



Photo by John Yuyi

The Jealousy and Guilty in Scrolling

Don't overwhelm yourself with the trend of hate-following. Why are you anxious about social media, anyway?

By Lindsay Geller

"Scroll. Screenshot. Send. Sh*t talk. That's what I found myself doing every few months with two of my best college friends. "

It's not as if I hopped onto Instagram hoping to find a post that we could all ridicule, but whenever one of us did – often plucked from the feed of a wannabe-influencer classmate – that's what happened. The kicker: No matter how much we detested their digital presence, no one ever suggested deleting them into the virtual ether: We hated their content but loved following them. I was a perpetrator of the so-called "hate-follow" – and I had no intention of stopping.

Illustration by Christopher DeLorenzo



and postdoctoral fellow at Stanford University, has a few theories. First, it could simply be jealousy: You want the "perfect life" they project, and that can be irritating but at the same time addictive. Or you do it to feel better about yourself (uh, guilty): "If somebody's posts are really annoying, and we feel we're not that way, then hate-following them can make us feel we're doing better than they are," explains Vogel. Last, you likely have people you follow out of obligation to your IRL relationship (a relative, colleague, friend). Even though they make you cringe you can't look away, or you feel guilty doing so.

The New Mean Girls

If Tina Fey's iconic film were written today, the Burn Book would be a group text (or Insta DM). Still, hate-following doesn't have to be a team sport; you partake whenever someone on social media consistently makes you roll your eyes, scoff, or feel virtual contempt.

But...why do it? No studies have examined the trend, but Erin Vogel, PhD, a social psychologist

An Upside to Downers

The term sounds extreme, sure, but hate-following someone doesn't necessarily mean you hate them. (Phew!) You could feel ambivalent, says Pamela Rutledge, PhD, a professor in media psychology at the Fielding Graduate University: "We may be

curious about what makes them popular with others, because understanding what motivates those around us helps us survive in a social world.” In other words, if your habit is fueled more by curiosity than by spite, you’re likelier to learn from these people even if they don’t appeal to you. Following them “may introduce you to new ideas,” Rutledge says. Maybe they end up showing you a life hack or vacation spot. You don’t have to like a person to like the same things.

What’s more, if it’s jealousy driving your tracking, know that comparing yourself to those you envy can actually be motivating - so long as you’re mindful about it. As much as you might not love seeing their glamorous job, overstamped passport, or Hemsworth-esque S.O., it can inspire you to go after those same goals yourself.

The key to making sure that happens - versus going into a self-bashing spiral - is comparing only what you can control. If you want to up your workout game, you might follow some fitness pros to get advice, even if their abs annoy you. “If you feel you could attain their success, then it can be helpful to follow them,” Vogel says. But if you compare things you can’t change, like your age or upbringing, adds

Rutledge, “you may find yourself disliking them more because they’re challenging your identity and self-value” (read: doubting your talents because a younger colleague posted about a big promotion.) If you notice that happening, remember that you are not just a collection of backlit photos and witty captions either.

Playing the Blame Game

The scrolling-and-eye-rolling routine can also “be a way of directing anger or anxiety from other things onto a ‘harmless’ source,” says Rutledge. After all, the only thing misery loves more than company is company that makes it feel less miserable. But while having an outlet for negative feelings can be helpful – and you’re not bullying the source of your mockery (you’re better than that, obviously) – hate-following will most likely hurt you. Gone unchecked, the habit can unleash your inner Judge Judy on everyone, says Vogel.

Suddenly, you’re criticizing others instead of working on yourself. So ask why you’re really doing it and whether following this person is actually benefiting you. If your answers make you feel more like a Regina than a pre-North Shore Cady, it’s probably time to give your social style a makeover. I know I did...and I’m all the better for it.



Illustration by Matt Blease



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70% The amount of Instagram users with fewer than 1,000 followers, according to a survey. So next time you’re comparing your social media popularity to someone else’s, snap outta the self-criticism. None of that matters in the real world anyway!