

# Social media helps users embrace differences and provide support to one another, study finds

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According to recent statistics, more than 175 million tweets are sent daily, and 11 accounts are created every second on Twitter. One celebrity who boasts the highest amount of global subscribers is singer Lady Gaga who enjoys more than 40 million Twitter followers. Now, University of Missouri communication researchers have found that online social media gives users an outlet to embrace their differences and provide emotional support to others while deepening perceived relationships they feel they have with celebrities.

"Our work tends to focus on studying audiences who are maligned or consider themselves awkward," said Melissa Click, assistant professor of communication in the MU College of Arts & Science. "In our study of Lady Gaga followers, we found that she uses [social media](#) not for promotion but rather as a communication tool with her fans. She shares personal and 'insider' information through social media and develops feelings of intimacy with her followers. By revealing her embrace of her own [differences](#) and unusual behaviors she allows her followers to embrace their own differences."

Click and her team found in some cases [emotional support](#) was a matter of life or death. Researchers interviewed several fans who identified as gay, who had eating disorders, who considered themselves different or who were taunted relentlessly. They reported that Gaga instilled strength in them through her acceptance of their differences, which gave them a

reason to live. In addition, the social support network Lady Gaga fosters encourages her followers to be more charitable to each other, Click said. Often fans create support communities that allow her followers to encourage and inspire others in times of difficulty.

"We found that among the more salient themes that emerged from our research was that participants' perceived relationships with Gaga affected how close they felt to her," Click said. "They felt that she is the voice who celebrates their differences instead of mocking them, and this was a very positive thing."

Researchers conducted one-on-one interviews with 45 self-identified "Little Monsters," or followers of Lady Gaga, who ranged in ages from 14 to 53, were equally male and female and who equally identified as gay or straight. Using software including Skype and Google Chat to communicate with followers from the U.S., Australia, Europe, Asia and Africa, among others, researchers asked how social media impacted their interest in and relationship to Lady Gaga. Researchers also asked interviewees about their feelings toward Lady Gaga's social activism.

The research, "Making monsters: Lady Gaga, fan identification, and social media," was conducted by Click and graduate students, Hyunji Lee and Holly Willson Holladay, both in the Department of Communication. Their work was published in the journal *Popular Music and Society*, a peer-reviewed social scientific journal. Click and her team are working on a second piece that examines Lady Gaga's political activism and how she encourages her Facebook and Twitter [followers](#) to be more active in the political system.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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