

In It for the Likes?

Leah is active on social media. She has accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. She uses these accounts for many purposes, some personal and others political. In the past, Leah always thought that she struck an appropriate balance between these topics. Now, looking back at her posts over the past year, Leah is surprised by how many of them are political. More often than not (and much more often than in the past), her posts involve her sharing news or commentary about political issues, her own thoughts about these issues, or pictures from marches, protests, or rallies.

Leah asks herself why her social media activity has changed over time and a couple of possible explanations occur to her. One is that Leah has learned more about political issues over the past year and has become more interested in them and concerned about them. Another is that many of her friends (and at least a few of her crushes) have become more politically active over the past year as well; and Leah imagines that at least part of the reason she writes more political posts and attends more marches, protests, and rallies is that she wants to impress these people. These partially self-interested reasons make Leah feel uncomfortable. However, she is not sure what conclusion if any to draw from her discomfort.

One thing that Leah feels uncertain about is how she should think of herself as a person. On one hand, she really does care about these issues for their own sake. And maybe it speaks well of her that she wants to impress the kinds of people who care about them too, and who see political activity as impressive. On the other hand, Leah knows that if she had no self-interested reason to engage in political activity, her overall engagement would decline.

Another thing that Leah feels uncertain about is what if anything she should do differently. For example, the next time she has an opportunity to share an article about an important political issue, should she still share that article even though she knows that part of her reason for doing so is that she hopes that certain people will see and like her post? On one hand, Leah thinks that it would be good to expose more people to this important issue. On the other hand, she also thinks that it would be bad for her to attempt to benefit from the plight of others.

After thinking about it for a minute, Leah decides to share the article. Within minutes, one of the people she was thinking about likes it, which makes Leah feel happy, then guilty, then confused all over again.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. If Leah performs good actions for self-interested reasons, does she deserve praise or blame (or neither)?
2. If Leah performs good actions for self-interested reasons, should she try to change her behavior? Why or why not?
3. If Leah performs good actions for self-interested reasons, should she try to change her motivations? Why or why not?

