

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY  
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF MARKETING

It's Nice To Have A Friend: Human Brand Parasocial Relationship Building  
and Marketing Implications from the Taylor Swift Brand

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SPRING 2024

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements  
for a baccalaureate degree  
in Marketing  
with honors in Marketing

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## ABSTRACT

The objective of this analysis is to explore the intersection of human brands and parasocial relationships, or PSR, through the lens of Taylor Swift. Although many fans engage in parasocial relationships with their favorite artists, the purpose of this thesis is to understand *how* and *why* Swift's fans, or Swifties, create comparatively personal and meaningful connections with the artist. In order to do this, I used the PSI-Process Scale, a model measuring parasocial relationships, to demonstrate the existence of PSR with Swift through qualitative analysis of observations social media data and news articles. I found that Swift and her fans share a best friend consumer-brand dynamic, which connects to additional factors that further the depth, nature, and intensity of PSR: authenticity, relatability, and familiarity; linguistics, voice, and tone; lyrics; live performances; and friendship bracelets. Finally, I used content analysis to understand the role of touchpoints in PSR with human brands, including the aspect of oversaturation, and the impact of brand transgressions on PSR.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to extend my deepest gratitude to my thesis advisor, Dr. Jennifer Chang Coupland, who guided, encouraged, and challenged me through this process. I have built so much confidence in my work and ideas in researching and writing this thesis, and none of my personal growth would have been possible without the kind and supportive environment Dr. Coupland cultivated. I would also like to thank Dr. Johanna Slot, my faculty reader, who has been an advocate for me and ignited my passion for marketing throughout my undergraduate years. I appreciate her thoughtful feedback and continued support.

I owe many thanks to my roommates — Jordan Yerger, Sneha Prem Chandran, and Sonika Kohli — who embarked on this thesis-writing journey with me over the past year. I am grateful for their constant encouragement and will always look back with gratitude on this period of our lives and the many hours we shared together that resulted in four successful honors theses.

Finally, I am endlessly grateful to my family, especially my mom, who encouraged me throughout my thesis process and my entire education at Penn State. I would not have been able to reach this point without their love and confidence in my abilities. To my mom, thank you for listening to me babble about Taylor Swift and believing that I could turn it all into this.

## Chapter 1 Introduction

In a September 2023 episode of the NPR podcast “Pop Culture Happy Hour,” host Stephen Thompson talks to three guests about Taylor Swift’s current career victory, the global phenomenon that is “The Eras Tour.” Guest Margaret Willison, a communications manager for a production company, observes:

“The Eras Tour is like seeing your best friend married ... You may not get a lot of individual time with her, but you’re just there to witness something so beautiful ... in her life ... and it’s incredibly moving, and you’re like, oh, my God, she made it. This is great.”

Willison goes on to observe a unique factor of Taylor Swift and the parasocial relationships she shares with her fans, which is Swift’s ability to “make the size of her audience still feel like it is not a parasocial relationship. Willison states:

“There is a friendship there. It’s like we know each other. We care about each other. We care about the same things. Your victories are my victories, and vice-versa.”

The observations Willison makes within one minute of the podcast mirror the sentiments shared by millions of Swifties (the official name for Swift’s dedicated fans) across the world. Swift has been able to encourage a unique relationship among her fans that feels more like being involved in a real-life, give-and-take interpersonal relationship than an imagined connection between a famous celebrity and the millions of fans who have made and will soon make the pilgrimage to see her at the Eras Tour by the end of 2024. What the following thesis will explore is how this

has taken place through Swift's intentional actions and the impact this has had on brand equity, engagement, and loyalty.

### **1.1 Introduction to and Motivation for Studying the Taylor Swift Brand**

Taylor Swift is Apple Music and Spotify's global top artist of 2023 and namesake of the highest grossing tour to date — the Eras Tour (Apple Music, 2023; Spotify, 2023; Millman, 2023). The musician, who has been sharing her music since 2003, continues to reach new peaks both in her own career and in the music industry a whole two decades into her career (Taylor Swift Museum, 2021). Her current "Eras Tour" is scheduled to span more than 20 countries and generate approximately \$5 billion in global spending beyond ticket sales (Kopstein & Espada, 2023). In 2023, *Time Magazine* awarded her the title of "Person of the Year" for her accomplishments and impact (Lansky, 2023). She has recently been the namesake of an economic phenomenon recognized as the "Swift effect" wherein the NFL is experiencing a significant surge in female viewership, attendance, spending, and general engagement due to the artist's current relationship with Kansas City Chiefs tight end Travis Kelce (Fatemi, 2023; Gaines, 2024).

But beyond a \$2 billion multinational tour, tens of billions of yearly streams, and the power to get the world watching football again, what sets the Taylor Swift brand apart from others is a deep, long-lasting loyalty from fans that stems from a perceived genuineness and authenticity (Spangler, 2023). Swift's particularly personal behaviors and messaging to fans through social media engagement, in-person events, intimate song lyrics and live performances has created a perfect storm for fans to build relationships with the artist. Whether fans interact

with Swift's brand through her personal social media accounts or those of her marketing arm, Taylor Nation, the authentic tone and voice is critical in creating and encouraging long-term relationships in nearly all of her communications with fans. Her efforts to create this sentiment with fans are not passive, as any successful parasocial relationship needs to retain a level of proactivity and reliability in order to sustain itself and create meaning for those engaged in it. Swift's talent is in bringing everyone — regular fans, celebrities, and what seems to be the rest of the world alike — into her orbit through charisma and passion that translate into what her fans perceive as a genuine brand image, creating sustained engagement and loyalty.

## **1.2 Introduction to Parasocial Relationships**

Do both parties in a relationship need to know of each other's existence for it to constitute one? Not necessarily, according to the field of parasociality research. Although the commonly accepted understanding of interpersonal relationships implies a two-sided, mutual connection and series of real-time, often face-to-face interactions, unilateral relationships certainly exist and can be as, if not sometimes more, important for the social lives of their participants. Researcher Vance Ricks likens these asymmetrical, one-sided parasocial relationships, or PSR, to the type of interactions children have with imaginary friends: any perceived interactions are based on a projected idea of an individual, rather than based in the reality of any real social interactions (Mello-Klein, 2023).

However, imagined relationships with media figures — what Caughey (1984) refers to as “fantasy relationships” — are neither a new phenomenon nor indicative of maladaptive socialization. In fact, the collective deep knowledge of an overwhelming amount of media is

“absolutely essential for adequate participation in many standard American activities” (p. 32).

Caughey posited that there are three ways people engage in fantasy relationships with media figures: imaginary relationships, hero worship, and “patterns of emulation and identification” (Caughey, p. 3). According to Caughey, fantasy relationships can transport individuals to alternate social worlds; this back-and-forth existence inherently requires a complex and developed understanding of human social conduct as a prerequisite for engagement.

Additionally, technology has allowed mass media communications from media personas to be perceived as personal communications, which allow individuals to fill gaps from their actual social worlds. To Caughey, the medium of communications technology that media personas employ to communicate with fans and society at large is critical in understanding immersion into imaginary social worlds.

Another related aspect of fantasy relationships is identification, which Feilitzen and Linné (1975) define as “a process in which individuals consciously or unconsciously seek to reinforce and expand their identities.” This process happens for two main reasons: a desire to be like another person (wishful identification), or a recognition of one’s own self in another person (similarity). According to Feilitzen and Linn, identification allows individuals to vicariously participate in another individual’s life. However, true PSR are not just imagined fantasies of the mind or a form of wishful thinking in which individuals assume the identity of a successful celebrity. When the persona is able to talk back to individual fans through TikTok comments and Instagram posts, the dynamic between the persona and the average person is inherently shifted from a form of maladaptive or fantasy-based cognition to a rational response as an extension of one’s real-life relationships (Giles, 2009).



In the past century, the potential intensity of PSR has continued to expand. With the advent and rise of mass media mediums such as radio, television and, more recently, social networking services, unilateral relationships have become increasingly more powerful due to the ability of famous individuals to reach us even when we are not actively seeking them out. Whether in the form of a morning meteorologist sharing the daily weather forecast on the local broadcast news station or a microcelebrity posting sponsored content on Instagram, PSR are a given throughout every facet of our daily lives.

Many fans with PSR may also be engaged in idol worship, which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as “excessive concern with, devotion to, or reverence for a person or thing; (now chiefly) very intense admiration for an individual, esp. a public figure or celebrity” (2023). The research of Maltby, et. al (2004, a) demonstrates that intense-personal individuals (those who hold intensive and compulsive feelings about a certain idol) are more likely to engage in celebrity worship and experience poorer mental health than other individuals. Maltby, et. al (2004, b) looked into the relationship between celebrity worship, cognitive flexibility, and social complexity (engagement in and maintenance of diverse groups), finding that those engaged in intense-personal celebrity worship are likely to be low in both factors. According to Cheung and Yue (2012), adolescents are likely to idolize celebrities as a form of compensation for both parental absence and low social status. However, McCutcheon, et. al (2010) found that individuals with higher cognitive functioning (including mental activities such as perception, learning, decision making, memory, and attention) are less susceptible to being consumed by celebrity worship fantasies (Kiely, 2014). It is important to note that not all idol worship can be characterized as unhealthy, while not all PSR should be considered healthy. Nuance is required in individual cases to determine both the positive and negative impacts of fans’ interactions with

and cognition regarding idols, and more research is necessary to establish the line between the two phenomena and their respective indicators of mental health. In the case of Taylor Swift, both healthy and unhealthy forms of both idol worship and PSR exist. Although this thesis will mainly concern healthy PSR, additional research is needed to establish the existence and impact of unhealthy PSR with the artist.

In the context of marketing, Chen, et al. (2022) propose that idol worship can positively influence fan consumers' brand loyalty. Brand-idol collaborations provide unrelated brands with an in-group identity associated with the idol. This serves to strengthen consumers' attachment to the associated brands, which can increase brand passion, leading to an increase in brand attachment and brand loyalty.

Although idol worship can be a powerful and compelling force that factors into an individual's PSR, there is nuance that separates the two. First, PSR can be an extension of a cognitively healthy individual's social interactions, while idol worship is regarded as a form of extra-social behavior (Giles, 2009). There is a clearly established connection between the two, wherein a medium level of idol worship correlates to high parasocial interaction behavior (Widiastuti, 2020). However, PSR can provide some key benefits to an individual that idol worship typically cannot: namely, a sense of companionship and satisfaction of social interaction needs that can pose long-term effects. Whereas those engaged in idol worship tend to become moderately to heavily involved in fantasies and develop a deep loyalty to the celebrity, PSR gives those fantasies and loyalty a direction and a purpose.

### **1.3 Research Question**

Therefore, I seek to explore the success of traditional measurements of PSR to see if each item holds true for Taylor Swift, the current top global musician. I will use content analysis to analyze how Swifties' online behavior maps onto a common measurement of parasociality, the PSI-Process Scale, as well as Swift's specific actions (including the personal content of her lyrics, speeches and social media posts) that create the right conditions for PSR-building. My analysis results in strategic implications for human brand managers aiming to increase overall brand equity. The final research question can be summarized as the following:

How do individuals experiencing PSR with Taylor Swift demonstrate traditional measurements of parasociality, and how does the Taylor Swift brand use authenticity and perceived intimacy to increase PSR?

### **1.4 Contributions to Literature**

There is a lack of research contributing to the various strategies human brands themselves utilize to encourage the creation of PSR. Additionally, minimal research outlines the success of these strategies, nor the reasons why individual tactics work so well for one brand but would not be successful for others. The past year was substantial for Swift — 2023 marked a record-breaking global tour, the release of multiple top-charting albums, and millions of social media posts, news articles, and conversations about her every move. Mena (2023) writes that “Swift achieved remarkable feats that would be impressive for any typical business leader running a Fortune 500 company.” Despite this overwhelming success that poses a variety of invaluable

growth and strategy tips for any brand, Swift's business savvy paired with an intuition regarding how to relate to a wide range of individuals has yet to be studied in depth in academic literature. This crossover between business knowledge and real intuition about people is a strong crossover that necessitates research and further academic exploration.

Taylor Swift is the prime example of parasociality in a marketing context due to the sheer effort, time, and dollars Swifties are willing to put into their PSR with the musician. Kaplan (2023) reports that, despite the majority of Swifties making under \$50,000 annually, they spent an average of \$1,300 per person to attend the Eras Tour — a considerable sum, in context. Those in Swift's 2023 top 1% of Spotify listeners racked up at least 100 hours of streaming, with the top 0.001% of fans listening for over 150,000 minutes (Alcántara, 2023). Swifties have even been recognized as a key voting bloc (Harris, 2023). After the artist backed two Democratic candidates — former Governor Phil Bredesen and U.S. Representative Jim Cooper — in her home state of Tennessee through her "Miss Americana" documentary, both individuals experienced a peak in Google search interest that could be attributed to the documentary's release. Swift's impact on voter registration was so powerful that at one point, it added flame to a Fox News conspiracy that the artist was floated as an asset for the Pentagon's psychological operations unit; this rumor was disproved (2024, Alafritz).

With every new social media post, media appearance, Emoji usage, and even manicure (yes, Swifties develop theories around Taylor Swift's nail colors), many Swifties invest hours into researching and preparing a convincing argument to show other fans what they predict Taylor Swift will announce next (Sarlija, 2023). In 2019, fans believed Swift was posting a countdown on her Instagram, with a photo of seven palm trees and seven emojis followed by a photo of her seated on the sixth step of a staircase and finally a picture with five visible holes in

the fence behind her — referred to as the “five holes in the fence theory”

(IndependentGround125, 2022). Despite the countdown being acknowledged by Swift herself as a coincidence, that does not stop Swifties from continuing to develop new theories about Swift’s planned announcements every few weeks, spending considerable time and effort to uncover evidence and present it to others on social media. The artist encourages this through her infamous placement of “Easter egg” clues that dot her owned media and public relations efforts, increasing brand engagement and strengthening the PSR benefits. Fans are able to feel as if their speculations are actually a form of intentional, two-sided interactions with Swift, which serves as a form of confirmation that they know the singer as well as they might a real-life friend to be able to predict her behavior and intentions. This social complexity paired with the validation from other fans engaged in the metaphorical Easter egg hunt serves a validating function in making the PSR feel more like a regular relationship instead of simply idol worship.

Additionally, the demographic of Swift’s fanbase show the overwhelming success of her appeal, transcending demographics in a manner that would make any brand jealous. Over half of U.S. adults identify as Swift fans (Blancaflor & Briggs, 2023). Swifties skew female, white, millennial, suburban, and democratic, and the anticipated frenzy of crazed teenage fangirls are far from the only group investing to see the Eras Tour, with 48% of fans identifying as male. The connections that many Gen X and Millennial mothers, who began their own PSR with Swift in their high school and college years, feel to the artist are strong and enduring more than two decades later. Shrikant’s (2023) reporting for CNBC uncovered that one mom would “hold my phone to my belly and play Taylor Swift” while pregnant, revealing she would be “crushed” if her daughter was not a fan of the artist. Although idol worship could factor into this mother’s response, the connecting role that her own PSR with Taylor Swift plays into her relationship with

her daughter is integral; as her relationship with Taylor plays such a defining role in her own life, the desire for her daughter to also be closely connected to her “friend” is the natural progression of logic. Although minimal research has endeavored to provide an accurate count of Gen Z Swifties under 18 years of age, the cross-generational appeal of Swift’s brand is undeniable and able to provide lessons for other human brands and non-human brands alike.

The following three chapters will outline a framework for understanding human brands and parasociality, a description of research methods and results, an analysis of factors influencing PSR with Taylor Swift, and a conclusion with limitations and future research. In Chapter 2, I review the literature around brand personality, human brands, musician human brands, PSR and its measurements, and parasociality in marketing. In Chapter 3, I describe the methodology regarding PSR with Taylor Swift as it maps onto a specific measurement of PSR; additionally, I analyze the specific consumer-brand relationship through various actions by both Swifties and Taylor Swift. Chapter 4 consists of an analysis of various factors that enhance and encourage PSR as it relates to aspects of Swift’s persona. Chapter 5 summarizes the findings, suggesting future necessary areas of research and addressing several limitations to this thesis.

## **Chapter 2 A Framework for Understanding Human Brands and Parasociality**

It is necessary to understand the ways in which regular brands can assume and display human-like characteristics and personalities before exploring how human brands communicate these, since they do so through the lens of a human becoming a brand with human characteristics instead of simply as a human being expressing themselves. Additionally, exploring previous research into PSR definitions and the various models proposed as measurements is critical in

understanding how individuals experience PSR with Taylor Swift and how the nuance of a musician human brand impact PSR.

## 2.1 Human Brands and Brand Personality

Although most brands are not human, the concept of humanizing brands through marketing efforts is far from new. Aaker (1997) describes brand personality as a set of human characteristics that grow to become associated with a brand and establishes five factors that define a brand's identity: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness. Aaker's work establishes a set of human-like characteristics and personality to otherwise inanimate brands, which differs from the way in which the human-like characteristics of human brands manifest. The human brand of Taylor Swift, on the other hand, begins with real human characteristics that are translated into a brand personality, which are then communicated to fans with a new human-like perspective. Because Taylor Swift is a billion-dollar brand with Taylor Nation, an entire marketing and communications arm, it is necessary for her personality to be communicated *through the context of a brand that is human* instead of simply a human being (Cerullo, 2024). With PSR, fans fuse the two, blurring what is communicated about Taylor Swift the person with Taylor Swift the brand. Although human brands are more easily able to attain and express human-like characteristics because they are based on an individual person, these five dimensions can inform how consumers view and identify with them.

Celebrity endorsement is also a well-known tactic in humanizing brands. McCracken (1989) found that source attractiveness (likability and relatability), credibility (trustworthiness and expertise), and power (ability to effect change), borrowed from social psychology research,

are foundational to the effectiveness of a source. Celebrities, who tend to be high in multiple forms of source attractiveness, are particularly effective partnerships for brands that want to leverage that influence to benefit themselves. In the case of Taylor Swift, she is high in all three forms of source influence, proving to previously be an ongoing effective partner for brands such as Capital One, Apple Music, and Starbucks (Simonetti, 2022; McCluskey, 2016; Kaufman, 2021). However, when Swift shifts from being viewed as a celebrity endorser to being the object of PSR herself, she almost transcends the source model, exceeding the effectiveness that brands expect in a celebrity endorser but also potentially shifting focus away from the endorsed brand itself. Additionally, McCracken (1989) found that celebrity endorsements transfer the cultural meanings associated with their own human brands to other brands and products (McCracken, 1989). When this happens, the consumer then views their own consumption of the brand as a way of defining themselves in association with the meaning imbued by the celebrity endorser.

Fournier's (1998) work went deeper into the humanization of brands, describing the unique relationships consumers form with brands to which they are loyal because of associations with meaning. The relationship fans of the Taylor Swift brand form with her largely resemble a best friend relationship, though due to the enduring nature of her career, many fans have PSR with her spanning into their childhood experiences. This long-term PSR has even become the topic of dozens of news stories, with many media outlets detailing the impact Swift has made on fans' lives for up to two decades. For example, considering the impact Taylor Swift had on her and her sister's lives, 23-year-old Eras Tour attendee Megan Vo said, "We grew up with her, she grew up with us, she's been there through every stage in life" (Toohey & Castleman, 2023). This long-lasting loyalty points toward a "childhood best friend" relationship that many Swifties



experience with Taylor Swift; but instead of being a consumer packaged goods brand offering a “best friend” type of support through a reliable product, this best friend calls you her friend back.

## **2.2 Parasocial Definitions and Models**

The term “para-social” was coined by Horton and Wohl (1956), who defined it as a sense of a personal relationship or connection between a television personality and audience member through mediated communication despite the lack of real-life interaction. They argued that this one-sided relationship is initiated and sustained by media consumers’ regular exposure to these figures, leading consumers to feel a bond or intimacy with the media persona, even though it is not reciprocated. Rubin and McHugh (1987) expanded the concept of parasocial interaction, or PSI, by exploring the development and nature of these one-sided relationships. They found that social attraction and task attraction are the most important characteristics in building PSR. Social attraction can be defined as the desire to form friendships with individuals, whereas task attraction is related to the abilities someone possesses and the confidence felt as a result (i.e. the desire to work with an individual. Rubin and McHugh (1987) found that details as minor as camera angles could impact the task attractiveness of television characters. Physical attraction, or the draw experienced toward another’s physical appearance, was not found to be significant.

Rubin and McHugh’s (1987) research highlighted that PSR progress from a relatively passive and one-sided involvement to a more active and engaged connection through attraction instead of exposure, as formerly hypothesized by Horton and Wohl (1956). The path of exposure to relationship importance was measured through the model below:

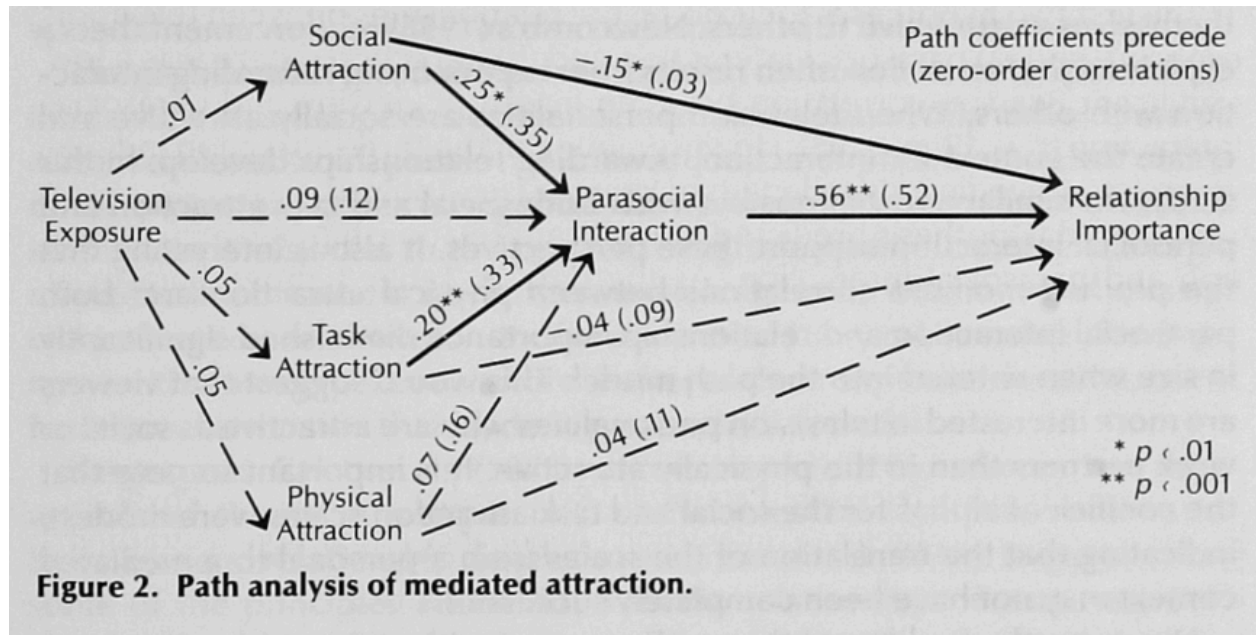


Figure 1. Robin and McHugh's (1987) path analysis of mediated attraction

Specifically looking at the emotional aspect and affective bonding between individuals and media personae, Konijn and Hoorn (2017) proposed that parasocial interactions are better understood through the lens of affective bonding theory, which illustrates the reasons *why* humans affectively engage with and establish relationships with media personae. Konijn and Hoorn (2017) outline these four propositions:

1. "Humans are hardwired to respond in human communicative ways" (p. 10) to any other human (or human-resembling character) in a media consumption setting.
2. Affective bonding requires some level of relevance, or personal meaning, attached to the persona or media figure.
3. A viewer's emotions related to a media personae serve as validation that the interaction is somehow "real."

4. The media personae offers affordances, or forms of benefits, that offer to meet a media consumer's needs, interests or desires.

According to Konijn and Hoorn (2017), an affective bonding lens can enable researchers to better understand PSI in the modern landscape of influencer marketing and celebrities sharing personal details on social media.

Schramm and Hartmann (2008) developed the PSI-Process Scale as a tool to measure the intensity and breadth of parasocial processes. Their focus was on creating a method to quantify and assess the strength and depth of these one-sided relationships, evaluating various dimensions including the emotional attachment, cognitive involvement, and behavioral responses that individuals exhibit toward media figures.

Response	Process	Item example
Cognitive	1. attention allocation	I carefully followed the behaviour of PERSONA.
	2. comprehension of persona's action and situation	I hardly thought about why PERSONA did certain things s/he did. (inverted)
	3. activation of prior media and life experience	I kept wondering if I knew persons that are similar to PERSONA.
	4. evaluations of persona and persona's actions	I became aware of aspects of PERSONA that I really liked or disliked.
	5. anticipatory observation	I kept asking myself how things would evolve around PERSONA.
	6. construction of relations between persona and self	Occasionally, I wondered if PERSONA was similar to me or not.
Affective	1. sympathy/antipathy	Sometimes I really loved PERSONA for what s/he did.
	2. empathy/counter empathy	If PERSONA felt bad, I felt bad as well; if PERSONA felt good, I felt good as well.
	3. emotion contagion	PERSONA left me rather sober and unaffected. (inverted)
Behavioral	1. nonverbal behavior (e. g. mimics, gestures)	Whatever PERSONA said or did – I kept still. (inverted)
	2. (para-)verbal behavior	Occasionally, I said something to PERSONA on impulse.
	3. behavioral intentions	Sometimes I felt like speaking out on PERSONA.

**Figure 2. PSI-Process Scale**

Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011) proposed the parasocial experience (EPSI) scale to measure the intensity of a parasocial experience, looking at six key criteria using a traditional seven-point Likert scale measuring agreement in association with a television personality. The scale measured the following questions, starting with: “While watching the clip, I had the feeling that [name] ...”

1. Was aware of me.
2. Knew I was there.
3. Knew I was aware of him/her.
4. Knew I paid attention to him/her.

5. Knew that I reacted to him/her.

6. Reacted to what I said or did.

This scale, while used less commonly in case studies of PSR, can serve to illustrate a viewer's experience in a *singular PSI setting* rather than assuming a *longer-term PSR*. Therefore, I will not be employing it for the purposes of this thesis.

Dibble, et. al (2016) critically assess the existing measures used to quantify both PSI and PSR, aiming to differentiate between the two. PSI is defined as a more transient and superficial connection with media figures, while PSR denotes a deeper, more sustained and affectively intense connection. They highlighted the need for clearer distinctions between these concepts, finding that the EPSI Scale measured PSI more accurately, while the PSI-Process Scale measured PSR effectively. Therefore, for the purposes of this thesis, the PSI-Process Scale will be used to analyze parasociality with regard to Taylor Swift in order to capture loyalty and sustained engagement.

Improvements to the measure and study of PSR have been posed by several researchers. Giles and Malby (2006) suggested that PSR with celebrities could be connected to the three dimensions of celebrity worship: entertainment-social (entertainment and social interaction benefits) intense-personal (intensive and compulsive feelings about the celebrity) and borderline-pathological (uncontrollable behaviors and fantasies about favorite celebrities). So far, minimal research has been conducted in the field to assess the varying levels of parasociality, nor to categorize different parasocial experiences into these categories. Giles (2009) later developed three main recommendations for PSR measurement and categorization, the first of which is distinguishing between media figures who are direct representations of real individuals versus fictional characters. Second, categorizing PSR in the field of social psychology is recommended

due to PSR being an extension of real-life relationships instead of a separate, extra-social experience. Third, Giles (2009) recommends researchers develop a continuum of social interaction with cartoon characters and fictional media figures on one side and face-to-face interactions on the other side, creating a continuum of social-parasocial encounters. Additionally, recommendations include defining the stages in the development of PSR.

Cohen (2004) found that PSR are best viewed as an extension of an individual's "real-life" social relationships instead of a result of familial or romantic loneliness, as researchers like Wang, et. al (2008) posited. However, regarding which individuals are more likely to form PSR, distinctions can be made. Cole and Leets (1999) researched the intersection between the three attachment styles — secure, avoidant and anxious-ambivalent — and likelihood to form PSR. Anxious-ambivalent individuals were found to be most likely to form an attachment, which is posed as a possible manifestation of the need for intimacy or a fill-in for unmet relational needs. Avoidant individuals are the least likely to form PSR, as an extension of their real-life resistance to intimacy. Secure individuals were found to be in the middle, often seeking predictability through the personas with whom they form PSR.

Although parasociality is far from a new phenomenon, social media has allowed individuals to take an increasingly personal view of the persona in PSR. Influencer marketing in the era of social media has shifted the accessibility and intimacy that brands have to the average consumer. McKinsey & Company (2023) defines the phenomenon as a paid partnership between brands and individuals popular on social media sites, often with a substantial following and trust from those followers. Since 2009, influencer marketing has been regulated through the U.S. Federal Trade Commission, when reviewing products online without disclosing their gifted status became punishable by fines (ABC News, 2009).

Influencer marketing on social media has been demonstrated to achieve positive return on investment for brands, with 80% of brands and 56% of brands using Instagram and TikTok respectively for the strategy. According to McKinsey & Company (2023), authenticity is the key in effective influencer marketing, achieving a cohesive, natural brand fit between the individual's regular content and personality and that of the brand. Although *influencers* are distinctly different from *celebrities* or *celebrity endorsers*, the increasing control that influencers hold over the average consumer's purchasing decisions has led a considerable number of celebrities to follow in their footsteps. The line between influencer and celebrity is increasingly blurred (Hacking, 2023).

Blight, et. al (2017) looked into how X (herein referred to as 'Twitter') and Instagram usage influence the roles and motives of PSR. Social media provides insight into the "backstage" of celebrities' personal lives, which allows them to forgo the constraints of traditional mass media mediums when communicating with those engaged in PSR with them. The study found that parasociality and a sense of community are particularly important for Instagram users and less important for Twitter users. Hoffner and Bond (2022) defined the relationship between PSR and social media with the following:

"Social media platforms provide fans with momentary glimpses into the professional and personal backstage of their favorite media figures that would otherwise be unknown. The frequency and perceived authenticity of media figures' self-disclosures on social media accelerate people's socio-emotional connections" (p. 1)

According to Hoffner and Bond, PSR encourage social connection, improve coping and promote eudaimonic well-being in those participating in them. Individuals can experience companionship and community through PSR, and the personal benefits including feelings of validation, finding

comfort and support during tough times and engaging in identity exploration and self-development.

Additionally, Hoffner and Bond (2022) uncovered that PSR can lead individuals to embrace social causes led by the persona. In September 2023, Taylor Swift made a brief nonpartisan post on her Instagram story encouraging voter registration and linking to nonprofit Vote.org's website (Sullivan, 2023). The message resulted in over 35,000 new voter registrations, which Vote.org reported was a 23% jump from the year before. The sheer success of Swift's decision to encourage voter registration prompted European Commission Vice President Margaritis Schinas to request Swift help the European Union increase voter turnout, especially among young people, through encouraging individuals to register to vote (Chiappa, 2024).

What is offered to those engaged in PSR is, largely, positive, according to Hoffner and Bond (2022) and Blight, et. al (2017). However, although most PSR are benign and even can be overall positive, it is necessary to understand the pernicious aspects of PSR and the indicators that individuals will experience negative impacts from them. Hoffner and Bond (2022) found that PSR pose a variety of benefits to those engaged in them, but there is a risk of individuals adopting the negative messages expressed by human brands in a way that is detrimental to their own lives and self-image. Although this analysis is beyond the scope of this thesis, the specific positive and negative psychological impacts of PSR are an area of research that necessitates attention and continued study.



### 2.3 Parasocial Relationships with Musicians

It should be noted that Kurtin, et. al (2019) found that the PSR consumers hold with musicians differ significantly from non-musician figures. They specifically found that, using Robin and McHugh's (1987) path analysis of mediated attraction altered to look at musicians rather than media personalities, several assumptions did not hold true. In particular, no relationship was discovered between exposure and task attraction. Additionally, the researchers found a *negative* association between exposure and social/physical attraction, implying a “less is more” perspective when it comes to getting to know musicians.

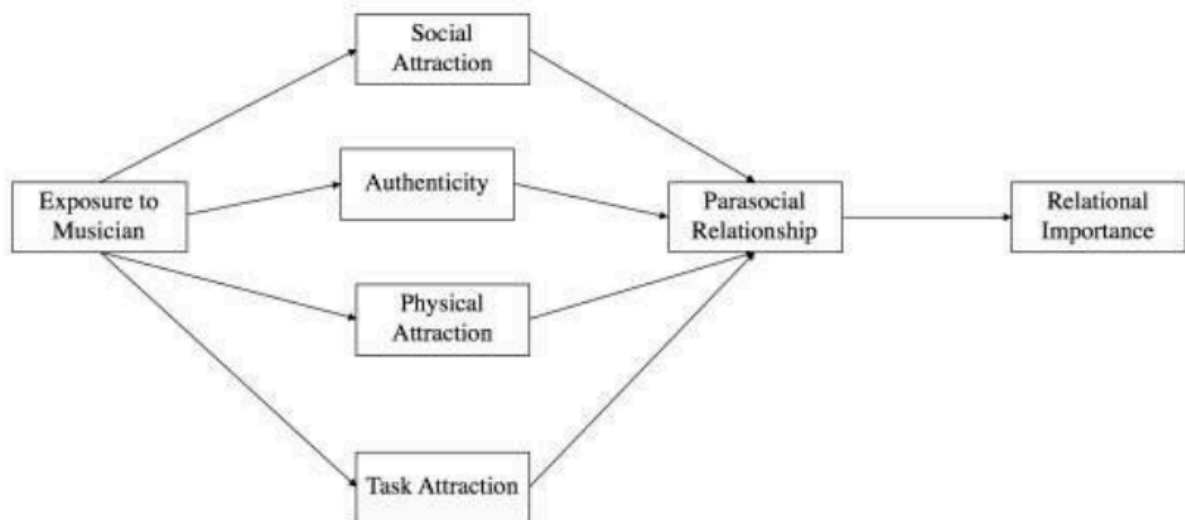


Figure 3. Kurtin, et. al (2019) proposed path model

More research is needed to determine the distinction between the “less is more” approach in celebrity worship versus PSR. In order for fans to form strong PSR with idols, revealing the right amount of information is critical; since authenticity is needed for PSR to achieve the feeling of a real-life relationship, celebrities must provide enough information about their personal lives

to create the illusion of a personal and intimate knowledge without sharing too many details that they lose all aspirational qualities.

According to Taylor Swift, her Instagram comments are intentionally disabled to “block some of the noise” and minimize her reliance on external validation (Swift, 2019). (It should be also noted that comment sections are enabled on all of her other social media platforms, including her marketing engine, Taylor Nation’s, Instagram page.) Whether intentionally or not, the decision to disable the comments has created a level of separation between what she chooses to share and how fans are able to engage with her and each other. However, this move is largely connected to the purposeful marketing strategy of Taylor Swift; Kate Kurtin, a communications professor at California State University in Los Angeles, stated that the singer “has remained vulnerable and authentic in her music but isn’t giving too much away so we no longer connect with her” (Shrikant, 2023). Wellesley College psychology professor Sally A. Theran posed that “Swift’s selective sharing is intentional and beneficial, as it allows people to project relatable feelings onto her.”

Kurtin, et. al (2019) suggest that increased exposure to musicians may have two major implications for consumers: firstly, that the unattainability of their lifestyles could create feelings of dissimilarity and decrease liking; secondly, the ordinary, mundane and “human” can interfere with aspirational, idealized images that musician human brands try desperately to create and maintain. However, Swift’s brand strengths of authenticity through humanness — sharing the right amount of heartbreak, failures and insecurities to remain real and ordinary instead of untouchably wealthy and famous — may disrupt Kurtin, et al.’s (2019) findings. Further research is necessary in establishing the distinct characteristics of PSR and musician human brands.

Another relevant suggestion from the study is that attraction — whether physical, task or social — is on its own not enough to encourage PSR; rather, an accumulation of interactions on a variety of media platforms is needed to foster parasociality. This aggregation of touchpoints, or ways in which a consumer can interact with a brand, can serve to build and strengthen PSR. In today’s media environment, where major international publications regularly write articles documenting such insignificant happenings as Swift’s consumption of chicken tenders and “seemingly ranch” at a football game, touchpoints to the Taylor Swift brand are visible no matter which direction one looks (DeBianchi, 2023). Finally, Kurtin, et. al (2019) found that authenticity can mediate exposure to create a path to PSR for individuals and musician human brands. This is particularly relevant for Taylor Swift, whose brand identity is seeped in authenticity, which blurs the line between Taylor the brand and Taylor the person. Even the name of Swift’s fanbase — Swifties — holds a different, less hierarchical and more relatable connotation than Beyoncé, Queen Bey of the BeyHive, or Lady Gaga’s “Little Monsters” (Macatee, 2017). Idols such as Beyoncé surely also infuse their music with details from their personal lives and relationships, but their music contributes to the overall “larger than life” impression of their art and brand as an artist, whereas Taylor’s music (especially through her lyrics) contributes more to how she is viewed as a person.

## **2.4 Parasociality in Marketing**

Minimal research has been conducted in the cross-dimensional space of evaluating marketing activities as related to parasociality. Saboo, et. al (2015) looked at musician human brands and the impact of social media activities encouraging engagement on the brand. The

study finds that the value of social media engagement for experiential goods is considerably more important than the size of a fan base, tying in social identity theory (SIT) to argue that “consumers ... perceive, feel, and value their belonging with a music artist and engage in a range of social media behaviors” (p. 525, Saboo, et. al, 2015). The impact of social word of mouth, or SWOM, on a musician human brand increases at an increasing rate to improve brand equity.

### **Chapter 3 Research Design and Findings**

Minimal research has looked past media personalities and toward musician human brands in particular — let alone suggested alterations to traditional measurements of parasociality in a livestream and video-driven, post-Covid world. Additionally, considering Kurtin, et. al’s (2019) findings that PSR with musicians do not follow commonly accepted parasocial measurement models, this research will also have implications for the field of parasociality research and may result in a modification to the criteria considered necessary to result in PSI.

Therefore, I seek to explore the success of traditional measurements of PSR to see if each item holds true for Taylor Swift, the current top global musician. To do this, I first outline a methodology and describe the activities of my quantitative analysis, providing the results from my observations. I then analyze the consumer-brand relationship dynamic observed between Swift and Swifties. In order to complete this section, I content-analyzed how Swifties’ online behavior maps onto a common measurement of parasociality, the PSI-Process Scale, as well as Swift’s specific actions and messaging that create the right conditions for PSR-building.

### 3.1 Methodology

In order to assess the success of PSR building between Taylor Swift and her fans, I used data from social media sites including Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Reddit, TikTok, Threads, and YouTube to find evidence of the existence of PSR as defined by the PSI-Process Scale established by Schramm and Hartmann (2008). In order to simplify the analysis, I condensed the six “cognitive” items in the model into one generalized cognitive response, summarized as “PERSONA takes up space in my regular cognition.”

I used data from these social media sites and various news articles to analyze the existence of PSR between Swift and her fans. I manually assessed over 10,000 posts and comments from these sources between April 2023 and March 2024 by analyzing the associated sentiment behind each post and/or comment. In particular, I content-analyzed the text, imagery, and tone of these posts using the framework of the PSI-Process Scale to determine whether or not fans demonstrated factors of PSR with Swift and the ways in which that behavior manifested. I looked at the specific emotions conveyed and words used to describe Swift, fans’ reactions to Swift’s behaviors and words, and the relations made between Swift and other current events; then, I kept a running list of common sentiments observed through these posts and the relative popularity of each sentiment in regard to current issues and discussions relevant in Swiftie communities across social media sites. I made note of social media posts that either demonstrated a high level of popularity (illustrated by a high number of likes or positive reactions) or a high amount of discussion (illustrated by a high number of replies, comments, or quote tweets). This resulted in

However, the nature and intensity of PSR will require additional content analysis of the consumer-brand relationship. My data collection and analysis resulted in various insights, including that Swifties typically have a strongly held, emotionally engaged relationship based on feelings of trust and reciprocity, much like a reliable and caring best friendship. Additionally, I will look at evidence from Swift's social media sites, song lyrics, behaviors, and live performances and speeches to analyze her linguistics and tone and illustrate the actions she takes to encourage PSR building. I will use news articles and social media posts to illustrate the importance of familiarity, relatability, and authenticity as key factors in powerful PSR building with celebrities.

Finally, I will explore the role of touchpoints in human brand perceptions and how this can both encourage PSR and potentially impact the broader perceptions of the brand through social media data. I will also use social media posts and comments as well as news articles to show the impact of human brand transgressions on human brand perceptions, specifically looking at how rumors around personal and professional actions impact the PSR.

### **3.2 Qualitative Analysis: Taylor Swift and Her Best Friends**

For the purpose of the analysis, I gathered data regarding both Taylor Swift and her fans' behaviors, including owned media through the Taylor Swift and Taylor Nation social media accounts as well as earned media on social media. From my analysis, these are the most-frequented social media sites that are home to the most significant Swiftie populations and discussions. The specific sources I used were:

- Reddit: r/TaylorSwift, r/SwiftlyNeutral, r/TrueSwifties

- Instagram: @taylorswift, @taylornation
- TikTok: keywords ('Taylor Swift Matty Healy')
- X (referred to as 'Twitter'): @taylorswift13, @taylornation13; keywords ('Taylor knows me,' 'Taylor saved my life,' 'depend on Taylor,' 'rely on Taylor,' 'happy birthday Taylor Swift')
- Threads
- Facebook: Taylor Swift
- Various news articles and podcasts

Through keeping a running list of common and popular sentiments throughout the Swiftie communities across the above sources, I was able to identify the most prevalent sentiments regarding Swift. These were then incorporated throughout my thesis to represent both the prototypical examples of the items on the PSI-Process Scale and prototypical examples of Swifties' reactions to the various factors of Swift's persona that encourage PSR.

### 3.3 Results

In content analyzing media associated with Taylor Swift, it is apparent that her brand maps onto the dimensions of Schramm and Hartmann's (2008) PSI-Process Scale. The following table summarizes these findings by selecting three examples corresponding to each response and process, including a brief description of each example's display of specific characteristics relevant in demonstrating the existence of PSR and analyzing trends of sustained engagement and loyalty with her fans.

Table 1. PSI-Process Scale responses and prototypical examples

Response	Process	Figure #s	Prototypical Examples
Cognitive	Attention and evaluation	Figure 4, Figure 5	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. “Did Taylor consult Abigail while writing fifteen?” (Reddit post)</li> <li>2. “There doesn’t need to be a comparison between her and Beyoncé” (Threads post)</li> <li>3. The number 13 (Various media)</li> </ol>
Affective	Sympathy/antipathy	Figure 6, Figure 7	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. “Another thing about Taylor that I love” (Reddit post)</li> <li>2. “She’s so basic, it’s become endearing” (Tweet)</li> <li>3. Trend of cutest moments compilations (YouTube, other social media)</li> </ol>
Affective	Empathy/counter empathy	n/a	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. “Call me sappy, but d--- it makes me happy to see her having fun publicly.” (Reddit)</li> <li>2. “Travis Kelce’s cutest moments at Taylor Swift’s Eras Tour show” (YouTube)</li> <li>3. ‘You OK?’ sign during Tampa show (news article)</li> </ol>
Affective	Emotion contagion	Figure 8	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. “Being a swiftie is so fun like I derive so much joy from her music and releases like she is my release from the bs of life” (Instagram story)</li> <li>2. “i hope miss taylor alison swift knows how sad she made me while she sang that” (Twitter)</li> <li>3. Trend of Swifties crying at lyrics during live performances (Various media)</li> </ol>
Behavioral	Nonverbal behavior	Figure 9, Figure 10	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Heart hands (Various media)</li> <li>2. Friendship bracelets (Various media)</li> <li>3. Cardigan (Various media)</li> </ol>



Behavioral	(Para-)verbal behavior	Figure 11	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Trend of fans wishing her a happy birthday (Instagram, other social media)</li> <li>2. Shining lights during 'Eras Tour' film (Various media)</li> <li>3. Trend of congratulating her for achievements (Facebook, other social media)</li> </ol>
Behavioral	Behavioral intentions	Figure 12	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Streaming after 'Midnights' release (Twitter)</li> <li>2. Queuing for merchandise (News articles)</li> <li>3. Going to her concert while pregnant (News articles)</li> </ol>

### 3.3.1 Cognitive

According to the PSI-Process Scale, cognitive responses include:

- Attention allocation
- Comprehension of persona's action and situation
- Activation of prior media and life experience
- Evaluations of persona and persona's actions
- Anticipatory observation
- Construction of relations between persona and self.

To exemplify the prolonged intensity of cognitive engagement Swift's fans demonstrate, I selected three prototypical examples that represent hundreds of similar social media posts made over the course of any given month across various platforms.

*Attention and Evaluation*

1. Reddit user midnightgotime (2024) made the following Reddit post discussing Taylor's personal life, decisions, and artistic choices for a song released nearly two decades ago, demonstrating multi-level cognition. The song "Fifteen" explicitly references Swift's long-time friend Abigail, who has remained both in Swift's life and a muse of her songs (Wickes, 2023). This post represents not only attention allocation and comprehension of Swift's situation and prior life experience, but also illustrates evaluation of the situation, constructing relations between persona and self by taking Abigail's perspective.

 r/TaylorSwift  
u/midnightgotime · 1d


## Did Taylor consult Abigail while writing fifteen?

Discussion 

I've always wondered this. The lyric "Abigail gave everything she had to a boy who changed his mind, and we both cried" clearly implies she had sex with him and he then left her. Which is unfortunately common for senior boys in high school, to sleep with younger girls with no intention of dating them.

My question is was Abigail okay with this? I don't know if I'd be embarrassed if my global pop star best friend sung of me losing my virginity in her song.

Edit: y'all can stop commenting "you think all a woman has is her virginity, that's everything". No, that doesn't mean anything to me as an adult. But this is the perspective of a 15 year old girl. They're told virginity is special and not to give everything up to a guy. I thought most swifties realized the story sung in the song is about falling in love with a senior guy who plays you just to get physical. The guy will tell you 'I love you' just to get it your pants. Abigail even said it was an important story to share to help other girls...

 554



 166

 197

Figure 4. Reddit post exhibiting cognitive response

2. A comment made by user trish\_lacasale (2023) under a PopBase Threads post discussing the artist's decision to not publicly release official box-office numbers of the Eras Tour is shown below. The user demonstrates an understanding of Swift's personal values and attitudes and has developed argumentation behind why the artist does or does not take certain actions. Commentary from trish\_lacasale (2023) also indicates anticipatory observations, assuming that the public would otherwise pit Swift against Beyoncé. Fans speaking with confidence regarding reasoning behind Swift's actions and decisions is a

significant trend I observed across social media platforms, evidently transcending just one topic or discussion.

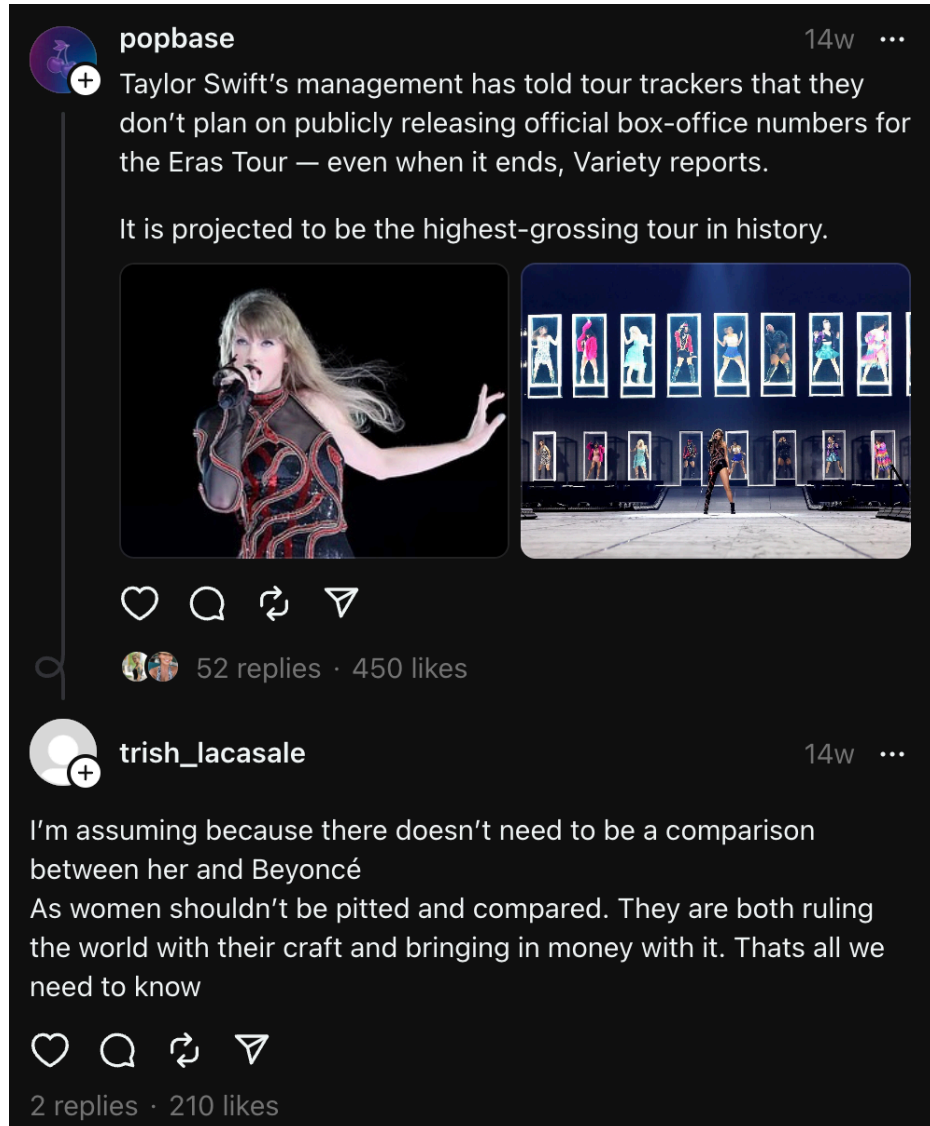


Figure 5. Threads response exhibiting cognitive response

- Although PSR is defined as a one-sided relationship, the intentional creation of PSR goes both ways. Perhaps the strongest example of cognitive processes that play into PSR is Swift's use of the number 13. Deemed her favorite number, she is known to consciously leave clues in the dates of posts and number of Emojis that add up to the number 13,

serving as Easter eggs for upcoming releases (Wang, 2023). Although many instances of PSR stem from organic PSR creation by fans, use of the number 13 is an intentional strategy Swift uses to encourage PSR through her communicating and encouraging engagement with her fans. Examples of fan interaction with the number 13 demonstrates each of the six factors of cognitive processes, though most notably comprehension of persona's action and situation, activation of prior media and life experience, evaluations of persona and persona's actions, and anticipatory observation relating to understanding and interpreting the cryptic messages from the artist. More information regarding use of the number 13 and the significance of "Easter eggs" can be found in the Linguistics, Tone, and Voice section of this thesis.

### **3.3.2 Affective**

Affective responses according to the PSI-Process Scale include a feeling of love for the persona's actions, a parallel experience of emotions as persona (e.g. "If PERSONA felt bad, I felt bad as well; if PERSONA felt good, I felt good as well"), and an emotional and/or visceral reaction to Swift's actions or words. The selected examples illustrate key trends I observed across social media platforms and through the sentiments described in various news stories.

#### ***Sympathy/Antipathy***

1. A Reddit post by user Prior\_Benefit8453 (2024) starts off with, "Another thing about Taylor that I love," clearly mirroring the PSI-Process Scale item example for sympathy

— “Sometimes I really loved PERSONA for what s/he did.” The Reddit post goes on to describe the individual’s appreciation for the genuine diversity that has been a hallmark of Swift’s career and persona since even her first tour. Words such as “love,” “appreciate,” and “inspire” were common sentiments in posts across platforms discussing Swift and her actions. More information regarding diversity as a source of authenticity can be found in the Authenticity, Relatability, and Familiarity section of this thesis.



r/TaylorSwift  
u/Prior\_Benefit8453 • 9d

Join

## Another thing about Taylor that I love

Discussion

I’m watching the full Fearless Tour on YouTube. And something I see time and again on any of her live performances is *diversity* — how things can be. It’s seamless. It’s just the way it is.

She’s so young and has so much energy on Fearless yet even then, she promotes women. She promotes talent across the spectrum. It’s incredible! It matters not what color they are. Gender. She promotes all of us.

I’m a relatively new Swiftie 69(f). First time watching the Fearless Tour. It is such a pleasure!



69



9



16

Figure 6. Reddit post illustrating Sympathy/Antipathy response

2. A tweet by Jamie (2023) expresses sympathy for a relatively simple action by Taylor — choosing a Milk Bar cake (a three-layered milky vanilla cake with rainbow sprinkles) for her 2023 birthday party. According to Twitter user Capri🍒(2023), “Taylor has talked

about how milkbar makes her favorite cake since like 2014 I think it's cute she still gets it." Use of the word 'cute' indicates a light, young, and diminutive tone that mirrors a level of closeness of a friend. The cake's popularity spiked after the original tweet was shared, and Milk Bar offered a 13% discount with code SWIFTIE for a limited time (Delores, 2023). Swift's decision to continue purchasing these cakes and her fans' response to her behavior invokes a shared nostalgia through the cake's childlike appearance using rainbow sprinkles and even Swift's use of 2014-esque social media filters. The sentiment from the tweet shows how Taylor's actions and personality can endear individuals to her, creating this necessary factor to demonstrate PSR.



Figure 7. Twitter post showing Sympathy/Antipathy response

3. A YouTube video posted by swiftiepink (2021) features nearly nine minutes of clips of Taylor “being the cutest woman this town has ever seen,” in reference to a lyric from “the last great american dynasty.” Compilation videos of Swift’s funniest, cutest, or most emotional moments are commonly created by Swifties across all social media platforms, with swiftiepink’s (2021) post in particular garnering over 820,000 views and 36,000 likes. These descriptive words regarding Swift’s behaviors and quotes showcase the



sympathy aspect of the PSI-Process Scale through embodying a tone of friendliness and intimacy.

### ***Empathy/Counter Empathy***

1. A Reddit post by JennaElizabethAdams (2024) featuring photos of Taylor Swift with her friends after a Chiefs game features a comment by indicatprincess, which reads, “Call me sappy, but d--- it makes me happy to see her having fun publicly. She’s having a great time and it seems so normal.” The comment received 179 upvotes, implying a strong positive reaction to it from users of r/TaylorSwift. This example illustrates a feeling of empathy for Swift’s own happiness that translates into personal happiness for the fan.
2. A YouTube Short compiling clips of Travis Kelce at one of Taylor’s Buenos Aires performances of the Eras Tour illustrates empathy as an affective factor of PSR (Riri’s Tea, 2023, b). The caption of the video reads, “Travis Kelce’s cutest moments at Taylor Swift’s Eras Tour show” with an empathetic Emoji. The video received over 66,000 views, 4,600 likes, and 104 comments expressing joy at this example of Swift’s fulfillment; in comparison, the next YouTube short the user posted received 15,000 views, 1,000 likes, and 12 comments (RiRi’s Tea, 2023, a).
3. At a Tampa performance of the Eras Tour, a Swiftie held up a sign reading, “You OK?” in reference to Swift’s reported break-up with actor Joe Alwyn (Holland, 2023). After Swift holds up a thumbs up to the fan, they can be seen jumping out and down with happiness after being reassured that she is also doing well. The TikTok garnered over 348,000 likes.

### *Emotion Contagion*

1. An Instagram story post from Dominic DiFrancesco (2023) references Swift's music and persona as a source of joy.

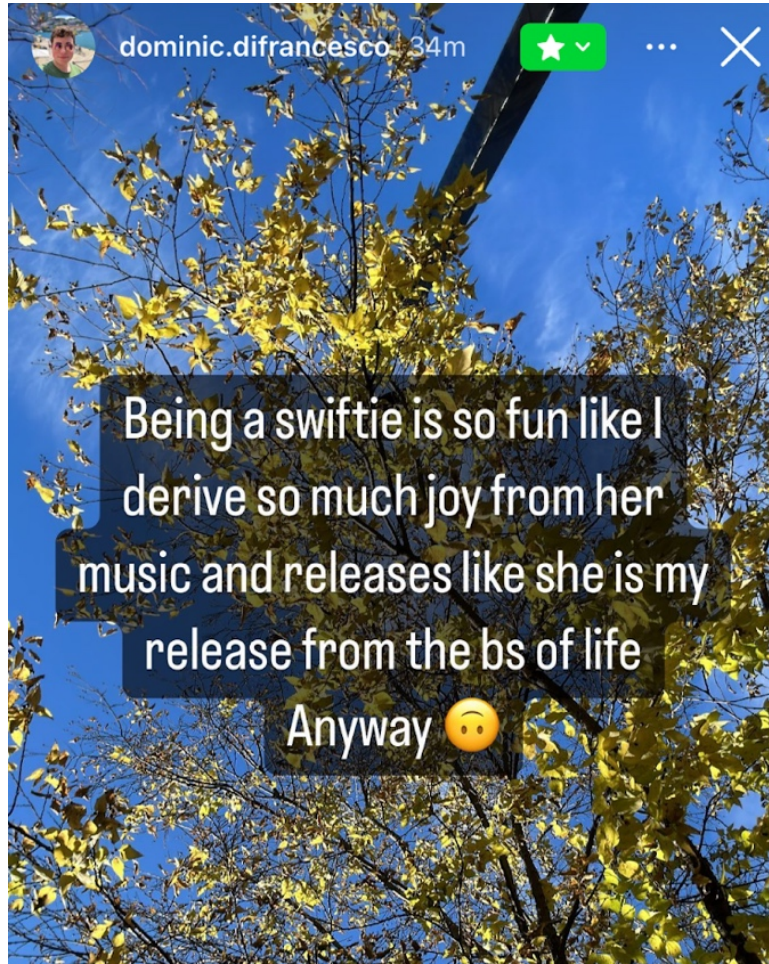


Figure 8. Instagram story post displaying Emotion Contagion

2. Twitter user CHLOE <sup>TS</sup> IS SEEING TAYLOR IN 94 DAYS 🙄 (2024) posted a video of Taylor singing “The Outside” at a Eras Tour performance in Tokyo with the caption, “i hope miss taylor alison swift knows how sad she made me while she sang that.” The

ability of Swift to elicit a spontaneous emotional response from a fan viewing a video of her singing is evidence of the existence of emotion contagion. This post received 61 likes.

3. A TikTok video went viral that depicted a fan outside of an Eras Tour performance in Sydney sobbing into her friends' arms as Swift performs "exile" as a surprise song (Patrick, 2024). The text on the video reads, "My reaction to Taylor singing Exile (also known as the song that saved my life)." The emotion contagion depicted by these and other similarly intense reactions coming from Swift's lyrics and voice clearly elicits a strong emotional response.

### 3.3.3 Behavioral

The behavioral responses as outlined on the PSI-Process Scale are a physical reaction to the persona's behaviors/words, speaking to the persona even without the opportunity for them to respond, and speaking out on persona. The following examples were selected as representative of the thousands of social media posts and comments and news articles I reviewed to analyze the behavioral aspect of the model. Nonverbal behaviors include any action or symbol prompted by the persona's words or actions directed toward the persona, whereas paraverbal behaviors include making statements directly *to* the persona.

#### *Nonverbal Behavior*

1. Taylor's iconic *heart hands gesture* has been a part of her connection with fans since the early stages of her career. Swift previously described it as "something between 'I love

you’ and ‘thank you’” when she uses it toward her fans, with them signaling the same message back (Meltzer, 2011). Since 2011, fans have viewed the gesture as “like a code word almost, special to us Swifties.” The gesture has become so synonymous with Swifties that, when Swift’s current boyfriend Travis Kelce made the move after scoring a touchdown during a Chiefs game, it was immediately attributed back to Taylor (Quinn, 2024; Massabrook, 2024). Heart hands demonstrate a nonverbal action directed toward Swift.

2. The trend of *friendship bracelets* exploded in conjunction with the Eras Tour throughout summer 2023. Due to a lyric in “You’re On Your Own, Kid,” — “So make the friendship bracelets, take the moment and taste it” — Swifties began crafting friendship bracelets with a variety of phrases, numbers, acronyms, and specific words that relate to the artist (“You’re On Your Own, Kid lyrics,” n.d.). Phrases can be as obscure and specific as “SFSWDAHSCBNWGBBHS,” an acronym referencing a phrase Swift yelled at a security guard on stage at a Philadelphia performance of the Eras Tour (Moss and Moths, 2023). The required level of background knowledge required to understand these references implies a deep level of devotion to the PSR between Swift and her fans. These friendship bracelets were traded between Swifties before, during, and after Eras Tour performances, with some fans sporting several dozen of them at once as a show of support and appreciation for the artist (Spencer, 2024).



Figure 9. Example of the style and quantity of friendship bracelets

Further discussion of the friendship bracelets trend and significance can be found later in this thesis in the Friendship Bracelets section.

3. The *cardigan* is arguably the most iconic piece of merchandise associated with Taylor Swift. Released initially in 2020 as a limited-edition piece attached to the *folklore* era, the knitted off-white cardigan with stars on the arms became a highly sought-after piece of merchandise, harkening back to Swift's song, "cardigan" (Haran, 2020). The piece has inspired hundreds of identical knock-offs being sold online, but originals range from around \$300-\$550 in resale price on eBay.com (eBay, 2024). Owning and wearing the original *folklore* cardigan is an example of nonverbal behavior directed toward Swift.





Figure 10. *folklore* cardigan

Similar cardigans have been released as limited-edition merchandise associated with several recent promotional cycles, and it is likely Swift will release other iterations following additional music releases. These sweaters are an immediate cue to other fans of one's Swiftie status, worn to honor the singer and identify with her.

***(Para-)Verbal Behavior***

1. Every year, fans prepare for December 13 in order to *wish Taylor Swift a happy birthday*.
  - Some, such as lia (taylor’s version) 🥳 (2023), make videos of their favorite clips of the artist, mirroring what many Gen Z individuals do when posting happy birthday messages to their real-life friends on social media (Gee, 2023). This tweet received 128 likes, 30 retweets, and 5,710 total views.
  - Fan this is justin trying ❤️ (2023) combined the lyrics of “Long Live” — a song fans regularly interpret as a thank-you from Taylor to the Swifties — with videos of thousands of birthday messages directed to Taylor scrolling across the screen. This tweet received 50 likes, 16 retweets, and 1,337 total views, with eight replies including tags to Taylor Swift, Taylor Nation, and even Swift’s publicist Tree Paine in the hopes that the message would reach Taylor herself.
  - Individual Swifties also wish the star happy birthday on their personal social media accounts. Kathryn Tague (2023) posted a video from the Eras Tour concert she attended on her story with the text, “Happy birthday to the mad woman ❤️” — without even tagging Swift directly. This nickname can be seen as a reference to two of Swift’s songs, “mad woman” and “the last great american dynasty.” The first song describes Swift’s experiences with female rage throughout her career, reclaiming control of the misogynistic narratives and phrases that are often used to describe her; the latter tells the tale of Rebekah Harkness, the woman who previously lived in Swift’s Rhode Island home and also lived freely and

independently in spite of society's sexist commentary ("mad woman lyrics," n.d.;  
"the last great american dynasty," n.d.)

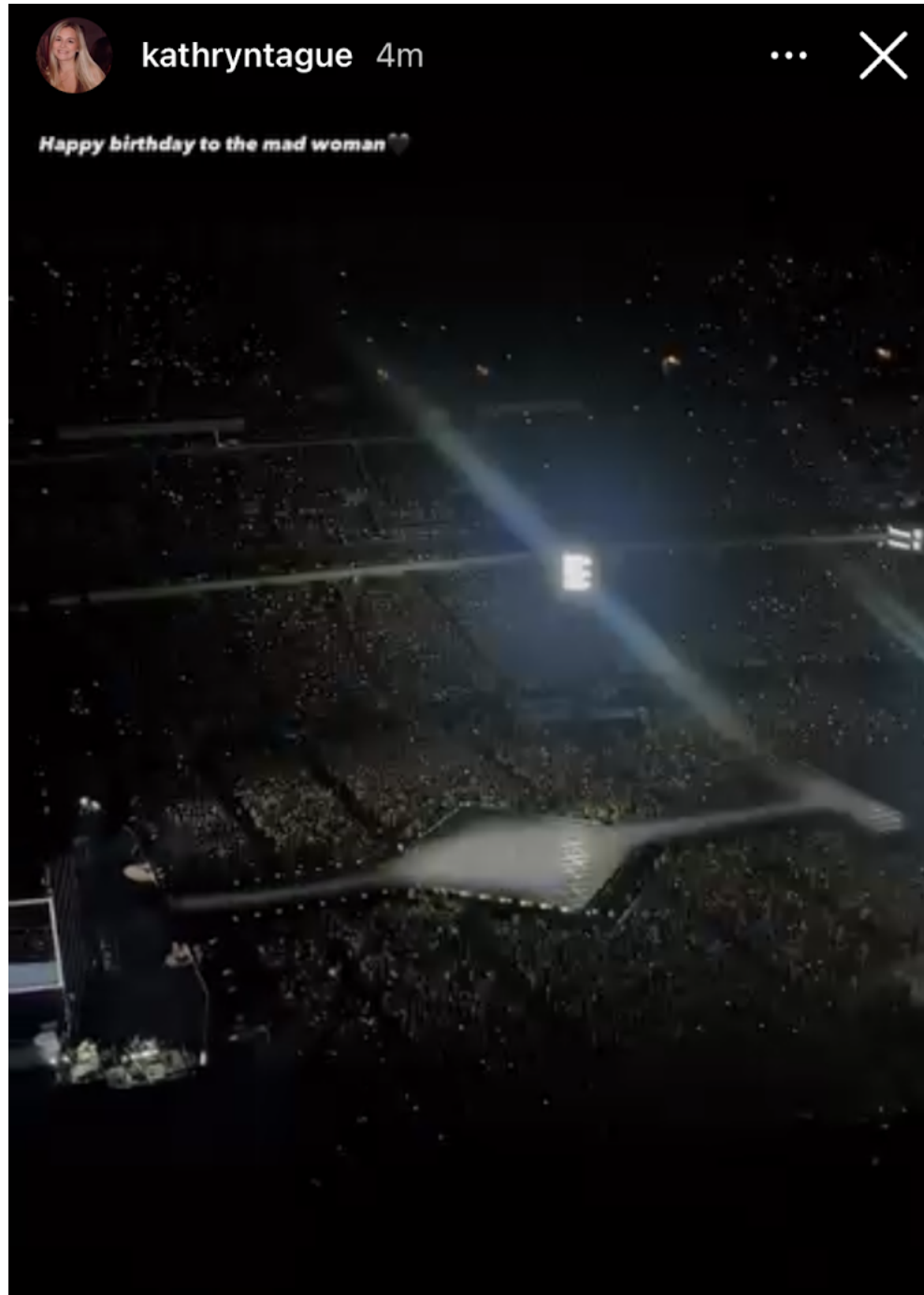


Figure 11. Instagram story post wishing Swift a happy birthday




2. During screenings of “The Eras Tour” film in late 2023, fans across the country were documented *shining their phone flashlights* at the screen while Swift performed “marjorie” (Gajewski, 2023). The gesture of a raised lighter or flashlight is widely regarded as a way to empathize with the artist and acknowledge their art (Vasquez, 2017). Despite the fact that Swift clearly would never feel the intended solidarity from fans shining flashlights at large AMC Theatre screens, fans still used the gesture.
3. After many major achievements, Swifties take to social media to wish the singer congratulations for her accomplishments. On Taylor Swift’s (2023) Facebook post made to thank fans for helping her achieve Spotify’s Global Top Artist 2023, the word ‘congrats’ or ‘congratulations’ shows up in at least every tenth comment. Despite the fact that Swift seeing the individual comments is nearly impossible, fans still spoke *to* her.


### ***Behavioral Intentions***

1. Many Swifties were highly personally engaged in ensuring the artist occupied all of the top 10 spots on the Billboard Hot 100 after the release of *Midnights*. A dedicated section of her fanbase consciously invested time and money in streaming and buying physical and digital copies of her music. More information about this phenomenon can be found in the Analysis of the Consumer-Brand Relationship section.

Many Swifties were highly personally engaged in ensuring the artist occupied all of the top 10 spots on the Billboard Hot 100 after the release of *Midnights*. A dedicated section of her fanbase consciously invested time and money in streaming and buying physical and digital copies of her

music. More information about this phenomenon can be found in the Analysis of the Consumer-Brand Relationship section.

 **Taylor Crave**  
@mainpopgirI

 **SWIFTIES!**

See this? Taylor is ONE STEP AWAY from making history and becoming the first artist to ever occupy the entire top 10 of Billboard Hot 100 — but unfortunately, this will NOT happen if we don't BOOST “Question” now.

15 hours remaining. Taylor needs you.  
**BUY QUESTION.**

P	P+	Song	Diff.	Points	Sales		Streams		Airplay		Units	Peak	Wks
1	NEW	Anti-Hero Taylor Swift	--	447	16.2k	7%	53.7m	85%	25.9m	10%	350.2k	1	1
2	NEW	Lavender Haze Taylor Swift	--	312	2.3k	1%	39.8m	97%	2.9m	2%	293.4k	2	1
3	NEW	Maroon Taylor Swift	--	272	2.2k	2%	34.9m	99%	0.7m	0%	258.2k	3	1
4	NEW	Snow on the Beach Taylor Swift feat. Lana Del Rey	--	270	1.9k	1%	34.6m	98%	1.0m	1%	256.0k	4	1
5	NEW	Midnight Rain Taylor Swift	--	264	1.5k	1%	33.9m	98%	1.4m	1%	250.0k	5	1
6	NEW	You're On Your Own, Kid. Taylor Swift	--	253	1.5k	1%	32.6m	99%	0.6m	0%	240.4k	6	1
7	NEW	Bejeweled Taylor Swift	--	251	3.0k	2%	31.9m	96%	3.6m	2%	229.8k	7	1
8	NEW	Vigilante Shit Taylor Swift	--	249	2.3k	2%	31.8m	98%	1.3m	1%	235.3k	8	1
9	NEW	Karma Taylor Swift	--	248	1.5k	1%	31.6m	98%	2.3m	2%	233.3k	9	1
10	-9	Unholy Sam Smith & Kim Petras	-3%	239	13.4k	11%	24.0m	74%	26.2m	18%	177.3k	1	5
11	NEW	Question...? Taylor Swift	--	238	3.0k	3%	30.4m	98%	0.3m	0%	225.7k	11	1

9:06 AM · Oct 27, 2022

165 1.9K 5.6K 45

Figure 12. Twitter user encouraging Swifties to continue streaming *Midnights*

2. During the beginning months of the Eras Tour, fans reportedly started camping out “armed with lawn chairs and blankets” over 12 hours before merchandise went on sale in order to get the first pick of merchandise (Bonner, 2023; WCVB Boston, 2023). In particular, during April and May 2023, a specific blue crewneck that could only be purchased at the shows was in high demand, causing merchandise lines to take hours to get through.
3. At Swift’s Melbourne Eras Tour performance, a soon-to-be mother attended the show despite being 39 weeks and 5 days pregnant (Christmass, 2024). Smith gave birth to her daughter later that night — but she stayed for the entire concert despite going through contractions for the majority of the three-and-a-half hour show. Just as a best friend might drop or risk everything to ensure they attended their friend’s important event, this mother weathered Swift’s concert while actively in labor, even naming her daughter in honor of Taylor and immediately giving the child her first friendship bracelet.

The existence of PSR between Swifties and Swift is evident, easily fitting each dimension of the PSI-Process Scale. However, what this thesis will explore in depth is the *nature* and *intensity* of these specific PSR, which create a unique consumer-brand relationship between Taylor Swift and her fans that increases brand equity and results in positive financial outcomes for the brand. Measurement of these characteristics is beyond the scope of the PSI-Process Scale and will require additional content analysis. Other human brands and traditional brands alike can glean wisdom from the success of Swift’s marketing and communications efforts, learning how to engage and build long-term, meaningful relationships with consumers.

### 3.4 Analysis of the Consumer-Brand Relationship

In a story about fans' reactions to Taylor Swift and Joe Alwyn reportedly breaking up in 2023, Hudgins described their sentiments and behaviors coming across "the way they might if a close friend experienced a breakup." These reactions included a TikTok of a friend group reacting to the breakup with the caption, "Had to document this historical moment so that our children can unpack their generational trauma in therapy later," relating to the behavioral dimension of the PSI-Process Scale. At an Eras Tour show in Tampa a few days later, a fan held up the sign reading "You OK?" to which Swift gave a thumbs up (Holland, 2023). Swifties often express concern for the singer's mental health, including on social media, where multiple forums and posts detail these worries. Reddit user cantrememberitrn (2022) posed the question, "Is anyone else worried about Taylor's mental health?" in response to the controversy surrounding Ticketmaster's management of ticket sales for the Eras Tour.

Through analysis of social media sentiments and various news articles featuring interviews with Swifties, it is clear that fans of Taylor Swift — especially those who hold PSR with her — are likely to hold an extensive knowledge of her life, defend her from outside criticism and attacks, provide honest and measured feedback to her, and empathize with her wins and losses in a way that mirrors a *best friend consumer-brand relationship*. There is also an added dimension of Taylor Swift and her fans being best friends since childhood, with many Swifties describing the integral role that her music and words have played throughout their lives, including a level of compassion that gives the impression that Taylor personally understands their experiences and struggles. According to one Swiftie,

“I understand she doesn’t actually know me, but she makes you feel like you know each other” (Kingsberry, 2023).

Wong’s (2023) reporting uncovered the sentiment that fans feel like Taylor grew up parallel to them. Another writer, Kat Weller (2023), described the experience of listening to Swift’s music as a child and teenager as being “the exact same age as her, halfway across the country, feeling the exact same things and undergoing extremely similar situations.” According to Weller,

“We got the chance to have our hearts spilled out into song lyrics that we didn’t even write, by a girl we didn’t actually know. We got to go through all of our pains, joys, breakups, friendships, and personal discoveries with our best friend Taylor Swift narrating them all for us.”

In her Instagram post announcing the release of *Fearless (Taylor’s Version)*, Swift (2021) says:

“this was the musical era in which so many inside jokes were created between us ... so many unbreakable bonds formed. so before I say anything else, let me just say that it was a real honor to get to be a teenager alongside you.”

Susan Fournier (1998) describes a best friend consumer-brand relationship as a “voluntary union based on reciprocity principle, the endurance of which is ensured through continued provision of positive rewards.” The dynamic is “characterized by revelation of true self, honesty, and intimacy.” These factors and the additional characteristics of authenticity and familiarity are relevant to building a strong consumer-human brand relationship based on my findings.

### 3.4.1 Reciprocity of Defense

Fans of Taylor Swift will regularly defend her against outside criticism, which she has been exposed to considerably throughout the course of her career. Reddit account imtrashytrash (2019) shares their experience reaching out to the author of an article that they believed mischaracterized a conflict between Swift and artist Kanye West, defending Taylor's actions and asking the publication to retract the piece and publicly apologize for it. And, reciprocally, Taylor Swift has defended her fans in return. At an Eras Tour performance in Philadelphia in May 2023, a fan in attendance was reportedly "harassed" by a security guard during "Bad Blood" for grabbing onto the railing in front of her (Roberts, 2023). In a later TikTok, the individual recounted that Taylor verbally defended the fan while continuing to sing the song, shouting, "She's fine! She wasn't doing anything! Hey, stop! Stop!" amidst the lyrics (Gabell, 2023). The fan later shared that Swift's team had reached out to give her group free tickets to the following night's concert. This two-way behavior to defend each other is indicative of a best friend relationship between Taylor and her fans.

However, sometimes fans will react asocially and even violently in the name of defending Swift from outside criticism. When Pitchfork senior editor Jillian Mapes and several other staffers collectively gave Swift's eighth studio album, *folklore*, an 8.0 out of 10 rating after its initial release, some Swifties took that as an attack to Swift's artistry and turned to doxxing the writer (Bradley, 2020). Some tweeted out Mapes' old and current addresses and phone numbers, with others joking about burning down the critic's house. To date, neither Swift nor her team has spoken out about the harassment.

Fans will also react to her previous romantic partners in a defensive manner that mirrors that of a real-life best friend relationship. In the wake of the *Red (Taylor's Version)* rerecording being announced in June 2021 and subsequently released in November, fans continued their decades-long speculation on which song was about which ex-boyfriend. Fans largely believe “All Too Well” was written about Jake Gyllenhaal, with thousands of social media posts validating this belief (Popular-Hospital6681, 2022; folklorian, 2021). A lyric in the song — “And I left my scarf there at your sister’s house / And you still got it in your drawer, even now” — prompted Swift to release a knit red scarf as part of her *Red (Taylor's Version)* merchandise collection (Ahlgrim, 2021; “‘All Too Well’ lyrics,” n.d.). The scarf has been and continues to be a symbol of the hurt that fans believe Gyllenhaal caused Swift in their relationship.

However, fans are proactive about this perceived harm, and fan accounts and Swiftie celebrities alike contributed their calls to action when “All Too Well (10 Minute Version) (Taylor's Version) (From the Vault)” was released. Singer and actress Dionne Warwick (2021) tweeted, “If that young man has Taylor’s scarf he should return it,” following up with, “It does not belong to you. Box it up and I will pay the cost of postage, Jake.” Dionne Warwick is not alone as a Swiftie celebrity, with many high-profile individuals seemingly engaged in PSR with Taylor. This could serve as a normalization of PSR as a healthy, normal factor of online communication and engagement with pop culture. Beyond the celebrity engagement on the issue, some fan accounts even threatened they would break into Gyllenhaal’s house to look for Taylor’s scarf, albeit jokingly (m | #1 eruri shipper, 2021). However, not all fans were just joking, and some engaged in atypically harmful and unhealthy PSR overstepped boundaries of typically acceptable behavior on social media, bringing the scarf references into distasteful places.

The “All Too Well”-related posts and comments followed Jake around all corners of the internet, even resulting in red scarf emojis on two of his Instagram posts tributing a bus driver working on September 11, 2021, and affirming the actor’s support for the Black Lives Matter movement (Stern, 2021). Even though many of the scarf-related comments were made without the intent of serious harm, they were certainly intended to vindictively defend Taylor and get back at Gyllenhaal for the harm he supposedly caused the singer. This has led Swift to address these behaviors publicly, which has been an effective strategy in curbing the atypical parasocial behavior. Before the release of *Speak Now (Taylor’s Version)*, Swift proactively curbed similar behavior pointed at another ex-boyfriend by speaking out at a Minneapolis stop of the Eras Tour, stating, “I’m not putting this album out so that you can go and should feel the need to defend me on the internet against someone you think I might have written a song about 14 million years ago” (Thomas, 2023). By directly addressing the fans engaged in this behavior, Swift reinforced and revalidated the parasocial connection between herself and the Swifties. It is relevant to note that the barriers to entry for engaging in PSR with celebrities has almost entirely been eradicated with the advent of social media and influencer marketing. Therefore, anyone can engage with anyone else — celebrity or otherwise — at any time with ease, including leaving harassing comments in inappropriate places online. This can be particularly problematic when it comes to fans’ combative and defensive behavior in support of a celebrity. More research is necessary to analyze the impact of social media’s ease of access in consumer-human brand online communication.



### 3.4.2 Fan Investment in Career Success

Swifties are also personally invested in the artist's career success. Following the release of her tenth studio album *Midnights* in 2022, she earned the record for most streamed album in a single day on Spotify, as well as being the first artist to consecutively occupy all of the top 10 spots on the Billboard Hot 100 (daniandkiara, 2022; Trust, 2022). Much of this effort came from fans' purposeful intent to help the artist break these records, with some claiming, "I contributed a stupid amount to this," and others admitting, "I had it playing on repeat until about 5am before finally calling it quits, then started it right back up as soon as I woke up" (daniandkiara, 2022). Fans on Twitter encouraged each other to stream "Question...?" and "Bejeweled," both songs that were close to but not yet in the top 10 spots.



Figure 13. Swifties on Twitter encouraging each other to stream certain songs so Swift can break chart records

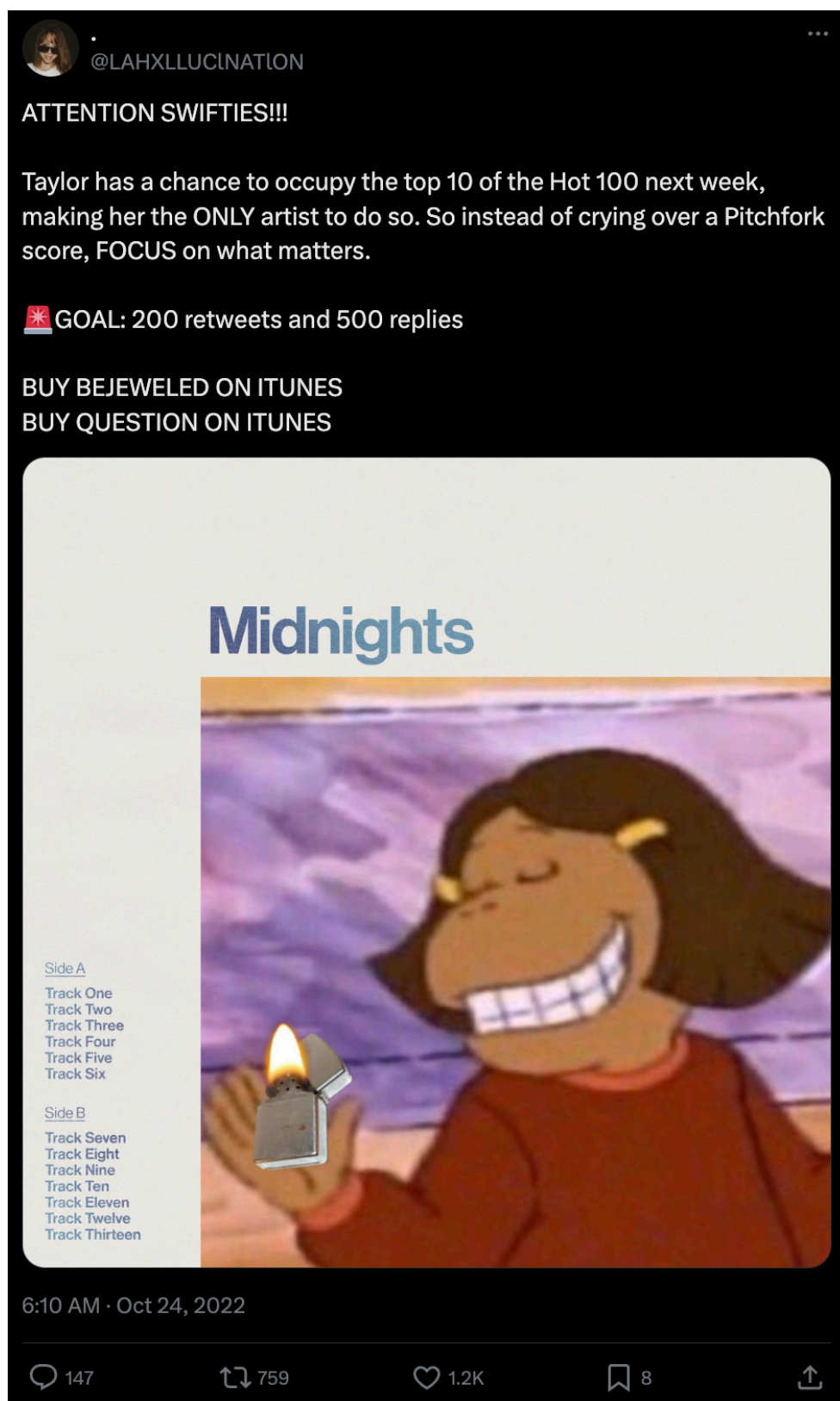


Figure 14. Additional examples of Twitter Swifties encouraging each other to stream specific tracks

Swift later explicitly thanked her fans for helping her with these achievements, tweeting, “How did I get this lucky, having you guys out here doing something this mind blowing?!” (Swift, 2022).

However, some fans are adamant that they only stream the “Taylor’s Version” of songs, which refer to the re-recorded tracks of previously released music that ensure Swift is in control of decisions and revenues regarding her music (Sherman, 2023). One Swiftie posted on the Spotify community website demanding that the platform cease putting Taylor’s “stolen version” of songs on Spotify-created playlists (ruthieebarnett, 2023). The five responses on the original post echo similar sentiments. Fans often hold discussions among themselves on forums such as Reddit to discuss the ethics of streaming non-Taylor’s Version songs, which many consciously avoid because they feel it betrays her purpose for re-recording the songs in the first place (pacificoats, 2022). Reddit user dearmissmisery responds on one of these forums, stating, “Those old men are still making money from her work, and if the fans continue to compare them and pick them apart the media will get wind of it and that company has the money to keep ‘Taylor’s new version isn’t as good as her old ones’ circulating in the news,” demonstrating personal accountability for choices regarding streaming Taylor’s music. Some fans helpfully suggest the option to use CDs or vinyls for listening to the original recordings of the songs without resulting in more profit to those who own Taylor’s masters (rasmulisone, 2022). These fans exhibit a fierce loyalty and commitment to not only Taylor’s professional achievements but also her personal growth associated with them that illustrate a best friend relationship.

### 3.4.3 Human Brand Reinforcement of Parasocial Relationships

What makes this best friend consumer-brand relationship so successful is the actions Taylor takes to reinforce its reciprocal nature. She pours her heart out to fans, sharing a considerable number of details from her personal life through not only her song lyrics but also what she chooses to share through earned media. With the release of physical copies of *Lover* in 2019, several handwritten diary entries from early on in Swift's career were included in four different special edition booklets, allowing fans a peek into her mind and private thoughts and feelings spanning over a decade (Caramanica and Coscarelli, 2019).

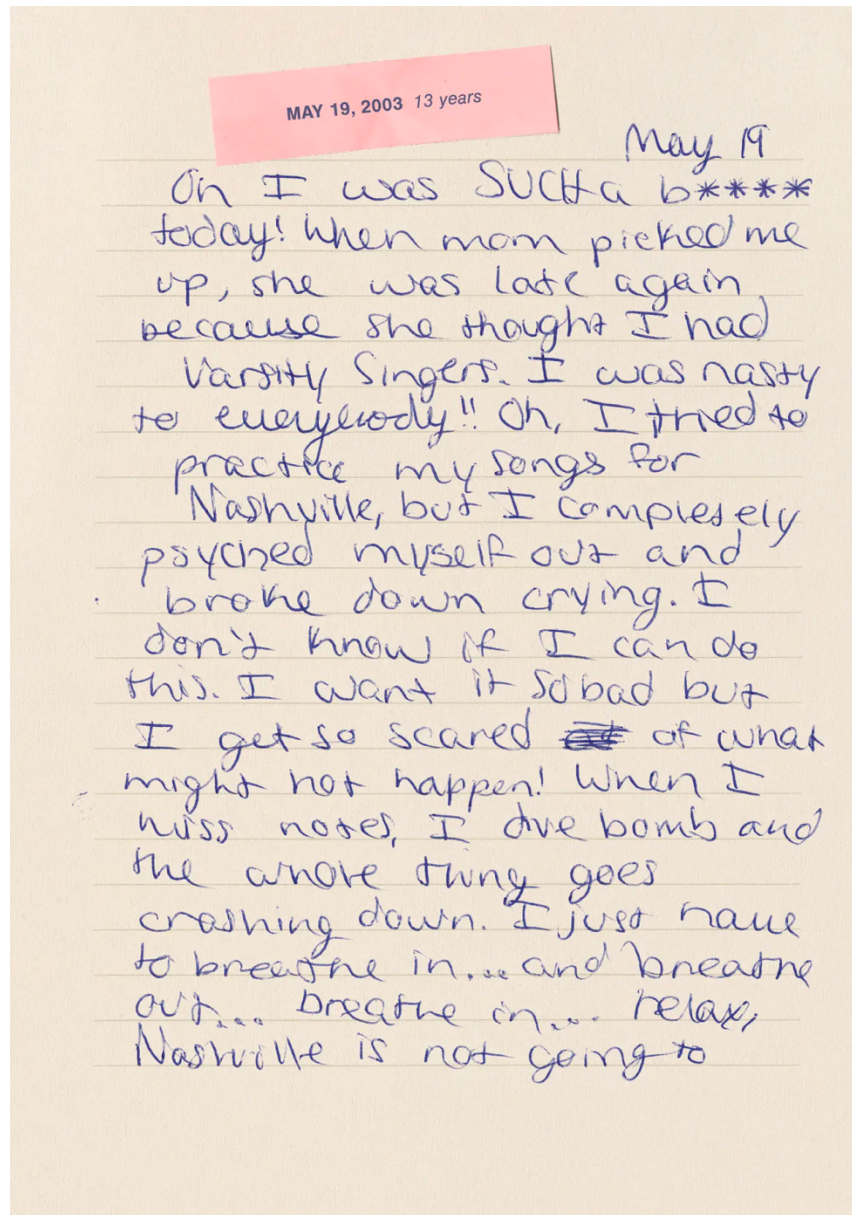


Figure 15. Example of Swift's journal entry released with *Lover* physical editions

Prior to the release cycles of *Red* and *1989*, Taylor and her team organized “secret sessions,” which saw the artist inviting hand-selected fans into her own home for private listening parties of her upcoming albums (Stutz, 2014). Swift admitted to personally choosing many of the fans through viewing their social media pages, providing fans with knowledge that Swift does look at select fans’ content and could very well be looking at theirs, too. The fandom

has since coined this activity of Swift looking at fans' content "Taylurking" (Raza-Sheikh, 2021). During these secret sessions, not only did Swift welcome these otherwise strangers into her home to listen to her private art, she also personally baked them chocolate chip and toasted coconut cookies, interacting individually and taking polaroids with every fan (Duboff, 2014). Similarly, at the beginning of her career, the artist infamously hosted a free event in Nashville, spending over 14 hours personally meeting over 2,000 fans and playing acoustic songs for them until everyone in attendance had been able to interact with her (Taylor Swift Switzerland, n.d.). A demonstrable commitment to giving her fans access to herself, despite the cost and risks to her own safety, is traceable since the beginning of her career.

Throughout her career, Swift has been known to help fans who she personally has observed demonstrating a commitment to her. In 2014, Swift sent out large packages of Christmas presents and personalized handwritten notes to over 30 fans, a phenomenon which has come to be referred to as "Swiftmas" (Wang, 2014; Taylor Swift, 2014). Additionally, during the Covid-19 pandemic, Swift sent payments totaling tens of thousands of dollars to over a dozen fans who were struggling financially (Specter, 2020). Although Taylor can clearly never personally interact with every one of her tens of millions of fans worldwide, she has interacted with enough to give remaining fans the belief that, one day, they could be lucky enough to be singled out by Swift with her hallmark generosity and openness. All of these actions strategically create the impression of the potential for each of Swift's fans to individually be her best friend.

## **Chapter 4 Observations Regarding Nature and Depth of PSR with Taylor Swift**

In Chapter 3, I demonstrated the existence of PSR as described by the PSI-Process Scale by analyzing social media posts, comments, and news articles regarding both Swift and her Swifties' cognition, emotions, and behaviors. However, it is relevant to explore in further depth the specific actions that Swift takes that work to encourage, reinforce, and sustain PSR with her fans. Through content-analyzing examples from these sources of media, I identified that authenticity, relatability, and familiarity are key aspects to Swift's persona that make developing PSR with her fans natural and deeply meaningful to both parties. Additionally, the use of linguistics, voice, and tone through Swift's in-person shows, lyrics, and social media posts are essential in establishing a successful parasocial best friend consumer-brand relationship. The use of friendship bracelets in building a community identity is explored. Finally, the role of touchpoints in Swift's marketing strategy are outlined, including the aspect of oversaturation. I observe the impact of two brand transgressions on Swift's PSR and explore the phenomenon of parasocial breakups due to perceived transgressions.

### **4.1 Authenticity, Relatability, and Familiarity**

One of the most critical pieces of the success of Taylor Swift's brand identity in building PSR is her authentic, relatable, and familiar persona. These characteristics go hand-in-hand with true self, honesty, and intimacy — three traits that are integral to the best friend consumer-brand relationship dynamic (Fournier, 1998). Even though Swift's net worth is estimated to be over \$1.1 billion, she has marketed herself in a way that allows her to be seen as an everyday person instead of one of the world's largest brands.



Since before her career took off, a cornerstone of her brand identity has been authenticity and relatability. Taylor has largely retained the charming and endearing “everyday” features of her life from before she reached the notoriety she currently holds. First, she has continued to maintain a clearly meaningful and genuine relationship with her family, even bringing them into her relationship with her fans (Evans, 2023). She has multiple released songs written about her mother — including “The Best Day” and “Soon You’ll Get Better” — and has even included Andrea Swift in the selection process of fans given the opportunity to meet her or interact with her during her live performances (Christmass, 2024). Referenced in her song “Christmas Tree Farm,” the singer famously grew up with her family in Wyomissing, Pennsylvania, before moving to Nashville in 2004 to help Taylor kick start her career. Her parents have been in attendance at many of her performances and award show appearances, often sitting with Swift’s celebrity friends and interacting with Swifties (Evans, 2023). When Swift spoke at the premiere of her tour movie “The Eras Tour” to thank over 2,000 hand-selected fans in attendance for their support, she referenced her parents and brother, stating, “They care about you just as much as I do” (TMZ, 2023).

Swift also has released dozens of clips from home videos in her music videos, on her physical albums, and through Spotify song canvases. These factors support the authentic and relatable persona of Swift, humanizing her to the public as someone with a genuine family and upbringing. In her interview with *Time*, Taylor said, “My dad, my mom, and my brother came up with some of the best ideas in my career. I always joke that we’re a small family business” (Lansky, 2023). This even further humanizes the unavoidable branded aspects of Taylor Swift: it feels like her marketing team consists of her family, which further increases the genuine and authentic feeling of her persona and art.

Swift's mom has been involved in selecting who gets the chance to meet Taylor since the beginning of her career. Reddit user Buttaflygirl03 says, "I think it's just cause Taylor doesn't want fans to pay to meet her. It's always been a special connection in her fandom" (nfpeacock, 2021). Therefore, either Taylor, her mother, or a member of her team has always been responsible for personally selecting fans who haven't previously met the star to attend her meet and greets. This, paired with the secret sessions and history of Swiftmas care packages, gives Swifties a compelling reason to not only be invested in her life but actively post about her on social media and put considerable effort into their costumes and actions at performances to "earn" the ability to meet Taylor. Although this decision can be seen as leveling the playing field, it also serves as a motivating factor to increase investment and engagement in the Taylor Swift brand — a strategic choice resulting in clear increases in loyalty and engagement for the brand. Behind the scenes, marketing is vital to the brand's success, despite how natural and authentic the intentional marketing efforts may come across.

Her "everyday" and relatable nature is a compelling reason that factors into why many Swifties have PSR with her. One Reddit user says, "I think one reason why Taylor Swift is so successful is because she is an every-girl. Her experiences, her hopes and dreams, are all just so average and normal and relatable" (fashionlover25, 2021). At the time of writing, Swift is currently dating Kansas City Chiefs player Travis Kelce, and the relationship has generated significant press for both Taylor, Travis, and the NFL alike. This coverage included a comment regarding Swift from Kelce's father, Ed, who calls the singer "sweet," "charming," and "down-to-earth" (Dye, 2023). He went on to describe the first time he met Taylor, noting that she was picking up trash in the suites. "I don't think she got the diva memo. She didn't get the spoiled musician. She doesn't know how to pull that off," Kelce said.

#### 4.1.1 Underdog Perceptions

Taylor has also managed to maintain the allure of an “underdog” throughout her music career.

Even at the movie premiere of “The Eras Tour” — a tour which grossed over \$1 billion and helped the artist achieve multiple all-time music records for both new and decades-old songs — Swift said to the audience, “I can’t believe music is my career” (TMZ, 2023).

In the *Time* article honoring Swift as 2023’s Person of the Year, Lansky (2023) describes the redemption the artist has faced throughout her career, allowing her to “discover new happiness not despite challenges, but because of them.” Swift remarks, “Nothing is permanent. So I’m very careful to be grateful every second that I get to be doing this at this level, because I’ve had it taken away from me before.” Swift has always maintained a sense of wonder and gratitude surrounding her fame and success, giving the impression that she does not expect nor believe she is inherently deserving of it. This increases Swift’s relatability, giving the impression that she is a normal person who happened into the life of a famous superstar instead of one of the top global artists with several hundred awards honoring her talent and art (“List of awards and nominations received by Taylor Swift,” n.d.).

Her music has always been regarded as “relatable,” tying together the human experience of love and heartbreak in a way that resonates uniquely with many individuals. She does not shy away from sharing what could be viewed as awkward or embarrassing details about her life and relationships, as vulnerability is a necessity in order to maintain her authenticity as an artist, person, and even brand. She has songs that allude to infidelity (such as “Getaway Car,” “High Infidelity”) and insecurity (like “Anti-Hero” and “Nothing New”) and shares bloopers that encourage fans to see her as a real, multi-dimensional person with both good and bad

characteristics — and leads them to build PSR with that person (Hi-Fi-Fusion, 2016; HOT\_NEWS, 2017).

Garcia (2023), a guest essayist for *The New Yorker* who is currently serving life in prison in California, shared the value of Swift's music in his life, describing the way that her lyrics connected him to the outside world and reminded him of the human experiences and feelings he shared with her. Garcia said, "When I listened to her music, I felt that I was still part of the world I had left behind." The aspect of familiarity demonstrated through Taylor's behaviors and words goes in tandem with the best friend dynamic; it feels as if she is someone with whom you *could* be best friends, if not like someone with whom you already *are* best friends. The lyrics to "Daylight" encouraged Garcia to send a letter to his romantic partner he had fallen out of touch with, allowing him to rekindle and reconnect with life outside of prison. He stated also that he listens to *Midnights* when questions about his life after prison keep him up at night, finding comfort in Swift's experiences. Not only does he feel that Swift can relate to his experiences, he also finds her authentic, relatable, and familiar — all factors he has relied on during his time in the prison system. This universally relatable and familiar nature to Swift's lyrics and persona are integral in understanding how and why fans create such strong PSR with the artist.

Beyond Swift's portrayal of her own persona, her care for her fans is evidence of her authenticity as a brand. In response to her preparation for the Eras Tour, Swift said, "[Fans] had to work really hard to get the tickets. 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" (Lansky, 2023). At an extremely hot Eras Tour show in Rio de Janeiro, Swift took time out of her set to direct staff to pass out water bottles to a specific section of fans, who had reported not being allowed to bring water into the show and struggling to get water when in the venue (Alvarado, 2023). The

extreme heat at another Rio de Janeiro performance led to the death of fan Ana Clara Benevides Machado, and Swift shared the information on social media the next day “with a shattered heart” (Childs, 2023). Swift invited Benevides’ family to meet her at a separate show and covered their travel expenses to get there. She also made a donation to the parents of Benevides (Kaplan, 2023).

In terms of explicit branding strategy, Taylor Swift deserves credit for popularizing the concept of “eras” in the music industry. This term refers to the distinct promotional periods of each of her albums. Despite the fact that Taylor enters a new era every time she announces and releases a new album, her changes do not give the impression of a publicity stunt and instead act as the artistic representation of her progression and growth as an artist and a person. This stands in stark comparison to other celebrities, including singer Camila Cabello, who recently announced an upcoming album with a clear shift in sound and visuals. Many Twitter users were quick to describe Cabello’s new album and associated “era” as inauthentic, tweeting, “I’m not buying it, so hallow<sup>1</sup>, not genuine, this is not ur tru artistry babes” and “Shes trying so hard to be Charli XCX” (CAMILLE PAGLIA STAN ✨ DELETED AT 17.1K, 2024; daniluv, 2024).

Words such as “dupe,” “steal,” “copy,” “commercialized,” and various comparisons to artist Charli XCX were commonly stated by Twitter users replying to and quote tweeting Cabello’s first teaser (camila, 2024). Despite the continuous changes in Swift’s discography and image — from country hopeful to pop icon and even to subdued alternative songwriter — inauthenticity has never been a common criticism of Swift’s strategic moves. Instead, her eras endear fans to her, who can feel like they have been a part of her growth process as if they have been a best

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<sup>1</sup> The tweet referenced includes this typo. It should more accurately use the word “hollow” or “shallow.”

friend who watched it all happen real-time. The dynamic works not in spite of but because of the fact that fans have PSR with her and trust her due to her proven genuine and authentic nature that has been constant throughout time and consistent with her past actions and words.

#### 4.1.2 Swift's Album Rerecording Process

Swift has been known to write her own lyrics since childhood, with many of her songs being credited exclusively to her — a factor that sets her apart in the modern pop industry (Pascual, 2022; Ingham, 2019). This is one of the key contributing factors to her perceived authenticity. Additionally, as Swift is currently embarked on the journey to rerecord her previous albums and retain ownership of her music, she has largely kept the original songs (some of which were written over two decades ago) and their lyrics nearly identical. The very fact that Swift is able to rerecord her old music is *because* she has always been heavily involved in the songwriting process; she owns her musical composition rights *because* she created them. This only further reinforces her authenticity, demonstrating that she meant what she said through her art when it originally came out and continues to stand by it.

In her *Time* Person of the Year 2023 interview, Swift described the process of rerecording as a way to “deal with loss” of her music and career accomplishments (Lansky, 2023). Although this can certainly be true, the rerecordings are clearly also a lucrative business strategy. Each album cycle has the potential to earn millions of dollars through streaming, physical music copies, merchandise, and related hype-building initiatives. Swift's authenticity is the reason that this works, though; to most fans, the rerecordings feel like an earmark of personal growth, while they really function, first and foremost, as a genius business strategic decision.

#### 4.1.3 Diversity as a Dimension of Relatability

Additionally, the authentic diversity of Swift's colleagues has been something that endears fans to her. Prior\_Benefit8453 (2024) observes from a Fearless Tour recording:

“Something I see time and again on any of her live performances is *diversity* — how things can be. It's seamless. It's just the way it is ... She promotes talent across the spectrum ... It matters not what color they are. Gender. She promotes all of us.”

Many of her backup dancers and vocalists have been involved with Swift for several of her tours at this point (Pettibone, 2024). The representation of diverse identities is evident in Swift's performances, indicating that this has long been a priority for Swift as well as a natural inclination to uplift performers from a variety of backgrounds. The individual differences of each performer are visually celebrated instead of toned down to conform to a specific “dancer” image. This contributes to the authenticity of Swift's branding, in an era where consumers are wary of brands exploiting their diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts as a marketing strategy (Brodzik, et al., 2021).



Figure 16. Photo of Swift, background dancers, and background vocalists at a 2023 Eras Tour show (Galante, 2023)

The reason why all of these individual strategies work so successfully for Swift in creating this genuine and relatable brand image is because it feels *believable* and *authentic* to who she is as a person. University of Buffalo associate professor of psychology Shira Gabriel said, “People like Beyoncé make a name for themselves by seeming almost out of reach. They inspire something closer to worship than friendship” (Wong, 2023). Similarly, Wortham (2015) describes Beyoncé’s business strategy of a larger-than-life flawlessness exhibited through the star’s social media as “a stunningly savvy business tactic, one that leaves her at a complete advantage.” Taylor, on the other hand, purposely avoids separating herself from her fans and the rest of the world, according to Gabriel (Wong, 2023). Although both strategies have their place



and have worked extremely successfully for both artists respectively, Swift's approach inherently allows more opportunities for PSR to grow and strengthen.

#### **4.1.4 Swift's Own Parasocial Relationships with Fans**

In addition to the existence of PSR between Swifties and the artist, Swift's behaviors and words create the appearance that she has her own PSR with her fans. In an Eras Tour performance in Tampa in 2023, Swift said to her audience:

"I've always loved putting on shows. I've always loved that connection. I've really thrived with the feeling of knowing that the feelings I've had when I was, you know, in a private moment and writing a song — knowing that you guys have felt the same way is just the most comforting feeling in the world for me. It's like a big, massive hug from 70,000 people" (Jen Tabor, 2023).

Describing her fear and uncertainty around performing live post-Covid-19, Swift said to the fans in attendance, "I do need you guys very much for my well being. I would try not to think about how scary that was, the idea that we didn't know when I was gonna get to hang out with you again like this" (Jen Tabor, 2023). Despite the fact that Swift is generally regarded as the idol and the object of parasociality in these interactions, it is clear that she also demonstrates an investment in and reliance on what she learns about both her fans individually through "Taylurking" and collectively as they act as a community.

## 4.2 Linguistics, Voice, and Tone

According to Georgetown University associate professor of linguistics Cynthia Gordon, the key to a close-knit social group is the use of “lects,” or unique characteristics of language that characterize specific in-groups to create intimacy and understanding (Georgetown University, 2023). These often exist as “familects” shared by a specific family, or even the patterns of speech shared among an artist and their fans, as in the case of Taylor Swift. References to Swift’s lyrics and persona even made their way to the U.S. Senate floor during a Judiciary Committee hearing over Live Nation and Ticketmaster’s handling of ticket sales for the Eras Tour, where senators used song lyrics to craft their arguments and questions and communicate their connection to other Swifties (Ceres, 2023). Although Taylor’s lyrics are a particularly compelling aspect of the “Swiftielect,” the power of her words reaches far beyond her art. Her use of “Easter eggs” — the term she uses to refer to clues consciously embedded in her messaging through social media, at award shows, and through her concerts — is not a characteristic unique to Swift and her fanbase. However, the intensity and power of Swift’s specific lect transcends other celebrities’ linguistic connections with their fans.

Beyond obvious references to Swift’s music and well-known personal details (such as the red scarf Emoji in reference to “All Too Well”), several key examples of a powerful lect exist. The number 13 is particularly integral to both Swift as a person and her brand, to those who are a member of the Swiftie in-group. Since 2009, Swift has been vocal about the number 13 being her favorite because it marks her birth date (December 13, 1989), the 13 weeks it took for her first album to go gold, and her seat number at all awards shows at which she took home an accolade (Vena, 2009). Early in her career, Swift would often write the number on the back of her hand in Sharpie before shows (“13,” n.d.). She often uses the number 13 as an Easter egg when

announcing new albums, challenging Swifties to do a variety of mathematical equations to see how the number 13 can validate theories regarding upcoming announcements (Yahr, 2022; Holderness Family Laughs, 2024). A fan chant emerged during the Reputation Tour, in which fans chant, “1, 2, 3, let’s go b----” after the first chorus of “Delicate” (Behnke, 2023). Since the chant became popularized among online Swiftie communities, Swift has begun to smile and count on her fingers at shows, encouraging fans to engage in this chant as a sort of “inside joke.” Additionally, she has made social media posts referencing the chant using an abbreviation that would be unclear to anyone who wasn’t a Swiftie and part of the in-group (Swift, 2023). The use of the phrase “iykyk,” which stands for “if you know, you know,” also increases feelings of in-group connectedness and can strengthen PSR.



Figure 17. Taylor Swift Instagram post from August 31, 2023

A similar phenomenon took place during an Eras Tour performance of “Blank Space” in Sydney, with fans referencing the “The 1989 World Tour Live” Sydney performance of the song and the artist smiling in recognition in return (Riley, 2024). These references serve no purpose or meaning to members outside of the Swiftie community, but in the context of those engaged in

PSR with the artist, they feel like a form of intentional, personal communication directly from the artist intended only for those who are connected enough to interpret them.

Gordon posits that this tactic of a “Swiftielect” is so successful for Swift because these clues hold “meanings that only her real fans can identify and uncover” (Georgetown University, 2023). Critical to the success of the Taylor Swift brand is the artist’s ability to treat her fans like her best friends by making them feel as if they are let in on her secrets (Robertson, n.d.).

Through the intentional use of Easter eggs, deeply personal song lyrics, and a pristinely authentic persona, Swifties can feel they have a genuine connection to the artist’s personal thoughts and feelings, further encouraging and validating the existence of PSR. Taylor’s use of Easter eggs also serves as a gamification of her soon-to-be-released music to generate buzz and increase engagement, according to University of Maryland Global Campus program director of marketing Sandeep Patnaik (Schempp, 2024). Patnaik describes this business strategy as serving to “arouse and sustain a sense of mystery around her impending offerings,” further increasing her ability to make Swifties feel as if they have been let in on a secret.

Voice and tone are also essential aspects in understanding the success of the Taylor Swift brand. Swift has retained her relatability throughout her career especially because of the way that she addresses her fans online and in person, specifically at concerts. From my analysis, the tone of Swift’s social media posts has been largely consistent since the beginning stages of her career; the artist often shares personal details and feelings, “gushes” about her love for fans and other artists, and uses Emojis and other slang that endear her to fans as extremely “millennial” (Soteriou, 2023). Although it is likely that a relatively high percentage of Swift’s posts on her personal account are actually created and/or posted by members of her team, her publicist, or others employed by her brand, the posts retain the inherent voice of Taylor Swift — the slightly

awkward, cat-loving millennial woman who is down-to-earth, authentic, passionate, and quirky (Perreca, 2017). This tone also creates a more personal feeling for those interested in communicating with Taylor through her social media accounts. Although it is obvious that Swift is posting to her over 280 million Instagram followers instead of any individual fan, her tone of voice gives the impression that you, individually, *are* the specific person she intended to read it. This intentional use of language can be a contributing factor in PSR, validating its existence.

### 4.3 Lyrics

Perhaps the most integral manifestation of the power of Swift's linguistics, voice, and tone is her confessional songwriting, resulting in lyrics that resonate with millions of fans while remaining true to Swift's artistic intent and authentic persona. Since the beginning of Swift's career, she has been known to provide more details than most artists would in creating her music. One of her first radio hits, "Teardrops On My Guitar," references a boy named Drew who Swift went to high school with. In her "Speak Now" album, a song titled "Dear John" plays on the concept of a Dear John letter while also explicitly calling out ex-boyfriend John Mayer. Although fans of any artists engage in speculation regarding which songs were written about which relationships or life experiences, there are almost no songs written by Swift that avoid being connected to the long list of documented experiences from her personal life.

When several media outlets announced that Swift had reportedly ended her relationship with partner Joe Alwyn on April 8, 2023, fans on all social media platforms were quick to share their emotions, with many referencing lyrics from Swift's songs that are widely regarded as being written about Alwyn (Melendez, 2023; Sands & Avila, 2023). Songs such as "Invisible

String” and “Cornelia Street” are two of dozens that were brought up regarding the news. Since “invisible string” is largely understood in the fandom to represent the feeling of fate that connected Swift and her former partner, Joe Alwyn, this tweet references a parallel example from Disney’s movie *Hercules* and the three Fates that control the thread of life. To hunter harris (2023) and the additional 4,100 fans who liked the tweet, Swift’s breakup felt like the hope of fate and soulmates being crushed.



Figure 18. Tweet response to Swift and Alwyn's breakup announcement

“Cornelia Street” has also been widely considered to reference Joe Alwyn and the two’s shared experiences in and around Swift’s former apartment on Cornelia Street in New York City (McDowell & Matassa, 2023). A lyric from the song’s chorus — “And I hope I never lose you, I hope it never ends / I’d never walk Cornelia Street again” — became all the more powerful to fans once Swift and Alwyn’s relationship was over and Swift’s Cornelia Street apartment was listed for sale (“Cornelia Street lyrics,” n.d.).



Figure 19. Tweet referencing Swift and Alwyn's breakup



Fans further speculated on the ending stages of Swift and Alwyn's relationship with the song "You're Losing Me," which was originally released as an exclusive track on a specific CD edition and as a digital release on her webstore; it was released on streaming services November 29, 2023 (Willman, 2023).

This is far from the first time — or the first relationship — that saw Swifties taking magnifying glasses to the lyrics of Swift's songs and the pages of Swift's life story. This is because one of the most defining factors of Taylor's career is her confessional lyrics, where it is evident she is not singing *to* the listener. Rather, the songs are most often addressed to the significant other serving as the subject of the song, and the experience of listening to Swift's music is like being a friend in whom Taylor is confiding about her experiences and emotions. She has been lauded for hundreds of times throughout her career are the very reasons so many highly engaged PSR exist between the star and her fans; Swift invites her fans into her life through the storytelling of her songs. By investing time, effort, and loyalty in engaging with the details of Swift's personal life, fans are able to create increasingly meaningful connections with her lyrics, heightening the experience of listening to her music and increasing their feelings of loyalty toward Swift's perspective. The context (not *too* much — Swift intentionally leaves out certain personal details) of each song creates fierce loyalty among fans and also allows them to discuss the songs and connect with other Swifties regarding their meaning.

Additionally, Swift does have a specifically powerful song that explicitly connects her with her fans. "Long Live," released on Taylor's third studio album *Speak Now*, has largely been regarded as a message of love, appreciation, and solidarity for both Swifties and Swift's touring band (including guitarist Paul Sedoti and others who have been a part of the band since as early

as 2007) (Roland Cloud, n.d.). Contributors to the song’s lyrics on Genius specifically comment on the lyric, “How the kingdom lights shined just for me and you,” stating:

“The ‘Kingdom Lights’ are the lights from the stage and the glowing things in the audience Taylor would occasionally ask the audience to hold up during concerts. Only those in the venue could fully enjoy this interaction, which Taylor cherishes” (“Long Live lyrics,” n.d.).

This specifically validates the PSR fans experience with Taylor, as she is intentionally speaking directly to them through this track. The trend of lyrics from nearly every song showing up on friendship bracelets traded between fans symbolically represents their significance in the PSR Swifties share with Taylor.

Additionally, the lyrics and meaning of “Long Live” serve an additional purpose in reinforcing Swift’s relatability and authenticity. First, the fact that Swift stated the song was “written for her band” is relevant in illustrating how much she genuinely cares about her band (“Long Live lyrics,” n.d.). This sentiment illustrates her “human” and authentic nature, which also increases her relatability — Taylor remains grateful for her success and those who have helped her achieve it, relating back to the underdog persona that helps her maintain relatability.

#### **4.4 Live Performances**

There is no shortage of news coverage and analysis of the impact of Taylor Swift’s Eras Tour. Beginning in Arizona in March 2023, the tour saw Swift sell over 4.35 million tickets for 60 shows across the United States and South America during the first leg, with over a dozen shows in Asia and Australia following in 2024 and over 60 more scheduled in Europe and

Canada (Spangler, 2023; “Taylor Swift | The Eras Tour: International dates,” 2024). The combined total ticket sales from the tour is estimated to surpass \$2 billion. Even fans who were unable to secure traditional tickets to attend the show inside the venue showed up by the thousands, gathering outside arenas across the U.S. to listen and sing along (Weatherby, 2023). Seismologists in Seattle and Los Angeles found that up to 2.3-magnitude earthquakes were picked up due to “dancing and jumping motions” from the roughly 70,000 fans in attendance at Swift’s July 22 Lumen Field and August 5 SoFi Stadium shows (Rosario, 2023; Rosario, 2024). The songs that were particularly found to be responsible for the “Swiftquakes” were “Shake It Off,” “You Belong With Me,” “Love Story,” “Cruel Summer,” and “22” (TODAY, 2024). Although these are some of Swift’s biggest hits, all but “Shake It Off” contain personal details of Swift’s life and emotions that invite fans into her story — comparatively more than the hits of other female idols, such as Beyoncé or Lady Gaga.

Toward the end of the first leg of the Eras Tour, a film of the tour was released in an exclusive deal with AMC Theatres on October 12, 2023, raking in over \$123.5 million globally and \$92.8 domestically from first-weekend box office numbers (Rubin, 2023). Naturally, ticket prices to the movie cost \$19.89 for adults and \$13.13 for children and seniors (Merlino, 2023). The film became available to stream exclusively on Disney+ on March 14, 2024 (Olson, 2024).

However, the financial impact is far from the most critical factor as it relates to PSR. The Eras Tour has largely been regarded by journalists as a cultural phenomenon, with Weatherby (2023) crowning it “the tour of [Swift’s] generation.” The concert medium allows certain factors that encourage PSR to be communicated more immediately, more intensely, and even more intimately than online mediums. The following table organizes five key findings and

observations regarding factors that can build PSR through the Eras Tour live performances as represented by the Eras Tour film (Wrench, 2023).

**Table 2. Observations relevant to PSR from Swift's "The Eras Tour" film**

Observation	Description	Influence on PSR
Choreographed spontaneity	Despite the fact that any two videos of separate Eras Tour performances may mirror each other, there is room in the routine for slight differences in speeches, songs, dances, and guest performers. Even the element of “surprise songs,” which refers to the acoustic act of each performance where Swift selects two unique songs to perform, allows for spontaneous elements to occur.	The feeling of spontaneous interactions between Swift, her dancers, and audience members relates to the authentic and genuine persona of Taylor Swift. By ensuring that no two performances are <i>exactly</i> the same, this allows fans to feel that their experience with Swift is unique and intimate — although they are sharing the specific performance with 70,000 other Swifties in attendance.
Pointing to the audience during “Cruel Summer”	During the opening song, “Cruel Summer,” Swift makes her way around the entire stage, pointing at each section of the audience while singing the lyric “It’s a cruel summer with you / With you” repeatedly. She also clearly attempts to make eye contact with the fans at the front of the section to which she is pointing.	By intentionally pointing at every section of the crowd and making eye contact with a select few fans, Swift brings each audience member into her performance, giving the impression that she is performing almost exclusively for them, promoting PSR.
“Anti-Hero” engagement with obstructed view seats	A section of seats near the edge of either side of the stage at every venue are described as having an obstructed view of Swift and the stage. However, Swift explicitly walks over to wave to these largely isolated members of the audience during “Anti-Hero.”	Swift’s persona is caring, which is why it matters in reinforcing that she wants to make <i>all</i> of her fans feel valued. By walking far away from the majority of the audience in order to make those with obstructed seats feel seen, Swift is directly encouraging fans to engage in PSR and believe that she cares about <i>their individual experience</i> at the concert.
“Red” hat given to selected fan	At each performance, Swift’s team or her mother Andrea pre-select a	Although the overwhelming majority of those in attendance at

	fan to come close to the stage and receive the black fedora Swift wears during the first half of her “Red” set. The individual gets to keep this hat as a memory of the show.	any performance will not be the person selected to receive the “Red” hat (nor will they have any connection to the individual who was), they can empathetically view Taylor’s behavior as a testament to her caring and genuine nature, also fantasizing about the possibility of Taylor interacting with them through a similar scenario, creating PSR.
Guitar pick thrown into audience	At the end of her “Fearless” set, Taylor throws her guitar pick into the audience for a lucky fan to take home with them. This harkens back to various performances throughout her career where Swift would throw her guitar picks into the audience, with fans sharing their experiences of catching her picks on social media (SV20TS13, 2021; TikTok, 2024).	Similar to the “Red” fedora, Swift comes off as genuine and caring when she gives as many fans as possible a chance to take home a physical memento of the experiences shared with her at her concerts. This can serve as a physical manifestation of the existence of a best friend consumer-brand relationship that exists because of PSR.

#### 4.5 Friendship Bracelets

Many artists can make the case for the existence of PSR among their fans — but not all of them can boast responsibility for a 500% increase in jewelry and bead sales due to a singular song lyric as a result of that PSR (Perez, 2023). As the Eras Tour kicked off in early 2023, many fans organically decided to engage in a friendship bracelet trend, inspired by a single lyric in “You’re On Your Own, Kid” — “So make the friendship bracelets, take the moment and taste it / You’ve got no reason to be afraid” (“You’re On Your Own Kid lyrics,” 2023). Thousands of Swifties independently decided to begin making their own friendship bracelets, featuring song lyrics, titles, abbreviations, quotes, and any details associated with Swift, her music, or her fandom that is particularly resonant, compelling, or funny (Perez, 2023). These bracelets have

been gifted and traded amongst fans at Eras Tour concerts for the past year. However, the reason why this trend felt so natural to Swifties as a connecting piece between each other and Swift herself is because the essence of friendship bracelets fits seamlessly into Swift's persona of authenticity and care. The bracelet serves as a physical manifestation of the intensity of the best friend consumer-brand relationship that exists between Taylor and her Swifties, making the intangible tangible.

Prior to the Eras Tour, friendship bracelets had been a constant but rather unknown factor of interaction between Swift and her fans. Caramanica (2008) reported that during performances in the first several years of her career, Swift "loaded up her wrists with bracelets that she would later toss out to fans, allowing them to take home a small piece of her." Some fans shared personal memories of Swift even personally giving them a friendship bracelet:

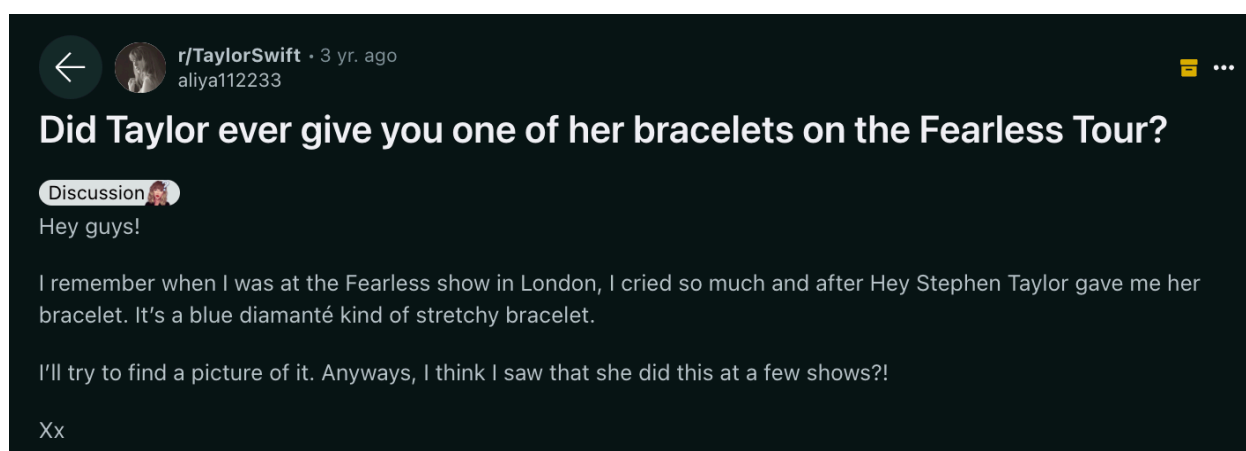


Figure 20. Reddit discussion regarding Swift giving fans friendship bracelets

Other Swifties on the thread responded to confirm aliya112233's (2020) memory, including wineinthebathtub's response, "Yes! I got one in Jacksonville. It made my life." Several other Reddit users discussed the phenomenon, stating that fans have given Taylor friendship bracelets as presents since the "Fearless" era (stripedbathmat, 2023).

Although not every Swiftie engaged in the friendship bracelet trend may have known about the Fearless bracelets does not matter; instead, the key takeaway is that giving out friendship bracelets to fans is something Taylor *would* do, consistent with her caring, authentic, and familiar persona. Friendship bracelets have become such a strong piece of Swift's backstory that they have even meaningfully impacted her real-life relationships. Current partner Travis Kelce revealed on his *New Heights* podcast that he had wanted to give Swift a friendship bracelet with his phone number on it at a Kansas City performance of the Eras Tour, which resulted in the two eventually entering a relationship (Fox Sports, 2023). Although at the Eras Tour, Swift is not able to personally give a select number of her 60,000-70,000 fans in attendance a hand-crafted bracelet, the act of giving and receiving friendship bracelets at the show still retains an integral connection to Taylor herself. The bracelets retain their symbolic power even though individual fans were the ones spending time and money to create and distribute the final products — it feels like Taylor herself is the one giving you the bracelet because she *is* the one who gave you the music, which gave you access to the Swiftie identity and community and thus the bracelets themselves.

#### 4.5.1 Identification and Community

The role of common identification in creating communities is well-documented in sociology research (Waseem, 2008). When individuals connect over a common shared identity, this creates positive outcomes for both personal and collective well-being, including decreased loneliness and increased social support (McNamara, et al., 2021). This relationship can also strengthen the in-group identity and associated pride that individuals feel when actively engaged

in their community. However, it is important to note that the reason why Swifties are even able to identify with each other is because they are first able to identify with Taylor. These multiple forms of identification compound to reinforce the existence of PSR and even fortify it against attacks, when considered through the lens of social science. Research in sociology and political science has also validated the tendency of social media users to engage in confirmation bias, seeking out opinions and ideas like ours to create a sort of online echo chamber (Peruzzi, et al., 2019; Knobloch-Westerwick, et al., 2017). This tactic of creating identification between another brand and Swifties as a group was utilized by advertisers prior to the “Eras Tour” film. Viewers reported seeing ads from two upcoming movies — “Mean Girls: The Musical” and “Trolls Band Together” — that explicitly called upon the group identity of Swifties to encourage brand engagement (Kiki\_And\_Horst, 2023).

This understanding can help explain and validate the existence and prevalence of fan interactions amongst each other. Stories of Swifties helping each other out are common, with news stories and social media posts referencing how “nice,” “sweet,” and “helpful” the fanbase and the individuals who make it up are (Content\_Aerie2560, 2023; fannypackthrowback, 2023; helloemilyem, 2023). Reporting from Power (2024) captures the helpful and collectivist spirit among Swifties. Meredith, a U.S. Swiftie traveling to Sydney for an Eras Tour performance, sent out the following tweet the morning of her show requesting help from fellow Swifties:





Figure 21. Twitter post calling for help from fellow Swifties

Within 20 minutes, Meredith received her first offer of help, with many more coming in throughout the day. These fan behaviors, mediated indirectly by Swift and her music, serve to validate and reinforce the existence of PSR through adding meaning, value, and reward to the relationship.

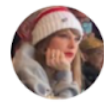
Swiftie TikTok creator Molly Swindall, who has been an avid fan of Swift since 2006, said in reference to her involvement in the community, “The more I felt like I was connecting with other people, the more I just wanted to keep creating content” (Kingsberry, 2023). Swindall owns tens of thousands of dollars worth of Swift’s merchandise and, naturally, dozens of friendship bracelets, all of which she protects in a closet monitored with a Ring security camera and fingerprint door lock. What makes these physical objects meaningful to Swindall is how they represent “so many memories connected to her music that are like core memories, almost, that have been bonding things through friends and family.” According to Swindall,

“When I go into that room and I see all the merch, I know that I stayed by [Taylor] through every single era, through all the thick and thin. And that’s something that I get to be proud of: that whether it was cool or not, I was a fan.”

This sentiment further mirrors the best friend relationship many Swifties share with Taylor, including the best friends *since childhood* aspect that strengthens the sense of loyalty, familiarity, and authenticity that are integral to Swift’s persona and her consequent PSR with fans.

#### **4.6 Role of Touchpoints in Human Brand Perceptions**

At the tail end of 2023, the concept of oversaturation was a common sentiment relating to the overwhelming quantity of news coverage regarding Swift (Gorov, 2024; Finley, 2024; Adhya, 2024). This only intensified as Swift began to be seen attending Chiefs football games in support of partner Travis Kelce (adora, 2024).

**adora**

@itxxsant

**Follow**

at this point i feel like i'm in a groupchat with them

**ET Entertainment Tonight** ✓ @etnow · Jan 22

Travis Kelce is planning something "special" for Taylor Swift as the pair get ready to spend Valentine's Day together.

A source tells ET, "Travis is focused on ...

[Show more](#)

Figure 22. Tweet referring to sentiment of oversaturation of Swift and Kelce news coverage

No brand manager could have dreamed for the amount and depth of earned media that Swift was receiving at the end of 2023 and beginning of 2024, in conjunction with the regular NFL season

and playoffs, finally resulting in the team's overtime victory in Super Bowl LVIII (Tanyos et al., 2024). Coverage included everything from a detailed account of Swift's actions at every Chiefs game she attended to coverage of her chicken tender dipping sauces from a Taylor Swift fan account (The Eras Tour, 2023).



Figure 23. Tweet referencing Swift's consumption of ketchup and "seemingly ranch"

This tweet even inspired Heinz to post on social media announcing a limited edition “Ketchup and Seemingly Ranch” condiment (Murray, 2023). Other corporations from a variety of industries jumped on the trend too, including the Empire State Building, New York Mets, Hidden Valley Ranch, Merriam-Webster, Walmart, Garfield, Arby’s, and McDonald’s (Treisman, 2023).

The past year has seen a significant increase in touchpoints to the Taylor Swift brand due to the constant media coverage relating to the Eras Tour and Swift’s relationship with Kelce and thus with the NFL. Touchpoints, which are defined as “any types of interaction or points of contact between a person or brand,” are a critical aspect of marketing that have the potential to reinforce existing PSR by engaging consumers in a variety of settings and mediums (Bynder, n.d.). Increasing and coordinating the number of brand touchpoints available to consumers is critical because it can promote brand awareness, credibility, and consistency, elevating the brand image and increasing engagement. According to Bianco (2024),

“Touchpoints affect your customers’ experience and their perception of your brand.

When you provide a smooth journey from discovering your business until they buy from you and reach out to you after purchase, they’ll remember you as a helpful and reliable company.”

Swift is no stranger to this piece of marketing strategy, as she has a significant number of owned touchpoints — including her website, music (physical and digital copies as well as streaming), email and text communications, in-person concerts, and her own social media channels (including her marketing arm, Taylor Nation’s, various accounts). The brand power of Taylor Swift is remarkable: any red scarf Emoji seems to harken back to “All Too Well,” and any (even unintentional) mention of a Swift lyric creates immediate buzz on social media. Actress Emma

Stone, recipient of the 2024 Best Actress prize at the Oscars, ended her acceptance speech saying,

“And, most importantly, my daughter, who’s gonna be 3 in three days and has turned our lives technicolor. I love you bigger than the whole sky, my girl” (Atkinson, 2024).

Although it is very possible this reference to Swift’s song, “Bigger Than The Whole Sky,” was unintentional, fans immediately began to speculate about Stone’s intention in using the phrase. This was only heightened with the context that the song “When Emma Falls in Love” has been speculated to be written about Stone herself. Everywhere, there are Swift references hidden in plain sight for those who wish to see them.

#### **4.6.1 Touchpoints as Earned Media**

What makes the past year of pop culture so critical is the quantity of touchpoints that were created regarding Swift’s brand that functioned *as forms of earned media*, including news coverage, unrelated brands making references to her music and persona, and actions and objects associated with her brand. This time around, though, this earned media has remained largely positive rather than reflecting poorly on the characterization of her persona. These earned media touchpoints includes categories such as merchandise worn in public, friendship bracelets and any reference to them, and news stories about Swift eating chicken tenders with “seemingly ranch” to being responsible for the rise in the NFL’s female viewership (The Eras Tour, 2023; Brandwatch, 2024). Swift does not have any substantial control over these touchpoints, which can pose risks to brand image and equity; however, because of her largely positive public perception currently, this has not caused significant damage to her brand. The following figure

graphs sentiments associated with the phrase “Taylor Swift” on Reddit. The majority of data points fall on the right side of the graph, demonstrating a mostly positive overall sentiment of Swift (Social Media Sentiment Visualization, 2024).



Figure 24. Sentiment visualization of social media posts for "Taylor Swift"

However, the collective sentiment of this earned media has in some ways soured over the past year, as both Swifties and non-Swifties alike began to share their perspectives about the amount of frivolous coverage regarding Swift’s every action. Journalists critiqued Swift’s unquestioned influence and “cultural ubiquity,” while Swiftie Redditors discussed the impact of oversaturation on Swift’s image and public perception (Spilde, 2024; Laika \_\_\_, 2024).





Figure 25. Reddit post regarding fan perceptions of Swift's overexposure

As the NFL season progressed and Swift attended more games in support of Kelce, the distaste reportedly intensified, with many NFL fans expressing dislike of her “involvement” in the NFL and Chiefs games in particular. When she was shown on screen during the Chiefs and Ravens game, fans reportedly loudly booed (Mohammed, 2024). At the 2024 Superbowl, a video documents fans heckling her repeatedly with, “Hey Taylor, you’re ruining football! You’re

ruining football!” Additionally, Swift was reported as receiving 53 seconds of airtime during the Super Bowl, which was valued at approximately \$12.4 million in advertisement costs (Gaines, 2024).

Despite the increasing negativity surrounding the amount and frequency of Swift’s coverage in the media, brands were taking note of Swift’s massive influence, even at the simple mention of her name or reference to lyrics or trends associated with her. NYX Makeup, e.l.f. Cosmetics, and Dove were reported as investing over \$7 million each in advertising, with Dove purchasing its first Super Bowl advertising spot in 18 years (Karruli, 2024; McCarthy, 2024). Karruli (2024) reported that the NFL has received a 37% spike in female NFL viewership as a result of Swift’s attendance and relationship with Kelce. Cetaphil even released an advertisement alluding to Swift’s recent involvement in the NFL as a connecting link between a father and daughter duo, who bond over the Chiefs games by wearing a number 13 jersey and friendship bracelets (2024, Piña).

Brands in totally unrelated categories to Swift have taken the hint to ride Swift’s golden coattails in an attempt to transfer her popularity (and the power of her loyal fanbase, many of whom are engaged in PSR) to their own brand to benefit from increased awareness, attention, engagement, and buzz. Restaurant chain Whataburger (2024) made an Instagram post referencing Swift’s upcoming album, *The Tortured Poets Department*, receiving 10,460 likes and 172 comments in comparison to the previous post’s 3,676 likes and 67 comments.



Figure 26. Whataburger Instagram post referencing Swift's upcoming album

A Reddit post regarding Whataburger's photo featured a variety of comments discussing how the post is "just another brand using Taylor's likeness for popularity points" (clarauser7890, 2024). Ready-Ganache8192 (2024) wrote, "These brands are a big driver in why people are getting tired of seeing Taylor everywhere. It's not even her fault 🙄 just another corporation trying to cash in."

#### 4.6.2 Negative Impact of Touchpoint Oversaturation

Although it is often beneficial to a brand's awareness and overall equity to increase touchpoints, these can certainly reach a point of oversaturation. With Swifties and non-Swifties alike struggling to get away from constant coverage of the Eras Tour and Swift and Kelce's relationship, Swift could strategically draw back on the touchpoints she *can* control — including a decrease in advertising for the Eras Tour and its concurrent film adaptation, or cutting down the number of special editions and vinyl variations announced with her most recent three album announcements (Rivera, 2024). Because Swift is already one of the most well-known brands globally, her marketing focus could also shift from any action focused on increasing awareness to instead create, validate, and sustain PSR with her loyal fanbase. This is where Swift's core competency as it relates to business strategy lies.

It is also essential to note that much of the negative media coverage and critiques Swift has received are a risk she took on knowingly. Throughout her career, she has openly shared details about her life through not only interviews but also her song lyrics and social media posts, which has blurred the boundaries that exist between her and her fans, making Swifties feel that they are on the same level as Swift. Although this has been enormously effective in increasing brand loyalty and sustained engagement, it has its downsides. It is unlikely Swift would have reached the level of success — or perceived oversaturation— without building her brand's identity around the authenticity, relatability, and caring nature of her persona. Allowing herself to be so visible to her fans, the media, and the world at large, knowing the level of her own superstardom, means Swift took a calculated risk, believing the rewards would outweigh the challenges; and, largely, they did.

Another relevant risk that has been elevated due to Swift's strategy of authenticity and relatability is the potential of harmful, unhealthy, and atypical PSR to develop. Because Swift has built the illusion of reciprocity, that she knows her fans personally as they also know her, negative manifestations of PSR are a possible natural consequence for those with asocial or violent tendencies. According to Cleveland Clinic (2023), borderline-pathological types of PSR manifest when "a person can no longer control their thoughts, feelings or (in some cases) their behavior. A borderline-pathological parasocial relationship may lead to stalking or violence." Swift has experienced stalking and harassment throughout her career, with the most recent incident making national news as 33-year-old David Crowe was arrested three times in less than a week outside Swift's Tribeca neighborhood (The Associated Press, 2024). Several break-ins have been reported at the singer's same residence, with previously identified stalkers being responsible for several of these instances. Although these are examples of abnormal forms of PSR, from which no celebrity is able or should have to be responsible to protect themselves, the risk of borderline-pathological PSR is consequently higher when even healthy forms of PSR are encouraged.

Too many touchpoints — and consequently, a sense of media oversaturation — can make consumers acutely aware of the fact that Taylor Swift is a billion-dollar brand instead of their celebrity best friend with whom they hold PSR. A Reddit post by MeeranQureshi (2024) about Swift releasing "so many versions of [her] album without even releasing the lead single" received a variety of affirmative responses.

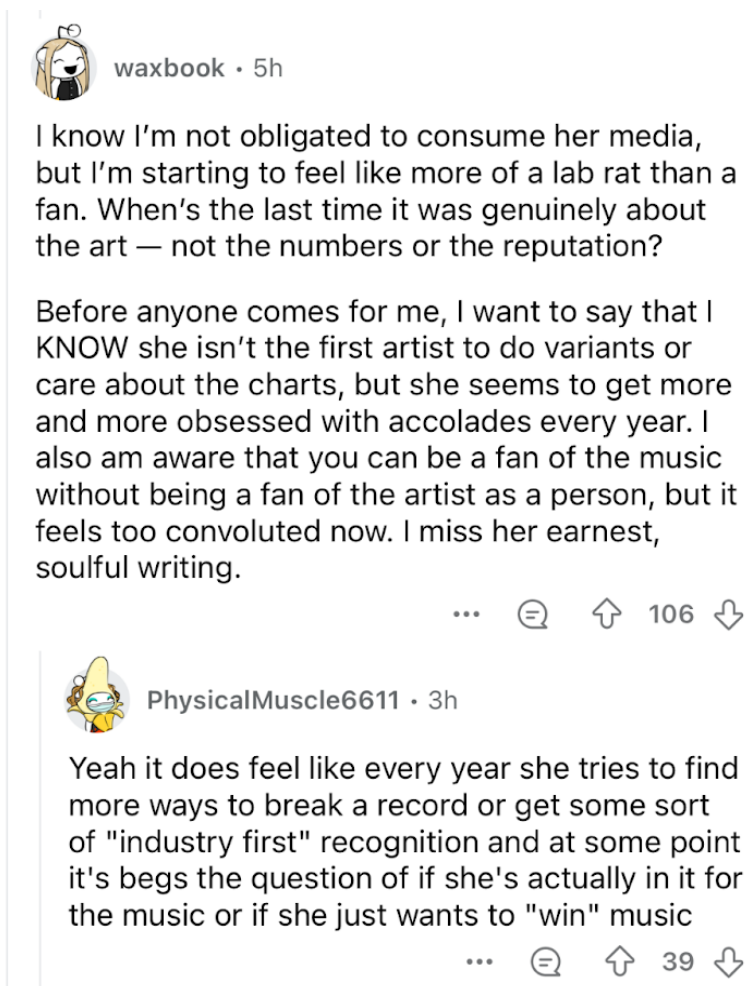


Figure 27. Swifties on Reddit discussing Swift's marketing

Other fans expressed feelings of being unvalued and unheard. Some comments specifically responded to Swift releasing four album variants for her upcoming album *The Tortured Poets Department*, referring to the same album pressed on different colored/designed vinyl records with often slight variations in the album artwork or other cover details.

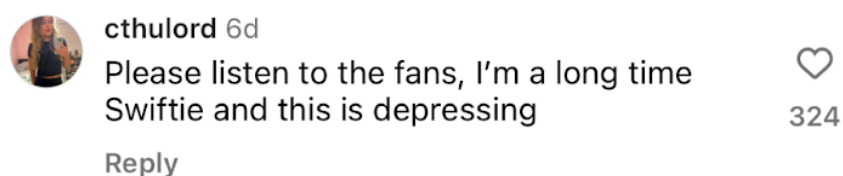


Figure 28. Instagram comment on Taylor Nation vinyl variant post

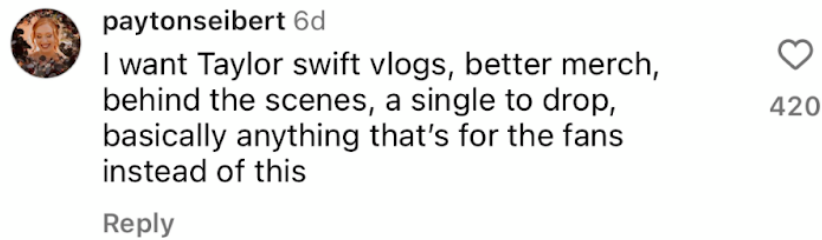


Figure 29. Additional Instagram comment on Taylor Nation vinyl variant post

Fans have expressed feeling like Swift is taking advantage of or exploiting her PSR with them in order to receive more album sales and therefore win more awards. If these missteps feel significant enough, this sentiment of being unappreciated and commodified can even lead some fans to experience parasocial breakups with the artist.

#### 4.7 Human Brand Transgressions

Brand transgressions are defined as “violations of the implicit or explicit rules which guide relationships” between a consumer and a brand (Karani, 2021). When brands misstep in a way that violates the trust and expectations of loyal consumers, brands often go into “crisis management mode,” employing verbal strategies (such as apologies or denials) or substantive strategies (such as organizational reform) to request forgiveness. The long-term impact of a perceived transgression can vary per brand based on the unique characteristics of consumers’ relationship with that brand; some consumers may choose to forgive the brand, while others may never recover trust in the brand (Lu, et al., 2012). This is particularly relevant when the brand in question is a human brand, considering the unique consumer-brand relationships that manifest due to the dynamic. If the consumer is engaged in PSR with the human brand that transgresses, this can result in a phenomenon called “parasocial breakup,” or PSB.

PSB can create negative emotions, which Hu (2016) observed to be experienced more intensely by those with the strongest, most-involved PSR (Cohen, 2004). However, this does not mean that consumers with strong PSR will be *as likely* to engage in PSB as those with less intense PSR. In some cases, it may be possible for human brand transgressions to actually *increase* feelings of loyalty, depending on how individuals engaged in PSR with the human brand perceive and react to the misstep(s). In the case of Swift, transgressions reported by the media and regarded negatively in society can be observed to strengthen in-group loyalty among Swifties who view the situation differently and continue to defend Taylor and their PSR with her.

#### **4.7.1 Swifties' Defense Against Transgressions: Background**

A growing distaste for Swift in popular culture is not foreign to her brand. A key piece of Swift's own folklore is the arc of public hatred shunning her into exile until she rises like a phoenix from the ashes into unapologetic ownership of her own identity — including the very reasons the public seems to hate her. After the release of *1989*, Swift was heavily critiqued by the media for her “calculated” actions, with several journalists painting events such as the 1989 secret sessions and her Swiftmas presents as less than genuine; according to public opinion at the time, Swift uniquely connected with fans because it was a strategic business move alone (Grady, 2018). Every action — from Swift's change in hairstyles to her narrative crafting through her album releases — were seen as manipulative in nature, with the artist being described as a “control freak” and “micromanager” of her image and any media relating to it. Describing her experiences around 2016 in her documentary *Miss Americana*, Swift said, “Nobody physically



saw me for a year. I thought they wanted this ... I became the person that others wanted”

(Anabel, 2023).

The beginning of the end of Swift’s positive public perception came when gossip website TMZ reported that Swift had given approval to artist Kanye West for a lyric referencing her in the song “Famous” (Coscarelli, 2016). A video was released featuring West and his then-wife, Kim Kardashian-West, on a phone call with Swift discussing the song’s reference to Taylor; public sentiment interpreted that Swift had agreed to the lyric and was “playing victim” now that the song was released. Swift’s publicist, however, shared soon after on Twitter that Swift was never made aware of the final lyric — “I feel like me and Taylor might still have sex / I made that b---- famous.” The context of this lyric stems from a previous clash between Swift and West from 2009, where West had rushed the stage at the MTV VMAs as Taylor was accepting her award for best female video for “You Belong With Me” (Mamo & Chan, 2023). He infamously took the microphone from Swift, stating, “I’m a let you finish, but Beyoncé had one of the best videos of all time!” The song “Innocent” from *Speak Now* was largely seen as Swift’s response to the interaction and what ensued between the two artists.

Despite what Swift’s team claimed and the “humiliation” Taylor said she experienced, the public was quick to deem Swift as “playing victim” yet again, blowing things out of proportion and reacting “dramatically” to the lyric’s portrayal of her (Mamo & Chan, 2023). All of this context at the tail end of the *1989* era led Swift to channel her emotions into creating her sixth studio album, *reputation*, which dealt with themes of public perception, new beginnings, and a love affair she kept to herself in spite of it all (Grady, 2018; Nelson, 2017). In her first musical response to the “Famous” feud with West, Swift created “Look What You Made Me Do,” which includes the lyric, “I’m sorry, the old Taylor can’t come to the phone right now /

Why? Oh, ‘cause she’s dead” (“Look What You Made Me Do lyrics,” n.d.). Thus, her most notable rebranding began.

This context is critical in understanding the nuance regarding fans’ PSR with Swift. At the time of *reputation*’s release, public perception of Swift was at an all-time low. To the average person who had seen the “Famous” phone call video between Swift and the Wests, she was dishonest, inauthentic, and manipulative — in other words, a liar; to her fans, she was the subject of a misogynistic hate campaign, a misunderstood, mischaracterized, and unfairly vilified artist with a genuine care for her fans and everyone else in her life. Similar to the 1989 era, Swift’s fans were willing to defend her against criticism from the broader society; however, this time, they believed they had the clear evidence to exonerate her. Therefore, when Swifties stood up for Taylor around 2016-2017, it felt more like they were defending their best friend from powerful bullies than advocating for a persona that was intentionally crafted to garner their sympathy. As Swift again becomes the target of negative comments from the general public and journalists due to her perceived oversaturation in media (and, again, the release of *reputation* looms on the horizon, though this time it is *Taylor’s Version* of the album), loyal Swifties again take the defensive, standing up for their best friend.

### ***Transgression 1: Private Jet Carbon Emissions***

However, the past year of media coverage regarding Swift’s actions have included two major brand transgressions that resulted in a range of reactions from dedicated Swifties engaged in PSR with the artist. First, carbon emissions from Swift’s two private jets were calculated and covered by the media, totaling 8,293.45 tonnes of carbon in a period of seven months — higher

than any other individual, ranking her number one globally (Peters, 2022). During the first six months of the Eras Tour, Swift's jets were calculated spending 166 hours, or nearly seven days, of time in the air over the course of 86 flights (Kay & Rains, 2023). This news coverage resulted in various social media accounts being created for the sole purpose of tracking Swift's private jet flights; University of Central Florida undergraduate student Jack Sweeney was one of the individuals served a cease-and-desist letter regarding the jet tracking from Swift's team, who "blamed his automated tracking of her private jet for tipping off stalkers as to her location" (The Associated Press, 2024). (It is important to note that Sweeney's automated tracking accounts used publicly available data from a government agency, the Federal Aviation Administration.) Swift's team told *Business Insider* that the artist "purchased more than double the carbon credits needed to offset all tour travel," a statement which has yet to be independently verified (Kay & Rains, 2023). According to a spokesperson for Swift,

"Taylor's jet is loaned out regularly to other individuals. To attribute most or all of these trips to her is blatantly incorrect" (Travis, 2022).

Additionally, one of Swift's two private jets was reportedly sold in January 2024, potentially decreasing the artist's total emissions (Rains & Kay, 2024).

Although Swift is far from the first celebrity to be criticized for her private jet usage and its detrimental impacts to the environment. Drake and Kylie Jenner have also been referred to as "climate criminals" for their usage of private jets for short flights (Peters, 2022). However, even long-time, loyal fans engaged in strong PSR with Swift expressed concern and distaste at the news of her environmental impact, criticizing Swift for the negative environmental impact of these actions. Fans were left to reevaluate their PSR and weigh the details of Swift's transgression with their own morals and values. Some fans provided measured criticism of the

artist, while others made jokes as a way to cope with the situation. Reddit user Ok\_Day\_4598 (2024) shared their thoughts regarding the situation, recommending a strategy to increase taxation on private jet usage while compassionately responding to Swift's usage of private jets. The user referred to themselves as as "massive Swiftie" but qualified that they work in an environmental field and "felt obligated to post something" before finishing the post with the hashtag "#SwiftiesForThePlanet." The post received over 1,100 upvotes, meaning many readers agreed with the sentiments shared.

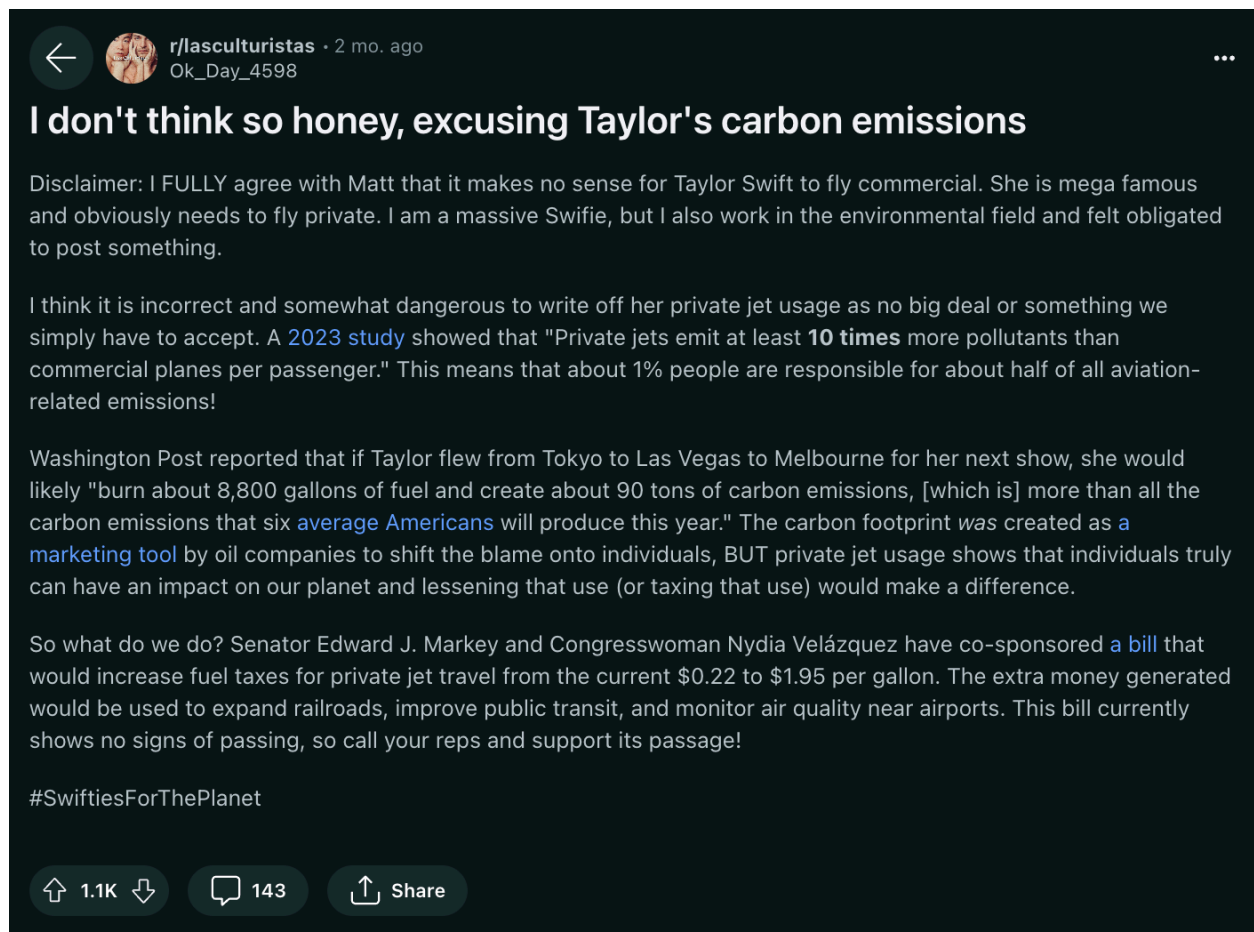


Figure 30. Reddit discussion of Swift's carbon emissions

Other fans made light of the situation as a way to cope with feelings of climate anxiety, or an increasingly anxious state over the “perilous” state of the planet (Yale Sustainability, 2023).

Taylor Swift fan account miguel (2022) made a post joking about Swift’s substantial usage of private jets and references to flying through her song lyrics.

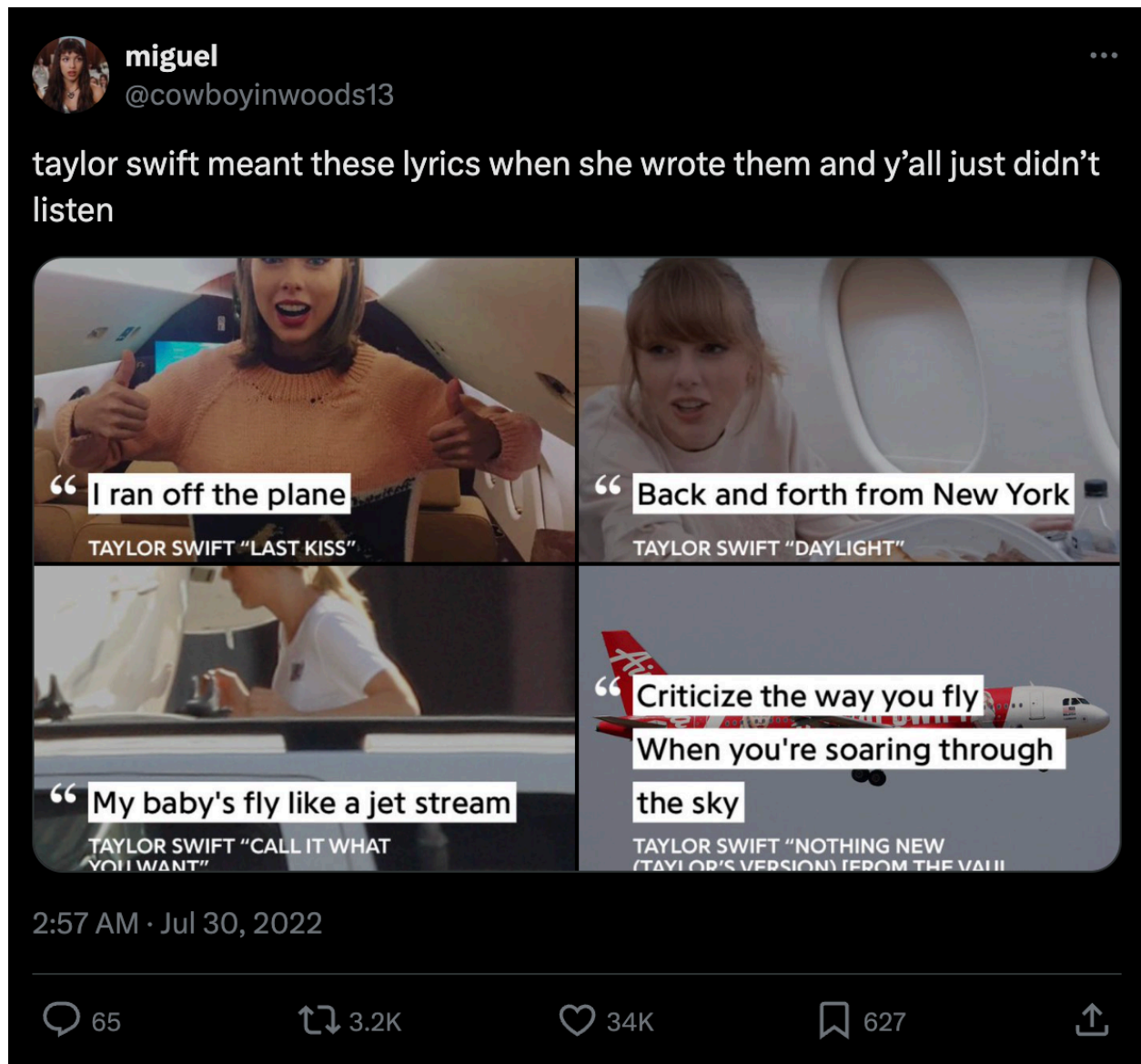


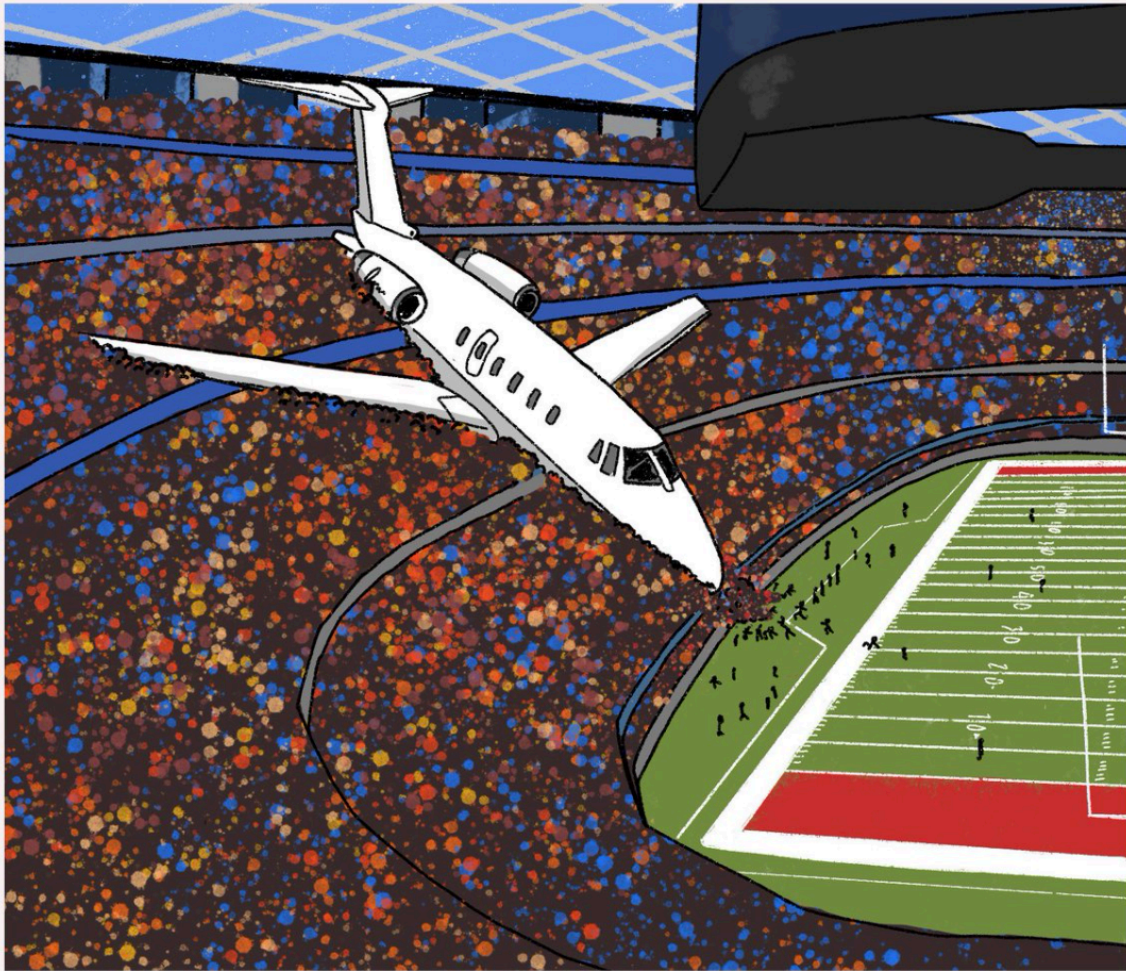
Figure 31. One Swiftie’s tweet joking about Swift’s private jet usage

Non-Swifties also contributed to the jokes, though in evidently less compassionate ways. Smooth Dunk (2024) referenced Swift's attendance at the 2024 Super Bowl, joking about her unnecessary usage of private jet flights in order to get places that are easily accessible by car or other less environmentally harmful methods of transportation.



**Smooth Dunk**  
@SmoothDunk

Taylor Swift makes her way down from the VIP box to the field



7:44 PM · Feb 11, 2024 · **12.7M** Views

427

33K

459K

7.9K



Figure 32. Popular tweet mocking Swift's jet usage post-Super Bowl



Others still defended the artist against the criticism, arguing that Swift is being unfairly targeted for her specific contributions to pollution. Competitive-Ad-5019 (2023) described their sentiments regarding the criticism Taylor has faced. This post — made in the Subreddit r/TrueSwifties, a dedicated fan-run, Swift-focused community — received 0 upvotes yet 131 replies, meaning that no Reddit users explicitly agreed with the sentiment, but they did have critiques to make in response.

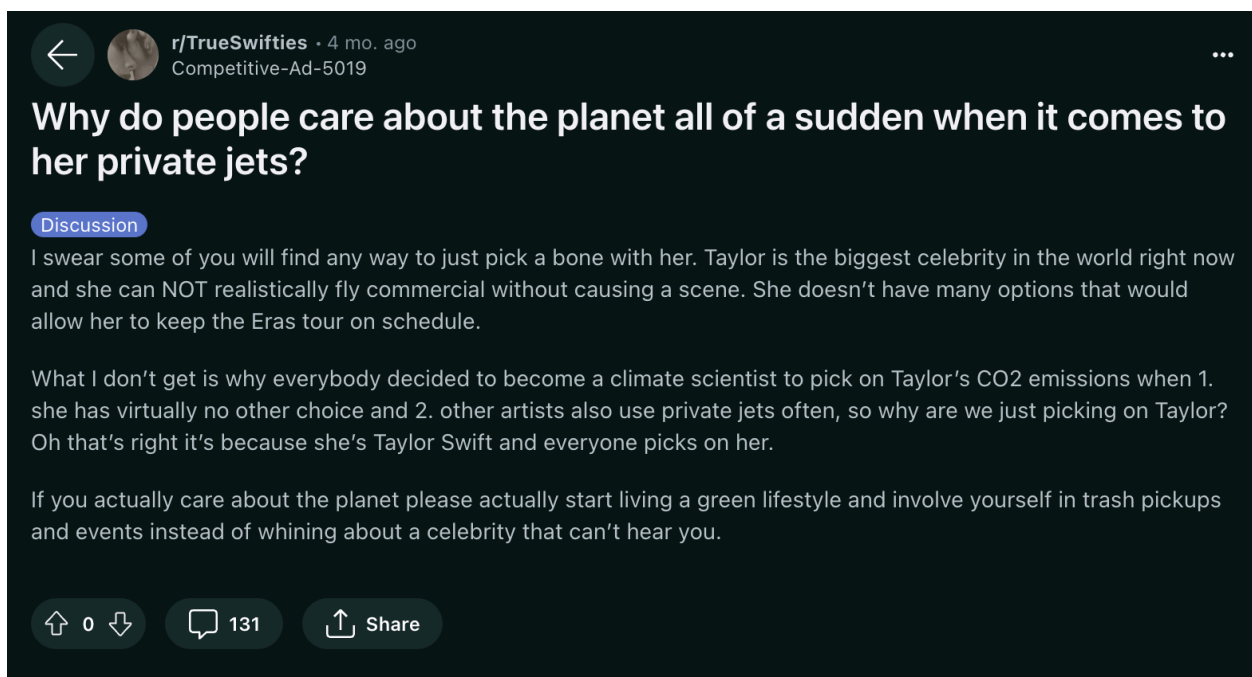


Figure 33. Reddit discussion voicing support for Swift amidst private jet criticism

Through my research and data collection, I observed that fans did not experience PSB with Swift exclusively due to the news regarding her carbon emissions.



### *Transgression 2: Matty Healy Dating Rumors*

However, another criticism of Swift from the past year had a larger impact on both her public image and her PSR with fans than her private jet usage. In 2023, at the height of the Eras Tour frenzy, rumors that Swift was dating British singer Matty Healy of The 1975 caused others to reconcile their own values with the behaviors of their idol. Contrary to the carbon emissions and public jet usage controversy, criticism of Swift dating Healy affected the Swiftie community disproportionately to the outside society, many of whom believed that the artist had “betrayed” them through her decision. The reason Swifties were opposed to Taylor being associated with Matty Healy, let alone dating him, was due to what they perceived as a history of racist, antisemitic, misogynistic, and otherwise offensive comments and actions (Driessen & Prins, 2023). The situation became increasingly controversial when Swift released a remix of “Karma” featuring rapper Ice Spice, an individual who had been the target of some of Healy’s problematic comments and jokes in the past. Across social media platforms, individuals accused Swift of using Ice Spice as a “prop” to improve her credibility and protect her against criticism that Healy’s comments were demonstrably harmful (Kornhaber, 2023). In the wake of these developments, some fans expressed a clear lack of concern for the matter since Swift has been “canceled” for previous actions throughout her career. TikTok user Alexa (2023) posted a video of her pretending to sleep peacefully with the text, “how I sleep when taylor swift is being cancelled and ppl are flipping sides again but I’ve been through this 8 times [already],” captioning the post, “she’ll come around eventually” in reference to Swift breaking up with Healy.

The sentiment of demonstrating loyalty through either actively defending Taylor Swift or, at the very least, avoiding publicly condemning her, runs deep through the Swiftie community.

As a group, Swifties often demonstrate the belief that Swift is a regular target of unfair hatred and criticism due to her status as a highly successful woman in the music industry (kikiorangutan, 2023; starbucks94, 2023). Therefore, it is possible that the specific form of PSR Swifties have formed with Taylor creates reinforcement against outside attacks and even further strengthens the in-group identity experienced. Additionally, the context of Swift and her fans' consumer-brand relationship demonstrating a best friend dynamic implies a level of defensiveness and loyalty that other consumer-brand relationship dynamics may not. Fournier (1998) described "reciprocity" and "honesty" as two defining characteristics of a best friend consumer-brand relationship, which can provide insight into why Swifties engaged in PSR with the artist respond the way they do to controversies surrounding Swift.

Seeing Taylor as a best friend can allow someone engaged in PSR to justify their response, whether they respond in agreement with the outside society's criticism or, contrastingly, defend her from the perceived attacks. Swifties who respond in the former manner often criticize Swift as a way to encourage her to change her actions and behave more in line with her stated values, critiquing her behavior with a level of nuance that demonstrates compassion; they want her to change because they know she *can* be better, which is why they call her out. TikTok user Suha 🤝🌻 (2023) posted the following TikTok with the caption, "'You are what you love' well I surely hope tf NOT!" The video received over 43,000 likes, implying a significantly high level of agreement.

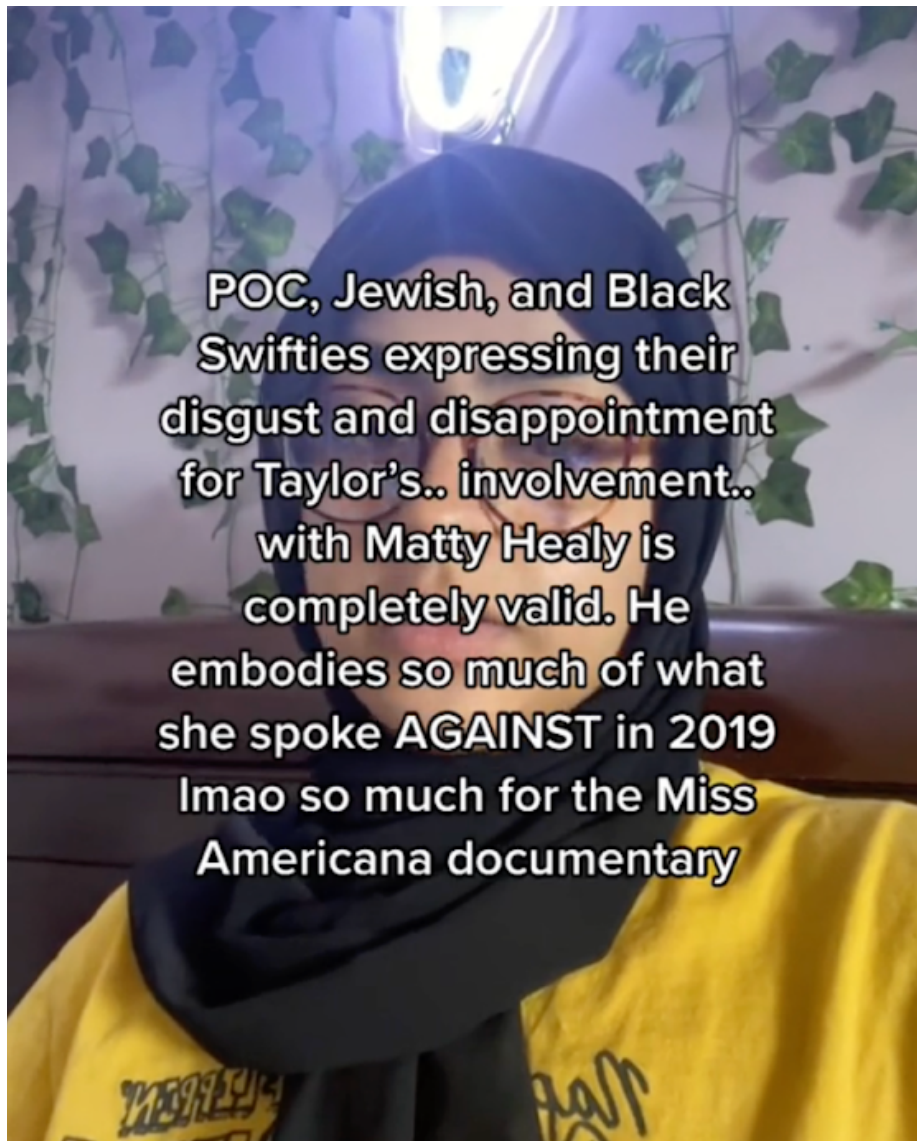


Figure 34. Swifties expressing criticism of Swift dating Healy

I observed at least a dozen of responses similar to Suha 🇲🇦🌻 (2023) that referenced the misalignment with Swift's discussion of her political values in her 2020 documentary *Miss Americana* (Leah, 2023). This type of reaction implies that these Swifties believe Swift places value in what they think and express regarding her personal decisions, demonstrating an aspect of parasociality. Of course, it is possible that in responding this way, the parasocial illusion may be broken, reminding those engaged in PSR that Swift is an independent person who has no idea

who they are instead of a valued best friend. In the case of Swifties providing measured criticism as a response to Swift's transgressions, it is possible that Swift making a statement or changing her behavior can impact whether or not they remain fans. More research into the specific responses of those engaged in PSR when a brand transgresses is necessary to validate this observation.

The best friend consumer-brand relationship dynamic can also explain why Swifties take the transgression so personally, feeling as if Swift is betraying the trust they have given her. Reddit user Justgravityfalls (2023) described the experience of learning that Swift was dating Healy as "like losing a friend."

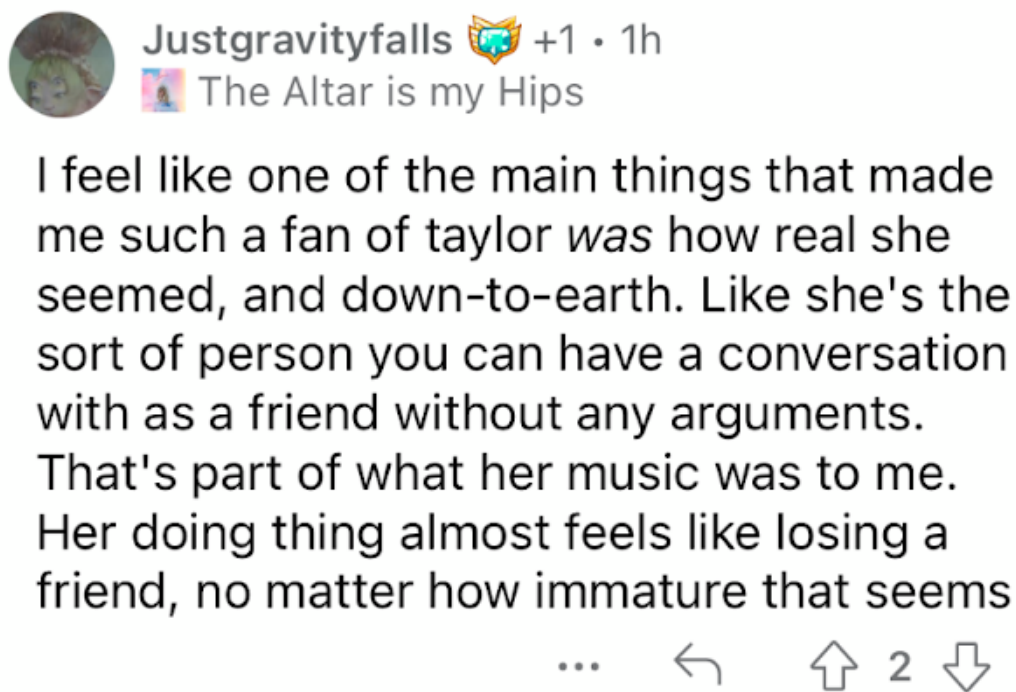


Figure 35. Reddit reply regarding Swift dating Healy

A Reddit post made by CowboyLikeMegan (2023) during the height of the Healy rumors was titled “Mental Health Check-In,” and it described its purpose as to “check in with everyone and see how we’re all doing,” including an observation that “that this [sub-Reddit] hasn’t been quite as active as it typically is and ... [I] wondered if it’s related.” The post received 975 upvotes and over 1,600 replies, indicating both a high level of agreement and a considerable amount of discussion regarding the issue. Additionally, as part of a since-deleted Reddit post titled “Swifties Maturity Appreciation Post,” user IsMeADouchebag (2023) commends the fanbase for not defending Swift’s “bad and unadvised decisions” just because they are fans of her (see Appendix x for screenshots of the full original post). The user goes on to say the following:

Furthermore, I wanted to say sorry for all of you guys who got truly hurt by what's going on right now. I'm very sorry if you're a poc. I'm sorry if you're Jewish, Muslim, Asian, a woman, or any other category affected. Know that you don't deserve this, none of us does, and that I'm here for you guys. I know it hurts when you really love someone from the bottom of your heart and support them with all you got and then get disappointed. I'm sorry if you can't listen to Taylor's music the same as before. I've known Tay for a year and a half now, and I've never imagined she would be associated with such people, she genuinely seemed not as the media is presenting her to be right now. But I'm just as disappointed as all of you guys. And nothing's gonna change that.

Your emotions are valid, and never defend anyone at the expense of your emotions/mental health. Hopefully we get the right explanation we all deserve after the tour. Maybe she'll post something, maybe she won't. But overall, I really hope she sits with herself and rethink her decisions, she better knows about our reaction on this matter. Remember not to get attached to somebody's public image y'all, it's not quite good for you mentally. I really hope this doesn't get taken down. Wish you guys a good day/night, sending you all hugs <3.

 698
 
 514
  Share
 

**Figure 36. Reddit discussion of harm perceived by Swift dating Healy**

Before being deleted, the post received 911 upvotes and 716 replies, indicating both agreement and some level of controversy through the substantial amount of discussion regarding the topic. I observed that a considerably higher number of fans engaged in PSR demonstrated characteristics of a PSB due to Swift dating Healy than when Swift's carbon emissions were covered heavily by the media.

Additionally, I observed that reactions to Swift and Healy dating were more likely to create permanent PSB than other prior transgressions from Swift. However, it is important to note that many fans who were engaged in public criticism of Swift during the relationship actually celebrated the announcement that the two had broken up in early June 2023, showing that even those who denounced Swift for her actions were willing to forgive her and continue engaging in PSR with her (Dailey, 2023). Some expressed sympathy for Swift as she experienced the break up, too, despite their perceptions of Healy.

#### **4.8 Parasocial Breakups**

PSB with human brands is an underexplored area of research that requires additional data collection, analysis, and validation from future researchers. From my particular observations, I observed that because of Swift's specific characteristics (both as a persona and a brand), she is largely protected against PSB in comparison to other brands whose personas are not based on authenticity and care. Critically, though, because the PSR fans experience with Swift tends to exhibit the characteristics of a real, give-and-take best friend relationship due to the actions Swift takes to reinforce that sentiment, it is possible also that the PSB has the potential to be even *more* severe than PSB with personas whose PSR are not based on sincerity and authenticity. The following tweet illustrates one individual's thoughts regarding the commodification of, among other factors, the PSR that individuals experience with Swift. The post received over 14,000 likes, demonstrating agreement from a significant number of Twitter users.



Figure 37. Tweet expressing perception of Swift as a brand

When PSB takes place — or when a human brand transgresses in a way that shatters the illusion of one’s PSR with a celebrity, even if it does not result in PSB — fans can become highly aware of the fact that the celebrity who feels like their best friend is, first and foremost, a brand whose primary goal is to make a profit. This realization can generate negative emotions and thoughts, including an understanding that, even if Swift *does* care about her fans and has confided in them personal details of her life, she has done so, at least partially, because it encouraged the creation of PSR that would result in a prolonged customer loyalty, engagement, and profit. For a human brand that is the object of PSR, it can be potentially fatal to allow fans to begin viewing the persona behind the PSR as a brand. More research is necessary regarding the impact of PSB and perceived commodification of PSR on the relationships and beliefs consumers hold regarding human brands.

## Chapter 5 Conclusion, Limitations, and Future Research

Perhaps the strongest evidence of Swift’s success in intentionally building brand equity through cultivating PSR with fans has been out in the open all along. At the May 13, 2023,



Philadelphia performance of the Eras Tour, I stood in silver cowboy boots for the seventh hour in a row as Swift concluded her show with her *Midnights* set. A black-and-white checkerboard pattern flickered across the stage, as Swift sang the first verse of her song “Mastermind” with an almost introspective air. She began to move her arms as her backup dancers fell down and moved fervently across the stage according to her whim; the power she exhibited over them through the choreography was breathtaking and awe-inspiring. As the dancers quickly marched across stage behind her, Swift, with a confessional look on her face, sang to the audience, one of her infamous bridges:

“No one wanted to play with me as a little kid /  
 So I’ve been scheming like a criminal ever since /  
 To make them love me and make it seem effortless /  
 This is the first time I’ve felt the need to confess /  
 And I swear /  
 I’m only cryptic and Machiavellian /  
 ‘Cause I care” (“Mastermind lyrics,” n.d.).

Throughout her career, Swift has been criticized, mocked, and sometimes praised for the considerable power she holds over her fanbase. When fans were unhappy with Ticketmaster’s handling of the Eras Tour tickets, the result was the company facing a Senate Judiciary Hearing (Kelly, 2023). When Trevor Noah, host of the 2023 Grammys, asked Swift to “get [Swifties] to handle the price of eggs” amidst a period of inflation, the U.S. Department of Agriculture found that some regions experienced a 13% price drop (KS95, 2023). (Swifties, unfortunately, cannot take credit for the egg price drop as it was already expected to decrease in coming weeks; however, the coincidence that the USDA report features Swift’s lucky number is uncanny.)

Whether Swift has pursued PSR with her fans since the dawn of her career because she knew it would build an intense loyalty leading to higher profits is possible; whether she shares details of her personal life with fans and donates to them during times of need because she genuinely cares and wishes to express gratitude to them for supporting her is also possible. The line between Swift the brand and Swift the person is and always will be blurred due to her being a human brand. What can be said is that, despite Swift's insecurities about being an ingenuine, fame-seeking manipulator who seeks validation and admiration from fans (expressed through the bridge of "Mastermind"), the PSR she shares with Swifties is powerful and evidently meaningful to both parties. Swift's attention to details that exhibit care for those who have invested time, money, and considerable effort into supporting her have created a strong bond between the artist and her (albeit parasocial) best friends.

## 5.1 Conclusion

The purpose of writing this thesis was to examine how PSR with human brands can generate positive outcomes through the lens of globally renowned artist Taylor Swift. I used the framework of the PSI-Process Scale to illustrate the existence of PSR through both Swift's actions and her Swifties' actions. The goal of this analysis was to understand how Swift successfully encourages and cultivates PSR through characteristics specific to her persona — namely authenticity, relatability, and familiarity illustrated through her linguistics, voice, and tone — and how she uses a variety of mediums to do so (including confessional lyrics, intimate live performances, and physical manifestations of a best friend consumer-brand relationship). I explored the impact these behaviors had on the *nature* and *intensity* of PSR. I also analyzed the

role that touchpoints play in promoting both brand awareness of and engagement with Swift, as well as the challenges that are posed with perceived overexposure through touchpoints achieved through earned media. Finally, I analyzed two examples of Swift's brand transgressions to understand the varying ways those engaged in PSR may react and the impact that PSB can have on those previously engaged in PSR.

## **5.2 Limitations**

Throughout the course of writing this thesis, a challenge that emerged was deciding when to refer to Taylor Swift as a brand versus as a person. Although I largely used her last name to refer to her persona (and her first when referring to aspects of her persona that felt particularly personal), this illustrates a complex and nuanced complication regarding human brands and parasociality. Any human brand that strategically utilizes PSR to increase loyalty, engagement, and overall equity will experience this blurred line and the challenges of maintaining the persona's image as a human being and hiding their function as a brand. More research is likely necessary on this nuance and the impact specific actions can have on consumers engaged in PSR with human brands.

The major limitation to this thesis is its focus on one brand, Taylor Swift. Although I have provided my justifications for focusing on this artist in particular, this only represents one fan group and its interaction with PSR and may not be generalizable or even applicable to other celebrities and other manifestations of PSR. Additional case studies should be explored regarding other human brands that have achieved success with building PSR, as well as research

that does not focus on any individual artist and may more clearly be applied across human brands and their respective instances of PSR.

Additionally, my own bias poses limitations to the above research. Although I reviewed over 10,000 social media posts, comments, and news articles to accurately understand the depth and range of perspectives both within and outside of the Swiftie community, the instances I employed to represent prototypical examples of sentiments and perspectives that trended within discussions relating to Swift may not be the most accurate or thorough representations of the diversity of viewpoints that exist. Given that I did not conduct my own experiment that would give me no option to refute results that potentially disproved my hypotheses, it is possible that I may have subconsciously looked for data that purposefully supported my hypotheses, which could have impacted the outcomes of my data collection and analysis.

### **5.3 Future Research**

As discussed throughout Chapters 2-4 of this thesis, more research is necessary in a variety of areas associated with Taylor Swift, musician human brands, human brand PSR, and the outcomes for individuals engaged in PSR related to these topics. Specifically, more insight into the impact of PSR on mental health is critical in understanding the psychological effects associated with different manifestations of PSR, from healthy to asocial and even harmful. Additionally, it is necessary to understand the nuances in PSR formation with musician human brands, including more validation to the finding that a “less is more” approach to revealing personal information is successful for musician human brands looking to build PSR. Researchers must also look further into how social media’s ease of access in consumer-human brand online

communication impacts actions taken by those engaged in PSR, especially in terms of how they manifest in detrimental and even violent ways. Finally, it will be necessary for researchers to invest resources into exploring the responses of those engaged in PSR to brand transgressions.

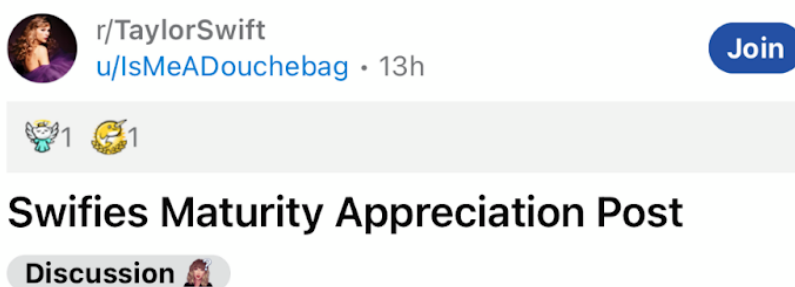
Additional research should be conducted into the manifestations of PSR with Korean pop, or K-pop idols, such as BTS. It appears that the way in which fans engage in PSR with artists in this specific genre of music can illustrate additionally relevant findings in terms of *engagement* and *intensity* of PSR, as well as the cultural impact of parasocial relationships. The factor of multiple personas existing within one brand, such as in many K-pop groups, is also relevant to consider. Another possible area of related research is the impact of in-group identity created from fan communities and its ability to strengthen individuals from perceived attacks to current beliefs. Understanding the ways in which fanbase identity and manifestations of PSR can influence confirmation bias is important moving forward.

Finally, I recommend that PSR researchers look more critically at the current measurements of PSR in order to validate each model's success. More nuanced factors of PSR, such as *depth* and *intensity*, are occasionally difficult to fully measure and communicate through current frameworks. Additional models may be proposed to improve the shortcomings of current forms of measurement, both in quantitative and qualitative processes. Sentiment analysis software tools used to quantitatively measure the emotions and thoughts of social media posts and comments can be utilized to measure intensity of PSR, but no existing PSR model is currently equipped to utilize or provide meaning to this data. This approach could also help to limit the potential for bias that can factor into qualitative analysis. Additionally, employing qualitative methods such as content analysis still requires the use of PSR models, but several models currently exist without a research-based consensus on which measurement is most

effective for which specific type of qualitative analysis. Being able to more cohesively measure the intensity of PSR may even allow researchers to explore the healthy versus unhealthy aspects of PSR, looking into specific subsections of communities engaged in PSR to understand how and why they form PSR and the implications of this.

## Appendix A

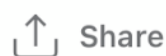
### ‘Swifties Maturity Appreciation Post’ Deleted Reddit Post



I've been thinking about posting this several days ago since the whole thing started. And I gotta say, in the most honest way possible, that the Swiftie fanbase is the most mature fanbase I've ever joined. I am very proud of you guys calling out for the bad things, standing up when something's not right going on, being totally unbiased and wise through this period of time. I'm saying this because I know some other fanbases would defend their artist's bad and unadvised decisions. And I'm proud that we're mature enough to most of us understand that Tay is a human being, and that she's never going to be the person we imagine here to be just because she's a huge popstar.

Furthermore, I wanted to say sorry for all of you guys who got truly hurt by what's going on right now. I'm very sorry if you're a poc. I'm sorry if you're Jewish, Muslim, Asian, a woman, or any other category affected. Know that you don't deserve this, none of us does, and that I'm here for you guys. I know it hurts when you really love someone from the bottom of your heart and support them with all you got and then get disappointed. I'm sorry if you can't listen to Taylor's music the same as before. I've known Tay for a year and a half now, and I've never imagined she would be associated with such people, she genuinely seemed not as the media is presenting her to be right now. But I'm just as disappointed as all of you guys. And nothing's gonna change that.

Your emotions are valid, and never defend anyone at the expense of your emotions/mental health. Hopefully we get the right explanation we all deserve after the tour. Maybe she'll post something, maybe she won't. But overall, I really hope she sits with herself and rethink her decisions, she better knows about our reaction on this matter. Remember not to get attached to somebody's public image y'all, it's not quite good for you mentally. I really hope this doesn't get taken down. Wish you guys a good day/night, sending you all hugs <3.



This post was originally retrieved and screenshotted on May 13, 2023, from

[https://www.reddit.com/r/TaylorSwift/comments/13go3de/mental\\_health\\_checkin/](https://www.reddit.com/r/TaylorSwift/comments/13go3de/mental_health_checkin/) on Reddit.



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## ACADEMIC VITA

### EDUCATION

<b>The Pennsylvania State University, Schreyer Honors College</b>	<b>University Park, PA</b>
Smeal College of Business   Bachelor of Science, Marketing	Class of May 2024
Bellisario College of Communications   Bachelor of Arts, Digital/Print Journalism	
<i>Recipient of the President Walker, President Sparks and Evan Pugh Scholar Awards</i>	Dean's List 7/7 Semesters

### RELEVANT WORK EXPERIENCE

<b>WTAJ-TV</b>	<b>Altoona, PA</b>
<i>Digital News Intern</i>	<i>Jun 2023 – Aug 2023</i>

- Wrote multiple SEO-tailored articles daily on local and regional events to generate more than 118,000 page views
- Coordinated efforts with various staff members to ensure our website and broadcast teams produced timely and accurate news coverage

<b>The Pennsylvania State University</b>	<b>University Park, PA</b>
<i>Marketing Teaching Assistant</i>	<i>Jan 2023 - Present</i>

- Advise and mentor students with the completion of assignments and group projects, including grading and delivering in-depth feedback on student submissions, to guide academic development
- Aid professor in creating, preparing and teaching key course information and providing resources for students' success

<b>Medical Language Specialists</b>	<b>Huntingdon, PA</b>
<i>Legal Assistant</i>	<i>May 2023 – Aug 2023</i>

- Prepare clear and thorough case reports and summaries on deadline while analyzing and managing a variety of case files with a detail-oriented focus

<b>Mutual Benefit Group</b>	<b>Huntingdon, PA</b>
<i>Marketing &amp; Communications Intern</i>	<i>Jun 2020 – Aug 2022</i>

- Wrote and edited blog content to increase corporate website traffic and provide useful and understandable insurance and safety information to more than 65,000 policyholders
- Created graphics and copywrote for a social media library offered to over 200 independent agencies

### ADDITIONAL COMMUNICATIONS EXPERIENCE

<b>The Daily Collegian</b>	<b>University Park, PA</b>
<i>Lifestyle Staff Reporter</i>	<i>Sep 2022 – Dec 2023</i>

- Write engaging features on deadline that conform to AP Style by identifying and interviewing a variety of sources
- Pitch new content ideas for traffic-generating blog content to be posted on the website and promoted on Twitter

<b>Kalliope</b>	<b>University Park, PA</b>
<i>Copy Editor</i>	<i>Feb 2022 – Apr 2023</i>

- Edit accepted nonfiction, fiction and poetry submissions to Penn State's print undergraduate literary magazine to increase clarity by using AP Style
- Maintain the artistic integrity of the authors by adhering to Kalliope's own style guide and standards

<b>Penn State Prime Branding &amp; Advertising Practicum</b>	<b>University Park, PA</b>
<i>Starbucks, Brand Communications Lead</i>	<i>Jan 2022 – May 2022</i>

- Developed slogans, copywriting and messaging that inspired Starbucks' current bulk gift card website design
- Researched past brand strategies to inform the creation of an innovative integrated marketing communications campaign to reach new customers and build brand loyalty

### ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- **Writing and Editing:** Advanced in AP Style, Blogging, Journalistic Writing, Copy Editing, and Copywriting
- **Design and Computer:** Proficient in Adobe Creative Cloud, Canva, Microsoft Suite, CMS, and Graphic Design
- **Interests:** Scrapbook Journaling, Cooking New Recipes, Listening to Taylor Swift, Reading Female-Centered Literature