



THE PSYCHGEIST OF POP CULTURE:

TAYLOR SWIFT

EDITED BY RACHEL KOWERT, PHD

**the psychgeist of pop
culture**

the psychgeist of pop culture

Taylor Swift

rachel kowert



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psychgeist of pop culture series

Play Story Press

Pittsburgh, PA

Series Editor: Rachel Kowert, PhD

Over the last few decades, interest in pop psychology has grown faster than our Netflix backlogs. This series highlights iconic pop culture content from television, film, literature, and video games through an examination of the psychological mechanisms that endear us to these stories for a lifetime.

series titles

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Taylor Swift (2024), edited by Rachel Kowert, PhD

dear reader

Rachel Kowert

Taylor Alison Swift is someone that almost needs no introduction, and yet here I am writing one to set the stage to explore her life and legacy, music and advocacy, in the *Psychgeist of Pop Culture: Taylor Swift*.

Born in 1989, Taylor Swift is an American singer-songwriter who has become one of (if not *the*) most prominent and influential figures in the music industry. Here are just a few of her many achievements:

- Most wins by an artist at the American Music Awards (40 at the time of this writing)
- Most Grammy wins by a female artist (14 at the time of this writing)
- First woman to win “Album of the Year” at the Grammy Awards four times (*Fearless* 2010, *1989* in 2016, and *folklore* in 2021, and *Midnights* in 2024)
- First artist to win the “Global Icon Award” at the Brit Awards (2021)
- The most simultaneous entries on the Billboard hot 100 (with 10 in 2022)
- Most top 10 hits among women on Billboard Hot 100 (49 at the time of this writing)

Rachel Kowert

- The first female artist to replace herself at number one on the billboard hot 100 (Anti-Hero which was released by Lavender Haze, both from the album *Midnights*)
- The longest reigning number 1 album on the Billboard 200 by a female artist in the 21st century (*Fearless*)
- The most streamed female artist in a single day (for her album *Midnights*)
- First female artist to win MTV's "Video of the Year" award four times (Bad Blood, 2015, You Need to Calm Down, 2019, All Too Well (10 Minute Version), 2022, and Fortnight in 2024)
- Highest-Grossing concert tour of all time and the first tour to ever to gross one billion dollars (Eras tour)

...and this is an abridged list.

In this book, we will explore the life and legacy of the musical and cultural icon that is Taylor Swift. This book is as much of a celebration of her musical success and the way it continues to resonate with the world (present company included) as it is a recognition of her activism and advocacy. As you make your way through the 13 chapters of this book (it had to be 13, right?), you will dive deeper into the psychology of Taylor's songwriting across her discography, her musical and personal evolution, her influence on pop culture, and the fandoms the surround her. From *Debut* to *The Tortured Poets Department*, and everything in between, we will explore into what it means to be a "Swiftie", why Taylor's lyrics resonate across generations, and what makes the Eras tour a truly joyful (and some say, transcendent) experience.

As you continue through the chapters ahead, I hope the words on these pages resonate with you and build a deeper appreciation for Taylor Swift's creativity, vulnerability, and artistry that have made her the voice of generations. She is not just a storyteller, but a mirror that reflects the lived experiences of so many of us. In the end, Taylor Swift's legacy is not her trail of hits, the records she broke, or her tour through the eras - it is her ability to embody our collective emotions,

Dear Reader

struggles, and triumphs in her art. Through it all, her legacy continues to evolve alongside her growth as a work-in-progress person.

But before we dive in, I want to end this introductory chapter with a short story called *Taylor the Tenacious*. For those who are not familiar with my work, in 2019, I successfully kickstarted a collection of short stories (poems, really) called *Pragmatic Princess: 26 Superb Stories of Self-Sufficiency* celebrating the power of the everyday girl, doing everyday things, with their everyday abilities. This book successfully raised more than \$20,000 in 30 days and a limited collection of hardback books were printed. In 2020, I rebranded the collection under the new label “Tales from Cloud Canyon” and published a few topical stories (e.g., *Invisible Friends*, a story about online stranger danger). During this time, I also wrote a handful of stories about more public figures, including Taylor Swift. Until today, this latter collection has lived exclusively in vault. However, *The Psychgeist of Pop Culture: Taylor Swift* seemed like the perfect opportunity to bring this piece of creative writing into the world.

Taylor the Tenacious



Image by Randall Hampton

*Taylor grew up on a farm,
Small town nowhere, full of charm.
She loved her family, music, and guitar,
And dreamt of singing to the world, near and far.*

*Day after day, she would write and sing,
About life, love, and everything.
She created a world all her own,
Where her creativity could be shown.*

*Setting her sights on the big city,
Taylor embarked on her own journey,
She was ready to be seen and heard,
Melody and chorus. Hums and words.*

*But the doors did not open as she thought they would,
She would knock, they'd say no, but her parents assured,
That one day Taylor would share her songs,*

With them beside her, her Dad and Mom.

*And they were right, because eventually it happened,
Taylor's tenacity necessitated action.
She found success, in the South and North,
The East and West. From port to port.*

*Taylor's tenacity led her to dare,
To experiment and find her own flare.
As Taylor's music grew and changed, so did her mind.
And Taylor realized her power was not confined.*

*See, when Taylor first started, she kindly smiled,
Kept thoughts to herself, an obedient child.
But it wasn't long before Taylor realized,
She could share her thoughts that were inside.*

*As the world around her was rapidly changing,
Not for the better. Her silence became draining.
Children hiding in schools, women losing control,
Of their own bodies, choices. This all took its toll.*

*Taylor could no longer sit idle, pretending,
And no longer cared if her words were offending.
Many insisted that she stay prim and proper,
But Taylor was tenacious, nothing would stop her.*

*So, Taylor stood up, sharing her thoughts loud and clear,
So everyone would hear with their hearts and their ears.
About equity, fairness, bigotry and hate,
How we should not sit idly and accept fate.
Love is love and injustice shouldn't be the norm,
And our officials should be open to reform.*

*And when Taylor spoke, something magical occurred,
Her wave of tenacity spread widely, endured.*

Rachel Kowert

*People enacted, rose up, and brushed off their coats,
To register a new generation of votes.*

*Today, she fills concert halls,
Packs stadiums, wall to wall.
Taylor inspires her fans, near and far
With her written words and trusty guitar.*

*As she sings about life, love, and loss,
Family and friends and being the boss.
Living in exile, getting down to a sick beat,
How we do not need London boys to feel complete.*

*Taylor's tenacity reminds us all,
To believe in ourselves and to stand tall.
Never stay silenced for fear of rebuke,
Believe in yourself. Stand strong, resolute.*

*Taylor built a castle out from bricks placed in her way,
She's brought Swifties together, and we're here to stay.*

*Here's to being too busy dancing,
And to not getting knocked off of our feet.
To making all the friendship bracelets,
And to never conceding defeat.*

taylor swift: the soundtrack to our lives

Mary Kenney

I'm driving down a long, flat highway framed by cornfields bare and yellow after harvest. The windows are down, letting in the cool air scented with burning leaves, a staple of late summer in the Indiana farmland. The radio in my Chevy is cranked all the way up — I'm 16, who can stop me? — and the song is *Teardrops on My Guitar*. I'm singing along, badly, and considering crying, which doesn't make much sense since I've never had a serious boy or girlfriend, and I don't play guitar. The desire to sob will fade a few songs later, when the same station puts on *Our Song*.

Taylor Swift is many things to many people: celebrity icon, gossip column staple, underrated songwriter, the first songwriter/performer billionaire. A joke, a legend, a role model. To me and many other 30-somethings, she's become a modern Plutarch, the chronicler of everyone who grew up in the early 2000s and now try to navigate adulthood through the 2020s.

Taylor's first album, appropriately titled *Taylor Swift*, could have been hand-crafted for teenagers like me. In 2007, Taylor's sweet voice and peppy guitar crash-land into my then-under 8,000-person Midwestern town. She's soon heard at every football game, in every diner, and on every portable radio precariously balanced in a high-

Mary Kenney

school locker. Just a year later, *Love Story* hits the radio waves. The sappy, hopeful ballad about a teen couple destined for each other lodges itself in the hearts of lovesick girls and boys alike. A boy sends it to me over Yahoo! Messenger, and I obsess over whether this means he wants to go to prom together (he ends up asking someone else; he sends her *Love Shack* to seal it, so I definitely got the better end of that deal). When *Love Story* plays at prom, couples swarm the dance floor so they can hold each other and sway, dreaming of a love that lasts forever. I'm one of them, though I'm not in love with my dance partner. What I don't know is that in less than a year, I'm going to meet my future husband, and I'm going to listen to *Love Story* on loop.

2009 is another big year for me, and Taylor is ready. I start university in a town four hours away from where I was born, the first time I've ever left, and the lyrics from her new song, *Fifteen*, could be about me - who hasn't taken a deep breath before they walk through a new set of doors on your first day in a new school? The way I listen to her shifts, too; I used to play Taylor over my car's speakers, but now I'm walking, not driving. Her music becomes more intimate as it plays directly through my earbuds, wired to my iPhone. The way people listen to music has changed, and the relationship between artist and listener has never felt more personal.

It's no surprise that I listen to 22 on repeat when it comes out just one month after my twenty-second birthday. The chaos, hope, and friendship in the song capture everything I love and hate about being in my early 20s. I'm ready to set the world on fire, and I have no idea where I'm going.

One year later, I've sunk into the worst depression of my life. It's the kind that keeps you locked inside, that prevents you from getting dressed or showering. It forces you to close all the blinds and makes it difficult to want to go out, make friends, see something beautiful, *live*. I'm trapped in a shoebox apartment, in a city where I know no one, and I feel like I'm disappearing. Going out to get groceries is a trial. My memory slips: even now, ten years later, there are gaps of foggy gray where there should be crystal clear events. Did I fly or drive to the city? Was I alone, or did someone come with me? How did I pick this

apartment? I can't remember. I spend months hunkering down and waiting for the sadness, the exhaustion, to go away.

When it doesn't, I do something drastic to snap myself out of it: I go to an animal shelter. I tell them I want a cat. They walk me through the dog kennels first, where I meet Nell. She sniffs my hand, wags her tail. I'm a goner. She rides shotgun on the way home.

Suddenly, my depression can't keep me inside: I have to take Nell out every few hours. We stroll through the sunshine together, and my earbuds are back in. *Shake It Off* hits number one on the charts. I listen to it on our walks, then at a dog beach, then at impromptu dance parties I throw in my living room with the dog as my solo guest. *1989* is a shift for Taylor, the album where she firmly leaves country behind and switches to pop. It feels like a shift for me, too. I'm not able to do everything I'd like to, or everything I could before depression, but I'm starting to live again.

In the years after *1989*, it's no longer cool to like Taylor Swift. This isn't prompted by anything she's done or a change in the quality of her music. Instead, it seems to be the far simpler, and thus more devastating, effect of being famous for a decade. People pounce on the tabloid coverage and her music's honesty about her hopes, failures, and disappointments. Taylor and her fans, aka Swifties, are widely portrayed as vapid and tasteless. I'd like to say I bravely rise above this and keep blasting her music through my car windows, haters be damned, but I don't. I'm in the middle of switching careers and desperate to fit in. As a journalist, and again in grad school, I've rarely been the only woman in the room. In my new job as a game developer, it happens constantly. Everyone around me wears band t-shirts and likes 80s metal? Fine, I'll try it, I need something to talk about at lunch so they start caring about my opinions. I don't like the new music much, but I also don't leave myself time to listen to Taylor. We're on a break.

I bring her back in my life, or perhaps she shoulders her way in, with 2022's *Anti-Hero*. It's one of the worst years of my life. I, like everyone else, am cut off from friends, loved ones, and a social life when COVID hits, so I decide to move to Chicago, a city where I once had a vibrant and active social circle. But when I return, all but one friend has moved away, and I discover that I don't have the time or

Mary Kenney

mental energy to make more. I'm starting in vitro fertilization, IVF, in the hopes that after two years of trying, my husband and I will be able to have a baby. I simultaneously feel like I can't keep up and that I'm not doing enough.

The hormone-boosting drugs leave me nauseated. The daily 7 a.m. appointments, which always include a blood draw, make my days long and exhausting. The constant refrain from nurses and doctors, "we're not there yet, but we'll try another round," feel like a never-ending death knell. I play *Anti-Hero* for the first time while driving to an appointment. Then I play it the next day, and the next. The opening lyrics allow me to smile: like Taylor, I feel like I'm getting older but not any wiser. I worry that I'm leaving the people I love behind and letting depression creep back in.

It's 2023, and the IVF finally works. My baby boy is born at the end of May, and his birth becomes my rebirth — one I didn't necessarily ask for. I was prepared, or thought I was, to be a mother. It's all I wanted. But I'm not prepared — can anyone truly be? — for the rewiring of my own mind. A host of things I used to care about that I can no longer be bothered with, replaced by new anxieties that tie together his future, my personhood, and my relationship with my new body. I was happy with the person I was before I became a mother; now I'm someone new, and I'm not sure if I like her, let alone want to be her.

While I'm sifting through all of this in the 10-minute snatches of free time I get between breastfeeding, cuddling, pumping, and trying to sleep, I've returned to Taylor. *Cruel Summer*, a song title almost too perfect for my summer 2023, debuts at the end of August, right when my maternity leave ends. I'm back to trying to be two people who feel disconnected from one another: the loving, engaged mother, and the passionate, driven writer. While the title speaks to me, the lyrics have very little to do with my life or circumstances: a peppy croon, it's a return to country-pop, focusing on a sweet summer romance and the fear that it won't last. The song — its lyrics, style, and innocence — remind me of being 16 years old, driving down a highway and belting *Our Song*. They remind me of who I was and what it was like to have the entire world in front of me. With that reminder in my heart, I can

focus on the future that I have now: one where I'm not dreaming of a boyfriend, but instead dreaming of the little boy my son will become.

The genius of Taylor Swift isn't just in the wittiness of the lyrics or the way her voice surges through icy coolness and fiery rage in the span of a few bars. It's something simpler and more fundamental. Like many country stars before her — Willie Nelson, Johnny Cash, Dolly Parton — her songs focus on heartache, hope, disillusionment, freedom, fear, love, and redemption. She writes her own life's story, and in so doing, about the thousand tiny moments in our lives that, added together, become our story.

changing, shifting, growing

Taylor Swift as an In-Progress Person

Hannah Glowacki

introduction

Taylor Swift's music is prolific and beloved by casual fans and Swifties alike. Her self-written lyrics resonate with listeners because she narrates her life experiences as if confiding in a friend.

To note a few highlights in her outstanding career, she has won numerous awards, broken countless records¹, created the ultra-successful Eras Tour, and been named Time Magazine's Person of the Year². Since her teenage years, she has faced many obstacles in both her personal life and career; yet, she navigates these challenges successfully while centering progress through constantly changing, shifting, and growing. This chapter is an exploration of Taylor Swift's journey as an in-progress person as told throughout her music, life, and Eras.

2006: taylor swift debut

Pause for a moment and think about the first Taylor Swift song you remember hearing. Can you even recall? For many, it is from her nostalgic debut album, *Taylor Swift*, released in 2006, when she was just

Hannah Glowacki

16 years old. Complete with a country accent, small-town reverie, and youthful yet universal themes, her first album captured the hearts of many. This album centers on friendship, romantic relationships, and heartbreak from the perspective of an adolescent just trying to figure it all out.

For example, *A Place in this World* describes the teenage precariousness of discovering oneself amidst various landscapes and relationships. *Our Song* weaves a story around the excitement of falling in young love while also having to sneakily maneuver around parents. She rounds out this beginning stage of a crush in *Should've Said No* when she illustrates the pain and emotional turmoil when someone is unfaithful. Her first album demonstrates relatability in sentiment as her country twang outlines very human experiences. In a single album, and her debut album no less, she captures crush to heartbreak while simultaneously finding her footing within the music industry as a teenage artist.

2008: fearless

Two years later, she released her second album, *Fearless*³, which swiftly claimed the #1 album spot on Billboard 200⁴. Like her first album, the songs on *Fearless* capture her youthfulness and country accent. However, there is also a notable shift towards a version of Taylor who is slightly older, yet far more world-weary. While the song *Fearless* describes the joy from a highly anticipated moment, many of the other songs on this album speak to pain in the aftermath of hardship. For example, *Fifteen* describes the naivety of first love at the intersection of growing up and discovering oneself more fully. This song serves as a heartfelt caution sign for the all-too-relatable realization you would have done things differently after growing up more. Not only does this song feel familiar to anyone going through a similar experience, but it also acts as a warning to younger listeners. In *White Horse*, she takes this narration a step further. Here, she alludes to the sometimes necessary physical and geographical distancing from a situation that, while it may feel like her whole world, she has recognized is actually just one small corner of her life.

While fans eagerly anticipated her third album, Taylor Swift experienced harsh criticism. If there was ever a time the world felt against her, it perhaps began at the 2009 VMA Awards. Here, she won the award for Best Female Video for *You Belong With Me*. This music video takes the viewer through the experience of a high school crush, wanting to be with someone who is a good match, and the courage it takes to speak about how you feel⁵. After a delighted Taylor Swift walked onto the stage to give her acceptance speech, Kanye West (a famous artist who now uses the name “Ye”)⁶ rose up from the crowd and joined her on stage. He grabbed her microphone mid-speech and interrupted her to announce that he believed “...Beyoncé had one of the best videos of all time”⁷. The crowd started to boo and Taylor believed she was getting shunned by the audience (only later did she learn the boos were not for her)⁸.

This event, so early in her career, sparked intense debate and cemented Taylor Swift as a focal point for criticism by the media. Given she was 19 years old, it is noteworthy she was so harshly critiqued by professionals who were much older than her. While an online frenzy erupted about this event at the VMAs, a cloud of heavy scrutiny related to her music’s genuineness and quality was also unfolding.

2010: speak now

In direct retort to this heavy media critique about her music, Taylor Swift took matters into her own hands. She underwent vocal lessons to go head-on with any criticism about her singing⁹. Previously, she shared the creative writing process with co-writers when constructing songs and lyrics. However, she wrote her third album, *Speak Now*¹⁰ entirely by herself in order to take sole responsibility for her narrative and work¹¹. Departing from the sound in her previous albums, *Speak Now* begins to step out of country twang and into pop and rock. The lyrics also shifted to broader life themes. For example, the song *Mean* includes lyrics written in response to a particularly harsh critic. When interviewed, she explained how there will always be someone who will be mean, but the only thing she can control is her response¹². In

parallel, she also used her music to respond to Ye's interruption at the VMAs. The lyrics from *Innocent* give grace and express understanding that it is never too late for someone to change¹³.

At the end of this album, as if hoping to put such heavy criticism behind her, she sets the stage for her future. She uses chronologically quippy lyrics in *Long Live* to let the world know this is not her finale. In just four years, Taylor Swift went from releasing her debut album to winning four Grammys in 2010¹⁴, to performing massive shows across the world¹⁵, developing a fan base of loyal "Swifties"¹⁶, and cementing her rise within the music industry.

2012: red

With *Red*¹⁷ in 2012, Taylor Swift maintained a pattern of releasing albums every two years. Throughout the album, she showcases songs that not only have a high degree of relatability but also have the energy and feel of an anthem. An anthem can be defined as "a usually rousing popular song that typifies or is identified with a particular subculture, movement, or point of view"¹⁸. Examples of this include *I Knew You Were Trouble*, *22*, and *We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together*. The latter's lyrics paired with the music's drilling tempo and pop beat help create a feeling and sense of commitment to the song's meaning. It is a song that can be used as a reminder to oneself or lobbied as a piece of gentle propaganda to a friend who is trying to get back with someone yet again.

Red's shift in sound helps carry the voice of a Taylor who is becoming increasingly mature in her young twenties. Fan-favorite *All Too Well* contains complex and emotional lyrics that explore the feelings of painful nostalgia surrounding heartbreak. The last song on the album, *Begin Again*, emphasizes this point further when she reminds herself that her desire to do something like wearing high heels is completely valid and should be appreciated and respected for the sole reason that it is important to her.

While fans were reveling in her fourth album, Taylor Swift was experiencing severe media criticism, particularly centered around her dating and personal life. The New York Times wrote that "Her ubiq-

uity, not to mention her dating history, has begun to stir what feels like the beginning of a backlash” and noted the existence of Facebook and Tumblr pages titled “I Hate Taylor Swift”¹⁹. Headlines like “Taylor Swift is the ultimate player” emerged and condemned many of her songs for outlining her dating experiences²⁰. In 2013, Ellen DeGeneres invited Taylor onto her show and repeatedly tried to delve into Taylor’s dating life despite Taylor continually trying to navigate away from the topic²¹. Articles and interviews like these continued to circulate and laid the groundwork for when, years later at the 2015 Grammys, a reporter told Taylor Swift she would be taking home “lots of men” in addition to trophies and then a videographer panned to Taylor’s legs. Taylor responded, “I’m going to go hang out with my friends, and then I go home to the cats. Men get me in trouble”²². This response to shut down criticism is significant, especially remembering she previously acknowledged during her *Speak Now* Era that she only has control over her response. Considering the events that would happen in the coming years, it is not surprising that she would begin to withdraw from interviews²³.

Let’s pause here for a trigger warning about *sexual assault*. Please skip this paragraph if you do not have space to read about this topic. While on tour for *Red* in 2013, Taylor Swift said she was groped by DJ David Mueller during a Meet and Greet when he put his hand up her skirt. There is even a photo (that she would later use as proof in the trial) of the moment. Two days after the incident, David Mueller was fired from his job at a radio station. Things stayed quiet until, over two years later, he would sue for character defamation and several million dollars. This would prompt Taylor to countersue for a single dollar and enter the courtroom in a legal battle in 2017²⁴.

2014: 1989

1989²⁵, Taylor’s fifth album, is a significant shift for a myriad of reasons. The song *Welcome To New York* uses a new pop sound to carry the message that change is afoot both personally and professionally. This album marks Taylor’s formal departure from country music and her official entrance to the pop genre. Shifting away from her previous

country image, Taylor relocated to New York and made significant changes to her own aesthetic as well as her music's overall sound and feel. Her change in genre and style symbolized a reinvention in her music and public image while marking a progressive turning point in her career²⁶.

Like she used *Speak Now* to speak for herself, she also uses *1989* to lyrically placate the media's critique of her dating life. *1989* explores themes of control with songs like *Blank Space*. Here, she not only acknowledges the rumors and criticism about her dating life, but she leans into it. Quite the opposite of shirking from it, she opts to own it. She uses wordplay to figuratively remind everyone that she holds the pen and can ink anyone's name wherever she likes. The last song on the album, *Clean*, even contains imagery about overcoming difficult times and moving towards a more untethered version of herself.

2017: reputation

Even though Taylor Swift consistently released an album every other year since 2006, she departed from that pattern in 2016. To fully understand this, we need to examine the song *Famous* released by Kanye West (Ye) in 2016²⁷. The song includes a lyric that calls Taylor a derogatory word and simultaneously claims that Ye may be owed a sexual act from her. The music video also showed Ye in a massive bed with many naked wax figures of celebrities, one of which was Taylor Swift²⁸. After release, there was much public debate and outcry regarding the lyric and situation. Ye tried to mitigate this by claiming he had personally called Taylor so that she could approve the lyric before release. Kim Kardashian, his wife at the time, later released a short video on social media of the phone call as evidence that Taylor did approve the lyric. Taylor Swift remained steadfast in her denial of this alleged approval. On National Snake Day, Kim Kardashian tweeted numerous snake emojis drilling up even more attention towards this brewing storm. This contributed to the association between the snake aesthetic and Taylor Swift²⁹. In her defense, Taylor wrote on social media, "...I would very much like to be excluded from this narrative, one that I have never asked to be a part of since 2009"³⁰. On Twitter, #Taylor-

Swift's *IsOverParty* emerged after she broke up with a boyfriend and people celebrated in her seeming downfall³¹. With all of this spiraling, she took a step out of the spotlight and later described her disappearance as “nobody physically saw me for a year”³².

Taylor Swift reemerged in 2017 when she won the trial against David Mueller³³. In her 2020 documentary *Miss Americana*, Taylor would explain how even though she had multiple witnesses and a photo of the moment of the event, she had to fight to be believed. She further explains how difficult she imagines it would be for someone who only has their word to back up their claim³⁴. This experience would help to lay the foundation for her future political stance and activism.

*reputation*³⁵, released three years after her last album, embodies and pays homage to these tumultuous years. Similar to how she used her previous albums to serve as her own voice and record, she yet again uses *reputation* to share her own experience and perspective. Like *1989* carried a change in sound and style, *reputation* also rides on a massive shift in sound and energy. *Look What You Made Me Do* and its associated music video introduces a version of herself who was forced to change and grow in the face of survival. The song contains a particularly quotable line that, in no uncertain terms, announces that the previous version of Taylor cannot speak... because she is gone. Also included in the music video are many of the previous “versions” of Taylor Swift in their respective outfits and Eras. At the end of the video, they are all arguing amongst themselves and critiquing each other ruthlessly. There is even a Taylor who holds a snake and hisses while another Taylor quotes the derogatory line from Ye's *Famous*. The current Taylor repeats her previous request about wanting to be excluded from the narrative, and all the other Taylors yell at her to stop talking³⁶. Through Taylor's perspective, she uses this music video to seemingly give life to the severely critical inner voice in many of our own minds.

Continuing to navigate this fine line of inner critic versus media scrutiny, she uses the song *Delicate* to play on the narrative of fragile beginnings and new love. Within this theme of deepening relationships, *New Year's Day* outlines the experience of not only wanting to spend the night with someone but also building the following day and

subsequent life with them. The album underlines the need for reinvention following the downfall of one's reputation.

There is a distinct shift from the younger Taylor Swift who sings *Our Song* to the one who, over a decade later, sings *Look What You Made Me Do*. In the documentary *Miss Americana*, she even explains the pressure of being perceived perfectly and according to the ever-changing standards of others. She describes it as "Live out a narrative that we find to be interesting enough to entertain us, but not so crazy that it makes us uncomfortable"³⁷. With this in mind, *reputation* feels like grief, autonomy, and hope unapologetically combined and come to life. During the *reputation Stadium Tour* Film, she describes the fear that can come with the downfall of one's reputation. She shows vulnerability with her fans when she explains how powerful it can be to personally relate so strongly to a song and realize others are going through their own trials too³⁸.

2019: lover

Taylor Swift encountered a jarring situation in 2019 when Big Machine Records (where she had recorded all of her music to date) was sold to music manager Scooter Braun. Taylor did not have a good working relationship with Scooter Braun, and with this purchase, he gained ownership of all her existing music masters. Masters grant the owner the power to approve (or deny) when and where songs can be played and also grant significant financial benefits. With this takeover, Taylor lost control of her existing discography³⁹. With this feeling like an exclamation point after her previous difficulties, it wouldn't have been out of the question to just quietly walk away from the spotlight and industry forever. However, she did the opposite.

Taylor moved to a different record label - Republic Records. In the move, she negotiated to own her masters for any future albums. Because of this, the first album Taylor Swift held her own masters for⁴⁰ is, *Lover*⁴¹, released in 2019. The song *Lover* immediately caught the attention and ears of listeners with its drastic change in sound from *reputation*. The sound and storytelling style help establish and lay ground for her future, more folksy, albums.

Perhaps because of her experiences and trial against David Mueller, Taylor Swift became much more vocal about her political views. *The Man* has lyrics that can be seen to speak to this. In a poppy yet painfully aware way, she wonders what it must be like to always be believed and respected. In this, she reminds listeners how much her songs tie in with her own lived experiences while also being sometimes unfortunately relatable. Besides having her songs express her own life events, she also began using her platform to encourage folks to vote. In her 2020 documentary *Miss Americana*, she stated, "Next time there is any opportunity to change anything, you had better know what you stand for and what you wanna say" (referring to the Tennessee 2018 Midterm Elections)⁴². While encouraging others to vote, she also released *You Need To Calm Down*. The song supports LGBTQIA+ rights with quippy lyrics that encourage voting to change the seat majority within the U.S. Government. She goes a step further in the accompanying music video which gives space to and features several queer celebrities⁴³.

As Taylor Swift had previously kept quiet about her political views, this was a significant shift. In fact, early fans will remember listening to *Taylor Swift* on CD in 2006 when the original lyrics of *Picture To Burn* included a line that is considered homophobic. Since then, she has changed this particular lyric⁴⁴. Contrasted with direct lines from *Miss Americana* and *You Need To Calm Down*, this reminds us that it is not only okay to change, but often we reach the best version of ourselves by reflecting and changing. In a single song and video, she shows us that we can own our past experiences while also growing into the person we want to be.

Many songs on *Lover* feel reminiscent of basic foundational concepts often associated with mental health and psychotherapy. In particular, the song *ME!* (featuring Brandon Urie) is reminiscent of previous anthems and also feels like a celebration of a person that matches on the inside and outside. This idea is defined as congruence, or ensuring that the external actions you take reflect your internal values⁴⁵. Lyrics that celebrate individuality joined with Taylor Swift using her platform to enact change lend itself well to this matching up.

2020: folklore and evermore

We all remember 2020 for the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown. Just as things were beginning to shut down in the U.S., a more complete video of the phone call between Ye and Taylor Swift emerged making it clear she was telling the truth the entire time about never approving the offensive lyric^{46,47}. Through Taylor's albums, we can see how awful it was to have the public generally turned against her and assumed she was lying about Ye's lyrics. Given this, Taylor's next two albums lean into themes of acknowledging inner pain and then later reconciling problems.

Like many other artists, Taylor Swift's upcoming tour, Lover Fest, had to be canceled due to Covid-19 restrictions. Despite this setback, she immersed herself in the creative process and released *folklore*⁴⁸ and later *evermore*⁴⁹ within just five months, styling both in lower case letters. Both of these albums, often considered sister albums, take on a new folksy sound with extra emphasis on storytelling. She weaves a narrative of a teenage love triangle, with each song sharing a different person's perspective in *august*, *betty*, and *cardigan*. In fact, in *folklore: the long pond studio sessions* film, she explains how this is the first record she has made that is not entirely autobiographical⁵⁰. While previously Taylor used her music to narrate her life, she takes her storytelling a step further here by narrating the experiences of others within her songs.

While some of the songs on *folklore* delve into fictitious relationships, other songs relate directly to her own experiences. *my tears ricochet*, with its haunting melody, describes the turmoil from the sale of her masters. In *hoax*, she specifically uses the word "scars" to describe how wounds that have healed can still hurt later and leave a metaphorical mark.

Continuing with the themes of pain and moving on contained within *folklore*, Taylor uses *evermore* to further reconcile painful events through the lens of onward momentum. *tolerate it* weaves a narrative of frustration and bargaining. She reminds herself she can shift away from a situation where she is not fully accepted. This growth and reinvention are further seen in *happiness*, a song that, ironically, is

extremely heartbreaking. Lyrics that play with the perspective of who is responsible for happiness demonstrate the idea that reinvention doesn't have to be instant. She implores that she hasn't even met the new version of herself yet. It is a song that reflects the growing pains from moving forward and being forced to reinvent yourself. Finally, in the song *evermore* (featuring Bon Iver), she beautifully narrates the feeling of floundering and begging for a way to just move on. Given the past events in Taylor's professional life, it feels cohesive that these two albums explore reconciliation, recovery, and reinvention.

After the new sound and introspective nature of these two albums, Taylor Swift announced a massive re-recording project – Taylor's Version. She released her first re-recorded album, *Fearless Taylor's Version*⁵¹ in 2021 to begin the process of gaining control over her first six albums. This led to not only having ownership over her own work, but fans enjoying songs re-recorded and released alongside "from the vault" bonus tracks from their respective Eras.

Similar to how Taylor Swift learned later in life the importance of her voice in terms of encouraging others to register to vote, she has made changes to some of her re-recorded songs. For example, the original lyrics in *Better Than Revenge* contain a line that can be seen as slut-shaming. Of note, she altered this line in *Speak Now Taylor's Version*⁵². This opportunity to use re-recordings to make a specific change to align better with her current viewpoint is a primary example of her being an in-progress person. By doing this, she demonstrates the importance of changing to truly reflect yourself and your views rather than stay with previously held ideas for no reason other than maintenance or nostalgia.

2022: midnights

*Midnights*⁵³, released 2022, contains direct and autobiographical lyrics. Themes of self-awareness and staying true to oneself are present throughout the album. For example, *Anti-Hero* describes the realization that she is the common denominator among her difficulties. *Karma* conveys a sense of presence and trueness to oneself. This is further developed in *You're On Your Own, Kid* when she describes fighting for

something that is now solely hers. It is clear in this album, that despite all the difficulties she experienced, she has stayed true to herself while changing, shifting, and growing.

Shortly after announcing *Midnights*, Taylor Swift announced that she would be going on tour. But, not just tour for *Midnights*. No - the Eras Tour⁵⁴. And, if *Midnights* shimmers, then the Eras Tour shines like a crowning jewel. Even the very name and concept of the tour emphasize continual movement and progression throughout her life. For example, while performing in Los Angeles, she explained to the audience her thought process of doing a massive three-and-a-half hour show to celebrate all her albums in one night. She alludes to the doubt she faced while coming up with the concept for the tour and her determined response to bring it to life⁵⁵. One of the many ways fans rejoice in the experience is by handmaking and trading friendship bracelets inspired by a lyric from *You're On Your Own, Kid*⁵⁶.

When she was named Person of the Year in 2023, she changed her practice of not participating in interviews. She shared many personal insights during her lengthy interview with Time Magazine. Regarding creating a memorable Eras Tour experience for her fans, she explained "I wanted to play a show that was longer than they ever thought it would be, because that makes me feel good leaving the stadium"⁵⁷. During this time, we have also seen changes in Taylor Swift's personal life. It is a beautiful redemption arc to see her go from singing about wanting to be with someone on the high school football team in 2008⁵⁸, to "nobody physically saw me for a year" regarding 2016⁵⁹, to attending professional NFL football games in support of her boyfriend and proudly having him on stage during her Eras Tour in 2024⁶⁰.

2024: the tortured poets department

In April of 2024, Taylor Swift released *The Tortured Poets Department: The Anthology*⁶¹. She uses 31 songs to look inward while listeners receive relatable and heartbreaking lyrics. At one of her concerts in Melbourne, she told the crowd "songwriting is something that actually gets me through my life" and explained how cathartic the writing of this album was for her⁶². A great example of this is *I Can Do It With a*

Broken Heart. While the beginning of the song describes fans enjoying being at the Eras Tour, she quickly reveals the reality of having to go on stage and perform while heartbroken. Listeners can even hear a count of “one, two, three, four” reminiscent of what she hears in her in-ear monitor to keep her on track while performing⁶³. In this, she confides in her music while fans conversely get a glimpse into her world.

Another example of the introspective and cathartic nature of this album is the song *Cassandra*. Here, she sings about the difficulty of not being believed and even being ignored when speaking out. While this narrative is certainly reminiscent of experiences in her life, she once again uses storytelling and imagery to cement her own perspective into song. *The Manuscript* is the last song on the album and is such a fitting way to close her current discography. The track does not follow typical bridge and chorus style of other songs, and is instead a long poem set to music. Here, she describes the process of reflecting on heartbreak and how that experience helped to shape her life. She closes out the song and album by acknowledging both pain and grief ran their course over time and helped her progress into the current version of herself.

conclusion

Taylor Swift has created a beloved catalog of songs and has reached countless fans with her emotional and relatable lyrics. Given that she started making music when she was just a teenager, it would have been easy and understandable for her to shy away from her older songs and previous versions of herself. However, she instead leans into each Era and experiences it with full intensity. By celebrating each Era in a single night during the Eras Tour, she exemplifies that it is okay to reach into the past while upholding future progression and betterment at the same time. She still does this even after the many challenges she has experienced. She has remained brave in the face of many obstacles, and exemplifies that it is how we respond to these situations that matters most.

This leads you, dear reader, to think about and question a few

Hannah Glowacki

things. Is progress ever final? Is there a boundary for a start and stop point in personal growth? The progression that Taylor Swift exemplifies in her personal and professional life would suggest not. Perhaps the most important lesson from Taylor Swift: if she can reclaim her past and learn to change, shift, and grow with each new Era, then surely, we can too. If we take anything away from Taylor Swift it is surely that changing, shifting, and growing is a lifetime, work-in-progress endeavor that is so worth it to find the fullest version of ourselves.

taylor (our version)

When music can sound like home

Celeste Sangiorgio & Dash Lunde

“That’s not music - that’s just noise!”

- Old adage, haters

You’re in the passenger’s seat of a car as someone you know drives - it’s a hot, summer’s day. The window is open, and you can feel a soft, steady blast of hot air and hear a hum from the road passing by as the car moves along. There’s a soft warmth from the sun on your face. You hear one note of a song. Do you know what song it is? You hear another note, how about now? When you realize that the music is by Taylor Swift - how do you feel? What happens to the mood in the car? What does everyone do? The question of when noises become music and when music becomes songs has been an area of study for years - but one major theme across studies from the 1950s to now is that music is active: a living event that requires the attention, interpretation, and emotional experience of a listener.^{1,2,3}

Whether the audience has a positive or negative emotional experience - and people have surely had both - Swift’s music is something that needs participation, as all music does. Swift’s music creates an emotional exchange, and she seems quite adept at making it an intense one for many of her listeners. But does one emotional experience create

a musical culture and scene? How about two or three? Much like a song, culture is a participatory experience - a living process where someone receives and then puts their own spin on the culture. Unlike other parts of culture, music is unique in that it is both deeply personal and universal; it doesn't choose a camp. As a musician, Swift has dedicated her life to rooting through her own personal experience to find the core, universal themes that she can transform into something that resonates with everyone in her audience. In this way, Swift's music is a balancing act - a tightrope suspended across individual and group experiences that becomes a lifeline for the meaning that can come from organizing the high volume of experiences, events, and relationships that we, as an audience, are bombarded with daily.

track 1: i've got a blank space, and i'll write an identity there.

Music can be thought of as a formula: a combination of sound, the audience, and the musician. Let's start with one part of this formula: Who is Taylor Swift? Taylor Swift's effective use of both musical technique and personal storytelling in her music are a large part of what creates such an emotionally resonant body of work, but her work is not just a creation of her own. It's been shaped by the culture she grew up in and adds to, and by the participation of her fans. Taylor Swift has created a body of work and persona that feel familiar to many people by combining many facets of the culture she's a part of into a unique musical identity, but also presents her real-life, personal identity in a vulnerable and intimate way. She asks fans to share a cultural experience with hers.

Swift spent her childhood in the United States in the 90's. The cultural atmosphere, called a zeitgeist, at this time featured a unique blend of songwriting that captured people reacting to the world around them in honest ways. Women were tired of patriarchal social norms, young people in general felt an irreverence for stuffy social norms and institutions, and disenfranchised people of color were reclaiming space through popular music. There was the feminist anger defined by songwriters like Alanis Morissette or Liz Phair,⁴ the pop

punk fun and self-effacing lyrics of Blink 182 or Sum 41,⁵ the social commentary and raw grittiness of the burgeoning hip-hop movement that included both gangster rap that represented the brutal life of the streets (Notorious B.I.G., Eminem) and uplifting lyrics of black futurism (A Tribe Called Quest, De La Soul),⁶ and the beginnings of Millennial irony in Beck and Damon Albarn's Blur.⁷

Swift came of age and began making music in the 00's. While some trends of the 90's continued, especially radical honesty, it was also marked by deeper introspection and imaginative storytelling, encapsulating an era of both cynicism and escapism. This time marked the rise of a new generation of pop divas like Beyoncé and Britney Spears,⁸ a return to conceptual character-driven rock music like the Killer's "Mr. Brightside," My Chemical Romance's "The Black Parade," and Green Day's "American Idiot,"⁹ and generally deep introspection and existential angst present across a variety of genres and artists. This era was also marked by personal and emotional explorations of relationships, as captured by Taylor Swift's own "Love Story" (2008)¹⁰ among others.

Looking at the multitude of cultural forces that acted on Swift in her most formative years, one can see many of the facets of what has made her a uniquely successful songwriter, and why so many people feel at home when they engage with her songs. Taylor Swift — the character — is not presented as pristine or morally superior but revels in revealing her angrier side, but in a fun way that says sometimes it's okay to get mad. To some it may seem self-indulgent, but that's exactly the appeal: it's human to get mad sometimes. It's okay to not always show our best face to the world. In fact, we can embrace it. Her music presents a perfectly imperfect person, someone who embraces and even celebrates their own flaws with a nod and a wink. And she does so in ways that are distinctive of the musical generation she grew up in. She blends the feminist themes and anger of Morissette with pop punk humor and sarcasm. She uplifts like a backpack rapper while she knocks down her enemies, and even herself, with all the fire of a great diss track. She's existential, but she doesn't take it too seriously. She creates a character that she readily admits isn't real, and even parodies. Her larger-than-life stage presence has the mystique of an untouchable popstar like

Beyoncé, yet she isn't afraid to put her less pristine side on full display as well.

In this way, she creates a unique world that is simultaneously glamorous and goofy, introspective and flirtatious, and character-driven yet personally relatable. It is this diversity that makes it so easy for so many to find a home in her music. Many of her fans can feel like they grew up with her, in fact a lot of them did, and they can hear it in the variety of influences she combines in her music. But this is just one aspect of why, culturally, Swift's music can feel like home.

The key to Swift's impact is that she goes out of her way to break down the barrier between artist and fan. Examples include the Secret Sessions, where she invited fans to join her in private listening events for new album releases, including fans in her music videos, "Swift-mas" gifts during the holiday season, and generally tons of exclusive content. Easter eggs and hidden messages themselves have become a personal trademark of Swift's. She speaks intimately about her personal life and struggles in public, and despite being judged for her public statements in the past she continues to do so with great candor. The friendship bracelet trend is also a great example of this, giving even large stadium tours the feeling of being at a friend's sleepover party.

The way she feels like a friend to her fans, in addition to her songwriting talent, is what amplifies her global yet intimate appeal. When fans listen to her music, they are not just resonating with the musical and lyrical content that creates familiarity, they also experience the personal relationship that they've developed with her outside of the music. It's associated with each song and rekindled with each listen. In a way, it's almost like listening to a talented friend's music. You know their struggles and the things you love about them as a person, and you can hear it reflected in music that is well-crafted to convey those feelings. You aren't just hearing a song and relating to it, you understand what in her life created that song and that makes it feel that much more familiar. It sounds like a person you've come to know — it sounds like home.

track 2: does a song live in the basement or the penthouse of your heart?

So then, what are the building blocks Taylor Swift uses to create these songs? A song starts at its most basic, with sound. Saying anything out loud or moving your body to make noise shapes the space around you. The way that these sounds bounce all over the space (like a room, or a car) around you and then bounce onto your eardrum is called acoustics.^{11,12} Words, sentences, and language tend to convey meaning and ideas, but the pitch and tone of these words create a musicality - an emotional tag for the words and ideas that are being shared. Or, put another way: picture someone saying the following example lines in three ways:

- A. Smiling, a high-pitched giggle: I'll keep moving, even if my heart won't heal.
- B. Looking into the distance, almost a whisper: I'll keep moving, even if my heart won't heal.
- C. Frowning, with a low-pitched growl: I'll keep moving, even if my heart won't heal.

What emotional tag would you put with each of these? Here's what we picked:

- Celeste — A, Playful, happy; B, Determined, hopeful; C, Angry;
- Dash — A, Optimistic, playful; B, Melancholy; C, Angry.

And you — did you pick similar or different emotions?

A simple sentence like the one above is quite complicated, mentally - it sets your brain in motion: the different parts of your brain have to talk to each other to process the sentence, pitch, tone, and sounds to form an interpretation of the speaker's intention. Music tends to be immediately digested and processed by the emotional and perceptual areas of the brain while language activates complex, thought-related parts of the brain.¹³ The processes at work behind listening to music form early on in people's lives: children recognize and show interest in

human noises over similar, distracting noises (e.g., a closing door) by the time they are 4-weeks old.¹⁴ By the time children are 5-months-old, they recognize music and can repeat parts of songs.¹⁵ However, a major shift happens in how people think about language that does not happen for music (pitch and tone). By 8-months-old, the brain starts to organize itself to recognize specific words within a specific language¹⁶ but does not do the same thing for music.

In other words, people cannot understand different languages, but they do understand music. When people are shown music in other languages and from cultures with different musical traditions, they may not be able to tell what the song is about but they can reliably tell others if the song is happy, sad, or otherwise pinpoint the emotional core of the song.^{17,18,19} More even than cross-cultural, these tones cross species - this is the same process at work that tells you if a dog is barking excitedly because he wants to play or growling a warning because he wants his space. This is also the same process that makes babies remember, sing, and dance to *Baby Shark* (2016)²⁰ and *Shake it Off* (2014).²¹

Think about a happy Taylor Swift Song; now a sad one; now a wistful one. More likely than not - these songs match to specific musical signatures. If each note in a song is like a single leaf, then a chord, a collection of musical notes, can be thought of as a whole tree and multiple chords as a whole event (the colors in autumn, for example). Chords are a collection of notes at different intervals that create a certain harmony, and in a broad way they are a type of communication that can be found anywhere - in songbirds singing together, in a booming symphony hall, or in a tinny laptop speaker doing its best to blast out a favorite childhood hit are a few examples. The size and shapes of chords tell us how to feel: loud sounds are urgent while soft sounds are sensitive; major chords are happy while minor chords are sad.²² Unexpected suspensions or shifts in music can be dangerous or scary. Think back to those songs you thought of before - Table 1 below shows Taylor Swift songs that use major chords, minor chords, and more wistful combinations. Maybe you'll see some of the songs you thought of here:

Major Chords (Happy)	Complex Chords (wistful, defiant)	Minor Chords (sad)
Stay Stay Stay (Red)	All Too Well (Red)	Safe & Sound (Red)
22 (Red)	Wildest Dreams (1989)	Soon You'll Get Better (Lover)
Shake it Off (1989)	Style (1989)	Exile (folklore)

Table 1. Chord types and corresponding emotions with examples from Taylor Swift's Discography

Table 1 shows some patterns in Swift's music - her music tends to use major chords or, more frequently, a mix of major and minor chords. Often, her songs start in a sad or wistful minor place of minor chords and then build into an intense, defiant place of major chords. Taylor Swift is not alone - pop music tends to have certain types of chords and notes,²³ and there has been a trend within recent decades of pop music to mix different types of emotions and chords in the same song.²⁴ But Taylor Swift may have a particular aptitude towards these types of mixtures - many of her most popular songs mix up major and minor chords. In fact, the only songs in the table above that primarily have minor chords are her collaborations! Swift's style of toggling emotions and chords to create the experience of processing different emotions, thoughts, and events make complex, emotional songs that guide the listener in thinking and reacting alongside her for the duration of the events within the song.

track 3: and seeing the shapes of her words still spells out feelings...

Taylor Swift is a songwriter - if a chord progression, or melody, is the backdrop of the song then the lyrics that she writes can be thought of as what happens in that landscape: the people walking through the colors of autumn or the person thinking about their relationships and favorite cardigans. Lyrics are more than the music or language that go into them - the whole of the song is greater than the sum of its parts - maybe this is because lyrics communicate simultaneously in the spoken language they are said in as well as the emotional language of pitch, tone, and melody. When people are asked to pay attention to

music or words, their brains behave differently and pick up on different things when the same words are set to music.²⁵

Lyrics within songs can be understood through music theory and through psychological science. Using a music theory approach, lyrics fit into blocks of exposition, called verses, sandwiched between repeating phrases and ideas, called choruses.²⁶ These can be further broken into signature pieces that are in some songs but not others - a hook is a catchy turn of phrase, and a pre-chorus is a build up into a chorus (see Figure 1).

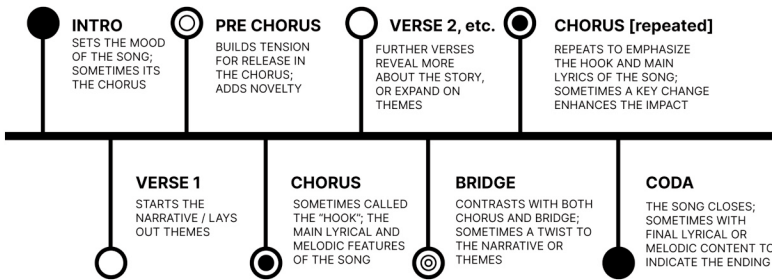


Figure 1. The anatomy of a song

Using approaches from psychological sciences, lyrics can be broken down into the words within them and the way they are said. Certain words are associated with certain emotions and shapes - this is sometimes called the bouba/kiki effect, because researchers found that across cultures and languages, people associate bouba with a soft round, shape and kiki with a sharp, hard shape.²⁷ (see Figure 2). To extend this into words we know - *Cruel* may be a hard, sharper word but *Summer* is a soft, rounder word; combining them into *Cruel Summer* creates a unified, complex image for listeners.

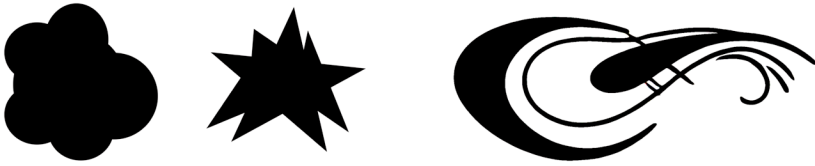


Figure 2 (left). The original Bouba / Kiki images | Figure 3 (right). Bouba Kiki: Our Version — our depiction of the hallmarks of Taylor Swift's songwriting as a "Bouba Kiki" image," representing the "C"ruel "S"ummer

When a musician elongates vowels to match lyrics to emotional melodies or repeats lyrics within songs, songs can become more memorable, or catchy. Said differently - elo-O-o-oong-Aate vowels and repeat, peat, peat, peat, peat, peat to be catchy. Interestingly, repetition and elongation are also common hallmarks of how caregivers speak to children.²⁸ The words in lyrics can be safe, exciting, or dangerous and the lyrical structure that they travel in can be familiar from a music or psychological perspective.

Taylor Swift's music is full of swiftly identifiable hallmarks (see what we did there?), with her wordplay and specific melodic techniques, but these distinctive features go beyond the music. Swift appears to have a knack for creating catchy melodies, using quick phrases and her iconic vocal glides, movement across chords, which make her songs stick in a listeners' head.²⁹ These are frequently simple stepwise melodies that are easy for fans to sing along with, but quirky enough to feel unique and engaging. In cultural psychology, this is referred to as the "minimal counterintuitiveness effect."³⁰ Pascal Boyer, a cognitive anthropologist, developed this term to describe things that break expectations just enough to be especially memorable, while preserving enough important rules to still feel familiar. And this is exactly what Taylor Swift has done with pop songwriting. Beyond her quirky melodic hooks, she has done the same with the lyrical content of her music. Swift frequently uses clichés in parts of her lyrics, but these deeply familiar sayings are always turned on their heads by the end of a phrase. In addition to subverting clichés, Swift often uses other types of wordplay or humor that create that element of the unexpected that makes her songs stick. This simultaneously creates a

feeling of intimacy, as we're in on the joke with her. A final, identifiable hallmark of Swift's music is her propensity to speed and slow her lyrics regardless of the melodic structure. This speeding and slowing lyrics, separate from melody, is communication from Taylor to her audience, through art: this action separates the emotional landscape of the melody itself from her reasoning about the events within the song, making the lyrics feel like watching someone's thoughts. Once separated, her thoughts feel alive and can even take on the rushed feeling of someone's inner monologue: slowing to speech to indicate reflection and emphasis or speeding extra words into a verse, creating the cramped feeling of panic or anxiety.

One way to think of a person's inner world is by imagining it as a personal landscape filled with thoughts, emotions, and types of actions - this is what cognitive-behavior therapy (CBT) calls the cognitive model.³¹ Music, through tone, can communicate some of these thoughts and emotions. A song, as a collection of tones and sounds, can be a way to communicate a full emotional state and related events (thoughts, actions); in this way, a song is an emotional communication - a message that boils down and shares beliefs about the world, life, and personal events. *Shake it Off* (2014)³² tells you how to get up, dance, and move past painful things; *Karma* (2023)³³ is a victorious reflection on how things come together and change; *You Belong with Me* (2009)³⁴ showcases the thrill and intensity of sharing a deep connection with a close friend and secret romance. Taylor Swift is not alone in using music to point out the internal, mental landmarks that many people share - investigations of songs across cultures found that despite language differences, there are consistencies across tone, emotion patterns, and contents in songs that parents sing to their children.³⁵ Obviously, we could not talk about the impact of Swift's songwriting without noting the content of her music, which largely centers around the dynamics of her social relationships — with partners, with friends, with collaborators, and with the public. The Taylor Swift persona is one that isn't afraid to say what's on her mind, to call someone out, or challenge public expectations, often with wit or even biting sarcasm. Swift takes in events in her life and relationships and processes them and shares them with her audience - using characteristic ways of

sharing and processing that are completely unique to who she is as a person.

In the same way that each person has a unique fingerprint, the characteristic tones, turns of phrase, and pitch of each person's voice creates a completely unique audio signature for each person - like a vocal-print.³⁶ Millions of people are familiar with Taylor Swift's unique vocal-print: from the emotions she discusses to the ways that she works through relationships, the world, and conflict to emerge victorious and reflective. Taylor Swift seems familiar to us - her vocal patterns are comforting, creating a penthouse in our hearts and furnishing it with beliefs about the power of emotional, thoughtful women to break through barriers and create their own moments of comfort and triumph.

Music is a complex exchange that involves the intersection of two tremendous forces: thousands of years of evolutionary development in communication interacting with the inner world of experiences and emotions within the relatively brief lifespan of the listener. Musicians weave this formula by picking out threads of meaning that they notice and creating sparkling reflections to share with their audiences. Taylor Swift is adept at collecting snapshots of events - a look, an image, a feeling - and placing them within melodies and lyrics that capture the emotional events and thoughts that are part of everyone's lives. The musical techniques Swift uses make these songs catchy - her repetition, cliches, and matching emotions to scales - but her precision in tapping into universal themes and her ability to draw attention to them by filtering them through herself are what transform her into a culture-defining musician.

A key to Swift's enduring impact lies in her ability to break down the barrier between artist and fan. Through personal interactions, exclusive content, and public candidness, she cultivates a sense of intimacy and friendship with her audience. This connection amplifies the emotional resonance of her music, making fans feel as though they are sharing in her personal journey. Swift's ability to make her listeners feel seen and understood transforms her music from mere entertainment into a comforting presence that feels like home. In this way, Taylor Swift's music serves as both a mirror and a sanctuary for her

fans, reflecting their own experiences while providing a space for emotional connection and understanding.

track 4: a taylor-made song, a tortured poet wrote here.

Because Taylor Swift has chosen to share her lyrical and musical aptitude with the world, she has taken on a complicated, important role in society: she points out what is happening in culture while she is also embedded in and influences the culture. Sometimes scholars in religious and philosophy studies refer to this ability to outline, call out, and critique the status quo as a *prophet* or *oracle*^{37,38} role - Taylor Swift herself has called the space she inhabits the Tortured Poets Department. Taking on the role of an oracle takes precision and expertise: an ability to reflect, technical expertise to understand this reflection, and then the ability to present and share these observations in (often deeply personal) stories. In Swift's version of this role - as a tortured poet - she has created a mirror to the events of the world around her to reflect the cultural zeitgeist, interpreting themes of feminism, introspection, and emotional honesty and charting them into new cultural territory.

"A song is like a stage. Everything signifies something... The audience will see a fallen red hair ribbon in that hyperassociative, fictional space called the stage and start connecting it, metaphorically, with the rest of the images they see," writes singer songwriter Dar Williams in her book, How to Write a Song That Matters.³⁹ Put another way by hip-hop artist Black Ice in Truth Is, "in the heads... is where the track is, and music shoots straight to the soul, it's so potent."⁴⁰ Swift's awareness of the emotional content of sound melody and her thoughtful lyrics combine into defiant songs that tell us, the audience, that it is alright and safe to treat emotions as comfortable and precious. Whether it is anger, sentimentality, or joy, Swift's comfort in the hyper-associative space, sitting with music that shoots straight to the soul, is an invitation to the audience to do the same and become comfortable, familiar, and even excited about their own emotions. If the 90s zeitgeist included righteous anger, Swift's extends this zeitgeist into the idea

that emotions do not have to be justified by ideas like righteousness - they can exist and be interacted with as is: part of the internal world that can always be accessed. Swift's reflective, triumphant tone and lyrical content tells us that introspection is not only safe, but a precious part of human experience; emotions (melody) and thoughts (lyrics) are treated as important and vital by Swift. Swift tells us that women - everyone - can treat their emotions as precious, important resources.

Swift's music can feel like home because her songs represent something that is inside of everyone: the hyperassociative space described by Dar Williams. Because she elevates and highlights her emotional experience, she communicates to the audience that they do not have to feel ashamed of treating their own emotions and related thoughts as important. Our own version of our emotions and thoughts may not be exactly within Swift's corner of the hyperassociative space, but her music is a lifeline that we can walk to and build a home there: a place where we can feel comfortable in and exalt our own emotions and thoughts. If Swift is an expert at navigating this space, does this also mean that, with practice, we can become adept at navigating it too? In other words, what memories, words, or symbols hold a special significance in your own mind? What are the metaphors that structure your life story? That's a blank space only you can fill.

we won't be sleeping

Insomnia and the feminist antiheroism of Taylor
Swift

Elly McCausland

Does Taylor Swift ever sleep? It's a reasonable question. A few months ago, I read a comment on Reddit from a fan who pointed out that '2AM is not a good time for blondie'. They've got a point. I can think of at least three references to the 'AMs' in Swift's lyrics, off the top of my head, and countless more to midnight (of course). Swift's nights are often sleepless, either due to restless romantic rumination ('Traacherous'; 'Back to December'; 'Hoax') or the ill-advised consumption of caffeine after 4pm ('You are in Love'). When there *is* sleep, it's often unconventional to say the least. Sleeping in half the day ('tis the damn season'). Midnights becoming afternoons ('Antihero'). Eating breakfast at midnight ('22'). Slumbering poorly in the hospital ('Fresh Out The Slammer'). There has been a host of fan discussion about how Swift manages to perform the Eras tour so energetically, night after night, month after month, country after country (and, as she revealed in *The Tortured Poets Department*, even with a broken heart) but perhaps this shouldn't surprise us. If her lyrics are anything to go by, the woman doesn't need sleep at all.

'Who needs sleep when there is Swift?' asked Alison Stine in 2023, discussing the promo surrounding the release of *Midnights* (2022), which was organised around the concept of meeting Swift – and the

new album – as the clock struck twelve.¹ Swift’s fans had expressed exasperation as well as excitement: ‘Can someone tell @taylorswift13 to please get a normal sleep schedule. I’m 32. How am I supposed to stay up till midnight on a work night?’ moaned one fan on X; ‘Taylor Swift never wants us to sleep again’, concluded another. It’s not just *Midnights*: fans have had to contend with a barrage of issues relating to different time zones when trying to purchase Eras tour tickets or watch Swift at the Superbowl, even braving ferocious jet lag for a glimpse of their idol on stage. It’s somewhat ironic, then, that the ‘Taylor Swift method’ for sleep-training babies gets rave reviews: the fans may not be sleeping, but their innocent babes are lulled into peace under starlight by her sweet nothings. Only the young, eh?

Swift herself revealed her unusual habit of semi-conscious ‘sleep eating’ in an interview on the Ellen DeGeneres show in 2019. She has often referred to her songwriting as autobiographical, and so it makes sense that her own disjointed sleep is reflected by a recurring lyrical trope: disrupted or non-normative slumber. This chapter will argue that this motif has a wider significance beyond the autobiographical. We can read Swift’s insomniac lyricism as a form of subtle rebellion: a deliberate, conscious rejection of certain ‘life rhythms’ in a way that has important implications for how we understand Swift as a modern feminist.

the witching hour

Midnights takes insomnia as its main theme, in a way that connects disrupted sleep with insatiable creativity. Swift’s announcement of the album release on her social media described lying awake in turmoil, staring at walls, pacing floors and facing demons. It was dedicated to those of us who stay up all night to search for ourselves. Midnight, it is implied, is a liminal space brimming with possibility and potential; like the witching hour of ye olde fairytale, it’s both a place of strangeness but also one where magic happens. Similarly, it’s worth noting, Swift identified the unprecedented weirdness and disruption of routine that accompanied the coronavirus pandemic as highly motivating for her creativity; it produced ‘willow’, whose video certainly

went all-out in exploring the dazzling potential of the witching hour. Beyond the normative, outside the routine, is where Swift seems to thrive best. After all, she has delighted in surprising her fans – with secret sessions, spontaneous album releases, and special tour guests – since 2006.

Twinned with its sleepless aspect is the ever-present hint of madness that runs through *Midnights*. Facing demons, making cages for ourselves, meeting our (evil) doppelgänger at midnight: all these references suggest a somewhat unhinged quality that recalls Swift songs such as ‘mad woman’, ‘this is me trying’ and ‘Blank Space’. Swift has long leaned into the image of the crazy ex-girlfriend: consider the video for ‘Blank Space’, where she leers at the camera with wide, mascara-streaked eyes and revels in taking a knife and a crowbar to her ex’s most treasured possessions. In her later work, from *Lover* onwards, she identifies the mad woman as a sexist construct defined and maintained by patriarchal gaslighting. Swift’s nuancing of ‘madness’ is key here. Yes, Swift acknowledges, the mad woman is mad – angry, furious – but she’s not *mad* – not *insane*. In fact, her madness is an entirely logical defensive response to centuries of patriarchal oppression, including the very real historical incarceration of inconvenient but perfectly sane women in asylums. By reclaiming and celebrating the mad woman, Swift rehabilitates her.

Representations of madness and mad women in Swift’s work deserve their own chapter, particularly since the release of *The Tortured Poets Department*, where she compares growing up famous to being raised in asylum. Here, however, I plan to focus specifically on how Swift’s fascination with sleep – or lack thereof – is part of the same feminist message that we see in her rehabilitation of the mad woman: one of subversion and resistance. Just as Swift refuses to shut up and be a good girl – a phrase she herself used when discussing her plan to re-record her masters – she also refuses to fit neatly into our societal expectations of how a woman should behave, including how and when she should sleep. It’s significant that one of the criticisms thrown at Swift, according to ‘Shake It Off’, is that she stays out too late. Why should we care so much about when she sleeps or doesn’t sleep, and why does it matter?

To answer that, we might turn to award-winning American author Otessa Moshfegh's groundbreaking novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, published in 2018. There are interesting parallels between the way both Moshfegh and Swift home in on irregular sleep – in Moshfegh's case, too much of it; in Swift's case, not enough – as a means of articulating a wider feminist message about the way in which patriarchal capitalist society attempts to dictate and police the bodily rhythms of its subjects, particularly those who identify as women.

rest, relaxation, and rebellion

My Year of Rest and Relaxation was reviewed by some critics as pushing the boundaries of the unlikeable protagonist: already, we can see a clear link with Swift's self-fashioned antiheroism and her desire to star in our bad dreams. Lincoln Michel describes Moshfegh's writing as 'almost like an attempt to see just how "unlikeable" characters can get',² and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is no exception: Rebecca Stoner described its protagonist as 'hypnotically unlikeable'.³ Said protagonist – also the narrator – remains unnamed throughout the novel. She is an attractive wealthy graduate of 26, living in New York City, who deliberately seeks out a dubious quack psychiatrist. This scatterbrained psychiatrist barely listens to her patient's invented symptoms (mostly insomnia) and prescribes her – as the narrator intends – increasingly strong sleeping pills, anti-anxiety and anti-psychotic medication. The narrator uses these to sink herself into a state of 'hibernation'. She has decided to sleep for a year to 'reset her life' and escape the dissatisfaction and boredom she feels in relation to her work, relationships and recently deceased parents. Her aim is that, by the end of her experiment, 'I'd be renewed, reborn. I would be a whole new person, every one of my cells regenerated enough times that the old cells were just distant, foggy memories'.⁴

Her early attempts at what we might call a 'conscious unconsciousness' – a deliberate decision to escape the world through deep sleep – go awry, after the narrator keeps waking up in odd places with no recollection of how she got there. She realises she has been leaving her apartment while under the influence of the drugs, even engaging in

sexual activity without knowing. She enlists the help of an artist acquaintance to lock her in her newly-decluttered apartment and bring her food every three days, when she wakes for one hour to eat, drink, exercise, shower, and ingest more medication. It's a pattern that continues until she eventually awakes for good in early summer, cross-legged on the living room floor. 'I heard a bird chirp,' she notes. 'I was alive'.⁵

The precise message of Moshfegh's novel has been debated. Michel points out that some critics perceive her as a satire of privileged white women, while others 'hail her as a feminist hero who decides it is better to sleep away than lean in. Perhaps she is both'.⁶ Regardless, it's clear that, in a similar way to Swift, Moshfegh's novel explores what it means for a woman to reject what scholar Elizabeth Freeman terms 'chrononormativity'. Chrononormativity, as Freeman defines it, is 'the use of time to organise individual human bodies toward maximum productivity'.⁷ In other words, it's a construct of capitalism. Thanks to the industrial revolution and electric lighting, we are no longer dependent on the seasons and can now work the same hours every day, all year. Institutional forces – timesheets, schedules, global time zones, wristwatches, state-mandated work and vacation hours – dictate time to the point where it seems natural, equivalent to our bodies' fundamental rhythms, when in fact it is the other way round: we have been forced to adapt our lifestyles, including our bodies, to suit these arbitrary constructs.

Moshfegh's narrator perceives these constructs as a 'virus' that is particularly pervasive in the heart of frenetic New York City. Her so-called best friend, Reva, is 'a slave to vanity and status, which was not unusual in a place like Manhattan', where everyone is obsessed with 'fitting in'.⁸ 'I'd tried being one of those blond women speed walking up and down the Esplanade in spandex, Bluetooth in my ear like some self-important asshole' the narrator tells us.⁹ It doesn't work. She grows bored and disaffected, seeking refuge in sleep: 'Oh, sleep. Nothing else could ever bring me such pleasure, such freedom, the power to feel and move and think and imagine, safe from the miseries of my waking consciousness'.¹⁰ We might interpret her actions as a weaponisation of sleep. Sleep becomes an intentional act of resistance

towards, and a refuge from, the demands of capitalist chrononormativity. The narrator starts to take increasingly long naps in the supply closet at work, and is eventually fired. 'Sleep felt productive,' she tells us, ironically reframing sleep as a meaningful alternative to capitalism's emphasis on increasing efficiency.¹¹ When Reva, a ditzzy materialist, tries to console her by framing unemployment as a positive breathing space to figure out her life goals, and mentions that 'in Japan, companies have special rooms for businessmen to take naps in. I read about it in *GQ*', the narrator explicitly refuses to allow her hibernation to be placed within this capitalist, goal-oriented wellness narrative: 'I'm not making a career move. [...] I'm going to sleep for a year'.¹²

Stoner points out that Reva is the narrator's foil, placing her trust in life philosophies drawn from

self-help books and workshops that usually combined some new dieting techniques with professional development and romantic relationship skills, under the guise of teaching young women "how to live up to their full potential".¹³

That many would see this as normal, she points out, 'is a reminder of how commonplace it's become to live only half awake.' In 2023, British newspaper *The Guardian* published an article with the headline, 'We're sedating women with self-care: How we became obsessed with wellness.'¹⁴ Alison Phipps points out that, within the framework of neoliberalist capitalism, self-care has become commodified to the point that those who do not – or cannot afford to – buy into it and thereby 'achieve their potential' are seen (and blamed) as failures, rather than the victims of oppressive social structures.¹⁵ By contrast, Moshfegh's narrator's determination to truly drop out, consciously sedating herself with medicine rather than being passively lulled into oblivion by the intertwined industries of wellness and capitalism, 'seems like a respectable rebellion', Stoner points out.¹⁶

This novel, saturated with sleep, is, paradoxically, a reminder to

wake up: to the ways in which our realities – particularly if we identify as women – have been shaped and distorted by the arbitrary and artificial rhythms of institutional forces (namely, patriarchal capitalism) without us even realising. Swift's music, which celebrates the high highs and the crushing lows of being indisputably, madly, wide awake, also urges a reappraisal of these rhythms in a way we might read as distinctly feminist.

help, i'm still not doing what the patriarchy wants!

Like Moshfegh, Swift rejects chrononormativity. Think of 'right where you left me', a bonus track from 2020's *evermore*, where Swift adopts the persona of a rejected lover, still occupying the restaurant table where her beloved left her for someone else years ago. She's still there, while life goes on around her: her friends are breaking up then getting married, while strangers are born and buried, and her ex-lover has probably now settled down with a wife and children, but she's unaware. The circle of life continues, but not for the persona of the song, who is an odd, haunting figure – a sad sight – because she doesn't integrate neatly into its progression and follow the expected trajectory of moving on, getting over it, and ultimately settling down with someone else. More than one Swiftie – including myself – has noticed the song's 'Miss Havisham vibes' (to quote a Redditor on its dedicated /r/taylorswift 'megathread'). Once again, the mad woman – one of literature's most *iconic* mad women, Charles Dickens's uncanny bride frozen in time – is given a compassionate, sympathetic portrayal. What is particularly interesting is that this sympathetic portrayal also rejects what we might term 'chronobiopolitics': how individual bodies are expected to fit into

teleological schemes of events or strategies for living such as marriage, accumulation of health and wealth for the future, reproduction, childrearing, and death and its attendant rituals.¹⁷

In the eyes of the state, Freeman points out, only lives that fit these expected patterns – which, incidentally, often serve a nation's

economic interests, since birth, marriage and death are licensed and registered to suit various taxpaying purposes and the (re)distribution of wealth and property – are socially construed as meaningful.¹⁸ If you're not working towards the next big milestone – an engagement, a pregnancy – your life is just floating around like an amorphous, structureless blob that does not fit the linear, goal-orientated narrative mould of capitalism. This ties into what the scholar Lee Edelman identifies as 'heterofuturity', the sociopolitical tendency to work towards a better future imaginatively organised around our descendants, and therefore one that prioritises the child, and ergo heterosexual reproduction.¹⁹ I saw a post on a feminist Instagram account the other day that asked, 'If I don't choose to get engaged, married or have a baby, will the next time we all meet be around my coffin?', an unsettling reminder that even women's social lives and friendships – choices over which we probably feel we have free will – are dictated by expectations of their normative life trajectories.

Chronobiopolitics is particularly applicable to, and felt by, those who identify as women. The 'biological clock' (note here the application of regimented modern timekeeping technology to something as incredibly fluid and complex as a woman's fertility) is often invoked as a means of encouraging women to arrange their lives into what Caetlin Benson-Allott terms 'linear stories organized around the traditional social benchmarks of romantic coupling and "reproductive futurity", wherein raising children and perpetuating the social order are the highest aims of human existence'.²⁰ All they keep asking us, as Swift acknowledges in 'Lavender Haze', is when we're gonna be a bride. And then a mother.

Cultural artefacts like literature and film only help to reinforce and perpetuate the narratives favoured by heterofuturity and chronobiopolitics. This is surely only increased by the modern trend to document our milestones on social media, and to frame ourselves as the main characters in our own lives. As Freeman points out, according to a chronobiopolitical way of thinking, having a life means being able to showcase it via a 'novelistic' framework centred on events, goals, epiphanies and transformations, something that social media increasingly encourages us to do in aesthetic ways.²¹ 'Reva often spoke about

“settling down”, the narrator of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* recalls, before forcibly rejecting this trajectory: ‘That sounded like death to me.’²² When Reva asks her about ‘the long term’, she simply replies, ‘I’m not thinking that far ahead’, resisting something that women are expected, almost from childhood, to do.²³ It is interesting that the narrator ensures that the artist who visits to check up on her leaves no evidence as to what has happened since her last awakening. As she puts it, ‘There was to be no narrative that I could follow, no pieces for me to put together.’²⁴ This has a wider symbolic significance, too: the narrator is deliberately seeking to escape all textbook, template narratives for her life trajectory as an affluent, white, American woman, and instead to carve out her own, starting from a fresh, blank canvas. Or, perhaps, a Blank Space.

Moshfegh herself has pointed out that ‘a lot of life doesn’t go anywhere, and what’s interesting is what happens on the inside in that time.’²⁵ As Freeman also points out, there are many different forms of time in our lives. Emotional, domestic, and biological time cannot be sped up and micro-managed in the way that increasingly characterises the wristwatch and timesheet time of neoliberal capitalism. To properly sit with one’s feelings, to consider one’s bodily reality in a deep and meaningful way, to move at one’s own pace, might be to resist the increasing pressure to conform to socially dictated rhythms. Swift’s music is deeply attuned to these different forms of time, and the intensely individual ways in which time is felt and experienced. She notices in, for example, ‘right where you left me’ and ‘All Too Well’ that time moves differently when one is paralysed by grief, or in ‘Say Don’t Go’ and ‘Sparks Fly’ that falling in love has a tendency to stop time. She often acknowledges that society expects moving on to be easy for one to do, and that insurmountable grief tends to lead to a stasis that makes other people uncomfortable (further explored in ‘Down Bad’ and ‘lomi’).

Swift’s music is often lauded for validating the intense feelings of girlish heartbreak that society tries to socialise us out of, because there’s something awkward and embarrassing about them. We might read her engagement with the messy reality of emotional time, combined with her subtle sleeplessness references, as an empowering

reminder that we do not necessarily have to fit our complex, chaotic, multifaceted lives into the strict rhythms that capitalism has carved out for us. They say move on, but you know we won't.

An important caveat: we cannot really argue that Swift is, by any stretch of the imagination, anti-capitalist. I'm interested here in her rejection of chronobiopolitics as a reaction against patriarchy rather than against capitalism, and particularly against the templates women are offered by society – including the art and culture it produces – for how they should live their lives. We see this in a revealing moment in the *Miss Americana* documentary, where Swift points out that women in the entertainment industry are cast off into an 'elephant graveyard' by the time they are 35. Yet as her fanbase and the media have pointed out, Swift's success at 34 – which shows no sign of abating – already seems set to challenge these precedents (alongside the continued popularity of other 'older' female artists such as Shakira, Beyoncé and Jennifer Lopez).

Swift's refusal thus far to settle down, to become a wife and mother, is often used as a critique, particularly by far-right conservatives, since it defies traditional expectations of what makes a woman's life meaningful and valid within patriarchal society. An academic friend of mine, presenting at a conference on Taylor Swift in 2023, was aggressively questioned by a woman in her audience as to how Swift could possibly justify not having children yet, as if this were a violation of some fundamental responsibility she holds as a woman in her 30s. When my friend tried calmly and politely to reroute the question, the woman turned on her instead, asking whether she herself had children, as if motherhood was the only thing that would make this tenured academic seem truly legitimate. Swift's refusal to follow the expected life trajectory of an American Queen from the deep South has not gone unnoticed, or unchallenged.

the many stories of us

The rejection of chronormativity is often identified as a hallmark of queer literature and film, which tends to go against the linear narratives of heterofuturity by emphasising and celebrating non-linear

trajectories and modes of storytelling. While I don't want to enter into the 'Gaylor Swift' speculation here, I will note that Swift's work does suggest a preference for non-linearity. Her re-recording of her old masters as new 'Taylor's Version' albums is 'starting to resemble something like metaphysics', journalist Chris Richards has pointed out: he uses the example of 'Never Grow Up (Taylor's Version)', which sees today's Taylor reinhabiting her 20-year-old self as she sings to both her past (now even *more* past) and future (now present) selves, all the while yearning to preserve an innocence that we know is now long gone.²⁶ Or, as Taffy Brodesser-Akner puts it, Swift – especially in her Eras tour – acknowledges that all women are made up of who we are, *and* who we *were*, all existing in the same body on the same timeline: 'You are your sluttiest version, your silliest version, your most wholesome, your your smartest, your dumbest, your saddest, your happiest – all at once.'²⁷ Swift's re-recordings, combined with a hugely commercially successful tour grounded in reinhabiting all her past selves, is the ultimate embrace of non-linear and non-teleological ways of storytelling.

We might identify Swift as carving out a new trajectory for women, one that deliberately resists templates established by history and art. It's no coincidence that she often references women from historical British and American literature: Jane Eyre, Miss Havisham, Daisy from *The Great Gatsby*, Emily Dickinson, Wendy from *Peter Pan*, to name but a few. It's also no coincidence that many of these women did not get their 'happy ever after'. Jia Tolentino points out that women in literature – particularly heroines or protagonists – start off 'brave and plucky' but, the longer they live, become 'blank and depressed and desirable, and then, when they're adult women, they're bitter, and often, by the end of the book, dead'.²⁸ She cites examples like *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary*. Popular culture still has little space for successful, happy, middle-aged women who eschew patriarchal narratives of marriage and childbearing. As Benson-Allott observed, literature and film often reinforce chronobiopolitics and 'have little comfort to offer when such timelines are disrupted'.²⁹

Dickinson, for example, is often depicted as a strange, mad recluse, while Miss Havisham has become a ghostly Gothic figure. The only female character to die in Marvel's hugely successful Infinity Saga is

Black Widow, whose inability to bear children has been previously stated in the films. In a cinematic universe that ultimately frames the nuclear family as of the highest importance, of course the infertile Black Widow is expendable. Even the bold, subversive female heroines of book series like *The Hunger Games* and *Harry Potter* ultimately succumb to what Edelman terms 'the fascism of the baby's face'.³⁰ Their life purpose is no longer to rebel against the status quo, but to fulfil traditional conservative expectations of reproduction and child-rearing.

Tolentino claims that 'brave girls and bitter women are so concentrated in literature' because 'we haven't made enough space for them in the real world'. If Moshfegh's writing is – to use her own words – 'fucking with the conservative tropes of novels', I would argue that Swift is, with her rehabilitation of the mad woman and her refusal to settle down and disappear into family life at 30, doing the same.³¹ Swift can use her enormous influence to exclude herself from what Freeman terms 'the rhythms of gendered performance' and pave a path for other women.³² If you've seen this film before and didn't like the ending, she tells us, go back and write (Your Own Version).

creating her own folklore

Taylor Swift and Meaning Making

Virginia Spielmann & Sarah Anne Hart

“Self is a perpetually rewritten story” -Jerome Bruner

Humans love a good story. In psychology, there is an entire field called narrative psychology that focuses on this innate human inclination to tell stories by exploring the ways we use storytelling to construct “narratives” that help us make sense of our world. By paying close attention to the stories we craft, we can gain new perspectives on ourselves, our life, and the human experience. Our personal stories can have a profound impact on the way we view ourselves and navigate our lives. Just like the stories we love in books, our own stories tend to follow a traditional format of introduction, development, and conclusion and feature their own cast of characters, plotlines, and overarching themes. Telling our stories, and more importantly sharing our stories, helps us establish meaningful connections between past, present, and future, and create a sense of unity and understanding within our lives. Stories help us find meaning in our lived experience.

Enter Taylor Swift. She stands out one of the most transformative artists in modern popular music, in a near constant process of self-definition and reinvention. Swift is a master storyteller, who has built a passionate, devoted fan base driven largely by a shared sense of

meaning making through her storytelling. Her approach to songwriting has created a sense of intimacy alongside a kind of grand mythology, which can serve as a rich tapestry for examining the intersection of narrative and identity.

This chapter discusses Swift's evolving body of work through the lens of human development and narrative psychology, exploring how her music reflects our shared human experiences. By looking at her developing work, we can uncover valuable lessons about personal growth and the common threads that connect all our stories. Through the insights of various thinkers, we'll see how Taylor's journey can help us better understand our own journey through life.

Before we begin, it is important to acknowledge that this chapter will not explore fan or critic narratives. Narratives are subjective and vary depending on the individual's perspective and interpretation. Different people construct different narratives based on their biases, preferences, and understanding of the artist. Narratives can also be influenced by external factors such as media coverage, cultural context, social media trends, and societal trends, ultimately shaping the way art is perceived and appreciated across diverse audiences. In essence, Taylor Swift the person must be separated from Taylor Swift's discography and public persona as a megastar. In this chapter, we are interested in how Swift's story telling through her music illuminates principals of narrative psychology and self-actualization and vice versa. While an objective lens as a clinician remains a mythical goal it is also reasonable to aspire to writing that suspends judgement; privileges curiosity; and emphasizes wondering, which is what this chapter aims to do.

making meaning and taylor swift's storytelling

How we create and interpret our stories help us make sense of our life-so-far. Stories shape our current self-perception, inform the aspirations we set for our future self; and help us understand the complex worlds we navigate. By telling and retelling these stories, we derive meaning, establish who we are and (try to) figure out where we sit in the whole of human existence. Narrative Identity Development theory¹ suggests

that we shape our sense of self by creating personal stories that connect our past, present, and future. Through this storytelling process, we craft a cohesive and evolving narrative that blends our life experiences, values, beliefs, and aspirations. This autobiographical journey is about uncovering who we truly are, creating coherence from our experiences, and discovering the direction we want our life to take.

In this context, narrative psychology is about becoming your best self—what some refer to as "self-actualization." It empowers us to make our own choices and embrace our unique paths.

Moreover, our stories extend beyond our individual experiences, contributing to the collective narratives we share as a community. Engaging with these shared stories fosters empathy and connection, allowing us to explore diverse perspectives and emotions, ultimately deepening our understanding of ourselves and others.

Taylor Swift's work exemplifies this process of meaning-making through storytelling as she crafts personal stories that resonate with her experiences and emotions at the personal, interpersonal, and communal levels. Her lyrics often reflect her own identity, relationships, and personal growth, in a way that allows listeners to connect with her as well as find themselves in her stories. Throughout Swift's career fans and critics alike have made multiple attempts to better know her, interpret her evolution as an artist, chart her personal growth, and explicate the themes and messages conveyed in her music. There is a desperate drive to know the artist across print, broadcast, and social media. Indeed, the original intention of this chapter was to examine Swift's discography and growth solely through the lens of human development. However, Swift has such tight control on what is known of her publicly and such strong editorial power over her prosocial relationships and social media presence that it is not possible to see Taylor Swift the person through examination of her discography. Instead, her albums provide us with a series of short stories in various genres including autobiographical, tragic, romantic comedy, coming-of-age, and folk tales. These stories take the listener on journeys of exploration, self-discovery, and heart break. They tell us a little about Taylor Swift's belief in communality, her investment in true love, self-discovery and self-actualization, but

which aspects of the story are personal, and which are fictional remains a mystery.

That said, our lives and our stories do not exist in isolation. We create meaning through our interactions with others, particularly in our close relationships^{2,3}. Indeed, relationships and sensory experiences are essential, they are the building blocks for understanding ourselves. This process is dynamic and continuous as we constantly learn and evolve through our connections with people and our surroundings. Each interaction we have adds a new sentence or paragraph to our personal narrative, making our journey through life richer and more relatable. It's a fascinating reminder that our sense of self is not just an internal monologue, but a vibrant tapestry woven from the threads of our interactions and experiences.

Our relations with others can also include exposure to, and interaction with, fictional narratives. Fictional characters and stories can have a profound impact on our personal identity by offering role models⁴; modeling values and life choices⁵; and helping individuals navigate their own life stories⁶. These stories create a space for exploring complex themes of meaning, morality, and human experience, enabling individuals to grapple with their own beliefs and values. The distance between the stories being told and the listener's lived experience creates an even greater potential for transformation.

As we explore the way Taylor Swift's music through the lens of meaning making, a lot of emphasis is going to be placed on her storytelling (i.e., lyrics). However, it is important to recognize that the structure and composition of the music that accompanies her lyrics can also contribute to our sense of meaning making through evoking different emotions and sensations. For example, the musical structure of her songs often reflects movement alongside emotion. Upbeat tracks with driving rhythms can evoke feelings of exhilaration and joy, while slower ballads invite reflection and introspection. This interplay between tempo and emotional content enhances how we physically respond to her music. The layering of sounds and harmonies also introduces a tactile quality to her music. For instance, the inclusion of strings or piano creates a warm, enveloping atmosphere, while electronic elements can evoke feelings of urgency or exhilaration. Then, of

course with her lyrics, Swift's storytelling taps into universal emotions such as love, heartbreak, and nostalgia. Combined with her authentic and raw vocal delivery, listeners can experience these emotions deeply, forging a strong connection to the heart of her stories. For a more detailed discussion of the role of musical structure, see Chapter 4 in this volume.

making sense of who we are: identity formation

Swift's discography often navigates the tension between self-reliance and the need for connection, reflecting a journey of self-discovery and identity formation. While the transformative stages of adolescence and young adulthood is not the giant leap to independence that we (in the western world) once thought it was, it remains a deeply important period of self-discovery. This pivotal period is marked by encountering various obstacles that test and shape character. Swift's musical journey was a very public coming of age and is characterized by significant transformations in both her public persona and her genre. These changes reflect something of her personal development, artistic exploration, and the complexities of maturing into adulthood. Swift's music resonates deeply with this developmental stage, exploring themes of personal empowerment, triumph over adversity, and discovering inner strength. Lyrically and musically Swift's songs offer a source of inspiration and motivation to young listeners, empowering them to confront the challenges and uncertainties that accompany this phase of life.

Swift's debut album can be seen as a powerful narrative artifact that provides a window into the identity-formation^{7,8} of both Swift and her listeners. Its themes include identity formation and the quest for recognition, particularly for young women often sidelined in society. In fact, many of her early albums resonated deeply with teenagers and young adults, addressing the pivotal experiences of adolescence head-on. Her songs present a compassionate perspective that captures the emotions, challenges, and triumphs of this transformative phase. She creates a melodic landscape that mirrors the journey from youth to adulthood, offering comfort, affirmation, and inspiration.

Swift often sings about trying to find her place in the world, reflecting the confusion and exploration. For example, in *A Place in This* on her debut album. In her second studio album *Fearless*, she then reflects on the trials and lessons of growing up and identify formation on the track *Fifteen*, where she tells the story of a young girl who follows the expectations and norms set by her environment, only to realize later that she needs to find her own path. The song emphasizes the importance of self-exploration and the pitfalls of prematurely committing to an identity shaped by external influences. Beyond that, the narrative *Fearless* constructed engaged listeners in a profound dialogue about identity, recognition, and emotional growth. *Fearless* creates a shared space where listeners see their own experiences reflected and validated, fostering a deep and enduring connection. In this album, Swift shows a redefining of fearlessness as—not as the absence of fear, but as the courage to act despite it. This reflects her psychological process of assimilation whereby she adapts a newfound understanding of the concept of fearlessness and invites her listeners to do the same.

As her narrative themes evolve in later albums, they embody personal growth and the creative exploration that comes with transitioning into adulthood. Her early songs, such as *Love Story* and *You Belong with Me*, capture the exhilaration and idealism of young love while also revealing the complexities of heartbreak. Her album *Red* (2012) represents a time of experimentation and transition in Taylor Swift's career. The album is sonically incohesive shifting from heartbreak ballad to pop masterpiece to somber acoustic melodies, mirroring the jarring and mixed feelings of searching for identity and love. Publicly, Swift has marked this album as her retrospective shift from country into pop and famously wrote the album herself. The songs in this album, such as *We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together* and *I Knew You Were Trouble*, reflect a period of emotional and artistic exploration. These tracks capture the essence of trying new things, making mistakes, and learning from them.

Through her poignant lyrics, Swift encapsulates nostalgia and the transformative experiences that shape our sense of self during this vital stage of life. However, perhaps the greatest indication of identity

transformation and evolution can be seen in her decision to re-record her albums and revisit her earlier work. For example, Taylor Swift's influential *Red* album and the subsequent *Red (Taylor's Version)* showcase the same emotions but Taylor's Version explores them from a fresh perspective. In Taylor Swift's re-recorded albums, there is a clear shift in self-confidence and greater perspective on her earlier work. This process not only showcases her artistic growth but also reflects a newfound self-confidence and deeper understanding of her earlier work. As she revisits and rewrites her past, Swift demonstrates a remarkable ability to embrace her journey, revealing layers of self-awareness.

In addition to her musical progression, Swift's persona also experienced transformations. During her *Reputation* era, she fully embraced a daring and rebellious image, marked by deeper subjects, a stronger demeanor, and a departure from her previous wholesome image. She explored identity and power dynamics in the music industry reflecting her struggle with self-definition and its conflict with public perception, aligning with the emphasis on personal narratives shaping our identities. Additionally, in *Reputation*, Swift challenges public perception and societal expectations head on, creating a bold narrative that addresses how stories imposed by others are limiting. She critiques the narratives surrounding femininity, relationships, and success. The album's darker tones and themes further emphasizing the struggle for self-definition in a world that often imposes constricting narratives⁹. The evolution of her storytelling mirrors her own maturation and that of her audience, illustrating how we can take back our stories, and redefine our narratives to foster deeper connections with ourselves and others.

In her latest releases—*Midnights, 1989 (Taylor's Version)*, and *The Tortured Poet's Department*—Swift shifts her focus from being “everyone's everything” to a more authentic narrative: “I'm writing about my life. I don't care if you get it; these are my unique experiences.” This evolution marks a significant step in her identity achievement, as she confidently embraces her individuality and invites listeners to interpret her story in their own way. The evolution of Taylor Swift's music over time exemplifies the transformative power of identity achieve-

ment, reminding us that self-discovery is a continuous journey worth celebrating.

making sense of who we are with others: exploring intimacy

As we explore the complexities of identity, we encounter the equally significant theme of intimacy. Our relationships are a bit like stories shaped by our experiences and interactions^{10,11}. Like stories relationships are made up of experiences, feelings, and events that happen over time. Just like a story features characters, plots, and lessons, our relationships are filled with people, shared moments, and the insights we gain from one another¹². This perspective encourages us to recognize how our personal stories influence our connections with others and vice versa. In her examination of relationships, Swift navigates the delicate balance between independence and connection, a dynamic that resonates with many.

According to the Triangular Theory of Love¹³, passion encompasses the physical and emotional attraction that often ignites relationships, while intimacy reflects the closeness and connection shared between partners. Commitment represents the decision to maintain that love over time. Swift's storytelling encapsulates these elements, illustrating how passion can intertwine with the need for intimacy and commitment. For instance, in her songs, we see how the thrill of infatuation can coexist with deeper emotional bonds, striking a chord with listeners who resonate with the intense experiences of yearning and connection.

Swift's early albums deeply engage with the heart-wrenching impact of love lost, with songs like *Teardrops on My Guitar* and *White Horse* vividly portraying the pain, disappointment, and vulnerability that follow betrayal and the end of a relationship. Heartbreak is an emotionally devastating experience, often shaking one's foundation and requiring immense strength and resilience to navigate. Swift's characters grapple with betrayal and self-discovery, and the way these experiences interact with their values and beliefs. The journey of healing and rebuilding from such loss is gradual and universal, often

leading to profound personal growth and the discovery of inner strength over time.

Perhaps the most obvious nod to intimacy comes within the album *Lover*, where Taylor Swift adopts a tone that is on its face romantic and hopeful, and at its core about grief and heartache, deeply scrutinizing the realms and the complexities of love. Here, she navigates the highs and lows of relationships, embodying a journey of personal development. Intimacy, passion, and commitment are represented here and this nuanced portrayal encourages listeners to reflect on their own experiences, fostering a shared understanding of the intricate dance between independence and connection.

Her ballad, *All Too Well* (10-minute version) is also an interesting vehicle to reflect intimacy through personal storytelling as it explores the echoes of a past relationship and highlights how over time love can transform and deepen—or unravel. At the song's outset, there's a palpable sense of passion. The vivid imagery and emotional intensity reflect the initial infatuation and excitement that often characterize the early stages of love. Swift captures those exhilarating moments that make a relationship feel magical, showcasing the thrill of connection and attraction. As the song progresses, intimacy becomes more pronounced. The lyrics dive into personal memories and shared experiences, illustrating how the couple grows closer. This emotional closeness is marked by vulnerability and understanding, emphasizing the depth of their bond. Swift's storytelling evokes a sense of nostalgia, allowing listeners to feel the warmth and familiarity that often accompany deep intimacy. However, the song also explores the complexities of commitment. As the relationship evolves, the narrative reveals the challenges and heartaches that can arise. The shift from passion and intimacy to feelings of loss and betrayal reflects how commitment can be tested. Swift poignantly illustrates that even the strongest connections can face difficulties, leading to a reevaluation of the love shared.

Ultimately, *All Too Well* encapsulates the idea that love is not static; it changes and matures over time. The song serves as a reminder that relationships can start with intense passion, develop deep intimacy, and face the realities of commitment. This journey resonates with listeners, as it reflects the multifaceted nature of love—showing that it

can encompass joy and heartbreak, growth and loss. This leads us to the other side of romance and love for love's sake; the emotional devastation that accompanies the unraveling of deep connections.

With her exploration of intimacy, we also gain insight into the flip side: a sense of isolation. This is especially true in *Red* and the intro to the album where she explicitly discusses the dichotomous nature of passionate (or red) relationships. The narratives we create about ourselves can lead to feelings of disconnection, particularly when hyper-independence becomes a barrier to intimacy. Hyper-independence is a recurring motif in Swift's work, particularly in songs that highlight her resilience and self-sufficiency. This notion resonates with many, as we often find ourselves balancing the desire for independence with the need for connection. Swift's music conveys the strength found in autonomy while acknowledging the complexities it brings. Tracks such as *Mean* and *Change* deliver powerful messages of resilience, defiance in the face of hardship, and discovering inner strength amidst difficulties. These songs serve as a source of inspiration, encouraging listeners to embrace their uniqueness, conquer obstacles, and recognize their own value.

Swift's exploration of love and emotional devastation invites listeners to reflect on their own experiences of isolation and connection. Engaging with our stories allows us to challenge the narratives that isolate us, fostering deeper connections with ourselves and others. Here, the lyrics of *Anti-Hero* easily come to mind.

Swift's music captures the raw intensity of these experiences, offering solace and affirmation to listeners who may be grappling with similar challenges. By articulating the struggles of navigating relationships during this pivotal phase of life, her songs provide a comforting reminder that we are not alone in our emotional journeys. This exploration is a prime example of the transformative power of shared experiences.

making sense of who we are: sense of self and empowered love

Within the album *Lover*, Taylor Swift juxtaposes a musical tone that is romantic and hopeful, with lyrics that explore heartbreak and loss. She explores love, dedication, disappointment, dealing with rejection, and embracing oneself. This duality illustrates her evolution from dependency on others to a more integrated sense of self. In her earlier works, Swift often portrays love as a source of identity and validation, reflecting a longing for connection where her sense of self is closely tied to her romantic relationships. This narrative underscores a need for another person to complete her, highlighting themes of infatuation and vulnerability. However, as her discography progresses, there is a noticeable shift towards self-discovery and personal growth. Songs like *Clean* and *New Romantics* illustrate her journey towards self-determination, suggesting that love becomes a part of her life rather than its entirety. In later albums, such as *Folklore*, Swift presents a more nuanced understanding of love, depicting it as a partnership where both individuals make mistakes and have intricate identities, character strengths, and flaws. This maturation in her understanding of relationships showcases interdependence rather than dependency, as her narratives examine the complexities of love, addressing themes of commitment, friendship, and community. Ultimately, Swift's narrative arc demonstrates empowerment, illustrating that love can enhance one's identity rather than define it. This shift resonates with listeners, encouraging them to view romance as a complementary aspect of a fulfilling life rather than a necessity for self-completion.

Songs such as *The Archer* and *Peace* illustrate how embracing one's flaws and uncertainties can lead to deeper, more meaningful connections. In *You're on Your Own Kid*, Swift captures the bittersweet relief in realizing that independence and self-reliance are in her view a stable part of the human condition. She frames this realization as empowering, shifting from centering romantic love to self-determination in her own life.

In addition, Swift's work captures the nuances of nostalgia for family and endings of friendships. In this way, her work expands the

nuances of love to include non-romantic ties, which are often under-represented in popular music. Her storytelling weaves complex emotional themes into coherent narratives, potentially allowing individuals to understand and articulate their own life stories.

Swift's personal development, artistic exploration, and the obstacles she encountered during her transition into adulthood are evident in the evolution of her musical style and public persona. As she progressed, Swift expanded her creative horizons and ventured into new musical territories. This experimentation served as a catalyst for her growth as an artist and provided her with opportunities to push her creative boundaries. In subsequent albums, the narrative themes and messages demonstrate a heightened sense of self-reflection, self-understanding, and a desire to reflect on intricate and multifaceted emotions. In a way, Swift's music has become more self-assured and more specific to her as she ages. For example, in her later work, she speaks about the experiences of fame and wealth with fewer attempts as an elusive sense of relatability that makes her earlier work. This is seen distinctly in songs such as *Clara Bow* and *Who's Afraid of Little Old Me*.

Swift's progression as a musician and her openness to transformation are evident in the changes she has made to her musical style as well as her public persona. She skillfully crafts interconnected stories that mirror her personal development, creative exploration, and the complexities of adulthood. This resonates with us, as listeners, as we discover parallels in our own lives as we navigate our own life journey.

concluding thoughts

Swift's music offers an insightful opportunity to explore narrative psychology, reflecting her journey of self-discovery and moral evolution. Through her storytelling, Swift not only engages listeners but also invites them to reflect on their own experiences and identities. This ongoing evolution in her work underscores the significance of storytelling in shaping our understanding of ourselves and the world around us, ultimately fostering a deeper connection between the artist

and her audience. As her narratives evolve, they not only mirror her personal growth but also resonate with western cultural experiences. This exploration addresses universal themes such as love, heartbreak, identity, and resilience. The emotional content of her songs invites listeners to engage with their own feelings and experiences, creating a dialogue between the artist and her audience.

Moreover, Swift's pursuit of growth and change—shifting from country roots to pop and indie influences—somewhat mirrors the changing cultural landscape. Sometimes intentional and sometimes incidental, this adaptability not only keeps her music relevant but also encourages her audience to explore new perspectives and ideas. Swift's storytelling is more than mere entertainment; it artfully cultivates empathy and understanding. By sharing her journey, she empowers her audience to confront their own narratives, fostering a deeper connection that enriches her art, and both her listeners' lives and their connection with her. This exemplifies the transformative power of storytelling in shaping our collective understanding of the human experience.

like some kind of congressman

The tactical creation of Taylor's "brandom"

Georgia Carroll

From the earliest days of her career, Taylor Swift has built a reputation for herself as a friend to her fans. From inviting fans backstage for meet and greets to inviting them into her home for Secret Sessions, she has blurred the line between fan and friend in a way we do not often see.

However, this is – of course – all an illusion created as part of one of the most strategic marketing plans in modern celebrity culture. Every time a story hits the news about Taylor sending her fans letters or presents, or – before the Eras tour – inviting them to a Secret Session, Taylor's brand grows. Rather than being seen as an unapproachable billionaire, she retains the aura of the girl next door. This aura has been cleverly cultivated since the days of her faux country twang as she sang about high school in a way that remains relatable over a decade and a half later.

This kind of reputation is reliant on fan buy-in. Even the hardest working marketing teams money can buy cannot force fans to believe in something they do not want to. Using data from my PhD research into the Swiftie fandom¹, this chapter will explore the idea of Taylor's fandom as a "brandom"², where fans follow a set of unwritten – but heavily implied – rules handed down from her team in the hopes of

one day being seen as “worthy” of her attention. As Taylor Nation – Taylor’s social media marketing accounts – encourage the neoliberal performance of fandom “as a capitalist enterprise”³, fans are trained to view the spending of money and a willingness to labour as the key to gaining access to Taylor.

While it may be tempting to judge such a strategy as either entirely effective or exploitative, the reality exists in shades of grey. As this chapter will highlight, Swifties are happy to participate within the structures built by Taylor and her team. However, there is still space for us to cast a more critical eye on the neoliberal commodification of what is traditionally a space of fan-led passion and inclusion.

fandoms and brandoms

When we think about Taylor Swift fans spread across the world, we commonly use the words “community” and “fandom”. Fandoms are participatory spaces of passion and connection to an object of fandom (i.e. the thing that an individual is a fan of) and to other fans. This is where we see Swifties bonding with other Swifties, connecting to her music, and forming memories through the shared experiences of being a fan. It is staying up late to listen to a new album, picking apart Easter Eggs and theories, and tuning into live streams of concerts (regardless of the hour).

However, fandoms are fan-led spaces that exist outside of the control of organizations in the entertainment industry. This makes it difficult for marketing teams to maintain the control they ideally desire to ensure that fans are engaging, purchasing, and sharing what is best for the brand at the time that is best for the brand. While Taylor Swift isn’t a brand in the traditional sense, understanding her business structure as a brand “gives insight into how [they] cultivate and manage the strong feelings of attachment that many consumers have” (p.21)⁴.

While it is difficult, it is not impossible, and teams can implement strategies to encourage fans to play within their lines, which – as this chapter will explore – is something Taylor has mastered.

It is helpful for us to look to the concept of “brandom”⁵ to explore the distinction between a fan-led community and a community under

broader brand control. We can distinguish “between fandom, which offers agency and autonomy” and brandom, which can be considered a “corporately controlled aggregation of people” (p. 20)⁶. Brandom can be seen as a form of “pseudo-fan culture engineered by brand managers eager to cultivate consumer labor and loyalty while preempting the possibility of resistance that participatory fan culture promises” (p. 26)⁷.

The key to brandom is the way an organization cultivates the required control. Control cannot be simply applied, but rather requires fans to understand the relationship between themselves and the brand as mutually beneficial. We can see this in the case of Taylor Swift, where fans are lured by the potential for reward in the form of recognition and engagement from Taylor herself⁸. Taylor and her team use “loyalty as a marketing strategy” (p. 321)⁹ to encourage fans to attempt to prove themselves to be the most dedicated fan, and thus “worthy” of her attention. Such rewards “are predicated on the fan’s role as consumer” (p. 327) and give “validation to a hierarchy in which those fans who participate...are held up as the ideal fans”¹⁰, ultimately serving to “extol the individual over the community” (para. 1.3)¹¹. This contrasts with traditional fandoms where fan-led community and associated forms of participation act as the primary motivator for fan involvement.

In practice, this strategy occurs primarily through the group known as Taylor Nation. Taylor Nation is the collective name for Taylor’s anonymous marketing team, as well as their associated social media channels. They exist as the bridge between Taylor and her fans, functioning as an official voice and attention proxy. However, as will be discussed throughout this chapter, fans also understand that there are unwritten rules they must follow to be understood as worthy in the eyes of Taylor Nation, and therefore Taylor herself¹². Thus, the brandom cultivated by Taylor Nation represents a form of neoliberal fandom^{13,14}. In this framework, fandom can be understood “as a capitalist enterprise” where “particular ways of expressing fannish enthusiasm” are disciplined and policed (para. 1.3)¹⁵.

the “friendship” era

In order for fans to be willing to follow the rules set out by Taylor Nation – or any brand – there first must be an underlying hook that draws fans in. In the case of Taylor Swift, this is the relationship fans believe they share with her. Celebrity fandom is built off the back of para-social relationships; which is a phrase often used to describe the one-sided social relationships between fan and celebrity. These develop through repeated exposure to a celebrity, creating the “illusion of a face-to-face relationship” (p. 215)¹⁶. In our modern, digital society social media allows us to experience updates from celebrities alongside those of our real-life connections, creating a “feeling of ‘knowing’ them” (p. 147)¹⁷ as though “we belong to their story and vice versa” (para. 1)¹⁸. While Taylor’s personal social media use has significantly dwindled since 2016, there has been no shortage of content *about* her on social media. This comes from both traditional media outlets and fan-driven update accounts that cover (close to) her every move¹⁹. These updates allow fans to retain a connection with Taylor even when she herself is not the one sharing the information.

However, what is particularly unique about Taylor is that unlike most celebrities, the primary para-social connection, but through her music. From her self-titled first album, Taylor has woven her personal story through her lyrics. Whether that was names of her high school friends and crushes, references to her family, break-up narratives, or industry feuds, her lyrics “often appear to have been ripped from the pages of...her own diary” (p. 43)²⁰.

As part of my PhD project, I interviewed members of the Swiftie community about their relationships with Taylor and the ways they participate in the fandom to better understand the dynamics at play. One participant, Inez (pseudonym) discussed Taylor’s relatability during our interview where she explained:

“In high school, um, I was taking these college classes and I took a poetry course and I took a creative writing class ... before [any] Taylor stuff came out. And so when Taylor did come out, I was like, “Holy crap. Has she been reading my diary?” Because there were a lot of things like, um, especially that

song "Tim McGraw" where I was, um, like I'd literally written a story a year before about my exboyfriend and how we would just go driving in his truck and like get stuck in the middle of nowhere. Like, it was crazy, like that parallel. So to me, yeah, like we definitely had a lot of similarities."

Taylor leverages this relatability to strengthen the idea of a true connection with her fans, encouraging them to view her not as a celebrity, but as one of their peers^{21,22}. While many celebrities accept that fans feel these deep connections towards them but do little to cultivate or encourage them, Taylor wants her fans to feel as though they could be her friend²³. James (pseudonym) spoke about this during our interview, saying,

A lot of people think that Taylor Swift really does care about them and she probably does...they feel, like, a personal connection to her.

The fans I interviewed for my research were aged between their early twenties and early thirties, broadly aligning them with a generation who – as Betty (pseudonym) stated – “feel that [they] have grown up with” Taylor. While the universal nature of Taylor’s music means fans across generations can see their own experiences mirrored in her lyrics²⁴, fans such as these who were teenagers at the same time as – or just after – Taylor herself often felt as though they were in step with her in a way usually reserved for friends and older siblings. James described this as he explained that he believed her music “resonates” with many fans, and that “she just [has] touched so many people’s lives”.

While songs such as “But Daddy I Love Him” on *The Tortured Poets Department* hint at a version of Taylor who feels frustration with the degree to which many fans feel as though they “know what’s best for” her, her career is reliant upon these deep-rooted, emotional connections.

However, the connections fans feel towards Taylor are just the first level of the fandom process. To further understand the bond between fans and their favourite celebrities, it helps to boil the very concept of celebrity down to its most basic element: attention^{25,26,27,28}. In an

economy of attention, individuals accumulate a form of capital based on the attention they receive from third parties²⁹. Higher levels of this attention capital correspond to higher levels of celebrity³⁰. The most straightforward form of attention capital is media industry presence^{31,32}, as “people enjoy nothing more than looking at faces shining with publicity”³³.

Attention capital has a trickle-down effect, where “proximity to celebrity makes a little celebrity”³⁴. There is an “accounting system” in play, where the value of attention is impacted by whom the attention is coming from (p. 12)³⁵. This means that attention from Taylor is the most highly sought-after, and then attention from Taylor Nation and others in her circle, attention from those who receive attention from Taylor and those in her circle, and so on, and so forth.

Social media has allowed the flow of attention capital to become visible on a broad scale, with attention being “an essential component” of the platforms (pp. 5-6)³⁶. Thus, fans receive these forms of attention, they frequently broadcast it to others in their community in an attempt to both maintain and increase their share of attention capital³⁷. This was described by Inez during our interview when she explained, “A lot of people will put like in their bio like noticed by Taylor two times. Taylor liked my tweet, Taylor Nation reblogged me”.

This topic was also discussed by Dorothea (pseudonym), who explained,

I know that there's a lot of like on Tumblr that Taylor Swift like followed someone. Like they always have like that, “Oh, I was followed on this date” and like make it really big so that like everyone knows like, “Oh, she followed me” and so you can like go and like see, oh, like this is like a big person and like that kind of thing ... Like...there's like famous fans almost in a way.

While not unique to the Taylor Swift fandom, it is a particularly prevalent behavior within the community due to the weight of value placed on attention from Taylor. This is partially because of the reputation Taylor has gained from doing what fans deem “Tay-lurking”³⁸. Tay-lurking refers to Taylor’s alleged habit of secretly viewing the social media accounts of her fans and engaging with them out of the

blue. It originally began on Tumblr, but in recent years has expanded to TikTok³⁹. Thus, the idea that Taylor could at any time be viewing *their* posts and deem them – out of all other content out there – worthy of engagement is an additional badge of honor.

This idea of “famous fans” as referenced by Dorothea reflects the fact that attention capital is not limited to celebrities in the traditional sense, but rather can be seen across social worlds more broadly⁴⁰. The specific concept of hierarchical fandom is nothing new, with “Big Name Fans”, or BNFs”, a common reference across fandom communities^{41,42}. While such fans pre-date online fandom, it is through social media that their popularity becomes visible to more than just those in the immediate fan community.

The desire to engage with celebrities is not limited to the online world. Reflecting the desire for attention, and the fact that para-social relationships are – by their very nature – one-sided⁴³, many fans seek face-to-face interactions with their favorite celebrities in an attempt to create a reciprocated connection. Face-to-face interactions come in several forms⁴⁴, with the most well-known of these being the paid meet-and-greet. These are traditionally ticketed and take place at fan conventions or as part of VIP concert packages where the fan can pay for the chance to meet their favorite celebrities⁴⁵.

Taylor, however, sets herself apart from other celebrities by “hand-picking” fans to meet for “free”. From the Fearless tour in 2009, Taylor’s team would find fans in the audience who were performing fandom in particular ways and provide them with invitations to attend a backstage meet and greet. This ritual continued across tours, with fans increasingly aware of the practice, driving a desire to be the ones chosen.

During the 1989 era, Taylor expanded the ways she interacted with her fans in face-to-face settings, introducing the “Secret Sessions”. Rather than taking place at concerts, Secret Sessions were invitation-based listening parties held in personal locations, including Taylor’s own home⁴⁶. With invitations to these parties coming via social media and being seemingly random, fans began to prioritize public forms of participation in the hopes that they could be the next ones selected.

During my interview with James, he discussed the desire for fans to meet Taylor. He explained,

Like I see people, you know, comment and tweet all the time like Taylor Swift literally saved my life, so like to meet the person that you believe literally saved your life. Like that. That's insane. How could life be any better than that?"

Similarly, Rebekah (pseudonym) discussed wanting to meet Taylor so that she could share *"what a big part of my life she's been. 'Cause there's really nothing else that I've like followed for as long or have been like so devoted to for as long"*.

While Taylor's in-person fan interaction was paused during the pandemic and not restarted for the Eras Tour (aside from the "22 hat"), she retains a reputation for this form of reward-based engagement. These interactions are often framed as being undertaken out of the kindness of Taylor's own heart – after all, she could be charging for them like many other artists. However, this is all a deliberate element in the construction of her overarching brand.

earning love

To be picked for an engagement, fans must first be visible. Within the Taylor Swift fandom, Taylor Nation encourage a particular form of visibility reliant on consumption and labor⁴⁷. This labor can be understood through the term "lovebor", used to refer to the "work of loving the object of fandom and showing that love" (p. 151)⁴⁸. This labor comes in a number of forms, but it can be most clearly seen through the public broadcast of emotional responses⁴⁹. Fans upload videos and photographs of themselves crying, screaming, and celebrating, tagging both Taylor Swift and Taylor Nation in the hope that their reaction will be not just noticed, but broadcast to other fans through the use of retweets and replies⁵⁰. The attention capital fans receive when this labor is noticed has a flow-on effect in which other fans are then encouraged to perform in a similar way.

On social media, many fans operate under a form of panoptic control in which they alter their fandom behavior due to the belief

that Taylor and/or Taylor Nation could be observing their posts at any given time⁵¹. Fans believe a set of rules apply both when a fan has been selected for an engagement opportunity, and should they wish to remain in the running for future opportunities⁵². They believe they need to be seen to be not only talking about Taylor, but talking about Taylor in a positive light, ultimately building Taylor's reputation as someone with a global, gushing fanbase. Reflecting the power held by Taylor and her team, Betty explained that, ultimately, *"It's really like you don't want to do anything that will upset them"*. Rebekah also noted this during our interview, explaining, *"I've noticed that Taylor Swift isn't on Tumblr looking at or reblogging or liking things that aren't about her."*

During our interview, Betty (pseudonym) also explained that when it came to being chosen for an interaction, the most important rule fans had to follow was a cone of silence. She said that Taylor Nation are,

"very like, secretive about it ... Like [you can't] tell someone that you're going [or] tell someone where the location is because then they have to cancel it and rehaul it. And that actually happened this year. Um, they had to move the secret session, like they had to change cities because someone found out the location where they were going to pick them up and stuff."

As fans learn these rules and expectations, we can see how Taylor Nation has created a true brandom, where fans act as a "corporately controlled aggregation" (p. 20)⁵³ rather than forging their own path.

In addition to the public displays of lovebor, another key way fans labor as part of their fandom participation is through the finding and solving of "Easter Eggs"⁵⁴. Taylor began hiding messages in the lyric booklets of her early albums, but over time has expanded the complexity of the clues, going so far as to hide them in website code^{55,56}. The more attention given to these forms of participation, the more fans seek to engage, hoping their efforts will be the ones spotlighted within the fan community.

Taylor's image is broadly built off the willingness for fans to conduct this labor. While nobody can deny her talent, the stories buoying her wider reputation frequently feature the passion and dedi-

cation of her fans^{57,58,59}. As Rebekah noted, “I definitely think it is a marketing strategy and a way to get closer to fans”.

In rewarding fans who participate in these ways, Taylor and her team are sending the implicit message that fans must unpaid marketing labour on her behalf in the hopes of being deemed a good enough fan – or a hard enough worker – and have their work “compensated” through engagement interaction. These rewards encourage fans to “act as co-marketers and salespeople” (p. 20)⁶⁰, with the visibility of their passion leveraged by Swift’s brand.

In addition to labor, fans are also rewarded for the way they spend money on their fandom participation⁶¹. Fandom is – at its core – an economic exchange⁶². While it is never compulsory to spend money to participate in a fandom community, consumption underpins a majority of the modern fan experience⁶³. And far from being an exception, the Taylor Swift fandom is perhaps one of the communities most defined by consumption⁶⁴.

Taylor has become increasingly known for the rate at which she releases merchandise collections, and the quantity of items that these collections include⁶⁵. When I spoke to Betty, we discussed merchandise, and she spoke of Taylor “merchandis[ing] everything about her life”, reflecting the fact that “the value of any brand includes history” (p. 23)⁶⁶. As fans have developed connections based on the relatability of Taylor’s story, they are not just being asked to purchase a shirt, or a necklace, but rather purchase something that will serve to strengthen their ties to Taylor herself.

Taylor’s merchandise collections are often advertised as being “limited edition”, encouraging rapid spending and drawing on fans’ fear of missing out on a potentially rare item⁶⁷. Betty explained some of the criticisms this form of sale face, saying,

they said it was a flash sale, so like the items would change every 24 hours. Well, once they showed you all the items, then they, then they started selling them all. Basically they’re going to sell them all until they sell out. And I know...some people that did get things on separate days. So now they paid for shipping four times.

While Betty was discussing the 2019 collaboration between Taylor and Stella McCartney, these tactics have not changed over time, with supposedly “limited edition” *folklore* and *evermore* merchandise still available on Taylor’s website months after the initial release⁶⁸.

Perhaps the most discussed aspect of Taylor’s merchandise offering is the multiple editions of each album she releases⁶⁹. This peaked in 2020 with the eight editions of *folklore*, but her two most recent albums – *Midnights* and *The Tortured Poets Department* – both had four versions available for sale. While this practice has faced critique⁷⁰, it is something that many fans are more than willing to continue to participate in⁷¹.

Rebekah discussed her complicated relationship with the multiple editions during our interview. She said,

And even I, I was like, “That’s so stupid. I’m only going to get one come on”. And the day of I was like, “I can’t help it. I need them all”. And I was like, “I can’t afford that. What am I doing?! This is so ridiculous”. Like I totally see right through it and I buy into it. Um, but I, I do think there is something to be said and for them promoting people who’ve bought tons and tons and even Taylor posting on her, her accounts, not just the Taylor Nation but like singling people out, reposting their photos. Um, I think it’s brilliant and sort of evil [laughs].

This quote reflects an understanding of the neoliberal reality of participation in Taylor’s fandom, in which “fans take critically pragmatic views of these processes, as being excessive yet unstoppable components of the commercial” landscape (p. 340)⁷². One of the ways fans come to terms with the rate of consumerism within their fandom communities is through the fact there is the chance they will be rewarded for their purchases. As Rebekah notes, the Taylor Nation Twitter account will respond to, engage with, and share messages from fans who provide proof of purchase in the form of screenshotted check-out confirmations or pictures of the items taken after receipt. Fans see others who are buying the merchandise receiving attention and being praised, encouraging them to do the same thing in the hopes that they are also noticed.

The emphasis on individual consumption drives fans to invest in their personal participation, often at the expense of the more traditional, communal forms of fandom⁷³. If fans believe it is every fan for themselves when it comes to gaining Taylor's attention, they will reflect the neoliberal value of the "individual over the community" (para. 1.3)⁷⁴. Fans want to be seen as the kind of fan who is willing to do anything to prove their support for Taylor, and this ultimately leaves fans prioritising consumption in the quest for their ultimate engagement goal.

conclusion

In 2024, nobody would dispute the claim that Taylor Swift is currently one of most famous and powerful people in the world. And yet her reputation as an approachable friend-in-waiting to her fans hasn't faltered. While the universal themes of her music draw her fans in, it is the well-executed marketing strategy that has them convinced they could be one moment away from being deemed worthy enough to be chosen to engage with Taylor at any given time.

While these engagements have become more limited over time, the lingering potential continues to drive a significant portion of fandom participation. As fans of Taylor become more entrenched in their interest in her as a celebrity and their connection grows, they become more open to deeper levels of support. This has become cleverly capitalized by the overarching Taylor Nation brand, who draw fans in with the potential for engagement, but lock it behind specific doors. However, when fans discover that there is an avenue to meet Taylor, that if they buy the merchandise and if they tweet about it at the right moment, there is the slightest potential that they may be noticed by Taylor Nation and, in turn, by Taylor herself, they are all too willing to hunt down the keys. Much like those who regularly participate in the lottery, fans are happy to pay to be in with the chance of receiving the ultimate jackpot. In framing the Taylor Swift fandom as a brandom in which purchase is framed as a road to reward and interaction, we can see that fans are trained as consumers; further reflecting the place of fandom within a neoliberal celebrity culture.

Like Some Kind of Congressman

On *Anti-Hero* Taylor sings, “Did you hear my covert narcissism I disguise as altruism, like some kind of congressman?”. While this lyric is not supposed to be taken literally, its accuracy cannot be denied. While nobody is attempting to say that Taylor is not a kind individual, or that she does not – at least in a universal sense – care for her fans, it is clear that her fan engagement efforts are less about kindness, and more about ensuring the capitalist wheel keeps turning. Like politicians cosyng up to donors in the hopes of funding, Taylor and her team know that attention is the ultimate key to success.

the science of swifties

Fandom, friendship bracelets and easter eggs
Bethany Thomas, Irma Melunovic, & Kelli Dunlap

From the beginning of her stardom in 2005 (age 16), Taylor Swift has cultivated a fiercely loyal fanbase, protecting her through bad break-ups, misogynistic media and music industry giants. Taylor has glimmered in the limelight for nearly two decades, and thousands of fans have grown up with her music as the soundtrack of their journeys from young and reckless to their roaring twenties and beyond, basking in her shimmer at every step. Although her accomplishments include five previous album tours, the commencement of the Eras tour in 2023 truly skyrocketed Taylor into universal recognition as a pop queen, singer-songwriter, and record-breaking performer. But when the Eras tour began, so did *The Great War*. Swifties, the affectionate nickname for dedicated Taylor Swift fans, turned on one another as they battled ticket costs, purchase queues, and scalpers for the opportunity to ascend to Mother's promised land. As Taylor dominates the music industry, this fandom has become an unstoppable force, so we ask what it means to be a Swiftie and why it matters.

This chapter explores fandom creation, fan identity development, and the challenge of navigating artist-fan interactions and expectations through the heart-shaped lens of Taylor Swift and her Swifties.

Drawing on social, psychological, and ludological (e.g. play and games) theories, this chapter decodes the science of Swifties across all their eras. This chapter debuts with an understanding of fan culture and defines what makes a Swiftie a Swiftie, from big reputations to friendship bracelets. This chapter also explores the very thin line that Taylor walks between engaging her massive fanbase while maintaining her own needs and boundaries. Lastly, this chapter acknowledges that while Taylor is a mastermind – so are the Swifties – and dives into the delights and dangers of using playful and gameful methods, like her love of easter eggs, to foster fandom (and sometimes conspiracy theories).

While this book is a collection of love stories about Taylor, this chapter is dedicated to the Swifties, who play an important part in her dazzling glory. For Swiftie's reading, we hope this chapter is a tool for self-reflection, providing a new perspective for understanding our fandom. For non-Swifties and those who may be new to the world (*Taylor's Version*), this chapter is a fun-sized introductory overview to many aspects of fan culture, and the Swifties in particular.

So, our dear readers, step into the Taylor-verse as we introduce you to the science of the Swifties.

casual fans, 'locals', and lovers: what makes a true swiftie?

Before discussing how to identify a Swiftie in a crowded room, we must first consider what distinguishes the Swifties from other music fandoms. A fan can be broadly understood as someone with a personal and relatively deep emotional connection to an artist¹, and fandoms as subcultures, groups or communities composed of fans characterised by their shared common interest². While there are many important aspects in the production and communication of fan culture³, there are three key factors that are particularly relevant to the Swifties: dress code, organized fan activities, and language.

dress code

Swifties take pride in how they show up and show out at each Eras show. Fans spend hundreds of hours hand-crafting costumes or piecing together outfits that reference their favourite lyric, song, album and/or meme. Dressing up in their glittering prime is part of the Swiftie fan experience, especially when attending a show. While this is a chance for Swifties to dress up, have fun, and be bejewelled, dress codes like this serve an important role in fandoms generally; a style of dress, from specific colour schemes to full cosplay, is an identity signal to others and connects them more deeply and meaningfully to the larger fanbase.

organized fan activities

Secondly, organized outlets for fan activities (i.e., conventions) have become important spaces for the Swiftie fandom and show the success of activities run by fans for fans. For example, in preparation for the Eras tour, fans began hosting bracelet-making meet-ups, inviting other Swifties in their area to share their excitement and prepare for upcoming shows. Then there are the prevalent and successful ‘Swiftogeddon’ events, the Taylor Swift themed club night hosted across the United Kingdom. Here, fans come together to worship at the altar of Taylor, playing only mothers’ music, and fans attending pose with song-inspired props, wearing their best dresses and dancing the night away.

Taylor’s influence has even impacted academia, with higher education institutions across the globe organizing ‘Swiftposiums’ and conferences (e.g., TayDay: Liverpool’s Version) exploring the cultural phenomenon of Taylor Swift. But it’s not just scholars who are Swifties, as many higher education students have formed Taylor Swift themed societies at their respective universities. These organized activities have become an important part of the fandom, as they create in-person spaces for Swifties to affirm their belonging and fan identity.

language

Finally, language (i.e., fanspeak) is crucial as Taylor has taught Swifties a secret language. The recently coined linguistic phenomenon ‘fanilect’ describes the unique speech created by a fan in-group (i.e., fanbase), shaped by their shared set of meanings and experiences⁴. If you’re reading as a Swiftie yourself, you’ll likely pick up on the coded language throughout this chapter – a deliberate choice from the authors to emphasise belonging to this fanbase. Like dress code and organized fan activities, access to and use of a special language reaffirms membership within a fan group and helps fans feel more connected to Taylor, the Swiftie culture, and one another. Taylor also uses linguistic riddles as secret messages, also known as easter eggs, which we discuss later in this chapter.

how fan identities evolve: a social identity perspective

Now that we’ve discussed how Swifties produce and express their fan identity and culture, we turn to the theories that help us unpack how this fan identity initially develops. Social Identity Theory⁵ illustrates how we define who we are based on our membership in social groups, using three key components: social categorisation, social identification, and social comparison.

The first principle, social categorisation, outlines how we categorise ourselves and others as interchangeable group members based on various attributes. For example, an individual might start by simply enjoying Taylor Swift’s music, watching her music videos, and then her documentaries. They then may realise there is a group of people who also share these attributes (e.g., love for Taylor’s music) and categorise themselves as a member of this group, the Swifties.

The next component of Social Identity Theory is social identification, which occurs after we see ourselves as members of a particular group and internalize that membership as part of our identity. After this, we often alter our behaviours to fit the group norms (i.e., an

unspoken rule or shared standard of behaviour in the group). For example, a person may, at first, see themselves as a Taylor Swift fan (group membership), call themselves a Swiftie (internalizing this identity), and then find themselves hunting for easter eggs, and creating friendship bracelets (adapting their behaviour to align with group norms and expectations).

It's important to note, however, that being a Taylor fan does not automatically equate to social identification as a Swiftie. For example, some longtime fans of Taylor may enjoy dressing up, going to a fan event or concert, and making friendship bracelets but do not identify themselves as Swifties. Why? Well, in this case, we could distinguish those in the broader fanbase and their fan identities using the hierarchies of fan communities. This hierarchical approach to understanding fans is quite helpful in the case of the Swiftie fandom.

Hierarchies of fans are categorized based on five factors: knowledge, access, leadership, venue, and level/quality⁶. Fans who rank at the top of all five are positioned as the superfans, and they play a pivotal role in connecting brand management with the fanbase⁷. Alternatively, we could classify the fans in the Swiftie community into three levels: low (social fans), medium (focused fans), and high (vested fans)⁸. If we follow this approach, the vested fans, or Swifties, who sit at the top of this hierarchy, would be characterized by their loyalty, deep engagement, and investment of significant time and money into Taylor's brand.

However, determining a Swiftie identity based on monetary investment causes trouble (*trouble... trouble...*). There is a temptation for fans to invest and consume in hopes of receiving attention from their idol, reflecting the value of the self (fan) over the community (fanbase)⁹. These factors of investment and consumption aren't limited to the Taylor Swift fanbase. For example, the link between consumerism and fandom is exemplified by the BTS Army and many other K-pop fandoms, who invest in a magnitude of merchandise products from photo cards to vinyl variants¹⁰.

Swifties themselves highlight the inequalities and nuances of consumption as a criterion for 'fan' identity¹¹ - because being in a posi-

tion to consume more does not necessarily mean someone is a more dedicated Swiftie. Factors like monetary investment are complex, and yet many fans showcased their large collection of Taylor merch to show their worthiness of Eras tour tickets over other fans who have spent less, which propelled online in-fandom fighting.

This is also not unique to the Swifties, as we see this kind of behaviour in other pop star fanbases as well, which highlights the cultural and global universality of this phenomenon. For example, in-group fighting in K-pop fandoms can be toxic, with frequent internal disputes over fans' favourite members, solo projects, and achievements¹². This not only sparks frequent in-fandom drama but also makes fans question their fan identity and invisible loyalty badges, creating internal conflict and self-doubt.

fan versus fan, and fandom versus fandom: the ultimate fan showdown

Participating in fan communities leads to positive experiences between fans, which is valuable for enhancing their sense of social identity¹³. Swifties are happy, free (sometimes confused), but not lonely, as fan communities provide a sense of belonging¹⁴, functioning as close-knit networks. Fan-fan relationships are an important part of fandoms. Despite this, we have seen repeated instances of in-group fighting between Swifties. This could be explained by Social Identity Theory, as the third component, social comparison, describes how groups fight when resources are scarce. For example, many Swifties fought online, and seemingly even lost friendships over the coveted Eras tour tickets, which were an in-demand and scarce resource as millions of fans battled for the limited dates, cities and seats.

However, amidst the frequent in-fandom battles, we often see Swifties uniting as one to defeat the ultimate enemy – other fandoms who question Taylor's achievements and worthiness. The battle of the BeyHive and Swifties is a key example and was particularly prominent during the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards as a consequence of another artist undermining Taylor's win. Although the music monarchs themselves have never compared their crowns, the fandoms

continued to feud. Social Identity Theory outlines how, because our self-concept is based on memberships in social groups (e.g., fandoms), we navigate the social world with in-groups (e.g., the Swifties) and out-groups (e.g., the BeyHive), and this fosters fighting and competition.

Our social identities prompt within-group assimilation, which pressures us to conform to in-group norms and foster intergroup bias. For example, a Swiftie may evaluate the Swifties (the in-group) as the best fandom and Taylor as the best female artist (intergroup bias) and in turn, negatively evaluate the BeyHive (the out-group) and Beyoncé. The process of social comparison in this theory is particularly relevant to fighting between fandoms, as we seek positive evaluation of the in-group (Swifties) through engaging in the comparison of out-groups (other fandoms). We see this competition across social media, bolstering when artists release new music concurrently, and while they compete for the top spot on the charts, fans compete for fandom supremacy.

But, if we consider the Swifties as one group, then social comparison may not fully explain the fighting within the fanbase. Instead, it may be explained by the process of intra-group comparison and conflict¹⁵. Where inter-group comparison explores fighting between groups (e.g., Swifties versus the BeyHive), intra-group comparison describes how fighting occurs within groups (e.g., Swiftie versus Swiftie). This explains how fighting within fandoms occurs because one fan may feel they have contributed more to the fanbase or artists' brand than others.

This intra-group (within-group) comparison is portrayed by the great Eras (Ticketmaster) war. With every release of dates and cities, Swifties battled on TikTok, and what was once an important digital platform to share their passion became a place of toxicity. Seemingly, two umbrella groups emerged: those who didn't get tickets and those who did. Some fans shamed others on the platform, turning against those they didn't perceive as 'fan enough' and questioned their belonging. Many users began hunting the witches too, looking for 'locals' who they deemed fake fans or greedy fans with tickets for multiple dates.

Fans who strongly identify with their fandom place significant importance on integrating their fan identity into their self-concept¹⁶ (i.e., our collection of beliefs about ourselves, embodying factors which may answer our question of 'who am I?'). Because of this, strongly identified fans are more sensitive to potential threats to this aspect of their identity¹⁷. This explains the hostility between some Swifties. If a strongly-identified Swiftie didn't get a ticket but believes attending the Eras tour is a crucial way of authenticating their fan identity, they might perceive others who did get tickets as threats to their own fan identity.

This intra-group (within) fandom conflict and interrogation of belonging has negative implications. Fans who receive threatening feedback about their fan identity may feel 'rejected' from their in-group and experience social exclusion, retreating from fandom-related activities¹⁸. Not every fan will know every in-joke or lyric, but fans shouldn't forget to be kind because being part of a fandom can have many positive experiences. For example, social interactions amongst fans are linked with enhanced well-being¹⁹.

It isn't all sunshine in the Swiftie fandom, and there is some midnight rain to consider. As Taylor grew up and her music changed, so did many of her fans, and they became emotionally connected to her transforming eras. Through the use of social media, fans feel as though they are interacting with Taylor, which is a catalyst for the development of parasocial relationships with their idol²⁰. In the next subtopic, we critically explore parasocial relationships using psychological research and the impact of these in the Swiftie fandom.

exploring fandom fantasies and parasocial relationships in taylor's wonderland

From leaving clues in music videos to inviting fans to her house, Taylor Swift has always had a unique relationship with her fans. Not only are her lyrics incredibly relatable, but she appears to be a down-to-earth girl-next-door type despite her superstardom. The connection that she has with her fans can be heart-warming, like giving away the 22 hat every show, but also spine-chilling, as in the case with fans

breaking into her house. At the end of the day, Taylor Swift is just one person, and there are millions of Swifties. This means that while we feel like we all know Taylor, Taylor does not know us. This phenomenon is what scholars may refer to as a parasocial relationship.

A parasocial relationship has been understood as a long-term, asymmetrical, or one-sided relationship that a user forms with a media performer, which extends beyond the media exposure (i.e., performance)²¹. For example, someone might hear Taylor on the radio, delve into her discography, and, in doing so, move beyond feelings of enjoyment and begin to form feelings of friendship for Taylor. This definition was established [YEARS] ago with the rising of the first starlets.

However, today's media landscape gives artists so many ways to connect with fans on what feels like a more personal, even intimate level. For example, in the old days, if Clara Bow had an admirer, she wouldn't know unless someone told her to her face or perhaps through an old-fashioned fan-mail letter. There was very little chance for Clara to speak personally and directly to someone, much less millions. Meanwhile, Taylor Swift can send a personal message to over 280 million fans through a single Instagram post. She can engage with fans and their content by leaving 'likes' and re-sharing their posts. This kind of parasocial relationship doesn't feel one-sided, but it's certainly not a fully reciprocal relationship.

Instead, we could consider this a "one-and-a-half" sided relationship²², which is very relevant for fandom cultures and communities, particularly as they become more digital. Where parasocial relationship traditionally describes a one-way relationship, the concept of a "one-and-a-half" sided relationship accounts for communities with a potential for reciprocal communication.

As the concept of parasocial relationships has moved beyond academic contexts, fans have increased awareness and often police their behaviours and interactions in line with the boundaries of fans and artists²³. It is also important to point out the gender bias embedded in topics of parasocial relationships, fandoms and 'obsession'²⁴. Fangirls, in particular, have been targets of misguided pathologisation²⁵. Going forward, the use of the term "parasocial relationship" is used to convey and explore the intense closeness and community in the Swiftie

fandom. However, it is important to remember the limitations of this concept and its sweeping application to the Swifties, which unlikely rise to the actual definition of a true parasocial relationships. Many aspects of 'parasociality' are, in fact, normal parts of fan culture and human behaviour.

social media and parasocial relationships

Social media tools have played an important role in opening the door for reciprocal communication between fans and artists²⁶ and is a key tool of interaction between Taylor and the Swifties. We may draw from TikTok for examples of this, where fans express their overwhelming feelings of closeness to Taylor, showing her addition to their private 'close friends' list on Instagram, and even explicitly referring to her as their best friend. To be clear, while this may seem intense from an outside perspective, it's a relatively harmless way to feel seen, feel validated, and feel a sense of belonging.

Parasocial relationships in the Swiftie fandom may be prompted by parasocial interactions (e.g., a user's reaction to a media performer where the user perceives the performer as an intimate conversational partner²⁷). Parasocial interactions are restricted to that circumstance, where a parasocial relationship is enduring and extends beyond this situation. For example, a fan may think they shared an intimate moment with Taylor, recalling how she sang directly towards them in a moment at the Eras tour. This experience would be vastly different to that of the lucky receiver of the 22 hat, who exchanges a hug and friendship bracelet with Taylor. In the latter example, there is a genuine exchange between Taylor and the fan for a brief moment in time, whereas the former example is based on the user's reaction and their perception of Taylor's actions. Repeated exposure to parasocial interactions with artists encourages fans to develop feelings of intimacy, friendship and identification with the performer²⁸.

Self-disclosure (i.e., revealing personal information about oneself with another) is an important part of Taylors crafted fan community, but can fuel parasocial relationships with Taylor²⁹. Taylor is known for her vulnerability and openness, detailing anecdotes of her life

throughout her songs, as well as her marketing tools. A clear illustration stems from the *Lover* CD deluxe Target versions, which came with a diary entry from Taylor, allowing her fans to feel a closeness to Taylor as she divulges these pages from her hand-written journal, which is something we often consider as deeply personal and private.

Social media also presents opportunities for these parasocial relationships to intensify, as there are more frequent chances of intimate interactions between fans and performers. Again, social media plays a key role in the Taylor-verse; Taylor has repeatedly shown she's #Taylurking in Swiftie spaces, showing off her awareness of fan memes (such as the 'No, it's Becky' callback) and even integrating a fan's viral *Bejewelled* dance on tour. Additionally, Taylor Nation, run by Taylor's management team, are very active across social media platforms, recurrently interacting with fans, who use platforms like TikTok to develop this community and closeness to Taylor.

positives and negatives of (para)social connections

The concept of parasociality is often misjudged, and it is important to remember that it is not inherently problematic. Parasocial relationships with media figures are beneficial to many aspects of a media user's well-being; they enhance feelings of connection and community³⁰ and foster personal development and identity exploration³¹. Many of these benefits are exhibited in the Swiftie fandom, as Taylor uses her storytelling to explore issues concerning friendship, heartbreak, gender, and mental health, and in doing so, she is an architect, crafting a community built upon the nostalgic escapism of girlhood³². Through her vulnerability, authenticity and relatability, she has created a template of confession shared with her fans³³. As a result, Taylor has formed a safe space where fans use her work as a vessel to reflect on their own experiences and feelings, and in turn, it is difficult not to experience a closeness to Taylor, as she so eloquently describes the aspects of ourselves we struggle to vocalise.

Alongside the benefits to users and fans, parasocial relationships are valuable to artists and their brands. For example, crafting relationships with their customers through online fan communities is a benefi-

cial marketing strategy for artists, who profit from fans' original content and product promotion³⁴. Building these relationships through social media provides opportunities for reaching new audiences, using these communities to increase brand awareness, gathering data about followers, and promoting new music quickly³⁵. By bringing fans into their world through participation and interaction, artists increase fan loyalty, which translates into revenue³⁶. But while they may have benefits for both fans and artists, this engagement blurs the boundaries of what constitutes a parasocial relationship³⁷. It could be argued that some Swifties' relationship with Taylor is not truly parasocial, particularly when considering Taylor's acknowledgement of her use of easter eggs as secret messages to her fans.

The intimate feelings of friendship mean that some fans have crossed the limitations of an artist-fan relationship, as ultimately, Taylor is not our close friend. The same fans who helped build the disco could also burn it down, and fandom can turn to fanaticism. Concerning behaviours such as stalking, obsession and aggression in pursuit of association³⁸ can develop from parasocial relationships. Looking at the release of *The Tortured Poets Department*, many fans have noticed Taylor's allusions concerning the problematic actions of some Swifties. In *But Daddy I Love Him*, Taylor appears to target a specific section of her fandom, calling out the sanctimonious, performative concern and critique she's received, as she'd rather disgrace her legacy than continue to listen to unsolicited advice. Again, it is important to remember that parasociality is not a synonym for stalking, nor is stalking a common behaviour exhibited by all Swifties.

Notably, as we discussed at the start of this subtopic, parasocial relationships are understood as nonreciprocal, one-sided relationships where the other party is unaware of the other's existence. This definition drives the foundation for the important discussion of easter eggs as part of this chapter because, as argued previously, the relationship between the Swifties and Taylor is not entirely nonreciprocal or one-sided. Taylor has gone beyond simple awareness of her fans describes her albums as diaries, prompting a fantasy of friendship and closeness that feels real. This is fuelled further by her reputation for implementing secret messages to her fans, scattering her cryptic easter eggs

for Swifties to discover and solve. Therefore, the following section looks more deeply into the impact and use of easter eggs as part of the science of the Swifties.

cracking the code: easter eggs, fandom conspiracies, and alternate realities

Easter eggs have played an important role in the Taylor-verse and the formation of her fandom. Easter eggs, in this context, refer to a message, image, or feature that has been hidden in a medium, which is usually electronic, for example, software, video games, or films. Taylor began hiding easter eggs and secret messages in her lyrics when she was developing her first album at age 15. She's continued to hide easter eggs throughout her subsequent albums using intertextuality (i.e., the interplay and interconnectedness between different texts) to create exciting interweaving patterns for fans to discover, providing amusement and challenge³⁹. For example, her six-line chorus in *My Tears Ricochet* from *Folklore* refers back to songs from each of her six stolen albums, including *State of Grace* from *Red*, *Superman* from *Speak Now*, and *Teardrops on My Guitar* from *Taylor Swift* (Debut).

Not only does Taylor use complex literary devices to hide her messages, but numerology (i.e., the belief in a mystical relationship between numbers and certain events) is also a key part of her secret codes. In particular, 13 is the suburban legend of the Swiftie fandom. As Taylor's birth date and lucky number, 13, has a recurring role in the fandom and has been at the centre of many fan theories (*also notice the strategic decision for 13 chapters in this book*). For example, the 100th Eras show at Anfield (Liverpool, UK) was on the 13th of June, and fans speculated about what special announcement would follow as the stars aligned on this important date (much to the dismay of two of the authors of this chapter attending this show, nothing came of this Swift-spiracy).

Taylor's genius is reflected in her elaborate and purposeful implementation of easter eggs. For example, Taylor's performance and outfit at the American Music Awards in 2019 referenced the order of her re-records (Taylor's version). If the theory continues to hold, *Reputation*

should be the next TV to be released, followed by *Taylor Swift* (Debut). In her announcement of Fearless TV, Swifties discovered the release date (April 9th) through her use of capitalisation in a social media post announcing the album. Additionally, her music videos overflow with clues about upcoming events: the neon sign in *ME!* and the tattoo in *You Need to Calm Down* hinted at the release of *Lover* are just two examples of Swiftie's secret communicate in action.

Taylor's cultivation of easter eggs is often complex and multi-layered. For example, Taylor used a combination of different types of ink pens when writing lyrics to *Slut* in *1989 TV (From The Vault)*. A snapshot of a few lyric lines was shared via a social media story, and fans were able to speculate about the nature of the song from the use of the different inks. For the uninitiated, this may seem strange or incomprehensible. However, those fluent in Taylor folklore were likely familiar with a 2021 interview where Taylor described categorising her lyrics based on the pens she used to write them: a quill pen for romantic, antiquated, and eloquent lyrics; a fountain pen for common phrases with a twist, modern yet poetic with vivid imagery; and glitter gel for bouncy, playful, and carefree lyrics. We cannot entail an exhaustive list of each easter egg in the Swiftie-sphere, and Taylor has expressed that it is unlikely many will ever be revealed – she has threaded these invisible strings across her discography years in advance. Finding and decoding of these cryptic clues is a tradition spanning decades for Swifties. This playful approach began as – and continues to be – an effective strategy for fan engagement, retention, and hype sustainability.

let's play... taylor's alternate reality game

From discovering easter eggs and decoding secret messages to fanilect and friendship bracelets, it's not a surprise that those outside of the Swiftie-sphere think of Swifties as inhabiting a different reality. For many Swifties, this isn't entirely untrue. The carefully constructed mystique of Ms. Americana is structured very similarly to an alternate reality game (ARG). An ARG is a story-game hybrid which interweaves game-world and real-world elements⁴⁰. The core mechanics of

alternate reality games frequently include collaborative problem-solving as players tap into their physical surroundings to solve plot-based challenges and puzzles and work together as a community to achieve the game's objective. ARGs bring the fun, challenge, and social connection found in games into non-game contexts. In the same way, Swifties collaborate to solve Taylor's riddles, share their theories, and analyse her easter eggs and secret codes to decipher information and insight into the plans of Taylor Swift.

As part of the game activities, ARGs encourage players to do their own research, engage in speculation, and share their discoveries with a community of fellow players. For example, city-based scavenger hunts and escape rooms require players to see the world beyond what is readily apparent, to look for deeper meaning in the mundane, to search for truth, to formulate hypotheses, and to be part of something greater than themselves.

Taylor's trail of easter eggs has snowballed into a multiplayer ARG puzzle for fans⁴¹. For example, Taylor has used 'Vault Puzzles' to support her previous album rereleases, but what started as fairly simple anagrams progressed into a significant undertaking, as these problems were scattered across Google search results. The Swifties worked together to unlock the vaults and the coveted secrets about *1989 TV*. More recently, fans close to Los Angeles were able to visit the pop-up library of tortured poets, which included callbacks to previous albums (e.g., a notebook titled "US", alluding to *The Story of Us* from *Speak Now*) and an abundance of purposefully installed art to allude to the themes of the tracks in her latest work. But the game didn't end with the release of *The Tortured Poets Department*, and fans quickly noticed lyrics at the library weren't present in the album, which fuelled the theory that there was another level to reveal. This was confirmed with the surprise release of *The Tortured Poets Department: The Anthology*, and fans were able to piece together all parts of the puzzle.

Easter eggs and the Taylor-verse ARG are also helpful to understand what makes a Swiftie a Swiftie and have started to play an important role in fans' identity and belonging in the fandom. The prevalence of easter eggs in video games reflects a paratextual industry, where being a member of gaming culture becomes more than just

playing games⁴². A similar perspective can be held for the Swifties, where awareness of the easter eggs riddled throughout Taylor's work has slowly become an integral part of the fandom culture. Being a Swiftie has become much more than just listening to Taylor's music.

While these are great qualities in an ARG, they can be co-opted for less playful purposes. Because ARGs merge the reality of the game world with our daily reality, they can be incredibly immersive. Players may start to notice random items or events and assign them importance or meaning. For example, is the folded corner of a book page accidental, or does it signify a clue lies within the text? Is the new aquamarine top and purple mini skirt during the 1989 Eras tour set just a new colour scheme, or does it hint at something more?

fan theories and conspiracies

Guessing at clues, uncovering secret plans, and connecting dots that only a privileged few are sharp enough to notice may sound like conspiratorial thinking. Going forward, the use of the term "conspiracy" is used to convey an intensity of speculation and suspicion that exceeds simple gossip and rumour but does not rise to the actual definition of a true conspiracy theory. A true conspiracy theory consists of five components: a hypothesised pattern, the perception that the alleged conspirator's plans are deliberate, the implication of agency, a group working in conjunction, an element of threat, and an element of secrecy⁴³. These principle components are not widely applicable to the conspiracies within the Swiftie-verse.

The motivations for engaging with conspiracy theories can be broadly understood under three umbrella motives: epistemic, existential, and social⁴⁴. Social motivations describe how we are prompted by the desire to belong and to maintain a positive image of the self and the in-group⁴⁵ and help understand the role of easter eggs in the Swiftie fandom. The motives stemming from social identities (e.g., Swiftie) to hold positive beliefs about in-groups and negative beliefs about out-groups can draw members of these groups to the contents of conspiracy theories which accomplish these motivations⁴⁶. For example, Swifties might be motivated to engage with information which

presents their in-group and Taylor in a positive light, alongside engaging with information which portrays competing artists and subsequent fandoms in a negative light.

Branding Swifties' involvement with easter eggs as conspiracy theories may not be fully representative of fan engagement and motivations. Generally, we are averse to randomness, and because of this, we impose meaning on randomness by perceiving patterns in events, even when these patterns do not exist⁴⁷. Moreover, Swifties are not entirely misguided in their development of fan theories and hunt for clues, as it is well-known that easter eggs exist in the Swiftie-sphere.

Conspiracy theories are overwhelmingly accompanied by negative implications, but engagement with fan theories has positive implications for Swifties. For example, fan theories promote a sense of community, evoking positive feelings of being an insider with the knowledge of secret information, alongside feelings of closeness to Taylor⁴⁸. Each of these implications aligns with the positive impacts of participating in conspiracy theories, such as feeling good about oneself and the groups to which they belong, in addition to feelings of specialness and uniqueness through knowing secret information⁴⁹.

However, not all Swiftie theories are simply attempts to decode music videos. As aspects of Taylor's life have descended into conspiracy, fans have crossed boundaries that Taylor may not have intended when using this tool for interaction. For example, the 'Gaylor' subculture in the Swiftie-sphere reflects a closeting conspiracy theory (i.e., a conspiracy theory centred on speculation of a public figure's sexuality), where fans theorise about Taylor's sexuality⁵⁰. This dates back to fan discussions on Tumblr, and fan 'evidence' has included colour-coded easter eggs, which are a central tool in her lyricism. For example, in the *You Need To Calm Down* music video, Taylor's hair is magenta, purple, and blue (interpreted by fans as a representation of the bisexual pride flag), and her song title, *Lavender Haze*, is an important colour symbolizing empowerment for the LGBTQ+ community. This theory is not trivial and has become a point of mainstream speculation, her team's repeated denial.

Easter eggs have become a renowned tool for engagement in the Swiftie-sphere, allowing fans to share experiences of surprise and

problem-solving. But these secret messages may have fuelled feelings of intimacy and the parasocial nature of some relationships in this fandom. Moreover, these cryptic clues have plunged the Swifties into conspiracy, as fans investigate and analyse every aspect of Taylor's life, developing fan theories to crack codes that may not even exist. In doing so, the Swiftie lifestyle has turned the real world into an alternate reality, but there is no end to the game that Taylor let begin.

making the friendship bracelets: concluding thoughts

In our chapter, we have broken down the science of the Swifties, exploring the development of fandoms and fan identities. In doing so, we outlined key aspects that define the 'Swiftie' fandom and identity, such as language and dress codes. We also considered different ways that fan identity develops and highlighted how fan identity is more than merchandise ownership. Because of the complexities of fan identities and fandom hierarchies, we implore the takeaway that the title of 'Swiftie' is not an identity to gatekeep. Instead, we want readers to focus on the belonging within this fandom – any fan of Taylor can join the Swiftie community.

We've explored some negative aspects of fandoms, such as the blurring of boundaries and safety of Taylor. It is important for fandoms (and academics) to engage in critical conversations about the 'parasocial' nature of fan relationships with Taylor. Misguided labelling can encourage unfair reputations for fans and broader fandoms, many of whom already face wider gender-based stereotypes, yet they are engaging in typical and harmless fan and artist interactions.

Finally, our exploration of easter eggs reveals the dynamic interplay between creators and audiences, highlighting how the Taylor-verse has become an alternate reality game for Swifties to play. The blending of fiction and reality through these cryptic messages and the allure of hidden meanings in fan theories portray the depth of this fandom's investment and engagement. Understanding these interactive tools sheds light on the evolving nature of media consumption and their

profound potential to boost connections that fans form with their favourite artist.

Taylor has crafted her artistry to enhance the engagement and loyalty of fans, fostering this community, and this unstoppable fanbase is a force to be reckoned with. We want to close this chapter by giving credit to the Swifties, who often face unjust criticism, but are unapologetic about their passion for all things Taylor.

haunted

How symbolic visuals haunt Taylor Swift's music

Sylvia Hayes

Taylor Swift is praised for her masterful use of language, and the self-appointed Chair of the “Tortured Poets Department” is often compared to poets or described as one of the greatest songwriters of a generation¹. Among fans and critics, there is an awareness of Swift’s lyrical craft and the importance she places on clever wordplay in her work. As is often the case, the fanbase has constructed a specific lexicon and verbal short-hand to communicate amongst themselves. Think, for example, of the term “Swiftie” to describe the fan community, or the shipping names “Toe” (Taylor and Joe Alwyn), “Haylor” (Taylor and Harry Styles), or the way that album title abbreviations are used without explanation online (e.g. TTPD). This is an important part of fan practice, creating in-jokes and acting as community-building so that fans feel almost as if they have their own language or dialect².

But what of the visual imagery? Just as fans have specific words and phrases to alert one another to their fan status, the same can be said of images which permeate the Swift universe. Though music is an inherently auditory experience, so much of the mythology, the “brand”, and the audience experience of Swift’s fandom is cultivated, reinforced, and shaped by the visual imagery and cues which surround the art. Images are powerful forms of communication,

surrounding us in not only banal and clichéd ways, but also in evocative and shocking ways. The ubiquity of visual imagery, particularly in our digital lives, is often overlooked in favour of textual information, but visual communication is an increasingly important part of the business of music and the cultivation of a celebrity brand. Just as a catchy piece of music can be stuck on repeat in your head, the seductive and alluring power of imagery can be just as “sticky”, with images or visuals becoming deeply rooted and persisting in your mind’s eye long after you move on from viewing the content.

Visuals have always been intertwined with the music industry, increasingly so as the digital age of music progressed, from stage performances to vinyl album covers to the visual revolution of MTV and the subsequent ubiquity of the music video. This importance of the aesthetic of music and musicians has only become more important for business in the social media age, with musicians such as Halsey and Florence Welch speaking out about increasing pressure from record labels to compete for “viral” sounds on video apps such as TikTok to promote music³.

In this chapter, I explore some elements of the visual imagery associated with Taylor Swift’s music, and the ways in which she has constructed a visual lexicon through two uses of visual imagery to communicate messages, emotions and connections across her discography through imagery.

First, I outline the use of colour across Swift’s albums, and how colours are used to define and cultivate the overall vibe and aesthetic of an era. I will explore how this deliberate linking between colours and albums is done through lyrical references in specific songs, but also through a specific exploitation of the deeply rooted psychological connections between audio and visual processing.

Second, I will discuss the way that certain visual images and objects become associated with specific themes in Swift’s music, and how these visual images are constructed as symbolic *motifs*. Using semiotics (the study of signs and symbols in visual communication), I explore how these visuals come to stand in for more than their denotative meaning, and instead represent themes or messages to fans. Through the example of the red scarf, this chapter charts the journey of certain

images in Swift's "cinematic universe", beyond the iconic (representing the item which is depicted), into the symbolic, where the signified or implied meaning is not immediately given in the visual itself, but requires some culturally learned^{4,5}. In turn, these motifs become *hauntological*, meaning they exist beyond the content they are viewed in and instead carry over, existing in the space between 'material objects' and 'abstract cognitive, embodied, subjective processes'⁶. A visual cue which is hauntological proliferates. It is reproduced, reinforced, reinterpreted, and reworked across mediums and platforms. Here, I outline the specific hauntological visuals which re-occur across Swift's discography as ways to imbue songs with meanings beyond the specific lyrics. This is done through music videos, lyric videos, but also through various ways in fan culture, such as online social media.

Due to the culturally learned information necessary to understand the cues, combined with the fan culture of reinforcing the hauntological nature of these images, this chapter discusses how Swift's music has a specific *visual lexicon*, or visual language of signs/images, which fans can draw on as a short-hand to evoke a specific message, emotion or connection across eras.

blue, dark grey, and red: colours in the lyricism and branding of taylor swift

One clear way in which Swift has evoked visual symbolism through her art is through the use of colour in her lyrics. In explicit ways, Swift evokes visual and colourful imagery through the lyrics in her music. The album "Red" is not only named after the colour, but the title track makes explicit links between colours and specific emotional experiences. In the chorus, Swift uses colours as a metaphor to take the listener through the emotional journey of loving someone and then losing them. Dark grey for the loneliness of missing someone and feeling alone. Blue for the sadness of losing someone you care about. Finally, Swift uses the colour red to explain her love for this muse, in this line only giving the colour rather than an accompanying emotion, as in the previous lines. Red as a colour is associated with passion, danger, and lust⁷, as well as female sexuality⁸. In contrast to the cooler

tones of blue and grey, both commonly associated with negative emotion and even often connotating depression, red is associated with intense feeling, often romantic or sexual, and danger. For example, some psychological work has demonstrated how exposure to red increased the speed at which participants walked to an interview in a romantic context (about dating), as compared to an interview in an achievement context (about intelligence)⁹. Swift makes use of this psychological link between red and danger deliberately, as it evokes the speed, uncertainty and insecurity associated with a new relationship.

This is an effective and poetic way of describing emotions and relationships but works also by producing a strong mental image to accompany the listening experience¹⁰. Psychologically, humans have been shown to associate abstract visual concepts or words with physical stimulus (e.g. how *happy* is often associated with *up*)¹¹, and music has specifically been linked with colour as far back as the 18th century through so-called “colour organs”. French mathematician Louis-Bertrand Castel produced so-called Clavecin Oculaires (“Ocular Harpsichords”), a harpsichord with sixty small, coloured glass windows which were opened by the pressing of corresponding keys¹². The effect was such that music and colour were experienced together, and Castel’s intent was to paint sounds such that deaf listeners were also able to enjoy musical experiences¹³.

Swift continues these colour associations throughout her discography, and the colour red specifically is referred to in later albums. This not only makes links between themes across the discography, but also allows Swift to evoke similar emotions in different albums. For example, in the song Daylight on the album *Lover*, Swift uses colours throughout the bridge to demonstrate her evolving perspective on love and emotions from the *Red* album (2012) to *Lover* (2019). The bridge states that Swift once understood love as *black and white*, meaning clear-cut, unquestioned, simple, but also as *burning red*, evoking the passion, lust, and desire which the colour red brought to the 2012 song *Red*. In contrast, the bridge goes on to explain, Swift sees love as *golden*, like daylight. This association of golden daylight of the sun rising implies a positive and calm experi-

ence of love, a far cry from the intense and dangerous red of the earlier album.

This continues further in the 2022 album *Midnights*, where Swift returns to and subverts the association of red with love in the song *Maroon*. In the song, Swift lists various meaningful elements of a past relationship as being so scarlet that they were in fact maroon. Spilt wine on a t-shirt, the flush of blood in cheeks when blushing, a mark on her skin, the metaphorical rust of un-used telephones, and the lips of the muse, were all described as being red, but specifically scarlet and maroon. The choice of maroon is meaningful, as all the elements (blood, wine, a mark such as a bruise, rust) all have dark, almost violent connotations. Maroon is a dark, deep shade of red, which can appear brown or purple. Swift is here using a shade of red which is dark to signify a changing understanding of love and relationships – perhaps reflecting back on the same muse which inspired “Red” but recognising the darker sides of the emotions or relationship when reflecting back. Here, love is still a shade of red, but such an intense red (scarlet) that it in fact transitions into maroon, a more harsh, brutal and dark shade of red. Swift uses colour in other ways throughout the discography to imply closeness and intimacy in relationships. In *Out of the Woods* (2014), Swift describes her and her muse as brightly colourful in a world of monotone, similarly in *Illicit Affairs* (2020) Swift implies a new vision of colours which is only possible with her muse.

Outside of lyricism, Swift uses colour to extend a visual aesthetic and overall vibe of an album or “era”. Colours have been assigned to albums, partly by fans and partly cultivated by Swift and her team, to help shape and reshape a branding and understanding of an album and its themes. Swift cultivates and plays with this association between an album and its colour through physical or material visual manifestations of colour such as the album cover, outfits, and merch. There is clearly a business imperative here, as the branding opportunities are increased when there is a clear visual message associated with albums, but it also allows Swift to reinforce the vibe and theme of an album, even before it is released. For example, the pastel, bright, feminine colour associations of the *Lover* era (pale pink, blue, yellow)

evoke a happy, calm and bright sound for the pop album, whereas the dark/monotone black and white of Reputation is in line with the darker, more experimental sounds and darker themes of obsession, addiction, revenge and spite which are throughout the lyrics.

For Swift and her team, this works because of the neurological association between material visuals and specific sounds which has been demonstrated in many psychological experiments. In the famous ‘Kiki/Bouba effect’ of the 1940s, for example, participants across cultures and languages consistently named a rounded shape “Bouba” and a spikey shape “Kiki”¹⁴. This so-called “sound symbolism” or “synchresis”¹⁵ describes the specific process by which auditory and visual phenomena are interconnected¹⁶. Neurologically, studies such as the Bouba/Kiki effect demonstrate that there is some deep interconnection between perceptions of both sound and vision¹⁷. The most common contemporary example of this in popular culture is the music video, but there has also been a long history of live visuals used in electronic music performances, to produce a ‘total artwork’ of sound and music through technology and audiovisual production¹⁸. Some studies have indicated that the look and format of visual accompaniment to music does affect emotive and acoustic responses to the music^{19,20}, and that this multi-sensory experience is a more active means of consuming media²¹.

Swift’s specific and deliberate use of colour refers not only to her lyricism, then, but also to the overall vibe, aesthetic and sound of each album or era. By utilising colour not only in material ways through the branding and aesthetic development of an album and its promotion, but also in immaterial or psychological ways to evoke specific emotional experiences in listeners, Swift therefore uses the visual communication of colour in a *hauntological* way. Colours are both real and imaginary in their significance to Swift’s music, acting almost as spectral visual entities as listeners experience the music²².

the scarf is a metaphor: the power of visual motifs

Swift plays with visual imagery not only through colour, but also through visual motifs or cues which reoccur throughout her work.

Consider the red scarf, first introduced in Swift's lore through the lyrics of perhaps Swift's most fan-loved song, *All Too Well* (2012). In Swift's masterful use of lyrical storytelling, this song charts the course of a past relationship and reflections on its breakdown. The scarf motif appears in the first verse of the song, where the singer recounts visiting the house of the muse's sister and accidentally leaving her scarf there. The singer then recalls how the muse kept this scarf in their drawer, despite the relationship being over. This is returned to in the final verse of the song, where the singer contrasts receiving her possessions back once the relationship has ended, with how the muse kept the scarf from that first verse. She claims that the muse couldn't part with it as the scarf represented the innocence of the early relationship and smells like the singer. In the song, the scarf is a material representation or *visual motif* for the emotions of nostalgia, memory, and regret attached to the breakdown of a relationship. In film, a "visual motif" refers to the visual element which reoccur throughout a story to tell a narrative²³, just as the scarf appears multiple times in the lyrics of *All Too Well*.

In semiotics terms, the scarf transcended its *iconic* meaning as a clothing accessory, and instead stood in as a *symbol* for specific feelings, themes, and emotions. Visual communication researchers recognise how certain visual tropes or motifs can go beyond being *iconic* (representing that which is visually present), towards becoming *symbolic* (where the full meaning of the visual requires some culturally learned information, and is not immediately denoted or communicated by the visual itself)²⁴. This distinction forms the basis of *semiotics*, or the study of "signs" which are signalled or communicated by visual imagery^{25,26}. In the context of news media, for example, certain news photographs come to be seen as "symbolic" in their ability and power to galvanise public opinion around a specific issue²⁷, for example the image of Alan Kurdi, the drowned Syrian refugee boy, or the image of the Earth taken from the Apollo 8 mission²⁸.

This scarf then took on a life of its own in the fandom. In everyday life, we often treat images or pictures as if they are alive, imbuing them with power to influence and challenge us, and visual communication literature explores this power, arguing that visuals must be treated

with the respect given to powerful agents, rather than static or inert objects^{29,30}. This was true of the All Too Well scarf, as All Too Well became one of Swift's most successful and acclaimed songs, and the emoji of the red scarf became a stand-in for the entire Red album in online content. Swift has spoken about All Too Well being her most emotional song to write and perform, and how her relationship to the song has undergone significant changes in the years since it was released. She describes how the fan response to the song has turned an emotionally raw and difficult experience into something beautiful, positive, and shared³¹.

Importantly in semiotics, signs are not universal but are culturally contingent on shared cultural references, knowledges, and contexts³². In the context of Swift's work, the scarf reached symbolic status as it began to stand in for wider themes and moments which stretch across Swift's discography. The scarf maintained this cultural significance for almost a decade to when the scarf image made a lyrical and material comeback in the re-release of Red (Taylor's Version) in 2021. The scarf is physically manifested in the short film music video accompanying All Too Well (10 minute version) (Taylor's Version). In the film, we see the character portraying Swift wearing the scarf and leaving it hooked around a banister of a house in the opening scene. Swift herself reinforced the relevance of the scarf in 2022 when the short film was released, stating in an interview: *"the scarf is a metaphor, and we turned it red because red is a very important colour in this album, which is called Red. And, I think when I say it's a metaphor, I'm just going to stop"*³³.

The scarf has therefore undergone multiple iterations of having meaning layered upon it. First, Swift uses the scarf in the lyrics of All Too Well (2012) to represent innocence, the nativity of the early stages of a relationship which does not work out. Over time, with fan input, the scarf came to additionally signify the changing emotions of the song All Too Well for Swift herself, but also growth, maturity, and the wisdom with which we are able to view our past selves and past relationships as we age.

Again, this specific element of visual communication (the motif of the scarf) exists across and between the spaces of material meaning (physically manifest in the All Too Well (10 minute version) Short

Film), and immaterial meaning through its cultural weight, making this another example of *hauntological* visual tropes. By reoccurring across Swift's discography and visual media, the red scarf haunts the music of Swift, reappearing and taking on new meanings as it is used and reused by fans and Swift alike. The meaning communicated by the red scarf in 2022 in the short film is different to and more than the meaning that Swift initially intended it to communicate in the original lyrics in 2012, and the scarf contains a cultural life of its own.

a secret language: implications of swift's use of iconic visual imagery

Taylor Swift has transcended most modern pop artists' level as a musician and has instead become a cultural icon and brand almost entirely removed from Taylor Swift the individual human. The strong cultural branding which Swift and her team have constructed around her and her art is in no small part the reason for her success in a highly competitive industry, and a core part of this cultural branding is the construction of *myths*³⁴. This chapter has demonstrated how these myths can come to be constructed through two examples of *hauntological* visuals, colour and visual motifs.

There are two key implications of the use of the hauntological visuals discussed here.

First, the artistic benefit of utilising hauntological imagery across a wide-reaching discography comes through the increased emotional weight that visuals carry, when combined with music. The use of visuals has enabled Swift to encourage audiences to engage and connect with her music even more strongly than with audio alone, and the emotional connection to her work that fans feel is a large part of her long-standing success.

Second, the way that hauntological motifs and colours creates a way for the audience to engage with the content in different ways. Fans of Swift's music have utilised the visual imagery (colour but also visual motifs/icons) in a number of ways, repurposing and reproducing the meanings which were intended by Swift. The association of each album with a colour has been adopted, adapted, and reinforced

by fan use and engagement with her discography. On social media, for instance, heart emojis of the colour of an album is often used as a short-hand for writing the name of the album. When attending live shows, fans will often wear a specific colour to signify to other fans which album is their favourite. This visual short-hand provides fans with not only a common language to communicate with, but also a way of reinforcing the deliberate links that Swift herself made between specific albums and colours. In the current digital media ecosystem, fans have been understood as encompassing the roles of consumers, producers, and poachers³⁵. The link between fan culture and identity has been widely discussed³⁶, and studies of fans of One Direction, Justin Bieber and Magcon found that participating in various fan practices (such as using the pronoun “we”³⁷) did contribute to feelings of social and cultural identity within the fan group³⁸. For Swift fans, this includes dissecting and discussing Easter Eggs communicated by Swift through coloured clothing ahead of an album release (to read more about easter eggs see the chapter on that topic in this volume). In this case, it is Swift’s use of a haunting colour which facilitates this.

Just as the “*secret language*” that the muse in *Illicit Affairs* taught the speaker, therefore, Swift and her fans have cultivated a specific visual lexicon or language, not only using colour as a visual short-hand for social media interactions, but also through reproducing iconic visuals as symbolic visuals to stand-in for more abstract or strong emotions. Put simply, the specific uses of visuals by Swift have facilitated fans becoming *active participants* in the media they consume, rather than passive consumers.

In 2023, the American magazine WIRED published an article on the “fanilect” of Taylor Swift fans³⁹. The term – coined by linguistics expert Cynthia Gordon – is a play on “familect”, which is a linguistic term referring to the in-group references and specific speech patterns and terms used within families. Spurred on by a culture of Easter Egg hunting and muse-searching, Taylor Swift fans have been described as communicating ‘in code’⁴⁰, and the concept of “fanilect” therefore describes this characteristic (common in many fandoms) where fans appear to speak a language of their own. Using lyrics, references, and

in-jokes, fans are able to communicate with other fans, often online, in a way which binds the group together.

In this chapter, I have shown how this fanilect goes beyond the linguistic and encompasses the visual, through fan use of emojis, evoking visual symbols e.g. the red scarf, and through colour in clothing or other signals. By reusing specific visual cues (e.g. colours), and by reshaping what is communicated by certain symbolic visuals (e.g. the red scarf), fans have contributed to a visual language and lexicon which has transcended the auditory experience of the music and become visible in the real world. There is, therefore, an interconnectedness between the producer of media content, the messages immediately conveyed by the media content itself, and the audience of the content⁴¹. This interconnectedness and closeness between Swift and her fans, in part through the use of visuals across her discography, is what has contributed to her success as an artist.

insights and future directions

Overall, what this chapter has sought to highlight is the powerful role that visual imagery plays, even in a purely audio medium such as music. By making the links between psychology and neuroscientific understandings of the sound-visual connections, this chapter has shone new light on the way that Taylor Swift uses visual imagery in a way to not only engage fans in the emotional side of her music, what she is most beloved for, but also how this use of colour and iconic visuals creates a strong identity among fans and a simplified visual language or short-hand which transcends the immediate meaning of the visual item. This *visual fanilect* is therefore jointly produced, reproduced, and reinforced by both Swift herself and her fans, and could go a long way in explaining her monumental success as an artist in connecting with fans.

f*ck the patriarchy

Sexism and Taylor Swift

Elizabeth D. Kilmer

Taylor Swift is a woman in the music industry and the public eye, and as such has been subject to sexism commonly experienced by female artists. As of this writing, Swift has 11 studio albums, 14 Grammys, and in 2023 she broke records for the highest grossing tour of all time ¹. Her continued success and popularity have contributed to privileges she holds as a celebrity, but her fame and power have failed to shield her from experiencing sexism on both personal and systemic levels. Despite her prolific success and adherence to many societal standards for “acceptable” white female artists, we continue to see sexist jokes and rhetoric about her, her romantic relationships, and her success. One need look no further than the stage of the 2024 Golden Globes for recent examples of such casual sexism ². As Swift is a role model for many children and young people in the US and globally, the normalization of sexist rhetoric directed at her is particularly concerning as it may reinforce such problematic cultural norms for younger generations. Certain aspects of her identity (white, conventionally attractive) and career (financial success, popularity) afford her some privilege in pushing back against misogyny and other forms of discrimination. This chapter will explore sexism directed at Taylor Swift throughout her career as well as her reactions to this and the changes she has pushed for. Further, Swift has previously spoken about her own expe-

riences with internalized misogyny and has gone so far as to change lyrics to existing songs presumably to better align with her current beliefs. This chapter will also examine the criticisms of Swift's personal responses to misogyny and her professional advocacy. Taylor Swift is one of the most well-known women of our time, and one of the most successful artists in the music industry - if she can't escape from the pervasive miasma of misogyny, what hope do the rest of us have?

defining sexism

Sexism and misogyny are both terms that refer to the beliefs of prejudice or hatred towards women as well as discriminatory actions. Beliefs and actions of sexism and misogyny are rooted in the idea that women are fundamentally inferior to men and considered a consequence of the patriarchal (male-dominated) society in which we live. It is important to note that the use of these terms has changed over time – for example, “sexism” now can be used to refer to discrimination against any gender (not just female), and misogyny at one time was used to denote more obvious or violent hatred towards women, but the terms are now often used interchangeably³ - for the purposes of this chapter, I will primarily be using the term “sexism.”

Sexism can be overt – such as sexual harassment and physical, gender-based violence, or more covert – such as microaggressions or “jokes” rooted in sexist stereotypes⁴. Because of the longstanding ubiquity of sexist beliefs in western societies, there are many tropes, standards, and stereotypes that have sexist roots, but may not be clearly sexist to those lacking context. Further, “sexism,” (like racism, ableism, and the other -isms) is now generally perceived as “bad.” As a result, people are more likely to use more covert used to *imply* the sexist meaning, while also giving the speaker plausible deniability of their discrimination. Many of the examples of sexism outlined in this chapter fall into this more covert category – understanding the history of the speaker/target and the context is often needed to determine whether a comment or action is sexist (importantly, one doesn't need to *intend* to be sexist for their actions to be sexist).

We often think about sexism as something that exists between individuals or groups of people - often referred to as "interpersonal sexism," but this is not the only domain in which sexism exists. Sexist beliefs we hold about ourselves is called "internalized sexism." Sexism in the in the US and many other societies is incredibly normalized, so much so that these beliefs are commonly internalized by women and girls themselves. "Institutional sexism" is sexism codified within organizations, institutions, and legal systems. For example, in the US, women's right to vote was not legally established until 1965 (White women were allowed to vote starting in 1920)⁵, and until 1974 many women were denied the ability to open their own bank account without approval from a husband⁶.

As with the voting example above, the way in which sexism is applied to and experienced by people is impacted by other identities they hold - this intersection of marginalization and experience is called "intersectionality"⁷. As a White woman, Taylor Swift may have more freedom to respond to sexism with anger and frustration than a Black woman does before being labelled as "angry"⁸. At the extreme end, sexism can include (and contribute to) experiences of gender-based violence, resulting in physical and psychological harm to women and girls. Stereotypes and myths about women's competence in the workplace can contribute to unfair hiring and promotion practices⁹. Sexist comments and behaviors can result in reduced self-esteem, increased anger and higher rates of depression¹⁰.

Though the most obvious harms of sexism are to women and girls, individuals of all genders are harmed by the hatred of women and the devaluing of interests, preferences, and occupations commonly associated with women and girls. Expressing emotions, help-seeking, and many aspects of community-building are considered "feminine" and as such relegated to the domain of women. This not only pigeon-holes women in specific supporting roles, but also prevents men from engaging in healthy emotional expression and caretaking without fear of rejection or derision. This can prevent men from engaging in expressing themselves, and seeking healthy community, which can contribute to loneliness and depression¹¹.

target of sexism

Like many women and girls in the public sphere, there are examples of sexism Taylor Swift has experienced throughout the entirety of her career. In the last several years, Swift has become increasingly vocal in speaking out against the sexism she has experienced – both directed from external sources, as well as internalized sexism. The sexism Swift has experienced can be further described across the categories of benevolent sexism, hostile sexism, ambivalent sexism, and internalized sexism.

benevolent sexism: afraid of little ol' me

Stereotypes that women are innocent, pure, nurturing, and in need of protection from men are examples of “benevolent sexism.” These views delineate the roles and characteristics appropriate for individuals by gender – and state that women are weaker and less capable than men. These views perpetuate problematic beliefs that limit what kind of jobs, emotions, and hobbies individuals of all genders can have, and place women under the *responsibility and care* of men, instead of as equally capable. For Swift, who started her career as a teen, her experiences of being patronized and dismissed for her opinions, as well as the work she had to do to prove her talent and success were likely exacerbated by both her gender and her age (another example of intersectionality – both her age and gender impacted the way she was treated). Swift has spoken out about the double standards she experiences as a female singer-songwriter, such as facing a higher bar to “prove” her songwriting or guitar playing abilities than male colleagues (the musician equivalent to “oh, you like Star Wars? Name all the movies, in order!”)¹². She noted in one interview that people treated her songwriting as a “trick instead of a craft,” and goes on to describe that this kind of language is a way to “take a woman who is succeeding...and completely minimize that”¹³.

Taylor Swift’s love life has long been obsessed over by the media and her fans. Though many musicians write songs about their romantic lives, the obsession with Swift’s dating life has been so persis-

tently intense over her career, it often seems to overshadow conversations about her music and work. Swift herself has called out the way in which male peers in the industry, such as Bruno Mars and Ed Sheeran don't receive the same level of scrutiny about their love lives¹⁴. Research backs up Swift's concerns - female musicians are less likely to receive media coverage of their music, and when they do, they are more likely than their male counterparts to be asked about their physical appearance and relationships¹⁵. In 2021, Swift expressed frustration that the Netflix show *Ginny & Georgia* for including the line (spoken from mother to daughter in the show) "You go through men faster than Taylor Swift"¹⁶. This line is problematic because it implies that there is something wrong with Swift for the number or rate at which she has dated people, and it fails to place any responsibility on the other half of the relationship. Swift has called out the double standards of such relationship dynamics in songs like *The Man*¹⁷.

Scholars have also noted how Swift has incorporated stories of other women of history who have been maligned for their audacity in stepping outside of traditional gender norms, such as in her songs *There Goes the Last Great American Dynasty* and *Clara Bow*¹⁸.

hostile sexism: you should be (afraid)

In an interview with CBS, she described there being a "different vocabulary" for men and women in the industry – for the same action, a man might be described as "strategic" while a woman is described as "calculated"¹⁹. Hostile sexism refers to beliefs and actions that are openly or directly hostile towards individuals based on their gender. Those who hold hostile sexist beliefs often see women as manipulative and deceitful. They may believe that women use their sexuality only as a control tactic (as opposed to for their own gratification) and that women need to be "put in their place." Men who endorse hostile sexist beliefs may be more likely to engage in physical abuse of female partners²⁰.

An example of hostile sexism Swift has experienced is the sexual assault and subsequent lawsuit from a Colorado Radio DJ, David Mueller. Swift stated that during a photo op, Mueller reached under

her clothing and grabbed her rear end ²¹. She then reported the incident to the station, which fired Mueller, who subsequently sued Swift for defamation. The assault itself is an example of hostile sexism, as is the attempts by Mueller to force Swift to pay for his crimes and the consequences he faced when his actions were reported (being fired by the station). Like many women who have experienced sexual assault, Swift spoke up about the way in which Mueller, his lawyer, and “internet trolls” attempted to make her feel guilty for speaking up about the assault ²².

ambivalent sexism: breaking your favorite toys

Ambivalent sexism, as the name implies, is a combination of hostile and benevolent sexist beliefs – with some research suggesting that hostile and benevolent sexism are complementary parts of a sexist ideology ²³. In this complementary ideology, women are protected when they comply with rigid gender role expectations, and hostile sexism and the threat of such act as further coercion as needed for subjugation.

Swift is White, blonde, young, and conventionally attractive. She has often dressed in soft, feminine clothing, and projected a “good girl” image. For much of her career, she refused to speak on politics, often dismissing herself as not being knowledgeable enough to have an opinion. This image of her fits the benevolent sexism ideal of a woman (with the exceptions of her lack of a husband and her independently thriving music career). Her adherence to this mold for the first part of her career may have protected her from some experiences of hostile sexism, while making her an easy target for benevolent sexism. To be clear, I’m not recommending Swift should be, dress, or act more or less “feminine” (that would be sexist, *and* it wouldn’t stop the sexism). For example, when Swift stepped outside of the benevolent sexism ideal – for example, to call on her followers to register to vote – Fox News anchor Sean Hannity was quick to accuse imply she didn’t understand the presidential race, and suggested she “think twice” about who to vote for in the 2024 election ²⁴ (Swift has sense officially

endorsed Kamala Harris for president, sending another wave of 405,999 people to a voting registration website within 24 hours)²⁵.

The feral outrage of some NFL fans as a response to Swift's attendance (and subsequent highlights by NFL programming) is an example of how ambivalent sexism is a system of both benevolent and hostile sexism. Swift's mere presence at a game to support her boyfriend may be seen as her adhering to gender norms – she's there to support her man, after all. However, the NFL's choice to highlight her on crowd cameras (as they do with many famous people at their games), and the increase in interest by potential female fans may have shifted the perceived dynamic of power. Suddenly, through no change to her own behavior, Swift was no longer playing the role of supportive partner – her status as a world-famous musician (much more famous than her NFL boyfriend) was clear. Not only that, her presence broadcasted by the NFL created a draw and a sense of safety for women to participate in the sport as fans. Barstool Sports hosts of the *Pardon My Take* podcast shared their concerns about how Swift was "distracting" from the game, and claiming she was a "problem for the NFL." They went so far as to state that the only way they would be "okay" with Swift continuing to attend NFL games was if she and Kelce released a sex tape. These sexist statements suggest a woman's (in this case Swift's) access to a public sporting event should be controlled by the men who feel they have cultural ownership over the space. Additionally, they believe it's appropriate for them to demand access to Swift's privacy and sexually as exchange for allowing her access to "their" space. These hosts weren't the only to complain – many fans expressed concerns that Swift was a "schemer" who was ruining the "purity" of football ²⁶. The characterization of Swift as a "distractor" and "schemer" assumes Swift could not be attending games purely with the goal of supporting a boyfriend, or perhaps learning to love the game herself. Additionally, these statements and concerns fail to consider the significant control the NFL – the very institution the Barstool Sports hosts claimed they wanted to protect – had over the visibility of Swift at games.

internalized sexism: the anti-hero

In her teens, Swift was asked by publicly about whether she would consider herself a feminist, Swift said she wouldn't. In speaking about this in the last decade, she's expressed some regret at her answer at that time – she acknowledged wishing she knew more about the topics of feminism and internalized sexism and misogyny²⁷. Her advocacy on feminism and other social topics continues to fall short of what many of her fans hope for, with limited political conversation and endorsements, including an endorsement of a political candidate in a Kentucky race in 2018, and the endorsement of the Harris-Walz presidential ticket in 2024.

Identifying publicly as a feminist is not the only way Swift's beliefs and actions have changed over the years. Notably, Swift has taken action to change some sexist lyrics as she re-releases her discography in efforts to own her own music again. For example, in "Taylor's Version" of the song "Better than Revenge," the line "But she's better known for the things that she does on the mattress," was changed to "He was a moth to the flame, she was holding the matches"²⁸.

Swift's music is not totally free of sexist stereotypes and tropes – for example, her song "You Belong With Me" is about comparing the singer/protagonist against the "girlfriend" over their relative worthiness for a boy's romantic interest. The topics used to draw differences between the two girls are their clothing choices, interests, and activities – with those typically coded as more "feminine" or "sexy" implied to be the worse choice. For example, two lines criticize the girlfriend for wearing short skirts and high heels. These lines imply that the song's protagonist is more worthy based on her clothing choices of sneakers and t-shirts. Swift is an individual who must personally identify and grapple with her own experiences of internalized sexism, and she can decide how much of the process to share through public statements and changes to her art.

comparing all the girls who are killing it: dismissal of the swifties

Women and girls are commonly at the forefront of shifts in arts and culture, but their interests, opinions, and occupations are continually belittled and devalued^{29,30,31}. For example, “pink collar jobs,” are occupations primarily dominated by female employees, and are often devalued and underpaid. As women began to enter these fields (i.e. teaching, bank teller), the societal and economic value began to decrease^{32,33}. The paternalistic and dismissive view towards interests and activities perceived to be “girly” artificially limits individual’s options for connection and joy, and may contribute to bullying, toxicity, and loneliness of people of all genders.

Despite Taylor Swift’s commercial success, she and her fans are often treated as “silly” and “frivolous” for enjoying her music, or using it as way to connect with other fans (such as through sharing friendship bracelets at concerts). Somehow, the hour spent creating bracelets to share with others is seen as a less worthwhile pastime than screaming at men running back and forth on a field after a ball.

My own experience at the Taylor Swift show in Seattle reiterated awareness of and frustration with the current norms as established and how they benefit few (if any) of us. This sold-out show at Lumen Field with 72,171 people was the most pleasant crowd experience I’ve ever encountered. Though the hallways and stadium were packed, the space felt *safe*. People made space for others, engaged in easy conversation, compliments on outfit choices were traded as often as friendship bracelets. Though occasionally jostled, no one ever shoved me or tried to touch me inappropriately. The crowds followed instructions and lines moved quickly. My experience seemed to echo many others who went to the concert. The line “I always thought I was afraid of crowds. Turns out I’m just afraid of men.” echoed across social media for months in reference to the Eras Tour. Though not all may have had quite as a transcendent concert experience, it highlights how the things we often expect at large events - shoving crowds, inappropriate comments, a need for vigilance, are not inevitable when large groups come together.

rediscovering her power: music and politics

In 2003, when Taylor Swift was 10, the Chicks (then the “Dixie Chicks”) made a comment at concert in London that led to an onslaught of hate and harassment³⁴. While on stage, Natalie Maines said “We do not want this war, this violence, and we’re ashamed that the President of the United States is from Texas” (in reference to the upcoming invasion of Iraq)³⁵. Within days of the comment, listeners were calling country radio stations, demanding their songs be pulled of the air. Industry members recall not only organized boycotts and destruction of Dixie Chick CDs, but violent threats made to radio DJs who continued to play their music³⁶. The Chicks themselves reported experiencing threats made to not just them but their family members as well³⁷. The Chicks have served as a powerful example of what can happen to successful female musicians who dare to share their personal opinions on politics in America, and were used as a cautionary tale, especially for women in country music³⁸.

Swift has received criticism over the years for her lack of commentary on political issues. While this criticism may hold weight with the current adult, superstar version of Swift, these comments started when Swift was still a teenage girl. At a time when the media was unwilling to take her dating life (or even her music) seriously, it’s unlikely her political opinions would have been treated with any more respect. Had Swift spoken up earlier, her opinions likely would have been dismissed because of her youth and gender. The dismissal alone would not have been enough to shield her from the vitriol and devastation to her career. At the time the Chicks made their comment, some saw them as the “Elvis” of country music – but that level of fame and respect within the country music space was not enough to protect them either³⁹. For example, during the Late Show with David Letterman, the crowd cheered and Letterman gave Swift a fist bump in response to her stating that people didn’t want to hear about her politics because she’s “just a 22-year old girl!”⁴⁰.

In many ways, public sentiment has shifted, and celebrities are increasingly expected to speak up on societal and geopolitical issues. Depending on their identities and the topics at hand, the risk of silence

to their careers may be greater than that the risks of speaking up. In 2018, Taylor Swift broke her silence on political issues to call for support of a candidate in Kentucky. The documentary “Miss Americana” includes a clip of a discussion about this decision, where her father expresses fear about how her decision to speak up may put her at physical risk. Swift breaking her long-standing silence on political issues may have been both a personal decision as well as a commercially savvy one – it allowed her to align with young, left-leaning fans and distance herself from white supremacists who were holding her up as an example of “white values.”

Swift wields significant social and political power. After a single Instagram post with a link to Vote.org in 2023, over 30,000 people used the site to register to vote – though not all those registrations may have been due to Swift, Vote.org credits her with many of those registrations ⁴¹. Though Swift didn’t make any explicit candidate recommendations in her post, her history of criticisms of Donald Trump and prior endorsement of a democratic party candidate clearly concerned some republican spokespeople – many of whom utilized sexist rhetoric in attempts to undermine or dismiss the power she wields. On air, Fox News’ Sean Hannity stated that Swift needed to “think twice” before making a decision about 2024 and heavily implied that Swift doesn’t understand republican values or the policies of Joe Biden ⁴². Jesse Watters (another Fox News presenter), claimed that Swift may be being used by Pentagon to influence American voters ⁴³. These statements suggest that Swift doesn’t know what she’s talking about – she couldn’t possibly understand the relevant differences between a Donald Trump and Joe Biden presidency, and that she couldn’t wield the power she does with her fans without government support. They are excellent examples of ambivalent sexism, with both benevolent (Swift is too innocent and naïve to understand and must be told what to do by others), and hostile (she’s working to manipulate and trick voters) sexist components. This rhetoric is not only harmful to Swift - it perpetuates the idea that women, no matter their financial and commercial success, are not welcome and will not be respected when discussing issues like politics.

she had a marvelous time ruining everything

When considering solutions to societal problems, many advocates recommend centering the most marginalized – if those who are the most vulnerable in our society are centered and protected, this will likely mean that most people will be similarly protected. However, when examining the scope of such problems, it can be valuable to examine the most privileged as well. If a conventionally attractive, able-bodied, white, billionaire, female musician continues to be regularly subjected to the horrors of sexism and misogyny, what hope do the rest of us have under our current societal norms? Swift’s own issues with misogyny have at times helped push issues forward that would have otherwise been ignored by lawmakers – such as the horrific pornographic AI deepfakes created about her.

We will likely never have complete answers to how much of Swift’s persona, public statements, and online presence are the “real” her – she will continue to be both a whole complex human being with a right to at least some privacy, as well as a public brand, whose decisions and behaviors have the power to impact the GDP of entire countries⁴⁴, and spark tens of thousands of people to register to vote⁴⁵. It’s critical we continue to examine the celebrities we follow – as our adoration and respect maintain their power. However, it’s also crucial to keep aware of the systems and norms of misogyny that may use an individual’s gender to justify discrimination and double standards.

It is undeniable that Taylor Swift’s music – the lyrics, performance, and persona has resonated with people globally. Though her main fan base is women and girls, fans of hers can be found across genders, ages, and races. She sings about her own experiences in ways that feel both universal and uniquely personal to the listener, allowing fans to connect with and feel heard in her music. Like many of the themes she writes about, her experiences with, and frustration about sexism walk the line of both universal and personal. Swift will likely never be quiet enough about oppression for some fans (and conservative pundits), or loud enough for others. But her music can continue to provide validation (and perhaps even some comfort) to those dealing with sexism in their everyday lives.

my stolen lullabies

Understanding the Impact of the Taylor's Version
Project

Annayah M.B. Prosser

Business deals are not usually glamorous affairs. What we usually see of the showbusiness world are its superstars, the hits, the incredible performances. We think about the catchy number ones, the stadium tours, and the drama of celebrity life. Rarely is it that the technicalities of a business deal make it into the public consciousness, let alone become a subject worthy of interest, or debate among fans. A business deal announced on the 30th June 2019 changed all of that, and brought the Swiftie community tumbling headfirst into a world usually reserved for boardrooms and legalese. This deal, the ensuing case, and resulting project was remarkable, and would set in motion a chain of events that would change the music industry forever. You may not have heard of the deal, but I am sure that as readers of this book, you have heard of its dramatic outcome: the re-recordings of Taylor Swift's first six albums, otherwise known to us as 'the Taylor's Version' project. In this chapter, we'll explore the project and its impact in depth. We'll start by understanding what the project is, and why Taylor embarked on such a mammoth endeavour to begin with. Then, we'll explore research from psychology, social science and marketing to help us understand the project's success, and its impact on all of us.

what even is the taylor’s version project anyway?

The ‘Taylor’s Version’ project involves the re-release and reworking of the first six albums of Taylor Swift’s career: *Taylor Swift*, *Fearless*, *Speak Now*, *Red*, *1989* and *Reputation* ¹. While the music and lyrics of these re-recorded albums remain (mostly) the same, much of the other elements of the works have been changed along the way. The re-recorded tracks often feature different producers and/or musicians, subtle differences in production and musical direction, and the cover art for all re-recorded albums is different to the original releases. These were the six albums that shaped her early career, and in the Taylor’s Versions she revisits these albums as someone with a significant track record of experience in the industry under her belt. She performs on the re-released tracks as someone between seven (for the youngest re-recorded album *Reputation*) to potentially over *twenty* years older (in the case of the oldest debut re-record) than she was when the tracks were first released. The table below documents the timeline² of the re-recordings and highlights the sheer scale of the project.

Album Name	Original Release Date	Taylor’s Version Release Date	Songs Included in Taylor’s Version
Taylor Swift (Debut)	10/24/2006	TBA (after 10/2024)	TBA (19 Original Songs)
Fearless	11/11/2008	April 9, 2021	20 Original Re-recordings 6 ‘From the Vault’
Speak Now	10/25/2010	7/7/2023	16 Original Re-recordings 6 ‘From the vault’
Red	10/22/2012	11/12/2021	20 Original Re-recordings 9 ‘From the Vault’
1989	10/27/2014	10/27/2023	16 Original Re-recordings 4 ‘From the Vault’
Reputation	11/10/2017	TBA (after 10/2024)	TBA (15 Original Songs)

Table 1. Taylor Swift Original and Taylor’s Version Release dates

In these six re-recorded albums, all original songs have been re-released, with the marker ‘Taylor’s Version’ (or TV) attached to them to

clearly distinguish from their earlier versions in both physical and digital editions. At the time of writing, four re-recorded albums have been re-released into the world, with only two remaining (to much anticipation from swifties). Even in its incomplete state, the project already represents the largest suite of re-recordings by a living artist in music history. When the project is complete, over 100 original Taylor Swift songs will have been re-recorded and re-released across six studio albums (notwithstanding the newly released 'from the vault' tracks, which we'll come to later in the chapter). This is a gargantuan undertaking for any artist, let alone an artist that *also* released two additional critically acclaimed albums throughout this rerecording period; *Midnights* and *The Tortured Poets Department* (three if you include *The Anthology*). This record cements Taylor Swift as one of the most productive (and indeed wealthiest³) pop artists of the modern music era. But why bother going to such effort to release songs already out in the world? What was so wrong with the originally released versions that prompted such a response from Taylor and her team? Why was such a dramatic move involving so much investment and hard work necessary for an artist that was already so well-regarded and decorated within the music industry?

so, what happened?

To understand why a legal battle about music contracts has led to one of the greatest upsets in the music industry we first need the background behind Taylor Swift and her first music label Big Machine Label Group (BMG). Back in 2005, the original owner of BMG, Scott Borchetta, was scouting for talent at an industry showcase at the Bluebird café in Nashville Tennessee. This is where he came across a fifteen-year-old country singer, Taylor Swift and saw great potential. This led to Borchetta signing Swift on his BMG label, contracting her for 6 albums and offering a monetary advance in return.

When she originally signed the contract with BMG, she was unknown to the world, and when the contract expired, she was the most famous musician of the modern age. She beat the odds and shattered industry records: *Fearless* won Album of the Year at the Gram-

my's in 2009, and 1989 shared the same accolade in 2016⁴. In the background of this skyrocketing success, her recording contract with BMG came to the end of its duration.

During this time, Swift herself had become extremely wealthy. She attempted to negotiate a new contract with Big Machine, where she would own the recording master's for all her future albums. This negotiation was denied, and she refused to budge when it was suggested she could "earn back her old masters an album at a time"⁵ for which she rejected outright. This led Taylor to sign a new contract with Universal Music Group under Republic records where she would be able to retain the rights to her masters⁶. So why were these rights so important for Taylor?

To understand this, we must now reach into the murky depths of copyright law. US copyright law states that music is subject to two separate copyrights⁷. The first, is a copyright over the recorded and released version of the song, known as the *recorded masters*. The second, refers to the music and composition of the song. Swift's original contract with BMG maintained that the label owned the rights to the *recorded masters* of Swift's songs "in perpetuity": forever. This right also gave the label control over how these original recordings are used, and whether they can be licenced (i.e. used in other media such as TV) or even played live. The second copyright to the songs, '*the publishing rights*', was owned by the songwriters. Famously Taylor Swift is the primary songwriter on all her songs, so she retains this 'publishing rights' copyright throughout her entire back catalogue of music. However, within the terms of her original contract with BMG, she does not own rights to the 'recorded masters' of her first six albums. We can liken this arrangement to a cookbook- while Big Machine might own the physical book, the illustrations, and the binding, the songwriter (in this case Taylor Swift) maintains ownership of the recipes within. This was a big problem for Swift. Legal scholars have characterised these copyright laws as creating a "pervasive power dynamic between musicians and record labels... that prevent[s] musicians from meaningful ownership over their creative accomplishments"⁸.

As BMG was sold in 2019, the 'recording masters' for Swift's first six albums produced under the BMG contract, were also sold with

them. Scott Borchetta sold BMG, to Scooter Braun, a man Swift accused of bullying her throughout her career. Braun now retained ownership over the recorded masters Swift had so desperately wanted to purchase herself. In June 2019, she responded to the news in an impassioned tumblr post:

“I learned about Scooter Braun’s purchase of my masters as it was announced to the world. All I could think about was the incessant, manipulative bullying I’ve received at his hands for years. Now Scooter has stripped me of my life’s work, that I wasn’t given an opportunity to buy. Essentially, my musical legacy is about to lie in the hands of someone who tried to dismantle it...

This is my worst case scenario. This is what happens when you sign a deal at fifteen to someone for whom the term ‘loyalty’ is clearly just a contractual concept.”⁹

Despite her further efforts to regain control over her masters, her attempts were repeatedly denied, and Braun continued to make a profit from the ownership of her master recordings¹⁰. Swift had no legal right to the original recorded masters of her songs that made her career so iconic, and at one point she could not even perform these tracks without permission from their owners. The legal and emotional intricacies of the dispute that ensued are extremely complex and are even alluded to in some of Taylor’s own music, in songs such as ‘My Tears Ricochet’, ‘The Man’ and ‘Long Story Short’. She decided to take action and fight to get those masters back on her own terms. In August 2019, when asked in an iconic interview with CBS if she would re-record those six albums, she replied: “**absolutely**”¹¹. And so, history was made, and the ‘Taylor’s Version’ project was born! Now, with an understanding of the complex legal debate that motivated the Taylor’s Version project originally, we can finally discuss its impact.

impact of the taylor's version project on the industry

Despite being a re-release of already largely available music, the re-records have sold millions of copies in their own right and have even netted Taylor another suite of hits and number ones¹². Beyond the obvious commercial success of the project, 'Taylor's Version' project brought the drama of copyright law to the global stage. The legal and economic realities of the music industry were revealed. Fans were engaged in the heat of an argument over music ownership for the first time in music history. The project also highlighted many of the struggles that artists face in the industry, particularly the misogyny they experience if they are women¹³. The project renewed conversations around artists copyright globally and led to many artists renegotiating contracts to empower themselves¹⁴. The ripple effects of Swift's decision to re-record were felt widely across the industry.

Swift herself also used her own contract renegotiation to directly ensure improved conditions for other artists. In the wake of this dispute, the terms of Swift's new contract with Universal Music Group became an important bargaining point for Swift to renegotiate protections for *all* artists as an industry standard. Using her contract as leverage, her success allows Swift to advocate for other artists as part of her contracts with record labels. This negotiation spread beyond rights to recorded masters. For example, as part of her new deal with Universal Music Group, Swift negotiated distribution of Spotify shares to all artists. When speaking about this condition in her contract, Swift herself said:

"[UMG] have generously agreed to this, at what they believe will be much better terms and paid out previously by other major labels. I see this is a sign that we are headed toward positive change for creators – a goal I'm never going to stop trying to help achieve, in whatever ways I can."¹⁵

When her two final Taylor's Version albums are soon re-released, Taylor's battle to reclaim her masters will be complete, and the music industry will have been changed forever in the process. Knowing what

we know now, it is strange to imagine that this project could be anything but a roaring success. Yet, this was originally uncertain. It was unclear whether fans would support a project like this at all. This was huge financial risk to take on, with very little precedent for such moves within the industry, or guarantee of fan buy-in. Much scepticism surrounded the project in its early months, from fans and the industry. In the remainder of this chapter, we'll unpick some of the psychology, social science and marketing strategy behind the project's unlikely success. Just how did Taylor Swift manage to effectively resell content that had already been released to her fanbase with such success?

understanding the success of the taylor's version project

marketing nostalgia and novelty

Marketing a product that has already been sold to consumers in a previous format is a challenge. The most common example of this approach in the music world is deluxe editions or 'greatest hits' collections. Musicians are also known for releasing 'anniversary' editions of their most popular albums, yet these do not typically feature entirely new recordings. While Swift is entitled to re-record as per her copyright, to fit with copyright law, the re-records needed to be *entirely* distinct from their original versions, as Swift was not entitled legally to reuse any of the original materials. She could not, therefore, rely on the successful campaigns and designs that played a role in the original success of these six albums. So, she had to get creative.

When positioning a product, marketing professionals commonly refer to 'The Marketing Mix' as important factors to consider in their marketing strategy ¹⁶. The original marketing mix, produced in the 1940s consisted of four Ps: product, price, promotion and place. Updates to the mix in the 1980s added three more Ps: people, process, and physical evidence. These models consider how products can be effectively marketed to consumers, and these play an important role in the promotion of the Taylor's Version project.

Of most relevance to the Taylor's Version project are how the re-releases are packaged and communicated. The marketing strategy around the re-recordings centres them as simultaneously nostalgic *and* new. In this, Swift takes the core problem of the re-records project- that they have been heard before- and turns it to her advantage. She 'remixes' the original release materials, invoking the outfits, themes and poses of her original covers with a 'Taylor's Version' twist. Take the album covers. Each album is clearly connected to its original release in some way, whether that is the same colours for 'Red', the same dress for 'speak now', or the same seagull motif in '1989'. This connection to the older versions with a new twist invokes nostalgia and surprise among consumers¹⁷. This marketing serves to invoke the past in the present, appeals to both older and younger fans, many of whom can see their childhood history in Swift's music¹⁸.

The Taylor's Versions are also free from the commercial baggage of the original releases- where Swift had less oversight surrounding the iconography and formatting her works. The re-recordings often poke fun at the original artistic direction, with new covers teasing easter eggs and referencing controversies from the time of the original album's release. For example, the *1989 (TV)* cover features Taylor's entire face, compared to the original Polaroid-style image where her eyes were excluded from the frame. Where the original covers focussed prominently on Taylor's girlhood and femininity¹⁹, the Taylor's Versions are more expansive, moving from close ups to fuller images in a variety of environments. The re-releases all feature personalised letters from Taylor to provide further context for the album. The deluxe packaging of the re-records also moves the project into the present with new photos, commentary and format, but maintains nostalgia by invoking the iconography of the original albums. In subverting the original images, Swift maintains brand recognition but adds a novel element to entice consumers and distinguish her 'Taylor's Versions' from their original release counterparts on the shelves.

While many of the tracks released are the same, the re-recorded songs also balance between nostalgia and novelty. With more creative control and oversight over the re-recordings, Swift is free of the previous constraints and norms of the music industry (such as the 12-

track standard album or three minute single) which limited her original releases. The most extreme example of this, and perhaps the biggest success from the Taylor's Version project is the 'All Too Well' (10-minute version), the lead single from *Red (TV)* which became the longest song to reach number one in the US Billboard Chart in April 2022. Swift was discouraged from releasing longer songs earlier in her career, and after teasing the presence of a ten-minute version of the song, fans anticipation around this release played a big role in the success of *Red (TV)*. The project has also given Swift the opportunity to amend some earlier tracks and update them for modern sensibilities: the most notable example being removing a derogatory comment from 'Better than Revenge' on *Speak Now (TV)*²⁰. These adjustments marry the old releases with a newer social and fan context.

This mix of nostalgia and newness aligns strongly with her Eras Tour publicity strategy. The timing of both projects plays an important role in both of their success. Both projects are ultimately a celebration of Swift's career to date, and each 'era' is treated as a time capsule in the way it is performed and promoted. The promotion of Taylor's Versions released during the Eras Tour period have been intertwined with the drama of her performances. Take the suite of outfits coloured in 1989 blue she sported before announcing the *1989 Taylor's Version* at her show in Los Angeles, or the drama of the *Speak Now* announcement in Nashville. The extensive tour helps to build momentum and provide experiential marketing moments for the project, providing a focus for fans that keeps the project clear in their minds and helps to market the re-recordings widely²¹. Perhaps the most important mechanism for the success of the Taylor's Version project though, was what was added: the 'from the vault' tracks.

from the vault: recontextualising the back catalogue

Alongside recordings of the originally released album tracks, each Taylor's Version re-recording also includes a selection of 'from the vault' tracks. These are additional tracks featured at the end of each album, which were originally excluded from the album's track list.

some of these tracks are extensions of already released songs (such as All Too Well 10-minute version), many tracks had never been officially released, or even heard before the re-recording project. The inclusion of these tracks adds a further element of novelty to the re-recording project, and the opportunity for fans to own and be part of the vault provides another reason for longtime fans to purchase the re-recordings.

The vault tracks extend Swift's discography and provide an insight into the broader stories behind each album. Much like the images, the album tracks of the initial releases were manicured, designed to appeal to the label's target fanbase. Swift's image as an artist was carefully designed during these early releases²². In the Vault, we see tracks that would not- or could not- have been released at the time of the original albums for a variety of reasons; tracks that play with, or directly contrast with Taylor's carefully crafted public personas from the time. For example, 'I can see you'- the lead single from the *Speak Now (TV)* re-recording features mature themes, and visions of what Taylor might do to her lover. Such narratives were uncharacteristic of Taylor at the time of the original *Speak Now* releases, where she led with a carefully crafted, demure persona to counter sexualisation rife within the industry. Similarly, the vault tracks from *1989 (TV)* provide a complex undertone which was (arguably) minimised for the saccharine pop hits of the original release. The vault of *1989 (TV)* hints at a more tumultuous relationship than would have been possible for Swift to disclose at the time due to the toxic media environment surrounding her relationships²³. The 'Vault' tracks give us some insight into what the albums might have been like without the intervention of the original industry drivers and stereotypes around female musicians. While we do not know the exact production dates of these vault tracks, they can help us understand how her albums were crafted and shaped intentionally, and what was chopped at the cost of maintaining the pristine public image surrounding each album eras.

The candour of the vault tracks adds layers of complexity and honesty to the re-recording project. We get a glimpse of the story behind the scenes in these tracks, and fans can find out more about the internal state of Taylor's psyche during these older eras. Many vault

tracks deal with difficult feelings that we rarely saw Taylor discuss at the time of the original releases. Songs like 'Nothing New' (*Red TV*), 'Slut' (*1989 TV*) and 'Castles Crumbling' (*Speak Now TV*) give us complicated reflections on the nature of fame and success in the music industry. From these tracks, we can see some of the inner reflections that were once hidden and gain an insight into what Taylor's rise to fame looked like outside of her carefully calculated public image.

The vault tracks also create a further connection between present and past Taylor, with some vault tracks bearing more resemblance to newer albums in their production than their original album re-rerecording. The *1989 (TV)* vault songs could be considered more stylistically similar to those produced on *Midnights*, for example²⁴. The move to publish the vault tracks also signifies a shift in Swift's overall release strategy, that is complemented by a changing industry focus towards streaming²⁵. She has moved away from the carefully crafted 10-song albums that are a main staple of the industry, instead moving towards albums ballooning with additional special-edition songs and vault tracks. Developing the vault has also influenced Taylor's mainline album work. The vault has also become self-referential in the latest albums released. Lyrics on the *Tortured Poets Department* track 'Guilty as Sin' (2024) reference a vault explicitly as a place for Taylor to hide her darker thoughts and feelings. In these stories, listeners and fans are now brought into the mythmaking around the vault and invited to speculate further exactly what is locked up there- and why. The re-recorded albums become a statement about reclaiming oneself and reclaiming the aspects of oneself that were sanitised or previously hidden.

how taylor's version reconnects us with our younger selves

For Swift as an autobiographical writer, each album can be seen as representations of her different phases of life, from the wistful teenage innocence of the debut and *Fearless* eras, through the confusion and heartbreak of early adulthood in *Speak Now*, *Red* and *1989*. Part of Taylor's success is that historically these personas have aligned with

the life stages of her fan base- young women growing up alongside her. Yet when approaching the re-recording project, she no longer had this shared identity to lean on. So, how does the TV project reconcile different versions of Taylor Swift's selves?

Developmental and personality psychologists note that as we move through life, our personality and identity change dramatically. Our hobbies and interests come and go, our preferences change, and our interpersonal relationships develop. Neuroscientists believe that our personality is not truly solidified until our mid-twenties, when our frontal lobe (the area of the brain that controls higher-order thinking) finishes developing around the age of 24²⁶. From a biological perspective, this is considered the end of adolescence: a period of development between childhood and adulthood (typically the ages of 10-24) where we learn who we are as people. This time involves dramatic emotional and social development and is often an incredibly turbulent time in our lives. Much of Taylor's back catalogue centres this time of life, with her first six albums being released when she was between the ages of 16-27.

Before the re-records, we can see this clash of identities and eras was a point of tension for Swift, with the music video for 'Look What You Made Me Do', involving her fighting with visual representations of her older albums, and emerging victorious²⁷. Relationships between our past and present selves have long been of interest to psychologists, with some of the earliest developments in psychology based around reconciling childhood selves with present conflict. Much of humanistic psychology focusses on reconciling relationships between the 'actual', and 'ideal' selves: the difference between who we currently are, and who we believe we should be²⁸. Where she once distanced herself from these older selves, the masters dispute has forced Swift to confront reinhabit these older 'eras' of herself and repackage them for both old and new audiences.

We can also view the Taylor's Version project from this developmental psychology perspective. Psychologists tell us our journey into adulthood involves us 'trying on' a variety of different selves, with different personalities, interests and passions, and this process help us learn who we really are²⁹. The Taylor's Version project represents a

way to reconcile our older and younger selves that can all learn from. Rather than pushing her younger selves away, in the Taylor's Version project Swift embraces and accepts them. While she has re-invented herself many times throughout her career, she continues to love and embrace her older eras (arguably) just as much as her newer music. As she accepts her older selves, so too can fans listening begin to accept their younger selves. The re-records encourage fans to revisit their younger selves from an older and wiser perspective. Through a present-day lens we can revisit our past selves and remember when we first heard the albums. While societal issues of sexism and misogyny remain, the opportunity to revisit enjoy the older albums in a different social and political context is a privilege for myself and many fans.

creating the 'stolen versions' through fan action

Marketing theory can help us understand fan engagement in the Taylor's Version project. 'Consumer Culture Theory' understands that our consumption is wrapped up in our identities and relationships with others and the world around us³⁰. The Taylor's Version project is a strong example of how a fanbase can become intertwined and embroiled in moral issues generated by the creators. Swift also promotes fans personal investment in her ideas and identity to create so-called 'consumer tribes' around her products³¹. A sure sign that a brand community exists is that there is a named label for the group identity, that members freely identify themselves with³². In the case of Taylor's fanbase, we know ourselves as 'Swifties'. Social psychologists also understand that the groups we belong to are incredibly important for how we live our lives and understand ourselves. Theorists see these groups through the lens of 'social identity theory'³³: the idea that we all belong to many groups which together, make up our understanding of who we are. We find community in these groups through our hobbies and our favourite things: music is an extremely important part of fandom for many people. The Taylor Swift fandom, the 'Swifties' are known as an extremely passionate and enthusiastic fanbase. By the time of the re-recordings, Taylor Swift had developed a large fandom around her work, and a community of fans who were

prepared to take action for her (for more about the science of Swifties, see Chapter 8 in this volume).

By making the narrative of the Taylor's Version project public, Taylor involved her fanbase in this feud and gave them a role to play in her moral cause. Morality is an important component of social action. When we feel that we, or someone we know, has been wronged, we are *much* more likely to take action as a result³⁴. Support for the project is a way that fans can act and make a difference, and their action is funnelled towards consumption. Some fans came to refer to the original albums as 'stolen versions', further emphasising the (im)morality of listening to them in online interactions³⁵. To be clear, this characterisation is legally false, as the masters were never truly 'owned' by Taylor and could not be 'stolen'. Nonetheless, as soon as Taylor's Versions became available, many fans refused to listen to these older 'stolen' versions, debating online whether doing so was immoral or not. Many fans even began to informally police other fans and encourage them not to listen to these older versions. This informal action from fans was not directed by Taylor, fans freely engaged themselves, and voluntarily took social action to participate in the project. This voluntary social action is a huge part of the project's success.

dark marketing strategy and the many versions of taylor's version

While the Taylor's Version project is in many ways revolutionary, it is important to recognise that it is still, at its core a business enterprise centred around the capitalist ethic of (over)consumption. Swift is an extraordinarily productive artist, and in the four years since 2020 she has released five new studio albums alongside four of the six re-records. For dedicated fans, that means eleven new albums to purchase, all with exclusive songs on physical copies often not available elsewhere. While it may be in Swift's *business* interests to get the re-recorded albums out as quick as possible, this may present a conundrum for fans who want to support but cannot keep up with her pace of production. When a vinyl can cost upwards of \$40 to purchase, this

is a significant investment for fans, particularly those on lower incomes.

Taylor has been previously critiqued for the sheer volume of special editions she produces of her albums, and the TV editions are no exception to this. For example, the *1989 TV* (2023) edition featured four limited edition colours, and one of these contained an extra limited edition with a new track (“sweeter than fiction”). These limited-edition tracks are often not made freely available online (through legal means) or via streaming, requiring fans to make purchases if they would like to listen to the tracks withheld from general release.

The project can thus stray into ‘dark marketing’ strategies, which may be intentionally or unintentionally taking advantage of fans who may be vulnerable³⁶. Strategies such as timed or exclusive drops create an illusion of scarcity, which fans who are neurodivergent, or younger may struggle with. When exclusives are dropped on a time limit, fans may feel pressured to buy then and there or miss out on the opportunity to purchase forever. As Swifties span many generations, the vulnerability of consumer groups also bears consideration. Swift is a successful artist, and at this stage in her career, these practices are optional. She and her team could choose to make other decisions here. While these comments may seem pessimistic, a comprehensive understanding of the TV project would be incomplete without these critiques.

conclusion

The Taylor’s Version project changed music history forever. It gave artists protections over their creative works that were never seen before. It proved that artists could have full creative control over their past works. It showed us the power of nostalgia as a marketing tool, and demonstrated just how important fan social action is to the success of a project. It is hard to imagine anyone with any more influence in the modern music industry than Taylor Swift. This dispute is not the first time Taylor has spoken out on social action issues, and it will likely not be the last. With such power and influence comes a huge amount of responsibility. Swift has shown she has the power to make

Annayah M.B. Prosser

the industry. The future will show us how else she can change the world for the better.

hold on to the memories

They Will Hold On To You

Emily Bouchoc

Taylor Swift has become, and is known for being, a large part of pop culture. From her music to her presence in social media, featuring easter eggs, surprise announcements and live performances, Taylor is someone that many people, of all ages, have a part of their regular rotation in music and conversation. Having released her first album, *Taylor Swift*, in 2006 and touring her first headliner show, *Fearless Tour*, in 2009-2010, Taylor has been singing and performing for over ten years. Her growth in show attendance and concert revenue has increased astronomically since 2009. Her *Fearless Tour* brought in around 1.2 million fans and around \$66.5 million dollars¹ and her Eras Tour US segment, she sold about 4.35 million tickets and over \$1 billion dollars². With that kind of growth being tracked in every concert she put on in between the first tour and her current tour, it is not surprising that Taylor Swift | The Eras Tour was bringing in that kind of viewership, as she continued to gain popularity.

Having a headlining tour for every album since *Fearless*, Taylor Swift had plans to embark on another tour in 2020 titled Lovers Fest, highlighting her album *Lover*. Given the Covid-19 pandemic, this tour was originally postponed to 2021 but then was officially canceled.

Taylor released a statement on Twitter saying “I’m so sad I won’t be able to see you guys in concert this year, but I know this is the right decision. Please, please stay healthy and safe. I’ll see you on stage as soon as I can but right now what’s important is committing to this quarantine, for the sake of all of us.”³ Making the right call for herself, her team and her fans, all of the world patiently waited for the world to open back up safely, and for concerts to return.

The global pandemic was challenging for a lot of different reasons, for many of us. Our normal routines were altered, many were taking care of sick family members and overall the state of the world was different. Our lives were quiet and isolated. We were finding new hobbies, learning about ourselves and finding what truly felt important to us. Just as we were learning about ourselves, so was Taylor. From the quiet of her home came two beautiful, unique albums, *Folklore* and *Evermore*, that told about heartbreak and loss, love and redemption and society as a whole. She told stories of characters, bringing their imaginary world to her fans. These albums had a different vibrance than her previous albums due to their soft, singer-songwriter style. These albums felt like they, along with the rest of the world, slowed down to reflect on the quiet parts of our lives, our happiness and sadness, an inward reflection of the heart.

As the quiet wore off, and the world woke up a bit, Taylor Swift put out her *Midnights* album just in time to give us the push off into our next season of music and of life. *Midnights* became yet another “Era” of music for Taylor and her fans, this one leaning into chill vibes and untold stories. Taylor stated, “Midnights, the stories of 13 sleepless nights scattered throughout my life, will be out October 21. Meet me at midnight.”⁴ Parallel to the ebb and flow of the world, *Midnights* had internal reflections and upbeat moments, all of which resonated with the fans, propelling them back into the world and linking them with community again.

As travel became more prominent and live music was making a comeback, Taylor Swift fans anxiously awaited a tour all the while wondering how she would play four untoured albums at a time. Many comments were made in the Swiftie community, questioning how she

would perform these albums. Going above fans most wild thoughts, Taylor Swift brought her live show experience back with a bang announcing her Taylor Swift | The Eras Tour stating that she would be performing all her albums in a three-hour show. Sharing an Instagram post on November 1, 2022, "I'm enchanted to announce my next tour: Taylor Swift | The Eras Tour, a journey through the musical eras of my career (past and present!) The first leg of the tour will be in stadiums across the US, with international dates to be announced as soon as we can!"⁵ Sparking excitement and even a little desperation, Taylor Swift | The Eras Tour was tracking to be one of her most anticipated tours to date.

look what you made me do: from reputation to the eras

Prior to Taylor Swift | The Eras Tour, Taylor's most recent tour was her Reputation Stadium Tour in 2018. *Reputation* was her first album to have a stadium tour and included 53 different shows, concluding the US tour in Arlington, Texas. This show brought in over 2.8 million attendees and it grossed around \$345 million dollars, breaking all kinds of records in the music industry at the time.⁶ Following the stadium tour, Netflix put out a concert film to celebrate the tour and provide access to those who were unable to see her in person. The Reputation Stadium Tour was released on December 31, 2018 and was the first of her concerts to be released on a streaming platform, allowing fans who had a Netflix account to watch this concert from the comfort of their own home. The final song on the Reputation album, being "News Years Day", leaned into the release date choice and was a small nod to the relevancy of the album. Having a background in live TV production, I had the thrilling honor of being a part of the post-production team for the Netflix special. Having a first-hand account of the special nature of a project like this, there is a confidence in saying that Taylor Swift takes special care and interest in all parts of her projects. This particular film and concert had over 60 cameras stationed around the venue to capture every moment in a million

different ways. Taylor and the film's director, Paul Dugdale, carefully mapped choreography and timing to the perfect shots. Sitting in office spaces in Hollywood, CA, a team of 8 editors spent many long days and nights pouring over hours of footage and piecing it all together in what you can now see in the final film. Taylor and her team spent a lot of time watching editing cuts to bring it all together and spent much effort in making sure her experiences are wonderful for her fans.

This *Reputation* film paved the way for Taylor Swift: The Eras Tour, which filmed at the first three nights of the Los Angeles show at SoFi Stadium in August of 2023. Taylor Swift: The Eras Tour was a multi-camera show which played in theaters and is now streaming on Amazon Prime. Directed by Sam Wrench, this movie was met by huge demand and brought in over \$100 million dollars in total global pre-sales and \$37 million dollars on opening day. This earned the Eras film the title of highest grossing concert film of all time. The unique element of a theatrical showing of this concert film lended itself to becoming an important part of fan culture. For many fans, the accessibility of a theatrical release allowed for the active participation in the concert but on a much more budget friendly level. Many fans dressed in costumes, exchanged friendship bracelets and danced the night away, just as they would have if they were at the concert in person. The ever-evolving nature of media has been taken into consideration from Taylor and her team and you could tell how they took in the important elements of previous tours and shows and created new and exciting ways to engage the fans and include them in the joy of music and experience.

this is me trying (to get tickets and merch): pre-concert buzz

Following the hype of Taylor's Reputation Stadium Tour and the global pandemic's lack of live shows, Taylor Swift | The Eras Tour created a lot of buzz within her fan community and online news outlets. Having been almost five years since her last tour run, bringing all her beloved albums to display in one night and the constant news stir, Swifties across the globe sat in hours-long online queues to purchase tickets. Taylor Swift partnered with Ticketmaster and Capital

One to send out pre-sale codes and special exclusive access, only to have thousands of people flood the website, crash it, and sell out very quickly. According to Ticketmaster, about 3.5 million fans pre-registered for the verified fan program, which was “the largest in registration history”. In addition, many non-registered fans logged onto the website too, leaving the website to crash at about 3.5 billion pre-registered requests. The long Ticketmaster queues quickly turned excitement into frustration into panic that rocketed through the Swiftie community. As many bots snatched up tickets, thousands of fans faced the inability to purchase Eras Tour tickets through direct source and many re-sell tickets were being upcharge by nearly ten times their original selling price. This sense of urgency sent waves of panic and FOMO through the Taylor Swift community as many fans were unable to secure tickets. Fans were not the only ones who were angry and frustrated over the situation. Taylor Swift herself expressed her frustration by saying that Ticketmaster said they could handle the influx of volume, only to see it handled poorly.

Those lucky fans who were able to secure tickets had the opportunity to purchase merchandise before the concerts. Taylor’s team of stage builders, production team members and merch trucks all set out to the cities she would be performing in a few days early. Setting up the merch trucks outside the stadiums, fans waited in hours-long queues to secure their favorite t-shirts, sweatshirts and posters before they even had to come to the stadium for the concert. This allowed less time to be missed during the actual show due to waiting in lines. However, fans quickly realized that by the end of the day, many times the t-shirts and sweatshirts that they wanted had quickly sold out. Online, many helpful tips and tricks were shared among the Swiftie community to help access the lines in a more efficient way and when to arrive to secure the merch that they wanted. A perfect example of the online Swiftie community banding together in support, solving problems, and gaining excitement with each show and experience.

make the friendship bracelets: cultural moments

Many wonderful cultural moments came from the Eras Tour experience. In Taylor Swift's song "You're On Your Own Kid" from her *Midnights* album, there is a lyric in the bridge that references making friendship bracelets and embracing moments in your life before they pass you by. This lyric about making friendship bracelets started a trend at all of her concerts where people would make many of their own bracelets with lyrics to her songs, inside jokes and more and trade them with others at the concerts. This created a moment of creativity that all could participate in, and a strong sense of community between young and old alike. We saw young kids interacting with those in their 30s, all brought together over a love of Taylor Swift songs and a commonality of homemade bracelets. As friendship bracelets historically have represented womanhood, we see in this resurgence of creativity transcend culture and generations. There is beauty and vulnerability in making something homemade, knowing it is just to give away. In return you receive someone else's homemade memories, forever linking you with strangers that participated in a shared experience.

Another aspect that brought people together for this concert experience was the costume element. Because each of Taylor's albums feels like a rebirth of her previous self, each album lends itself to an "Era" in her music career. Music videos, concerts and overall "vibes" from each album created a space for fans to dress as their favorite era and allowed for incredible people watching and conversation starters at the concert. So many people took such care in choosing what they were going to wear to the concert. Because each Taylor Swift album feels so different, fans see different versions of themselves in each of the albums. Upon each album release, anyone who listens to Taylor's music is met at a specific intersection in time. Many times, memories are locked in music and listening to albums and songs from your past bring back those memories associated with the time you first heard the music. This experience – when music brings back memories of events, people and places from our past – is known as a music-evoked autobiographical memory.⁷ Leaning into memories is a large component of

Taylor's fans' decisions on what they chose to wear to the concert and which Era to represent. Costumes included characters from favorite Taylor Swift music videos, recreations of on-stage outfits that Taylor herself wore in previous concerts on other tours. Other costumes represented funny moments of Taylor's life or even recreations of the costumes worn on stage by Taylor at the Eras Tour. This also bled into the movie theater experience too, as people all over the country went to sit in a dark theater, still in costume, to participate in the Swiftie community that was so clearly stated on social media from the concerts. The theater showing of this concert gave fans the opportunity to dress up in era clothing and sing the songs, just as they may have if they went to the concert, offering a more affordable and accessible way for fans to view the show, while still getting a little piece of the Swiftie community with others who came to watch at the theater, as well. These costumes were also spurred on by the Taylor Nation instagram account, encouraging fans to share their outfits and concert moments in hopes to be featured on her fan account page. Sparkles, pearls, and actual concert costumes replicas from Taylor Swift herself, can be seen online and in person at these magical events.

i was screaming long live: the live show

While to eras costumes and friendship bracelets were brought from home and the anticipation built in the stadiums, no one really knew what to expect on the first night of Taylor's first concert. Online, many theories were shared about the setlist, the length, and much more. Opening night is when fans realized when Lady Gaga's *Applause* ended, the show started. On the first night of the first show, fans watched a countdown clock lead to the mashup song of her albums and the start of a true three hour concert where every single album was performed. Every night, in every city, Taylor performed two different acoustic, surprise songs on the guitar and piano. This created a huge buzz every night, where fans anxiously watched live TikTok recordings to see if their favorite song was being played, or perhaps saved for the night of the show they would be attending.

During covid, one of the apps that grew in popularity was

TikTok. This app started off as mainly a place for dance videos but has transformed into any content you could possibly want, from cooking videos to travel guides. One of the features that became popular was TikTok's live stream. This particular feature became a large part of the Swiftie culture who were viewers at home. It became a nightly event where you could search the Eras tour on TikTok and find a plethora of videos from that night's concert, all from different angles in the stadium. This also added to the large internet conversations around easter eggs in Taylor's outfits for new album releases, blooper reels and specifically the nightly surprise songs.

Taylor Swift's nightly surprise songs were an element of her shows that became interactive for her fanbase. Once the first few shows were underway and fans noticed that her acoustic songs changed every night, the dialogue online quickly grew. Everyone with their favorite songs would keep up on social media or tune into the live TikTok to see if she had played it that night. Many people even created spreadsheets to keep track of the songs played and which ones were still left. Those waiting to see their show in their city waited anxiously to see if she would perform their favorite songs prior to their night. This ability to watch her live show every night had not become available to people at Taylor's previous concert tour for "Reputation", at least not in this capacity.

In addition to people watching live feeds of The Eras tour for surprise songs, people also gathered in these virtual spaces to watch for easter eggs and create theories of when Taylor would announce her next re-record album. There was a prominent build up for Speak Now (Taylor's version) where Taylor Swift performed in Nashville and the Capitol building was lit up purple the previous day. Additionally, the show before she made her Speak Now announcement, all the wristband lights at the end of the show flash purple and Taylor made a post on Instagram with purple photos and a purple heart. All of which were outside of her "normal" behavior. Taylor had also hinted at Speak Now (Taylor's version) being her next album released in her Bejeweled music video and a few other places online. When Taylor did announce Speak Now (Taylor's Version) as her next album at the concert in

Nashville, fans knew that they could look for easter eggs in the future and be potentially correct.

In addition to her acoustic surprise songs, Taylor Swift is famously known for her rain shows. Typically for outdoor concerts, people tend to be nervous about rain because there is a chance that the show could be canceled or just uncomfortably wet. That is not the case with Taylor Swift fans. Many fans would almost root for a rain show. Rain shows at Taylor Swift concerts become magical. While having the confidence that her team is monitoring safety, Taylor, her team and her band are all out to give a show of a lifetime. Many times the rain makes the dancers, and even Taylor herself, look like they are having the time of their lives. State of the art sound equipment allows for the rain shows to go off without a hitch, thunder and lighting permitting. Fans stand at their seats in the glitter and ponchos, soaked to the bone, but only adding to the bejeweled moments. For the Eras US tour, there were about 3-4 rain shows and many more in her whole career. That means thousands of people have experienced soggy, glittery nights filled with the best, more unique memories.

Another unique element to Taylor Swift's Eras Tour was the addition of an entire "Era" to her setlist. She built her previous concert excitement as she continued to release her re-recorded albums while touring, including night two of Nashville Tennessee's announcement of *Speak Now (Taylor's Version)* on July 7th, 2023. She subsequently announced *1989 (Taylor's Version)* on the Wednesday of her Los Angeles stop of the tour, stating that the album would be released on October 27th, 2023. On February 4th, 2024 at the 66th Annual Grammy Awards, Taylor surprised her fans with the announcement of her newest album *The Tortured Poets Department* to be released on April 19th, 2024. The announcement of this album stirred excitement for the music but also for her tour. This album featured people like Post Malone and Florence and the Machine. Taylor described this album on Instagram as "The Tortured Poets Department. An anthology of new works that reflect events, opinions and sentiments from a fleeting and fatalistic moment in time - one that was both sensational and sorrowful in equal measure. This period of the author's life is now over, the chapter closed and boarded up. There is nothing to avenge, no scores to settle

once wounds have healed. And upon further reflection, a good number of them turned out to be self-inflicted. This writer is of the firm belief that our tears become holy in the form of ink on a page. Once we have spoken our saddest story, we can be free of it. And then all that's left behind is the tortured poetry."⁸ Having had a break in tour dates, Taylor started back up at her show in Paris, France. She surprised the audience with an entirely new "era" of the show based off this new album. Dressed in black and white and leaning into a more classic look, Taylor coined this segment as "Female Rage The Musical!" Leaving fans who saw her previous shows disappointed and fans of her future shows exhilarated, Taylor Swift proved that just because you are on tour doesn't mean you can't still make music and change up your whole set list to accommodate that new music.

this night is sparkling: making memories

Human beings love community and a sense of belonging somewhere, and part of the magic of Taylor Swift is knowing that as a fan, you have access to all of that and more. Taylor's lyrics have always left fans, new and old, with a feeling of being seen and understood. Her live shows give a space to look around and know that every person you see in there recognizes the special moment in some way. There is a comradery that is created when you and your neighbor do not know each other but you can look at each other while singing every line to a song with your whole heart.

Taylor Swift's iconic nature creates conversation anywhere you choose to find it. Many mothers today grew up singing Taylor's song as a teenager themselves. A wonderful doorway to relatability for their kids was created, just because they know the same songs. It also brings a level of child-like joy into the lives of those who haven't experienced that in a while. Young and old alike are reminded of lyrics that feel relatable and take you back to a specific moment in time. Memories locked in music.

The magic of Taylor Swift | The Eras tour could be found for every single person who saw her live, in the theater or in the comfort of their own home. Her music transcends time and feels relatable in every

stage of life, while also reminding you exactly when you first heard a song. The memories of the sun setting over the course of the three-hour concert into the bright twinkly lights of the stage, surrounded by flashing wristbands will stay with fans forever. And the magic of some fans becoming mothers to then share the magic with their little kids becomes generational magic. This tour will be remembered for all the records it broke and the news articles written about it, but it will also be remembered by the thousands of people who experienced it and have shared experiences with strangers from all over the world. Which is truly an enchanting thought.

ten ways taylor alison swift has shaken up pop culture

From An Experienced Earthquake Enthusiast

Ashley Esqueda

In Southern California, we love telling people when there's an earthquake. There's nothing better than a ground shaking event to bring us together, and so when I was asked to contribute thoughts on Taylor Swift's pop culture influence to this book, I knew there was no better way to walk through her biggest impacts than to assign them a magnitude and talk about each entry. Get out your earthquake kits, and let's go!

1. revenge (taylor's version)

Magnitude: 9.8 (because Taylor always finds a way to outdo herself)

Impact: Other artists have followed suit, changing label / artist relationships

This has to be the number one shaker, y'all. First off, nobody hates Scooter Braun more than Taylor Alison Swift. Only Kendrick vs Drake is a bigger beef in music. I love petty revenge. And there's no better petty revenge story than the one involving Taylor and Scooter; on top of that, its unfolding has potentially massive implications for the future of recording contracts and the music industry as a whole. If

you're reading this book, you probably have some idea of why Swift loathes Braun, but if you haven't been paying attention, here's the summary:

The two first met in 2011 when Braun's client Justin Bieber opened for Taylor during her Fearless tour. When Braun signed noted Swift-hater Kanye West in 2016, it was a month after Ye had dropped his song "Famous," which took shots at Swift. A few months later, West's then-wife Kim Kardashian released an incomplete conversation between West and Swift, further escalating Swift's feuds with both West and Braun. Then, in 2019, things really blew up: Braun purchased Big Machine Records for \$300 million, which included all of Taylor's master recordings. Braun would make money every time one of her songs was licensed or streamed. Buying her masters was a massive coup for Braun, both professionally and personally. But Taylor decided to take matters into her own hands, and in August 2019, announced she would be re-recording all six of her albums made while she was signed to Big Machine, with the ultimate goal of devaluing her original masters and replacing all of them with versions she owned entirely. The feud encompasses way more incidents and details, but those are the broad strokes. And the decision to re-record every single one of her first six albums was unparalleled in its scope, to the point that the phrase "(Taylor's Version)" is now shorthand for flipping the script and coming out on top, despite the odds stacked against you.

Taylor's first re-recorded album, Fearless (Taylor's Version), was released on April 9, 2021. It included identical re-recordings of the original album's songs, as well as six previously unreleased tracks. It debuted at number one, and since that debut, has earned more than 3 times as many units as the original. It was the first re-recorded album to hit No. 1 on the Billboard chart, a record that has only been matched by every single re-recorded album Swift has released since. And since Taylor Swift is a master of fan engagement, her plan to effectively replace her original recordings with versions that are fully owned by her was enthusiastically received by Swifties, who have cheerfully helped her stick it to The Man (and also, specifically stick it to Scooter Braun, who ended up selling Big Machine's catalog to a private equity group in 2020).

She has single handedly shown every musician that their work has value, and that retaining some rights to it is worth fighting for, even when the deck seems stacked against them. With some grit, patience, and clever strategy, those fights can be won. But there's almost always a dark side to innovation, and in this case, it's the record companies altering their contracts to prevent this sort of freedom from ever happening again with new artists. Before Taylor's Version, labels usually required artists to wait between 2 to 7 years from an album's initial release before they are allowed to re-record a record; now, those same labels have reportedly implemented clauses that keep artists from re-recording their albums for 10 to 30 *years* after they leave a label. We probably won't see a huge influx of musicians attempting to do what Taylor did due to these (frankly, villainous) changes by record label execs, but Taylor's work here has opened a massive dialogue in the music industry. It's always going to be an uphill battle for up-and-coming artists to own their own masters, but Swift seizing control of her music (and the narrative) by releasing a Taylor's Version for her pre-UMG albums will forever be a shining example of masterfully capitalizing on loopholes to reclaim one's art.

2. ticketmaster

Magnitude: 9.6

Impact: Could break up a decades-long stranglehold on live events and ticketing

Tickets for Taylor's Eras Tour were supposed to go on sale via Ticketmaster on Tuesday, November 15, 2022. Unfortunately, it was a cursed experience, and fans quickly took to the internet to voice their dismay at how difficult it was to get tickets. Pre-sale codes weren't enough to keep traffic from slowing to a standstill, often locking fans out of the site or simply not loading at all. The outrage was so vast that Swift herself took to Instagram to discuss the mess, saying "I'm not going to make excuses for anyone because we asked them [Ticketmaster], multiple times, if they could handle this kind of demand and we were assured they could." The issues ran so deep, Ticketmaster canceled sale

of tickets scheduled for the following Friday, apologizing for the issues fans faced and admitting it sold so many tickets during the presale process, it didn't have enough inventory to meet demand for sales to the general public. Sure, 2.4 million tickets were sold in a single day, shattering the record for the highest single-day ticket sales ever by an artist, but 3.5 million people had preregistered for Ticketmaster's Verified Fan presale. Over a million Swifties—and Taylor herself—were all *pissed*. In short, The Eras Tour literally broke the internet (or, at minimum, Ticketmaster).

Normally, that would be the end of a company bungling sales for a specific event. Everyone hates using Ticketmaster. We can all empathize with the rage felt when a concert sells out in seconds, with a huge chunk of tickets bought out by bots and quickly put up on a reseller site like StubHub to be scalped for astronomical prices.

But Hell hath no fury like a Swiftie scorned.

Less than a month after the initial ticket debacle, more than two dozen fans sued Ticketmaster and its parent company Live Nation, claiming it violated antitrust laws, among others. "Ticketmaster is a monopoly that is only interested in taking every dollar it can from a captive public,"¹ the lawsuit states, directly accusing America's Most Hated ticketing company of breaking the law through anticompetitive behavior. It's worth taking a minute to note how powerful Live Nation is as a corporation: Not only does it own Ticketmaster, it also controls around 70% of the ticketing and live event venues market. It's a huge competitive advantage, and many artists have their hands tied when it comes to organizing a tour. If they want to play medium-sized venues or larger in the U.S., it's almost impossible to avoid Live Nation/Ticketmaster. This has been going on for decades, long before Taylor Swift was strumming a guitar. Historically, fans have simply grumbled angrily while forking over their hard-earned cash for shows, but this time, Swifties decided enough was enough and chose to take on the Goliath of live events ticketing.

Even more anti-Ticketmaster groups and businesses emerged, all looking to take down Ticketmaster:

Ten Ways Taylor Alison Swift Has Shaken Up Pop Culture

- Professionals with backgrounds in law, PR, computer science, government, and others with antitrust experience were assembled like The Avengers and created a grassroots group called “Vigilante Legal LLC,” dedicated to gathering fan complaints and evidence of wrongdoing by Ticketmaster.
- Another trio of fans launched ErasTourResell, which utilized spreadsheets, forms, bulletin boards, and human verification to help connect fans who wanted to sell their tickets at face value to other Swift fans hoping to buy a ticket on the reseller market.
- A Gen-Z activist organization launched its own antitrust initiative against Ticketmaster, naming it “Swifties Working to Increase Fairness from Ticketmaster,” or “S.W.I.F.T.” for short, and working toward pushing legislation to prevent entertainment industry monopolies in the future. Many lawmakers across the country fielded calls and complaints from constituents about the Eras tour ticketing disaster, with many taking advantage of the high-profile artist attached to the issue and leveraging Swift’s popularity to gain support for bills to limit Ticketmaster’s power in the market. Senate committee hearings were held, investigations were launched, subpoenas were issued. All of this political action has culminated in the biggest threat to Live Nation/Ticketmaster’s sustained chokehold on the live event industry:

The United States, et al. v. Live Nation Entertainment, Inc. and Ticketmaster Entertainment, LLC.

That’s right: The Department of Justice got officially involved in May of 2024, and it found enough evidence to bring a lawsuit against Live Nation and Ticketmaster that alleges the companies hold a monopoly on the live event market. If successful, the case would break up the Live Nation/Ticketmaster merger. This kind of ground shaking movement doesn’t just benefit Taylor Swift and her fans. There have already been laws introduced that force Ticketmaster to show the true

cost of tickets (including its oft-excessive fees), to limit bot scalping, and more. If the DOJ wins its lawsuit, it could permanently alter the landscape of touring and ticketing for every creative that performs live. Oh, and let's not forget the class action lawsuit filed by consumers the day after the DOJ's suit, that seeks \$5 billion in damages for people who bought tickets through Live Nation/Ticketmaster.

There's a lesson to be learned here, especially for corporations:
Never underestimate the power of Swifties. They will *end* you.

3. the eras tour (the economy)

Magnitude: 8.7

Impact: A minimum of \$5 billion in boosts to local tour stop economies

We've already discussed the paradigm-shifting deal between Taylor and AMC to distribute The Eras Tour concert film, but there's also The Eras Tour itself to talk about. This tour has been one of the biggest tours of all time. By the end of 2024, Swift will have played at least 152 shows around the globe, sold millions of tickets, and grossed more than \$2 billion. If you need a little context, the second-highest grossing tour of all time is Elton John's Farewell Yellow Brick Road Tour, which took double the number of shows (328) to earn less than half of what Eras made (\$939 million). That's just pure ticket sales, by the way. If you add in merch, that's another \$240 million or so for the first year of The Eras Tour, not its final total.

It is, far and away, the highest grossing tour of all time. It's not even *close*.

Now that we've covered the enormity of The Eras Tour itself, we also have to talk about the money spent by fans to attend these shows and how it boosted local economies: the flights, the hotels, the additional tourism, food expenses, transportation...these tour stops brought huge influxes of spending to the cities that hosted them. By most estimates, The Eras Tour is projected to boost the U.S. economy by around \$5 billion, a number the Federal Reserve agrees with. That's based on a study by QuestionPro, which added up direct spending by fans; some estimates put the total economic impact of The Eras Tour

closer to \$10 billion, once indirect spending and adjacent spending—money spent by those who did not attend the concert but participated in tour-driven activities—were added into the mix. In Europe, a significant percentage of tickets were scooped up by Americans (prices were much, much lower than the eye-popping reseller prices in the U.S.), and those fans often opted to extend their stay and pour money into local economies across the continent.

There's no way to understate the economic impact of The Eras Tour, and equally, there's no way to understate how influential the playbook of the tour will be for future artists. Taylor Swift is a master at connecting with her fans; she makes them feel seen, appreciated, and included in her career in a way no other artist has managed to accomplish. A 90-minute show? Double it, for the fans. Same setlist every stop? Let's add two surprise songs every show. Stick to the choreography night after night? Nah. I'm gonna let my footballer boyfriend perform on stage for a massive viral moment. The Eras Tour has raised the bar for live concerts and permanently shifted what fans expect when they purchase a ticket to see an icon perform, and that expectation will gradually trickle down and reach every level of performer in some way. To be fair, most artists don't have a catalog deep enough to play for 3.5 hours straight (nor do they have the clout to sell out multiple nights at the biggest arenas on the planet), but they'll ultimately find something to take away from the success of The Eras Tour. Taylor's impact will be felt in venues big and small as The Eras Tour influences pop culture—and how we experience it live—long into the future.

4. the eras tour (the concert movie)

Magnitude: 8.5

Impact: Changed distribution deals for concert movies going forward

In the summer of 2023, theaters were in a bit of a panic: tentpole blockbusters like *Dune 2* had pushed its release date to 2024, because the simultaneous WGA & SAG-AFTRA strikes meant actors were unavailable to promote any union movies on the release slate. Then, at the end

of August, AMC made an announcement: Taylor Swift's Eras Tour would be a concert film, dropping on October 13, 2023. On its face, it seemed like a traditional release; in reality, AMC and Swift had completely cut out the studio system and the Hollywood executives who thought they might have a chance to distribute the film through their own studios.

There were discussions with those studios about being the distribution partner for The Eras Tour, but they fell apart in early summer after Swift's team ghosted; turns out, Swift's dad Scott had the idea to reach out to AMC directly and cut out the middleman. That decision became a massive financial savior for the exhibitor, which had been teetering on the brink of bankruptcy:

"Taylor Swift: The Eras Tour is expected to achieve \$2.2 billion in North American ticket sales, potentially triggering approximately \$5 billion in consumer spending in the United States. This partnership suggests a strong possibility that AMC could earn approximately \$1 billion from the venture, a pivotal step toward the company's return to pre-pandemic levels of revenue."

It also was a massive financial success for Swift, who pocketed the majority of 57% of the revenue from the film's release (AMC took an undisclosed portion of that percentage, while the theaters pocketed the other 43% and kept 100% of concessions money). Considering Taylor Swift: The Eras Tour raked in over \$267 million at the box office, there's no way to frame this move as anything but genius business acumen. And if there's any question at this point as to how a deal like this could have massive repercussions for theatrical releases, there's already another case study that proves Taylor has already moved the goalposts going forward. That case study involves the only other artist alive who exists in the same rarefied air space as Taylor:

Beyonce Knowles.

One month after AMC's deal with Taylor went public, the exhibitor announced *Renaissance: A Film by Beyonce*. Similarly, Beyonce had opted out of the traditional Hollywood system to release her concert film. Just weeks prior, her team had reached out to executives at major

studios to prepare pitches and offers for the concert film. Similarly to Taylor, those talks went radio silent and ultimately ended with the artist choosing to deal directly with AMC as a distributor. You want to talk about Taylor's impact on pop culture? She hasn't just impacted fans, or industries, or upcoming artists, or corporations. She's influenced Queen Bey herself—a cultural icon in her own right. If that's not earth shaking, I don't know what is.

Unfortunately, not many artists have the clout (or the icon status) to demand a concert film deal like Taylor or Beyonce, so it doesn't land as high on the magnitude scale as some other groundbreaking moves Swift has made over the course of her career. But other high-profile artists have almost certainly taken notice of how the Eras Tour/AMC agreement played out, and are discussing how they can leverage their own version of success with their respective teams.

5. the swiftie voter bloc

Magnitude: 8.2

Impact: Huge voter registration numbers and political engagement

The first half of Taylor Swift's music career was largely apolitical, even in the face of nationalist groups taking advantage of her general silence and claiming her as their queen. But after a school shooting at Parkland High School took the lives of 17 people in February 2018, Swift took to social media to support March For Our Lives, a gun reform campaign created in the aftermath of the tragedy, and her foray into the political sphere began in earnest. Later that year, she took to Instagram and addressed her beliefs publicly, subsequently endorsing two Democratic candidates running for office in her home state of Tennessee. Years later, the conversation leading to that post was included in her documentary *Miss Americana*³:

"It's really basic human rights, and it's right and wrong at this point, and I can't see another commercial and see [Marsha Blackburn] disguising these policies behind the words 'Tennessee Christian values.' Those aren't Tennessee Christian values. I live in Tennessee. I'm

a Christian. That's not what we stand for. [...] I need to be on the right side of history.”

The following year, Swift pushed hard for her senator to support the Equality Act and released pro-LGBTQ+ anthem *You Need to Calm Down*, as well as spoke publicly about then-president Donald Trump’s presidency and her regret at not speaking up during the 2016 election cycle. When she won the MTV VMA for Video of the Year, Swift took to the stage and repeated her support for the Equality Act, announcing the petition she’d urged fans to sign had crossed the half-a-million signature mark. She’s supported racial equality, women’s rights, and the LGBTQ+ community vociferously since 2018, and there is a significant group of journalists who believe she could single-handedly sway a presidential election because of her power and influence. She flexed her political voice the loudest on September 10, 2024, posting a full-throated endorsement of U.S. Democratic presidential nominee Kamala Harris and her running mate Tim Walz in November’s election (and Swift followed up with that endorsement with a plea to fans to get informed and vote in her thank you speech at the 2024 MTV VMAs, where she won Video of the Year *again*—her 30th VMA—this time for “Fortnight”).

But arguably, her single biggest contribution to politics has been her ability to get fans to the ballot box. When Swift urged her fans to register to vote in 2018, over 169,000 people answered the call in the 48 hours after the post went live (for context, 59,000 people registered to vote on the same website in the previous *month* before her post was published); after her endorsement of the Harris/Walz ticket in September 2024, the Vote.org link she included in her Instagram story recorded almost 406,000 clicks from fans interested in learning more about voter registration. Swifties are even considered their own voting bloc by some political analysts—which makes sense, considering over half of Americans identify as a fan of Swift on some level. That’s around 1 in 6 people, more than enough to sway a close election. Is there fair criticism that Swift still hosts tour dates in states with regressive laws and policy that harms women, BIPOC, and LGBTQ+ groups? Of course. Everyone can always do more to fight

for injustice in the world, and Taylor Swift's voice carries far more weight than the average activist. While her ability to actually mobilize a significant portion of her fan base to vote is difficult to measure, her work in getting eligible citizens to get more engaged politically (and at least register to vote) is undeniable, so it belongs on this list.

6. the easter eggs

Magnitude: 7.7

Impact: Artists are incorporating these kinds of fandom clues and hints into their own careers

Nobody does Easter eggs like Taylor Swift.

Sure, secret tracks and gems made for fans to discover in music have existed long before Swift was even born. But Swift has mastered the art of engagement, and she's done it in a way that's redefined the artist-fan relationship. Her hints, clues, and callbacks give fans a sense of closeness to her that few musicians have ever managed to replicate; they give fans something to ruminate over while she's less visible or working on new music, and they foster a feeling of camaraderie with Swift herself. What started as a fun series of hidden messages via capitalized letters in album lyric books—designed to get fans to read her lyrics—has expanded to an entire universe of mysteries and breadcrumbs. Even the most casual Swiftie knows Taylor's favorite number is 13; they also know she color codes her albums and uses color to foreshadow upcoming drops. There's a small army of influencers and fans dedicated to analyzing her every move. During an appearance on *The Tonight Show* with Jimmy Fallon, Swift described the amount of Easter eggs in her second music video for *Bejeweled* as "psychotic" and talked about a PDF she and her team needed to keep track of them all. And it's all extremely intentional:

"I've trained them to be that way. I love that they like the cryptic hint-dropping. Because as long as they like it, I'll keep doing it. It's fun. It feels mischievous and playful."⁴

One would imagine these kinds of fun mind games and treasure hunts would feel tired—Taylor’s career is almost two decades old at this point—but it’s the opposite. With nearly 20 years of history in her pocket, she has an almost infinite number of references, gems, and other puzzles to create for fans...and as her career continues to move forward, that vault of potential riddles only gets bigger. Easter eggs are not just a fun pastime for Taylor, they’re a way for her and the Taylor Swift brand to stay connected to fans and keep the hype levels high. Lastly, they act as chum for gossip sharks circling the rumor mill, keeping fans distracted with a never-ending stream of mysteries to chew on so Swift can maintain some level of personal privacy. Genius!

The impact of Taylor’s affinity for stuffing Easter eggs into every single nook and cranny throughout her career changed the game for upcoming artists. Now, fans are looking for intentional signals, clues, and hints in new releases. If an artist doesn’t include Easter eggs in their drops, fans will see imagined connections and subsequently create their own conspiracy theories and conclusions.

Other artists have picked up on the fact that the more engaging an experience they can create for their fans, the stickier those fans tend to be—and that translates to more money spent on albums, merch, tours, and other activations. Sault, an R&B collective in the UK famous for concealing the identities of its band members, created an announcement message dropping five new free albums. But to download them, fans needed to crack the code on a password-protected folder by searching the announcement message for clues. Singers like Lady Gaga and Ariana Grande are constantly including references and homages to other creative efforts like movies and art, and there have been many brands that have tried (some successfully, others much less so) to generate engagement through the same kind of breadcrumb trails Taylor leaves for her fans. There’s one thing that seems crucial to the sustained success of these kinds of campaigns, though: the art has to surpass the game. Swift’s strength as a songwriter makes the journey of solving these mysteries feel fun and exciting, not like a chore required to get to a message. Taylor didn’t invent Easter eggs, but she revolutionized the way they were used, and that’s why it made this list.

7. artists' rights

Magnitude: 7.4

Impact: Artists are paid for streams during free trials (but the war for fair residuals rages on)

“Music is art, and art is important and rare. Important, rare things are valuable. Valuable things should be paid for. It’s my opinion that music should not be free, and my prediction is that individual artists and their labels will someday decide what an album’s price point is. I hope they don’t underestimate themselves or undervalue their art⁵.”

In a 2014 self-penned opinion piece titled, “Here’s Why Taylor Swift Pulled Her Music From Spotify,” Swift laid out her argument for keeping her highly-anticipated upcoming album *1989* from the streaming platform. Part of the problem, she said, was the rise of piracy. But it was also about the devaluing of creators—streaming was in its earlier days, and the payouts for artists were unacceptable, in her eyes. When *1989* eventually drops, it’s conspicuously absent from Spotify, just like Taylor had promised. And one week later, she does the unthinkable, pulling her entire catalog from the streaming service. You think you can hold a grudge? Please. Taylor Swift kept her catalog off Spotify for three years, all because it offered a free tier for users that didn’t pay artists for streams heard there.

A similar issue kept Swift’s catalog off of Apple Music: a three-month free trial withheld royalties for artists whose songs were played by customers during that time frame. But Swift and her team quickly convinced Apple to change its mind after vocally expressing their concerns and threatening to withhold her music from the service.

This is the kind of power Taylor Swift wields. It is true that she stood to make a pretty penny with streams from *1989*, had the album been made available initially on Spotify; however, her constant championing of artists’ rights and fair compensation for creating their art has always been near and dear to her heart. Her willingness to take a financial hit in order to criticize streaming services and their compensation deals clearly altered the trajectory of these platforms is both

impressive and terrifying in equal measure—with the choice depending on whether you're a fellow artist or a streaming company, respectively. While there is still a long, hard war to be won in the war for fairer revenue from streaming platforms, Taylor's fight to change even a single aspect of compensation for artists has had positive repercussions, and for that reason, it makes this list.

8. the nfl

Magnitude: 7.2

Impact: Higher female viewership, younger audiences, and huge brand value for the NFL

By the time Taylor made her first appearance at a Kansas City Chiefs game on September 24, 2023, rumors about her and Chiefs star Travis Kelce's burgeoning relationship had hit a fever pitch. But once Taylor made her NFL debut, the noise transformed into cold, hard data. Not only did Kelce's jersey see a nearly 400% increase in sales the week after that September game, the NFL itself went full Swiftie: Analysts dropped puns inspired by her song titles and lyrics;

team social media accounts leveraged the pop star's presence to engage with her fans in an attempt to bring them to American football; StubHub announced an almost-300% increase in ticket sales for Chiefs home games; Kristin Juszczuk's handmade NFL fashions ended up in a licensing deal with the NFL after a jacket inspired by Kelce's jersey—custom made for Taylor—went viral when Swift wore it to a Chiefs game; and small business Wove saw a 470% increase in its sales after Taylor wore a custom-made "Tennis Friendship Bracelet" with the letters TNT on it (the internet's preferred acronym for the couple).

And then there's the pure boost in interest and business for the NFL itself due to Taylor's presence. Some reports have suggested Taylor's association with the NFL has tacked on an extra \$330 million in brand value to the league, which is an impressive statistic, especially considering it comes from the mere presence of one single human being. But that human being just so happens to be Taylor Swift, and that's a huge opportunity for the NFL to grab new fans they've never been able to

reach at significant levels: teen girls. Indeed, viewership among girls aged 12-17 increases by 53% when Taylor is in attendance at an NFL game, according to a Nielsen data, and there have been a mountain of wholesome and endearing TikToks from young girls and their dads saying they've bonded over tuning into NFL games together.

There's no way to predict how much that newfound interest in the NFL will last for those teen girls discovering football (and no way to know if they'll stick around if Travis and Taylor break up). But it's clear that no matter how many longtime fans of the NFL complain about her presence, Taylor Swift is big business for the NFL. There's no question she has increased viewership, generated new interest, boosted engagement, and generally upped the cool factor of the National Football League. Which brings us to the ultimate NFL coup: A Super Bowl Half-time performance. Swift has reportedly been offered the gig, but declined in order to focus on re-recording her albums. I respect this, as an overt act of righteous vengeance against a man who screwed me over would also take priority in my world. But there are only two albums left to re-record for Swift, and by the time you read this, *Reputation* (Taylor's Version) might already be unleashed upon the world, leaving debut album *Taylor Swift* as the final record in line for the T.V. treatment...so, maybe not a 2025 performance, but it would shock me if she did not accept the gig for 2026—especially if she's still dating (or married!) to Travis at that point in her career.

I don't know what the future holds for Taylor and her relationship with the NFL, but I do know this: If I were League Commissioner Roger Goodell, I'd be sending her a gift basket full of Chai cookies and cat treats every week for the foreseeable future as a thank you for everything she's done for the NFL since September 2023.

9. friendship bracelets, polaroids, vinyl, guitars... and ranch dressing

Magnitude: 6.8

Impact: Visible impact on popularity of (and demand for) these products

The last one on this list is *kind of* cheating, but indulge me. It's a group of products that have clear resurgences because of the Swift Effect. There have been many things that have been the beneficiary of a Taylor Swift bump; in fact, she's been responsible for upticks in sales for a ridiculous amount of products, including but not limited to:

- Polaroids: Swift's 1989 prominently featured a Polaroid of her on the cover, and the special edition of the album included a dozen more shots handpicked by the singer. Polaroid camera sales shot up almost immediately after 1989's release, with some analysts estimating a 578% increase in Polaroid sales in 2014.
- Vinyl Records: In 2023, Taylor's music represented 7% of record sales in the United States. That's a massive flex that translates to one out of every 15 records sold belonging to her catalog. She continues to champion vinyl, often supplying exclusive variants to independent record stores and releasing multiple versions of new albums at big box retailers.
- Guitars: Sales of acoustic guitars have surged in recent years, with Fender Guitars discovering a whopping 50% of new guitarists were women in a 2018 consumer survey. She's not the sole driver of guitar sales, but she's the reason many young girls and women decide to pick up a guitar for the first time.
- Ranch Dressing: This one sounds unbelievable, but it's true. A fan account posted a photo of Taylor Swift with the caption, "Taylor Swift was eating a piece of chicken with ketchup and seemingly ranch!" Soon thereafter, the phrase

“seemingly ranch” was viral, with participation from everything from ice cream brands, to Merriam-Webster, to the literal Empire State Building. Heinz even announced a limited-edition variant of its Kranch condiment with a “ketchup and seemingly ranch” label.

But there is one item that has experienced a positively explosive increase in popularity directly attributed to Taylor Swift...can you guess what it is?

Friendship bracelets.

The release of *Midnights* included the track “You’re On Your Own, Kid,” which features one single reference to making friendship bracelets. One single line, in one single song, on one single album—out of all the lyrics, songs, and albums Taylor has crafted—sparked a massive demand from fans, so that they could create their own bracelets and trade them with other fans at concerts. In a 2023 interview with USA Today, Michaels Stores CEO John Gehre acknowledged Swift’s impact: “Overall, sales in our jewelry category, including jewelry-making kits, are up more than 40% chainwide since mid-April, when the friendship bracelet making trend really began to take off.” That number skyrockets when Taylor comes to town, with Michaels reporting 300-500% increases in jewelry supply sales for local stores in the days leading up to a concert.

And if you’re even a casual Swiftie, you know the role friendship bracelets played at the start of Taylor’s relationship with NFL superstar Travis Kelce, who made a bracelet with his phone number on it to give to the singer in hopes of getting a date (and we all know how *that* iconic move turned out, at least at the time of this writing). Killa Trav has been spotted with an entire arm of bracelets at Eras Tour stops, handed to him by fans enamored with him and rooting for his relationship with Taylor.

Will sales of crafting materials for friendship bracelets cool down? Probably, someday. But this seems like one of the most lasting trends specifically for Swifties, and I wouldn’t be surprised if cities saw friendship bracelet material sales surge throughout the rest of her career as she played shows in them. It’s going to be 2089, and there

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will be a 100-year-old Taylor Swift playing “Karma” while her fellow centenarians exchange friendship bracelets at her farewell tour.

That’s *influence*, baby.

10. country music

Magnitude: 6.3

Impact: Taylor’s pop influence on country music is still felt today

Taylor Swift’s self-titled debut album *Taylor Swift* released in 2006—almost 20 years ago, if you can believe it—and quickly made a splash in the country genre. Though she has moved squarely into the pop arena, her impact on country music can’t be ignored. Much like Easter eggs, Taylor didn’t invent country music, but she’s absolutely influenced it both directly and indirectly. Yes, there was a palpable move towards more pop-leaning country music after Taylor’s debut skyrocketed her to mainstream fame, but there are two more specific ways Swift has changed the landscape of the genre.

The first major shift occurred because of the age at which Swift was initially signed to a label. Taylor’s professional songwriting career kicked off when she was just 14 years old. She signed with Big Machine Records just two years later at 16. And a year after that, she released *Taylor Swift*, which included “Love Story” and “You Belong with Me,” two songs that became massive crossover hits across country and pop radio. This girl hit the ground running, and country music labels quickly began searching for younger acts to sign in hopes of hitting a similar jackpot. Traditionally, country music has not been welcoming or eager to sign younger artists, especially ones in their teens. But post-Taylor? An avalanche of sub-25 performers hit the airwaves, including Kacey Musgraves, Lucy Hale, Hunter Hayes, and Maddie & Tae. Swift’s success shifted the perception of younger artists in country music as more viable and worth investment to record labels. Which brings us to the next topic: Songwriters.

Country music tends to prefer maintaining the illusion of a sole artist with a guitar, writing lyrics on paper detailing their struggles and triumphs. But songwriters have long been a staple of the country

music scene, just like almost every other genre of music. Taylor, though, isn't just a performer—she's a songwriter largely responsible for penning the bulk of her music. Labels became far more interested in signing artists who write/co-write their own songs after Taylor's debut. Why? That's easy: Money. If a record label picks up an artist on a 360 deal—a contract that gives the company a percentage of every revenue stream an artist creates, including merch, sponsorships, and appearances outside of concerts—they get additional income for publishing a song on which the artist is credited as a writer. The incentive to discover artists who pen their own lyrics (or at least some of them) became much, much higher for country music record companies once Taylor hit the scene in 2006.

On top of those two massive changes, there's also the fashion, the fan engagement, and the overall spectacle Taylor brings to her work. Had it not been for Taylor, it's possible the country music scene would have taken longer to evolve into what it is today.

concluding thoughts

We're all familiar with ripple effects, but if this list is any indication, Taylor Swift is more than just a droplet in a calm lake. She's a meteor that can slam into the ocean and force it to bend to her will. She's a shrewd businesswoman who's taken control of her empire and molded it into more than the sum of its parts, and her impacts on industry will continue to occur as her career keeps evolving. I can't believe I'm saying this as a Californian, but I can't wait for the next earth-shattering Big One from the singular, extraordinary career of Ms. Taylor Alison Swift.

notes

changing, shifting, growing

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taylor (our version)

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we won't be sleeping

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about the editor



Rachel Kowert, Ph.D (she/her) is a research psychologist, award winning author, and globally recognized leader in facilitating global policy development with non-profit, governmental, and non-governmental agencies for more than 15 years through data-driven research focused on mental health and trust and safety in digital games. She has spoken about her work to thousands of people across the globe, including the United States Congress, United Nations, and

Department of Homeland Security. She also serves as the editor for the *Debates in Media Studies* (Routledge) and the *Psychgeist of Pop Culture* (Play Story Press) series of books. In 2020, she founded Psychgeist, a multimedia content production studio for the science of games and pop culture. To learn more about Rachel and her work, visit www.rkowert.com. Rachel is currently in her Tortured Poets Era but is forever listening to Holy Ground on repeat.

about the authors

Emily Bouchoc (she/her) is a passionate creative in the entertainment industry, having journeyed through many intersections of media and culture. Some of her previous work includes films, music documentaries, live television shows and more, and has led her to her current role as Director of The Game Awards Future Class, a global community of emerging voices from more than 15 countries who represent the video game industry's bright, bold, and inclusive future. Emily has been locked into her Reputation era since the release of the album in 2017, but has a soft spot for All Too Well (Taylor's Version) and Last Great American Dynasty, which leaves her feeling like a truly well-rounded Swiftly.

Dr Georgia Carroll (she/her) is a communications professional who completed her PhD in Sociology at the University of Sydney in 2023. Her research focused on the intersection of community and consumption in fandom spaces, and the Taylor Swift fandom was one of her two case studies. Through this research, she explored the ways in which Taylor encourages participation-through-purchase and rewards fans who both undertake unpaid labour and spend significant amounts of money to try and gain her attention. The completion of her PhD was very well timed, aligning with tickets to the Eras Tour going on sale in Australia. This timeliness has seen her become a media expert, providing commentary on Taylor and her fandom across print, digital, and broadcast media in Australia, and internationally. She is also set to be a keynote speaker at the 2024 Swiftposium conference. Georgia is currently in her Speak Now era (did she ever leave?), but currently has Suburban Legends on repeat.

Kelli Dunlap, MA, PsyD (she/her) is the Executive Director at Take This, the first mental health non-profit to dedicate itself to serving the gaming community and games industry. Within this role, Dr. Dunlap draws on over a decade of experience in mental health, games, esports, community management, and game design to provide gaming environments with more empathic, ethical, and empirically-informed mental health resources and support. In addition to her work at Take This, Dr. Dunlap is a licensed clinical psychologist, holds a Masters in game design, and serves as a researcher-in-residence at American University's Game Center. She is an award-winning game designer and has collaborated on game design projects with organizations including the National Institute of Mental Health, UNESCO, VOX Media, and U.S. Congressional staffers. Dr. Dunlap is an internationally recognized researcher and speaker on the intersection of games and mental health, especially pertaining to mental health representation in games and ethical game design. And while Dr. Dunlap has many publications to her name, she is most proud of her work as the editor of *The Psychgiest of Pop Culture: Bluey* book. With over a decade of work at the intersection of games and mental health, Dr. Dunlap is a real tough kid who still finds time to make the friendship bracelets, is absolutely ready for it even if it feels like faking it until you make it, and stands by all the witches (even if they aren't one).

Ashley Esqueda (she/her) is an award-winning host, writer, consultant and pop culture expert. She has worked with some of the world's biggest brands across tech, gaming, and entertainment, including Nintendo, Microsoft, A&E, and Vox Media. Her creative work at CNET earned two Gold Telly Awards in 2021 for digital docuseries *Hacking the Apocalypse* and viral video "I prerecorded myself in video meetings for a week (and nobody knew)." In 2023, she founded Rowdy Skeleton, a media consultancy company focused on next-gen spokesperson training and digital brand strategy. She is also the author of *The Art of Psychonauts 2*, and writes sketch comedy in her spare time. She's always doing something new, but you can catch up anytime with Ashley on her website, www.ashleyesqueda.com. Ashley

will forever be in her *Midnights* Era, but will also keep *Style* (T.V.) on repeat until her speakers explode.

Hannah Glowacki, BSP, BSN, RN (she/her) is from Minnesota, USA and is passionate about mental health, gymnastics, ceramics, travel, modern art, and literature. And of course, she has been a Swiftie since 2006. She competed as a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division 1 Athlete while obtaining her Bachelor's degree in Psychology and Minor in Biology. Additionally, she holds a Bachelor's degree in Nursing and has subsequently worked as a Registered Nurse in the Neonatal and Clinical Dermatology settings. She is previously an American Region 3 Champion and World Championships Qualifier with the American Quarter Horse Association. She is currently in the process of writing a collection of literary fiction short stories. She is also an avid traveler and has been to over 25 countries. She is firmly in her evermore Era, but is currently listening to *You're On Your Own, Kid* on repeat.

Sarah Anne Hart (they/them), OTD, OTR/L, is a neurodivergent occupational therapist who works with neurodivergent adults, adolescents, and children to discover and rediscover joy in meaningful occupations. They graduated from the University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill with a double major in human development and family studies and psychology; their honors thesis investigated occupational barriers for autistic youth with and without a co-occurring mental health condition. They completed their Doctorate of Occupational Therapy at Wingate University magna cum laude; their doctoral capstone researched self-advocacy in the context of disability. They have a special interest in the effects of autistic burnout, the impact of active rest, cultivating third spaces, and, of course, Taylor Swift. They are among the top 1% of Spotify listeners of Taylor Swift and have been a devoted super-fan since childhood. Sarah Anne is currently in their *Midnights* Era and has *Paper Rings* on repeat.

(soon-to-be-DR) **Sylvia Hayes** (she/her) is a Research Fellow at the University of Exeter in the Centre of Climate Communication and Data

Science. Her (recently completed) PhD was in the visual communication of specialist climate change online news websites, and the potential of innovative forms of journalism to promote and create positive social change for a sustainable future. Based in Geography but working interdisciplinarily, her research focus spans visual imagery, photography, climate change, communication, cultural studies, and many other areas. Sylvia is currently in her Reputation Era, but will always have *Is It Over Now (Taylor's Version)* on repeat.

Elizabeth Kilmer, PhD is a licensed clinical psychologist dedicated to education and research in the use of applied games and resilient gaming communities. She currently serves as a qualitative researcher for *Take This*, focused on developing resources to help the games industry build communities resilient to hate, harassment, and extremism. In addition to their work with *Take This*, Dr. Kilmer developed a comprehensive training program on the use of applied games, with tracks for educators, therapists, and community members. She is the editor of the upcoming *Psychgeist of Stardew Valley* book, part of the *Psychgeist of Pop Culture* series with ETC press. Dr. Kilmer co-authored the book *Therapeutically Applied Role-Playing Games* and has supported the use of digital games like *Minecraft* in interventions with neurodivergent youth. They have extensive teaching and public speaking experience, with talks featured in conferences in the US and internationally. In her clinical practice, Dr. Kilmer uses games like *D&D*, *Minecraft*, and *Animal Crossing* to support insight, growth, and change with her clients. In keeping with her chapter topic, Elizabeth has *The Man* on repeat, and sinks deeper into their Reputation Era every day.

Dash Lunde leads *Virtual Perfection Cowboy (VPC)*, an eclectic musical project blending electronica, psychedelic rock, dream pop, and neoclassical music. Known for creating immersive, multimedia experiences, VPC explores the boundaries of sound through improvisational composing techniques as well as the meditative and spiritual elements of music. Through *VPCstudio*, Lunde expands this vision across collaborations in film, art, games, and new media, continuously

evolving across genres and styles. Lunde is also a staff UX designer and researcher at SiriusXM. He is currently in his *Midnights* Era.

Dr Elly McCausland is Associate Professor of English Literature at Ghent University, Belgium. Her MA course 'English Literature (Taylor's Version)' launched in 2023 to global media attention and has been featured by The Guardian, CNN, USA Today, CBC Toronto, Der Spiegel, HighLow with Emrata, Times Radio, BBC World News and ABC Australia, among others. Her blog, Swifterature.com (@swifterature1989) explores the interconnections between Swift's work and historical English literature. Her other research interests include children's literature, adaptation, medievalism and ecocriticism, and she is also an award-winning food writer. Elly is currently in her *Reputation* era after spending a whole semester repeatedly dealing with the fragile egos of middle-aged men and keyboard warriors who don't believe Taylor Swift is an appropriate subject for academic study.

Irma Melunovic (she/her) is a Lecturer in Forensic Psychology at York St John University, currently in the last stages of completing her PhD at Edge Hill University. Originally from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Irma has obtained her Bachelor's degree in Behavioural Neuroscience from University of British Columbia, but has since then pursued masters and PhD in forensic psychology, with a particular focus on investigative interviewing, crisis negotiation and personality. Irma has worked in clinical and forensic practice facilitating therapy and conducting risk assessments, as well as conducted research pertaining to the field of clinical and forensic psychology. Her current focus is on exploring how different personality characteristics can benefit in investigative interviewing of suspects. In addition to her research, Irma is passionate about teaching, photography, music, reading and board games, which she has a habit of collecting more than she should. Irma is currently in her *Evermore* era (with a healthy side of *Speak Now*), but listening to *Epiphany* and *Carolina* on repeat.

Dr. Annayah Prosser (she/her) is an Assistant Professor in Marketing, Business and Society at the University of Bath School of Management.

Her PhD was in social, moral and environmental psychology, where she explored how morality and identity impacted prosocial and pro-environmental behaviour. Her primary research interests explore how individuals and groups respond to societal crisis, such as the climate and ecological emergency and structural inequalities. Previously, she worked at the University of Oxford and Yale University, exploring 'transformative experiences' and 'exceptional altruists'. The idea of choosing one era is stressful for Annayah, but she is currently oscillating between her Evermore and Lover eras, with Renegade on repeat.

Celeste Sangiorgio, PhD is an early-career clinical psychologist who splits her time between research advancing digital therapeutics, particularly mental health skills learning games, and providing therapy directly to patients. Her research and academic writing focus on what makes up an experience and how people make sense of the experiences they have, particularly in the context of romantic and other close relationships. She translates this work into writing on identity and romantic relationships and beliefs (ex: *What is love? Triss don't hurt me*, in the *Psychgeist of the Witcher*, 2023; *Sexual motivations and ideals distinguish sexual identities within the self-concept: A multidimensional scaling analysis*, in *Social Sciences*, 2014), workshops and panels for psychology professionals and others (*Mental DTx: Making & Testing Conflict Skills Tools*, at *Serious Play*, 2024; *Psychology in Final Fantasy VII: Recovery and Trauma*, at *PAX East*, 2022), and content for digital therapeutics and games. Her therapeutic practice uses third-wave treatment orientations, primarily Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), and integrated traditional therapies (e.g., humanistic therapy); Celeste has over 10 years of practice providing mental health care to adults, including crisis care at the National Eating Disorders Association and Safe Horizon hotlines and free psychotherapy through the Behavioral Health Programs within Rochester Institute of Technology, where she supervises predoctoral psychologists. Celeste is presently in her folklore era, cozily building up readings and literature in her office, and certainly wearing quite a lot of cardigans while doing therapy.

Bethany Thomas (she/her) is a current postgraduate researcher (PhD) at Edge Hill University (UK) and Assistant Lecturer at Arden University. Throughout her studies, Beth has pursued her passion for exploring gender identity in stigmatised settings, with a particular focus on stereotypes and social identity. This is reflected in her current research as part of her doctoral studies, which explore the intersection between gender and gamer identity, investigating the efficacy of various theoretical frameworks from social psychology as processes involved in the construction of gamer identity, in order to establish the theoretical basis from which women gamers may be better understood. Beth is also an ambassador for Women in Games (WIGJ) and is a member of the ArGen gender equality network. To learn more about Beth and her projects, you can find her on X @_brthomas. Beth is currently in her Folklore Era (in a moonlit witch kind of way), but listening to Florida!!! on repeat.

about play story press

<https://playstorypress.org/about/>

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