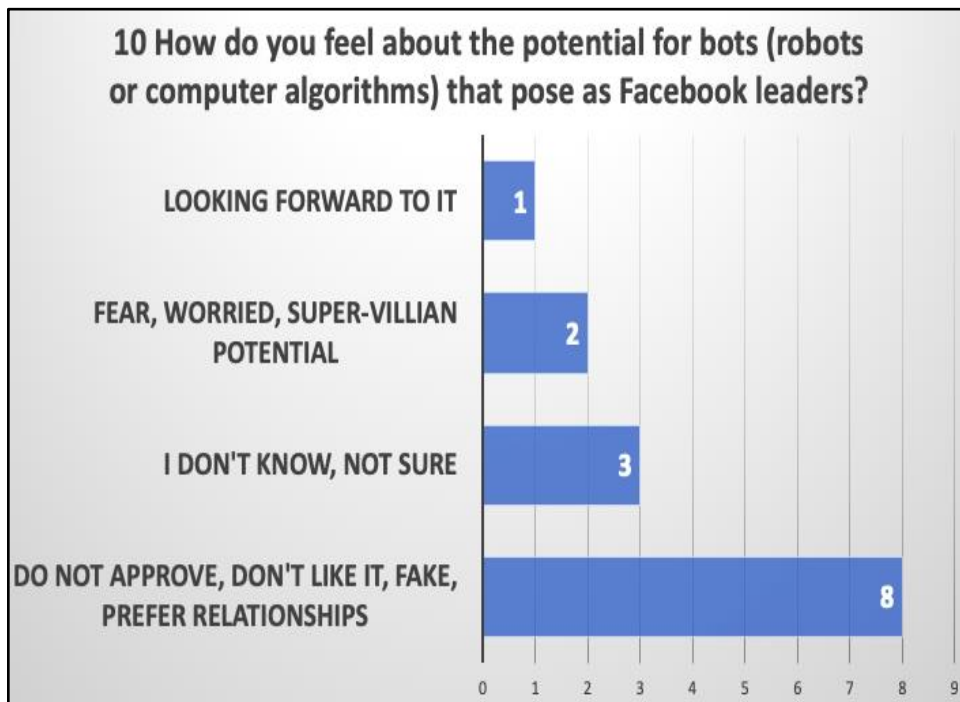

Figure 14. Question 10

Note: All data limitations will be explained in the limitations section.

The quotes from participants gave greater insight into this undesirable activity.

Respondent three wrote:

The use of bots totally annoys me and ruins the credibility of a leader in my opinion. When I sense that someone is responding via bot, I generally no longer see them as a good leader.

Respondent six wrote:

Not sure that this has become a factor, yet. The potential does not seem as likely because there should be human interaction and verification of communication when evaluating leadership.

Respondent twelve wrote:

I don't really think about that. But if that were the case, I would feel that I couldn't trust FB. I tend to know the people who I perceive as leaders.

Respondent fourteen wrote:

I'm really worried about what is coming through from other countries that influence Facebook readers. The more that comes through the more that is read and the more that is believed is only hurting our country. We have got to instill common sense and think for oneself instead of believing everything that is before your eyes.

This question received the most heated and emotional responses of all the questions. The majority of Facebook uses in this survey do not like the idea of being tricked by a robot or manipulated by an algorithm.

Limitations

One weakness inherent in this method of obtaining data was that the sample size for the study was rather small (n = 14), due to the availability and willingness of the targeted participants. The small sample size would not be conclusive for any concrete findings. This is why the actual number of responses was given in cases where

percentages were not appropriate. A larger sample size would be recommended for further research on this subject. Qualitative findings must be taken at face value and do have weight since they are a participant's personal opinions on the topic, but one or two opinions are too few to make substantial conclusions. However, the data could be used to refine the instrument, as such providing groundwork for broader studies in the future.

Chapter V: Discussion

The intention of this research paper was to ask engaging questions of Facebook users and get data that supports the existence, perception, and organically changing definition of Facebook leaders. The data received was compelling but had inconsistencies with responses. This leads me to believe that Facebook users either have robust opinions, possibly very complicated views or that there might be a group think paradigm creating an invisible buffer. If a group think dynamic is present, then all responses that disregard the influence of Facebook leadership status, trustworthiness, and/or credibility could be subjectively idealistic. The judgement of a user might be unknowingly influenced by the very world that Facebook creates. Analogous to this effect would be "seeing the forest from the trees." Might we all just accept the validity of a Facebook leader just by the virtue of accumulated likes and followers?

This paper and its research survey questions might be the first time any of the participants actually thought about this social media phenomenon. The questions this research paper asks were theoretical until the data was collected. The question remains if the respondents accepted Facebook leadership involuntarily up until the moment these questions were posed. The answers in the beginning of the survey were less developed and different with the same category of questions than in the end of the survey. This might have to do with a second thought and deeper thinking on the subject of Facebook leadership during the process of the survey itself.

There might be an explanation for this disparity among answers. Our lives are so busy, and we get bombarded by thousands of split-second decisions in a day. Compartmentalizing is a skill that we all use involuntarily to remain sane and make sense

of our complex analog and online presence. Social media has become internalized as a

reflex and extension of our communication. As communities and citizens, we accept

leadership with lightning speed, for instance, when we see a police officer uniform, we

assume this person has authority, as well as a doctor's smock, a postal service mail truck,

or a fire department vehicle. We may make the same split-second decisions with

Facebook leadership and not take on the arduous journey of responsibly vetting online

leadership.

Chapter VI: Conclusion

A master's in leadership studies is a fascinating and comprehensive study of the history and varieties of leadership. The one area that was lacking in this degree category was the advent of virtual and online leadership brought to us through social media sites. Facebook is an interesting platform for leadership and the perception of leadership. This survey of Facebook users examined the attributes of leadership, such as, credibility, status, trust worthiness, experience, as well as likes and followers.

There was a main research question considered for this study, *do Facebook users perceive leadership status as based upon the number of individuals' likes and followers?* There were three other questions considered as the paper developed:

How do you define a Facebook leader, including what attributes are important?

How would you expand the traditional definition of leadership to include Facebook leaders?

What are your feelings towards robots or computer algorithms that pose as Facebook leaders?

The answers given that contribute to the status, credibility, trust worthiness, and perception of a Facebook leader were honorable and positive. The replies included thoughtful content, providing value, showing empathy, embodying compassion, supportive, passionate, transparent, having integrity, maintaining morality, and caring for others. Likes, followers, and proper citing of sources (a prerequisite for leadership credibility) were not as important to survey respondents as was genuinely contributing back to humanity.

Secondly, the only indication of leadership definition expansion was that of including a worldwide influence, universalism, and transcending traditional barriers. Potential robot or algorithm Facebook leadership sparked emotional responses like deception, being misled, and threatening the trust of Facebook as a social media platform. In general, Facebook users in this survey value the qualities of a relationship between leader and follower more than the social capital of accumulated likes and followers.

I sincerely hope that Facebook imitates life, similar to those qualities of art. My fear is that we are turning to more transactional leadership from a relational, as in the Democratic National Convention losing the 2016 election, the majority of women voting for Donald Trump against their own self-interests, Susan Collins from Maine voting with her party to confirm Judge Kavanaugh, and the toxic Theronos CEO Elizabeth Holmes creating delusion disguised as vision.

To fully understand leadership is to include toxic leadership, as well as, quality positive leadership. Traditional analog leadership is being extended to online, virtual, and vision powered leadership. The reason for the acceptance of virtual leadership might be the product to market economy, the like economy, and the rise of the social capital economy.

Worldwide social media is a wonderful tool to spread joy, hope, and equality, but reposting atrocities can create a feverish wave of negativity and exploit a toxic faction or agenda. This universal spreading can originate from just one or two negative outliers. A case in point would be the video reposting of the Christchurch, New Zealand mosque catastrophe.

As a society, we have forfeited our checks and balances to one or two CEOs that profit from retweets, reposting, and sharing of any controversial topics. It is in their financial interest to allow these social anomalies to grow unvetted and unregulated. Social media might need a social revolution to remain moral.

There will be growing pains with technology and leadership credibility, but if we stay true to our convictions of transparency, integrity, and morality, we should be able to navigate this intriguing new frontier of social media and online Facebook leadership.
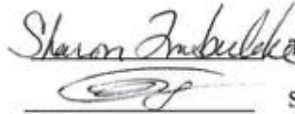
FINAL APPROVAL FORM

The University of Southern Maine

Master's in Leadership Studies

May 10, 2019

We hereby recommend that the thesis of Troy Andrew Johnston entitled Facebook: How

Likes and Followers Affect Users Perception of Leadership be accepted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the Master's in Leadership Studies.

Thesis Advisor (Dr. Sharon Timberlake, Ph.D.)

Second Reader (Dr. Elizabeth Goryunova, Ph.D.)

Accepted

Director (Dr. Dan Jenkins, Ph. D.)

Director Leadership Studies Program

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