

**ENGAGING MILLENNIALS IN SOCIAL ISSUES THROUGH  
CELEBRITY TWITTER ACTIVITY**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Engaging millennials in social issues through Celebrity Twitter activity

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Twitter plays an increasingly large role as an information source for millennials. Previous studies show the importance of social media advocacy programs in nonprofit organizations, as well as the influence celebrities have on political opinion. However, little research has been conducted on how celebrities advocate for social change through their Twitter accounts. In this study, researchers examined the communication characteristics of celebrities on Twitter, by employing a qualitative approach to content analysis. Researchers analyzed and coded Demi Lovato and Lady Gaga's advocacy tweets to provide a deeper understanding of these celebrities' communication strategies and practice when it comes to advocacy work. Five themes of how celebrities post about social issues on Twitter emerged—education, personal narrative, policy, pop culture, and support. Policy and pop culture were among the most common themes observed. However, millennial Twitter users are more engaged with tweets that reference personal narrative and pop culture. This study confirms the relevancy and importance of Twitter in celebrity advocacy campaigns and offers strategic approaches to engaging millennial audiences.

## **DEDICATION**

Abuela Ninfa, gracias por todo. Desde que era pequeña, me criaste a no tener miedo de llamar las cosas que estaban mal. Cada vez que pienso de amparo, creo de usted. Gracias por apoyarme siempre, también cuando ni sabias lo que estaba haciendo. Sin ti, yo no.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

Since the early 2000s, user-generated content has become increasingly popular on the internet. More and more users are participating in content creation, instead of content consumption (Agichtein, Castillo, Donato, Gionis, & Mishne, 2008). Similarly, semi-public social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter represent a new way of communication among the public (Naaman, Boase, & Lai 2015).

Social Media Awareness streams can be described by three distinguishing factors: a) the public (or semi-public) nature of the conversation; b) the brevity of posted content; and, c) a social space driven by online contact networks (Naaman et al., 2015).

Social media platforms allow participants to post short messages and/or updates in the form of links, text, and photos. The messages are then either posted publicly or semi-publicly, depending on the initial author's preferences. The messages are consumed by readers within their social media streams.

Facebook and Twitter offer new ways for nonprofit organizations to engage the community (Saxton & Wang, 2013). According to Ammann (2010), these platforms are a relevant tool for advocacy campaigns. In a study of 53 advocacy groups in the United States, Obar, Zube, and Lampe (2012) found that most used social media on a daily basis to facilitate civic engagement

and collective action. However, scholars have yet to examine messages sent by celebrities on social media and how their advocacy strategies engage the public.

The purpose of this study was to determine if celebrities use social media to advocate for social change. In pursuing that purpose, two objectives were sought: 1) to describe how celebrities use their Twitter accounts to talk about social change, and 2) which strategies offer the most millennial engagement.

### **Celebrity social media streams**

Celebrities embrace social media through their online personas and, because they construct themselves as valuable commodities, are able to maintain their public profiles (Marshall, 2010). For instance, Marshall (2010) noted that rapper and television personality Snoop Dogg makes sure that both his Facebook and Twitter profiles have sufficient content for his fans. Dogg's Twitter cross-links to Facebook, and further aligns with the content on his website. The rapper's online presence is used to promote his concerts and music, ensuring that he has a connection to his followers no matter where they search (Marshall, 2010). Similarly, Lily Allen uses Twitter to her advantage, helping spread her fan reach and strengthen their relationship (Marshall, 2010).

Jackson and Darrow (2005) found that the public's level of agreement with certain political statements increases by the endorsement of celebrities from the realms of popular music and sports. Their study suggests that celebrity involvement makes unpopular statements more palatable (Jackson & Darrow, 2005).

## **Millennials and social activism**

The Millennial Generation, or those born between 1982 and 2002, make up one of the largest generations in U.S. history (Sago, 2010). Millennials are heavy users of social media as both producers and consumers of information (Sago, 2010). In fact, this generation made the nouns Facebook and MySpace into verbs (Kitsis, 2008), therefore, they are an increasingly relevant population to consider when looking at the advancement of social media strategies.

Millennials have a greater concern for social issues, and are more likely than their elders to support same-sex marriage, labor unions, immigrant rights, and socialism (Milkman, 2014). According to Milkman (2014), the 2008 Wall Street crash, along with the Great Depression, sparked a new wave of political activism among the millennial population. This political activism makes them uniquely suited for research about social change.

In addition to being more politically active than other generations, millennials focus on specific body issues including LGBT issues like marriage equality (Milkman, 2014) and healthy body image (O'Dougherty, Schmitz, Hearst, Covelli, & Kurzer, 2011). O'Dougherty et al. (2011) interviewed 60 millennial women in the United States and found that half of the women endorsed some ideal body, while the other half favored a “healthy” or “average” body size, shape, and/or appearance. The study further suggested that millennial women deal with “critical body surveillance, rendering contestation of the ideal theoretical (O’Dougherty et al., 2011).”

According to Pew Research Center (2010), Millennials are living their lives on the internet. Millennials and younger generations feel at a loss if they are not tuned in to what is happening

with friends and celebrities (Jones, Johnson-Yale, Millermaier, & Perez , 2009), and according to a study by Pate and Adams (2013), Twitter has become more than just a means of communicating with friends and relatives.

### **Twitter as a social awareness stream**

According to their website, Twitter is a social media platform with 320 million monthly users as of December 2015 (“Twitter Usage,” 2015). Users can post short, 140-character messages, or *tweets*, that are displayed on the user’s home page. Tweets can be posted in the form of text, images, or links, depending on the user’s preference.

Twitter users may subscribe to each other’s’ profiles, or *follow* them. Following users on Twitter is not symmetrical. For example, Jack can follow Jill, but Jill isn’t required to follow Jack back. This back and forth interaction allows for the spread of information on Twitter.

Users can set their preferences so only people who follow them can access their tweets.

Followers can publically *like* a tweet. Followers can also *retweet*, or share, a tweet to their followers. And, by default, accounts that are made public are available for public consumption.

Little is known about how celebrities advocate through Twitter and how those strategies are consumed by millennials. According to Jackson and Darrow (2005), the public agrees with political statements when celebrities use their fame to talk about them, therefore understanding celebrity advocacy on social media is crucial for the establishment of social change.

## **Theoretical framework**

Uses and Gratifications theory is an approach to understanding how the public seeks certain media outlets as an outlet for receiving gratification (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch 1973). The theory suggests that people consume media not only to fulfil a need, but to enhance their knowledge, social interaction and diversion.

Uses and Gratification theory shows that users have four needs: *diversion and entertainment*, or the escape from the constraints of everyday life; *personal relationships*, or reflecting on one's self or comparing oneself to media characters; *surveillance and informative*, or gaining knowledge about the world and how it works; and, *personal identity*, or personal reference, reality exploration and feeling involved in media characters as if they were real (Katz et al., 1973).

Uses and gratification theory plays an active role in interpreting and integrating media into people's lives, because they encounter media expecting a positive result.

## **CHAPTER II METHODS**

### **Research Design**

Researchers employed a qualitative approach to content analysis. Through open coding, researchers created phrases that described the motive behind each tweet (Merriam, 2009). The tweets were categorized based on recurring themes of meaning, until data saturation was reached (Merriam, 2009).

### **Collection**

Data was collected by downloading tweets using BackTweets, a qualitative categorization tool that organizes and tracks social media posts. According to their website, the program is a public domain application that lets people search through a tweet archive for URLs sent via Twitter to see “how many people are talking about certain topics, who is talking about them, and what they are saying” (“About BackTweets,” 2016). BackTweets also provided engagement information, in the form of likes and retweets. The data obtained included URL links and engagement metrics that were marked as public at the time of posting.

### **Artifacts**

For this study, researchers looked at tweets posted by Demi Lovato and Lady Gaga. Lovato had 33.5 million Twitter followers and Gaga had 54.6 million Twitter followers, as of January 2016. Both celebrities have over 30 million Twitter followers, making them influential among Twitter users. The chosen celebrities frequently tweet about social issues and are active and reciprocal in communicating with their followers, most of which are millennials.

Since millennials have a greater concern for same-sex marriage and body image, the following keywords were purposefully selected to identify relevant tweets based on (a) their representativeness of the desired categories; (b) the issues in which the identified celebrities advocate for:

- Demi Lovato: Body image, mental health, eating disorders, change
- Lady Gaga: LGBT, gay, rights, activist

As a baseline, only original content tweets were considered in this study, or those that were not found in back-and-forth conversations. The sample included tweets that were posted between January 2011 and January 2016. Due to the inductive nature of this project, data was analyzed until data saturation was reached (Creswell, 2013).

### **Coding**

The process of qualitative content analysis involved coding data (Foreman & Damschroder, 2008) and capturing relevant characteristics of the messages' content (Merriam, 2009).

Researchers open coded each tweet, and created phrases to describe the motive behind each.

Researchers looked for emerging themes based on recurring ideas or themes of meaning.

Given the short, 140-character limit of tweets, selecting a single theme was not always desirable.

For this reason, when suitable, researchers assigned more than one theme per tweet.

The total sample included 36 tweets. However, 43 units were utilized because tweets with more than one central topic were broken up into more than one unit. The units were analyzed with original punctuation and grammar.

### **Engagement**

In this study, researchers operationalized twitter engagement as Twitter likes and retweets.

BackTweets is a qualitative categorization tool that publically tracks social media posts.

Engagement information was downloaded using BackTweets, and because of the conversational nature of Twitter, back-and-forth conversations between users did not constitute as engagement.

## CHAPTER III

### RESULTS

Researchers analyzed 43 units. Of those units, five themes emerged: *education, personal narrative, policy, pop culture, and support*. Table 1 shows the definition and frequency of each theme.

Table 1

*Twitter Advocacy Themes and Descriptions*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>n</b>
<b>Education</b>	<b>Reference to research, education, outreach and teaching</b>	<b>6</b>
Research	Reference need for research and funding	3
Outreach	Relay information about social issues	3
<b>Personal Narrative</b>	<b>Reference their own experience</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Policy</b>	<b>Reference society, entertainment and multimedia</b>	<b>13</b>
National	Reference social action and policy within of US	6
International	Reference social action and policy outside of US	2
Change	Reference the need to establish change	5
<b>Pop Culture</b>	<b>Reference government, policy, and creating change for issue</b>	<b>12</b>
Societal standards	Reference to and challenge societal standards	5
Positive reinforcement	Reinforce positive media behaviors and trends	4
Negative reinforcement	Reinforce negative media behaviors and trends	3
<b>Support</b>	<b>Offer support to followers' struggles to combat issues</b>	<b>6</b>

## **Education**

Of the sample, six units referred to *education* and, of those tweets, half mentioned the need for research, funding, and general awareness of issues (“Research funding per individual: Alzheimer’s \$88, Schizophrenia \$81, Autism \$44. Eating disorders? \$0.93. Insufficient. #NEDAwareness.” [T14]) The other half showed celebrities educating people about the importance of said social issues (“This is an epidemic that is sweeping our nation, and causing more and more tragedy every day.” [T17])

## **Personal narrative**

Six tweets from the sample referred to *personal narrative*. Units that included in this theme included celebrities posting about social issues using themselves as examples. For example, Demi Lovato tweeted, “I’m not fat, and I’m not skinny... I’m normal!” [T08].

## **Policy**

*Policy* comprised of 12 units from the sample. Of the 12 units, five referenced social action and policy within the United States. Legislature, Supreme Court, and congress were often mentioned (“Gay marriage is headed to the SUPREME COURT. Lets get ready to rumble.” [T38]) Four units mentioned social and governmental action outside of the United States (“The Russian government is criminal. Oppression will be met with revolution. Russian LGBTs you are not alone. We will fight for your freedom.” [T39]) The remaining three units referenced the need for social change, and mentioned different forms of creating, fostering, and increasing change (“It’s unbelievable how there are STILL accounts on Twitter/Instagram SUPPORTING eating

disorders. Something has to change.” [T22]) The previous unit is an example of a phrase that fell within multiple themes—*policy* and *pop culture*.

### **Pop culture**

*Pop culture* comprised of 13 units from the sample. Units that fell into this theme referenced societal norms, entertainment, and multimedia. Of the 13 units, seven addressed societal standards and norms (“Starving is not a ‘diet’ and throwing up isn't something that only extremely thin men or women do.” [T18]) Four of the units reinforced negative media behaviors that further contribute to the advancement of the social issue, (“I find it really funny how a company can lose one of their actress' from the pressures of an EATING DISORDER and yet still make joke about” [T11]), and the remaining two tweets reinforced positive media behaviors that alleviate the effects of the social issue, (“I really loved Glee’s Born This Way episode. I admire the show for being brave+fighting for such modern social messaging.” [T40])

### **Support**

Of the sample, six units included themes of *support*. Units that fell into this theme were of supportive nature and included the celebrities offering help, prayers, and well wishes to people who have dealt with the respected social issues. Two examples include Lovato tweeting, “Please say a prayer for all of those struggling with eating disorders, self harm, mood disorders, and substance abuse” [T23], and Lady tweeting “Happy Veterans Day! A special thank u to all my LGBT friends who have served. We remain inspired by your bravery.” [T31]

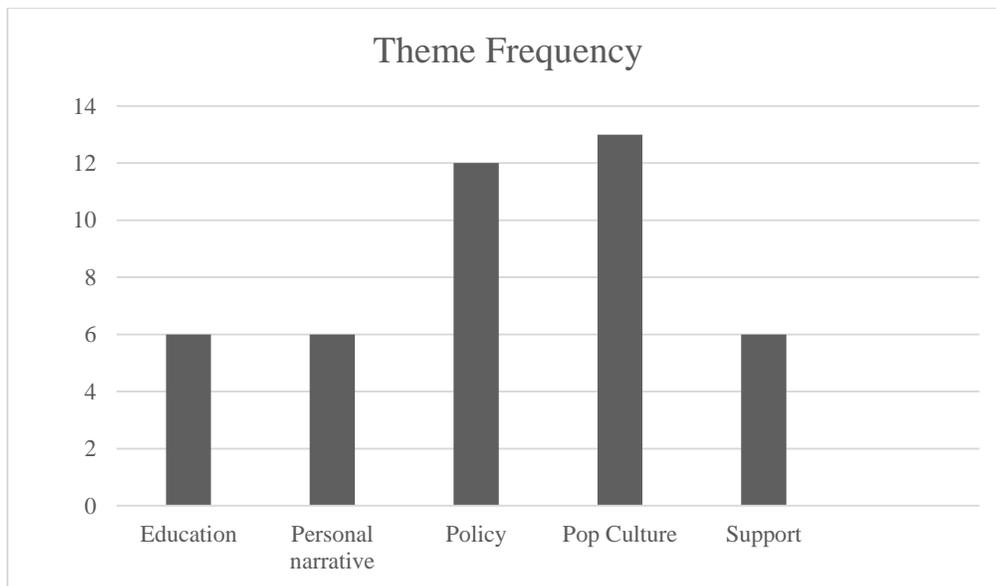
## Frequency and engagement

Of the 43 units that were categorized, 30 percent included themes of *pop culture*, and 28 percent included themes of *policy*. *Education*, *support*, and *personal narrative* each made up 14 percent of the sample size.

Figure 1 shows the frequency of each theme. As reported in Table 1, there were 6 units that constituted education; 6 units that constituted personal narrative; 12 units that constituted policy; 13 units that constituted pop culture; and, 6 units that constituted support.

Figure 1

*Theme Frequency*

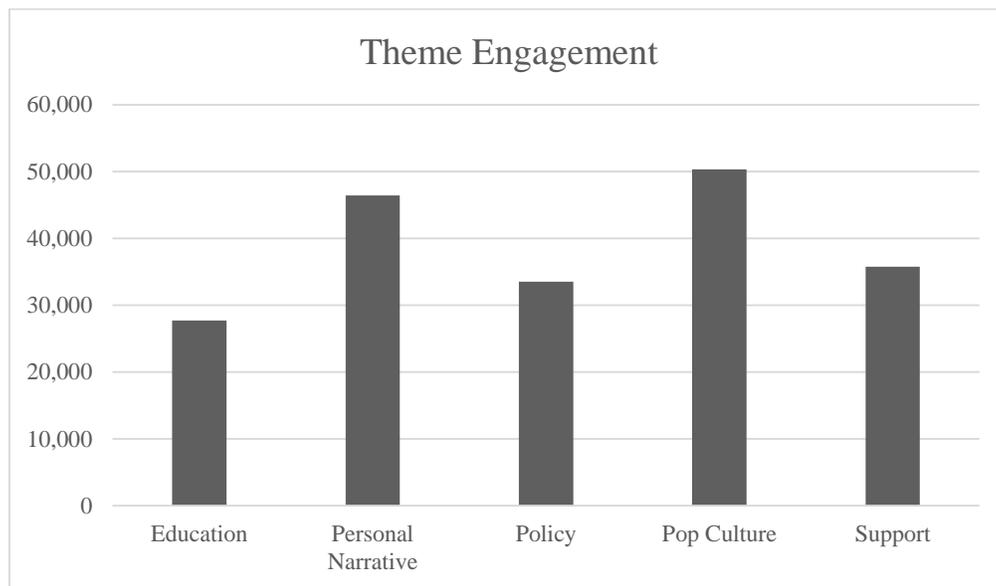


Although *pop culture* and *policy* were the most frequent themes, *pop culture* and *personal narrative* saw the most fan interaction and engagement, as measured by the average number of retweets and likes per theme.

Figure 2 shows the engagement of each theme. Of the total sample, units that fell under the theme of pop culture received, on average, 50,336 engagements; personal narrative received 46,428 engagements; support received 35,764 engagements; policy received 33,500 engagements; and, education received 27,713 engagements.

Figure 2

*Theme Engagement*



## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSIONS

Celebrities post about social change on their Twitter accounts using the following themes: *education, personal narrative, policy, pop culture, and support*. According to Ammann (2010), social media platforms, such as Twitter, are a relevant tool for advocacy campaigns. When tweeting about advocacy, although celebrities post more frequently about pop culture and policy, millennials are more engaged with tweets that make references to pop culture and personal narratives. These messages play an important role in how celebrities should advocate for social change on Twitter.

While celebrities are frequently using policy as an avenue for tweeting about social issues, they receive little engagement with such tweets. Celebrities don't frequently use personal narratives when tweeting about social issues, yet they receive increased engagement when they incorporate their experiences into their tweets. Marshall (2010) noted that celebrities thrive on social media because they construct themselves as valuable commodities. Because celebrities, such as Lovato and Gaga, are seen as valuable commodities on social media, they receive increased engagement when they tweet about social issues through personal narrative and pop culture.

Uses and Gratification theory suggests that people consume media based on expected results, or gratification (Katz et al., 1973). Similarly, people follow celebrities on social media expecting to connect with, and receive gratification from, their tweets, presumably for informative or

entertainment purposes. To maximize social media advocacy efforts, celebrities can connect with their target audience by publishing content that their audience will relate to.

Since pop culture is so engrained in millennials' lives, they associate well with tweets that reference the media and pop culture, e.g., Disney Channel, Glee, thigh gaps, etc. because it is a way to escape their everyday lives and reflect on what they've seen on different media channels.

When looking at Uses and Gratification theory, millennials take in information to meet their entertainment and personal identity needs, which contributes to a high engagement in tweets that reference pop culture. When celebrities post about social issues using themselves as examples, they are able to connect with their followers on a more personal level, thus receiving personal companionship, or the feeling that they are connecting with celebrities.

Personal narratives had higher engagement because millennials choose to use social media expecting to get informed and entertained by stories about celebrities. When that happens, there is higher engagement, because that is their desired outcome. Further research can look into Uses and Gratification theory to understand why fans choose to follow celebrities on social media, and what implications that has on engagement.

While millennials are deeply involved in social issues (Milkman, 2014), this study suggests that millennials may not be as involved, or interested, in policy, therefore they don't feel as affected by tweets that reference national or international policy.

While posting personal narratives and pop culture led to more engagement on Twitter, it might also hold true for organizations, businesses, and other groups. Based on the findings, when trying to engage millennials on social issues, social media communicators can adopt similar strategies to purposefully increase engagement.

By tailoring advocacy strategies and campaigns into the themes of pop culture and personal narrative, celebrities will receive more engagement, and contribute to the advancement of social change. Further research can look into additional social media streams, or different issues to see if the identified themes are similar across social media streams.

The public's level of agreement with political statements increases when statements are endorsed by celebrities (Jackson & Darrow, 2005). Researchers did not look into whether these tweets are influential enough to directly contribute to, or increase social change but, rather, millennials' consumption of social advocacy issues. Celebrity advocacy tweets don't immediately change social policy, or cause millennials to actively create social change. They do, however, familiarize millennials with social issues, serving as a gateway to the advancement of social change.

Saxton and Wang (2013) found that social media platforms offer new ways for nonprofit organizations to engage the community. Similarly, social media platforms offer new ways for celebrities to engage the community. Tailoring tweets to fit into the themes of pop culture and personal narrative will increase engagement and lead to the gradual advancement of social change.

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