

You Belong With Us?

A Netnographic Study of Status and Hierarchy in the Taylor Swift Fan
Community

by

Group 35

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Abstract

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Research Question: How do fans gain and maintain status within online fan communities through consumption of pop musicians?

Purpose: This study explored how fans gained and maintained status through consumption practices in online pop music fan communities. It focused on how this process was shaped by consumption, peer evaluation, platform visibility, and the artist's participation.

Theoretical Perspective: The data drew on Bourdieu's forms of capital and symbolic violence, Thornton's subcultural capital theory, and Lamont's symbolic boundaries to examine how status was gained and maintained within online fan communities.

Method: A qualitative Netnographic study was conducted using data from Taylor Swift-related subreddits, employing purposive and intensive sampling. Data were analyzed through a six-phase thematic analysis. The study adopted a relativist ontology and social constructionist epistemology, following an abductive research approach.

Empirical Results: The themes identified that status within the online Swiftie community was constructed through three dimensions. First, fans demonstrated dedication through visible consumption practices such as collecting, streaming, fan labor, and fan expertise. Second, status was shaped through processes of policing and judgment, in which distinctions were drawn between "real" and "casual" fans, alongside moral evaluations of artists and fandom. Third, proximity to Taylor Swift emerged as a status marker, where marketing strategies and platform metrics shaped perceived closeness.

Conclusion: Status in Taylor Swift's online subreddit communities was not fixed, but was an ongoing process in which consumption practices acquired meaning when made visible and validated by other fans. The findings extended work on brand communities, parasocial theory, and subcultural capital by showing how the artist actively shaped status hierarchies within the fandom, and highlighted tensions between fan devotion and the commercial system that sustained it.

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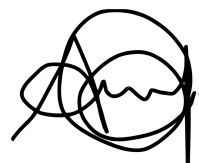
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1 Introduction

A fandom was defined as a community of people who engaged with a media property, where participation often involved creative and collaborative practices (Peeples et al. 2018). Over the years, numerous studies had examined celebrity fans and fandoms, including how fans engaged with celebrity culture and fan-celebrity encounters. A small but growing body of research had focused on fans and their relationships with celebrities.

Building on this, early researchers believed that mass media facilitated parasocial relationships, creating a dynamic in which audience members felt as though they personally knew the celebrities, perceiving this as an intimate connection. Different typologies had been developed to describe how audiences connected with celebrities, ranging from admiration, emotional attachment, to engagement with celebrity gossip, which could foster a sense of belonging to a shared community of values. Lastly, fandoms were not homogeneous; as perceptions of celebrities varied across fans and were interpreted in different ways (Gamson, 2015).

This diversity was evident within the Taylor Swift fandom, known as Swifties. Widely recognized as one of the biggest and most successful artists (Théberge, 2021), her large and digitally active fanbase had been described as a global phenomenon shaped by strong emotional connection and loyalty (Hamidan, 2025; Théberge, 2021; Zafina & Sinha, 2024). However, despite these shared attachments, the fandom was fragmented, with fans holding differing, sometimes opposing, perspectives (Driessen, 2022).

1.1 Background

The public recognition of fandom communities had evolved in recent decades, shifting from underground collectives to a broader ecosystem shaped by the rise of digital platforms (Booth, 2017, p.14). While fan engagement was once limited by geography and small-scale distribution networks (Duffett, 2013, p.184), digital platforms enabled participation across transnational platforms shaped by streaming, social media, and viral circulation (Jenkins et al. 2013). In this context, fan communities played a central role in how music was circulated, interpreted, and validated (Baym, 2018).

This shift had also transformed how fans engaged with consumption, with contemporary fandom shifting from passive consumption to more active forms of participation. Building on the idea of the “prosumer” (Toffler, 1980, p.291), fans increasingly engaged in content creation, promotional labor, and coordinated digital practices that could influence their visibility (Jenkins, 2006, p.134). This form of engagement made fandom a more continuous

and public activity, in which participation often occurred within collaborative fan communities (Jenkins, 2006, pp.134, 136-138).

As a result, fan participation became increasingly visible on digital platforms, and consumption practices extended beyond their functional purpose to become a form of identity expression. In these digital settings, such practices influenced how individuals were perceived by others, turning consumption into a form of social signaling rather than purely private enjoyment (Schau & Gilly, 2003). Online forums served as spaces where participation was visible and continuously evaluated, and where behavior and self-presentation were shaped by social expectations (Boyd, 2010, pp.4-5). At the same time, these environments could foster a strong sense of community and belonging (Pendry & Salvatore, 2015)

In this context, although fan spaces often appeared supportive and enthusiastic, the increased visibility of interactions on digital platforms could give rise to subtle hierarchies in which fans might feel pressure to follow community norms and expectations (Huang & Zou, 2025). This aligned with Zubernis and Larsen's (2012, p.13) findings, which argued that fan communities were often hierarchical and marked by aggressive behavior, indicating a high level of policing in these online communities. Within music fandoms, there was a clear hierarchy: ambient fans, engaged fans, superfans, and executive fans, each taking on different roles. Executive fans sat at the top and acted as opinion leaders or administrators of fan groups. They held the most status and discursive power, allowing them to influence conversations in the community (Edlom & Karlsson, 2021). In turn, fans created boundaries around who was considered a legitimate or authentic fan. Although fan communities were participatory spaces, they were still structured by internal hierarchies that distinguished highly active or knowledgeable fans from less active or less knowledgeable participants (Fiske, 1992, pp.43). Within these hierarchies, status was shaped less by interest alone and more by visibility, cultural knowledge, and demonstrated commitment (Bourdieu, 1984).

As Jancovich (2002, p.307) argued, fan culture became a "vicious struggle for distinction", where individuals actively judged and distanced themselves from other fans using negative stereotypes. What was considered a bad fan fell into two broad categories: behavioral stereotypes, which could be portrayed as excessive consumption and obsessive traits, and identity-based stereotypes that framed fans as having undesirable personal characteristics (Stanfill, 2013). Furthermore, anonymity in online spaces could intensify negative interactions by reducing the perceived consequences of users' actions, sometimes leading to withdrawal from fandom (Zubernis & Larsen, 2012, p.120). Alongside these dynamics, fans often developed a sense of obligation toward the artist, feeling they owed something back for the comfort, identity, or belonging the music had provided. This was expressed through promotion, unpaid support work, or financial contributions, which Baym (2018, p.125) described as a form of relational labor. Therefore, artists cultivated these relationships strategically, communicating in ways to evoke emotional responses. At the same time, there

was an increasing expectation that artists remained constantly accessible and personally open to audiences on social media. Musicians were often perceived as friends, and greater openness and sharing of personal aspects of their lives fostered connections with fans (p.171). This created significant pressure for musicians to remain constantly accessible and to build ongoing intimate relationships with their fans across digital platforms (p.1).

Taken together, these dynamics suggested that fan cultures were not just communities; they also functioned as social hierarchies. Bourdieu's work on cultural distinction offered a way to analyze how status was constructed in fan communities and how competition was central to fandoms in terms of fan knowledge, access, and status (Hills, 2002, p.20). In addition, as Thornton (1995, p.26) stated, subcultural capital could confer status, but only among those who recognized and valued such cultural signals. Fan cultural capital became a resource that structured recognition and influence within the community.

1.1.1 Problematization

While fandom was often understood as participatory and community-oriented, fan communities were not necessarily equal social spaces. Rather than functioning as purely collective environments, fandoms often contained internal hierarchies shaped by differences in engagement, knowledge, participation, and recognition. Edlom and Karlsson (2021) showed that fans occupied different positions within fandoms, ranging from casual “ambient” fans to “superfans” and “executive fans” (pp.124-125). While not all fans sought higher status positions, their findings suggested that fan communities nevertheless contained visible distinctions and competition for recognition and legitimacy.

Reinhard (2018) similarly argued that fandoms were organized through internal hierarchies, in which fans accumulated cultural capital through detailed knowledge of the object of affection and used it to position themselves as “true fans”. This identity often became exclusionary, as those who identified as “true fans” dismissed others as “fake fans” if they were seen as not fitting the expected fan ideal (Reinhard, 2021, pp.42, 45, 83). These hierarchies were shaped by factors such as how much a fan knew and which activities they participated in. Reinhard also noted that those in dominant positions could feel threatened by others and therefore acted to maintain their status. Over time, this gave the most invested fans greater influence in defining and enforcing ideas about legitimate behavior within the fan community (pp.44-45).

These dynamics became increasingly visible within digital fandoms, where participation and engagement were often publicly displayed and measurable. Metrics such as likes, follows, shares, streams, and other visible indicators functioned as accessible markers of popularity and engagement. However, these measures were not neutral; Baym (2013) argued that platform architectures encouraged users to pursue visibility and interaction, turning emotional investment into quantifiable value. As a result, fan participation became increasingly open to

comparison and evaluation, with visibility often associated with legitimacy, influence, and status.

This was particularly relevant within followership contexts surrounding musicians and celebrities, where fan practices extended beyond passive consumption. Liao (2021) observed that fans engaged in unpaid work to help their idols succeed in competitions, highlighting how followership could extend into competitive digital labor, in which fans invested effort not only for emotional connection but also to enhance their own status and the artist's.

Existing research on fandom and brand communities had primarily focused on status as a hierarchical outcome produced through consumption practices, visibility, and participation. While this research had provided important insights into how status differences were formed, it tended to emphasize outcomes more than the processes through which status was continuously gained and maintained in everyday digital interactions. Research on hierarchy, platform visibility, followership, and fan participation had largely been examined in isolation, with less focus on how these processes connected and influenced one another within fandom spaces.

This gap became evident in digital fan communities centered around musicians where engagement was highly visible, participatory, and continuously evaluated (Zhang et al. 2022). In these contexts, consumption became publicly visible and served as a basis for differentiating status within the community. This was evident in fandoms such as Taylor Swift's, where intense digital engagement and participatory culture were prevalent (Morris, 2024). News reports had documented how Taylor Swift fandom could foster toxicity and competitiveness (Smith, 2024). Such communities indicated that fandoms could involve not only shared identity and belonging but also the ways legitimacy and status were defined within the group.

This study addressed this gap by conceptualizing fandom not only as a community but also as a visibility-driven system in which status and legitimacy were continuously shaped. This led to the following research question:

How do fans gain and maintain status within online fan communities through consumption of pop musicians?

1.2 Research Purpose

The study aimed to provide new insights by exploring how fans gained and maintained status through consumption practices in online pop fan communities. It focused on understanding the influence of consumption, peer evaluation, platform visibility, and the artist's own role in fan dynamics. Together, these factors had not been fully examined in existing research.

Within the Swiftie community, different forms of consumption, such as streaming, purchasing merchandise, and engaging in fan activities, were interpreted and valued differently. Rather than being neutral, these practices were associated with varying degrees of legitimacy, authenticity, and status, contributing to the formation of informal hierarchies within the community. Reddit served as a digital space where continuous interaction was publicly visible, and comparisons among users were reflected in upvotes, comments, and posts. This provided a relevant context for examining how digital environments shaped status and belonging within fan communities.

Beyond its theoretical contributions to research on fan communities, brand communities, and digital consumption cultures, this study sought to provide practical insights for artists and brand managers into how fan engagement strategies operated and the tensions they might produce.

1.3 Delimitations

This study was delimited to focus on pop-music fandom rather than other forms of fandom, such as sports or film, to maintain a coherent and clearly defined research scope. The analysis was limited to the digital fan communities and online interactions. Offline contexts were not examined directly but were instead addressed through their representation in online discourses. In terms of consumption, the study focused on specific practices within the music fandom, including physical consumption (e.g., concert tickets and merchandise) and digital consumption (e.g., streaming), while excluding general consumption behavior unrelated to fandom practices.

Given that status could be defined in multiple ways, the study drew on Bourdieu's forms of capital (1986) and symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), Thornton's subcultural capital (1995), and Lamont's symbolic boundaries (1992), which were discussed in detail in the theoretical framework chapter. Finally, the study adopted a primarily fan-centric perspective, focusing on fans as consumers, while also acknowledging the artist's role in shaping fan behavior and community dynamics.

2 Literature Review

Previous research on status consumption and contexts in digital communities identified four main themes: Status, Consumption and Community Membership, Fan Communities and the Human Brand, Signaling Cultural Capital and Distinction, and Platformization and Production of Visibility. Together, these themes explored how status emerged through consumption, cultural distinction, relational dynamics, and platform visibility. These perspectives provided an understanding of how status was continuously gained and maintained across both social interaction and digital infrastructures.

2.1 Status, Consumption, and Community Membership

Status had historically been conceptualized through conspicuous consumption, a magnified display of luxury goods and services intended to signal wealth and social position (Veblen, 1899, pp.48-49; Bagwell & Bernheim, 1996). This form of status relied on public visibility and social recognition, determined by other members of the community (Trigg, 2001).

Holt (1995) emphasized that status was not solely determined through economic attributes and symbolic interpretations, but was embedded in social and symbolic practices that varied across contexts. Building on this view, subsequent research emphasized status's role in fostering social bonds and reinforcing a sense of belonging within collective groups. Cova (1997) defined linking value as the social bonds established and reinforced through products, services, and shared interests, while Cova and Cova (2002) showed that consumption operated as a key mechanism for reinforcing a sense of tribal belonging in brand communities. Therefore, status could signal cultural capital and influence how individuals participate in the community (Arsel & Thompson, 2011).

Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) defined a brand community as a non-geographic group of individuals who shared admiration for a brand. Three core elements characterized these communities. First, consciousness of kind referred to the shared sense of connection among members that distinguished insiders from others. Second, rituals and traditions consisted of repeated practices that preserved the community's history, culture, and shared meanings, and were often centered on collective consumption. Third, moral responsibility was the sense of obligation to support the community and its members. This included guiding others to use the brand appropriately, maintaining shared norms, and addressing those who violated them. Within brand communities, legitimacy and belonging were continuously gained and maintained. Members differentiated between authentic and faux members, as well as between old and new members, through cultural capital, oppositional loyalty, and adherence to norms. Oppositional loyalty, positioning the community against competing brands, reinforced a sense

of collective identity. According to the authors, status and belonging in brand communities were gained through shared consumption practices and moral boundary work.

Within brand communities, consumption practices functioned as the foundation for individuals to establish relationships grounded in shared values and mutual support. Commitment was further reinforced through side bets that were material and social investments that demonstrated and increased commitment in brand communities. As individuals invested more time, energy, and money, they felt a stronger sense of authenticity. Status within traditional brand communities was therefore gained through the individual's commitment and was also closely related to experience, participation, seniority, and knowledge accumulated over time. Schouten and McAlexander (1995) examined how status in the Harley-Davidson brand community derived from members' perceived commitment to the group. Belonging was not given but earned within relatively bounded communities, where recognition depended on how authenticity and engagement were judged.

2.2 Fan Communities and the Human Brand

While insights on brand communities stemmed from commercial contexts (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), fan communities extended this logic and were centered on human brands. These communities were tied to emotional and symbolic attachments to celebrities (Riddell, 2021). Previous studies indicated that pop music fandoms were characterized by high levels of consumer spending and time invested (Sandvoss, 2005, p.51). Fans identified with the celebrity as an extension of the self, reinforcing identity (Riddell, 2021). In addition to the forms of relational value, Thomson (2006) argued that celebrities functioned as human brands that held intangible assets, such as reputation, image, and credibility, which shaped perceived brand value.

Fans formed strong attachments to human brands, such as celebrities, because these relationships resembled real interpersonal ones, including feelings of intimacy and affection (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Chen et al. (2022) described this as a fan-idol bond marked by emotional intensity and a sense of personal connection. However, this form of attachment was asymmetrical, as parasocial relationships involved a one-sided perception of intimacy that developed between fans and celebrities who were unaware of them (Xu et al. 2022). This dynamic between fan-artists was often driven by the desire to maintain closeness with the artist and could evolve into a parasocial bond, in which fans experienced a sense of intimacy and closeness with the artist (Suprpto et al. 2025).

Building on this, McCutcheon et al. (2002) conceptualized celebrity worship as a psychological framework with three levels of engagement. The lowest level involved supporting a celebrity for entertainment purposes, the middle level meant discussing the

celebrity with friends and other admirers, and the highest level showed 'obsessive-compulsive features' and 'delusional beliefs', in which individuals believed they shared a real personal connection with the artist (p.81). These levels suggested that fan attachment to celebrities could range from casual engagement to intense identification, with the strongest forms resembling devotion. Earlier work by Bennett (1926) had defined worship as 'religion in act' (p.486), grounded in religious practice, offering a broader way of understanding devotion, which this study drew on alongside McCutcheon et al.'s (2002) psychological framework.

Through more direct and personal communication with audiences, Baym (2018) argued that musicians increasingly presented their private selves, positioning intimacy as a key marker of authenticity (p.172). Relational labor was defined as the ongoing, interactive, and emotional effort involved in building and maintaining closer connections with audiences, creating relationships that felt close and could sustain their support over time (pp.19, 53). Baym indicated that when fans discovered an artist on social media, this perceived closeness could increase their likelihood of purchasing the artist's music, highlighting how artist-fan relationships could translate into consumption (p.5).

Marwick and Boyd (2011) demonstrated that status was often linked to perceived proximity to the artist, such as acknowledgment or notice online through a reply or direct message. Fans who received this interaction from an artist gained a higher status, being perceived as “mini celebrities” in the online community (p.150). The authors emphasized that status was gained and enhanced through fan-musician dynamics, in which fans competed for visibility that only celebrities could confer.

2.3 Signaling Cultural Capital and Distinction

Beyond hierarchies in communities, status in consumer research had also been examined through signaling of cultural capital, which was communicated through consumption. Previous studies by Han et al. (2010) introduced the concept of brand prominence, illustrating how preferences for status signaling varied across audiences. The authors established that effective status communication relied less on the signal itself than on the audience's ability to interpret it. Specifically, wealthy consumers with a low need for status could recognize cues without brand names, whereas less wealthy consumers relied on explicit branding. Hence, status signals were not inherently conspicuous or inconspicuous; it depended more on whether the audience could correctly interpret them. The authors illustrated that the ability to use subtle markers depended not only on wealth but also on cultural capital, which even some wealthy consumers could lack.

Berger and Ward (2010) indicated that individuals tended to use consumption as a signal of identity when products were closely tied to self-identity and to visibility to others. However,

not all individuals shared these preferences for similar types of signals. Today, traditional, highly visible status signals were less effective because increased accessibility and imitation had reduced exclusivity. This introduced a paradox in status signaling: highly visible brand signals facilitated recognition by the general public; they simultaneously made status easier to replicate, weakening its exclusivity. Consequently, individuals with high cultural capital tended to prefer subtle signs that were only decodable to other insiders. Mainstream consumers lacked such knowledge and therefore relied on more explicit markers. These subtle signals served as status markers recognizable only to insiders, enabling differentiation from the mainstream. Furthermore, because outsiders often failed to recognize subtle luxury signals, these signals were less likely to be copied by mainstream consumers seeking to imitate high-status groups. This helped insiders protect their status and maintain distinction within the group. As a result, a system of symbolic cues was created to maintain in-group recognition while restricting access to outsiders.

McQuarrie et al. (2013) showed that ordinary consumers acquired a mass audience online through what they called the megaphone effect, the process by which individuals displayed taste recognized by others and produced cultural capital. In this study, status was not dependent on established industry actors but developed through a repetitive public display of taste that demonstrated aesthetic discrimination. Participants gained cultural capital by signaling superior judgment, which could translate into economic and social rewards.

2.4 Platformization and Production of Visibility

Research on platformization highlighted how algorithms and engagement shaped visibility and recognition, and how these processes related to hierarchies within online fan communities. Digital platforms not only acted as neutral spaces where individuals interacted but also actively shaped public discussions by organizing, monetizing, displaying, and removing content. Like traditional media, these platforms were powerful models of visibility, participation, and social conflict, while appearing objective and unbiased (Gillespie, 2010). Social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and TikTok, structured creator engagement through algorithmic systems that determined visibility based on metrics such as likes, views, and shares (Duffy & Meisner, 2022). As Bucher and Helmond (2017) argued, features such as likes functioned as a “universal currency” (p.382) that made engagement measurable and publicly comparable, while platforms actively shaped visibility through design changes, positioning themselves as active participants in the production and negotiation of status (pp.381–382).

Bucher (2012) argued that on social media platforms like Facebook, visibility was not given but gained through software that acted as the algorithmic voice. Visibility was not about one's presence but about being selected by the algorithm. This created a system in which participation was constantly ranked and monitored, making users feel pressured to stay visible. Visibility worked more as a reward for interaction rather than as a form of punishment. Building on this, Bucher (2018, pp. 7–8, 107) conceptualized algorithmic power as a form of gatekeeping that not only tailored what users saw on platforms based on their behavior, but also reinforced existing power structures. By filtering and prioritizing visibility, algorithms shaped participation in online communities, elevating certain users and positioning them within established hierarchies. This was evident in Bucher's analysis of Facebook's News Feed, where only a small fraction of content became visible while the majority remained unseen (p.7). Despite the appearance that algorithmic visibility rewarded interaction, Bucher (2012) showed that the system produced unequal opportunities, in which prominent users gained greater exposure while less-connected users remained largely invisible. As Bucher (2018, p.155) further argued, agency was not symmetrically distributed, meaning that different actors did not have the same level of power within these systems.

This algorithmic logic extended across social media spaces. Platforms like TikTok had reshaped how visibility was achieved, rewarding those whose content aligned with the platform's logics, through mediated content like video creation and engagement through likes, comments, and shares, to reach the "For You Page" and gain recognition among other users (Abidin, 2020, p.79). As Cotter (2019) noted, manipulating platforms' mechanisms to gain visibility had been defined as "gaming the system" (p.896). She argued that algorithms relied on anticipated patterns of behavior, positioning users as active participants within structured systems. Marwick (2015) further showed that visibility on Instagram, measured through likes and followers, functioned as social currency even without material consumption, where gaining an audience became the status itself, surpassing the display of material goods. Although it might appear that status could be achieved by anyone online, these individuals who successfully gained visibility often aligned with conventional markers of success, such as wealth, proximity to celebrities, and physical attractiveness. Platform ranking systems based on engagement metrics were designed to sustain prolonged user attention, influencing behavior and exposure (Metzler & Garcia, 2023), generating continuous pressure to sustain visibility and virality (Mears & Beauvais, 2025). Engagement metrics such as likes and shares served as indicators of social recognition and could also enhance the perceived status of products by increasing their value (Anlamlier et al. 2025).

These platform dynamics shaped status not only at the individual level but also within communities. In virtual communities, influence was not determined by traditional status markers such as age or income. Instead, members who contributed actively and demonstrated greater knowledge became influential voices (De Valck, 2005, pp.47, 228, 237). In some instances, fans engaged in strategic behavior, drawing on strong bonds and social capital to

increase visibility to push and dominate trending spaces (Recuero et al. 2012). However, platforms actively encouraged this competition for visibility by turning affective responses made by fans into measurable indicators such as reactions and follower counts (Stanfill, 2019, pp.140-141). This platformization facilitated the rapid amplification and coordination of online harassment and exclusionary acts within fan communities (Stanfill, 2024), thereby increasing competition for recognition as metrics became markers of success. (Duffy, 2017, pp.74-75). Sibai et al. (2024) examined an activity-based forum organized around a music genre, rather than a single public figure. In these virtual spaces, individuals participated in conflicts to gain status among others. This highlighted how conflict and structured violence contributed to social differences between members within these communities.

Within virtual communities specifically, these dynamics became more coordinated and intense. Hierarchies within digital idol fandoms were intensified by the highly coordinated nature of fan participation. Fans invested significant amounts of time, energy, and money in pursuit of contributing to the idol's success. Within this context, participation became a signal of dedication and recognition while engagement metrics and platform visibility reinforced status differentiation and hierarchies within the community. This suggested that status was actively gained through continuous processes of visibility and evaluation of fan activities (Huang & Zou, 2025). While Zhang et al. (2022) did not explicitly test status as a variable, the study demonstrated that fans manipulated these engagement metrics to boost their idol's visibility while suppressing unfavorable content. This behavior signaled effort and commitment, suggesting that higher engagement might serve as a form of social recognition and fulfillment. The relationship between engagement and visibility became more complex when fan interactions were shaped across social media platforms, where achieving high engagement required knowledge of platform algorithms, leading to acts of exclusion in the fan community. This indicated that visibility within these spaces was not stable but was maintained and negotiated among fans, algorithms, and platforms, as recognition depended on how user activity was rewarded and made visible through platform mechanisms (Bishop, 2018).

Yin (2020) argued that fans on digital platforms were not only consumers but also actively contributed data as a form of immaterial labor. Actions such as liking and commenting on celebrities were quantified, ranked, and incentivized by the platform's algorithm. Platforms transformed fans' emotions into data, enabling fans to signal devotion to the artist, a process Yin (2021) called the "datafication of emotional labor" (p.460). Fans contributed data as part of their daily routine, and since the algorithm ranked users through likes, comments, and reposts, fans often felt a sense of obligation to contribute to support their idol. In contrast to the appearance that fans were merely exploited by digital platforms, Yin (2020) highlighted that fans were not passive victims; they learned the algorithmic rules and developed creative tactics to manipulate visibility, suggesting a limited but active role within platform constraints. Moreover, Yin (2021) highlighted a paradox in which authentic affection for an idol was mediated by quantified engagement metrics, creating a tension between emotional attachment

and its measurement by data. Drawing on these findings, status within fan communities was closely tied to measurable data contributions, which might marginalize fans who could not or would not engage in intensive data labor.

Taken together, the four streams provided valuable insights, but they did not fully capture the phenomenon our study aimed to explore, as they left unaddressed elements that were central to fan communities. Research on brand communities established that consumption-based communities developed hierarchies that distinguished authentic from inauthentic members and enforced behavioral norms (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). These patterns also appeared in fan communities; however, the literature treated the brand as a passive object around which the community organized, rather than an active participant that validated particular members. While later research on the human brand acknowledged the artist's presence, it generally framed accessibility, including artist-fan interactions, as a celebrity characteristic rather than as a dynamic that actively shaped hierarchies between fans (Thomson, 2006). Baym (2018) came closer to this idea by describing relational labor as an ongoing process between artists and audiences, but she still framed it as a connection built with audiences as a whole, rather than something that created status differences between fans.

Work on signaling and cultural capital established that status communication was highly dependent on the audience, in which subtle cues were readable only to insiders and functioned as indicators of cultural capital. This perspective was relevant in fan communities, where status was often expressed through artist-specific knowledge that only other fans could recognize. At the same time, this literature treated the signal as an attribute of the individual, disregarding how signals were constantly shaped, assessed, and negotiated by peers and platforms in real time (Han et al. 2010; Berger & Ward, 2010). Even McQuarrie et al. (2013), who acknowledged audience reception through the megaphone effect, framed it as one-directional recognition of taste rather than as ongoing peer evaluation that shaped hierarchies.

Studies of platformization highlighted how visibility was produced and negotiated through algorithmic systems. While this provided a solid foundation for understanding how status operated in platform-based fan communities, it rarely connected these dynamics to the cultural capital signaling discussed earlier. Visibility was therefore typically understood in relation to platforms and peer audiences, with little attention to the artist as a central figure shaping how status was recognized within fan communities (Bucher, 2012, 2018; Cotter, 2019). Marwick (2015) and Stanfill (2024) focused more directly on fan dynamics, examining visibility as social currency and the platform coordination of fan harassment, respectively, but in both cases, status was theorized through peer audiences and platform mechanics rather than through the artist's role in validating particular fans. Yin (2020, 2021) came closer by examining how fans signaled devotion to the artist through quantified data labor, but the artist remained the

object of devotion rather than an active participant, validating particular fans and reproducing hierarchies among them.

To address these gaps, this study examined how status was gained and maintained in online fan communities as an integrated process in which the human brand was present as both an object and an active participant. Visibility was continuously shaped through peer evaluation and might be validated by the artist. Consumption was openly visible to other fans in real time, conditions that current literature had not yet fully theorized together.

3 Theoretical Framework

The following theoretical concepts provided the foundation for exploring the research gap addressed in this study: Lamont's symbolic boundaries (1992), Bourdieu's symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), Bourdieu's forms of capital (1986), and subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995). Given this study's focus on how consumption shaped status and social hierarchies, resulting in inclusionary and exclusionary acts, these theories helped explain how distinction, legitimacy, and hierarchies were developed and negotiated within communities. Symbolic boundary theory examined how distinctions were created in everyday life, while symbolic violence highlighted the mechanisms through which these distinctions became legitimized and internalized. Bourdieu's forms of capital, particularly economic and symbolic capital, further explained the resources individuals drew on to produce social differentiation, with symbolic capital capturing how others' recognition transformed these resources into status. Building on Bourdieu's broader concept of cultural capital, Thornton introduced the concept of subcultural capital, which examined how status was gained in subcultural contexts through insider knowledge, authenticity, and distinction from the mainstream. Subcultural capital was particularly relevant to online fan communities, as it explained how value was produced within insider groups through knowledge, taste, and authenticity that outsiders did not recognize. This study explored how it shaped status formation within the fandom.

3.1 Symbolic Violence

Building on Max Weber's argument that legitimacy was central to maintaining power, Bourdieu explained how such legitimacy was produced and sustained in society (Swartz, 2011, p.146). He developed the concept of symbolic violence by extending ideas from Marx's ideology and Gramsci's hegemony. While both explained domination through ideas and messages, Bourdieu argued that this alone was insufficient (p.1035)

Bourdieu therefore examined why inequality persisted across generations despite limited resistance and without individuals recognizing how they were dominated (Swartz, p.1034). This concern also shaped his critique of Marxism. According to Burawoy (2019, pp.34-35), Bourdieu argued that Marxism could not explain how the working class became a recognized social group because it lacked a concept of symbolic violence. As a result, it focused on material conditions but overlooked how power also worked through meanings, categories, and shared beliefs that made social groups appear real and legitimate.

To explain this process, Bourdieu introduced symbolic power, which he defined as the ability to shape what was understood as legitimate and meaningful (Swartz, 2011, p.1034). Symbolic

violence referred to a form of power exercised without physical force or direct pressure, in which individuals partook in their own domination without realizing it (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.167). This domination was subtle and often perceived as natural and legitimate by both dominant and subordinate groups. It operated through everyday practices, language, classifications, and cultural norms that reproduced social hierarchies; it was also embodied in self-presentation and body language (Schubert, 2013, p.184; Swartz, 2011, pp.146, 1034). In this way, domination functioned as an internalized structure in which the preferences and forms of capital associated with dominant groups were misrecognized as objective value or merit (Schubert, 2013, p.184).

This internalized structure was what Bourdieu called *habitus*, a system shaped by broader social conditions that guided how people think, perceive, and act, often leading to the reproduction of existing power relations (Burawoy, 2019, pp.23, 44-45). Each person developed a *habitus* that served as an internal sense of self, dictating and guiding actions. This *habitus* was reinforced because individuals constantly monitored one another in relation to those beliefs (Mills et al. 2010). As Burawoy (2019) interpreted, Bourdieu's symbolic violence operated across all social fields (p.8). The social hierarchy usually remained stable; a crisis could change the existing values, redefining what was considered valuable capital. Even then, the field stabilized again, maintaining the social hierarchy and adjusting to new criteria of capital (Mills et al. 2010). Consequently, symbolic violence became effective when marginalized individuals accepted their subordinate position within a social field as a reflection of their inherent limitations, thereby reproducing and legitimizing the very power structures that constrained them (Schubert, 2013, pp.190-192).

An example of this process could be seen in education. Schooling was structured in a way that presupposed the cultural capital of the dominant class, even though it was presented as neutral and merit-based, thereby contributing to the reproduction of inequality in society (Thomson, 2013, pp.73-74). Dominant groups interpreted their success as natural and merit-based, while non-dominant groups were more likely to attribute failure to personal shortcomings; this reflected how symbolic violence operated in practice (Crossley, 2013, p.94).

3.2 Symbolic Boundaries

Symbolic boundaries referred to the central distinctions that certain groups of individuals drew to classify other persons, practices, and material or immaterial objects (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, p.168). These variations served as markers of inclusion and exclusion, establishing hierarchical distinctions in which certain individuals were deemed worthy and legitimate members of the community, while others were belittled as outsiders (Mijić & Parzer, 2024). While Bourdieu focused on symbolic violence as the process by which social differences were

internalized as legitimate, Lamont's theory of symbolic boundaries emphasized how individuals actively drew, negotiated, and reproduced distinctions in everyday life. They were developed to understand the dynamics of social hierarchies and the processes by which individuals maintained a sense of identity and membership within their community. In this sense, symbolic boundaries provided a broader understanding of the moral, cultural, and socioeconomic aspects that shaped how individuals assigned value and drew hierarchies among groups (Lamont, 1992, pp.4-5, 9-12).

The process of drawing social distinctions was closely tied to identity construction, as individuals sought to develop a sense of dignity and honor, with daily practices oriented toward policing group hierarchies. At a broader level, it reinforced social order by strengthening collective norms and organizing social structures (Lamont, 1992, p.11-12). These symbolic boundaries could also have become institutionalized, producing unequal access to material and non-material resources and opportunities (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, p.168). However, these distinctions did not necessarily lead to exclusion; instead, inequality emerged as an unintended outcome of how individuals defined themselves within the community. (Lamont, 1992, p.6).

Three types of symbolic boundaries were identified by Lamont (1992): moral distinctions, cultural boundaries, and socioeconomic boundaries (p.4). Moral boundaries were based on evaluations of moral character, through which individuals evaluated worth through ethical conduct, such as honesty, integrity, and social responsibility, rather than material acts of success, and drew distinctions between others that did not align with these beliefs (pp.4, 63). Socioeconomic boundaries defined worth through social position, embodied by wealth, power, professional background, and class. In this scenario, success acted as a key indicator of value, where money functioned as a central signal of legitimacy in social contexts. Hierarchical distinctions were reinforced by linking identity to measurable success, thereby generating exclusion of those perceived as less accomplished (pp.63-64). Lastly, cultural boundaries were constructed by markers such as an individual's education level, taste, manners, and familiarity with high-culture frameworks. These distinctions extended beyond behavioral attitudes to include judgments of character and worldview, thereby reinforcing acts of exclusivity grounded in lifestyle and knowledge (p.4, 114).

3.3 Forms of Capital

Bourdieu's theory of practice provided a framework for analyzing complex social structures and relationships that shaped differences in individuals' everyday practices (Apps et al. 2019). These practices surfaced within fields, which were structured social spaces organized around specific forms of capital, where individuals competed over status, resources, and social

positions (Swartz, 1997, p.117-119). Fields could be found across areas such as the arts, academia, finance, and politics, where individuals could interact either as individuals or as part of a collective (Delva et al. 2021). Within these spaces, individuals' practices were guided by the habitus (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.72-73).

Social hierarchies were not determined exclusively by economic resources, but were also shaped by forms of capital such as knowledge, taste, and skills (Bourdieu, 1986, p.241). To explain this, Bourdieu identified three forms of capital: cultural, social, and economic.

Cultural capital referred to non-economic resources such as knowledge, skills, education, and dispositions that shaped and reproduced social inequality (Bourdieu, 1986, pp.243-245). It functioned as a mechanism of distinction, in which markers of cultural competence reflected and reinforced social hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1977, p.164). Social capital was defined as the assets individuals gained through relationships and networks that could generate status, influence, and opportunities. These dynamics were particularly evident in exclusive contexts, where access itself became a form of power (Thornton, 1995, pp.24-26). Although cultural and social capital might overlap with economic capital, they did not automatically translate into economic capital, as individuals might hold uneven distributions across different forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986, pp.243-245). According to Bourdieu (2011), economic capital referred to resources that could be directly converted into money, including cash, property, and ownership rights, and was the most tangible form of capital. Cultural and social capital, in contrast, only became convertible into economic capital under particular conditions (p.242). He further argued that economic capital was the root of all the other forms of capital (p.250). Finally, symbolic capital was central to the transformation of any form of capital into status. It described the prestige, recognition, and legitimacy that individuals held when their economic or cultural capital was socially acknowledged. As a form of power, those with greater symbolic capital could shape what was considered valuable and legitimate within the community (Bourdieu, 1989).

3.4 Subcultural Capital

Building on the concept of cultural capital, Thornton proposed a theory of subcultural capital, developed through ethnographic and archival research on the British dance music scene (1995, p.23). Thornton argued that Bourdieu's concept of capital did not fully account for subcultural capital. While Bourdieu discussed slang and popular distinctions, he did not treat them as a structured form of capital. Thornton developed subcultural capital through research on youth club cultures, arguing that these spaces operated as "refuges for the young where their rules hold sway" (p.26), where distinct social rules and hierarchies were produced. Subcultural distinctions had significant social consequences within and beyond these spaces (pp.26-27).

In subcultural capital, status counted only when it was recognized by others. It involved objects one owned, such as fashionable haircuts or well-chosen record collections, and qualities embodied in a person, as well as being “in the know” (p.27). This meant possessing insider knowledge and displaying it effortlessly and authentically rather than performatively. These criteria might affect one’s economic capital by enabling access to job opportunities in cultural industries. A key distinction from cultural capital was that the media played a central role in circulating and shaping subcultural capital (pp.27-29).

Most importantly, subcultural capital was constructed through distinction, as individuals gained status by differentiating themselves from the perceived mainstream and framing it as less desirable (pp.158, 164). While subcultural capital appeared independent of one's traditional social class, it produced an alternative hierarchy based on social identity markers (pp.28, 164).

Club cultures were “taste cultures” built around shared preferences in music, media consumption, and most importantly, social associations with like-minded people. Participation in these cultures was socially learned. However, these cultures were not equal; they contained a structured internal hierarchy of what was legitimate and authentic through which individuals could become ‘hip’. Authenticity, therefore, became a key criterion of value within these spaces (p.15). Furthermore, Thornton argued that distinctions were not neutral, but were used to assert authority and position others as inferior. This showed that hierarchies were created through comparison, as groups defined themselves in relation to others (p.24).

In the underground fashion system, subcultural capital was shown to be temporary and dependent on position, timing, and context, allowing “hipness” to remain exclusive to those who were culturally informed and positioned within the scene. By design, it quickly became devalued; this built-in obsolescence explained why media were important, as they distributed the cultural knowledge of what was defined as hip at the moment (p.182-183). When trends spread through mass media, overexposure occurred as subcultural knowledge became widely recognized. This reduced exclusivity and, therefore, devalued subcultural capital (p.19).

Although Bourdieu's broader concept of cultural capital was widely used in consumer research, subcultural capital was better suited to studying fan communities, where knowledge, taste, and references were recognized by insiders rather than by wider society. Thornton introduced subcultural capital because Bourdieu's framework did not fully capture how status operated in subcultures, particularly among youth, where media played a central role and class was not directly tied to position. This study, therefore, adopted subcultural capital as the primary lens for analyzing how status was produced within the Swiftie community.

4 Methodology

4.1 Research Philosophy

This study adopted a relativist ontology, in which reality was not singular, fixed, or objective but existed across multiple perspectives and was socially produced and shaped by individuals' experiences and contexts (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021, pp.73-74). From this perspective, realities would not be considered universally true but rather contingent and context-dependent, and might shift over time as interpretations evolved (Lincoln & Guba, 1994, pp.110-111). Accordingly, status in music fandom was not treated as an objective or fixed attribute, but as something that emerged through ongoing collective discussions within online communities. What counted as status was not predetermined, but continuously negotiated through shared meanings that could differ between individuals and situations.

At the epistemological level, the study adopted a social constructionist stance, which concerned how knowledge of the social world was produced and investigated (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021, p.72). Moreover, knowledge was not objective or independent; rather, it was socially constructed through interactions and interpretations. Knowledge was therefore understood as actively co-created through social interactions and interpretations, rather than as a reflection of external truth. This perspective would prioritize understanding and valuing diverse experiences over seeking universal laws or rules to explain behavior. Through language and social interaction, knowledge and interpretations of the world would be collectively constructed (pp.78-79). As meanings were not fixed and continuously negotiated through interaction and language, this perspective was particularly relevant for studying online fan communities, where communication was central to how status was understood and maintained. By observing interactions, fans interpreted each other's behaviors and consumption displays, which might signal an individual's position within the community.

In line with this epistemological position, the study aimed to explore how fans interpreted and assigned meanings to status and consumption practices in online spaces, with a focus on socially constructed hierarchies. Given the nature of this research, it was assumed that participants held multiple, potentially varied understandings of status rather than a single, shared definition.

4.2 Research Approach

We adopted an abductive approach, moving between empirical observations of Swifties' interactions within subreddit communities and theoretical concepts such as symbolic boundaries. Rather than applying theory in a fixed way, these concepts guided interpretation while remaining open to patterns in the data. Through repeated engagement with the dataset, we found that parasocial relationships were a central factor of the themes found, which led us to refine the theoretical framework as findings emerged (Sandoval-Hernández & Rutkowski, 2024).

Observation in qualitative research involved examining behaviors, interactions, and patterns of engagement within their natural contexts (Patton, 2002, p.4). Therefore a qualitative approach was appropriate for exploring how fans gained and maintained meaning from consumption and status within online communities, as it allowed for a more detailed interpretation of social interaction than was typically possible with quantitative methods.

4.3 Research Design

4.3.1 Netnography

The ethnographic methodology had been widely applied in cultural, sociological, and consumer-related studies, as well as in a wide variety of other social scientific fields (Kozinets, 2002). It could be defined as the study of social interactions, perceptions, behaviors, and attitudes that occurred within communities, organizations, and societies (Reeves et al. 2008). Ethnography's strength lay in observing the everyday routines of a group of individuals, in contrast to other methodologies that analyzed these behaviors through interviews. This methodology focused on observing and talking with community members (Flick, 2014, p.36). Given that the phenomenon was embedded in online environments, a traditional ethnographic approach was limited in its ability to capture where these interactions took place.

Netnography merged the concepts of "ethnography" and the "internet," reflecting their methodological parallels while emphasizing its focus on virtual environments (Kozinets et al. 2014, p.262). This approach involved a structured set of interrelated processes for data collection, analysis, and reporting, in which participant observations were derived from publicly available content in digital spaces (Kozinets, 2015, p.171). Compared with other qualitative methods, netnography enabled researchers to systematically access and analyze publicly shared data from online communities, facilitating a deeper understanding of users' behaviors, consumption practices, symbolic expressions, and underlying motivations

(Kozinets, 2002). It was particularly well-suited to studying how communication occurred in real time in online environments shaped by platform features (Kozinets, 2015, p.5).

Kozinets (2002) identified several online environments suitable for a netnographic study, including virtual spaces, such as bulletin boards, chat rooms, virtual worlds, blogs, social networking platforms, and audiovisual sites, among others (Kozinets, 2015, p.354-355). However, these online environments were increasingly complex due to the volume and diversity of interactions. Communication might occur publicly or privately, synchronously or asynchronously, and across multiple platforms and formats, often with overlapping conversations (Kozinets et al. p.264).

This method was well suited to studying Taylor Swift's online fan community, "Swifties," as it enabled observation of interactions among geographically dispersed members connected through platforms such as Reddit. Moreover, netnography benefited from the interconnected nature of the internet, including search engines and platform structures (Kozinets et al. 2014, p.263).

4.3.2 Reddit

Online forums functioned as spaces for discussion, evaluation, knowledge-building, and interpretation. They enabled users to share experiences and perspectives in collective exchanges, while also supporting peer networks through which individuals could seek guidance and form communities. At the same time, participation could lead to the emergence of informal hierarchies, where certain users gained greater influence within the community. Because interactions took place without physical presence and often through partially anonymous profiles, these spaces could both enable open discussion and contribute to hostile dynamics (Jansson, 2019; Sunita, 2024).

Within this broader landscape, Reddit was selected as the empirical site of analysis. In 2025, the platform had an estimated 70 million daily active users and was organized around user-generated communities known as "subreddits." In contrast to other social networking platforms, Reddit's structure was based on threaded discussions and a voting system in which users upvote or downvote content. With more than 138,000 active subreddits, this mechanism shaped visibility (Fiesler et al., 2024; Tang et al., 2021; Schmitz & Samory, 2025). Thereby impacting who stood out and who was seen as more prominent in the community.

According to Boehmer and O'Hallarn (2026), Reddit users perceived the platform as enabling deeper and more intelligent discussions than other social media sites. In addition, platforms like Facebook and Twitter tended to favor short, quick posts, whereas Reddit allowed longer, more in-depth posts and comments (Bonifazi et al. 2023). The platform included a wide range of comment lengths, from single-word replies to highly detailed posts, and Reddit had

extensive data, with millions of comments posted monthly. It was considered to be more accessible than other platforms with fewer restrictions, such as no character limit, unlike X, and the majority of the content was public compared to platforms such as Facebook (Messerli et al. 2025). Conversations on the platform were structured as tree-like structures known as discussion trees. This allowed for wide and deep conversations (Yu et al. 2024). Therefore, we considered Reddit the most suitable platform for this study, as it enabled observation of naturally occurring interactions in which the meaning of status was continuously gained and maintained within the Taylor Swift fandom.

4.3.3 Taylor Swift's Fandom

Because of the large-scale and high digital presence of Taylor Swift's fandom, known as "Swifties," this community was selected as the focus of the research. This fandom had been recognized as highly engaged, loyal, and creative, with a strong sense of togetherness (Hamidan, 2025). Fandom participation extended across both material and immaterial practices, ranging from acquiring limited-edition merchandise, concert tickets, special-edition CDs and vinyl records, and friendship bracelets to streaming, online community engagement, and the creation of fan art (Murphy, 2022; Wind, 2024; Escurignan, 2025).

What made this fandom particularly relevant to the study was the visibility of marketing strategies in shaping fans' engagement with Taylor Swift as an artist (Adler et al., 2025). Taylor Swift adopted a strategy of releasing multiple variants, encouraging repeated engagement and consumption run by her management team (Rossman, 2022). This combination of strong fan engagement and the commercial nature of the fandom made the Swiftie community a relevant setting for exploring how consumption was discussed and understood in online fan communities.

4.4 Data Collection Method

4.4.1 Online Communities

From the wide range of Swiftie-related subreddit communities, eleven subreddits were selected for this study. This selection reflected the understanding that subreddits operated as separate spaces with their own moderators, norms, and communication styles. The selection was designed to capture the different opinions and attitudes fans held toward both consumption and the artist, rather than focusing solely on highly positive perspectives. The subreddits could be grouped into four categories.

General fandom spaces, where discussion of Taylor Swift and the wider fandom took place: r/TaylorSwift, r/swifties, r/TrueSwifties.

Consumption-focused communities, centered on merchandise, vinyl, and collecting practices: r/SwiftieMerch, r/TaylorSwiftMerch, r/TaylorSwiftVinyl.

More critical spaces, where discussion was more reflective and sometimes challenged the dominant views in the fandom: r/SwiftlyNeutral, r/NuancingTaylorSwift, r/travisandtaylor.

Satirical or meme-based spaces that used humor and exaggeration to comment on fandom culture: r/swiftiecirclejerk, r/YouBelongWithMemes.

One notable feature of the Swiftie fandom was the presence of multiple subreddits dedicated to consumption practices such as merchandise, vinyl variants, and collection displays. In many online fandoms, these discussions were usually scattered across general threads. The presence of r/SwiftieMerch, r/TaylorSwiftMerch, and r/TaylorSwiftVinyl as separate communities suggested that consumption played a big role within this fandom, as discussion and participation often centered on collecting practices.

4.4.2 Sampling Strategy

A purposeful sampling method was used to strategically select posts and comments that met the study's predetermined criteria, specifically posts that illustrated fans' negotiation of status through consumption-related activities in subreddits related to Taylor Swift (Patton, 2015, p.264). An intensity sampling strategy was implemented to ensure that the data would capture information-rich cases in which the phenomenon was strongly manifested but not excessively displayed (Patton, 2015, p.267). Data collection would proceed until insights into the negotiation of status through consumption practices were reached and no new themes emerged, following a saturation sampling approach (Patton, 2015, p.271).

In order to manage the large amount of available data on the Reddit platform, we followed Kozinets (2019, p.226-228) five criteria for netnographic research, as presented below.

Relevance

The data was selected based on its relevance to the study's purpose. To follow this criterion, we studied only subreddit communities dedicated to Taylor Swift and fan engagement, particularly those on related topics such as consumption, merchandise, streaming practices, and expertise, where status and hierarchies could be observed. The selection of these communities ensured that the data directly reflected how fans gained and maintained status through consumption.

Activity

As Taylor Swift was a worldwide artist with a strong online presence, her fanbase was highly active. While there were many Taylor Swift-related communities on Reddit, only some generated consistent daily discussions, which limited the amount of relevant data available for analysis. For this study, we focused on high quality discussions and weekly contributions within each subreddit community, rather than the number of members. Each of the chosen subreddits had active members posting regularly within the selected timeframe. This ensured that the data captured ongoing fan interactions. The details of these communities were presented in Table 1 below.

Interactivity

The level of interactivity between community members was a central criterion in the data collection process. Threads that generated discussion among fans were prioritized over those with fewer or no interactions, as they provided richer insights into how status and legitimacy were collectively gained and maintained. This allowed the data to demonstrate community interaction rather than just individual expressions.

Diversity

To capture a broader perspective among Swifties, data were collected from four types of subreddit communities: general fandom spaces; consumption-focused communities centered on merchandise, vinyls, and collecting practices; critical spaces; and meme-based communities. Once unnecessary comments were excluded, the dataset was reduced to 204 comments for analysis. The selected posts spanned different album eras and time periods within the chosen timeframe to capture the evolution of fan dynamics. This approach aimed to reduce the risk of only focusing on a single type of fan or a specific moment in the artist's history.

Richness

Data richness was prioritized throughout the data collection process. Posts and comments on Reddit threads that contained detailed descriptions or extended discussions were selected because they provided significant context for interpretation. Shorter responses and comments with lower engagement were also included when they added meaningful value to the discussion. Visual content, such as pictures or videos, was also collected. This focus on richness ensured that the data captured real-time interactions in which fans expressed themselves authentically.

Table 1. Netnography sampling of subreddit communities.

Group Name	Platform	Number of members (22nd May 2026)	Weekly contributions (22nd May 2026)
r/TaylorSwift	Reddit	314,000	5,000
r/travisandtaylor	Reddit	302,000	9,900
r/SwiftlyNeutral	Reddit	123,000	4,200
r/TrueSwifties	Reddit	72,000	1,100
r/NuancingTaylorSwift	Reddit	23,000	1,900
r/SwiftieMerch	Reddit	16,000	226
r/swifties	Reddit	16,000	1000
r/YouBelongWithMemes	Reddit	15,000	196
r/TaylorSwiftMerch	Reddit	11,000	389
r/TaylorSwiftVinyl	Reddit	6,000	116
r/swiftiecirclejerk	Reddit	3,900	295

4.4.3 Reddit Time Frame

Data was collected from Reddit posts and comments published between 2021 and 2026. This time frame was selected because it coincided with an active phase in Taylor Swift's career, including the release of multiple re-recorded and new studio albums, alongside the Eras Tour. This period had been associated with recurring cycles of merchandise releases, media attention, and online fan discourse (Aira, 2025; Naushad, 2025), generating a rich and varied dataset relevant to the study's focus on consumption and status. It also covered a period of increased fan activity and more frequent releases, which meant consumption-related discussions appeared more often across the selected subreddits.

The fieldwork was conducted between February and April 2026, during which posts and comments published from the 2021–2026 period were collected and analyzed.

4.4.4 Data Collection Procedure

The data collection followed Kozinets' (2019, pp.215-229) netnographic framework of five investigation operations: simplification, search, scouting, and saving. While we presented this in a structural sequence for clarity, the process was iterative, moving between different stages.

Simplify

The first step involved simplifying the research focus into searchable terms. Kozinets (2019) argued that simplification required translating abstract research interests into concrete search terms that could be used across platforms. Because the study examined fan hierarchies, status, and authenticity within Taylor Swift fan communities, concepts such as subcultural capital could not be searched directly. Instead, these broader concepts were translated into fan-specific, fan-terminology, and insider language.

Search terms included broad terms such as Taylor Swift merch, Swifties, Eras Tour, and Taylor concert, alongside more community-specific and value-related terms such as FOMO, friendship bracelets, meet and greet, Taylor Nation, Secret Session, streaming, boycott, spending, scalpers, limited edition, resale, real fan, former Swiftie, OG Swiftie, jet fuel, Easter eggs, fan theories, meeting Taylor Swift, and merch collection. These terms developed over time, with additional terms emerging from Reddit discussions and fan conversations found during the search process.

Search

Following simplification, these search terms were entered into Google and Reddit. X was initially considered; however, discussions within the community appeared scattered, and platform algorithms made conversations more fragmented. Since the study aimed to investigate status, hierarchy, and interactions among fans, Reddit was considered more suitable due to its threaded discussion format and extended comment interactions.

Google searches often acted as an entry point into relevant discussions through combinations such as Taylor Swift merch Reddit, real Swiftie Reddit, or Taylor Swift FOMO Reddit. Rather than exclusively identifying communities first, searches frequently led directly to specific posts and discussions, which subsequently guided the identification of relevant fan communities. The process was iterative, with searching and scouting feeding into each other as early findings shaped later search terms and adjustments. Through this iterative process, 11 subreddits were eventually included.

Scout

Kozinets described scouting as an exploratory and immersive process in which researchers investigated potential sites and developed familiarity with the culture being studied. This stage also served as an initial filter before final data selection.

Scouting was conducted over approximately three months. During this time, Reddit communities were explored to get a sense of fan practices, language, interactions, and recurring topics. Relevant posts and comments were saved and documented, while observations and reflections were noted in research journals. More than 300 posts and

comments were initially identified. This immersion also generated new search terms and themes that shaped later rounds of searching and refinement.

Select

According to Kozinets (2019), data selection considered five criteria: relevance, activity, interactivity, diversity, and richness. These criteria guided the selection of posts and discussions for the final dataset, as seen in the data sampling paragraph.

Priority was given to posts that generated active discussion among fans and contained rich, detailed descriptions of fan experiences and perspectives. Extended conversations with multiple replies, strong interaction between users, and highly engaged discussions indicated through comment activity, and upvotes were prioritized. There was particular emphasis on posts that reflected disagreement, negotiation of status, authenticity claims, or discussions around fan identity. Shorter comments or posts with lower engagement were generally deprioritized unless they provided contextual value or highlighted perspectives not represented elsewhere.

Save

Following selection, each chosen thread and its comments were systematically stored for analysis. Links to posts were saved alongside the copied text in a shared Excel spreadsheet accessible only to us. Only the sections of comments and posts relevant to the research focus were extracted. However, no alterations were made to wording, spelling, or grammar in order to preserve the authenticity of the original user-generated content.

4.5 Trustworthiness

To ensure research quality, this study followed Lincoln and Guba's framework of trustworthiness, which included four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (1985, pp.301-326).

Credibility was established through several techniques. First, prolonged engagement with the fan community was maintained throughout the data collection period. Given that such communities were complex and constantly evolving, it was necessary to spend sufficient time observing interactions and practices to understand their cultural context. This prolonged engagement allowed us to identify potential distortions, such as personal biases, and to gain a deeper understanding of recurring practices, language, and meaning-making processes. During data collection, early observations were compared with new data to check whether emerging patterns were consistent across different instances, and adjusted when they were not. Second,

peer debriefing was used as an additional credibility-building technique: a peer not involved in the study reviewed the emerging findings and challenged the interpretations. For example, the peer questioned the usefulness of the broad code “consumption,” which led us to refine it into more specific categories such as buying merchandise and collecting merchandise. These sessions were conducted verbally and helped to refine our interpretations. Third, to strengthen credibility, all selected posts were stored with direct links in a private dataset, enabling verification of interpretations against the original user-generated content.

Transferability was supported by providing a detailed account of the Reddit environment in which the data was collected. This included the structure of threads with original posts followed by comment chains, and how features such as upvotes, replies, and awards influenced which contributions gained visibility. The analysis also highlighted recurring interaction patterns across threads, including users positioning themselves as “real” or “casual” fans, negotiating authenticity through references to consumption practices, and using community-specific language to signal belonging. Particular attention was given to how identity claims, such as “OG Swiftie” and “casual listener,” were maintained and challenged in comment exchanges. Rather than making broad claims, this contextual detail allowed readers to judge whether similar platform dynamics might be present in other online communities.

Dependability was supported by maintaining a clear and systematic audit trail throughout the research process. A shared Excel spreadsheet was used to record all included posts and comments, along with notes on inclusion and exclusion decisions and the reasoning behind them. In the same tab, we added more than 40 initial codes (e.g., “OG fan”, “FOMO,” and “limited edition”) and their refinement into broader themes. Some decisions about what to include, exclude, or refine were made through discussion between researchers rather than being formally recorded at the time. However, these decisions were later reflected in the coding structure and written notes, ensuring they remained traceable within the overall dataset. In addition, repeated engagement with the data, including revisiting posts and refining interpretations over time, helped maintain consistency in the development of codes and themes.

Confirmability was evaluated using a confirmability audit. The same audit trail was used for dependability and was examined by an auditor, who focused on the findings, interpretations, and conclusions. The auditor traced a sample of findings back to the raw data in the Excel sheet through the audit trail to verify that interpretations were grounded in the data. The auditor confirmed that the audit trail was complete and sufficiently documented.

4.6 Thematic Analysis

A thematic analysis aligned with the study's constructionist perspective by examining realities and events shaped by discourse, making it suitable for exploring how social hierarchies were gained and maintained within Taylor Swift fan communities. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. Although these phases were presented sequentially for clarity, the process was not linear in practice. Instead, it was abductive and iterative, with ongoing movement between coding, theme development, and writing as interpretations were repeatedly revisited and refined.

Phase 1: In the familiarization stage, the data were processed through immersion, involving repeated reading of all collected Reddit posts and comment threads. This involved going through each thread in detail, including original posts, comment chains, and replies to understand context and interaction dynamics. During this stage, initial notes were recorded in both the Excel dataset and separate written documents. These notes included early impressions of recurring ideas, for example, the "real fan" discourse, consumption as status, and gatekeeping behaviors, as well as contextual observations about tone, disagreement, and engagement within threads.

Phase 2: Initial coding was conducted manually using a combination of an Excel spreadsheet and a separate coding document. Codes were applied to meaningful segments of text rather than full posts, and the same extract could receive multiple codes where relevant. Semantic codes captured explicit content, e.g., "buying merch", "streaming", "buying from resellers", while latent codes captured underlying meanings, e.g., "True fan/dedication", "enviousness", "moral superiority". Over 40 initial codes were developed and continuously revised, with earlier codes often adjusted or merged as new data were analyzed.

Phase 3: After initial coding, the codes were reviewed and grouped into potential themes. This was done by comparing similarities and differences across codes and identifying broader patterns of meaning. An Excel-based sorting system was used to cluster related codes together. At this stage, some codes were reallocated to different clusters as new patterns emerged during continued analysis.

Phase 4: Themes were reviewed and refined by revisiting the original Reddit posts and comment threads and comparing them against the coded data recorded in Excel. This process involved returning to the original Reddit threads at times to ensure that themes accurately reflected the data in context. Several challenges emerged in distinguishing between overlapping themes and subthemes. During analysis, it became clear that several themes overlapped and were not mutually exclusive. As a result, themes and sub-themes were repeatedly revisited during both analysis and writing. Some were merged or restructured to better reflect patterns in the data, while others were refined as interpretations developed.

Phase 5: Final themes were refined to ensure clarity and analytical focus. Each theme was defined in relation to its role in constructing fandom status, hierarchy, and authenticity. The analysis moved beyond description to interpret what these patterns revealed about how fandom operated socially. Themes were also reviewed to ensure internal coherence and clear distinctions between them.

Phase 6: The final stage involved presenting the analysis, in which each theme was supported by selected Reddit extracts for their relevance, engagement, and richness. Extracts were discussed alongside interpretation rather than presented as standalone descriptions, allowing the analysis to move beyond summary. Variation within themes was also included, with attention to both supporting and contrasting perspectives. The final structure was organized to build an overall argument about how status was gained and maintained within the fandom.

4.7 Limitations

Netnography research relied heavily on the researcher's interpretative skills to analyze data and draw conclusions, which might introduce subjectivity (Kozinets, 2002). However, this subjectivity was consistent with the interpretive nature of this study, which explored the socially constructed meanings and negotiation of status within online fan communities. Since the study adopted a passive netnography approach, it did not involve any direct interaction with participants, which limited the ability to request follow-up or seek clarification of meaning. This approach was intentionally chosen to observe naturally occurring interactions without any interference, thereby ensuring that participants' behaviors and opinions remained authentic.

Although framed in relation to ethnography, this balance was also relevant to netnographic research, where similar tensions existed between insider understanding and outsider distance. From an insider's perspective, the researcher gained a deeper understanding of participants, while from an outsider's perspective, the researcher could remain objective. However, insiders faced the risk of over-rapport, such as adopting participants' perspectives too closely and overlooking internal diversity within the community (Atkinson, 2007, pp.124-125). In this study, we acknowledged that our role as researchers, along with our prior exposure to the fandom through social media despite not being active participants, might have increased this risk. Our familiarity with the fandom provided cultural and insider access that an outsider might lack, enabling a more nuanced interpretation of meanings within the data. To mitigate these risks and enhance confirmability, a reflexive approach was adopted to ensure that our findings remained grounded in data rather than shaped by personal assumptions.

A limitation of the study was that social media was designed to maximize engagement, which might distort reality. A small subset of users, typically the most vocal and extremely

opinionated, tended to dominate online discussions, leading to a false perception of norms (Robertson et al. 2024). As such, the views expressed on social media might not accurately reflect broader contexts and reality; the findings were to be interpreted with this limitation in mind. In addition, algorithmic and platform structures further shaped how content was produced and engaged with. On this social media platform, features such as upvoting, downvoting, anonymity, and subreddit moderation influenced discourse (Fiesler et al. 2024). Therefore, the study did not generalize its findings across all social media platforms; instead, it focused on Reddit to illustrate how status was gained and maintained through consumption practices in online fan spaces. Differences between the two platforms were acknowledged rather than treated as equivalent.

Data were collected from posts published between 2021 and 2026. This time frame was deliberately selected because it coincided with a period of high activity and multiple album releases by the artist, generating high engagement within the fandom community. This would provide richer, more varied data relevant to the study's focus on how status was gained and maintained through consumption practices. However, it was important to note that focusing on this period might overlook earlier phases of the fandom dynamic, which could lead to different insights regarding status. In addition, the use of predefined search terms might have resulted in the capture of posts that explicitly matched the selected keywords. This might have resulted in the exclusion of relevant discussions that used alternative terminology to express similar ideas, potentially limiting the breadth of perspectives captured.

Finally, transferability of the findings was mainly limited to similar music fandom contexts, where comparable hierarchies and patterns of consumption were present. While the artist–fan relationship was a distinctive feature of music fandoms and differentiated them from broader brand communities, the findings might still offer conceptual relevance to other online consumption-based communities. However, their applicability beyond similar contexts remained limited.

4.8 Research Ethics

Ethical issues arose in netnographic research concerning whether online spaces should be treated as public or private spaces. Some scholars argued that posts in public online communities implied implicit consent to being observed, while others argued that many who posted online were unaware that their messages might be used for research. Since netnography entailed passive lurking without participation, it could be ethically controversial, as the content was not created for research purposes and posed risks of harm, including social consequences if identities were revealed (Kozinets, 2002). Informed consent was not obtained due to the use of publicly available data and the non-intrusive nature of the study.

Data were collected only from publicly accessible posts on Reddit. To protect user privacy, only text from posts and comments, and their URL were stored in a spreadsheet. A mixed approach of direct quotes and paraphrasing was used in the analysis. Quotations were included to preserve the original meaning of the content, as excessive paraphrasing might dilute the intended message. Usernames were not saved or reported to protect anonymity. This approach was adopted to minimize the risk of harm and ensure confidentiality, especially since some users might also be young and vulnerable within these platforms. All data were used in confidence and kept only for this research.

5 Analysis - Status among Swifties

In this chapter, we examined how status and hierarchy were gained and maintained within Taylor Swift's fandom on Reddit. Through the data collection process, three themes were identified: Demonstrating Dedication, Policing and Judgment in the Fandom and Fan proximity to Taylor Swift. Together, the findings showed that fandom participation extended beyond personal enjoyment, operating as a socially structured process in which belonging and legitimacy were actively gained and maintained within online Swiftie communities.

5.1 Demonstrating Dedication

The following theme explored how Swifties gained and demonstrated dedication within subreddit communities. The sub-themes identified were Collecting and Spending, Streaming and Metrics, Fan Labor and Fan Expertise. Through the Reddit threads, including posts, comments, and visual content, the findings indicated that consumption practices were not only expressions of admiration but also visible ways for fans to signal engagement, gain recognition, and maintain belonging within the fandom.

Drawing on Bourdieu's forms of capital (1986) and symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), Thornton's subcultural capital (1995), and Lamont's concept of symbolic boundaries (1992), this theme illustrated what counted as "dedication" and how it was actively gained and validated through fan interactions in online spaces.

5.1.1 Collecting and Spending

In the Swiftie community, collecting merchandise such as limited-edition items and vinyl variants played an important role in how fans showed their dedication to Taylor Swift. Users frequently showcased their purchasing practices, both physical and digital, across various albums and merchandise releases. Fans liked to publicly display their emotional attachment to Taylor Swift on Reddit in hopes of recognition from other members.

This pattern aligned with Schouten and McAlexander's (1995) concept of the subculture of consumption. In the Harley-Davidson subculture, merchandise and event-related items acted as visible markers of commitment and signals of membership.

Amanda - "I collect because I'm crazy and obsessive. I mainly collect the vinyls. I'm not a completionist, but I'm close. During the Speak Now era, I decided that if it's a different cover, I'll buy all of them... Also, I have most of the signed CDs."

Jasmine - "... I ended up buying multiple shirts, all the folklore records (paid some crazy prices from ebay sellers for some of them)... I wanted to collect all the blankets, guitar pick sets, keychains, buttons, christmas ornaments, etc. from all eras..."

These comments reflected how fans collected as part of a repeated practice they had maintained across multiple eras. Another fan described collecting merchandise as a longtime practice that involved significant financial investment. The language was often emotional and hyperbolic, such as "crazy", "obsessive", "I'll buy all of them", and "paid some crazy prices". Extreme consumption was viewed as emotionally charged, suggesting that extreme dedication could become a recognized and valued part of fandom identity. This aligned with Thornton's argument that subcultural capital depended on being perceived as authentically "in the know", where legitimacy was shaped by the intensity of engagement and knowledge of which objects carried value within the Swiftie fandom.

Laura - "... Over the 17 going on 18 years of being a Swiftie, I have spent a lot of money on physical media but most notably in the last few years with the obnoxious amount of variants..."

Laura's comment "obnoxious amount of variants" carried a critical tone, indicating that despite recognizing the excessive releases and having spent money across 17-18 years spending money in the fandom, this awareness did not necessarily disrupt her participation in these consumption practices, suggesting that long-term spending had become embedded in her identity as a Swiftie. This reflected a tension between consumer consciousness and continued engagement in consumption, which was tied to loyalty and dedication. The long-term investment functioned as Bourdieu's concept of economic capital, which was also translated into symbolic capital through recognition from other fans in the form of upvotes.

Swifties shared images and videos of their collections, gaining recognition from other users. Figure 1 "All my Taylor CDs in one place 🥰" received a high number of upvotes, reflecting how fans expressed admiration for extensive collections through comments such as:

Jacob - "this is the biggest flex i've ever seen"

Rebeca - "That is a very impressive collection!! I'm jealous!!"

Jacob's use of the term "biggest flex" in response to Figure 1 framed large merchandise collections as status symbols, where value emerged not from ownership itself but from being seen and recognized by other fans. This aligned with Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital, where economic resources only translated into status once they were socially acknowledged. Rebeca's response reinforced the original poster's status by implicitly acknowledging a hierarchy within the fandom. Her use of "jealous" followed by repeated exclamation marks positioned her below the original poster in terms of fan dedication. This reflected Lamont's

concept of socio-economic boundaries, in which possessions became a means of assigning value and creating distinctions within the community.

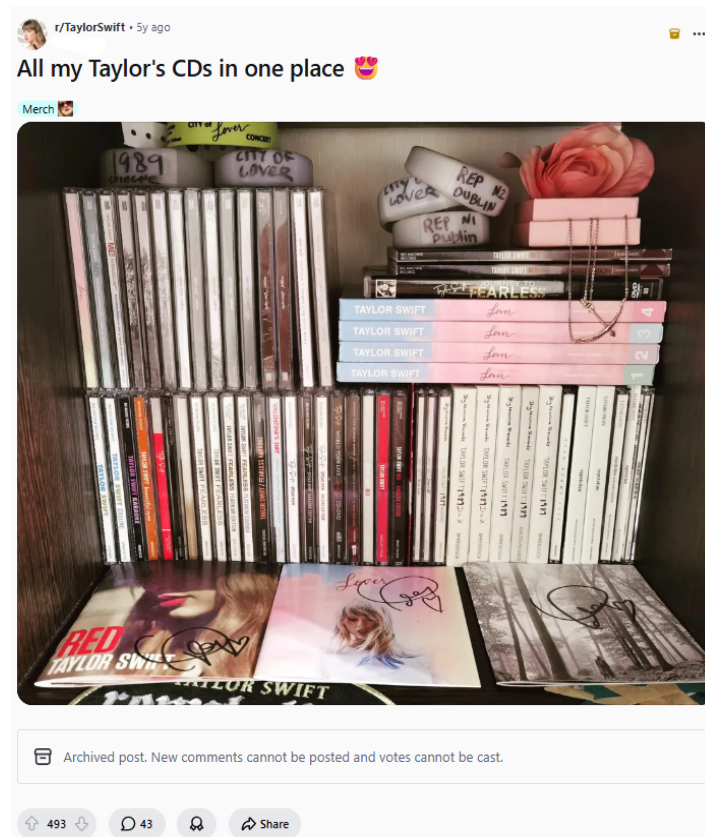


Figure 1: Taylor Swift merchandise collection

A recurring stance in these online communities challenged the belief that spending habits were necessary to participate and be considered a fan.

Marie - "Am I literally the only poor person left in this fandom lol... but for a lot of people I think 1) it's just collecting for the sake of proving they are in fact the biggest swiftie... We're not less of a fan for not having all the merch..."

Marie saw collecting as a way to prove one's position as the bigger fan. At the same time, her statement, "We're not less of a fan," challenged the idea that fan legitimacy was not dependent on spending power. However, another thread highlighted that some fans reported going into debt to sustain their concert ticket spending, with others even normalizing this behavior.

Alex - "I have 20 different credit cards..and i've maxed them all out on taylor swift merch & its been worth every penny"

This illustrated how high spending habits were sometimes framed as an acceptable, or even expected, part of fandom participation, reinforced by fans who described being the "biggest Swiftie" as buying everything possible and by others who expressed a willingness to purchase concert tickets at any price. Phrases such as "worth every penny," alongside references to

using “20 different credit cards”, normalized financial strain as debt was framed as a sign of devotion, and this emotionally charged language appeared in earlier examples, where exaggerated language signaled dedication. This reflected Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence, in which high spending became a norm that was rarely openly challenged, even by those disadvantaged by it.

5.1.2 Streaming and Metrics

Streaming reflected dedication, as listening behavior was tracked and ranked, platforms such as Spotify and Apple Music rewarded these practices by categorizing users into tiers, including the top 0.5% of listeners. Here, fans used rankings to understand and express their identity. Fans invested significant time and effort in streaming Taylor Swift’s music, and multiple threads shared their rankings and streaming minutes, creating a space to compare and display their dedication to one another. Some users expressed embarrassment and disappointment at failing to reach certain listening milestones.

Since streaming became publicly quantifiable, listening behavior had become visible, enabling comparisons and evaluations among users. The rankings generated by platforms such as Spotify and Apple Music served as indicators of the dedication fans displayed online to showcase their loyalty. This reflected Yin’s (2020) idea of datafied emotional labor, where emotional engagement was translated into numbers that could be tracked, ranked, and compared.

Luis - “Same. I only had 9,039 though. I’m shocked it wasn’t more tbh. I was also shocked I only listened to Champagne Problems 76 times. Because I swear I had that on repeat for dayyyyyyyys at a time lol.”

Luis was disappointed to have “only” 9,039 streams, which showed that high streaming minutes had become normalized. The exaggerated spelling of “dayyyyyyyys” added emphasis and conveyed strong emotional investment in his listening activity. This was aligned with symbolic violence, in which differences in achievement were interpreted as personal limitations. More importantly, the thread reflected a competitive dynamic in which fans with significant streaming numbers were viewed as more dedicated than others. This reflected what Bucher (2012) described as algorithmic visibility, in which being seen depended on being selected and ranked by the platform’s logic rather than on participation alone

In Figure 2, the thread discussed different views on what constituted a Swiftie across different levels of fandom engagement. Despite many identifying as top 1% Spotify listeners of Taylor Swift, some still emphasized the existence of “more dedicated” Swifties, reinforcing a perceived distinction based on listening metrics.

As reflected in the comment “we’re all 1–.1% top listeners, but it is definitely different levels”, even among highly engaged listeners, hierarchies were still prevalent. This act of ranking other top-tier listeners reflected Lamont’s concept of symbolic boundaries, where distinctions were actively constructed to assign value and sustain internal hierarchies. Moreover, it illustrated how knowledge-based criteria (tswift bar trivia) were complemented by streaming metrics, with fans valuing theories, lyrics, and discography to distinguish themselves even among the top percentage of listeners. This reflected Thornton’s idea of subcultural capital, in which status was shaped by the ability to demonstrate cultural understanding.



Figure 2: Thread of streaming and fandom levels

Spotify Wrapped was a yearly music recap that introduced a dynamic that fueled comparison and self-evaluation among fans, creating a competitive environment in which listening metrics were often posted on social media to signal dedication. As a result, users questioned their level of commitment when comparing their listening minutes with others, perceiving themselves as less devoted within the fan community.

These threads suggested that streaming platforms facilitated fandom participation while also contributing to the negotiation of status and hierarchies through visibility and comparison. As a result, fans actively evaluated whether their actions signaled sufficient dedication. The platformization of the fandom further shaped perceptions of legitimacy and belonging.

Across these threads, higher streaming numbers were interpreted as signs of greater dedication, contributing to perceived status within the fandom. This aligned with Lamont's concept of cultural boundaries, in which categories such as the top 1% listener were used to distinguish and rank levels of Swifties.

5.1.3 Fan Labor

Fan labor involved custom-made merchandise, managing fan accounts, organizing events, and engaging in social practices. It was understood as a demonstration of dedication and involvement. For instance, friendship bracelets were a significant, recurring theme in Reddit posts.

This ritual entailed social bonding and collective exchange, such as crafting bracelets for strangers and friends, and was often described as both enjoyable and emotionally meaningful. One post shared an extensive spreadsheet organizing bracelet ideas into different categories such as “For The Kids”, “Gen Pop,” and “IYKYK”. References such as lyrics, easter eggs, and inside jokes that only dedicated fans understood were incorporated into these bracelets. The use of the abbreviation "IYKYK" (if you know, you know) framed the references as insider knowledge, signaling that the meaning was understood only by other Swifties. This aligned with subcultural capital, where meaning was tied to cultural knowledge not accessible to outsiders, as illustrated by another fan under the Figure 3 post:

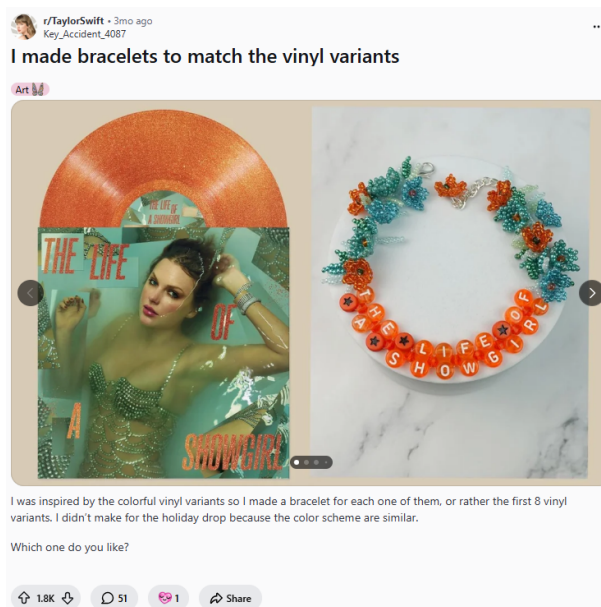


Figure 3: Friendship bracelets shared by a fan

Terry - “I wish I could upvote multiple times, those are ✨STUNNING✨. Beautiful bead work!!”

There were several positive responses in the comment section. Terry used very strong praise, with words like "STUNNING", highlighting its beautiful beadwork, which not only reflected aesthetic appreciation but also recognition of the effort and dedication behind it. The wish to "upvote multiple times" acted as an exaggerated expression of appreciation, highlighting the emotional tone in the response. This illustrated how peer recognition operated as a form of symbolic capital, converting fan labor into status within the community. These practices only gained value when recognized by other fans, and this constant validation of effort resulted in distinctions between active contributors and less active fans creating cultural boundaries. This extended Baym's (2018) concept of relational labor, originally theorized as the ongoing emotional effort artists invested in building closeness with audiences, by showing that fans also performed this labor toward one another within the community.

Beyond this, listening parties were a widespread practice that consisted of themed decorations, food, games, and discussions centered on album releases. Together, these examples illustrated that labor such as managing fan accounts, creating content, and organizing events was recognized primarily by other fans within the community. Displaying these practices on Reddit threads resulted in recognition and validation from other Swifties. These visual posts accumulated high levels of engagement in the form of upvotes and positive comments, which was a form of symbolic capital.

These activities also reflected subcultural capital, as crafting and organizing events demonstrated knowledge, creativity, and familiarity with Taylor Swift's cultural references and discography. In this context, status was shaped not only by what was produced but also by how far it reflected insider knowledge and understanding of fandom meanings.

5.1.4 Fan Expertise

Fan expertise was a subtheme in which legitimacy was built through sustained engagement with fandom knowledge systems, such as "Easter eggs," extending beyond content knowledge to include long-term participation and the interpretation of meaning across albums, thereby signaling authority within the fandom. It was evident in the subreddit threads that fandom expertise was often met with appraisal, which was a form of symbolic capital (Thornton, 1995). This dynamic aligned with Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) concept of legitimacy within brand communities, where sustained engagement and specialized knowledge distinguished "true" members from "casual" participants and shaped status and recognition within the community.

Sandy - "As an OG Fearless fan I could probably give an unprompted 12 hour lecture on Taylor and her lore..."

The statement “OG Fearless” signaled long-term engagement as a form of authority. Similar comments appeared across threads in which fans emphasized their seniority, positioning themselves as more legitimate than newer fans. The acronym “OG” (original) served as an insider marker linking authority to time spent in the fandom. The reference to a “12 hour lecture” was an exaggeration, implying depth of knowledge without explicit demonstration. However, subcultural capital was most effective when it appeared effortless rather than performed. Sandy’s comment could therefore be read as an attempt to gain legitimacy, which other fans might interpret as performative.

Another thread specifically highlighted expertise in the fandom, as the original poster questioned what every Swiftie should know. The post generated strong engagement, with many responses emphasizing forms of knowledge that were socially rewarded among fans. Additionally, multiple users posted descriptions of hierarchical categories based on fans’ level of engagement, such as “The Historians,” who possessed extensive knowledge of Taylor Swift, “The Mercantiles,” who were known for collecting vinyl and merch, and “The Troubadours,” who mainly listened to the music without engaging in deeper fandom practices. The named categories were a clear way for fans to create distinctions, classifying themselves and others based on how they engaged. This was connected to symbolic boundaries, where such distinctions helped shape identity, status, and order within a community.

Notably, Swifties also engaged in detailed analysis of visual and material content, such as objects, music videos, clothing, and promotional imagery, as clues for upcoming releases.

Harry - “Call them clues, call them Easter eggs, call them “reasons I stay awake every Thursday until midnight just in case she drops something”: this is a list of all known teasers that Taylor Swift hid in her work and media appearances... This list does not include any references to past work, but instead focuses on clues that we couldn’t decipher at time of release and could only understand after the clue came true... Please let me know of any clues that I’ve missed any clues or accidentally mixed up any dates. Enjoy, you clowns!...”

Harry positioned himself as someone with deep familiarity with Taylor Swift’s career by organizing “easter eggs” into a structured list. The phrase “staying awake every Thursday until midnight” used exaggeration to highlight the time and emotional effort involved in following the artist’s releases, framing constant alertness as a normal feature of fan dedication. He also invited others to add cues, presenting fandom knowledge as something that was collectively organized and built. This expertise became collaborative and socially validated through recognition from others, with some fans who held greater influence contributing knowledge to the community.

The negotiation of expertise within fandoms could become exclusionary, as fans deemed less knowledgeable might face criticism, dismissal, and other forms of toxic online behavior.

Valeria - "I got piled on in the first hype megathread for not knowing the 4/30 third album theory... I enjoy Easter eggs... but there's a nasty undertone of people who are rude if you don't agree with them or don't know every single theory or bit of Taylor information..."

The phrase “piled on” suggested that a lack of knowledge could lead to negative reactions from other fans. Interactions on Reddit showed expectations about what a “real” fan was expected to know regarding theories and references related to the artist.

Expertise was used to draw boundaries between more and less legitimate forms of participation, reflecting Lamont's cultural boundaries. Valeria's use of "every single theory" highlighted how extensive these expectations could be, suggesting that partial knowledge of Taylor Swift was considered insufficient. Additionally, it functioned as a form of subcultural capital, with status deriving from being seen as someone who was "in the know" (Thornton, 1995, p.27). This contributed to informal hierarchies in which fans with extensive knowledge and long-term involvement appeared to be valued more highly within the fandom. These patterns demonstrated that fan expertise played a role in creating cultural boundaries within the fandom, where differences emerged between those who possessed deeper knowledge of references and theories and those who did not.

However, another thread included a comment that directly challenged this behavior by criticizing fans who positioned themselves as more "elite" than casual listeners. These discussions revealed contrasting views within the fandom regarding the level of knowledge required to participate

5.2 Policing and judgment in the fandom

This section explored how Taylor Swift fans established, enforced, and contested the boundaries of authenticity within the Swifties fandom. Across three subthemes, Defining the “real” fan, Policing fan consumption, and Policing the artist, the analysis revealed that authenticity was continuously negotiated through social judgment. Building on theories such as Bourdieu's symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), Lamont's symbolic boundaries (1992), Thornton's subcultural capital (1995), and Bourdieu's forms of capital (1986), the findings showed how understandings of “real” fans were normalized through repeated expectations around knowledge, consumption, and engagement. Policing and judgment in the fandom operated on multiple levels, regulating fan consumption and moral actions, while also extending critical judgment toward the artist herself. This revealed that belonging was constantly maintained among the fandom.

5.2.1 Defining the “Real” Fan

One Reddit thread with high engagement discussed the verified fan system, with the original post expressing nostalgia for the earlier model, in which fans could improve their chances by participating in what they described as “real” fan activities, such as streaming videos or purchasing albums. Following the shift to a lottery system, the user expressed a desire to have those activities brought back. In response to the post, Quinn noted how the systems created distinctions based on participation. The term “real” fan was used to refer to consumption practices such as attending tours, accessing tickets, owning merchandise, and making significant time investments. These activities were used as a way to distinguish between “dedicated”, “deserving,” or “authentic” compared to the “casual” fan.

This resembled Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001) discussion of legitimacy in brand communities, where members distinguished between legitimate and illegitimate forms of participation. They also argued that communities reinforced certain behaviors while discouraging others that conflicted with shared expectations. Similar patterns appeared in the Taylor Swift community, where ongoing policing and judgment shaped ideas of what counted as authentic fandom and enforced sanctioning behaviors. This pattern resembled Stanfill’s (2013) account of intra-fandom stereotyping, in which fans used negative categorizations of other fans to legitimize their own position within the community.

Quinn - “Ugh this was so great! I really wish it was back. I feel like it separates some of the more dedicated fans from more casual ones (like fans who would kill for a ticket vs don’t mind going)... It was like what months or weeks of dedication which was awesome... These tickets are like five years in the making for the Eras tour! But unfair for fans who didn’t know Taylor five years ago...”

The comment expressed nostalgia for a system in which tickets were seen as earned through active engagement, with “months or weeks of dedication” implying that time in the fandom translated into entitlement. The phrase “five years in the making” framed concert attendance less as something bought and more as something earned over time. The word “kill” added intensity and marked strong emotional investment, separating highly invested fans from those who were more casual or “don’t mind going”. This linked access and legitimacy to willingness and desire, where deeper commitment became a marker of status. As Schouten and McAlexander (1995) noted, seniority or sustained commitment over time could translate into recognized status.

This logic was also expressed by linking knowledge and the required fan effort in consumption practices to categorization as a true Swiftie. Zara framed this through knowledge of Taylor Swift’s discography.

Zara - “I think to be a swiftie you have to be know at least 70% of her discography.”

An informal threshold separated those seen as legitimate fans based on knowledge of Taylor Swift's discography, with Zara suggesting that knowing "at least 70%" was expected. The specificity of "70%" turned what could have been an open-ended emotional connection into a quantified criterion. Belonging here depended not on affective attachment but on how much of the artist's catalog someone could recall, turning familiarity with the discography into a gatekeeping device. Those who met the implied threshold were positioned as legitimate fans, while those who did not could be classified as less authentic. This reflected Lamont's concept of cultural boundaries, in which knowledge and cultural competence were used to draw distinctions between inclusion and exclusion within a community.

Similarly, participation and streaming activities were mentioned as indicators of being a "true fan" in the discussion. Ariana referred to high levels of streaming and engagement as something that was described as part of fandom identity:

Ariana - "...if you couldn't stream at 24/7 that sounds like a personal problem..."

The comment suggested an unspoken expectation to stream constantly within the fandom. Its dismissive tone towards members who could not meet this standard suggested that reduced participation was framed as a personal failure. The phrase "personal problem" shifted responsibility onto the individual, framing difficulty in meeting expectations as personal failure rather than questioning the standard itself. This reflected Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, as ideas about what counted as a "good" fan were treated as normal and natural, leading members to accept these hierarchies as given rather than as socially produced. The expression "24/7" was clearly exaggerated and established what counted as adequate participation, making anything less seem inadequate.

This view was challenged by fans who instead emphasized enjoyment and emotional connection as the main basis of being a fan. This was reflected in comments such as: "There are no 'must knows'. You need to like her music; that is the only requirement..." which rejected the idea that fandom should only be defined by one's consumption practices.

The pattern was further reflected in Lola's comment. In this thread, fans who had attended multiple tours or purchased large amounts of merchandise claimed themselves as more deserving than others when it came to ticket access.

Lola - "...I hate seeing all these posts from Swifties who have been to all the tours or bought loads of merch claiming they are more 'deserving' of tickets. Its really sad to see the fanbase act like this."

Fans often cited past consumption practices, such as attending tours or buying merchandise, to justify a stronger sense of entitlement. However, this view was challenged by other fans, like Lola. The upvotes on her comment suggested that others disagreed with this statement and

instead supported the idea of fairness regarding equal access to concert tickets within the community.

5.2.2 Policing Fan Consumption

A prominent theme in the data revealed ongoing tensions among fans, reflecting Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001, p.419) notion of legitimacy processes by which “true” members were distinguished from more “opportunistic” ones. Discussions of fan policing centered on consumption practices such as merchandise collecting, ticket purchasing, and debates around reselling, which became markers for separating “real” fans from those seen as acting out of self-interest. Behavior framed as appropriate was reinforced through agreement and upvotes, while contested actions were publicly criticized and labeled as illegitimate. This reflected Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001, p.412) idea of moral responsibility in brand communities, in which norms were maintained through peer enforcement rather than formal rules.

This was clearly exemplified by tensions in which some individuals owned excessive amounts of merchandise and engaged in resale activities. Other fans often criticized these behaviors, especially when members purchased large quantities of limited-edition items for profit rather than for personal enjoyment.

Isla - “...Most of the merch is just fluff... Why do you need every variant of the cardigan. The problem is on both sides. Anyone buying 30 cardigans is obviously buying them for resale and is almost certainly not a Swiftie.”

The critique of excessive purchasing was treated as morally questionable. The mention of “30 cardigans” was an exaggerated example to frame the behavior as clearly excessive. By saying “almost certainly not a Swiftie,” Isla shifted from describing consumption to judging identity, implying that this level of spending was not acceptable within the fandom. This reflected Lamont’s idea of moral boundaries, where judgments were made about what counted as appropriate behavior within the community.

Similar sentiments were repeatedly expressed in the Taylor Swift subreddit threads. Discussions illustrated how fans valued behaviors associated with fairness and mutual support. Ryan’s gesture led to another fan obtaining merchandise at retail price and was met with positive reactions, in contrast to those seen as taking advantage of the situation of scarcity for profit.

Ryan - “I sent one to a French Swiftie for retail plus shipping. It's not hard to be a good Swiftie but some people just see dollar signs and the opportunity for a quick buck.”

This comment illustrated how ideas of proper fan behavior drew distinctions between “good” fans and opportunists. The metaphor “see dollar signs” portrayed some fans as primarily

motivated by profit, contrasting them with “authentic” fans, who were seen as driven by genuine interest and mutual support. Statements such as “it’s not hard to be a good Swifty” and “true Swifties help each other out” framed generosity and community-oriented actions, such as giving away merchandise, as simple and expected forms of behavior, while criticizing those who capitalized on the fandom for profit. These norms were praised within the community and reflected symbolic violence, in which particular ideas of “good” fandom were treated as common sense rather than as socially constructed expectations.

Alongside this, some fans challenged the idea that fandom participation was to be tied to consumption, such as collecting merchandise. These users framed these practices as competitive and exclusionary, arguing that spending money was not to determine fan status.

Policing of fan consumption also extended to ticket buying and concert attendance. Multiple discussions centered on whether attending several tour dates was unfair to others who were unable to secure tickets due to the limited number available.

Fernanda - “...Over 5 shows it too much. Let someone else have a chance. 3 is probably the maximum I would go since the Setlist of the same. 4-5 would be pushing it. Over 5 is too much!!”

Fernanda drew a boundary around acceptable consumption by describing attending “too much!!” as morally excessive rather than just a preference. By saying “let someone else have a chance”, she framed concert tickets as a shared resource, suggesting that buying multiple shows limited access for others. Attending more than five concerts was therefore positioned as unfair, encouraging fans to self-restrict due to limited availability. These critiques also pointed to the role of economic capital in shaping participation since the ability to attend several shows or buy resale tickets at inflated prices depended on financial resources.

At the same time, there was a debate over whether “real” fans’ participation in the resale system contributed to ticket scarcity. While some Reddit threads blamed scalpers for exploiting the fandom, other fans argued that Swifties also engaged in these activities by purchasing merchandise and tickets for resale purposes. This behavior was frequently met with strong criticism in the community.

Kylie - “Fans are scalpers too after all. Purchasing 4 tickets, to trade or sell, so they can keep going to shows. Fans are a major part of the problem...”

Kylie pointed out that “scalpers” were not only seen as outsiders, but fans were also involved in resale practices. The phrase “fans are scalpers too” blurred the line between fan and scalper, showing that this boundary was not fixed. By calling fans “a major part of the problem,” Kylie shifted responsibility for scarcity onto the community itself, suggesting it was produced within fandom rather than outside it. Instead of separating fans from non-fans, it created a distinction

between ‘good’ fans and those seen as acting opportunistically. This reflected Lamont’s idea of a moral boundary, where inclusion depended on shifting moral judgments rather than on clear divisions.

In other discussions, fans also expressed frustration with those perceived as engaging in consumption for visibility and attention rather than for the enjoyment of the music. Criticism was directed at individuals who displayed large collections online or attended multiple concerts in an attempt to gain attention from Taylor Swift or other fans.



Figure 4: Getting Taylor Swift’s attention

As Figure 4 showed, this behavior appeared to function as a form of competition for visibility, building on earlier fan practices such as secret sessions. One reply described it as “disgusting” and rejected the idea that “having more things, buying more things means you’re more than a fan of others,” suggesting that excessive consumption could be morally criticized. The term “disgusting” was a sign of strong disapproval of fandom practices. It also indicated that consumption was used to reach the most recognized level of status within the fandom.

5.2.3 Policing the Artist

According to Muniz and O’Guinn (2001), brand community members were often critical of the brand and its management. Members frequently felt like the brand belonged as much as the manufacturer. The authors noted that a strong brand community could “collectively reject marketing efforts or product change” (p.427). Within the Swiftie fandom, this critique extended to Taylor Swift herself, with fans responding through withdrawal, criticism, or reduced consumption.

Across the findings, the discussion extended beyond fan practices and focused on judgments of Taylor Swift’s behavior regarding social and political issues, music-related products, and environmental impact. These views were often reflected in fans reducing their participation in fan activities, withdrawing from consumption, and reconsidering their participation in the fandom.

Fournier (1998) described brand relationship dissolution as following two distinct paths: either suddenly, after a specific negative event, or slowly over time as interest faded. This framework demonstrated how fan relationships with brands or artists could break down. There was a pattern where fans described either a gradual or a sudden disengagement in response to perceived changes in Taylor Swift's public behavior. Some fans explained that their connection faded over time, while others pointed to a more immediate break. This was evident even among long-term fans who had previously spent considerable amounts of money on her music, merchandise, and related experiences, showing that strong emotional and financial investments did not necessarily guarantee long-term fandom loyalty. Mariam described this shift as:

Mariam - "She has disappointed me deeply with her silence. To the point where I'm fading from being a fan. I've been a swiftie since 2008. I have 3 Taylor tattoos. I've spent thousands on merch and traveling to her concerts. I went to eras 3x across 2 continents. I loved her so deeply and admired her as a person in addition to loving her music. That's done now..."

Mariam's exit from the fandom was framed as a reaction to disappointment in Taylor Swift's actions. Before announcing her departure, she listed markers of long-term commitment "since 2008", "3 Taylor tattoos", "thousands on merch", and "3x across 2 continents," which collectively built her credibility as a highly invested fan. In Thornton's terms, this reflected subcultural capital, in which insider knowledge lent greater legitimacy to her critique.

The statement "That's done now" fitted Fournier's idea of a brand partner's action in this case, Taylor's silence. This showed how an artist's moral judgment could outweigh emotional, cultural, and financial investment, consistent with Lamont's idea that moral boundaries could override other forms of value when behavior was deemed unacceptable. This suggested that loyalty was not permanent but could shift depending on how fans interpreted moral issues.

Additional conversations reflected concerns about Taylor Swift's release of multiple vinyl variants and limited-edition products. While some fans perceived these merchandise releases as part of fan culture or collecting practices, others argued that they were excessive and financially exploitative. Ivory explained this shift, noting that she had previously justified the constant releases of variants because collecting merchandise was enjoyable. However, over time, she began to view these marketing practices as exploitative, suggesting that Taylor Swift was taking advantage of fans willing to continually purchase new releases. Ivory's comment received a significant amount of upvotes, and similar views were also found repeatedly across different Reddit threads.

Ivory - "...I am usually the 1st one defending vinyl variants because I am a collector and no one is making me buy them but, honestly, this drop might have finally broke me from my Taylor variant collecting. At a certain point, it's impossible to ignore that Taylor is taking advantage of her fans willingness to buy anything she puts out..."

The phrase “taking advantage of her fans” cast Taylor Swift’s marketing as ethically questionable, linking fan enthusiasm to the repeated release of commercial content. Ivory’s claim that she was “usually the 1st one defending” the practice built credibility as a long-time supporter before introducing criticism. The phrase “finally broke me” used emotionally charged language to suggest a gradual erosion of loyalty rather than a sudden rupture. This reflected moral boundary work, where consumption practices were reinterpreted as exploitative depending on how they were judged. It also highlighted what counted as acceptable around consumption shifted over time and depended on how these practices were judged within the community. This showed that fandom membership remained conditional and continuously renegotiated.

In another post that received a lot of attention and agreement, the original poster stated Taylor Swift no longer felt like an “artist” but more like a “brand,” expressing disappointment and reduced engagement. The contrast between “artist” and “brand” reflected a common authenticity-versus-commercialization divide, where “brand” signaled a loss of sincerity. This reflected Thornton’s idea that status in subcultures was often tied to rejecting commercialization as inauthentic. In this case, fans applied the same judgment to Taylor Swift, seeing her growing commercial scale as a shift towards something more mainstream and less like a genuine artist.

Environmental concerns also emerged in conversations around Taylor Swift’s behavior. Maddy revealed that her perception changed over time, noting that she initially defended the artist. However, her stance became more critical after seeing Taylor Swift’s jet use, which ultimately led to her withdrawal from the fandom. The post also received high engagement, with many fans responding and upvoting it.

Maddy - “...At the time I swore to boycott her forever, but eventually softened and figured maybe it was her management that were to blame... Now that I see her atrocious jet use and total disregard for the environment we all share...”

Belonging in the fandom appeared conditional, with fans actively judging Taylor Swift’s behavior. Words like “atrocious” and “total disregard” framed the criticism as an ethical issue rather than disappointment. “The environment we all share” extended the judgment beyond fandom and showed how environmental concerns shaped decisions about whether to engage or disengage. This reflected moral and cultural boundaries that fans used to judge what counted as acceptable within the community.

5.3 Fan Proximity to Taylor Swift

This theme explored fans' pursuit of closeness to Taylor Swift, and how marketing strategies, platform structures, and fan interactions influenced this sense of proximity. Across two subthemes, Shaping fan engagement and Recognition as reward, the study showed that fan proximity was not simply emotional, but socially and commercially produced and rewarded.

Drawing on Bourdieu's symbolic violence theory (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) and Bourdieu's forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986), Lamont's symbolic boundaries (1992), and Thornton's subcultural capital (1995), the findings revealed that FOMO-driven marketing practices and the pursuit of recognition created ongoing pressure to engage, turning proximity into a hierarchical system shaped by economic, cultural, and platform-based inequalities.

5.3.1 Shaping Fan Engagement

A recurring point in the findings was the awareness that proximity to Taylor Swift was not a natural phenomenon but was shaped by marketing strategies that influenced fan engagement, visibility, and behavior. These tactics were designed to encourage consumption through scarcity and limited releases. Fans believed that Taylor Swift and Taylor Nation played a major role in creating and intensifying this dynamic. Gia described this as emotional pressure built into how the fandom operated, shaped by its rules and incentives:

Gia - "...You're feeling FOMO because the marketing campaign for everything Taylor related is designed strategically to make you feel that way... It's bringing you to her website to give her your money over and over and over. But you are not required to participate..."

The marketing tactics created Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), pushing repeated consumption through constant new releases and drops, which Gia reinforced through "over and over and over", mirroring the ongoing cycle. Her line "you are not required to participate" shifted responsibility back onto the individual, even while acknowledging the pressure of the system. This showed a tension between structural pressure and fan choice that appeared throughout the data. Symbolic violence was evident in how fans framed participation as a personal choice while also describing FOMO, pressure to keep up with releases, and anxiety about falling behind. Gia explicitly described the marketing as "designed" to trigger FOMO, yet still concluded that "you are not required to participate." This showed how symbolic violence could persist even when it was recognized, as awareness of structural pressure coexisted with the idea that participation was purely an individual decision. At the same time, constant exposure to other fans' collections and activity on platforms such as Reddit reinforced what an

“active” fandom looked like. For instance, Rosa discussed this pattern of how repeated exclusive releases shaped fan behavior and hierarchy:

Rosa - “...There are too many drops and advertising designed for FOMO... being on Reddit and Twitter gives you FOMO because people are showing their collections all the time...”

Fans’ desire to be close to Taylor Swift was shaped not only by marketing strategies but also by constant comparison with other fans. Seeing others display large collections turned participation into something visible and competitive, where engagement could be observed and implicitly ranked. This sense of closeness was therefore also produced through fan-to-fan interactions, as posts showing merchandise often received approval and validation from others. As a result, this system could be linked to overconsumption and a sense of obligation among some fans. Not participating became difficult because the fandom was structured around continuous, visible engagement.

Malika - “...The problem is how common overconsumption of TS merch is encouraged... fans feel like they have to almost prove how big of fans they are to the point of obsession and overbuying things...”

The pressure described suggested that fandom participation shifted from voluntary enjoyment to a socially validated performance, where belonging was maintained through visible demonstrations of commitment. Malika’s comment framed overconsumption as something encouraged within the fandom, where fans felt they had to “prove” their commitment through buying and accumulation, “to the point of obsession”. This suggested participation became less about enjoyment and more about proving belonging, with identity tied to visible, ongoing consumption within the fandom. In this sense, Taylor Swift’s marketing helped establish the standards of what counted as normal within the fandom. These standards came to operate as a form of symbolic violence once accepted by fans as natural rather than constructed. Although fans perceived their participation and purchases as voluntary, their behavior was shaped by an affective system that encouraged continuous engagement, in which certain forms of consumption came to feel necessary rather than optional.

Regarding concert access and tickets, Swifties mentioned past tour structure systems that rewarded persistent engagement through algorithmic mechanisms:

Kiran - “It was basically a loyalty reward system... you do Taylor stuff and you get points... buying merch and CDs are worth more... so it gave more points, putting you on this imaginary leaderboard.”

The comment described a past loyalty reward system where streaming, watching videos, and buying merchandise were tied to ticket access, creating clear differences in fan status based on

an “imaginary leaderboard”. This showed how dedication became easier to measure when fan activities were turned into visible, countable actions. This reflected Yin (2020), in which fan engagement was converted into trackable inputs that shaped access and recognition. It was also tied to Bourdieu’s economic capital, since spending on “merch and CDs” was valued more than other forms of engagement.

Closeness to the artist depended not just on having these resources but also on their recognition through ranking systems, thereby turning them into symbolic capital. Alongside this, subcultural capital showed up in long-term knowledge of lyrics, “eras,” and Easter eggs, which, together with economic capital, shaped who could participate most visibly in fandom spaces, with fans who accumulated more of these resources more easily positioned as “closer” to the artist than others.

As a result, closeness to the artist was not only seen through an abstract lens, but participation levels could also quantify it. Overall, closeness to the artist became quantified and ranked, with fans positioning themselves relative to one another based on levels of involvement rather than on equal membership in the community. Building on this, fans believed that Taylor Swift’s marketing strategies intentionally reinforced parasocial behaviors that had been occurring since the beginning of her career. Fournier (1998) argued that brands could function like actual relationship partners. Hannah’s comment showed how that played out here:

Hannah - “I think most people in this fandom can agree that Taylor really fostered a parasocial relationship with her fans early on in her career as a marketing tool, and tbh, it was smart...”

Hannah described this marketing tool as a way for Taylor Swift to create a sense of closeness with her fans, positioning her as someone they could confide in and relate to like a close friend. This reflected Horton and Wohl’s (1956) concept of parasocial interaction, where one-sided intimacy with media figures was mistaken for personal connection, and Chen et al.’s (2022) description of the fan-idol bond marked by emotional intensity and a sense of personal connection. This framing was also reflected in fan discussions on Reddit, where this sense of intimacy corresponded with Fournier’s idea of the brand-as-a-partner relationship.

Importantly, this sense of closeness was not only felt but also understood by fans as actively produced through Taylor Swift’s marketing strategies. Many fans recognized that emotional intimacy was built into how the fandom operated, yet this awareness did not necessarily lead to reduced engagement.

The manufactured proximity surrounding Taylor Swift also created ongoing pressure for fans to remain continuously engaged. Figure 5 described how the constant cycle of new releases, online updates, and the Taylor Nation activity around future announcements affected her experience participating in the fandom.

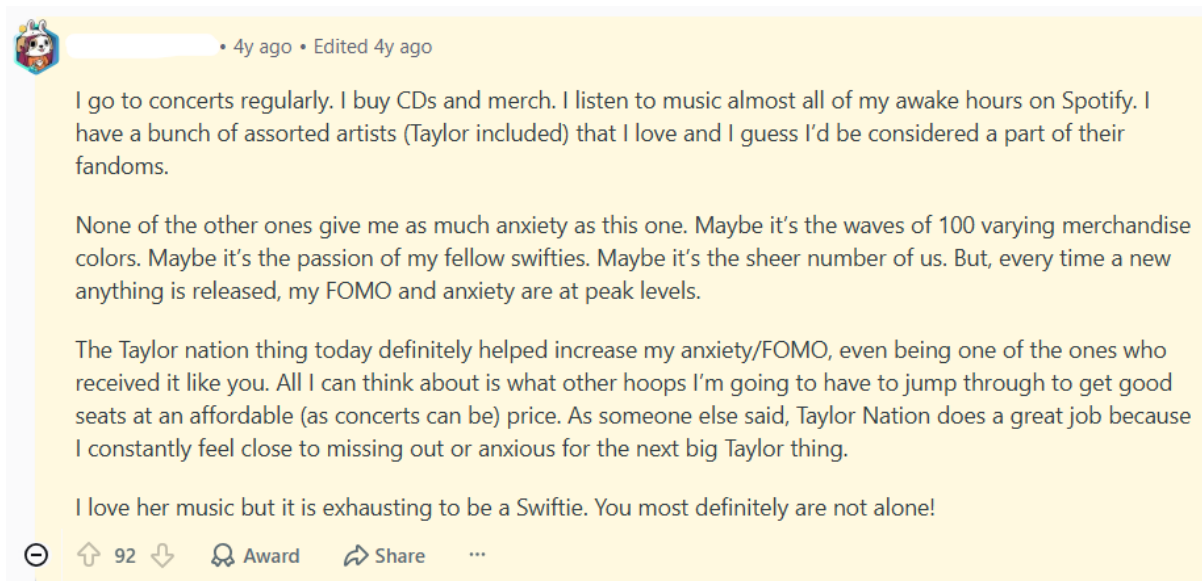


Figure 5: FOMO in the fandom

Phrases such as “go to concerts regularly” and “listen to music almost all of my awake hours” showed how deeply embedded these practices had become in everyday routines, while “exhausting to be a Swiftie” added a sense of fatigue alongside enjoyment. This mix of attachment and exhaustion reflected emotional labor in fandom, where staying engaged took effort even as it felt meaningful.

As seen in Figure 5, fandom participation was illustrated as continuous and difficult to disconnect from. Another Swiftie acknowledged that Taylor Swift’s marketing practices and fan culture could intensify the emotional exhaustion associated with fandom engagement. The discussion around Easter eggs and fans’ habits of speculations and analyzing theories determined the fan-artist and fan-fan interactions with Bella writing:

Bella - “...the easter eggs can encourage the unhealthy behavior but parasocial relationships are unhealthy regardless by definition. there shouldn’t be a reason for someone to be spending so much emotional energy towards someone they don’t know. It can turn into obsession as well...”

Bella described Easter eggs as a central part of how fans engaged with Taylor Swift, noting that such speculation could become excessive. Her phrasing, “spending so much emotional energy,” suggested that fans were strongly emotionally invested in the artist, indicating an imbalance in the relationship. Repeating “unhealthy” and “obsession” framed parasocial dynamics as something negative rather than just normal fandom behavior. She also argued that parasocial relationships were inherently problematic, as they involved a high level of emotional attention towards a public figure. In practice, fans also spent considerable time interpreting clues and constructing meanings from them. This suggested that the parasocial

dynamic between artist and fan was also shaped by fans' own speculation and emotional investment. The findings demonstrated that proximity to artists was not simply an emotional feeling but was actively shaped by systems that rewarded visibility and scarcity and encouraged repeated engagement.

5.3.2 Recognition as Reward

In the Swiftie fandom, many fans aimed to be in close proximity to Taylor Swift through visible participation, long-term dedication, and consistent activity. In many discussions in the Swiftie communities on Reddit, gaining recognition from Taylor Swift or Taylor Nation, in addition to access to exclusive fan opportunities, was considered highly valuable within the fandom. One prevalent theme in the data was the belief that online visibility increased the likelihood of being seen by Taylor Nation. Several users suggested that access to rare opportunities such as secret sessions, meet-and-greets, or pre-sale tickets was closely linked to being active on social media and visibly demonstrating dedication to the artist. For instance, Oliver wrote:

Oliver - "...It seems like unless I dedicate a Twitter account to every single thing that Taylor does, there is no chance I will ever get selected to meet Taylor at a show..."

This indicated that opportunities for recognition were not experienced equally, where fans adjusted their activity based on what they believed would increase their chances of recognition and access. The phrase "every single thing" emphasized how impossible the implied standard was to meet, while "no chance" signaled resignation rather than simple disappointment. This reflected how fans tended to interpret unequal access as a personal failure rather than as a result of uneven visibility within the fandom. The thread reflected Bourdieu's idea of symbolic violence, in which structural inequality was attributed to individual failure. Fans often ignored how platforms and marketing shaped visibility when explaining who got recognized.

Recognition in the form of likes, follows, comments, and visibility from both the artist and other fans was considered significant in the community. Long-term participation and content creation were, therefore, often framed as a path to receiving such recognition. This was contrasted with earlier fandom recognition that was more community-oriented, as Susan commented:

Susan - "I was one of the lucky ones who got a follow and a few likes. Each one sent me over the edge lol!! It was wild. I always tried to help others out too but honestly once people started joining with only the intention of getting a follow or like it was sad..."

There was a strong emotional response to Taylor Swift's acts of recognition, which Susan described as “sent me over the edge”. This reflected Marwick and Boyd's (2011) finding that fans who received direct acknowledgment from artists gained higher status within the community, being perceived as 'mini celebrities'. The phrase “Sent me over the edge” used exaggerated language to show that even small actions like a follow or a like had a strong emotional impact. It only made sense in a parasocial context, where minor gestures from the artist were read as meaningful personal recognition. Although likes and follows might appear ordinary outside the community, they held significant value in the fandom because recognition was treated as rare and meaningful. In Bourdieu's terms, this kind of acknowledgment functioned as symbolic capital because its value depended on its public visibility as evidence of closeness to the artist, where a follow or like gained meaning through being seen by others rather than the gesture itself.

By contrast, a long-term fan stated that despite being a dedicated fan on social media for years, the chances of being noticed by Taylor Nation were very low unless one was highly active at all times. As a result, fandom became a structured race for recognition, a dynamic that some fans found frustrating and discontented with. In several cases, fans also distinguished between those who participated in the fandom purely for enjoyment and those who were driven by hopes of gaining recognition from Taylor Swift or Taylor Nation. This showed that participation went beyond fan practices and became centered on maintaining visibility, which fans actively worked toward. As a result, recognition itself became something to compete for, producing clear differences in status within the community.

Similarly, competition could also be shown in offline environments such as concerts and events, where fans implemented strategies to maximize visibility, including visually striking outfits, buying expensive seats, and holding fan signs, as one post explained:

Eleanor - “...Before every tour, there's countless threads about 'how to meet Taylor' or the best way to 'get seen' by a member of her team... It then becomes a contest of how much money you can spend... I feel like it cheapens the experience of meeting her and turns it into some kind of competition or sport.”

Concert attendance mirrored similar fan behavior patterns observed in online contexts, where fans competed to be seen by Taylor Swift and her team. Eleanor described this as a “competition or sport”, implying that recognition was earned through effort, spending, and deliberate attempts to stand out, rather than simply attending for enjoyment. Calling fandom a “sport” showed how recognition became something to compete for rather than share. The word “cheapens” added a moral judgment, suggesting that paying for access made it feel less authentic.

Here, economic capital showed up in fans buying better seats, outfits, or attending multiple tour dates, producing socioeconomic boundaries in which access depended on financial

resources. Eleanor pushed back against this, treating spending as inferior to “real” dedication. This reflected moral boundaries around financial advantage, in which wealth-based status was recognized but not considered legitimate.

The post was highly validated by users who agreed and upvoted this sentiment, reflecting the belief that opportunities were so unevenly distributed within the fandom. Alongside these frustrations, Swifties shared stories of how they had successfully met Taylor Swift. These experiences were portrayed as emotional and extraordinary moments, as fans got to enter Taylor Swift’s home, meet her parents, and spend time with her in private. This reward was exemplified by comments such as “I won the contest to be at the shake it off premiere, then she invited us all back to her house for pizza... we got to wander her apt and hold her cats...” and “I met Taylor after being invited to the T Party room during the second leg of the Fearless tour...”

These narratives further positioned recognition as the peak of fandom status, in which being noticed was treated as rare, emotionally significant, and valued. These stories spread within Reddit fan communities, where sharing and discussion amplified recognition and increased their perceived importance among fans. This also encouraged fans to seek closer proximity to Taylor Swift.

A portion of the fandom believed that the desire for recognition not only shaped participation but also led to frustration around how fan-artist relationships were structured. Kelly, as a long-term fan, reflected on how competitive it had become to gain Taylor Swift’s attention:

Kelly – “...I honestly think this is how the fandom has always been!... people went ALL OUT on outfits to try and get her attention on tour spending so much time and money to try and get a notice of going to the T Party... because of the close relationship Taylor had with fans in the early days... it causes people to lose their minds a little.”

As Kelly recalled, fans went “all out” with their outfits and invested significant time and money in an attempt to get noticed. This dynamic between Taylor Swift and her fans had existed since the beginning of her career. Her capitalized “ALL OUT” emphasized extreme effort, while “lose their minds a little” normalized intense reactions as part of fandom. The final line linked this to Taylor’s early closeness with fans, suggesting those parasocial relationships still shaped fan behavior today.

The strong devotion was described as fans losing their minds, spending time and money just to be noticed, and treating brief encounters with Taylor Swift as highly meaningful. These behaviors resembled what McCutcheon et al. (2002) identified as the highest level of celebrity worship, marked by obsessive attachment and a perceived personal connection with the artist. In this sense, the intensity observed within the Swiftie community echoed the older idea of

worship as religion in act (Bennett, 1926), now redirected toward a celebrity rather than a religious figure.

6 Discussion

This chapter discussed the findings across the three analytical themes and their theoretical implications. The findings showed that status within the Swiftie community was shaped by consumption, visibility, and recognition, with participation gaining value through how it was interpreted and recognized by others. Parasociality emerged as a significant foundation underlying fans' dedication, policing, and pursuit of closeness to the artist.

6.1 Summary of Key Findings

Within the Taylor Swift community, status was less shaped by participation itself and more by how consumption became visible, socially recognized signals of dedication, legitimacy, and closeness to the artist. The first theme demonstrated that dedication was gained through visible consumption practices such as collecting merchandise, streaming music, fan labor, and fan expertise. These practices often signaled a strong commitment, with status only emerging when these actions were made publicly visible and recognized by other fans. The second theme explored how status was continuously maintained through a system of informal judgment established by fans, which defined who was considered legitimate. The judgments were expressed through discussions between “real” and “casual” fans, and between “authentic” and “inauthentic” behaviors, alongside criticism of opportunistic tendencies and the policing of Taylor Swift's own actions regarding morals and ethics. The last theme showed that the closer proximity to the artist enhanced one's position in the hierarchy. Recognition from the artist was mediated through algorithmic visibility and platform engagement, which contributed to fans gaining social status within online communities. This created a reward system that reinforced closeness to the artist, transforming fandom participation into a competitive and comparative space. As a result, the findings indicated that status was produced through an ongoing cycle between consumption, recognition, and visibility. What mattered was not the actions themselves but how they were interpreted and evaluated by other fans.

Among the three themes, a consistent pattern was observed across different forms of participation: status was built through actions that gained meaning from both perceived closeness to Taylor Swift and peer validation within the fandom. Actions such as buying merchandise, streaming music, creating fan content, and demonstrating knowledge became meaningful indicators of dedication when they were made visible and validated by others. Similarly, fans' policing of others' behaviors often reflected broader ideas about what constituted a “real” fan and which forms of engagement were considered appropriate within the fandom. The pursuit of visibility was closely linked to the belief that recognition from

Taylor Swift represented a unique form of validation and closeness. Taken together, these practices suggested that fans were not only participating in fandom activities. Still, they were continuously negotiating and reinforcing both their relationship to the artist and their position within the fandom hierarchy.

6.2 Advancing and elaborating the meaning of finding

Emotional expressions were a key feature of fan discourse, with strong affective, emotional, and hyperbolic language such as “obsessed”, “crazy,” and “biggest fan”. This language not only described feelings but also served as a signal of commitment. In this sense, stronger emotional expressions and participation practices both became part of how fans were evaluated. Fans who displayed stronger emotional expressions were often perceived as more authentic, while those with lower levels of engagement were seen as less committed. This pattern reflected what Shen (2022) described as emotional labor, where fans invested emotional effort in supporting and maintaining a connection with an artist through activities such as engagement, promotion, purchasing, and participation. These actions were driven by emotional attachment and performed voluntarily, often without direct reward. Rather than a fixed rule, this reflected a shared way of interpreting and judging other levels of fandom within the community. At the same time, platform visibility reinforced these interpretations of “realness”. Streaming metrics, merchandise displays, and other forms of engagement were publicly visible in posts and comments, encouraging ongoing evaluation and comparison. In these interactions, status was continuously maintained through discussions. Fans were not simply “being” fans, they repeatedly showed this in ways that could be seen, measured, and compared against others. Being recognized as a dedicated fan required ongoing emotional labor, in which devotion had to be repeatedly demonstrated in ways others could see and validate. This visibility also meant that fan practices such as streaming could be quantified and compared through music platforms, enabling competition between fans. Being the “most invested” fan, therefore, had to be continuously performed and signaled rather than simply felt, requiring sustained effort to remain visible against others.

A central question this raised was why fans sustained this emotional labor for an artist who, in most cases, would never directly acknowledge them. The answer could be rooted in the parasocial dynamic that structured the fandom. Horton and Wohl (1956) defined parasociality as a one-sided, illusory form of intimacy experienced by audiences toward media figures. Unlike genuine social interaction, these relationships lacked reciprocity, the performer maintained control, and they could not develop into a mutual relationship. As highlighted in the literature review, the fan-idol bond was marked by emotional intensity and a sense of personal connection (Chen et al. 2022, p.2). Parasociality, therefore, provided the emotional foundation that made the labor feel worthwhile, since fans were invested in a one-sided

relationship with the celebrity they felt close to. The findings illustrated that parasociality was a central theme in understanding why fans engaged in highly dedicated, and sometimes extreme, behaviors, such as regularly staying up late in anticipation of potential releases. Because many fans experienced a perceived closeness to Taylor Swift, practices that involved collecting large amounts of merchandise, intensive streaming, developing detailed knowledge of the artist, and judging other fans' authenticity became meaningful. They were understood as ways of expressing, strengthening, and demonstrating that connection to the artist.

Seen through this lens, parasociality both strengthened and complicated symbolic boundaries. On one hand, it gave meaning to fan practices by turning ordinary actions into expressions of devotion. On the other hand, the parasocial dynamic between the fan and the artist resulted in less positive experiences, including FOMO, financial pressure, and disappointment when not receiving recognition from the artist or Taylor Nation. Because visibility and recognition were uneven, parasocial closeness depended as much on platform dynamics as on effort and commitment. This helped explain why fans continued to participate despite recognizing problems within the fandom, such as exploitative marketing practices and unhealthy competition. While symbolic violence could help explain how these dynamics became normalized, the parasocial angle offered a different perspective. Fans persisted in participating in these activities because the perceived relationship with the artist remained meaningful and worthwhile.

The four theories, Bourdieu's forms of capital, Thornton's subcultural capital, Lamont's symbolic boundaries, and Bourdieu's symbolic violence, were selected and combined because each captured a different layer of how status was produced in the fandom. Forms of capital explained which resources fans used to display economic resources and knowledge. In contrast, subcultural capital referred to insider knowledge and practices recognized within the fandom as markers of authenticity and status. Symbolic capital captured the process through which such recognition was converted into a visible status through peer validation. Symbolic boundaries explained how fans created distinctions between "real" and "casual" fans, whereas symbolic violence helped explain why these hierarchies often felt natural, even when they disadvantaged participants.

Using a combination of theories strengthened the analysis because economic capital explained unequal access to resources, while symbolic boundaries captured how fans judged and differentiated one another, together showing how status was shaped through both material access and ongoing moral evaluation. Together, these highlighted the value of combining the theoretical frameworks. Adding the parasociality angle provided the missing emotional layer. It explained why these processes of economic and cultural resources, judgment, and hierarchy were relevant and why status became tied to perceived closeness to the artist.

6.3 Contributions

The findings extended Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) by showing that moral responsibility helped maintain community belonging and supported member retention. However, our study showed that moral responsibility could generate ongoing conflict, particularly in online fan spaces where members held different moral, political, or commercial expectations. Fans continually reassessed the brand itself, even highly invested fans with tattoos and significant spending questioned their dedication to Taylor Swift when her actions conflicted with their expectations around ethics, politics, or marketing practices. Schouten and McAlexander (1995) noted that longtime members could feel betrayed when a brand became mainstream. But their main focus was on how people’s commitment grew over time as individuals invested more of themselves, making it harder to leave. These investments, such as money, time, friendships, and identity, became strong barriers to leaving the subculture. Our study built on this understanding by showing that leaving a fandom was not uncommon, as moral, political, and commercial disagreements could lead fans to disengagement from online fandom communities.

In addition, unlike brand communities, fan communities were structured around an active participant, such as an artist. The present study explored how fan communities built around a living artist, the artist’s own actions could trigger moral conflict and withdrawal from fandom, a dynamic not addressed in brand communities. Moreover, fans’ desire for acknowledgment from the artist and the artist’s use of marketing practices to shape fan behavior introduced a two-way relationship that brand community theory did not account fully for.

Fournier’s study focused on relationships with functional brands and material goods people used in everyday life. This helped explain why breakups were difficult and why people remained connected, since individuals still relied on those brands in daily use. In our study, fans did not rely on Taylor Swift in a functional sense; instead, the bond was based on identity and emotional connection. Because of this, there was no practical reason to stay after a “break-up”, yet disengagement was still rarely simple. Fans often moved between distancing and re-engaging, because leaving also meant letting go of part of their fan identity. The emotional attachment could make it harder to fully register or accept the negative aspects that would normally lead to a break-up. This pointed to a gap in Fournier’s model for non-functional relationships. In parasocial contexts, attachment was less about use and more about identity, and this emotional “blindness” made it harder to break away as a fan.

The study extended Thornton’s argument that status in communities operated primarily through subcultural rather than cultural capital, as the forms of knowledge, taste, and authenticity valued by Swifties were recognized only by other fans. The study further extended Thornton’s work by showing that subcultural capital in platform-based fandoms remained grounded in insider knowledge, such as lyrics, eras, and Easter eggs, while also being shaped

by visible platform metrics, such as streaming rankings and upvotes. This made status significantly more visible and enabled comparisons in ways not accounted for in Thornton's original framework.

Han et al. (2010) and Berger and Ward (2010) argued that high-status consumers often preferred subtle signals. However, in the Swiftie community, loud signals such as collections and listening metrics were also read as signs of devotion. Fans used both loud and subtle signals, including insider knowledge and curated collections, to express status within the community.

The findings also extended Horton and Wohl's (1956) concept of parasociality as an individual with one-sided attachment. Within digital fan communities, parasociality appeared not only as a personal relationship but also as a shared structure shaping which metrics, forms of knowledge, spending practices, and recognition were valued as status markers.

A further contribution of the study was that parasociality was also actively sustained through the artist's own participation. In the case of Taylor Swift, the continued encouragement of closeness and recognition helped preserve the parasocial relationship, which in turn maintained high levels of fan investment and engagement. This suggested that parasociality was not a one-directional attachment, but an actively managed relationship that could also serve strategic purposes in maintaining visibility and cultural dominance within the fandom space.

7 Conclusion

The study answered the question: How do fans gain and maintain status within online fan communities through consumption of pop musicians? The findings showed that status in the Swiftie community was built through visibility. Buying merchandise, streaming heavily, crafting fan content, and demonstrating insider knowledge of lyrics, eras, and Easter eggs only carried weight when other fans recognized these practices as signs of dedication. This was reinforced by platforms such as Spotify and loyalty point systems, which turned consumption into rankings that fans shared, compared, and used to position themselves against one another.

Once gained, status had to be continuously re-produced. Fans stayed continuously active, since slowing down signaled fading commitment. They policed what counted as a "real" fan, judging other fans as legitimate or opportunistic and extending similar judgment to the artist when her behavior conflicted with their values. They also pursued proximity to Taylor Swift through striking outfits, online activity, and content creation, since being noticed by the artist or Taylor Nation was considered the highest form of recognition within the community. Parasociality was what made this sustained effort feel worthwhile, as status signaled closeness to an artist fans felt personally connected to, which was why the work continued even when it was exhausting or unrewarding.

Fandom participation in the Swiftie community was closely linked to Taylor Swift's commercial and platform systems that shaped it. Buying, streaming, posting, and attending concerts were experienced by fans as expressions of devotion. Still, the same acts were tracked simultaneously as streams, upvotes, loyalty metrics, and revenue for Taylor Swift and her management team. Moreover, recognition from Taylor Swift was perceived by fans as personal. Still, it was also shaped through reward loyalty programs such as secret sessions and acknowledgments from Taylor Nation, which were managed by her team. Even when fans recognized this, it rarely changed their behavior, as their relationship with Taylor Swift remained central to why participation felt worthwhile. The financial strain, FOMO, exhaustion, and the feeling that their effort went unnoticed all stemmed from the same dynamics that made the fandom meaningful in the first place. This tension highlighted key concerns for marketing ethics, platform design, and fan experience in fandom communities. These dynamics existed because the Swiftie community operated as a commercial structure, where the sense of closeness to Taylor Swift was also converted into streams, sales, and tour revenue. In this context, marketing ethics were complicated, as they generated emotional value for fans and also produced commercial value for the industry. Although they were produced together, the experience was not equal; the industry captured the revenue, while fans shouldered the financial burden and emotional labor. Status in this community was therefore gained by making consumption visible to other fans, and maintained through continuous performance, peer judgment, and the pursuit of recognition from the artist.

7.1 Wider Implications

The findings offered valuable insights for artists and brand management, particularly for those with highly engaged fandoms and a strong presence on online platforms. While digital platforms strengthened fan-artist and fan-fan relationships through visibility and recognition, they also intensified pressure and comparison among fans, which could lead to fan disengagement. As the literature showed, perceived proximity to an artist created status within fandoms (Marwick & Boyd, 2011), and this was intensified by platform algorithms that quantified engagement and made participation constantly visible (Bucher, 2012; Bucher & Helmond, 2017). Because of this, engagement strategies were to focus not only on creating and increasing participation but also on managing it in a way that did not overwhelm or exhaust fans.

Recognition within the fandom must not be mainly based on fans' spending, streaming, or constant activity. The study showed that members of fandom communities who could not meet these expectations often interpreted this as a personal failure. Introducing more forms of recognition that didn't require significant spending could reduce this pressure and make closeness to the artist feel less dependent on money and constant engagement.

Album variants and merchandise were to be released more strategically to avoid oversaturation and commercial fatigue. When artists frequently dropped merchandise and multiple variants, fans could perceive this as excessive, with some describing a shift from enthusiasm to feeling exploited. More intentional, slower release cycles for merchandise and album variants could reduce the negative perception that marketing strategies were financially exploiting fans through continuous commercial releases.

The artist's behavior, whether in a commercial or public setting, played a crucial part in maintaining a good relationship with fans. The findings demonstrated that even highly dedicated fans were willing to withdraw support from the artist when the artist no longer aligned with their ethical or commercial expectations. Loyalty in the fandom was therefore conditional, depending on how fans interpreted the artist's actions, an important consideration for brand managers and artists. It could be suggested that fan engagement strategies were most effective when they balanced visibility with moderation. While frequent material releases and high visibility could increase participation, they could also produce comparison pressure and lead to fan fatigue.

Beyond implications for artists and brand management, the findings also illustrated how followership worked more broadly in today's consumer culture. Fan identity was no longer fixed, but had to be continually performed. Simply being attached to an artist was not enough, unless it was made visible in ways others could recognize. This pattern likely extended to audiences around influencers, athletes, and other online personalities.

The study also contributed to work on hierarchies in brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), in which status was understood as something built up gradually over time. In platform-based fan spaces, status worked differently. It had to be re-earned constantly through streaming counts, merchandise displays, and disagreements about who counted as a "real" fan. Hierarchy was therefore not earned over time but actively produced through ongoing visible participation, making these communities more competitive than traditional brand communities.

Finally, the findings reflected a wider shift in how closeness with a public figure now worked. Celebrities and influencers actively built a sense of intimacy as part of their public image, and audiences responded by engaging in ways that were visible and measurable. At the same time, people increasingly judged public figures on their behavior and values, so support was continually reassessed rather than taken for granted.

Overall, although this study did not aim for generalizability, it highlighted that the ways fans participated in online communities could shift from pressure connection when recognition was closely tied to measurable activities such as streaming metrics, online interactions, and spending. The study of the Swiftie community, therefore, offered insights into how attachment, status, and belonging were shaped more broadly in online spaces.

7.2 Limitations of the Study

There were several limitations to consider when interpreting the findings. First, fans described how FOMO, financial pressure, and recognition-seeking were often linked to marketing practices engineered to produce scarcity, platform metrics that rewarded continuous visibility, and constant comparison with other fans on Reddit. Our study could not establish whether these factors were a direct or primary cause of these experiences.

Second, the study only captured how fans interpreted Taylor Swift's marketing strategies and the systems Taylor Nation used to select fans for exclusive opportunities. It could not determine how these systems were actually designed, or what the marketing team aimed to achieve with them. The analysis discussed marketing strategies, such as variant strategies and ticket systems, only through the lens of Swiftie's interpretations.

Third, the data reflected only what Swifties chose to share publicly on Reddit, including some former and long-term fans who used the platform to reflect on disengagement or earlier fandom experiences, which was valuable for the analysis. However, those who left without posting, lurkers, and fans who kept their participation private were not included in the data.

The study focused on one artist-centered fandom shaped by particular platform dynamics and commercial practices. While the identified findings might be relevant, they should not be assumed to apply in the same way across all fan communities. Offline experiences were only captured through what fans mentioned online.

7.3 Future Research

Future research could examine whether the link between consumption-based status and parasocial attachment also appeared in other fan contexts centered on a central public figure, such as sports or influencer communities.

Methodologies beyond netnography, such as interviews, would help explore how fans understood their own behavior, while surveys could capture how common experiences like pressure, FOMO, or disengagement actually were. Comparing platforms like Reddit, TikTok, or X would also highlight how different platform designs shaped visibility and status.

Since our study examined an artist who actively cultivated an intimate relationship with fans, future research could focus on fandoms around artists who resisted this parasociality by maintaining a distance from fans, for instance, by avoiding loyalty programs or controlling the frequency of variant releases and merchandise drops.

Finally, future work could benefit from engaging directly with individuals working in the industry. Further research focused on management teams and record labels would add insights into how recognition and marketing practices were designed from the business perspective, not only how fans experienced them.

8 References

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Appendix A

Use of AI

We used generative AI tools, specifically ChatGPT, Claude and Grammarly to support the early stages of brainstorming topic ideas for the thesis. In addition, AI was used to generate suggestions for headings and subheadings and to improve the wording, clarity, and structure of sentences we drafted. We conducted all data collection, coding, thematic analysis, and interpretation. Finally, AI was used as a final check after we had manually reviewed each reference, ensuring that formatting was correct and that entries were listed in alphabetical order. We critically reviewed and edited the AI-assisted suggestions to ensure that the final text reflected our own reasoning and understanding of the subject.

Appendix B

Raw Data

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N
Link	Subreddit	Post	Drop or keep	Theming	Theming	Comment	Coding	Coding	Coding	Coding	Coding	Coding	Notes
https://www.reddit.com/r/TaylorSwift/comments/10u3v3w/what-is-the-bars-minimum-to-be-considered-a-swiftie-according-to-you/	r/TaylorSwift	What is the bars minimum to be considered a Swiftie according to you?	Counter	Polishing and judgement in this section	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Comment: Yeah, for me, I'm confused as to why some people think you aren't a Swiftie if you don't buy any merch or vinyls. You can easily be a fan even if you don't buy anything from her.	Moral Superiority	Non-cons. umption in a fandom	Buying Merch/Physical items				
https://www.reddit.com/r/TaylorSwift/comments/10u3v3w/what-is-the-bars-minimum-to-be-considered-a-swiftie-according-to-you/			Counter	Polishing and judgement in this section	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Comment: agree!! I have been a fan for a little over ten years and only started buying merch a few years ago. I never really noticed how common it was to wear merch at concerts until after rap tour now. I actually enjoy collecting merch but it's not the biggest part of being a fan at all.	OG Fan	Collecting Merch	Spending habits				
https://www.reddit.com/r/TaylorSwift/comments/10u3v3w/what-is-the-bars-minimum-to-be-considered-a-swiftie-according-to-you/		I just got these and this may be the cutest display I've ever seen!	Counter	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Post: I just got these and this may be the cutest display I've ever seen!	Freaking / showing off	Enclosure	Limited edition				
https://www.reddit.com/r/TaylorSwift/comments/10u3v3w/what-is-the-bars-minimum-to-be-considered-a-swiftie-according-to-you/			Counter	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Comment: leave your door unlocked for good luck!!							
https://www.reddit.com/r/NaucoringTaylor/comments/10u3v3w/what-is-the-bars-minimum-to-be-considered-a-swiftie-according-to-you/	r/NaucoringTaylor	Swifties yearn to spend	Counter	Polishing and judgement in this section	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Comment: One thing about being a huge fan girl/ boy is it's really buying everything possible.	True fan / Dedication	Buying Merch/Physical items	Spending habits	Fanaticism			
https://www.reddit.com/r/NaucoringTaylor/comments/10u3v3w/what-is-the-bars-minimum-to-be-considered-a-swiftie-according-to-you/			Counter	Polishing and judgement in this section	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Response comment: There is a competitive element in some circles which contributes to this, but it does seem that some people have an insatiable appetite for TS content.	Fanaticism	Fanaticism					belongs to comment above
https://www.reddit.com/r/NaucoringTaylor/comments/10u3v3w/what-is-the-bars-minimum-to-be-considered-a-swiftie-according-to-you/			Counter	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Comment: But because Taylor has brought me SO much joy and connection, and I usually digest music via streaming, I will also buy digital copies of every item so I know she likes to win chart battles.	True fan / Dedication	Status signaling	Streaming	Fanaticism			Emotional investment as status
https://www.reddit.com/r/NaucoringTaylor/comments/10u3v3w/what-is-the-bars-minimum-to-be-considered-a-swiftie-according-to-you/			Counter	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Comment: I'm one of the fans who has never bought anything from her unfortunately. I'm happy I can use all of her content for free.	Financial Constraints	Non-cons. umption in a fandom					
https://www.reddit.com/r/NaucoringTaylor/comments/10u3v3w/what-is-the-bars-minimum-to-be-considered-a-swiftie-according-to-you/	r/NaucoringTaylor		Counter	Polishing and judgement in this section	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Post: ... spending money on Taylor and Taylor-adjacent things is a part of their hobby. In the same way as supporters of a sports team often do. ... Different types of fan engage in different levels and types of spending, but the overwhelming fun really is that TS fans want to spend their money on TS-related items.	Buying Merch/Physical items	Fanaticism	Spending habits				
https://www.reddit.com/r/NaucoringTaylor/comments/10u3v3w/what-is-the-bars-minimum-to-be-considered-a-swiftie-according-to-you/			Counter	Polishing and judgement in this section	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Comment: I think it's fun it's kind of cool to see how the value of things change over time and how suddenly a bottle of Reddewick or a Beautiful Eyes CD or signed lower insert can be worth so much. You never know when something is going to be super limited and end up being highly sought after.	OG Fan	Collecting Merch	Limited edition				
https://www.reddit.com/r/NaucoringTaylor/comments/10u3v3w/what-is-the-bars-minimum-to-be-considered-a-swiftie-according-to-you/			Counter	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Comment: I'm rich owning both enchanted wonderland and incredible things to	Collecting Merch	Status signaling	OG Fan	Freaking / showing off			connected to comment above
https://www.reddit.com/r/NaucoringTaylor/comments/10u3v3w/what-is-the-bars-minimum-to-be-considered-a-swiftie-according-to-you/			Counter	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Comment: I collect vinyl in general and I have for years, but in the past year or so I decided to try and collect every Taylor album... including stolen versions so that I have a way to still listen to them without a bootlegging bad people.	Collecting Merch	Fanaticism	Spending	Freaking / showing off			connected to the same thread
https://www.reddit.com/r/NaucoringTaylor/comments/10u3v3w/what-is-the-bars-minimum-to-be-considered-a-swiftie-according-to-you/	r/NaucoringTaylor	Why Do You Collect Merch?	Counter	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Comment: I collect because I'm crazy and obsessive. I mainly collect the vinyls. I'm not a connoisseur, but I'm close. During the peak now I've decided that it's a different cover. I'll buy all of them. Also I have most of the signed cds. Nothing on CD, not, but most everything else.	Fanaticism	Collect	Freaking / showing off	Spending			connected to the same thread
https://www.reddit.com/r/NaucoringTaylor/comments/10u3v3w/what-is-the-bars-minimum-to-be-considered-a-swiftie-according-to-you/			Counter	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Comment: I buy everything that has to do with Red, so that album is my life. Otherwise I am just starting my vinyl collection even though I don't even have a record player yet. I love her covers and they are the most perfect I have seen and I am so in love with her happy	Collecting Merch	Spending habits	Fanaticism				connected to the same thread
https://www.reddit.com/r/NaucoringTaylor/comments/10u3v3w/what-is-the-bars-minimum-to-be-considered-a-swiftie-according-to-you/			Counter	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Comment: I have an obscene amount of merch and I think I get attached to the idea of a full set? I don't start collecting something if I don't think I can get a "full set".	Collecting Merch	Fanaticism	Consumption in based comparison				connected to the same thread
https://www.reddit.com/r/NaucoringTaylor/comments/10u3v3w/what-is-the-bars-minimum-to-be-considered-a-swiftie-according-to-you/			Counter	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Comment: I'll always buy one variant and maybe think of buying another if I like the color. I've got a lot of hoodies from each album but I don't go crazy. I'm collecting most of the four merch to save me from buying on the day a part from one of the hoodies that is currently out of stock.	Collecting Merch	Intentional spending	Spending habits				connected to the same thread

B1: Sample screenshot of coding

Link	Post	Drop or keep	Theming	Theming	Comment	Coding	Coding	Coding	Coding	Coding	Coding	Notes
https://www.reddit.com/r/TaylorSwift/comments/10u3v3w/what-is-the-bars-minimum-to-be-considered-a-swiftie-according-to-you/	What is the bars minimum to be considered a Swiftie according to you?	Counter	Polishing and judgement in this section	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Comment: Yeah, for me, I'm confused as to why some people think you aren't a Swiftie if you don't buy any merch or vinyls. You can easily be a fan even if you don't buy anything from her.	Moral Superiority	Non-cons. umption in a fandom	Buying Merch/Physical items				
https://www.reddit.com/r/TaylorSwift/comments/10u3v3w/what-is-the-bars-minimum-to-be-considered-a-swiftie-according-to-you/		Counter	Polishing and judgement in this section	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Comment: agree!! I have been a fan for a little over ten years and only started buying merch a few years ago. I never really noticed how common it was to wear merch at concerts until after rap tour now. I actually enjoy collecting merch but it's not the biggest part of being a fan at all.	OG Fan	Collecting Merch	Spending habits				
https://www.reddit.com/r/TaylorSwift/comments/10u3v3w/what-is-the-bars-minimum-to-be-considered-a-swiftie-according-to-you/	I just got these and this may be the cutest display I've ever seen!	Counter	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Post: I just got these and this may be the cutest display I've ever seen!	Freaking / showing off	Enclosure	Limited edition				
https://www.reddit.com/r/NaucoringTaylor/comments/10u3v3w/what-is-the-bars-minimum-to-be-considered-a-swiftie-according-to-you/	Swifties yearn to spend	Counter	Polishing and judgement in this section	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Comment: One thing about being a huge fan girl/ boy is it's really buying everything possible.	True fan / Dedication	Buying Merch/Physical items	Spending habits	Fanaticism			
https://www.reddit.com/r/NaucoringTaylor/comments/10u3v3w/what-is-the-bars-minimum-to-be-considered-a-swiftie-according-to-you/		Counter	Polishing and judgement in this section	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Response comment: There is a competitive element in some circles which contributes to this, but it does seem that some people have an insatiable appetite for TS content.	Fanaticism	Fanaticism					belongs to comment above
https://www.reddit.com/r/NaucoringTaylor/comments/10u3v3w/what-is-the-bars-minimum-to-be-considered-a-swiftie-according-to-you/		Counter	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Comment: But because Taylor has brought me SO much joy and connection, and I usually digest music via streaming, I will also buy digital copies of every item so I know she likes to win chart battles.	True fan / Dedication	Status signaling	Streaming	Fanaticism			Emotional investment as status
https://www.reddit.com/r/NaucoringTaylor/comments/10u3v3w/what-is-the-bars-minimum-to-be-considered-a-swiftie-according-to-you/		Counter	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Comment: I'm one of the fans who has never bought anything from her unfortunately. I'm happy I can use all of her content for free.	Financial Constraints	Non-cons. umption in a fandom					
https://www.reddit.com/r/NaucoringTaylor/comments/10u3v3w/what-is-the-bars-minimum-to-be-considered-a-swiftie-according-to-you/		Counter	Polishing and judgement in this section	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Post: ... spending money on Taylor and Taylor-adjacent things is a part of their hobby. In the same way as supporters of a sports team often do. ... Different types of fan engage in different levels and types of spending, but the overwhelming fun really is that TS fans want to spend their money on TS-related items.	Buying Merch/Physical items	Fanaticism	Spending habits				
https://www.reddit.com/r/NaucoringTaylor/comments/10u3v3w/what-is-the-bars-minimum-to-be-considered-a-swiftie-according-to-you/		Counter	Polishing and judgement in this section	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Comment: I think it's fun it's kind of cool to see how the value of things change over time and how suddenly a bottle of Reddewick or a Beautiful Eyes CD or signed lower insert can be worth so much. You never know when something is going to be super limited and end up being highly sought after.	OG Fan	Collecting Merch	Limited edition				
https://www.reddit.com/r/NaucoringTaylor/comments/10u3v3w/what-is-the-bars-minimum-to-be-considered-a-swiftie-according-to-you/		Counter	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Comment: I'm rich owning both enchanted wonderland and incredible things to	Collecting Merch	Status signaling	OG Fan	Freaking / showing off			connected to comment above
https://www.reddit.com/r/NaucoringTaylor/comments/10u3v3w/what-is-the-bars-minimum-to-be-considered-a-swiftie-according-to-you/		Counter	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Comment: I collect vinyl in general and I have for years, but in the past year or so I decided to try and collect every Taylor album... including stolen versions so that I have a way to still listen to them without a bootlegging bad people.	Collecting Merch	Fanaticism	Spending	Freaking / showing off			connected to the same thread
https://www.reddit.com/r/NaucoringTaylor/comments/10u3v3w/what-is-the-bars-minimum-to-be-considered-a-swiftie-according-to-you/	Why Do You Collect Merch?	Counter	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Comment: I collect because I'm crazy and obsessive. I mainly collect the vinyls. I'm not a connoisseur, but I'm close. During the peak now I've decided that it's a different cover. I'll buy all of them. Also I have most of the signed cds. Nothing on CD, not, but most everything else.	Fanaticism	Collect	Freaking / showing off	Spending			connected to the same thread
https://www.reddit.com/r/NaucoringTaylor/comments/10u3v3w/what-is-the-bars-minimum-to-be-considered-a-swiftie-according-to-you/		Counter	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Comment: I buy everything that has to do with Red, so that album is my life. Otherwise I am just starting my vinyl collection even though I don't even have a record player yet. I love her covers and they are the most perfect I have seen and I am so in love with her happy	Collecting Merch	Spending habits	Fanaticism				connected to the same thread
https://www.reddit.com/r/NaucoringTaylor/comments/10u3v3w/what-is-the-bars-minimum-to-be-considered-a-swiftie-according-to-you/		Counter	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Comment: I have an obscene amount of merch and I think I get attached to the idea of a full set? I don't start collecting something if I don't think I can get a "full set".	Collecting Merch	Fanaticism	Consumption in based comparison				connected to the same thread
https://www.reddit.com/r/NaucoringTaylor/comments/10u3v3w/what-is-the-bars-minimum-to-be-considered-a-swiftie-according-to-you/		Counter	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Demotivating dedication to artist and fandom	Comment: I'll always buy one variant and maybe think of buying another if I like the color. I've got a lot of hoodies from each album but I don't go crazy. I'm collecting most of the four merch to save me from buying on the day a part from one of the hoodies that is currently out of stock.	Collecting Merch	Intentional spending	Spending habits				connected to the same thread

B2: Sample screenshot of themes

Drop or keep	Theming	Theming	Comment	Sub Theme	Notes
Context	Demonstrating dedication to artist and fandom		Post: I just got these and this may be the cutest display I've ever seen! 🥰 Comment: leave your door unlocked for good luck !!! Reply: 🥰🥰 Both together were 350 USD. Which I didn't think was that bad. Considering how much time and money it probably cost her to make them.	Collecting and spen...	
Essential	Demonstrating dedication to artist and fandom		Comment: But because Taylor has brought me SO much joy and connection, and I usually digest music via streaming, I will also buy digital copies of every remix bc I know she likes to win chart battles.	Collecting and spen...	
Counter	Demonstrating dedication to artist and fandom		Comment I'm one of the fans who has never bought anything from her unfortunately. I'm happy I can use all of her content for free	Collecting and spen...	
Context	Demonstrating dedication to artist and fandom		Comment: I think it's fun! It's kind of cool to see how the value of things change over time and how suddenly a bottle of Wonderstruck or a Beautiful Eyes CD or signed Lover insert can be worth so much. You never know when something is going to be super limited and end up being highly sought after.	Collecting and spen...	
Essential	Demonstrating dedication to artist and fandom		comment: i feel rich owning both enchanted wonderstruck and incredible things lol	Collecting and spen...	
Context	Demonstrating dedication to artist and fandom		Comment: I collect vinyl in general and I have for years, but in the past year or so I decided to try and collect every taylor album—including stolen versions so that I have a way to still listen to them without it benefiting bad people...	Collecting and spen...	
Essential	Demonstrating dedication to artist and fandom		Comment: I collect because I'm crazy and obsessive. I mainly collect the vinyls, I'm not a completionist, but I'm close. During the speak now Era I decided that if it's a different cover, I'll buy all of them... Also I have most of the signed cds. Nothing pre OG red, but most everything else.	Collecting and spen...	
Context	Demonstrating dedication to artist and fandom		Comment: I buy everything that has to do with Red, bc that album is my life. Otherwise I am just starting my vinyl collection (even though I don't even have a record player yet 🥰) bc I love her covers and they are like mini posters I can place around my room to make me happy	Collecting and spen...	
Essential	Demonstrating dedication to artist and fandom		Comment: I have an obscene amount of merch and I think I get attracted to the idea of a full set? I don't start collecting something if I don't think I can get a "full set".	Collecting and spen...	
Context	Demonstrating dedication to artist and fandom		Comment: I'll always buy one variant and maybe think of buying another if I like the colour: I try and get a t shirt or hoodie from each drop but I don't go crazy. I'm collecting most of the tour merch to save me from buying on the day a part from one of the hoodies that is currently out of stock	Collecting and spen...	
Essential	Demonstrating dedication to artist and fandom		Comment: I collect the signed albums, just because they look cool with a signed cover (not going to lie, having an insert signed for Midnights was a tad disappointing) and also FOMO 🥰	Collecting and spen...	
Essential	Demonstrating dedication to artist and fandom		Post: ... I ended up buying multiple shirts, all the folklore records (paid some crazy prices from ebay sellers for some of them) I wanted to collect all the blankets, guitar pick sets, keychains, buttons, christmas ornaments, etc. from all eras.	Collecting and spen...	
Essential	Demonstrating dedication to artist and fandom		Comment 2: Ugh I'd dieee for that blanket lol	Collecting and spen...	
Essential	Demonstrating dedication to artist and fandom		Post: Not to brag but... Look what just came, still sealed. Kismet after today's RSD announcement but... yes... I'm screaming on the inside. I have to wait to open and put it in sleeves for when I get off work but I'm still excited!!! (image)	Collecting and spen...	
Context	Demonstrating dedication to artist and fandom		Comment 2: I mean, you should brag lol Congrats! Very exciting, and very jealous.	Collecting and spen...	
Essential	Demonstrating dedication to artist and fandom		Post: my TS corner 🥰 (update!) 🥰 🥰	Collecting and spen...	
Context	Demonstrating dedication to artist and fandom		Comment: IM SO JEALOUS	Collecting and spen...	
Context	Demonstrating dedication to artist and fandom		Comment 2: I spent \$2000+ on eras tour tickets for one night. I don't want to talk about it	Collecting and spen...	
Essential	Demonstrating dedication to artist and fandom		Comment 3: I have one copy of each album on vinyl (except debut and rep). I have debut somewhere around here on CD that I bought in 2007. I own one shirt. I went to the Reputation tour (those tickets were a gift though) and I went to Eras (and only paid \$1000/ticket). So in 17 years of being a fan, I'd estimate that I've spent ~\$575 or ~\$34/year. Most of which has been in the past few years as I've gotten more in collecting records, listening to vinyls, and as I've reached my 30s and make enough money to blow on silly things. I have a hard time letting all my music come from streaming services when an artist or the platform can pull that music at any time. I much prefer to have physical copies. But I'm only buying one version.	Collecting and spen...	
Essential	Demonstrating dedication to artist and fandom		Comment 4: Too much. Over the 17 going on 18 years of being a Swiftie, I have spent a lot of money on physical media but most notably in the last few years with the obnoxious amount of variants. Obviously I don't have to buy anything but I've been collecting cds since I was 6- it's my thing, and at this point I'm too far in to ever stop.	Collecting and spen...	

B3: Sample screenshot of subthemes