

Working title: Digital social status drives social media posting

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Abstract:

In 3 novel social media datasets (Instagram, Twitter, Mastodon) we document that users – everything else equal – post again faster when their last post received less likes. Previous theoretical accounts, specifically reinforcement learning and rate maximization of likes, habitual behavior, and intrinsic motivation, fail to predict this robust effect. We formulate a new theoretical account where users are motivated by improving their digital social status: they compare their status quo with their expected future status and are more strongly motivated to post again the worse their status quo is relative to their future expectation. We provide causal evidence for this mechanism, by experimentally manipulating expected digital social status independently of the status quo via a Newsfeed manipulation in a Social Media Game. Our results suggest that posting is a complex social choice indicating awareness and active management of one's perception by others. Using simulation, we derive managerial implications for social media platform design.