

Taylor Swift And Fluctuating Social Likeability: To What Extent Are Fans Aware of How the Knowledge of a Celebrity's Personal Life Affects Their View of Them?

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ABSTRACT

Despite Taylor Swift cementing herself as a formidable artist in recent years, her attempts to push against the narrative that she's purely a "break-up" songwriter, have been met with dismissal and consistent attempts to undercut both her artistry and success. Taylor Swift's love life has been a large topic of criticism and speculation throughout much of her career, and her fans, even with all the devotion that they hold for her, contribute to this. The purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which fans are aware of how their involvement in Taylor Swift's personal life can affect their perception of her as their idol. This is a qualitative study that utilized content analysis and survey to achieve the project's purpose. This study's findings conclude that fans remain mostly, but not purely unaware of how their knowledge of Taylor Swift's romantic and personal life affects their perception of her.

Introduction

Up until just recently, the representation of what it meant to be a fan in the media was often framed as socially unacceptable. Being seen as such could lead to being called a multitude of insults including "geek," "nerd," and "weirdo" due to it being seen as something that comes with the price of being socially inept and negatively associated with obsessive behavior. Now, being considered a fan of something is much more normalized, with conventions and spaces being held in order for people to express their enjoyment towards shows, people, books, etc (Bennett & Booth, 2016). With this normalization, comes an increase in the literature surrounding the nature of celebrity-fan dynamics, making it a topic of much discussion and criticism. In particular, the parasocial relationships between fans and celebrities are often examined in literature to gauge how attachments are formed between an audience and a media figure they barely know. Cynthia Vinney, expert in media psychology defines parasocial relationships as a "one sided relationship that a media user engages in with a media persona," and she asserts that the nature of parasocial relationships have changed over time due to social media making it possible to directly contact these media figures through both their direct messages and comments online. Because of this, many fans believe that they are even closer to these online personas than they actually are, a phenomenon that psychologists Horton and Wohl refer to as the "illusion of intimacy," (1956). This illusion is mainly used in reference to actors and refers to when the audience feels so connected to a character and what happens in their lives, that they feel like they're a part of it, despite the relationship being one sided.

The celebrity-fan base observed in this study is that between Taylor Swift and her fans known as "Swifties." Swift is a celebrity known for having a particularly close relationship to her fans, and research attributes this to her fans feeling understood and validated by her music (Drevitch, G, 2023). Dr. Jennifer Beckett, professor of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne, even asserts that Swift has redefined fan engagement by sending personalized gifts to her fans, and holding what she refers to as secret sessions where she invites select fans into her home to socialize and listen to music before it's officially released. Swift has been applauded for her talent as a

storyteller and her ability to create songs that showcase strong vulnerability and emotion, which, along with her attempts to create a connection with her fans, makes her fans feel like they know her personally (Frye, D. 2023). This level of engagement with Swift includes heavy investment in that of her love life, which has been a prominent topic of discussion for most of her career. Swift herself has stated that the media often treats her love life as a “spectator sport where I lose every time.” (New York University, 2022). Therefore, it is important to consider the question: To what extent are fans aware of how the knowledge of a celebrity's personal life affects their view of them? This study is meant to examine what outside of just a celebrity's persona, affects how celebrities are viewed by their fans, especially in circumstances in which that celebrity's personal life is heavily publicized and oftentimes the cause of ridicule. The purpose of this project will hopefully allow for closer thought and conversation about how a fan's devotion to a celebrity isn't purely the sort of reverence that can never be questioned or changed, but contingent on the personal life of that celebrity.

Literature Review

Publicizing Celebrities Lives

Part of the reasoning for why fans feel so connected to the celebrities that they follow is the constant publication of celebrities' personal lives through social media. As opposed to “traditional” celebrities, who didn't have such open channels of constant communication with their fans in the previous decades, current celebrities post a copious amount of their lives on social media. This ranges from details of their personal relationships, to their health, and they feel the need to let people in on their lives in ways that weren't common in traditional celebrities. This contributes to the reason that traditional celebrities from a few decades ago were viewed as more distant, while celebrities today are seen as more relatable to their fans. However, research has proven that the tendency to showcase their private lives on social media may have a negative impact on their popularity, as seen in Klosterman, et al's study examining the connection between sharing content and popularity (2009). Furthermore, the contribution of celebrities posting about their own lives, aligned with the media's attempts to obtain information, has resulted in celebrities being a part of everyday life through all forms of media (Hermes & Kooijman, 2015). This provides the illusion of people having an actual relationship to the celebrity.

Taylor Swift and “Swifties”

Taylor Swift initiated a connection with her fans early on in her career through writing songs about her own experiences, therefore allowing intimate access to her emotions. She often discusses the importance of song writing to her and gives behind the scenes information about her process of writing music (Wilkinson, M. 2019). This form of vulnerability through storytelling prompted her young fans, toward their own forms of self expression (Fogarty & Arnold, 2021). Therefore, it isn't only the publication of Swift's life that makes her marketable, but her fan's ability to relate to her on an emotional level. Swift feeds into this connection in more direct ways than music as well, as she has a tendency to invite her fans to her house, visit them in person, and send them personalized gifts. This creates a form of attachment between her and her fans that is more potent than it is with other celebrities. Though current literature regarding the topic of Swift and her fans exclusively is scarce, the effects of these attachments are broadly discussed in the literature regarding celebrities and their fans in more general conversations.

Clinical Effects and Attachment

Researchers in previous literature have identified the ability to turn followers into consumers, the psychological effects of celebrity worship on adolescents, celebrity worship as it pertains to social media consumption, etc. These

psychological impacts have been highlighted in many different written works including that of Randy and Lori Sansone (2014), in their study on the clinical effects of celebrity worship on adolescents. In this study, the authors find that addictive tendencies, compulsive buying, and stalking behavior are linked to celebrity worship, among mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and social dysfunction. Furthermore, the effects of renouncing fanship to a celebrity have also been discussed in previous literature through a study done by social psychology professors He and Sun in 2022. This study describes the stressful outcomes that occur when a fan “breaks up” with a media figure that they’ve grown attached to due to exposure to negative news about said figure. This news was treated with the same solemnity as a problem in the followers’ own life and often led to various harmful emotions and behaviors such as depression, anxiety, social avoidance, substance abuse, etc. Studies such as these are used most often to support the basis that celebrity worship is harmful particularly to adolescents as it isn’t based in reality and provides a false sense of closeness. It is because of this attachment that fans have with celebrities that businesses have begun to utilize celebrity endorsements more often.

Methods Overview

The methods for this study were chosen for the purpose of answering the question: To what extent are fans aware of how the knowledge of a celebrity's personal life affects their view of that celebrity? The celebrity that the researcher chose as the focus subject for this study is Taylor Swift due to the projected levels of fame that she’s reached in current years as well as personal interest in her as an artist. The topic chosen for examination was chosen due to it being an example of the merging of fan opinion and a celebrity’s personal life. On April 8th of 2023, it was announced that Joe Alwyn and Taylor Swift had broken up, creating a mix of emotions in her fans. This study, however, focuses on the events that occurred later in the year when Jack Antonoff, Swift’s producer, shared the exact date that a song believed to have been about Joe Alwyn was created. These later events, along with the previous, will allow for in depth analysis on the events surrounding the breakup and the reaction following them. This led to a great deal of conversation within the fandom resulting in many coming to the defense of either Swift or Alwyn with the new information given. This was the researchers reasoning for using content analysis. The next strategy of discovering if a connection exists was the administration of surveys via google forms to fans regarding their connection to Swift, their involvement in her personal life and affairs, her relationships, etc. There are limitations within this study for the methods chosen. Surveys depend on a proper sampling of the population being examined so it’s possible that the population in this research could be flawed despite attempts to make it accurate (Clancy, L, 2019). The interest that participants have in the subject of the study is an indicator of there being bias in their answers, which could garner misleading results (Andrade, C. 2020).

Frequent Methods & The Gap

In the vast majority of the research that’s been observed, the investigators achieve their results through a qualitative method. A qualitative method is used to understand people’s behaviors, attitudes, and experiences through non numerical data (Pathak, et al. 2013). This method most often includes surveys, semi structured interviews, content analysis, and the use of the Celebrity Worship scale. The Celebrity Worship scale is used to calculate how an individual feels towards a particular celebrity in order to identify if they can be classified as a celebrity worshiper (Vinney C, 2023.) These studies are most often conducted with the goal in mind to understand how different facets of life, be it consumer culture or mental health, can be impacted by the attachments formed between media figures and their admirers. However, a gap that’s been observed in the evaluation of the literature in this topic is the lack of research that revolves around how the examination of specified fandoms. This study aims to examine the extent of awareness that fans have about how the publicization of a celebrity, in this case, Taylor Swift’s, personal life, affects their view of that celebrity. The value of this research lies in the vast amount of content that can be found on celebrities and a rise

in the attachments formed with media figures because of that. This research would aid in understanding the extent of how self aware fans are of their attachment when it comes to the celebrity they follow, instead of just examining if there exists any attachment at all. This could be used to further research in the creation of ideas on how we could strengthen that awareness to prevent the negative effects that parasocial relationships could have on fans as discussed previously.

Content Analysis

The first method that is being used in this qualitative study is content analysis. Content analysis is a method based on observing different forms of content and ways of communication in order to find themes for the purpose of understanding social phenomena (Krippendorff, K. 2018.) Even though this is the method that most adequately achieves the goal of this study, which is to examine conversations surrounding the topic of Taylor Swift's relationships to better understand the phenomena of fan dynamics, there are limitations to the use of content analysis. For example, it is generalized to an extent with it not being able to represent the whole fandom's thoughts and feelings regarding the situation. However, content analysis will allow for the most current examination of conversations being had about the topic online, making it the most reliable method (Linda, L. 2015). The website chosen for this examination was Twitter as it is a heavily conversational platform, allowing the monitoring of how fans interact with celebrities in order to answer and examine any recurring themes and conversations that imply attachment or personal involvement. The content analysis for this study consisted of searching for a controversy surrounding Taylor Swift and her personal connections that warranted a particular response from fans online in order to examine the fandoms attitude. The controversy chosen for this celebrity in particular, Taylor Swift, was her split from actor Joe Alwyn. This situation was chosen as it highlights a recurring theme in many topics regarding Taylor Swift, her romantic life (Junes, E. 2023). Swift's alleged partners are viewed as a spectacle to much of the public and are the cause of many people's opinions of Swift. This news first broke in April of 2023 and recently resurfaced in November with the release of her song "You're Losing Me," as well as the new information provided about what time the song was written. From this analysis, it can be observed the relationship that fans have with Swift in regards to her personal life when the information is available to them.

Participants

To garner results for this study, surveys were administered to the participants through Twitter through purposive sampling. A purposive sample is one whose characteristics are most effective for the purpose of the study chosen (Andrade, C. 2020). Purposive sampling was chosen as the researcher wanted to choose a group of people who had the most presence online, and were most representative of Swift's fanbase. For this research, the people chosen to participate in this study are adults from the ages of 18-24. This age group was chosen as it is the one most often represented in the fandom being examined and would be the easiest to communicate with via social media (Jaksa, U. 2022). The researcher reached out to the participants through a social media account of their own. The participants were found by searching through the followers of Swift's official social media account. The researcher began by first looking at the possible fan's profile to make sure that they reached the criteria, they were then asked through direct messages if they'd like to be involved in the study, if they said yes, they were sent the survey. In the survey, the participants were informed of the goal of the research, what the research entailed, what was required for its completion, and they were provided with a consent form prior to their participation.

Surveys

Surveys were chosen as the second method of this study, as this is the most effective means of communicating with fans on a large scale since this study is being conducted entirely online. A singular fandom will be the focus for this research as that would be the most effective, focused, and organized method in conducting this study. These surveys will include questions that will help garner answers on how the fans perceive the celebrity, how entitled, if at all, they feel toward the celebrity, their supposed relationship status, and their emotional attachment to the celebrity.

Results

Content Analysis: Overall Break-Up Speculation

The researcher performed content analysis through the examination of tweets created by Swifties following the release of “You’re Losing Me,” along with the additional information given about the song as many fans believed that it revealed what led to the eventual split between the couple. The researcher looked for the most common themes in the posted tweets about this situation and bookmarked them for later reference when coming to a conclusion. The researcher gathered a sizable amount of data for this analysis to lessen the chances of their findings being too generalizable. Once enough pieces of data were taken, (45 tweets were taken to account when coming to a conclusion), the research then began to look for common subject matter between them. As shown in figure one, fans took to Twitter to express their thoughts and concerns mainly regarding Swift’s feelings about the split as implied by the song and timeline of its creation and release, her producer Jack Antonoff’s feelings regarding Joe Alwyn with his post being the including the date being what reignited this discourse, and Joe Alwyn’s supposed faults as a partner. Many fans express sympathy for how she may have felt during her relationship with Alwyn and after its conclusion, others claiming to feel her pain as closely as their own. Many began to find connections between the timeline of the song being written and her behavior on stage, as well as her other music that was released during that time. They believe that marriage was a cause of tension between the couple and the public due to a lyric in the newly released song “And I wouldn’t marry me either, a pathological people pleaser, who only wanted you to see her,” (Swift Taylor. “You’re Losing Me.” *Midnights*, Republic Records, 2023). This is believed to parallel a lyric in a song that predates it, “Lavender Haze,” being about societal pressures to marry. It’s widely believed by fans that Swift had plans to marry while Alwyn didn’t, and the pressure of the public to get married along with Alwyn’s supposed refusal of it led Swift to be heartbroken. This was further established in the fandom when Swift liked a Tweet that implies the song “Sweet Nothing,” a song previously believed to be about Joe Alwyn is instead about the relationship between Paul McCartney and his wife, Linda. This is seen by Swifties as Swift backpedaling and trying to rewrite the history between her and Alwyn.

Jack Antonoff

Jack Antonoff has been Taylor Swift’s producer for around 10 years and is regarded as one of Swift’s closest friends and confidantes (Jefferey, J. 2024). In Jack Antonoff’s post about the creation “You’re Losing Me,” on his instagram page, he notes the exact date that the song was written. It is believed by many fans that Antonoff’s inclusion of the date in his post was a cause of wanting to start lighthearted drama within the fandom, so that Swifties would investigate more into what led to the eventual split. Many fans note that the song was written a week before Swift’s 32nd birthday and nearly a year and a half before it was announced that they had officially broken up. Many Swifties believe that Swift’s producer, Jack Antonoff, has never liked Alwyn due to his alleged behavior towards the celebrity.

Joe Alwyn's Faults

Many fans reacted to the song with either discontent towards Alwyn or the need to come to his defense. Some believe that Alwyn was never a good partner, and that he used Swift as a means of success without truly respecting her craft. There are many posts of fans on Twitter expressing their disapproval of Joe Alwyn as a partner and how they feel about his alleged lack of support for Swift and her career. Some Swifties often report back to Alwyn rarely attending award shows, hardly speaking about Taylor, and not being able to name her songs. Others, however, seem to have grown attached to Alwyn and took to Twitter to defend him. They claim that Alwyn must have indeed been supportive of her career, even if it weren't in the public eye, and that it shouldn't be cause for speculation as their relationship as a whole wasn't very publicized. It's believed that it is unfair to judge the actor on the basis of a single song without knowing what the whole of their relationship was like beforehand. A few express dissatisfaction toward Swift for publishing the song and allowing her fanbase to criticize Alwyn based on numerous posts from fans on the app.

"You're Losing Me" official release date discourse - 5/26/23	
Believed to be about the events that took place before the break-up	Inspired either sympathy for Swift, or sympathy for Alwyn
Additional song information given by Antonoff + discourse following - 11/28/23	
Reveals that the song was written more than a year before its release date (12/5/21)	
Inspires more investigation on the relationship between the couple	Encourages some to believe that Alwyn was never a good partner
Reignites beliefs that Antonoff never liked Alwyn	Fans begin to connect the timeline of the breakup to Swift's behavior on stage
Believed that Antonoff provided additional information to start discourse	Some believe that judgments on the relationship are unfair with only one song to draw from

Figure 1.

Figure two displays the results collected based on the questions in the survey that measured the fans devotion to Taylor Swift. The measure of a fan's devotion to begin with is crucial to the study because the phenomenon that's being observed is any sort of perceivable loss in that devotion. The first thing examined was the average amount that the fans post about Swift on social media whether it's consistent or inconsistent. As seen on figure two, 25% of the respondents reported that they post about Taylor Swift consistently, 50% post about her fairly consistently, and the last 25% post about her somewhat consistently. None report that their posts about Swift are at all scarce. The next form of measuring devotion was how fans view their connection to her. The majority, 41.7%, view her as their idol, 33.3% view her as just a celebrity, 16.7% view her as a mentor, and 8.3% believe that they have no connection with Taylor Swift. The last measurement of devotion was how the fans favor Taylor over other artists and whether or not they feel the need to defend her. 50% like very few artists more than Taylor Swift, 66.7% feel more connected to her than other artists, 75% feel the need to defend her when either she or her music is insulted, and 41.7% feel the need to defend her generally.

Devotion to Taylor Swift		
Posts on <u>Social Media</u>	Connection to her	Favoritism and Defense
3(25%) post about Taylor Swift on a consistent basis	5(41.7%) see her as their idol	9(75%) feel offended when Taylor Swift or her music is insulted
6(50%) post about Taylor Swift on a fairly consistent basis	4(33.3%) view her as just a celebrity	6(50%) like very few artists more than Taylor Swift
3(25%) post about Taylor Swift somewhat consistently	2(16.7%) view her as a mentor	8(66.7%) feel more connected to her than other artists
	1(8.3%) believes they have no connection to Taylor Swift	5(41.7%) feel the need to defend her

Figure 2.

Swift's love life has been a topic of much conversation and criticism throughout her career and still is due to her many high profile relationships (James, G. retrieved March 14, 2024). In order to examine how the knowledge of a celebrity's personal life can skew a fan's perception of them, it is necessary to know their involvement in Swift's personal life. Furthermore, since Swift's love life is sometimes seen as imperative to understanding her career and the narratives surrounding it, measuring how her love life is viewed as opposed to her general life not including romance could provide valuable insight into the study's findings due to the contrast.

Attachment to Love Life	
Entitlement	Speculation
None feel the need to know more about Taylor Swift's love life.	3(25%) never speculate on Taylor Swift's love life
11(91.6%) are not upset because they don't know more about Taylor Swift's love life.	8(66.7%) almost never speculate about Taylor Swift's love life
1(8.3%) is neutral toward Taylor Swift's love life.	1(8.3%) somewhat speculates on Taylor Swift's love life.
Attachment to General Life	
6(50%) never speculate on her general life	
4(33.3%) almost never speculate on her general life	
2(16.7%) somewhat speculate on her general life	

Figure 3.

The way that a fan's perception changes due to Taylor Swift's personal relationships was measured by who is found to be at fault for a breakup (Taylor or an Ex boyfriend), and in the specific case of Joe Alwyn, who chose to defend Swift as opposed to Alwyn. This topic is divided into impartial responses for people who don't feel inclined to defend either of them, and impartial responses for people who feel a little more strongly about the topic. For the partial responses, 83.3% believe that when a breakup is reported that Swift is not at fault, while 75% believe that this is true of the rumored ex. Furthermore, 16.6% believe that when a breakup is reported, Taylor is *somewhat* at fault, while 25% believe this to be true of the rumored ex. For the impartial responses, 66.7% believe that it is no one's fault, 16.7% believe that it has to be *someone's* fault, 8.3% believe that the fault can fall on either both or neither, and 8.3% believe that there's no point in speculating. In the case of the breakup between Joe Alwyn and Taylor Swift specifically, 16.7% defended Joe Alwyn, 41.7% defended Taylor, and 50% defended no one. One final question was asked to gauge if participants believed that Swift's relationships have any effect on how they see her at all, 83.3% responded that it doesn't, with two participants not checking that box at all. This was used to gauge how the perception of Swift changes when her romantic life is involved.

Change in Devotion Due to General Break-ups	
Partial responses	Impartial Responses
10(83.3%) believe that when a break-up is reported in the media, Taylor is <i>not</i> at fault	8(66.7%) believe that it is no one's fault when a break-up is reported in the media
2(16.7%) believe that when a break-up is reported in the media, Taylor is <i>somewhat</i> at fault	2(16.7%) believe that it <u>has to</u> be someone's fault when a break-up is reported in the media
9(75%) believe that when a break-up is reported, the rumored ex is <i>not</i> at fault	1(8.3%) believes that there's no point in speculating
3(25%) believe that when a break-up is reported, the rumored ex is <i>somewhat</i> at fault	1(8.3%) believes that it can be both or neither person's fault
Change in Devotion Due to Joe Alwyn Split	
2(16.7%) defended Joe Alwyn when the break-up was reported	
5(41.7%) defended Taylor Swift when the break-up was reported	
6(50%) defended no one when the break-up was reported	
10(83.3%) believe that Taylor Swift's relationships have no impact on how they see her	

Figure 4.

Discussion

Key Finding 1

When coming to a conclusion about the finding of the research, the researcher took all of the responses from the survey and compared them to not only other responses but also the findings from the content analysis section. The findings in this study show that fans are mostly unaware of how Taylor Swift's relationships affect their perception of her. When asked directly whether or not Taylor Swift's relationships impact their perception of her, 83.3% responded no, however, because two participants neglected to check that box, it can only be assumed that for 16.7%, the opposite is true. When asked a less direct question regarding the nature of how Taylor Swift's relationships affect them, some of their answers were much more partial, such as believing that the fault can lie with Swift when a break-up occurs. This implicates that the participants are at least somewhat swayed in their opinion of Taylor Swift based on her relationships, though unaware of it. Furthermore, the awareness of how involved they are in Taylor Swift, whether it's about their involvement in her personal life, or who she is in general is lacking. In the beginning of the study, when asked what the participants relationship is to Taylor Swift, most gave answers that implied no emotional connection, such as perceiving her as only a celebrity, and one believing that they have no connection to her at all, however, many of their later answers imply that there's a substantial amount of attachment to both Swift and her personal life. These

answers include feeling offended on Swift's behalf, Taylor Swift being the artist they feel most connected to, and clear beliefs on who is at fault for a break-up. This aligns with a claim made in McCutcheon (2010) & Zsila et al's (2018) study about how a person's attachment to a celebrity involves a certain level of a loss in reality regarding how a fan perceives their own relationship with that celebrity. This contradiction is further demonstrated based on the results from the content analysis section of the study which show that there were many emotional stakes when news of Alwyn and Swift's break up became public, such as many fans blaming Joe Alwyn for the split. Many fans expressed feeling heartbroken on Swift's behalf due to Alwyn's faults as a partner.

Key Findings 2

The majority of participants don't express discontent with the fact that they can't know more about Swift, while one remains neutral. Three of the participants state that they never speculate on Taylor Swift's romantic life, while 6 of the participants state that they never speculate on her general life. A smaller number of people abstain from involvement in her romantic life, showing that it's still somewhat of a spectacle to other participants as compared to her general life including family and friends. This aligns with the claim made by researcher Gilad James, (James, G. 2024), that Taylor Swift's romantic life holds much of the public's interest whether they hold positive or negative feelings for her. Furthermore, the vast majority of the tweets examined in the content analysis section have to do with speculation of what exactly caused the break-up to occur based on the lyrics of the songs she's written. Many fans ventured back to past songs to try and find clues as to where the relationship could've gone wrong, further establishing the contradiction between claims of non speculation and the vast speculation that's observed.

Future Research

The sample size of this study along with the content analysis data that was gathered isn't enough to represent the nuances of a fandom of millions of people with differing opinions and characteristics. Furthermore, the questions asked weren't all encompassing of the themes being measured as the amount of questions asked on the survey was kept to a minimum in favor of preventing non response bias. In this study, the gap being observed was the lack in literature regarding how a fandom's perception of an artist can change based on that artist's personal life, just as easily as the public perception of an artist can. The literature regarding how the relationship dynamic between fans and celebrities is based in a lack of reality is not at all scarce, but this study is also examining if that occurs past just the celebrity themselves, but also that celebrities personal relationships. There is also a lack in specific fandoms being examined in these studies, therefore this project focused on one in particular. For future research, it might be beneficial to examine a separate celebrity and their fandom, as different celebrities have certain topics held at the forefront of conversations about them. It would also add value to the research to choose a different age group to examine, whether it's older than the one observed in this study or younger. This could be used alongside literature regarding how fans at different developmental stages will view their devotion to a celebrity. Future research could even use different websites to see how fandoms interact with celebrities on social media apps that are less conversational than Twitter.

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