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**When Admiration Turns to Obsession: A Case Study on Taylor Swift Fan Theories**

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### **Abstract**

This research uses a qualitative content analysis of Taylor Swift fan theory TikToks to determine the personal benefits of the development of celebrity fan theories. Findings indicate three main themes – a sense of community, a knowledge of secret information, and a perceived closeness to the celebrity – that serve to explain the motivation behind this behavior. In addition, this study identifies a connection between celebrity parasocial relationships and conspiracy theories. The results of this study suggest that further research should examine how celebrity parasocial relationships might lead to the development of a new category of conspiracy theories.

*Keywords:* parasocial relationships, TikTok, Taylor Swift, fan theories, community, social media, conspiracy theories, celebrities

**About the author:** Kendall Resnick is a senior Communication & Digital Studies major at the University of Mary Washington with particular research interests in digital literacy and community development.

## **When Admiration Turns to Obsession: A Case Study on Taylor Swift Fan Theories**

Through the use of modern technology, individuals are able to follow celebrities and influencers on social media, comment on their pictures, or even personally interact with them (Eugene & Labrecque, 2020). This regular exposure and interaction can result in the strengthening of perceived bonds between social media users and celebrities, giving followers the idea that they personally know or are friends with certain celebrities (Dobias, 2017). This interaction, also known as a parasocial relationship, is defined as “a relationship that a person imagines having with another person whom they do not actually know, such as a celebrity or a fictional character” (dictionary.com, 2021).

This research explores the connection between parasocial relationships and the use of fan theories, specifically examining the perceived benefits of the development of fan theories on the social media platform TikTok. As this research illustrates, the exploration of parasocial relationships and fan theories can be useful in understanding the motivation behind fan behavior. In addition, this research introduces new concepts for further study.

### **Literature review**

Although parasocial relationships existed before the formation of mass media, when people could form bonds with political figures, gods, or even spirits (Termini, 2015), social media has resulted in the formation of a new kind of parasocial relationship. The use of mass media has allowed celebrities and other popular figures to intimately connect with their audiences while still being able to choose which information to keep private (Stever & Lawson, 2013). A significant amount of research has been conducted regarding the use of social media platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook, which have been widely used as spaces for

celebrities and influencers to connect with fans (Liebers & Schramm, 2019). However, newer forms of social media, such as TikTok, have been less widely studied.

TikTok was released worldwide in August 2018 and quickly rose in popularity to become one of the most widely downloaded apps for both Android and Apple users. The TikTok app allows users to view and upload videos with running times from fifteen seconds to three minutes. TikTok allows users to like, share, and save videos, along with the option to create and post content (Anderson, 2020). The use of TikTok has resulted in a new, deeply personal way for users to connect with celebrities and influencers.

Many celebrities and influencers have taken advantage of this new platform and used it for purposes such as self-promotion and brand-endorsement (Chung & Cho, 2017), as well as a way to interact with fans. In addition, fans are able to use TikTok to interact with other fans who share their same interests. Consumers have long been fascinated with celebrities, but a more recent aspect of celebrity and fanbase relationships is the ability for fans to engage with each other through the exchange of information and ideas regarding their shared celebrity interest (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016).

One example of this occurrence is the Taylor Swift fanbase, who frequently share ideas, predictions, and stories about Taylor Swift's career, music, and personal life. Taylor Swift, a multi-Grammy Award-winning singer and songwriter, is one of the world's most powerful and influential celebrities. From the beginning, when her music career rocketed to success after she released her first album in 2006, Taylor Swift's fans have been enamored with her persona as well as her music. As Taylor Swift grew up and her music changed, so did her fans, who were as emotionally connected to her changing identity, style, and interests as they were to her music. Social media allowed fans to feel as if they were exchanging ideas, communicating, and

interacting with Taylor Swift, also defined as maintaining a parasocial relationship with her (White, 2019).

This study expands previous research through the examination of parasocial relationships and the use of TikTok as a way for fans to connect with celebrities and influencers. Specifically, this research seeks to answer the question: What do Taylor Swift fans gain as a result of the development of fan theories? There is very little research currently examining the use of TikTok in regard to parasocial relationships, especially concerning the use of TikTok as a space to develop fan theories. The findings identified at the completion of this research will also contribute to the understanding of how fanbases have used social media to further connect with celebrities and with each other.

## **Method**

To gain a better understanding of what Taylor Swift fans gain as a result of the development of fan theories, I chose to conduct a qualitative content analysis. I selected this method in order to fully comprehend the connections among parasocial relationships, TikTok use, and fan theories. The use of qualitative research also allowed me to understand the feelings, values, and perceptions that influenced the behavior of the fans I was studying. I was able to use this data to better understand the reasoning behind their actions. For my sample, I selected ten Taylor Swift fan theory TikToks. Each of the videos needed to meet the following two requirements in order to be used for my research:

1. The video had to contain a hashtag that identified it as a Taylor Swift fan theory (i.e., #taylorswifttheories, #swiftietheories, #taylortheories, etc.)

2. The video had to be a prediction of something that hadn't happened yet, rather than an explanation or an analysis

Using these criteria, I was able to identify a variety of TikToks to use for my research. I then watched each of the TikToks, keeping track of relevant quotes and noting the main points of each video. After analyzing all ten of the videos, I compared my notes from each of the videos and identified the themes that emerged.

## **Findings**

The results of the content analysis suggested that most of the video creators shared common beliefs and ideas in regard to the benefits of engaging in the development of Taylor Swift fan theories. Based on the analysis, various aspects of Taylor Swift fan theory videos were determined.

Creators often based their videos on the deciphering of intricate clues and the formation of new predictions. Throughout the TikToks, the idea that Taylor Swifts fans are identifying clues that Taylor Swift has left them is commonly discussed. The creators discuss the idea of "easter eggs," defined as "a hidden surprise or extra feature that is included in something such as a computer game, a piece of software, or a film, for the person using or watching it to find and enjoy" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Examples such as music video props or answers to interview questions are pointed out and interpreted as hinting at deeper meanings.

Throughout the videos, the content creators relied on their audience to have an extensive previous knowledge of the content and ideas that they were discussing. Some of these facts were simple and straightforward, such as the time frame of Taylor Swift's past relationships, her favorite number, and the order of her previously released albums. Other ideas required a closer

observation of Taylor Swift's career and music and used examples from past interviews, music videos, and announcements in order to be cohesive.

The video creators relied on elaborate interpretations of the information being discussed in order to form theories. These interpretations are not obvious to those outside of the Taylor Swift fan theory community, who would likely be unaware of any underlying meanings. One example was the frequent discussion of a screenshot from Taylor Swift's music video "The Man," which is heavily analyzed and interpreted as a calendar for future music releases. This brief glance was enough for multiple Taylor Swift fan theory creators to form ideas about upcoming events. These predictions often referenced other videos and used the previously released content of other creators to further establish predictions.

After a careful examination of these aspects, three main themes emerged in relation to this study's research question. The first theme was that Taylor Swift fans who develop fan theories feel that they are a part of a community. This theme was demonstrated through the use of community-based language throughout the videos. As creators shared ideas and predictions, phrases such as "we all know," "I have a theory about why we are so conflicted," and "did she tell us" were frequently repeated, invoking a sense of experiencing the same events and working together to decipher clues and develop predictions.

The second theme is that the creators and supporters of these theories feel like they are aware of secret knowledge. Throughout the videos, the language used suggests that insider information is being discussed. Phrases such as "I've cracked Taylor Swift's latest TikTok" and "I think I've cracked the code" are repeated throughout the videos, leading the viewer to understand that they are being informed of new and exciting information.



The third theme is that fans who develop these theories feel like they are close to Taylor Swift as a result. Phrases spoken throughout the TikToks such as “she knows that Swifties love this kind of stuff,” “she’s gotta throw us off, she can’t be too predictable,” and “we know Taylor loves” imply that Taylor Swift is aware of the relationship that she has with her fans and is relying on this information to guide her decisions.

## **Discussion**

These three themes – the sense of community, the knowledge of secret information, and the closeness to Taylor Swift – were determined to be the three main benefits that Taylor Swift fans gain through the development of fan theories. Although this research was conducted to examine the connection between parasocial relationships and fan theories and the benefits of fans participating in these theories, the findings suggest that Taylor Swift fan theories align closely with the aspects of conspiracy theories. However, a conspiracy theory is defined as “a theory that explains an event or set of circumstances as the result of a secret plot by usually powerful conspirators,” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) which does not describe the phenomenon being studied. Nevertheless, the benefits that Taylor Swift fans gain through the development of fan theories and the benefits experienced by those who participate in conspiracy theories are very similar.

By participating in conspiracy theories, people are able to feel good about themselves and pleased with the groups to which they belong (Sternisko, Cichocka, & Van Bavel, 2020). This aligns with the feeling of community that is experienced by people who participate in the development of Taylor Swift fan theories. This sense of community and belonging could be seen throughout the analyzed videos as fans bonded over their shared love of Taylor Swift and their passion for deciphering her words and actions.

In addition, those who participate in conspiracy theories assert to know of secret information, making their beliefs special and unique (Sternisko, Cichocka, & Van Bavel, 2020). This aspect can also be seen in the behavior of Taylor Swift fan theory creators, as their videos are based on the idea that they are sharing new and secret information with their viewers. This sense of secrecy adds a layer of excitement and camaraderie to the situation, convincing both creators and consumers that their fan theories are valid and important to share.

This research suggests a new question – Can parasocial relationships with celebrities lead to the development of a new category of conspiracy theories? The current findings suggest that this could be the case. The analysis of the data obtained as a result of content analysis indicates that the benefits gained by fans who participate in the development of Taylor Swift fan theories align closely with the benefits experienced by those who participate in conspiracy theories, although the definition of conspiracy theory is not shared between the two examples.

Research has not adequately explored the connections between parasocial relationships and conspiracy theories. Continued development of research examining these connections could have considerable value when seeking to understand the behavior of fans and their interactions with celebrities.

## **Conclusion**

This research aimed to explore parasocial relationships and the use of TikTok as a way for fans to connect with celebrities and to each other. Taylor Swift was chosen to use as a celebrity example based on her large and enthusiastic fanbase, and the research was narrowed further to examine the use of TikTok in the development of fan theories. After previous research

had been identified and studied, a qualitative content analysis was conducted to determine the perceived benefits gained by Taylor Swift fans as a result of the development of fan theories.

Three themes emerged as a result of this analysis. First, Taylor Swift fans who develop fan theories feel that they are a part of a community. Second, the creators and supporters of these theories feel like they are aware of secret knowledge. Third, fans who develop these theories feel like they are close to Taylor Swift as a result. It was then discovered that these themes aligned with various aspects of conspiracy theories, and a recommendation was given for further research.

Limitations of this study include a small sample size and the unavoidable personal bias of qualitative content analysis. Further research must be completed to understand the potential connection between parasocial relationships and conspiracy theories.

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