

# Should You Tweet Like Elon? When It Pays to be Provocative

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Entrepreneurs often use social media platforms like Twitter or Instagram as a low-cost way to connect with their ventures' stakeholders. Superstar entrepreneurs often use it to wield their clout, announce major developments and influence their followers. A few get attention by being outrageous -- like Elon Musk, who now heads Twitter and whose own tweets turn into headlines around the world

But what about the rest of us? Can Elon's provocative style do the same for *all* entrepreneurs? As a team of teachers and researchers of entrepreneurship, we were curious to find the answer. Our goal was to help ventures understand how to communicate effectively to gain social engagement, as it ultimately helps with visibility, building a brand, and securing resources.

Little is known about how new ventures can effectively use provocative language on social media. Although some entrepreneurs may try to imitate the social media behavior of famous entrepreneurs, it is unclear whether this strategy would work for all ventures, especially those without high status or recognition. Think about the celebrity chefs at Michelin star restaurants or shows like Hell's Kitchen for a moment. While chefs like Gordon Ramsay use strong language, an unproven kitchen brigand doing the same might be punished or just bluntly ignored. In our research, we wanted to find out (1) how a venture's status might influence audience engagement with its social media posts and (2) how a venture's status might influence the impact of provocative language on audience engagement.

## Our research

We collected data on 268 US-based internet ventures founded between 2011 and 2015 and funded by reputable venture capitalists (VCs). We also analyzed 369,142 of their tweets, both before and after receiving VC funding. This was important, given that getting

venture capital is considered a great marker of status in entrepreneurship, especially from these reputable VCs. Passing VCs' rigorous due diligence processes verifies a venture's quality and marks the start-up as one of the "selected few." Such high-profile funding is typically communicated with fanfare, and gives entrepreneurs a status that many growth-oriented ventures covet and other stakeholders' respect (for example, our data indicate that these VC-funded ventures also have more social media followers).

We gathered information about these ventures from Crunchbase, an online platform capturing ventures and their funding history, and conducted a statistical analysis, considering factors such as ventures' media visibility and other variables that might impact our examined relationship. Specifically, our investigation focused on the relationship between venture status, provocative language usage in tweets (for example, words expressing aggression, disobedience toward regulations, swear words, antagonism, or other expressions of challenging societal norms), and audience engagement, as indicated by the number of retweets and likes a venture's tweet received.

## What we found

We found that high-status ventures attract more engagement with their tweets in general, and they can further boost audiences' engagement when they use provocative language in their posts. In contrast, low-status ventures saw their posts' engagement *decrease* when using provocative language. These findings highlight the importance of status in determining how provocativeness affects audiences' engagement on social media. Achieving status makes people pay more attention to your posts and engage with them more, ultimately resulting in higher social media engagement. However, status also dictates how provocative language is received. It can help high-status ventures



because it grabs audiences' attention and evokes emotional responses. It ultimately means retweeting such posts can help the audience join an inflammatory conversation and boost their own visibility on social media. However, provocative language for low-status ventures is more likely to backfire because it can be seen as inappropriate. In other words, such language can be seen as "colorful and dramatic...but... 'talking loudly and carrying a small stick' can be ignored" (Gamson, 1990, p. 87). While previous research found that being provocative can help relatively high-status actors, such as politicians and well-established brands, we saw that low-status actors face a different reality.

## Takeaways

Our research warns entrepreneurs that using provocative language to increase audience engagement can backfire until they've proven their status. For high-status (i.e., VC-funded) ventures, however, it appears that tweeting like Elon can help with audience engagement. Still, we caution that entrepreneurs should also consider the long-term effects of provocative language. Consistently relying on "Twitter tantrums" and provocation as a strategy may help in the short run (as we show on a post level), but it is unclear in the long run how it might affect the venture's public image.

An implication of this is that founders or others seeking to tweet on behalf of their ventures should choose a communication style that resonates with their audience and aligns with them and their ventures. In other words, as your venture evolves, so should your communication. When your venture grows and gains more recognition or funding, your status may change. Recognize such changes and adjust your social media communication strategy accordingly. A style that didn't work for you earlier might become more effective down the road.

## Explore the Research

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0883902622000945> Tweeting like Elon? Provocative language, new-venture status, and audience engagement on social media. Benedikt Seigner, Hana Milanov, Erik Lundmark and Dean Shepherd. *Journal of Business Venturing*, March 2023

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