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**@AcademicsSay: The Story Behind a Social-Media Experiment**

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By Nathan Hall

{{see the actual URL link for the tweets included in this article which did not translate to word}}

I am not an intellectual, leading expert, or public scholar. I am a rank-and-file academic with the job of balancing respectable research with acceptable teaching evaluations and sitting on enough committees to not be asked to sit on more committees. And in my spare time, I run what is arguably one of the most influential academic accounts on social media: [Shit Academics Say.](https://twitter.com/academicssay)

Since starting the account in September of 2013, it has grown to over 122,000 followers, gaining 250 to 300 new followers daily and ranking in the top 0.1 percent across social media influence metrics such as Klout, Kred, and Followerwonk. To unpack this a bit, tweets sent from my phone while recalibrating dopamine levels on the treadmill, or waiting outside my 3-year-old’s ballet class, are showing up in about 10 million Twitter streams and generating 200,000 to 300,000 profile visits a month, effectively making @AcademicsSay a [bigger "social authority" on Twitter than nearly all colleges](https://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/top-100-most-influential-uk-and-us-universities-on-twitter/2013373.article) and academic publications. Not weird at all.

Although this might sound impressive, the popularity of the account is perhaps not surprising. First, academics use Twitter mainly for [distraction,](http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11192-014-1229-3) with tweets providing [humorous details](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/asi.23101/abstract) of academic content typically gaining the [most exposure.](http://www.slate.com/blogs/future_tense/2014/11/11/_crappy_gabor_paper_overly_honest_citation_slips_into_peer_reviewed_journal.html) Second, it is immediately apparent to new Twitter users that parody accounts like @kimkierkegaardashian, @NoToFeminism, or @SwiftOnSecurity tend to be more popular than traditional outlets — an observation that sparked an idea for how to personally connect with other academics in a not-boring way and on a scale large enough to have my procrastination count as research.

Like many academics, I have never been completely comfortable with the peculiarities, predilections, or pretentions of our profession, and have over time found myself both ashamed and amused while telling students to "please have a seat while I sit three feet away and finish this non-urgent email for the next five minutes", or telling myself "I should be writing" when doing anything remotely enjoyable. And since starting this profession six years ago, I have also been regularly confused and frustrated by the cognitive dissonance I regularly encountered as part of trying to stay productive, employable, and, most important, fundable.

As a grad student, I had often heard that a retirement boom was coming, that course evaluations should not be believed until the third time around, and that all resubmitted manuscripts and grant applications are eventually accepted. However, I personally found these sentiments to be less than comforting after my own failed job applications (90-plus over two years), unsuccessful grant applications (15 since 2000), soul-crushing course evaluations ("He should have applied some of the motivational principles he teaches about to his own teaching." — Winter 2015, paraphrased), and unjustified manuscript rejections ("I am a jealous and generally unhappy person." — Reviewer 2, paraphrased).

And very much unlike a detached analysis of affect in which I was well-trained, I increasingly found myself dealing with unexpected combinations of emotion such as boredom/anger while grading, guilt/envy while reviewing a manuscript I should have written, or relief/shame after an internal grant deadline was extended. As an experienced overthinker, I was also able to convince myself that these wonderfully nuanced internal experiences were somehow unique to my beautiful mind. Whether it was self-disappointment over writing guilt on date night, resentment while teaching night classes instead of reading bedtime stories to my kids, or using humor to avoid feeling like a fraud while teaching content learned the day before or writing papers few would ever read, well-worn constructs like work-life balance and impostor syndrome didn’t seem to fit.

But I shouldn’t complain. I get paid to think about thinking about thinking, and start my first sabbatical this summer to ostensibly gain a "fresh perspective on an old problem" (aka: binge-watching *Entourage*). However, after a difficult year prepping my seventh new course in four years, accepting my sixth concurrent graduate student, and writing over 50,000 words to win at least one of three federal grants, I was burned out. I struggled to enjoy teaching, had little interest in writing, and, most heart-breaking of all, was no longer impressed by that special brand of meta-angst that can only come from grappling with motivational issues as a motivation researcher.

So why a Twitter account.

By the fall of 2013, I had done everything needed for tenure and was unusually motivated to do something that did not need a good reason. Something just for me, and not my CV. Although I had long disliked Twitter for its propensity for oversharing and groupthink, growing an anonymous parody account seemed like a not-boring way to poke fun at the profession that made my head hurt, maybe take myself a bit less seriously, and test an alternative hypothesis that I was not alone in being confounded by the curiosities and psychological challenges of an academic career.

What I quickly learned from Twitter was that my personal academic experiences were not at all unique, and more importantly, that it could be worse. Much worse. I was not a minimum-wage adjunct struggling to manage 12 courses a year and being fired at the end of each term. Nor was I a female, LGBTQ, or racial-minority scholar facing pretenure demands compounded by institutionalized roadblocks, or at risk of having my tenure revoked or position terminated by politicians or university donors. I was (and still am) a middle-to-upper-class white male who, although had trained for years for a job that perhaps wasn’t as intrinsically rewarding as expected, had job security, grant funding, and enough free time to Google "privilege guilt."

So I soon started to take Twitter more seriously, and in addition to attempts at humor during my commute or while debating between an evening shift and Netflix, took a page from academic Twitter pioneers like Raul Pacheco-Vega ([@raulpacheco](https://twitter.com/raulpacheco)) and began to experiment with academic [community building.](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0360131511002454) To my surprise, followers whom I had assumed were there just for the jokes seemed to very much appreciate referrals to informative hashtags, resource accounts, or professional-development blogs (e.g., #ScholarSunday, #GetYourManuscriptOut, @SUWTues, @AcademicKindes), with single tweets crashing websites and prompting unsolicited [social network analyses](https://nodexlgraphgallery.org/Pages/Graph.aspx?graphID=18392) or [blog analytics.](https://twitter.com/thesiswhisperer/status/494662280202571777)

More unexpectedly, this account also provided me an enviable VIP pass to connect with academics over some of the most fun, irreverent, and NSFW academic hashtags in recent years. Ranging from cathartic tweets about manuscript rejections ([#SixWordPeerReview](https://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/comment/opinion/the-scholarly-web-30-january-2014/2010843.article)) and awkward attempts at romance ([#AcademicValentines](https://storify.com/BeckiePort/75-of-the-best-academicvalentines)) to a torrent of sarcastic humor in response to gender bias ([#DistractinglySexy](http://www.stuff.co.nz/world/europe/69350990/nobel-laureate-sir-tim-hunt-resigns-over-trouble-with-girls-remark)), it’s hard to describe the giddy grade-school excitement of jumping into a rapid-fire fray of remarkably creative, clever, and brutally honest tweets from academics around the world ­— a uniquely engaging and not-often-enough experience unlike anything else in academia. And although I did occasionally attempt my own super-creative hashtags (e.g., [#SixWordPaperTitle,](http://io9.com/the-20-best-sixwordpapertitle-tweets-1519056813) [#YoManuscript](https://twitter.com/Dr_Mel_Thomson/status/455146571911286784)), I eventually settled on a better use for the account.

Over the past six months, @AcademicsSay has allowed me to recruit over [6,800 faculty and graduate students](https://twitter.com/search?f=realtime&q=%2540ame_research%20%2540academicssay) from over 60 countries to participate in three online studies on topics ranging from procrastination and impostor syndrome to work-life balance and burnout, resulting in one of the most comprehensive and international investigations of psychological well-being in academia to date. So beyond the account making my academic life maybe a bit less boring, perhaps the most important part of this experience for me has been the sobering realization of how deeply and widely these psychological challenges resonate with other academics and that I am in a unique position do something about it.

By January of 2014, I had reached 10,000 followers simply by joking about these issues, and was curious about how effective @AcademicsSay could be for conducting actual research. So I dusted off a failed grant proposal from 2011, submitted an ethics application, and started to apply "growth hacking" strategies to maximize account reach (e.g., adding images, pre-scheduling tweets, using Twitter lists). I began to pay attention to follower and tweet analytics, curate content for international exposure and cross-disciplinary appeal, and even created a [graduate course](http://ame1.net/hall/edpe668-f14-syllabus.pdf) on the topic as well as a parallel [Facebook page](https://www.facebook.com/academicssay) that now reaches up to 1.5 million followers a week.

Basically, I have over the past 18 months been telling jokes on the internet and teaching myself about social media to give myself a meaningful shot at turning my anonymous online procrastination into an actual research program. Again, not weird at all.

So there you go. What was started as a private social experiment borne out of confusion and frustration quickly turned into something more: a one-of-a-kind experience of connecting with a previously unknown academic community through humor, an unexpected education in social media and higher-education issues, and an obligation to expand my research to address a very real need for longitudinal, large-scale studies on self-regulation and well-being in academia.

If you are a professor or graduate student and wish to participate in our study, please visit [www.ame1.net/sas.](http://www.ame1.net/sas) If you follow at @AcademicsSay on Twitter or Facebook, thank you once again for your support.

And if you're finding it increasingly difficult to convince yourself that pursuing an academic career was a not a terrible mistake, that your work impacts anything other than your CV, or that "data" is plural yet "agenda" is somehow not, you are not alone. I’m not sure if it gets better, but I’ll certainly look into it and get back to you ;)

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