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## Miss Americana: Taylor Swift as a Battleground for Feminist Discourse

Juliet Eklund  
*University of Denver*

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# Miss Americana: Taylor Swift as a Battleground for Feminist Discourse

## Abstract

The United States finds itself at a historical moment in which feminism is perhaps more polarizing than ever before. On the one hand, it is no longer taboo to identify as feminist; in fact, men and women alike are embracing feminist perspectives. A recent Pew Research survey found that 61% of American women identified as feminists, with this proportion even higher among Democrats and those who had received higher education (Barroso, 2020). At the same time, women are faced with more opportunities and fewer barriers to achieving success than ever before. Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign and the 2020 election of Kamala Harris to the vice presidential seat saw women launched into the apical political sphere. Likewise, the worldwide influence of superstar Beyoncé and the media-savvy Kardashian clan showcase the ability of women to reach the pinnacle of visibility.

However, the same Pew poll shows that 45% of Americans think feminism is not inclusive (Barroso, 2020). And a majority (61%) of men belonging to Generation Z do not identify as feminists, signaling an expanding gap between young men and women (Cox, 2023). While feminism may be more "hip" than it once was, it has not altogether lost its controversial nature. Feminists must navigate pushback from the American public as they attempt to disseminate their messages on a large scale.

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**Miss Americana: Taylor Swift as a Battleground for Feminist  
Discourse**

Juliet Eklund

Honors Thesis

Department of Sociology & Criminology, University of Denver

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## Introduction

The United States finds itself at a historical moment in which feminism is perhaps more polarizing than ever before. On the one hand, it is no longer taboo to identify as feminist; in fact, men and women alike are embracing feminist perspectives. A recent Pew Research survey found that 61% of American women identified as feminists, with this proportion even higher among Democrats and those who had received higher education (Barroso, 2020). At the same time, women are faced with more opportunities and fewer barriers to achieving success than ever before. Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign and the 2020 election of Kamala Harris to the vice presidential seat saw women launched into the apical political sphere. Likewise, the worldwide influence of superstar Beyoncé and the media-savvy Kardashian clan showcase the ability of women to reach the pinnacle of visibility.

However, the same Pew poll shows that 45% of Americans think feminism is not inclusive (Barroso, 2020). And a majority (61%) of men belonging to Generation Z do not identify as feminists, signaling an expanding gap between young men and women (Cox, 2023). While feminism may be more "hip" than it once was, it has not altogether lost its controversial nature. Feminists must navigate pushback from the American public as they attempt to disseminate their messages on a large scale.

Taylor Swift, international popstar sensation, business titan, and forever girl, was born December 13, 1989 to an upper-middle-class family in Pennsylvania. By age 11, she was already a prolific musician and songwriter. At 14, she had secured a development deal and relocated with her family to Tennessee, where she was closer to potential career opportunities. Swift went on to become the youngest musician ever signed to Sony's publishing house. From there, she (swift)ly

skyrocketed to fame, releasing her first album under Scott Borchetta's Big Machine Records to platinum-certified success.

Since her 2006 debut, Swift has written and produced 15 studio albums, the most recent of which released in April, 2024. Her music is characterized by its deeply personal, poetic lyricism, simple but addictive melodies, and Swift's sweetly resonant voice. She is an incredibly versatile artist, known for her distinct musical - and personal - "eras." As a candid storyteller, Swift crafts each album to reflect the circumstances of her life at the time of writing, such that the majority of her work revolves around her own stories of love, loss, and personal growth. Thus the central theme and ambience of each album is unique, something which Swift has capitalized upon in her ongoing record-breaking *Eras Tour*.

These days, Taylor Swift is a billionaire, a musical mogul, and a cultural icon. Her presence is almost ubiquitous in American society, to the joy of some and the chagrin of others. But whether or not one appreciates her music and public personality, one cannot deny her utterly enormous cultural capital. She has achieved peak celebrityhood in a way few other women have been able to. As such, she is known among many feminists, and especially among her fans - the "Swifties" - as a prominent feminist figure.

Swift did not start out as a feminist; in her early years, like many other women of her time, she rejected the label, which has drawn negative attention by progressive feminists. But in 2014, she publicly declared herself a feminist, and since then has become a representation of the American public's own debates surrounding feminism (Hoby, 2014). As a high-profile female figure, she is the battleground for the negotiation of contemporary feminism.

In this work, I recognize Swift as an enormously influential female celebrity with the power to produce and reproduce social expectations for women. The central question of this

investigation is: what does Swift signify for current feminist movements, both for the culture at large and for the fans in the Swiftie subculture? By engaging with debates surrounding Swift, I form an understanding of our own sometimes contradictory, ever-contentious social landscape. The object of my interest is the individual ways in which Swift, her fans, and the rest of the American public construct a female celebrity's image, as well as the intersections of these many constructions. I showcase four distinct perspectives in this essay, based on a grounded theory analysis of the most prominent voices on the topic. Importantly, I also examine the limitations to these configurations, as each perspective on its own cannot explain the entire picture. I therefore use Swift as an iconic emblem of a much larger feminist debate playing out on the grander stage.

## **Review of the Literature**

### *Popular Feminist Engagement and Celebrities*

Feminism has become incredibly prevalent in both online and real-world spaces. Yet it is counterweighted by a renewed embrace of conservative ideals surrounding women which promote the dismantling of reproductive health laws and blatant online misogyny. With this backdrop, there has been a surge in feminist involvement of celebrity women. Their legitimacy as feminists, however, has been questioned by many within the movement. Tennent and Jackson's 2017 work reveals the current state of feminism by examining online feminist discussion of celebrity activism.

Tennent and Jackson argue that popular, highly visible forms of feminist activism uncritically uphold post-feminist neoliberalism. Post-feminism emphasizes the innate power of the female individual, encouraging women to "rise up" in order to find success. As conventionally attractive frontwomen for affluent, high-status platforms, celebrity feminists are

at the center of this model. Of course, not all celebrity feminists subscribe to neoliberalist ideology, and not all who do are “bad” feminists. Female celebrities such as Beyoncé, Jennifer Lawrence, and others, have participated in activism to a great extent, especially considering the corporate deals they are required to navigate. Nevertheless, celebrity feminists are often shunned for commodifying, whitewashing, and watering down their messages.

In their work, Tennent and Jackson analyzed blog posts and their subsequent public comments that mentioned the term “celebrity feminism.” Taken together, these online texts formed a conversation, mutually influenced, of what it meant to be a celebrity feminist and how that influenced the culture at large.

The authors found a variety of opinions surrounding celebrity participation in feminist movements, ranging from vehement disapproval to grateful appreciation. One of the themes represented in the content was a positive acknowledgement of the uptick in the popularity of feminism. Bloggers who took this approach praised celebrity feminists’ ability to transcend social norms designated for women and inspire other women to do the same. Celebrity endorsement of feminism was recognized as an effective way of bringing attention to the movement.

At the same time, many bloggers expressed disappointment in the “shallow and disingenuous” feminism performed by celebrities (Tennent & Jackson, 2017, pg. 230). Public figures were accused of ignoring critical social justice issues and instead focusing on the betterment of White women with already immense amounts of power. Several comments argued that beautiful, wealthy, beloved celebrities have no stake in the feminist movement and therefore no legitimacy as activist leaders. Additionally, they had to navigate expectations of high-profile

women, involving a self-representation of confidence and independence while simultaneously pandering to the patriarchy.

Tennent and Jackson also found a pattern of concern about the co-option of grassroots movements by celebrities. One blogger wrote, “how can multi-millionaire businesswoman and performers adequately give voice to the inequities faced by women around the world?” (Tennent & Jackson, 2017, pg. 230). Because women in the public eye had a brand to maintain, they promoted a distorted trivialization of the “true” message at the heart of feminism.

Ultimately, Tennent and Jackson showcase a binary argument: is celebrity feminism beneficial or harmful to the movement? A core aspect of the debate is the question of who may accurately be called a feminist. Who is permitted to identify and perform as a feminist, and whose feminism is most authentic? The authors point out that even today there exists no single definition of feminism, nor of whom is informed enough to speak on it. Like all models of feminism, celebrity feminism is a mosaic of diverse voices - not just White, beautiful, apolitical ones.

Celebrity feminists *can* have stakes in the movement, even if they must navigate a public image as mainstream media darlings. Celebrity feminism is an essential way of complicating feminist debates, which are ever-evolving. The good/evil dichotomy of the argument is disingenuous and ineffective, and it distracts the public from the critical issues present in feminism. In the following pages, I will provide an overview of recent literature that discusses celebrity feminism and its implications for the movement at large. In doing so, I demonstrate the very complex debate at hand, one in which Taylor Swift will play a crucial role.

### *Celebrity Feminism: Constructive to the Movement*

#### *A. Access to Activist Capital*



Gender studies researcher Chidgey posited that celebrity feminism is increasingly present in popular culture (2021). I define celebrity feminism as a unique strand of fun, uplifting feminist activism that is defined by its centralization around a highly visible public figure. Celebrity feminism is often criticized for being ambiguous, apolitical, and shallow, as it tends to embrace feminist values without undertaking the necessary work to achieve feminist goals. Yet, Chidgey argued that celebrity feminism can indeed have “activist capital,” a term she defines as a social justice movement’s potential for organized progressive change.

Like Tennent and Jackson (2017) before her, Chidgey recognized the polemical discourse surrounding celebrity feminism and chose to delve into its nuances. She conducted an analysis of texts discussing the SlutWalk, a feminist movement that began in 2011 as a reaction against rape victim-blaming. The campaign went viral online and was appropriated by activists pockets across the globe. In 2015, it was picked up by sex-positive model, writer, and self-proclaimed ‘hustler’ Amber Rose. Throughout her career in the public eye, Rose had been criticized for her overt sexuality. Naturally, then, she was drawn to the SlutWalk and soon became the face of the organization.

Chidgey noted that Rose flew her feminist flag in a distinct manner from other celebrity feminists, who were more likely to represent a “cleaner” feminism. Whereas in Tennent and Jackson’s work (2017), feminist celebrities were condemned for having little investment in the movement, Rose had personal stakes in the SlutWalk. As a former sex worker herself, she aimed to combat slut-shaming and promote sex positivity among women. Rose was able to use her life experiences as discursive fodder, molding the SlutWalk into a personal brand and a more centralized community. x that emphasized equality

Chidgey found that some writers criticized Rose's obviously capitalistic spin on feminism. The movement was well-promoted on social media and entirely managed by a marketing agency. This supports Tennent and Jackson's (2017) comments on the intertwined nature of celebrity feminism and neoliberalism. However, Chidgey also demonstrated that Rose's work was generally received as earnest and heart-felt. Rose effectively tapped into "affective labor," which the study defines as activist work that appeals to pathos. Often underestimated, a celebrity's fervor for her cause is an important factor in generating positive audience perceptions. Even progressive feminists gave Rose credit for using social justice terms and emphasizing intersectionality in her branding, which was considerably radical for celebrity feminist discourse. Notably, Rose herself is a person of color, as is much of her audience. This, too, gave her credibility in the activism world.

For Chidgey, celebrity feminist crusades were reliant on the ever-shifting relationship between the public and its idols. In the case of the SlutWalk, she found that layman activism and celebrity campaigns mutually conditioned each other. And like Tennent and Jackson (2017), Chidgey denounced the black-and-white view that corporate feminism is bad and inauthentic, and grassroots movement is good and substantive. Celebrity feminism can be hollow and publicity-oriented, but it can also bring otherwise impossible visibility to a movement, drawing huge crowds of justice-minded people. Celebrities are capable of inciting real social change.

### *B. Digital Activism*

In our modern day, maintaining an online presence is essential to feminist activism, as it is one of the most valuable tools for spreading one's message, especially for celebrities. Amber Rose's ability to maneuver the SlutWalk movement in her direction was aided immensely by her use of social media. The virtual world held great potential for developing trust and rapport

between idol and fan (Chidgey, 2021). Expanding on this work, Ghaffari's analysis (2020) of Instagram feminist rhetoric and digital representation asserted that media was a powerhouse for disseminating gender discourse. For better or for worse, social media is a mode of constant communication. 47% of Americans use Instagram (Gottfried, 2024). But while it represented a useful avenue for activism discourse, Instagram was also a rather unregulated space that could breed abuse.

Ghaffari highlighted that social media was a world in which regular people could make their voices heard and their ideas known. On Instagram, users were able to create a carefully curated online avatar and facilitate community with like-minded online individuals. They could engage with their favorite celebrities in a way that felt almost as familiar as speaking face-to-face. Social media could be a place for empowerment, as seen by the #MeToo movement and other hashtagged empowerment campaigns. On the other hand, social media could also push the corporate, neoliberalist post-feminism that has been regarded as self-serving and profit-hungry (Tennent & Jackson, 2017) (Chidgey, 2021).

In her investigation of social identity, online feminism, and hate speech, Ghaffari studied Lena Dunham, a famous American entertainer that has been outspoken about her progressive views on gender and sexuality. In 2018, the actress chose to undergo a total hysterectomy, a last-resort operation that she hoped would cure her painful endometriosis. This disease is characterized by the growth of uterine-like tissue outside the uterus, and can be debilitating. Dunham took to Instagram to share a photo of herself post-operation. In her work, Ghaffari analyzed audience response to these posts.

Many user comments belonged to fans of Dunham, and were incredibly supportive and uplifting. In the same way that online engagement with celebrity feminism dramatically

expanded the SlutWalk movement, Dunham's fans brought attention to a feminist issue by allying behind her symbolic act. Dunham's post displayed her body as literally disabled and the caption formally and explicitly mentioned the anatomical challenges of Dunham's condition. Ghaffari argued that sharing this piece was perceived by fans as an act of resistance to the post-feminist image of the 'ideal' woman. This woman must strive for (perhaps even surpass) occupational and social success, but she must never put these endeavors before her basic womanhood. That is, she must not neglect to maintain a coquettish appearance and demeanor in service to men.

Dunham subverted this narrative of the traditional female celebrity, as outlined by Tennent and Jackson (2017). As a result, she was met with severe and prolific hate speech. Various comments expressed disdain for Dunham's body, which did not fit the standard of beauty for women of her demographic profile. Additionally, although the post in no way implied a sexual connotation, users sexualized and shamed Dunham's body anyway. These comments utilized both hateful speech and contemptuous emojis to connote disgust. They represented a generally male, "self-entitled" perspective (Ghaffari, 2020, p. 171).

Ghaffari's study was a relevant example of a rampant issue within digital spaces. Even prominent celebrities are not immune to hate speech, and women are particularly vulnerable to nasty gender-based language online. What Ghaffari's study also demonstrated, however, was the overwhelmingly positive response from Dunham's fans, who mourned her physical loss while still honoring the beauty of her body. Online spaces open doors for social justice coalitions to develop, especially when there is a singular public figure around which the public can gather.

### *C. Fangirl Power*

Celebrity feminism may revolve around one icon, but it is truly made possible by the celebrity's followers, or fangirls. Fangirling is an essential aspect of the contemporary relationship between girls and popular culture. Here, I define fangirling as behavior pertaining to overly enthusiastic involvement with a specific cultural text or icon. In Cann's study (2015) of high-school age girls, she investigated discussion surrounding girls' cultural text consumption, with a specific focus on fangirling. To understand how fangirls (those who participate in fangirling) were perceived by peers, the study highlights personal accounts from young boys and girls as they spoke to their perspectives on popular culture. Cann seeks to emphasize the construction of girlhood as a concept via discourse, wherein girls contribute to both the development and reproduction of hegemonic ideology surrounding femininity.

Cann is careful to define the word 'girl,' which she describes as an encapsulation of the intersection of youth and gender. Girlhood is a performance, as it not only signifies connection to the physical female body, but also represents social expectations of feminine behavior. Consider, for example, the word 'girly,' which may be used derogatorily against a man who behaves in a typically feminine manner. If there exist masculine women and feminine men, then girlhood cannot pertain merely to the female sex.

Cann recognized the influence of hegemonic femininity and its inability to uphold feminine dominance in the way hegemonic masculinity does male dominance. She also explicitly emphasized the complexity of femininity and its construction. Modern conceptualizations of girlhood encourage girl power, a decidedly neoliberalist take on female empowerment. Girl-power feminism dictates that girls can do anything boys can do, a notion arguably implying that girls no longer have use for feminism. As Cann contends, this take on girlhood actually

disenfranchises girls, distancing them from their own femininity as they strive for success under the constraints of a patriarchal structure.

Cann conducted focus groups with high-school age students (the majority of them 14 years old) of mixed gender. She deliberately chose to include male students because femininity is constructed by *all*: by girls and also by boys. In addition to these focus groups, the study utilized ‘identity pages,’ an activity in which girls were asked to build online avatars that featured their favorite cultural texts.

Cann found that, ultimately, the majority of girls were unlikely to show eager interest in traditionally feminine texts. There were exceptions, of course, as I will explain in the next paragraph; but on balance, girls tended toward contempt for the ‘girly.’ Romance texts especially were recognized as designated for girls, and most girls strived to avoid association with these works. What is interesting is that girls had a profoundly intuitive grasp on what it meant to be a girl, but many actively chose to shun identifying behavior. If the study participants did consume girl texts, they sheepishly dismissed their participation as guilty pleasure.

Enter fangirls. These girls were shamelessly proud of their full-body embrace of the object of their obsession. As Cann notes, fangirling “acknowledges the devaluation of the feminine but embraces it anyway” (2015, p. 167). This was typical girl behavior and therefore undesirable. In fact, it had real social consequences. ‘Obsession’ is a uniquely defining component of fangirling. High school students scorned fangirls for being hyper-fixated on the popular subculture of their choice, especially when this obsession bled into daily life (think band tees and other merchandise). Some girls commented that participating in fangirling could constitute grounds for social ostracization.

It is important to note that fangirls need not be girls. As mentioned in the beginning, a fangirl is anyone that is hyper-enthusiastic about a particular cultural text. While this may be socially viewed as feminine conduct, anyone can participate in fangirling. But they may not want to. As Cann demonstrated, ‘fangirl’ is already utilized as a derogatory term against girls; it would maintain this defamatory significance even if used to describe anyone who does not identify as a girl.

This is because, ultimately, fangirling is perceived as a deeply feminine - and therefore devalued - performance, and anyone who participates is subject to derision. When the obsessor is a girl, her ascription and the girlishness of the product combine to create a ‘too-feminine’ identity that is subject to discrimination. It is exactly this intersection that I will expand upon in my own analysis of Taylor Swift and Swift’s fangirls.

### *Celebrity Feminism: Detrimental to the Movement*

#### *A. Feminist Subcultures: Riot Grrrls*

Each group of fangirls can be categorized as a distinct subculture, a sect of people that diverges from the greater culture by rallying around a distinct set of values, norms, and symbols. Dunn and Farnsworth (2012) examined feminist subcultures, which are activism-focused and consistently underscore the rights of women and other underprivileged groups. Members of Amber Rose’s SlutWalk campaign are a modern example of such a subculture (Ghidgey, 2021). In Dunn and Farnsworth’s work, the authors conducted an analysis of Riot Grrrl, one of the more prominent feminist subcultures.

The punk scene emerged in the UK and New York City in the late sixties and early seventies, the result of simmering frustration and resentment among working-class young people. This novel musical genre provided a voice to a generation that had watched the ideals of

preceding generations crumble before them. A seemingly new social order required a new rhetorical channel, and that was punk. Although relatively diverse in its early days, the punk subculture eventually came to strongly represent masculinity, perhaps due to its rageful origins or perhaps owing to its peculiarly dark and standoffish aesthetic. Women in the punk scene were pushed to the margins until a feminist movement began to materialize in the 1980s.

In 1991, two members of the female punk band Bratmobile worked with a fan magazine editor to develop the feminist “zine” (homemade magazine) *Riot Grrrl*. All-female groups of young artists and activists began hosting forums under the same name. In just a few years, the movement had spread across the United States and into Europe. Riot grrrls discussed relevant feminist issues such as abortion, sexual assault, and racism. But one of their more important contributions, Dunn and Farnsworth argued, was their resistance to mainstream media and their emphasis on not just womanhood, but girlhood, in all its strange and uncomfortable glory.

The riot grrrls demanded attention, but they never expected acceptance. They didn’t receive much, either; as one riot grrrl lamented, the media painted them as vengeful but misguided girls “parading around in [their] underwear” (Dunn and Farnsworth, 2012, p. 142). As Lena Dunham would experience long after them (Ghaffari, 2020), riot grrrls were sexualized no matter how hard they tried.

Frustrated with media response to the Riot Grrrl feminist movement, members of the campaign put together the Riot Grrrl Press, a ‘DIY’ effort that allowed total freedom of speech for the marginalized. In doing so, Riot Grrrl put itself in direct conflict with the neoliberalist post-feminist model. Riot grrrls had witnessed the corruption of their core message, and they condemned the media’s role in oversexualizing members and selling out the riot grrrls as a thrilling fashion aesthetic. This trend of commodification, Dunn and Farnsworth suggested, was



a bureaucratic process of integrating a rebellious subculture into the dominant ideology, thereby subduing its radical message. Any attempts to celebritize the movement failed, because Riot Grrrl never had an idol around which to centralize.

Riot Grrrl remained grassroots until the end. The Riot Grrrl Press was necessary as a large-scale distributor of alternative zines made by and for girls. The Press empowered its audience “to be more than consumers of culture, but producers of their own media” (Dunn and Farnsworth, 2012, p. 153). After its golden age in the nineties, the Press disbanded due to lack of funds, but in no way did the movement fail, as some critics suggested. Dunn and Farnsworth asserted that Riot Grrrl left a significant mark on the feminist world. The movement’s celebration of self-representation, authenticity, and DIY activism continue to influence feminist campaigns today.

### *B. Hegemonic Femininity*

Understanding the concept of femininity is essential to analyzing the debate surrounding feminism. Like Cann’s (2015) complex notions of girlhood, much of the work investigating feminism has done so with patriarchy as a foundational backdrop. Hamilton et. al. (2019) drew on the concepts of hegemonic femininity (the most revered representation of femininity) and intersectional feminism to examine women in positions of power and their critical role in supporting the patriarchal system. They scrutinized the matrix of domination, in which high-status women hold power over other women while also deferring to men.

The authors argued from an intersectional lens, acknowledging that identities do not exist individually, but in relation to one another. Additionally, they based their argument around the concept of hegemony, which they defined as the construction of distinct social norms and hierarchies via public discourse that both justifies and normalizes these norms. In gender studies,

hegemony has been studied mostly in relation to masculinity. However, Hamilton et. al. argued that, while gender order is an essential piece of the hegemonic masculinities puzzle, it is crucial to recognize the salience of race, class, sexuality, and other identities. The ‘axes’ of the matrix, far from being binaries (i.e. woman/man, White/Black) are interwoven into a compounded identity web. The authors posited that gender is distinct in that it does not always rely on segregation for enforcement, as race or class might. Indeed, gender implies complementarity, wherein men and women are expected to work together, each contributing their own skill sets, within and without the family unit.

As a “foundation” for all social norms, gender is therefore well-positioned to develop other identity constructions. White, heterosexual women are especially adept at upholding White male domination; it is in their interest to avoid subverting the dynamic that allows White women’s relative liberation. Thus, hegemonic masculinity requires the collaboration of women, who also gain from participating in this collusion. It is exactly this compliance that many feminist bloggers lamented in Tennent and Jackson’s foundational work on feminist debate (2017). Women who are especially deft at embodying hegemonic femininity may receive a “femininity premium” that carries bonuses such as higher-status romantic partners who will promise them longer-term commitments. They may also be able to gate-keep what it means to be a “good” woman and may be qualified to lead groups of women. Thus, celebrity women are in the perfect position to dictate the rules of femininity.

Hamilton et. al. examine the “tactics and trades” (2019, pg. 329) of the matrix of domination. For example, performing the correct femininity can actually be degrading, as women are complicit in their own oppression, and may relinquish control of their sexuality, wealth, or intellectual property to men. In other words, performing at peak femininity cannot

compare to performing masculinity at the highest level, due to the “feminine ceiling” (Hamilton, et. al., 2019, pg. 330). These women may be individually benefiting, but they are harming the collective sisterhood.

To receive the femininity premium, one must be “respectable.” But Hamilton, et. al. argue that this quality is inaccessible to some women, such as “ghetto” girls in the working class, who are hypersexualised by the elite. For example, as a conventionally unattractive woman, Lena Dunham could not afford respectability despite her celebrityhood (Ghaffari, 2020). Clearly, even within the elite, women must also negotiate power. Women of high class may use their individual positionality to promote exclusivity and support the social hierarchy.

### *C. Neoliberal Post-Feminism*

Neoliberal feminist ideology is the current backdrop for feminist debate. In *Power Feminism, Mediated* (2009), Hains took a critical view of the girl power model of feminism. This model builds off of neoliberal socioeconomic structures, centering the strength of women in a positive, forward-focused, commercialized ideology. The narrative came to the fore in the 1990s and was known as “power feminism,” a term coined by Naomi Wolf in 1993. It has since become the dominant form of Western feminism, and it profits off of girls as cultural consumers capable of enormous impact.

Hains conducted a discourse analysis to uncover how media sources tell stories about girls and feminism. She set out to identify the relationship between “power feminism” and girl power, critique the commercialized aspect of the power feminism model, and understand the symbiosis between media marketing and cultural understandings of feminism.

Hains condemned the power feminist model, because it presumes that all women have power and some simply choose not to exercise their right to buy into it. Neoliberal feminists

maintain that patriarchy does not have as much salience as it once did, and that it no longer inhibits women from achieving equality. Instead, what holds modern women back is a fear of tangible power and a penchant for self-victimization. Power feminism rose to prominence as the solution to these hindrances, because it appealed to female resilience instead of helplessness. It leaned on economic power instead of some ineffable, mystic sisterhood.

Girl power is now an extension of power feminism. Interestingly, however, Hains attributed girl power's origins to Riot Grrrl culture. This campaign was, as I have claimed, distinctly different from power feminism, as it entirely rejected the capitalist tendency toward commercialization of social movements. Ironically, Hains wrote, this may well be the reason that Riot Grrrl did not last. But its progeny, girl power, moved into the mainstream with the rise of the Spice Girls in the 1990s. This group and others espoused the idea that girls can do anything they choose, and do it better than the boys.

Eventually, girl power and power feminism were somewhat fused, as both were situated within post-feminism. They both generally appeal to women of higher socioeconomic status, such as female celebrities, who have the privileged ability to participate. Hains wrote, "The root of post-feminism's hegemony, then, is its collusion with the imperatives of the commercial capitalist system, upon which mainstream Western media depend and therefore propagate" (2009, pg. 99).

Hains also critiqued the media representation of strong female children, which is a group historically underprivileged. In shows like *The Powerpuff Girls*, the girl characters are indeed powerful, and as a result they receive pushback from male characters; but they are also overshadowed by their "pervasive niceness" (Hains, 2009, pg. 100). Girls in popular media were also generally White, middle class, with conventionally beautiful bodies. The narrative of the

strong, independent girl was, in Hain's opinion, merely "inflated rhetoric" and "an empty husk" (2009, pg. 107) that has been co-opted by corporate interests to sell commodities.

Additionally, mass media associated with girl power strongly encouraged femininity and 'girly' behavior. Yet, Hains critiqued the idea that mainstream women - those who adhere to normative gender roles - can also be feminists. Hains found that this narrative alienates those women who cannot or will not adhere to these rules. This was the case for Lena Dunham, who was unable to master hegemonic femininity and rejected traditional norms of a neoliberal feminist society (Ghaffari, 2020). The problem, Hains posited, is that girl power feminism does not simply encourage femininity, it demands it, which leads to a lack of diversity in media and, ultimately, self-loathing in young girls.

### *Conclusion*

As I have shown, much has been written on the topic of celebrity feminism, fangirls, and the intersection between the two. It is against this backdrop that I will analyze the unique case of the Taylor Swift subculture in my own work. Inspired by Cann's work (2015), I investigate the fascinating connotations of fangirling, whose participants honor their 'girly' passions even in the face of social ridicule for their overt femininity. Swifties gather around Taylor Swift as an icon, as well as her cultural texts, many of which exemplify celebrity feminism. As shown by Chidgey (2021) and Ghaffari (2020), fangirls and celebrities, far from being distinct entities, actually interact with one another on a mutual level. Celebrities may pad their campaigns with in-group cues, and fangirls in turn absorb their idol's ideology and manipulate it as needed. This may even include feminist pushback against "faux" feminist celebrity messages (Tennent & Jackson, 2017).

Swift's influence lies at that elusive intersection of fan influence and celebrity clout, such that her brand is not only created for, but managed by her fans. Like Amber Rose, Swift herself has launched her own feminist campaigns via social media that have met great success (Chidgey, 2021). Her fans, deeply embedded in her personal and corporate branding, have always been her number one supporters in these endeavors; yet, at the same time, they are not afraid to criticize Swift's work if they feel it does not go far enough in progressing the feminist movement. Swift and her fans work together as one intelligent machine to produce and reproduce a massively impactful brand that champions girl power in a post-feminist digital age. Swift and Swifties share an interdependent relationship, in which they both generate and absorb feminist rhetoric.

This connection is one that has been little-studied in regards to other female celebrities. Swift has an absolutely enormous amount of power and has built it on the foundation of this intimate fan/celebrity exchange. In this work, it would be impossible to center only one perspective, because Swift and Swifties are truly symbiotic organisms.

The influence of the Swift/Swiftie dynasty is significant enough to have intervened in the greater culture. I have reviewed feminist subcultures such as Riot Grrrl (Dunn & Farnsworth, 2012), a similar coalition of girls, and one that explicitly champions female empowerment. The concept of 'girl power' emerged from this subculture and became interwoven with neoliberal power feminism, resulting in a distinctly commercialized framework for female empowerment (Hains, 2009). Celebrities such as Swift espouse this ideology as part of their branding. The Riot Grrrl Press was a fitting example of how feminist subcultures can create and distribute their unique messages in traditional grassroots style. However, Swift diverges here, because while she may still brand herself as a grassroots, everywoman project, she has enough fame and affluence that she may actually negate the Swifties' subculture status.

Compounding the positive benefits of her girl power branding, Swift achieves an acute embodiment of picture-perfect hegemonic femininity. Unlike celebrities such as Dunham (Ghaffari, 2020), Swift has generally profited from her femininity because she is so skilled at it. Hamilton et. al. (2019) argued that high-status women maintain hegemonic femininity by tiptoeing around success while still ceding to men. But Swift subverts this narrative. As Hains might posit, Swift has been awarded the “femininity premium,’ promoting her to postergirl for everything an American woman can and should be (2009). She drives girl culture. And yet she does not cede to the man, instead explicitly advocating her own feminist views, which are then contended with by Swifties and the culture at large.

As such, my work is a concert of multiple voices. In this post-feminist era, I investigate the contemporary American landscape of feminist debate, using Swift as an exemplary case study.

## **Methods**

This study is a grounded theory analysis of a variety of cultural texts. I seek to make sense of the cultural significance that Taylor Swift brings to society at large. The study examines 59 online texts pulled from a variety of public sources. These include 17 Tweets from the social media platform X (formerly known as Twitter), 7 Reddit posts and corresponding threads of comments, 28 articles of news media from major sources such as *The New York Times* (5) and *The Washington Post* (3), and 7 online blog pieces, written by either Swift fans or cultural critics.

Data collection was performed without a set of exact criteria. Instead, data were collected based on relevance to the topic and organized into a spreadsheet; the prominent thematic codes of the text were then extracted. Initial codes varied widely, and in this way, the texts spoke for

themselves. This prohibited the study from imposing its own preconceived beliefs upon the data, allowing for greater accuracy and a more objective study.

The media information presented here was found through Google searches of key terms such as “Taylor Swift feminism,” “Taylor Swift female empowerment,” “Taylor Swift politics,” *etc.* This was the case especially for mainstream media news outlets and Reddit posts. However, in finding relevant Tweets, it was generally only necessary to enter “Taylor Swift,” as feminism-coded content was readily available on the platform without much digging.

Data was excluded, firstly, on the basis of irrelevancy. Texts that did not explicitly or implicitly discuss Swift’s power, her cultural and social influence, or her womanhood and femininity, were excluded from data collection. For example, blog posts that only commented on her musical prowess were omitted for irrelevancy. It was necessary, of course, to include a melange of texts contradictory to one another, because at the heart of the study was a quest to understand the myriad perspectives on Taylor Swift. But content that did not pertain to the feminist debate at large did not qualify for this study.

Additionally, content created prior to January 1, 2015 was excluded. This decision was founded in the fact that Swift did not make her feminist debut until 2014 (Hoby, 2014), and therefore was not necessarily a participant in (let alone a symbol of) the debate until that point. Also, 2014 was ten years ago, and as this study investigates *contemporary* debate, anything prior to that point is rather antiquated in the quickly evolving feminist sphere.

Once enough data had been collected, major themes began to emerge across texts. These themes were grouped together into subthemes, which included *victimized identity*, *control of the narrative*, *relatable and accessible feminism*, *performative white feminism*, *public apathy*, and



*exclusive and powerful fandom*. These were consolidated into larger, overarching themes, which became the basis for the four perspectives which I review in the following pages.

## **Results**

In this study, I sought to understand what Taylor Swift symbolizes for the current feminist landscape. Analysis revealed four distinct patterns of perspective on the Taylor Swift phenomenon. I have chosen to magnify these voices in order to demonstrate the uniquely conflicting typology of feminism. These perspectives can be categorized into 1) the Swiftie fandom, 2) mainstream media, 3) progressive feminists, and 4) out-group bystanders.

### *Swifties*

First, I will examine content pertaining to the Swiftie subculture. Swifties, as Taylor Swift's fans have coined themselves, comprise a major subculture that originated in the late 2000s, after the 2006 release of Swift's first studio album, *Taylor Swift*. As a term, "Swiftie" became so beloved and emblematic of the fandom, that in 2017, Swift herself had it trademarked. The subculture was originally based in the United States. But Swift's fan base has expanded globally, especially following her uber-successful transition into the pop genre with records *Red* (2012) and *1989* (2014).

Before investigating the role of the Swifties in popular discourse surrounding Swift, it is important to understand the demographic makeup of this subculture. In a Morning Consult survey published in 2023, 16% of U.S. adults identified as 'avid fans' of Swift. 74% were of White racial identity, 13% Black, 9% Asian, and 4% of other racial identities. And 52% were female, while 48% were male. Finally, it is also interesting to note the political makeup of Swifties; 55% of those surveyed identified as Democrats, 23% as Independents, and another 23%

as Republicans (Dellatto, 2023). This information is critical as background to the results pertaining to Swifties.

#### *A. Relatability and Star/Fan Relationship*

For Swifties, fandom is about more than just appreciating Swift's music. Although invariably centered around Swift as an icon, Swiftiedom is a way of life. In Malaysia, a radio station representative remarked:

*“She’s got such a massive following and they’re so totally in love with her that there’s nothing really like it... Even if you compare it to BTS or Blackpink, her fans are so, so protective of her. [They are] into her music, into her lifestyle, into her. I would almost say it’s [like a mass] media cult.”*

I argue that part of the reason for the nature of this “cult”-like relationship to Swift is due to the singer's hypervisible commitment to her fans. Since the beginning of her music career, she has made it a goal to befriend her Swifties, to connect with them via every mode and medium possible. Her primary channel for constructing the tight-knit fan relationship has been social media. Born in 1989, Swift is a digital native. Although almost every high-profile celebrity now maintains a highly curated social media presence, Swift was a pioneer in this arena and was able to incorporate a www-based fan relationship into her brand. Tumblr was uniquely helpful in this project. In a *New York Times* piece, 17-year-old Swiftie blogger Megan Chesney said, *“Tumblr allows her to focus on the people who matter to her... She gets to talk directly to her fans and eliminates all of that drama and excess hate on Twitter or Instagram.”*

Tumblr and other social media platforms were essential to meeting fans at their level - at an incredibly personal level. Swift is adept at demonstrating that she is *one of* her fans, part of

the Swiftiedom. She celebrates her own fanbase as much as they worship her. It is a mutual relationship: a friendship. Says one fan:

*“it’s not just the fact that Taylor Swift as president would course correct society and fix carbon emissions in 10 years. it’s that I care about her mental health and she cares about mine (she doesn’t know me but she’d care).”*

Of course, Swift’s close ties to her fandom may be orchestrated with the intent of expanding her paying audience, not developing profound bonds with her supporters. She developed an app called *Swift Life*, since deactivated, where fans could engage with Swift’s own content. A Swiftie who downloaded the app wrote:

*“Taylor’s diehard fans are, as her “long list of ex-lovers” would all call her, insane — they obsessively pick apart and parse her words, and they’ll do absolutely anything to get onto their idol’s radar. Why else would we download yet another social app? Because Taylor told us to, of course.”*

This profession of insanity is not something Swifties are ashamed of, as long as it is endorsed by their moral compass: the star herself. To the fans, the friendship is real. Swift has hosted them in her home (Kelley, 2017). She even bought a house for a heavily pregnant fan who had fallen homeless (Liquor, 2023). And like any good friend, she shares secrets with her fans; she is notorious for burying Easter eggs in her music videos, song lyrics, and album covers. Besides her personability, her vulnerability has catalyzed her ascent to fame. Swift’s music has been lauded as a return to the tradition of oral storytelling. Indeed, her lyrics are real and raw, autobiographical yet strikingly *familiar*. To some critics, this familiarity is a sign of vague, generic, pandering songwriting. But for Swifties, it is relatable. Her work and her

all-encompassing brand speak to what Swifties would deem the universal female experience.

Says one female fan:

*“I wanted to take this opportunity to thank you for making me cry. Thank you for saying the things that other people are too jaded or scared to say. Thank you for reminding us all that who we are is often defined by what we believe about ourselves, for better or for worse.”*

Swift taps into a kind of collective girlhood, a reflection of her fans’ own experiences. They adore her because she understands them. She is their model of emotional courage, a woman who spits in the face of female shame.

### *B. Exclusive/Defensive Fandom*

Considering the reciprocal nature of this star/fan relationship, one of the hallmarks of Swiftiedom is *defense* of the idol in question. Swifties are steadfast protectors of Swift, despite her leading role in several squabbles on- and off-line. From the fan perspective, any criticism aimed at Swift is undeserved villainization. One of her most well-known public incidents was Kanye West’s intrusion on her 2009 VMA victory speech and his 2016 song “Famous” that brazenly stated *“I feel like me and Taylor might still have sex / Why? I made that b—h famous.”* While most mainstream media swiftly castigated West’s disruption, it wasn’t long before Swift came under scrutiny for her own (in)action. A year after the debacle, PopFront claimed:

*“Kanye upstaging Taylor in that moment not only gave that narrative merit in a lot of people’s eyes, it also looked like the personification of many a long-standing white fear: a black man taking away a white woman’s power. And Taylor has been playing off that narrative ever since, while America has embraced the notion of white victimhood — despite the reality.”*

A key component of Swift’s image is her portrayal as a victim. But this quality that inspires contempt among so many is instead a call-to-action for Swifties. They serve as her

vigilantes, protecting and defending her from public backlash. They are *empowered* by her victimhood because they believe in it wholeheartedly. Despite Swift's world-dominating success, Swifties will always remember her face onstage in 2009, her exploitation at the hands of Scooter Braun's record label, her struggle with body image as a young woman. After Swift was accused of faking her insecurities for attention, a fan Tweeted:

*"I hate that she received backlash for her own perceptions of herself."*

Like Swift's incessant social media presence, the question arises whether her identity as victim is a calculated public relations maneuver or an accidental, fan-driven portrayal. Swift's authenticity, not only as a celebrity, or a woman, but as an individual, is frequently called into question. She must sell a performance while convincing her audience that the performance is genuine; it's a smoke-and-mirrors show in which she can never admit that the "authentic" role she plays is actually an act. It is this performance, and not her sincerity as an individual, that she must sell as a celebrity. Regardless, her vulnerable, relatable image is crucial to the Swiftie identity, because fans see themselves reflected in this narrative.

*"Swift has always functioned best as an artist when she feels like an underdog, and obviously that's a feeling she's been chasing, sometimes to her detriment, since at least '1989.'"*

Another defining quality of the Swiftie fan base is exclusion. Swiftiedom identifies itself through language ("Swiftie," "era," Swift's own popularized lyrics), appearance (friendship bracelets), and creed (what would Taylor do?). Such specific in-group signaling also makes it obvious who is *not* a Swiftie. The subculture is tight-knit. Not only are fans friends with the icon herself, they are also friends amongst each other. One fan remarked:

*"This just shows that any Swiftie can be friends with another Swiftie... You're automatically best friends."*

Swifties both implicitly and explicitly set a compass of rules for participation, encouraging passion, kindness, *“empathy and outstanding communication.”* Yet anyone who threatens the subculture is the object of sometimes severe punishment. In 2021, Swift’s ex-boyfriend and fellow musical artist John Mayer claimed that a Swiftie had Tweeted him, *“f-k yourself you ugly bitch i hope you choke on something <3.”* (Bitsky, 2021)

One Swiftie Tweeted:

*“swifties, we HAVE to stop quoting/replying/interacting with these verified accounts posting taylor hate & trolling. they’re doing it for the response to get paid. just report and block and move on. that’s how we get them to chill out. they only tweet to get a response yall”*

Because Swifties see themselves in Swift herself, any criticism leveled at their leader is interpreted personally. Swifties are willing to breach their own code of conduct in order to prove themselves as the most protective Swiftie and defend their very own images. In this way, Swift herself does not bear much responsibility for her own narrative. Her fans do that work for her, unasked, because everyone’s reputation is on the line.

### *C. Feminine and Empowered*

Swift’s friendship with her fans is certainly cultivated by the popular culture vehicle that is social media, and it is protected and enshrined by the exclusive Swiftie base. But relatability and online presence alone do not explain how Swift skyrocketed to stardom. I argue that her influence is primarily reliant on the content of her message. I have established that despite Swifties’ passionate lambasting of her villainization in the media, they are actually complicit in Swift’s victimhood.

Swift’s own message is that women are just as powerful as men - that she, herself, is “The Man.” It is her girl-power theme that has most resonated with Swift’s audience, especially

among women. Swifties' take on feminism is a kind of warm, cozy sisterhood whose common goal is female success. And Swift is also undoubtedly a *feminine* cultural icon. Her music, her entire brand, is created by and for girls, period. Swift has not made any attempt to diminish her feminine qualities for the public eye. On-and-off stage, she glitters in pink and gold, rocks a red lip, vlogs from her home as she snuggles her cats. She sings unabashedly about boys and heartbreak, and trades friendship bracelets and gossip with her fans. She is just a girl.

*“She is the singer whose initial, unapologetic girlishness made her seem endearing and vulnerable – and easily exploited – but whose immense talent, fearlessness and gumption have proved she is anything but weak. To prove this, she has made a career of calling out men in her songs and in her life, from Braun to Kanye and Albarn to the ex-radio DJ David Mueller who sexually assaulted her in 2013 and whom she successfully took to court.”*

But how can a woman so empowered also forever remain a victim of male America? One fan blog had the answer:

*“Taylor Swift is hated so much simply because she is proud of herself. She embodies her outrageous success in a way that just isn't culturally acceptable for a woman to do. She knows she's 'the man' and she absolutely delights in it. She has a 'fuck you haters' energy that she carries like a big flag behind her. We love that quality in men but HATE it in a woman. Taylor is hated not for her looks, her money, her gender or her lyrics — but for her rich dude sized ego.”*

Swifties embrace this Miss Americana ideal about what it means to be a girl. It is okay to be feminine *and* angry. In a sense, Swift perfectly embodies the archetypal woman scorned, and for Swifties, this is far from a humiliation. It is instead a symbol of empowerment. That a woman can be so demonized, so mortified, and still rise to the very top is the greatest revenge. That she can do it in heels is what lights a fire under Swiftiedom.

### *Mainstream Media*

Like Swifties, mainstream media also applauds Swift and her brand. However, this channel tends to view Swift's success as a woman artist through an economic lens rather than an explicitly feminist one. In popular media, Swift is portrayed as a multimodal business pioneer that has taken the world by storm. While many pieces lauded Swift's impact on the feminist agenda, they generalized female empowerment as hardworking women who could match if not surpass women in profits and recognition. Swift's success was indeed a function of her "everywoman" narrative, her relatability and accessibility to women, but it was her business acumen, her boss lady image, her "stick-it-to-the-man" mentality, that made Swift uniquely impressive. She has built a brand founded in the desires of her audience, and she shapeshifts as fan demands change. Taylor Nation has pushed revolutionary concerts, cozy insider documentaries, major brand deals, and a historic return to vinyl, all of which have made record amounts of revenue. Forbes commended her versatility:

*"With the release of her song, "Look What You Made Me Do," the star took a huge creative risk and emerged with a completely different image. While the critics did not hesitate to insult her transformation, fans were all for it, and the song was a huge success. The video was played 43.2 million times on YouTube in 24 hours which is the most views any music video in the history of YouTube has ever had in that time frame. The song also topped the Hot 100 for three weeks in a row."*

Mainstream media tended to measure Swift's influence and affluence by emphasizing raw numbers. Like Swifties, the media has much celebrated Swift's courage, including her lawsuit against Mueller, and most recently her divergence from record label tradition. Following the controversy with Braun, in 2021 Swift began to re-record and re-release her old records, this



time entirely under her ownership and agency. Mainstream media saw this as an impressive move of gravitas. Accomplished music writer Ted Gioia praised:

*“For the first time in ages, the superstar musician at the top of the hierarchy is brave, independent, generous, and willing to challenge the system. You stand up for artist rights. You stand up for live music. You stand up for people. And you do all this with a grass roots power base that nobody can match—no politician, no billionaire technocrat, and certainly no other performer.”*

The idea that Swift’s brand is founded in “grass roots” movement commonly appears among both mass media outlets and the Swiftie fandom. Despite being the top musician on the entire planet right now, Swift is still viewed as an underdog, a martyr, a heroine. Media portrays her as working twice as hard as the man. Her success lies in her ability to beat him at his own game.

However, some outlets pointed out the contradictory image that Swift manages.

*“But of course, this being Taylor Swift, one of the savviest chess-playing pop stars who’s ever lived, we’re left to parse not how much of what we’re watching is real — I never got the sense that anything in this film was staged more than any other documentary about a camera-trained performer — but what aspects of it are selective spin. Is this a film full of vérité explanations or carefully edited excuses?”*

The media cannot deny her universal success, but they are skeptical about its origins; Swift is characterized as calculated and manipulative. Although Swifties would categorize her narrative, her entire persona, as sincere, many mainstream media outlets were uncertain about her authenticity. But across the board, there was acknowledgement of the incredible power that

Swift has come to exercise on American culture. Many works would teasingly scrutinize her supremacy even as they complemented her accomplishments:

*“People like us will chirp and try to convince ourselves that their reign of terror and dominance is over. We are fools! Absolute fools for ever doubting them... Tom Brady and Taylor Swift are cockroaches. They're gonna outlive us. They're gonna outperform us. They're gonna be here when we're dead and gone, dominating their fields.”*

Similarly, one outlet wrote about Swift’s high-profile posse of beautiful women:

*“Certainly, these new friendships may be genuine, but these women are more often seen in Ms. Swift’s milieu — baking, shopping, taking lovely-looking vacations — than she is in theirs. They can appear decorative, carefully arranged details in a trompe l’oeil of normal life.”*

Swift is the target of heavy flak for manipulating the media itself. Her public appearances and gestures are viewed as pawns on her chessboard of world domination. Even her close friends, apparently, could be fake. The notion that Swift is unlikeable even within her own circle is a reflection of media opinion on the validity of her endearing image. Her friends are too pretty, too famous, to *really* be friends with Swift, despite the fact that Swift blows all of them out of the water in terms of aggregate wealth and cultural sway.

The same notion has been applied to many of Swift’s past relationships. Most recently, she has come under fire for her extremely conspicuous partnership with Travis Kelce of the Kansas City Chiefs.

While Swifties maintain that her myriad references to ex-boyfriends are simply the voice of a girl speaking her truth (how many breakup songs have male superstars written?), mainstream media takes the view that these stories are milked to boost publicity. NPR claimed:

*“Being seen at Kelce's game against the Denver Broncos ahead of her film's opening expands her cultural footprint beyond the Swifties, and causes the perfect storm of media attention any star would want before a major release.”*

Swift has been accused of using Kelce as a way of merging an otherwise generally disinterested demographic - the NFL and its supporters - with her own audience. But at the same time, the media recognizes Swift's ability to quickly and effectively respond to criticism. She is adept at handling judgment in the press, even when on trial for inauthenticity, disloyalty or manipulation. After the “Famous” fiasco, Swift found her perfect revenge:

*“So, the snake imagery combined with the "Look What You Made Me Do" lyrics? Swift isn't pretending that all this controversy didn't happen. She might have spent the past year out of the spotlight, but she's not hiding. She knows what people are saying about her. She is noting the media's role. And she's ready - oh, she's ready - to respond.”*

The media also understands that there is only so much that criticism will do; Swift is almost untouchable. She will always defeat them, especially with her fans by her side. And she'll always do it her own way, conceding nothing to the man. She has built a base of to-the-death loyal supporters, and anyone who sullies the Swift image is immediately and very publicly shamed.

An important pillar of this power is the ability to equate Swift with picture-perfect womanhood. One writer argues:

*“while harboring anti-Taylor sentiments won't necessarily put you on a government hit list or get you fired, it will immediately make everyone think you're an asshole. Or at the very least, that you're not a supporter of women.”*

Here, the author admits that, while a Swift criticizer may not be severely punished in the most explicit sense, they may risk an accusation of misogyny, and, at worst, social ostracization. In Swiftie circles and in mainstream media, Swift represents everything a woman can and should be. Tall, blonde, and slim, Swift is and always has been conventionally beautiful. Affluent since childhood, and unfathomably rich in 2024, she has always possessed class privilege. And her undeniable talent for songwriting and storytelling have transformed her into Miss Americana, a vision of great success, and a role model for little girls everywhere. She has achieved all of this *is* the everywoman. Therefore, to critique anything about her image or influence is to critique womanhood itself.

### *Progressive Feminists*

The third pattern of perspective that emerged from content analysis was a progressive feminist take. Whereas the Swiftie fandom and mainstream media were insiders, in the sense that they supported and affirmed Swift as a feminist cultural icon, progressive feminists were outsiders. They invalidated Swift's position as a feminist, calling her out for performative, White-centered feminism and dismissing her activism as unproductive on the basis of her elite status.

#### *A. Complicity and Silence*

A major aspect of the progressive feminist argument against Swift was her ability to slyly weaponize silence. In 2023, Swift dated The 1975 lead vocalist Matty Healy, but they broke up quickly amidst controversy surrounding Healy's allegedly anti-feminist message. In particular, Healy light-heartedly admitted to watching porn involving brutalization of Black women. Swift fans and outsiders alike admonished Healy's behavior and called on Swift to condemn him, as well. A feminist blog wrote:

*“... even if Swift didn't condone Healy's disrespectful, racist remarks, she chose not to denounce them publicly. Being neutral is not neutrality; it's complicity.”*

By remaining silent on the issue, Swift left it unclear whether or not she excused Healy's actions. To her credit, she had the foresight to break up with the frontman before she, herself, was denounced by her own fans. But to progressive feminists, this was just more evidence of Swift's crooked talent for escaping culpability. The notion of “complicity” appeared frequently in analysis. In discussion of the issue of the Israel/Palestine conflict, one X (Twitter) user wrote: *“I've been saying this for weeks. One singular post from Taylor Swift creates waves of activity and response GLOBALLY. She is the epitome of white feminism and weaponized oppression. It's honestly appalling”*

Progressive feminists do not debase Swift's platform, nor do they deny the legitimacy of her power. They recognize her cultural ubiquity, not without a little disquiet. In fact, it is *because* of her inconceivable dominance that Swift should be held to a higher standard. It is her duty as a celebrity, they argue, to further the feminist message. One Redditor gave her half-credit for advocacy:

*“Her Pride involvement a couple years ago felt pretty pandering and opportunistic with that song/video, I'll admit. But her democrat campaigning felt sincere, and it's not like she was the only artist to make statements against Trump lol. And I guess I remember hearing about her sexual assault case and feeling like she handled it in a pretty impressive way.*

*But I haven't seen anything crazy "woke" or noteworthy. Maybe it's because many of the artists I follow are particularly engaged activists, so Taylor seems less relevant in comparison.”*

In other words, compared to her peers, Swift is a decidedly dispassionate feminist, so her message is on the whole ineffective. Progressive feminists vary in the degree of castigation they aim at Swift, but all agree that she can and must do more for the cause.

*B. Affluence: A Discreditable Factor*

In many instances, audiences called out Swift's authentic narrative. Progressive feminists held that Swift is merely an arm of the bourgeoisie, an agent of lower-class destruction that has taken advantage of every avenue for profit, even at the cost of further alienation among the poor. They poked holes in claims to Swift's victimhood, pointing out the irony of her damsel-in-distress narrative despite her earth-shattering success. The Eras Tour is so far the highest-grossing concert tour on record, perhaps because tickets are prohibitively expensive. A Swiftie lamented:

*"I know I did not just see someone selling one singular eras ticket for \$2,000 in the broke swifties facebook group"*

Swift maintains seemingly close bonds with her fans, even financially supporting some (including, for example, \$100,000 bonuses to Denver-based tour truck drivers) (Bhatnagar, 2023). The exclusive price of her concerts, then, signals to progressive feminists that she does not stand for what she claims. A major point of contention is Swift's frequent use of private jets, which were deemed necessary in order to transport the star to more than 152 stops on her global tour. An X user sardonically posted:

*"This is Taylor Swift. Taylor is concerned about climate change. Her private jet emits more carbon in a single trip than your car in your entire lifetime (and that jet flew more than 200 times last year), but it's your car that's causing climate change 🤡"*

Here, Swift is being criticized again for her complicity, but not because she neglects to utilize her cultural capital for good. Instead, she is mocked for pretending to care about emissions and continuing to utilize her financial capital for her benefit only.

### *C. White Feminism*

One of the more common critiques of Swift's feminism pertained to her Whiteness and the White focus of her branding. The following Tweet condemns the feminist message of the sensational *Barbie* movie, a 2023 film centering Barbie as a representation of girlhood and womanhood. The author uses Taylor Swift as an exemplar of the corrupted feminism shown in the movie:

*“This Barbie Oscar discourse is really highlighting the issue with white feminism(especially the Taylor swift ‘if I was the man’ brand of it. It’s not about equality...it’s about redistribution of power with them replacing the white man on the totem pole but everyone else remains where they are.”*

White feminism is a kind of hegemonic femininity performed best by beautiful, White, affluent women such as the semi-fictional Barbie or the very real figure that is Taylor Swift. Whereas the girl power feminism lauded by riot grrrls promotes DIY, deeply emotional pushback against traditionally oppressive social systems, the Barbie/Swift brand does very little to subvert the pillars upholding a White supremacist patriarchy. While Swift may have damaged the collective white man's ego on-stage and in her business dealings, she has ensured that “everyone else remains where they are.”

Her feminism is neither explicitly intersectional nor political. But it doesn't need to be. Swift broadcasts a White, straight, politically ambiguous ideal of womanhood. She is empowered, but she is still “nice.” She will never allow herself to be defined by the men she

dates, but the majority of her songs are written about these exact men. And she pushes female empowerment over all else, yet reproduces victimized identities. These contradictions compose a white feminism that does little to advance the status of other underprivileged people.

### *Out-Group Bystanders*

There are few popular sensations that escape high-profile life without garnering at least a few “haters.” Taylor Swift especially seems to have made a variety of enemies, from public critics to fellow celebrities. This may be a result of her relatively long time in the spotlight, or because she has been quite outspoken online since the early 2010s, or simply because people enjoy hating what is beloved. And I raise the question: are these really “haters,” or simply people tired of hearing about Taylor Swift in every corner of American public discourse?

A theme that emerged, coined by Newsweek writer Andy Gorel, is “Swift fatigue,” in which many members of the public are simply frustrated by the omnipresence of Swift, Swifties, and the general brand. For example, one Redditor bemoaned that:

*“Music and sports have always been havens of respite for the disgruntled American. At least to the perception of the average person, sports and art are supposed to be spaces where what you see is what you get, and nothing more. And yet in today's hyper-political world, the coupling of Taylor Swift and Travis Kelce has robbed them even of that respite, thanks to what the two represent.”*

The Swift fatigue here is owed to Swift’s relationship to Kelce, which seems from this perspective an elaborately designed corporate deal. Sports ought to be a “haven” where Americans can interrupt their regularly scheduled viewing of polarized politics and victimizing marketing schemes. The presence of Kelce and Swift signifies the elite’s intrusion into these safe spaces.



Similarly, another Redditor wrote:

*“Right before our eyes, Taylor Swift has become a polarizing figure, and it has nothing to do with what America fell in love with in the first place: her music.”*

This user laments the loss of the old Swift, a gifted singer/songwriter and America’s sweetheart. Whether this image has been corrupted by Swift herself or by public narratives is unclear in this comment, but it speaks to a greater concern about the politicization of celebrity figures. This comment suggests that Swift and other celebrities should stick to what they know. Like sports, “music is a respite.” When even the most personal indulgences - such as the music we listen to - are politicized, we can no longer enjoy them to the fullest extent.

Others took this perspective a step further, connecting Swift’s frustrating pervasiveness to class division and charging her for reliance on and endorsement of the capitalist elite. In late 2023, the singer officially became a billionaire. Swifties celebrated another glass ceiling shattered, mainstream media honored her business ingenuity and guile, but progressive feminists sprang into action. *Newsweek* reported:

*“It’s how much her entire existence has come to represent an establishment Americans are losing trust in, and a deepening class divide that continues to weaken national unity. Swift is presently propelled by a group of white suburban liberals who spend more on a three-hour concert than the average American earns in weeks. She’s dating a pro athlete who makes \$14 million a year; has knelt for the National Anthem, and is the face of Pfizer.”*

How “real” can her love story be, the commenter asked, if it comes with so many publicity perks? In contrast with the previous comment, this text recognizes that Swift is more than a singer/songwriter; she is a businesswoman. She represents a private, billion-dollar brand that profits off of Swift’s very image and representation. According to this author, Swift’s paying

fanbase consists of “white suburban liberals” that privilege their own elite status and further class division. This is another way in which celebrities like Swift have come to inspire polarization within the culture at large.

## **Discussion**

In my work, I have sought to examine the role of popstar Taylor Swift as a representation of womanhood and feminist debate in contemporary times. Through nuanced content analysis, four distinct perspectives emerged, each showcasing a few essential themes. These perspectives are organizing tools that establish and categorize the themes present in the content. It is important to note that relevant themes express themselves across perspectives, but in very distinct ways.

The first perspective that arose from the cultural texts examined in this study was that of the Swiftie subculture. Arguably, their status as a subculture has been overturned, as Swift and her fanbase are now embedded in the mainstream. What may have begun as a girlhood-focused subculture has transformed into a multimedia, billion-dollar organization consisting of Swift, her fans, and the corporations that uphold the Swift brand.

As I have shown, Swifties band around a very similar kind of girl power feminism that founded the Riot Grrrl movement. These subcultures were built by and for girls: girls of every kind dedicating themselves to the betterment of marginalized girls everywhere. The defining difference between the two camps is that riot grrrls never accepted the media’s attempts to commercialize their grassroots organizing. Their decision to remain decentralized and DIY was ultimately the death of them. If Swift were not so media- and tech-savvy, perhaps her own feminist activism would have faced the same fate.

What has permitted Swift so much power and influence was her deep bond with fans, a relationship rarely seen in other celebrity circles. Swift was able to achieve such a connection with her fanbase partly as a result of her early use of social media, which launched her into the public eye in a distinctly modern way. For this reason and others, Swift was born in the right place, at the right time. By the time she began making music professionally, feminism was gradually creeping its way into hegemonic ideology, establishing sturdy roots as it grew. Post-feminism and neoliberalist feminism pushed the girl power model of female empowerment, which allowed Swift to position herself as “The Man,” a successful woman with a can-do attitude who never allowed her “niceness” to slip.

In this way, Swift perfectly embodies the pinnacle of the femininity premium, as outlined by Hamilton, et. al (2019). She has been able to achieve success that is traditionally only reserved for men. The reason she has been able to do so is because her conventionally attractive, rich, White image appeals to Western women with aspirations of that same femininity premium. Hamilton, et. al. (2019) posited that gaining this premium was the best way to obtain success without disrupting complex social institutions.

What is so unique about the Swift/Swiftie dynamic is that Swifties are not a passively absorbent sponge. Of course, Swift wields incredible influence over her fanbase, who eagerly follow and often emulate her every move and message. Their tight relationship is emblematic of the cozy sisterhood that Swift claims as her personal form of feminism. But the Swifties have the power to provide critical feedback, thus shaping Swift’s image even as she creates it. Swift’s performance of womanhood is both informed and evaluated by her fans. Thus, I posit that Swift’s ability to manage her own image and impact is limited by her fans’ equally enormous

power. The two parties benefit from uniting as a huge collective, rallied around one essential symbol.

Yet, as I have said, Swift's brand relies on her self-representation as a victim of an oppressive society. Although she is crowned with the femininity premium (Hamilton, et. al., 2019), Swift chooses to portray herself as the damaged party in her songs and public statements. When a threat is perceived, Swift's fans come to her rescue. One tactic that Swifties tend to employ, with the double-pronged goal of empowering their idol and promoting her victim narrative, is equating Taylor Swift with superior womanhood. To Swifties, criticism of Swift is congruent to criticism of women as a whole; using this model, Swift's critics become misogynists (even "internally misogynistic," in the case of Swift's female critics). Their arguments are therefore easily condemned and disregarded.

Cann (2015) painted a portrait of fangirls as obsessors. Fangirls are willing to risk social ostracization for their celebrity, to whom they are wholeheartedly dedicated. Diehard Swifties demonstrate similar behavior. They are willing to face public derision for their mania because they understand they will always have the most important ally there is: Swift herself. They will never not have someone to defend and someone to defend them.

The second perspective that appeared in this analysis was the mainstream media. While major news outlets did not engage in the Swiftie's passionate obsession, they did tend toward a highly positive vision of Swift and her success. Unlike Swifties, who view the fan/Swift bond to be the greatest success of her career, the media take a more traditionally economical approach. Many media sites lauded Swift's internationally renowned concert tours, her public relations management, and her brand's versatility. Their measurement of success is wealth, and by all calculations she has surpassed ultimate prosperity.

Yet the media has been more critical than the Swifties of Swift's performances of female success. Some commentators have questioned the legitimacy of her "realness," which Swift has been known for since her career initially took off. She has always been the down-to-earth, relatable girl, naturally gifted and beloved by all. But how, some authors wonder, can a billionaire with two private jets and 283 million Instagram followers (at the time of this writing) remain down-to-earth? A major contradiction lies in the way that Swift's stardom bolsters the authenticity of her empowered-woman narrative while simultaneously highlighting the obviously minor stakes Swift holds in the feminist movement.

If mainstream media was somewhat critical of Swift's manicured public image, feminists were extremely so. This group found fault in Swift's silence on matters essential to modern feminism, such as racism and international sociopolitical conflicts. Her complicity, they said, is a symptom of her White feminism, which champions the financial success of other attractive White women. Disparate identities are at best, neglected, and at worst, entirely excluded by her message. These feminists also heavily criticized Swift's decision not to use her own financial capital for the greater good.

As Hains postulated, the overrepresentation of White women and girls in mainstream feminist movements can cause detrimental effects to women and girls in the American public (Hains, 2009). Feminism is often co-opted by women in positions of power, as Tennent and Jackson (2017) and Chidgey (2021) have also pointed out. Celebrities like Swift recognize their own "activist capital" (Chidgey, 2021) and will often take the helm of preexisting activist movements, subsequently contorting the message to fit their individual capitalist brand. Like the aforementioned authors, progressive feminists heavily critique this "false" feminism, which reinforces systems of hierarchy and encompasses a very performative feminism.

Feminist progressives' analytical narratives were sometimes met with hostility by Swifties. As has been shown, Swift's fanbase is profoundly protective and defensive of the star. When progressive feminists blast Swift's weak feminism, Swifties perceive this as a threat to their ideas of womanhood.

The final perspective that emerged from the content was one of "Swift fatigue," a kind of exhaustion with the constant intervention of the Swift subculture in the dominant culture. Many people view Swift as a marker of the ever-increasing polarization of American society, where even the most private spaces are invaded by politics. These people, however, are often villainized by Swifties, to whom any opposition may be categorized as outright contempt or disdain for their very culture.

I argue that both progressive feminists and apathetic bystanders have the potential to dull Swift's influence on the feminist movement. Progressive feminists have been outspoken about their demands for Swift's message, which they deem to be inauthentic and ambiguous. On X especially, feminists were calling for Swift to become explicitly political. Recognizing the impactful force of her fanbase, progressive feminists even called on Swifties to coerce the superstar into compliance, or dissociate completely from her performative celebrity feminism.

Bystanders make up the rest of the American public, and while they may not have as much clout in Swift-centered circles, they are certainly capable of shifting debate away from deeply polarized opinion on Swift. They offer a more level-headed approach to the question at hand, pointing out the basic fact that Swift has more power than anyone can responsibly handle.

## **Conclusion**

In 2023, Taylor Swift was honored with Time Magazine's exclusive "Person of the Year" award, which concretized her almost transcendent influence on Western culture (Lansky, 2023). One would be hard-pressed to find an American who doesn't recognize Swift's name. She has accomplished a campaign for world domination, with no signs of stopping, and she does it all with a red lip. The Swift phenomenon embodies the traditional American values of hard work and meritorious success, individualism, and a proud sense of justice. She is everything the United States wants to stand for.

Understanding Taylor Swift's role as a celebrity in producing and reproducing hegemonic femininity is essential to understanding the greater feminist debate. She has come to represent the perfect woman - beautiful, successful, and "nice" - by Western standards. She and her Swifties, once a rather small Tumblr subculture, have blown into a mainstream phenomenon. As an exemplar of the girl power model of feminism, Swift has drawn significant attention in feminist debate.

In this work, I have provided an analysis of modern feminist debate with Swift as a focal point, identifying a variety of perspectives on Swift's role in the feminist movement and what she has actually accomplished along the way. I have demonstrated how impactful her fanbase has been in spreading Swift's message to the wider population and squashing any opposition, feminist or otherwise, that arises.

Future research on this topic would help further understanding of Swift's influence on feminism as well as female celebrities in general. The scope of my research has excluded some crucial elements of this subject. Steps should be taken to contend with Swift's political "coming-out," which was an essential milestone in her journey to becoming the feminist she is today.

Additional research is needed into the discourse surrounding Swift's talent, which is an incredibly salient factor in her success. Swift's music and patterns of perspective surrounding it merit more attention in future studies. I recognize also that I include very little content created by Swift herself; this was deliberate, as Swift's perspective on her own success would naturally be intensely biased. Ultimately, the scope of my research focuses on how those engaged in feminist debate consider Swift and her feminism.

A subsequent limitation to this work: it is possible that the demographic makeup of some data sources are skewed in regards to race and class. Forums such as Reddit, for example, may lean white and highly educated, while X (formerly known as Twitter) may pose a more accurate representation of American demographics today. I recommend that future studies take this potential issue into account.

Finally, it is important for future research to consider the exceptions to the rule. Because I conducted a general thematic analysis, my study did not allow room to examine each and every divergent viewpoint. These perspectives, however, may prove helpful in understanding feminist debate and ought to be investigated by future researchers.



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