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# Twitter and Identity: Living up to the Social Comparison

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Mark Ramelb

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## **Twitter and Identity: Living up to the Social Comparison**

Throughout this millennial age, technology continues to develop. Every day new technology such as computers and laptops have new applications that affect our society. Humans live in the era known as the digital revolution. The digital revolution is where people are constantly using the internet, more specifically, social media applications on their computer or mobile devices. Nick Lalone, author of "*Fluctuations, Technologies And Media: Social Change And Sociology Change*" states "that the technological makeup sits at the foundation of computer-mediated communication has had tremendous impact on society itself the technological makeup" (Lalone 559). In other words, humans interacting with each other through words is not the primary form of communication. Technology has influenced how we represent our thoughts and personalities to society.

With the advancement in technology comes the ability to create a new self, a new image, a new representation, which is ultimately a new identity. Similar to what Nick Lalone states "communication is changing rapidly", which is true because the new technology changes how we form an identity online. Individuals often construct an identity based on how their cultural influences and external influences. Individuals will use technology as a platform to express their identity. People who often view the individuals using the social media applications to express themselves will get a better understanding of who the individual is. Because technology has increased vastly, people have made technology and applications that involve the concept known as social media.

Social media is defined as the collective of online communications channels dedicated to community based input, interaction, content-sharing and collaboration. In today's society, social media applications such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are being used because it is another world for them. It gives them a chance to escape from reality and enter a virtual world. In reality, there are certain things one cannot express because it may not be justified. Or perhaps it is a thought they do not feel comfortable sharing. But when individuals use social media applications, it allows one to build an identity because creating an identity online allows one to portray his or herself in a different fashion.

Foremost, it is important to understand how social media affects who we are. Erin Vogel, author of "Social Comparison, Social Media, And Self-Esteem" explains how social media sites allow users to construct electronic profiles for themselves, provide details about their lives and experiences, post pictures, maintain relationships, plan social events, meet new people, make observations of others' lives, fulfill belongingness needs, and express their beliefs, preferences, and emotions" (Vogel 2006). The quotation by Vogel is a representation of how people use social media to create an identity for themselves, but it has a deeper meaning. The key word in the quotation is s  
"fulfill belongingness" because people will often express themselves on social media to construct an identity based on the audience they are attempting to target.

Primarily, I want to expand on Vogel by looking at a form of social media known as Twitter. I want to look at various accounts on Twitter and examine how their tweets allow them to construct an identity based on the audience they are targeting. Twitter is a social networking and microblogging service where users post things about their daily known as "tweets". Tweets are often a form of expression and allow one to tweet whatever is on his or her mind. Usually,

the tweets that appear are often an expression of an individual's own thought. But every thought has a purpose, and usually they are different objectives that a person who is tweeting is attempting to accomplish. Focusing on the twitter accounts, I will be able to see that each account comes from a different background and has a different perspective. I will look at the Twitter accounts of celebrities, politicians, and average people. By examining these twitter accounts, we can not only gain a better understanding of their identity, but how the tweets are targeting an audience.

Based on the audience they can target, we can see how individuals will tweet and create a fake self because they start to express themselves and build themselves based on their self-esteem. It is simple that an individual's tweets are a reflection of one's identity, but it is important to realize by looking at specific words throughout the tweet, we can get a better understanding of who they are. To go even further, we will understand that their tweets are targeting certain audiences because they want to build their brand and attract people's attention.

Attention is a key word for this argument because we know that by making controversial tweets, it will attract people attention and build their brand further because they will gain an audience. Twitter users create an identity through their tweets that reflects a brand they constructed of themselves. This brand may be personal, reflecting an emotional or mental state that an average individual wants their friends and family to see, or it may target a consumer audience for a well known party. In the end of this paper, I hope that you all will get a better understanding of the relationship between identity and Twitter on a deeper extent. There is more purpose to Twitter than just expression, there is an underlying meaning to an individuals tweets. Thus, identity building on Twitter is not about accurately representing one's true self, but about

representing who you want to be or aspire to be. So people create a Twitter account and tweet to a specific audience whether it is a brand, community, or life.

### **Definition of Identity**

Foremost, it is important to understand concepts and definitions that help us better understand how it relates to social media, in this case, Twitter. Beginning with identity, identity is defined as “the condition or character as to who a person or what a thing is; the qualities, beliefs, etc, that distinguish or identify a person or thing.” Identity is defined as “the condition or character as to who a person or what a thing is; the qualities, beliefs, etc, that distinguish or identify a person or thing”. This is important because we see how an individual’s makeup can consist of a multitude of factors based on the definition. Key words such as qualities or identify show that there are external influences that play a part in crafting one’s identity. This is essential when it comes to social media because my argument is to relate social media, more specifically, twitter to identity. From there understand that there is a need to build one’s identity based on the audience they are targeting.

### **Social Media: The Beginning and History**

Identity has been explained, but it is more important to see the role that social media plays in identity. Since the 2000s, the upward trend towards using social media applications began to form. For example, Myspace, one of the first social media sites, is an application that many people use to express their own thoughts, ideas, pictures, etc. This form of social media is a perfect example of how people used it to express their identity, based on the audience they wanted to target. As a result, individuals would be constructing their own identity and having a fake-self. During the individuals were using Myspace, it allowed people to at a young age to express themselves which often formed an identity. These expressions allowed individuals to

have an online identity; however, the online identity would be constructed based on the audience an individual was targeting. Before I can dive into Twitter and explain the connection, it is important to understand the theory behind this. By understanding the theory, it will build the framework for the argument I will address later.

### **The Theory Behind It**

Why is it that people who go online and use these social applications are constantly expressing themselves. There is purpose behind these tweets and it can be related to the theory known as the social identity theory. In order to explain the theory, there is an article written by Dorothy Schmalz known as “Social Media Sites As A Means Of Coping With A Threatened Social Identity”. The paper begins by talking about the social identity theory, and that individuals are motivated by a need for high self-esteem and being tied to a social group fulfills this need. This theory is connected to social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, where social media sites is used to develop friendships and build one’s self.

The author identifies a user that shares a connection offline but do not know each other as “latent-ties” (Schmalz 23). It is almost as individuals who do not know their friend group as well or want to gain more value in society have social media sites to do that for them. The author states any individual can have multiple social identities. This article is a primary example of how social media sites are related to identity, and that there is data that exists which exemplify the correlation between the two.

Therefore, I am not saying that people who use Twitter mostly have self-esteem problems, but I am arguing that there is a relationship between identity and social media. People who will use the social media will construct an identity based on who they are, their environments, social standings, etc. It will allow them to develop an identity for themselves and

give the opportunity to express how they truly feel, which will show what their real identity is. As a result, they will create an identity to target a certain audience in order to build their reputation. But, it is as if they creating a fake self, a new representation of themselves because their identity is not real, it is virtual.

### **Hashtag Tweet Example**

To further explain the identity and social media concept , there is an article written by Emily Lewis called "Humor And Identity On Twitter: #Muslimcandyheartrejects As A Digital Space For Identity Construction." The article examines how the hashtag that was tweeted states #muslimcandyheartrejects and that Muslim digital diaspora communities use social media to construct and reinforce a Muslim diaspora identity. The author states "Twitter creates the ability for such a temporary conversation to appear and develop, and its specific architecture allow for a variety of forms of participation" (Lewis 33). The author talks about what a hashtag is, etc. People who shared the same hashtag or were posting it, could create an identity. The author goes on to explain how it build a community and that those who use humor and can affiliate with orders helped them create an identity within that an online community. By looking at this source, we understand the significance the tweets hold, and that Twitter is being used as a social space, and being able to define themselves based on the tweet gives them a sense of identity.

An example of a #muslimcandyheartrejects is a Tweet that comes from Heeba Sorsour which states #muslimcandyheartrejects I now have 90 twitter followers does that make me promiscuous and non marriage material? LOL." This tweet is a perfect example of how she is trying to represent herself online as entertaining while at the same time making fun of her own traditions and culture. This is something she would not do in person based on culture, but by Tweeting it allowed her to express herself to a targeted audience, a collective community. By

this she has been able to establish an identity with all of these members online and prove that she is targeting a certain audience based on her tweet. From this, we can see how many people went online to represent her identity which is over 200-300 and we can see how important this hashtag is for their culture as they continue to develop their identity.

### **Twitter Account 1: Kanye West**

Twitter is a representation of one's identity based on the tweets and further the tweets allow one to construct a self based on who they want to be. First, Kanye West, who is a very popular hip hop singer has some controversial tweets that are a representation of who he is. Kanye West has been known for doing controversial things such as the Taylor Swift situation. He went on stage when Taylor Swift won an award and said that Beyonce should have won the ward. It is important to provide some context so I have an idea of who he is and what the tweets say about himself. From there, we see how celebrities will tweet controversial statements in order to build their brand and make them have a greater sense of worth within the community.

Beginning with one of his tweets, we can get a sense of his identity and the audience he is targeting. The tweet states "maybe I couldn't be skinny and tall but I'll settle for being the greatest of all time as a consolation." This tweet is a representation of who Kanye West is as a music artist, he is very confident and cocky because he defines himself as the "greatest of all time". This shows that Kanye West does not care about what other people think or will say about him, he can express how he really feels about himself and this shows identity to the public. From there, he is able to build his self-esteem and brand, which feeds his ego and make him who he is today. That is what twitter has done for celebrities because by writing a tweet such as this, it will make people hate him or appreciate him, but it will build himself up. More importantly we can see how Kanye is tweeting to target an audience, build his brand, and represent himself in a



fashion that he would not expose directly to people. His tweets allow him to construct an identity based on the audience he talks too, not just he's skinny. But that he has the power to tweet anything he wants because the audience he is targeting shows how powerful Twitter can be online.

Another tweet that Kanye West states is "I'd rather teachers got paid more and books cost less." Again, we see how controversial this tweet is because Kanye West is an artist, not a person who will speak his mind on education. Once again, Twitter is a public platform and he has no fear in expressing how he feels about education. We understand that he is tweeting something controversial in order to target a certain audience, the audience is the whole Twitter community. Because he knows that his tweets will make him more popular and attract him more followers and retweets, which will build his self-identity and worth up. What is amazing about Twitter is how people can talk about things they believe in and stand for, but they will never say in public. Twitter gives Kanye West the opportunity to speak about a subject he is not familiar with and from this we can see how he is addressing a multitude of topics government spending, teacher salary, and the cost of books. Thus, these are some examples of tweets that Kanye West has addressed and from his tweets we get an idea of who he is and how his tweets attract more people to follow him and build his worth within the world.

#### Twitter Account 2: Donald Trump

So Kanye's tweets show his identity, Like Kanye, Trump's tweets relate to his strong ego as well, but his tweets define his identity by targeting a political audience. Everyone knows Donald trump for being a billionaire and for being the upcoming person to run for president. He has written some controversial tweets that allowed him to construct an identity to target an audience. The tweet states "If Hillary Clinton can't satisfy her husband what makes her think she

can't satisfy America." Looking at this tweet, Donald Trump is seen as very cocky and confident person as well, but we can see that he is targeting her personally in order to create controversy. By creating controversy, it will build his brand and make him more recognized politically. From this, we get a better understanding of his identity and the values he upholds. Once again, this proves that celebrities will make controversial tweets so they will have a different identity, a new self, in order to build themselves within society.

Trump's tweet shows that he is very egotistical and we understand who he is as a person. Another tweet that demonstrates Donald Trump personality is when he stated "Sorry losers and haters, but my I.Q. is one of the highest and you all know it! Please don't feel so stupid or insecure, it is not your fault." The tweet is another representation of how Donald Trump is using twitter to construct an identity that will target audiences in order to build his brand. He is showing that he is successful, smart, and has a lot of power. He has a lot of power to tweet something like that and that it shows that social media plays a prevalent role in his life. By tweeting, and creating an identity as being that makes him egotistical, he will only attract more users and followers and build himself more within the world. Thus, Twitter allows one to portray a broader portion of their personality and the tweets by Donald Trump prove so.

### **Twitter Account 3: Kim Kardashian**

Similar to Kanye and Trump, Kim Kardashian tweets represent her identity and how she is marketing herself to target an audience. She happens to be one of the most iconic figures within the world and is known for the show "*Keeping up with the Kardashians*". Again, Kim Kardashian will be demonstrate a tweet like another celebrity would do, which is attracting attention in order to build herself up. In the tweet, she states "I never thought I would ever say this... But I'm wearing flats today." This tweet has meaning to demonstrate the relationship

between building one's self online in order to target an audience and build her brand. A simple tweet such as this shows how she is writing a tweet in order to attract other people towards her. In the tweet, over 1,752 retweeted and 2,457 liked it, which means that she knows she can tweet anything on her mind and she knows it will build herself a bigger online presence and identity on Twitter. From this, we can see again that tweets will represent one's identity, we can see that she likes the attention and that she is very high maintenance, but we can also see that she is crafting her identity so people will follow her, just as Kanye West and Donald Trump did.

#### **Twitter Account 4: Anonymous User**

The last twitter account that I wanted to talk about is my friend who goes to college. He is a college student and by presenting a normal user tweet, we can get a understanding of who his identity is. His Twitter states "Update: both presentations went well" and a couple minutes later "Please pray for me". Based off these two tweets, we can see how much he can be attention needed and that he wants to always let users know what is happening in his life. Simple, subtle things such as analyzing a tweet give us an idea of how tweets and identity are related to one another. More importantly, this is another a celebrity, but a normal user, and we can see how his tweet is targeting an audience so it will build himself up within the community. Often normal users, who use Twitter frequently will tweet something because it will build their self-esteem. Andre Karle, author of "*Review Of Digital Youth: The Role Of Media In Development*" shows that youth integrate media into their lives. This article is applicable to my friends Twitter account because she states that Internet and anonymity are intertwined with one another. By having an online presence, you can establish a distinct persona on the Internet separate from what you are in reality. Based on this account, this also demonstrates the study by Nihan Ozguven, which is on the relationship between personality and social media use. The fact is there has been a change in

communication due to social media websites and that there is a relationship between the two. From this study, we get a better understanding that Twitter is representing one's identity, but using Twitter as a platform for online communication allows us to change who we are.

### **Discussion**

Obviously, the tweets demonstrate how the tweet can reveal a lot about oneself because the tweets are targeted to a certain audience in order to craft their online identity however they chose to do so. Jennifer Golbeck wrote an article "Predicting Personality From Twitter". The author begins by stating that users reveal a lot about themselves both in what they share and how they say it. Similar to Kanye West, Donald Trump, Kim Kardashian, and the anonymous user, it happened to reveal a lot about themselves based on their tweets. From their tweets we can understand that personality can be predicted based off what a person tweets about, The words one states can reveal about the personality, in more subtle ways than we imagine. Similar to the celebrities and to the anonymous user, the tweets allow users to discover who they are as people.

All the celebrities tweets mentioned above is a representation of branding. They do an excellent job in explaining their brand. An article titled "Following Celebrities' Tweets About Brands: The Impact Of Twitter-Based Electronic Word-Of-Mouth On Consumers' Source Credibility Perception, Buying Intention, And Social Identification With Celebrities" shows how people are using social media sites to increase their brand. The celebrities most certainly used social media as a platform to market themselves. Their tweet did not just represent who they are but it allowed them to create a different version of themselves online in order to cater to a certain network or audience.

In the United States, Twitter has been adopted as the social media site du jour for celebrities, athletes, and politicians. Joe Phua states “the more followers one garners on Twitter, the greater perceived social influence one has” (Phua 182). It is amazing to think that Twitter can be utilized as a form of social capital. Tweets are broadcasted to each and every follower, who may then retweet these posts on their own profiles, which reaches other members as well. What is amazing about this article is that it talks about how individuals get access to celebrities twitter, which is a social resource in helping them build their identity. Once again, there is evidence to show that Kanye, Trump, Kardashian, and the anonymous users tweets have all a significant influence on one’s identity.

By understanding the importance of tweets, we can understand how anyone can market themselves online and create any image they want. Nicole Kramer, author of "Impression Management 2.0: The Relationship Of Self-Esteem, Extraversion, Self-Efficacy, And Self-Presentation Within Social Networking Sites" states “nowadays anyone can appear in the media and broadcast himself or herself to the globalized world. Tweets allow users to brand themselves in any possible way” (Kramer 106) . There are opportunities for people to present themselves, their pictures, their videos, etc. Being on these social networking sites allow users to present himself or herself in a profile with personal information and they have control over their self-presentational behavior. This provides an ideal setting for impressing others. By creating online self-presentations, users have the opportunity to think about what aspects of their personalities should be presented.

In conclusion, I wanted to show that there is a correlation between an individual's tweets and their identity. From the evidence that I have presented above, we can see that this is fairly true. But to a deeper extent, I have expressed that people who tweet are not just doing it to create

an online identity, but to build their online identity and market themselves further. Hongladarom, author of “Personal Identity And The Self In The Online And Offline World” states “social networking sites seem to emerge a new kind of self in the online world” (Hongladarom 534). This is evident as demonstrated by the various twitter accounts I have provided above and that individuals can create the persona the way he or she likes. I hope that by understanding what I have explained that we can start to realize the influence social media and pop culture has in society. As Twitter continues to grow and expand, it will keep give researchers better ways of understanding who they are as individuals.

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