More Than Music: Decoding Swifties’ Digital Discourse and Feminist Narratives

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**Introduction**

Taylor Swift has been sweeping records with her long-list of discography, groundbreaking concerts, and methodical digital media usage. As she continues in completing her renowned Eras Tour, featuring music from her early days in the industry to present day body of work, there is one major aspect to Swift’s career that stands out amongst other global leaders in music, and that is, her devoted fandom. Utilizing diverse tactics of engagement and presentation, Swift has been partially sustained by a unique network of fans that are well-known for supporting one another while sharing the love of Swift. These fans are known as “Swifties.” Artist-fan relationships have reached new lengths since the influence of technology has increased the capabilities of digital interconnectedness. Using various devices to strengthen the ties between herself and her fans, Swift has created a new pathway, restructuring the way celebrities interact with their fans. In forging this path, Swift found a way to create fan engagement in a manner that is beneficial for both her career and the overall satisfaction of her fans. As interpretations and fan theories have made their way into Swiftie culture, new narratives have risen to folklorically reshape Swift throughout the years. The symbiotic relationship between artist and interpretation will be discussed in this piece, as well as the uncovering of fan theories and their effect in mitigating a shared connection. In this piece, I will delve into the community that is the Swifties to gain a better look into the communication and networking aspects of those belonging to the fandom. In this endeavor, I hope to uncover the underlying reasons that have formulated these intricately-closed fandom relationships within the community and how Swift’s recent feminist advocacy has shaped new following and respect.

**RQ1: In what ways do Taylor Swift fans utilize technology like social media to communicate with one another and express their connectivity to Taylor with others?**

**RQ2: How do fan theories and interpretations strengthen the feeling of connection between Taylor Swift and the Swiftie fan community?**

**RQ3: How do fans interpret and respond to Taylor Swift's feminist advocacy?**

**A Brief History**

Taylor Swift, world-renowned artist and recent winner of Time Magazine’s 2023 Person of the Year has revolutionized pop-culture over her decades of triumph. While she experienced a slow start to her career when first debuting in 2006, Swift quickly jumped to the top of the charts after releasing her “Fearless” album in which she swiftly began headlining stadium tours in 2009. The industry leader has since released 7 more albums and 11 singles along her way to stardom, allocating more following as the years went on. With 11 of her songs hitting the #1 spot on the Billboard Hot 100, it is no surprise that Swift found a spot amongst great music legends in the list of top 10 artists in the industry (Zellner, 2023). While Swift has hit a new peak, no doubt, it is important for this study to not shy away from her history in the shadows.

**All-time Low**

Snakes, shadows, silence. 2016 brought a new kind of devastation to Swift and her fans. After feuds with Kanye West began after West’s interruption of Swift’s Video Music Awards (VMAs) speech of 2009, the pair’s dislike for one another grew to an extreme. After a few years, all had seemed to settle when in February 2016, West released “Famous,” a song disparaging Swift’s popularity and digging into her rise to fame. Following the song’s release in 2017, West released a thought-to-be edited audio clip of Swift “approving” his music after she had publicly claimed that West had no right to release such statements in his released song (Gavilanes & Dodd, 2022). The aftermath of this audio clip release led Swift to be on the receiving end of antagonizing hatred towards her and her music taking her “psychologically to a place she had never been before” and leading her to be “pushing away most people” in her life (Lansky, 2023). After making a statement to the press, Swift receded into the shadows with only the snake emojis in her comment sections on social media sites left to comfort her. At the age of 29, Swift had gone from one of the most loved artists to the most hated.

“Being falsely painted as a liar when I was never given the full story or played any part of the song is character assassination. I would very much like to be excluded from this narrative, one that I have never asked to be a part of, since 2009,” - Taylor Swift *(People Magazine)*

**A Swing and a Hit**

Leaning into her newfound reputation, Swift released an album that would be known by Swifties to be her most transformative yet: Reputation. This album kick-started Swift’s alternative styles to pop and generated a new following, as well as a new course of action for Swift’s public affairs. She was no longer the sweet American-idol society had known her to be, but now presented as an avenging and unperturbed adult artist. No longer would she be seen out in public. From here on out, she utilized the provisions that shadows provided to create top-charting singles and lucrative albums that pertained to her own liking.

Dropping her original producer Scooter Braun in 2020 along the way to her newest albums, *Lover, Folklore, Evermore,* and *Midnights*, Swift has since re-appeared into the spotlight after re-releasing some of her original albums: *Fearless,* *Speak Now*, *Red*, and *1989*. Swift has proclaimed that in re-recording her albums, she is making a statement about music ownership, and claims that all artists deserve the right to own their own music after previous producer Braun went behind Swift’s back and sold her music to another buyer, Shamrock Holdings. Receiving respect and support from her fans, Swift has enjoyed the launching of her world tour: The Eras Tour.

The Eras Tour has been a smashing hit since its announcement in 2022. Selling out stadiums worldwide, Swift has shaken-up the structure of concerts as she performs weekly for three hours each night, highlighting music from all of her albums. Celebrating the success of the Eras Tour, Swift released “The Eras Tour Film” in theaters for fans of all U.S. regions to enjoy. In hosting this concert series, Swift has gained millions of followers on social media sites, with an uproar in Swiftie messaging across all digital platforms. In this article, I will make steps in discovering how the presence of a strong communication pattern between fans and Swift has formed pathways to creating a successful shared meaning of experiences, values, and sense of unity.

**Literature Review**

**Fandom as Scholarship**

Fandom has yet to find a definitive field of study, however, there is scholarship that offers background in how fan culture influences and shapes our lives. While fandom scholarship has been known to be studied with both a deductive and inductive approach, there are arguments on whether the study belongs amongst psychology, communication, or media studies (Cavicchi, 2015). While the location of the study does not determine its’ importance, it could have detrimental impact on the foundations of future research. Fandom has the ability to shape the way we see our world. Fans of all kinds utilize their presence to unknowingly reframe popular culture as we know it. Fandom has a way of creating drastic impact on our adult lives as we are shaped by our psychological and social processing. The idols we choose to discover, dote on, and listen to may have substantial implications to our cognitive state and emotional condition (Harrington & Biebly). All of these factors emphasize the importance of understanding the social and psychological effects of fandom and the overall impact it has on political issues. Fandoms have real consequences in promoting political activism and swaying political matters. Idols often share their thoughts on current political crises which in turns leads many of their followers to follow in their footsteps. While some idols respond to political matters, some find themselves creating it. For instance, Swift has sparked much discussion surrounding politics in recent years, with her newer hits often underlining feminist advocacy and public showings of affection to her new boyfriend, Travis Kelce.

**Narrative**

As Swift has progressed through the years, her own personal narrative has changed along with her discography. Starting out as the all-American girl from middle - U.S.A, Swift’s persona emulated that of a perfect public figure for young women to look up to, and for men to not look down on. In the first decade of her career, her public persona paralleled her writing, with her slim figure, blonde hair, and blue eyes, just like her stature, her lyrics were viewed as down-to-earth and easy to consume. By having this all-American girl narrative, Swift rose to fame. Whether it was a consequence of being easy to like or being seemingly care-free, Swift’s career got the plunge it did because of this narrative (Brown, 2016). As she grew older and experienced the heartache that comes from painful love and cruel media coverage, her lyrics began to take new meaning, with deeper thoughts and emotions behind every humm. As she debuted Reputation and Lover, Swift became known as a feminist advocate, sharing lyrics of self-love and calling out hegemony and heteronormativity in her songs, “The Man,” and “You Need to Calm Down.” Swift’s fandom soon began to flourish with the essence of feminist and LGBTQAA+ support. This opened up a new pathway for more individuals to become fans, as she started reaching new audience members not only due to her political activism, but her embracement of new style. While Swift sang activist lyrics and often proclaimed feminism, she has continued to tear down rumors of her LGBTQAA+ past. Members of her fandom often discuss her possible previous love interests that she has seemed to hint to in songs like, “Wonderland,” and “Lavender Haze.” By tearing down these rumors, she is in a way discrediting her fans but also standing up for her personal freedom of privacy. Swift was not the first female artist to declare feminist remarks however, as Lady Gaga led the way for woman-identifying artists everywhere (Williams, 2014). “Gaga Feminism” a feminism that opposes gender binary and voices queer equality received much attention from news outlets and fandoms alike. While Gaga has also been questioned about her true intentions with her feminist displays (Williams, 2014), Swift has also been accused of using sexual identity cues in her music to gain traction and new types of following (Dajches & Stevens, 2023).

Here, fans are actively taking a part in forming a role for Swift. Whether she meets the criteria or not, fandoms take the wheel and push narratives based upon what they feel is evidence. In doing so, fandoms are creating a meaning behind their idol (Rickman, 1993) and exploring the boundaries that come with reinterpreting media text. In doing so, fans are “textual poaching.” This redefinition often leads to new narratives (Rickman, 1993). While textual poaching may not always be viewed as a positive attribute of media usage, it can be useful in creating political activism (Dean, 2017). The idea of politicized fandom reinstates the possibilities of fandom impact on political matters.

**Means of Communication (Formats)**

Online disturbances, much like that shown through the #MeToo and #FreeBrittany movement, displays the power of social media influence (Anderson, 2023) (Riddick, 2022). With the serious side of social media as a communication tool also comes the fun side of promotion and discourse. Swift and her team utilize different modes of communication as a means of outreach for fans to interact and learn more about Swift’s day-to-day, as well as stay in touch about upcoming events. A drastic aspect of Swift’s presence online and with her fans is through her use of “Easter eggs'' and puzzles. Using these puzzles as a way to connect to her fandom while also getting word about her upcoming releases or events has proven to be incredibly helpful in Highlighting the struggle of power dynamics faced by the suffering community as dominant powers attempt to take over the movement’s narrative. This human behavior of interacting with fans in online mediums has been proven to expand and support fan community identification and fan community trust (Kim & Kim, 2017). By creating a platform for fans to accumulate and resonate with one another and also interact with Swift in a special way, Swift is greatly strengthening the structure of her fandom.

**Methods**

In gathering data, I decided to employ qualitative methods that included textual analysis, short-term interview questioning, and the conduction of extensive field-note taking in a rapid-ethnographic manner. During my time in observations, I assessed the Taylor Swift fandom community in which I would be studying through an ethnographic lens that highlighted a major event for Taylor Swift and fans alike - “The Eras Tour Film” premiere. I chose this route of field note study because it provided a physical environment where Taylor Swift fans of various types would gather and spend a large amount of time.

**The Study**

I conducted 10 in-person short-term interviews during my time in the Eras Tour Movie setting and conducted 2 in-person short-term interviews outside of this atmosphere. All interviews at the theater took place after the movie had been viewed by participants between the time of 11-12 p.m. It is vital to note that most interviewees watched the movie extensively, as discussed in my field notes, and that all participants had been actively participating in fandom culture during the time of my questioning. As a result of these interviews, 19 pages of transcript were allocated and used towards my overall data analysis.

**Primary interview questions consisted of:**

1. As someone knowledgeable of Taylor Swift and the fan base discussions, how do you think our communication with one another in the fan base ultimately affects our relationship with Taylor Swift?
2. How do you as a fan contribute to the Taylor Swift fan base if at all?
3. Taylor Swift’s sister account - TaylorNation- has the most following of any fan-based account with 6.6 million followers. How do you think this account aids in the communication and relationship between Taylor and her fans?
4. How do you believe the Taylor Swift fan base communications has uprooted additional feminist ideas in popular culture today? Are there any specific things you can think of that Taylor or her fan base has done to support this?

**How I made sense of my data:**

Narrative analysis played a large role in unraveling the complex relationship between my raw data points and the culmination of my final analysis. This method allowed me to examine the interplay between the setting, plot, characterization of fans, dialogue, and symbolism through extensive field note taking and interview data, offering a more comprehensive understanding of my overall data collection. During my field note process, I visited both the Condado Restaurant and Regal Theater. The Condado Restaurant was chosen due to its proximity to the theater (.2 miles) as well as its Taylor-Swift-themed event. While I spent more time at the theater, my notes of the fan interactions in Condado played a role in my overall analysis. The settings of the Condado Restaurant and Regal Theater contributed to the narrative processing of my data, while dialogue, characterization of fans, and plot came to life through the lens of my personal experiences. Using narrative analysis allowed for me to have a greater understanding of the overall impact one event designated for Taylor Swift had on the local fanbase. The locations of my field note settings became a pivotal attribute in allowing my project to unfold. My data processing was shaped by the locations observed in my field note taking and made room for dialogue, characterization of fans, and plot to unfold before my eyes. By capturing the dynamics of the fan community, I was able to delve into the deeper cultural significance Swift has left amongst her fans and gain insight on fan interaction in an unprovoking yet transparent manner.

In order to ensure authentic responses from participants, I was careful to mind my personal experiences and thoughts on Swift’s fandom. I myself identify as being part of the fan base and have personally seen Swift in concert, listen to her music often, and have watched as her following has grown after addressing social justice issues of feminism and heteronormativity. It was vital for me to present the interview questions to my participants in a manner that would not sway them from one direction to another.

**Benefits of Using Qualitative Research Method**

I chose qualitative research as my method for conducting this study because it would allow me to analyze extended data from subjects. In this study, I am trying to find reasoning behind fan theories, connections, and growth. In order to accomplish this, I need to hear from the personal perspectives of participants. While qualitative research is often conducted over a long-length of period, I had to perform rapid ethnographic assessment and Rapid Qualitative Inquiry (RQI) to formulate considerable narrative analysis and data assessment (Vindrola-Padros, 2020) The iterative process for data collection is a means of reflexivity that entails the going back and forth between inductive and deductive data which provides a means for continuous meaning-making (Prachi S 2009). The iterative process aided in my reflexivity of data because it allowed me to reevaluate the data I had accumulated and reconsider how my original research questions benefited from the data presented. The setting also allowed for a narrative analysis of my gathered data. This atmosphere allowed for an excellent opportunity for short-term interviews to be conducted. During my time performing field notes, I myself was placed in a familiar position surrounded by people who I had understood to have similar thoughts and beliefs regarding Taylor Swift’s role in social movement activism and the building of fan-based relationships.

**Findings**

**Fan Interpretations**

Overall, fans feel as though they truly have a relationship with one another. The close ties they feel when stepping into the Eras Tour Film was not due to the sharing of political ideals, but for the same love of Swift. During my time interviewing participants, three major themes came into play on how each individual identifies with other Swifties and Swift herself. These three traits were: feminism, narrative, and shared meaning.

**Feminism**

Most of the interviews conducted had mentions of Swift and her contributions to feminism or exemplary of feminist ideals. However, some claimed that the fandom has not been kind to Swift’s feminist remarks. When asked how Swifties react to Swift’s feminism, one fan stated, “They haven't. If anything, Taylor fans are incredibly judgmental and compare other women to Taylor all of the time. Or they assume that other women in the entertainment industry are constantly trying to copy her, or throw shade at her.”

The mixed perspective of Swift's contributions to feminism were unsurprising. Many complaints have been made about Swift’s lack to follow suit of other feminists like Lady Gaga or Emma Watson. Meanwhile, some fans prefer her old-self, the Miss Americana girl who sang country songs and frolicked in a field with boys. Either way, while fans perceived her feminism in different lights, they all pushed a similar narrative of overall rooting for the independence and leadership of young women.

**Narrative**

While Swift has shown to make attempts in shaping her own narrative with albums like *Reputation* and *Lover*, the public holds the control of her narrative, and this showed to align with the data. It is hard to be a Swiftie without acknowledging the rumors surrounding her previous relationships. The collective consciousness fuels a new narrative surrounding her relationships, career, and life. Despite Swift’s storytelling efforts and dismissal of external narratives, she is still fighting the battle of shaping her public perception.

**Shared Meaning**

My collected data showed that fans find appeal in having a shared identity with one another and Taylor. Their relationships with one another strongly impact their relationship with Swift, and vice versa. Her forms of communication through her social media page TaylorNation and personal accounts leave room for Swifties to theorize and grow in the love of Swift together. Swift offers them a happy place, and the fans hope to do the same for Taylor.

“As for our relationship with Taylor, maybe it’s all in our heads, but the Swiftie community makes us feel closer to her. Like she knows who we are. Like she sees us and has our best interest at heart” - Participant 4

**Communication Patterns of Swift Fans**

To understand how the different aspects of communication reach Swift fans, we must look at the Dissonance Threat Model of Fan behavior. This theoretical framework sheds light on the dissonances that arise in the fan experience (Sean Pradhan, 2019). Using this model we can conceptualize the linear and causal relationships of fans through the understanding of the following attributes: dissonance, team identification, fan behavior, self-concept, and threat. We can look directly at how some Swiftie’s push the narrative of Swift belonging to the LGBTQAA+ community, or perhaps look at those who do the opposite and ignore all the signs that may lead to this in effort to remain in their happy little bubble. Throughout the responses were feelings of team identification; fans felt as though they were part of a community and therefore wanted to lift one another up. A great example of this is the interviewers being willing to take time out of their exhausting night to answer Swiftie related questions for no benefit of their own. The team dynamic shines through to Swifties, and I believe that is the aspect that sets this fandom apart from many others. Using this model as a lens, we can see a linear relationship between Swift’s career milestones, such as her Eras Tour Concert and fandom activity. Causal relationships can be identified as the activism that disperses because of Swift’s contributions to political causes, such as her push for voting, in which she garnered an extra 35,000 voters this past electoral season (Peters, 2023).

Fans drew on similar findings when asked how they feel their relationship between one another and Taylor has maintained strength throughout the years:

“As for our relationship with Taylor, maybe it’s all in our heads, but the Swiftie community makes us feel closer to her. Like she knows who we are. Like she sees us and has our best interest at heart.” - Interviewer 5

“I think we have grown up with her. I was there with her when she went through her first heartbreak, when she fell in and out of love I was going through the same thing. And because of that we have a shared experience as a community. I’ve never met a mean swiftie. We are all so kind and understanding of each other because that's what Taylor has encouraged us to do (make the friendship bracelets)” - Interviewer 7

“She has the fanbase she has for a reason and communication and involvement are high on that list of reasons why.” - Interviewer 4

In studying Swiftie culture, a trend that was deemed recurring from my iterative process of analyzing data was the construction and discussion of narrative. In the middle of her current career, Swift’s transition from country to pop brought angst to many fans and non-fans alike as it held authorship amongst male pop artists of that time who dominated the field. Here, we can look at paratextual strategies to configure how she went about these changes and how her strategies were tied to neo-liberal values of postfeminism. Paratextual strategies here refer to Swift’s artistic endeavors and the various facets used to create a new sense of identity. From her cover art to public statements, paratextual elements played a pivotal role in shaping how society views Swift today. While her shift from country to pop seemed like an easy transition, it was made up of calculated usage of social media platforms. (McNutt, 2020). By examining the paratextual strategies in this transition, we can have a better understanding of her past and current narrative as well as her ties to neo-liberal values of post-feminism. Swift is pushing for a narrative that now aligns with that of dependency, tying herself to neo-liberal values of post-feminism.

**Proposal:**

This study has covered the background of fandom literature, and various models for understanding and analyzing qualitative data. Some interviewees thought of the fan relationships as being “cringey” at times, however, most Swifties taking part in the interviews relish many of the attributes the community brings about. One interviewee states, “I think overall as a community we try to be respectful of Taylor and each other. We enjoy speculating easter eggs, analyzing the music, and just feeling unashamed of enjoying her music. I don't know many people in my personal life that enjoyed Taylor Swift music throughout the year so I have always felt secluded, but I feel validated among Swifties.”

I propose a study to be performed that would illuminate the impact different means of communications has had on fandom relationships. For instance, there is much more to be studied on the way Swift interacts with her fans and how that controls adapts narrative. While many of her games with fans seem light-hearted, there is often more meaning to her actions that goes under-the-radar. By dissecting the narrative, feminism, and shared connection attributes between both the Swifties and Swift herself, we can have a broader interpretation of fan-fan and fan-idol behavior.

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