



UMEÅ UNIVERSITY

Construction of knowledge in online fandom spaces

Sexuality discourse in Taylor Swift fans' subreddits

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Master thesis, 15hp

Media and Communication Science, 60 hp

Spring term 2023

Acknowledgments

I want to thank my supervisor Moa Eriksson Krutrök for her invaluable knowledge and support throughout the entire thesis process, and I am also grateful for the help and insight from other staff members during this time. I have learned so much from all of you.

I would also like to thank my friends and family for the emotional support during my entire academic career. I could not have achieved any of it without you.

- Elin Forslund

Abstract

This study explores how knowledge and reality is constructed within an online fandom's communication, with a focus on LGBTQ+ discourse within Taylor Swift's fans on Reddit. This is done through a qualitative digital ethnographic method and uses LGBTQ+ symbols and parasocial relationships as tools to analyse 75 posts and 850 comments total. The theoretical framework mainly consists of Berger and Luckmann's (1966) theory on the social construction of reality and Couldry and Hepp's (2017) reinterpretation of their work that considers the effects of digitalization and how our construction of reality has changed with it. The analysis showed that the group uses symbols to build a shared collection of facts and continuously follows an us-versus-them narrative to construct their community. Their foundational belief that Swift herself is secretly queer is not to be too closely questioned within the group and they often use the version of Swift that outsiders have built up to discuss hypothetical *what-ifs*. To participate in the community and be seen as "logical" it appears to require that you to some extent correctly consume the media in a way that aligns with pre-existing facts that the group shares. Meaning that the group has unspoken rules that dictate the knowledge hierarchies within it.

Keywords: *Knowledge construction, Fandom studies, LGBTQ+ studies, Taylor Swift, Reddit, Community, Parasocial relationships*

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1. Introduction

The communities we belong to, whether they are chosen *for* or *by* us, create their own version of reality and knowledge together. While this can lead to a shared sense of belonging, it can also initiate unspoken rules and demands based on the internal rhetoric and the hierarchies that become established within them (Jørgensen & Phillips, 1999, s. 102; Fiesler & Dym, 2020). In a mediatized and globalized world this has now been extended to online platforms in which there are both naturally formed *and* organized groups, sometimes with endless amounts of subcategories within them. These come with their own cultures, language and now even history that have brought some previously non-existent factors to the equation. The social hierarchies on online platforms and the group mentalities that form both carry a new weight and it has become more and more important to research the effects that belonging to an online community will have on your version of reality.

This thesis wants to focus specifically on communication made within Taylor Swift's fandom on Reddit and the subcategory within it called *Gaylors*. It exists to discuss and analyze her music and personal life from an LGBTQ+ perspective, which includes speculating about the validity of her heterosexual relationships and how she has potentially been in unconfirmed queer ones. They gather in several subreddits¹ to post and have conversations about her lyrics, public statements, appearances, and relationships. The definition of what a Gaylor is often depends on who within the Taylor Swift fandom you would ask. People who do *not* identify as a Gaylor often use it as a negative term to describe someone who speculates about Swift's sexuality and relationships, while those who *do* identify with it see it as a positive term that can range from "someone who analyses Swift's lyrics from a queer perspective" to "someone who believes and is actively discussing how Swift is secretly a part of the LGBTQ+ community in some way".

Online fandoms have long been built upon environments that harbor contrasting feelings of affinity and isolation. In practice it has often emerged out of a desire to be understood, which has resulted in these spaces being built on unspoken rules in order to protect themselves from outsiders (Tiidenberg, et al., 2021; Fiesler & Dym, 2020). They often depend on a variety of factors that change from fandom to fandom or platform to platform, hinging on the diverse sets of demographics that exist. This of course causes fandom studies to consist of many jigsaw pieces within a wider perspective. The results of a study focusing on sports is not necessarily comparable to that of music or movie franchises; they will all have different histories, cultures, references, and humor which go on to create different cultures, social interactions, and

¹ **Subreddit:** What a group on Reddit is called. They have moderators that manage each space and create their own rules within the subreddit. It is often dedicated to one specific thing and users can create their own posts within them.

relationships within these fandom spaces. Discussions about sexuality and LGBTQ+ culture has existed on a wide spectrum of fandom spaces throughout history but have only grown as LGBTQ+ friendly spaces like Tumblr or LiveJournal became popular and then migrated to other platforms (Tiidenberg, et al., 2021). The migration often happened during times when these online spaces were experiencing significant changes that affected the content, such as Tumblr deciding to ban Not Safe For Work (NSFW) content (Fiesler & Dym, 2020, p. 17; Leskin, 2019).

As mentioned, this study wants to examine the communication occurring and how the perception of knowledge is conceived within online fandom communities that were specifically created to host discussions about LGBTQ+ related topics. This study wants to look at this through the lens of previous research topics such as sociality and affinity spaces, parasocial relationships and discourse surrounding sexuality and LGBTQ+ symbols. As well as Berger and Luckmann's (1966) theory on the social construction of reality and Couldry and Hepp's (2017) reinterpretation of their work that includes necessary research about the effects of digitalization. The thesis consists of a case study of subreddits that focus on discussing both queer themes within Taylor Swift's music but that also theorize about her private relationships and sexual orientation from that perspective. The aim is not to unravel said theorizes to conclude some kind of ultimate truth, but rather to discover how the perceived truths and knowledge are constructed by the members of said groups. They have been conditioned by the community's experiences, identities, feelings, and relationships that are constantly evolving and that culminate in the discussions that occur. I therefore want to look at both the posts themselves and more importantly the conversations that happen within the replies to understand how the group is constructed.

This will be done through a qualitative digital ethnographic analysis of these conversations, using Jørgensen and Phillip's work on discourse analysis and more specifically discourse psychology. The results can potentially show patterns and tendencies in the groups that can affect and shape more general conversations surrounding not only LGBTQ+ topics but also our communication in fandom spaces.

1.1. Purpose of study and research questions

The purpose of this study is to show how knowledge and a shared reality is constructed within online fandom spaces and their communication, specifically focusing on LGBTQ+ discourse and using Taylor Swift's fandom on Reddit as a case study. Additionally, the study attempts to understand the social dynamics that form within these groups and how these dynamics shape this communication.

- How is knowledge constructed in the Taylor Swift fandom subreddits, specifically the ones focusing on sexuality discourse?
- What rhetoric and tools are used during the construction of a shared reality?
- What hierarchies can be found within these fandom spaces?

2. Background

2.1. *Taylor Swift*

Taylor Swift is an American singer songwriter born in 1989 in West Reading Pennsylvania. She started her career in the country scene but later transitioned to pop and eventually folk music (Britannica, 2023). She is currently one of the most successful artists globally, having won IFPI's Global Recording Artist of the Year award in 2022 for generating the most money from all music formats within the calendar year (Ingham, 2023), and is known to communicate with fans through what Swift herself has called "cryptic hint-dropping" (Merinuk, 2022) about upcoming releases and important dates. A few examples of this are capitalizing letters in CD booklets to spell something out, including names of future tracks in social media captions, wearing an outfit to an event that is meant to hint at an upcoming music era, or using a specific amount of emojis or letters to reference a date (Merinuk, 2022).

Her dating life has been consistently discussed in the media, something that she has previously mentioned feeling uncomfortable with. In a Vogue interview she was asked what advice she would give to her younger self and answered that "I would say, 'hey, you're gonna date just like a normal 20-something should be allowed to, but you're going to be a national lightning rod for slut-shaming'" (Vogue, 2016) and has described putting out albums as "getting some sort of live-streamed, public autopsy" (Siwak, 2023). She has been romantically connected to several famous men throughout her career and from 2016 until April 2023 she was publicly in a relationship with actor Joe Alwyn, but kept the details of the relationship relatively private. There have also been several rumors and theories about potential romantic relationships with female friends throughout the years. Swift herself has not confirmed any romantic relationships with women though. On the contrary she has publicly referred to herself as an ally as recently as 2019 and has made tweets about not wanting to be accused of dating her friends, as shown below:



Taylor Swift 
@taylorswift13

As my 25th birthday present from the media, I'd like for you to stop accusing all my friends of dating me.

[#thirsty](#)

08/12/2014 15:29



taylorswift

Guys. That is ABSOLUTELY false. To be an ally is to understand the difference between advocating and baiting. Anyone trying to twist this positivity into something it isn't needs to calm down. It costs zero dollars to not step on our gowns. 💕🙌

15,331 notes Jun 14th, 2019



taylorswift

Exactly. We should applaud artists who are brave enough to tell their honest romantic narrative through their art, and the fact is that I've never encountered homophobia and she has. It's her right to call out anyone who has double standards about gay vs straight love interests.

30,536 notes



2.2. *Celebrity privacy*

While reading this thesis it is helpful to be aware of important aspects of celebrity culture relating specifically to celebrities' privacy and personal life. The main discussion in a lot of these instances is paparazzi, whose job it is to photograph celebrities in their everyday life and that can be a difficult topic to navigate. There are two different sides to that discussion, both how it is an invasion of privacy and that celebrities use paparazzi to their advantage. This

happens not only through coordinating appearances, but also maintaining a delicate relationship with each other by offering approval on pictures or respecting boundaries and in return gaining more access (Hazlehursts, 2021; Machan, 1997).

This introduces a relevant topic, which is to what extent celebrities control their own narrative and what exactly they are expected to handle as public figures. Tabloid culture has changed a lot due to mediatization and the rise of social media. Celebrities now control their image more than ever. A side-effect of this is the demand for information and discussions concerning who has the right to what parts of celebrities' lives (Hazlehursts, 2021). In recent years we have seen a rise in accounts on social media that gain a following from posting insider information or that post their locations in real time. For example, there are accounts tracking celebrities' private jets and arguing that it is to hold them accountable for their carbon footprints, but that have received criticism for also giving easy access to their location and causing potential safety risks (Clairouin, 2022). Another popular account is Deuxmoi, who is an anonymous² gossip source mostly known for her Instagram page that currently sits at 1.9 million followers as of May 2023. She regularly posts gossip that has been submitted to her by readers and alleged insider sources. The information ranges from who has been spotted at which restaurant, to breakups and new relationships, to industry conflicts (Kacala, 2021). While she has previously posted information that turned out to be correct, she has also been criticized by both celebrities and social media users for posting submissions with no proof and normalizing constant speculation about public figure's personal lives (Petter, 2023).

Swift herself has a history of known stalkers, including those convicted after sending several death threats and even breaking into her homes, which has led to her team going as far as installing facial recognition software at venues she is performing at to ensure they are not present (Ibrahim, 2022). Privacy issues are not limited to serious threats though, sometimes it even extends to a portion of her fans. Swift is known for having a close relationship with her fans, inviting them into her home to listen to albums before their release date and communicating with them on social media (Duboff, 2014), but she has also spoken up about struggling with feeling like a person due to how "unmanageably sized" her life has become (Uitti, 2022). She spoke about this in the deluxe edition of her album *Lover* in 2019 which included diary entries from Swift throughout the years. In one entry from 2013 she described how celebrity sometimes felt like "being a tiger in a wildlife enclosure ... I still get so anxious when I see a group of people staring, amassed outside my house, pointing, camera phones up... they could never imagine how much that feels like being hunted" (Gawley, 2019). This is still an ongoing issue (JustJared, 2023).

² DeuxMoi has not revealed or confirmed her own identity, but in May 2022 journalist Brian Feldman revealed on his Substack who he believes to be behind the account based on "publicly accessible records of intended-for-public-consumption online activity" (Feldman, 2022)

3. Previous research

Within the previous research we will go on to look at some issues and changes within fandom studies, prior studies about parasocial relationships, and how queerbaiting and queer flagging is applicable to this study.

3.1. *Imagined communities, sociality and fandom culture*

Morimoto (2018, p. 175) describes modern fandoms as imagined communities that emerged from technological advancements and our access to international communication. Imagined communities is a term that was initially coined by Benedict Anderson in his 1983 book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* that defines it as groups that develop a sense of belonging and a collective identity despite not having met any or most members face-to-face (p. 6). From the title you can tell that the topic of Anderson's work is not exactly reflective of what this thesis is exploring, but *Tumblr* by Katrin Tiidenberg et al. (2021) focuses on a more relevant perspective. They describe the social network platform Tumblr and its imagined communities with the term silosociality or silos and argued that it captured what would otherwise be referred to as "online communities, networked publics... social worlds and arenas" (ch. 2, prt. 11, para. 1), while not ignoring how these spaces also offered its members a stable, communal place with a broader network; something that is crucial to understanding its purpose. People gather within these silos due to more social, moral or cultural reasons and Tiidenberg et al. argued that the term contributes to critically thinking about not only spaces like Tumblr but also other platforms and how their structure can help us understand their potential consequences (ch. 2, prt. 11). Other researchers such as James Paul Gee (2004) and Ito et al. (2018) have criticized how widely used the term community has been when discussing online groups. Gee (pp. 70-71, 75-79) argues that while the term is sometimes appropriate, there are occasions in which groups form around their affinity for something without a sense of belonging or membership. In that case he prefers the term affinity space that describes both physical and digital spaces where people "relate to each other primarily in terms of common interests, endeavors, goals, or practices, not primarily in terms of race, gender, age, disability, or social class" (p 77).

Research shows that some significant changes have occurred within these spaces the past few years. Dym and Fiesler (2018) described fandoms as "an ever-evolving community of nomads migrating across platforms and constantly attracting new members across generations" (para. 1.1), which leads to new digital ecosystems. Tiidenberg et al. (2021) compared silos with Erving Goffman's theory of so-called back places due to how they partially offer a place for

its members to escape reality, but Dym and Fiesler (2018) argued that the changes within these digital spaces threaten that image of fandom spaces, writing:

“The traditionally private nature of fandom is rooted in long-standing issues such as social stigma or anxiety over copyright law, and even the spreading popularity of geek culture brings with it the danger of segregating remaining outsiders that might not fit easily into this more mainstream mode” (para. 2.1.).

The consequences of these changes and the migration to different platforms is important to keep in mind when analyzing digital spaces that were not necessarily where a fandom originated from. In an additional article from 2020 Dym and Fiesler highlight these specific problems and requested that researchers expand their understanding of fandoms outside of the confinement of a specific platform to gain a better understanding of how their structure affects the research. They wrote that fandoms rarely emerge from a vacuum, but rather carry an extensive history which provides important context in researchers’ platform analysis (p.22). These types of changes and challenges contributed to the choice of Reddit as the case study for this thesis. There are several studies that focus specifically on Reddit (such as Lynch, 2020 och Ring Carlson & Cousineau, 2020), but the platform is generally underrepresented within fandom studies despite playing a key role in the issue of fandom migration. The platform carries a strong knowledge culture, specifically through community collaborations and investigations, which studies like *Knowledge Collaboration in Online Communities* by Samer Faraj et al. (2011) and *Solving Crimes Online: The Contribution of Citizens on the Reddit Bureau of Investigation* by David Myles et al. (2016) points out. These studies do not necessarily discuss fandoms, but they reflect Reddit’s culture in general and can be particularly useful when it comes to understanding how the platform’s own structure can reshape the groups that migrate over from other social media sites.

Fandom studies also run into other potential issues that can be relevant for this study, meaning not just the researcher’ own understanding of the subject and their choices – but also what goes ignored. For example, Morimoto (2018, p. 176) points out how language and culture differences causes research not written in English or not focusing on western culture to be separated from the rest. It is also common for power structures and negative reactions to emerge when marginalized groups attempt to raise awareness of these issues, creating a tension both within the area of study and the fandom spaces. This can cause different groups to become even more isolated and protective of their community, which is a potential issue regarding the group this study is examining since the space consists of many users who identify as LGBTQ+ (p. 184). Duffett (2013) on the other hand wants to highlight how digitalization has also led to fandoms and researchers gaining access to a more globalized

media consumption, but also brings up how western researchers can sometimes see fandoms as nothing but an object of study which has resulted in them “treating the ways in which fan identities are legitimated as authentic “expressions” of group commitment” (ch. 1, Community and performance, para. 2) rather than a circular social network that can be used by individuals that are looking for interactions and affinity. Both are issues that need to be considered and remedied.

3.2 Parasocial relationships

Parasocial relationships are one-sided relationships, most often with a public figure, organization or fictional character, wherein one person is invested in the relationship while the other party does not know of its existence. The National Register of Health Service Psychologists describes it as a relationship that “expands the social network in a way that negates the chance of rejection and empowers individuals to model and identify with individuals of their choosing who naturally elicit an empathic response” (NRHSP, 2023) and often grow to resemble face-to-face interactions and dynamics. The NRHSP also emphasize that while parasocial relationships were previously most likely established with public figures or organizations you saw in movies or TV shows, the mediatization of public figures has “transformed [them] into more interactive environments, allowing individuals to communicate with their media personas, and increasing the intimacy and strength of the parasocial relationship” (NRHSP, 2023).

A large portion of previous research that focuses on parasocial relationships fall within psychology-based studies. The goal is mainly to explore *how* and *why* those types of relationships occur, in relation to changes in human behavior. For example, older studies often approached the subject by examining which characteristics belonging to celebrities or fictional characters that might cause it. Rubin and McHugh (1987, pp. 290-2) concluded that social (platonic) attraction was more important than physical attraction in the development of parasocial relationships (pp. 290-292), while Turner (1993, p. 452) found that the weight of different types of attraction was dependent on what type of media figure they focused on. More modern studies from researchers like Scherer et al. (2022) and Hwang and Zhang (2018) on the other hand show that the tendency to develop a relationship is connected to an individual’s high levels of empathy as well as low self-esteem. Both studies were partially dependent on survey results from participants who themselves identified that they had a parasocial relationship with a public figure, which could change the outcome. It is also important to note that modern studies tend to focus more on the individual than the public figure.

Turner's (1993) results are still relevant for this study though. They emphasize the importance of being clear about your study's limitations. An article like *Older Adults' Parasocial Relationships with Favourite Television Characters and Depressive Symptoms* by Quinten Bernhold (2018) for example can be a useful comparison or might present interesting theoretical perspectives, but the results are not necessarily applicable when trying to understand other types of public figures or younger generations. My study is no exception, and we have to be aware of what it can and cannot be used for.

Regarding the flaws in previous literature, Giles (2009) argued that future research also needs to acknowledge the differences between the *types* of relationships you can have with a public figure. Other than a parasocial one there are also situations in which an individual simply relates to or *wishes* they related to a public figure or character, or just takes a liking to them without any presence of parasocial dynamics (ibid, p.p. 290). Separating or categorizing in this way is not a common occurrence in previous research, both in relation to fandoms and parasocial relationships specifically. For example, a common topic of study is the consumers' financial decisions that have been made due to the influence of a public figure and its effects on marketing strategies (Burnasheva & Gu Suh, 2020; Donabedian, 2021; Hwang & Zhang, 2018), but within these studies the definition is relatively vague in comparison to Giles' (2009) work and is often used as an umbrella term. The existing research that actually focuses on group behaviours rather than individual ones also mainly consists of survey or interview studies (Chung & Cho, 2017; Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Scherer, et al., 2022; Kreissl, et al., 2021).

3.3. Queerbaiting vs. flagging

Discussions surrounding sexuality and LGBTQ+ topics online is far from a new concept, especially not on platforms that foster an inviting environment for it, but one of the more controversial debates within both fandoms and academic circles is queerbaiting. Judith Fathallah (2014) defines queerbaiting as a strategy used by writers and networks in "an attempt to gain the attention of queer viewers via hints, jokes, gestures, and symbolism suggesting a queer relationship between two characters, and then empathically denying and laughing off the possibility" (p. 2). What started as a term that was used to describe fiction though has slowly developed to include real people's actions and ways to express themselves. For example, in 2021 the artist Billie Eilish was accused by users on social media of queerbaiting in her music video for her song *Lost Cause*, in which she was seen closely dancing, lying down, playing twister and so on with other girls (Kelly, 2021). It sparked a debate in media around what the term should be used for.

Researchers within fandom studies such as Joseph Brennan often analyze this the concept of queerbaiting based on its original context. In *Queerbaiting: The 'playful' possibilities of homoeroticism* (2018) Brennan discusses the nuanced interpretations of a set of tv-shows and movies that are often present in queerbaiting debates and he personally suggests using more positively loaded terms. Meanwhile other researchers such as Pablius (2021), Zhao (2021) and Abidin (2019) have been using queerbaiting as a point of reference when studying influencers, artists, and reality TV stars. The criticism against applying it in this way mainly comes from the potential pressure it puts on individuals who might not feel comfortable discussing their sexuality or gender with the public yet (Lenton, 2022). The lines between fiction and reality tend to be blurred when the media figures' public images are carefully calculated and marketed with similar methods as fictional pieces of media though (Zhao, 2021, p. 1034; Pablius, 2021, 3.1.; Abidin, 2019, p. 619–620).

These discussions and speculations regarding public figures, especially within the fandoms themselves, often come from perceived clues and symbolism (Marks, 2022; Jones, 2022) which make the accusation of queerbaiting a more nuanced conversation. Oakenfull and Greenlee (2005, p. 426) described queerbaiting from a marketing perspective and how it's rooted in the idea that material and art can contain specific words, symbols or phrases that communicate with the LGBTQ+ community without most of the heterosexual and cisgender public picking up on it. As many other subcultures, LGBTQ+ people have developed what Oakenfull and Greenlee (2005) refer to as “markers of gay identity” (p. 427) that allow them to communicate with each other, which in everyday context has several different names (Smorag, 2008, p. 2) but in the Gaylor subreddits it is often referred to as queer flagging. The origin of the term flagging has been debated, but the most agreed upon point of reference is that during the Gold Rush in California men would use handkerchiefs to indicate or “flag” if they would lead or follow when dancing with another man during a time when there were very few women around. The term's connection to the LGBTQ+ community goes back to the 1960s and 70s though, when it first started to be used to describe telling others about your sexual preferences - most often gay men (Cornier, 2019). Today the term has become widely used within fandom spaces to describe more of what Oakenfull and Greenlee (2005) are discussing. Here it is not exclusively used to indicate a preference for specific sexual acts, but rather to publicly communicate their queer identity without straight and cisgender members of the public noticing.

Many academic sources that discuss queer flagging or symbols are rather dated though and there are not a lot of modern studies that touch on it from a fandom perspective. When researching discourse about sexuality it is pertinent to understand the historical context that Oakenfull and Greenlee (2005) or Smorag (2008) highlight. Future research on the subject

should always take that into consideration as to accurately depict these issues within fandom spaces and how fans within the same community can come to such differing conclusions based on the same material presented to them.

4. Theory

4.1. Social and mediated constructions of reality

In Berger and Luckmann's (1966) theory on the sociology and construction of knowledge they present the theory of how our everyday life is made up of our own individual and subjective perception of what reality is, which is the object of their sociological analysis (p. 31). To understand the situations that we examine we must also understand that the perceived reality of the people within it is going to be different from our own, and how it is the foundation of their communication. Despite now being rather outdated, their work lays the groundwork for beginning to understand how our communication has changed with digitalization.

One of Berger and Luckmann's (p. 69) main claims is that "all human activity is subject to habitualization" and that we tend to construct our reality through the affirmation of certain social interactions. Meaning that our social patterns and habits are created through the approval of others (ibid., p. 69). They discuss how the legitimization of institutions and facts often uses language as its main tool here. The theory touches on this in a broader societal context but reiterates that through language you can create a kind of generational "cookbook knowledge" and "knowledge recipes" that get passed down and with time become seen as fact (ibid., p. 82). This knowledge and perception of facts creates a specific dynamic within the institution's actions and the roles people will be assigned to play. Because of this people will see this perceived knowledge as a general truth about reality, rather than just something connected to their own version of it, and everyone who opposes it will be seen as someone who is out of touch with said reality. It also means that those outside of that institution, or as it is applicable to this paper – outside of that group, will suffer a variety of consequences, but most importantly will be seen as having a lower knowledge status. This will often create divides between individuals or groups of people when they do not have the sociological awareness to recognize the reasons behind these differences in realities (pp.81-84). To fully understand an institution or group you must therefore understand its history and linguistic process to be able to start analyzing their specific reality and current day communication (p. 71).

Something they also emphasize throughout the book is the weight of face-to-face interaction; at the time the text was written they claimed that it was the most important communication-related experience you can have with another person and the "prototype of social interaction" (ibid., p. 41). In their analysis it stands as the opposite of anonymity and what grounds us in here-and-now interactions, which in turn distinguishes between what they call *consociates* and *contemporaries*. Consociates are those who you recall through more personal interactions and

who you have direct evidence of their “actions, [their] attributes, and so on”, while with contemporaries you have “only more or less detailed recollections or of whom [you] know merely by hearsay” (ibid., pp. 45-47). They make a point to say though that language can reach beyond the limits of here-and-now and bridge the gap between consociates and contemporaries. Through language we can conjure other realities that are not currently present and avoid the limitations of someone else’s or our own perception of reality (ibid., p.53).

This idea at its core remains applicable even today, but one of the reasons Berger and Luckmann’s theory has grown outdated is the clear lack of a digital presence at the time. Their discussions and conclusions surrounding communication, especially regarding the importance of face-to-face interactions, now lack a fundamental factor. That’s where Couldry and Hepp’s (2017) *The Mediated Construction of Reality* comes in. They have repurposed and reinterpreted Berger and Luckmann’s work to integrate technological advances in communication and to include more modern research on its effects. Couldry and Hepp’s (2017, p. 138) work on constructing knowledge begins with the core concept of mediatization of communication. They say that Berger and Luckmann’s main principle about how we develop, transmit and maintain knowledge through social interactions, “that is, situations where human beings, by virtue of their mutual dependence on shared resources must *come together* to act and think” now has new implications due to digitalization (ibid., p. 138),.

Their most relevant critique of Berger and Luckmann begins with how face-to-face interactions and the narrative surrounding here-and-now often lacks complexity if we try to use it as the sole tool to understand how “processes of communicative construction take place across a variety of different media” (p. 17). Communication as a practice is how we can construct meaning in the world and since media now holds a lot of power over our everyday communication, that would imply that mediatization has changed how we build knowledge and meaning amongst each other (ibid., p. 27). They also claim that rather than here-and-now it is extended to there-and-now when media becomes involved in our communicative practices, saying:

“... media are never neutral in the act of communication. They are a stage in how our communication is ‘moulded’. And this is the reason why our communicative construction of the social world and its everyday reality changes when media are involved in this process” (ibid., p. 33).

Their main point is really that face-to-face interactions should not be an unquestioned center of communication anymore and that we should now more so focus on how even during direct conversations we are still deeply intertwined with media. This also causes Berger and Luckmann’s distinction between consociates and contemporaries to become blurrier than

before and other scholars have urged people to be careful about using it to describe communication in a mediatized world (ibid., pp. 27, 33).

Couldry and Hepp (2017) do introduce some emerging principles of their own when it comes to mediatized collectivities and their communication though. While processes other than mediatization can also be pivotal factors in our communicative developments, such as individualization, globalization, or commercialization, “collectivities remain a meaningful unit of human life in times of deep mediatization, but through mediatization [they] become transformed in a range of ways” (pp. 174-175). The first way in which this happens is that media content is an important resource in defining these groups or institutions. They say that in modern forms of media it is especially connected to fan culture and shared interests that focus on any type of media content. Media has expanded what can be seen as collectivities and communities, because while a decade or two ago a lot of communication occurred through mass media – online platforms create a whole new world of accessible resources. Secondly, media are “means for constructing collectivities” That is to say that groups, especially ones that rely on online spaces, can use media as a building block for the collectivity to emerge. “Together a collectivity’s specific features and the communicative capacities of its media ensemble define its possibilities of transformation”. Third, and lastly, “media trigger dynamics in collectivities”. The entirety of the media ensemble is the focal point in this argument. Being able to understand and consume the media at large or in a specific way might become a requirement to participate in certain collectivities after mediatization of communication (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, pp. 175-176).

Couldry and Hepp also argue that not all spaces where people congregate online are created equal. They write that “other media-based collectivities include various sorts of ‘online groups’ and again it is an open question how far they are considered communities” and that it might not be helpful to refer to them as such (p. 171). There have been numerous discussions amongst scholars on how to define communities, or even interpretive communities, in a mediatized society and whether their members must know each other and have a “self-understanding as a group” or can be less attached as individuals (ibid., p. 171). In Couldry and Hepp’s eyes online groups that form via different platforms are not necessarily automatically considered a community just based on gathering to discuss common interests, but rather “the *degree* of community involved depends on the individual case and its meaning” (p. 172). They urge us to be careful not to mix the technological definitions often set by the platform themselves with our sociological understanding of what defines a community (ibid., pp. 171-172). Before mediatization, communities were often looked at as “collectivities of *pure* co-presence” but has slowly turned into “collectivities of *multi-modal* communication” (ibid., p. 175). Collectivities of pure co-presence often meant that people shared both a space and practices, with knowledge that was applicable to the whole group. These days though it is

defined by a diverse set of platforms and media ensembles, which means the focus is no longer on direct experience but rather on shared types of communication. This means communities often form when they “build up a ‘common we’ as well as long-term structures” (ibid., pp. 175-176). It is also important to not think of the entirety of specific fandoms and fan cultures as one singular community, instead we might benefit from looking at them as “complex figurations of figurations that links up different local groups in a range of interdependent activities” (ibid., p. 171).

4.2. Discourse

Discourse involves various forms of communication. Spoken, written, digital, face-to-face, and so on. It is generally defined as a “set of ideas and symbols shared and used by a population or group of people in the process of creating meaning” (Ueno et al., 2023, p. 1075). Jan Blommaert (2005) refers to it as “language-in-action” and says that it is a general mode of semiosis, that is to say that it is “meaningful symbolic behaviors” (ibid., p. 2). To analyze it we need to pay attention not only to the language but also to the actions involved and Blommaert makes it a point to emphasize how discourse will always remain not only social, but also cultural and historical. It is a way for us as humans to construct meaning in our environments through both “linguistic” and “sociocultural” means. Discourse has previously been seen as simply a text longer than a lone sentence or “language-in-use”, but studies have gone on to be more flexible in their use of it as different fields progressed and began cooperating more broadly (ibid., pp. 3-4). Jean-Paul Metzger (2019, p. 3) narrows this idea down to explore how discourse exists through rhetoric and argumentation. This involves persuasion through speech in order to convince the speaker’s audience of correct or incorrect statements. They argue that “everything that people imagine and socially create is related to speech and its capacity for persuasion which influences belief, order and obedience” (ibid., p. 3). It is only through discourse analysis of various forms that discourse is seen as an object of study though. Metzger argues that “to consider a text by linking it closely to its production conditions is to consider it as discourse” (ibid., p. 3). Analyzing discourse includes looking at not only the content of the communication, but also the structure, social interactions, and dynamics. Rhetoric is also a way to not only construct but also maintain power in different contexts; everything leads back to speech. Learning to analyze rhetoric is a way to analyze other people’s discourse and the intentions of the language that surrounds us. Metzger says that learning to engage in and criticize discourse allows us to develop the knowledge needed to form our worldview and helps us construct ideas and thoughts (ibid., p. 3).

This thesis touches specifically on discourse surrounding LGBTQ+ themes. Ueno et al. (2023, pp. 1075-76) uses it to describe discourse shared and used by people within the LGBTQ+

community to “conceptualize sexual identities, themselves as a group, and their relationships with straight people” (ibid., p. 1075). For this thesis though, LGBTQ+ discourse needs to extend to not only focusing on the individuals themselves, but rather groups of people that speak about their own identity, *someone else’s* identity, or a combination of both. Within the subreddits discussed in this thesis, all three perspectives exist within the discourse and the people involved are not necessarily a part of the LGBTQ+ community themselves.

5. Method

5.1. Case: Reddit and Taylor Swift

Before discussing the digital ethnography, it is important to look at the case study chosen for this analysis and why it was chosen. Reddit is a forum platform that allows for longer posts with text, pictures and videos, as well as allows users to leave comments and vote for which posts and replies that they want to highlight or push down within so called subreddits (Ring, Carlson & Cousineau, 2020). This leads to longer conversations occurring in comparison to other platforms, which allows for more thorough and detailed discussions and that is the type of communication this thesis wants to focus on. This particular fandom being studied, Taylor Swift fans and the specific subsection who refer to themselves as Gaylors, are also present on other platforms such as Twitter, TikTok and Tumblr, but those either do not allow for that type of communication or the activity is not as present as it used to be (Fiesler & Dym, 2020, s. 3-4; Tiidenberg, et al., 2021). The purpose of choosing Reddit as a platform with a forum structure is to have access to more detailed and discussion-based communication and it allows for users to express themselves in a less limited format.

The study will mainly focus on Taylor Swift and her fandom as a case on the platform, which is a choice that developed from some flaws within the previous research. Articles and dissertations that focus on Swift in relation to LGBTQ+ topics often do so based on allyship and advocacy, or even capitalism (Avdeeff, 2021; Smialek, 2021; Theberge, 2021). Groups that analyse a celebrity's personal life and art from a LGBTQ+ perspective have grown significantly the past few years though and has become more commonly mentioned in traditional media (Jones, 2022; Earl, 2022). If we look at previous research overall we can also see that studies that focus on discourse related to sexuality, parasocial relationships or concepts such as queerbaiting within fandom spaces tend to either not have a main case *or* will use male celebrities or groups of people to analyse the communication (Zhao, 2021; Tiidenberg, 2021; Lynch, 2020). This lead to the study aiming to look at a female public figure instead since there could be differences in the fan bases and their dynamics that produce new findings.

Individual subreddits have their own rules and moderators that to a certain extent decide what gets posted on the site. In this case these rules mainly consist of standard boundaries that the platform also claims to enforce, such as no hate speech or harassment. Then there are more specific rules that can include for example not speaking about specific people (kids, controversial figures etc.) or avoiding certain topics. Therefore, one limitation within this study is that it is difficult to determine to what extent these subreddits' rules affect the material and what gets discarded by moderators. Although, this can also be used to show what kind of communication these environments will encourage and welcome.

There are also posts that for one reason or another were not included in the main analysis and sometimes not even in the material. This mainly pertains to posts and comments that did not appear relevant to any type of discussion about LGBTQ+ related content, for example ones that are not about the topic at hand or that are just asking a basic question. There were also posts that while it is possible that they *could have* added to the discussion, they unfortunately did not have any comments and very few upvotes so far, which would mean that there is no substantial communication or approval of rhetoric to collect from them. This could be due to the algorithm not pushing the post, that others did not have anything to add, that there were other big discussions happening which meant that different posts were priorities by other users, and so on. It is difficult to say the exact reason for each post, but it is still important to note that these types of posts exist on the subreddit.

5.2. Material

The fieldwork consisted of emerging myself in several subreddits over a two-week period to collect and analyze 75 posts and their comment sections, with approximately 850 comments total. Comments range from short sentences to several paragraphs and in total the screenshots take up 215 pages. Not all posts will be included via quotes or descriptions, but they all contributed to finding patterns and tendencies in the communication. They were gathered from different subreddits that were all public at the time they were collected, and all posts were published within a year of this study. It is worthy of mentioning that the material was collected *prior* to Swift's alleged relationship with Matty Healy which has sparked new debates. All material and people described have been anonymized not only through changing quotes to remain unsearchable, but also through combining material to create fictionalized versions. This is first and foremost to protect the individuals involved. A valid criticism of this technique is that you risk losing the original context and intentions throughout your analysis, so to ensure that the anonymization process does not affect the results the analysis will always occur *before* the material is changed. More on that in part 5.4.2.

The posts and comments will be analyzed in two steps: looking at how symbols are used to establish facts and then at how the community itself is constructed through these facts. To analyze them the thesis will use LGBTQ+ symbolism and parasocial relationships as tools to find patterns and tendencies in the material, as well as building blocks to explain the meaning behind the rhetoric used. Speech in and of itself is structured in patterns and discourses, and the meaning behind it occurs and changes based on solid speech- and text actions (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 1999, s. 17-18). The construction of meaning behind communication also changes from discourse to discourse. According to Potter and Wetherell's theory you

cannot expect your research subject or participants to be consistent, it relies on the topic of discussion and context (s. 115), so these two steps will help identify the relevant parts of the communication.

5.3. Digital ethnographic analysis and discourse psychology

The method of choice for this material is a qualitative digital ethnographic analysis. It is an approach that combines traditional ethnography with digital tools and methods to research communication, culture and behaviors. It most commonly includes observing digital spaces to understand how people or groups interact with each other and create meaning within their communication. There are different directions you can go in with this method depending on your case and research questions, but the key steps involve observing participants in a digital context and collecting the relevant data before moving on to some form of analysis. The analysis in question for this thesis is discourse analysis and Winther Jørgensen and Phillips (1999, pp. 112-113) describe it as a grouping on several approaches that all rest on socially constructed principles with a focus on “how text and speech are rhetorically organized within the social interaction and therefore substantiates decided-upon constructions of the social world” (ibid., p. 112). They base it on language being a dynamic form of social practice that shape this world and that our mental processes rely on social activities and discourse (ibid., s. 97).

The main goal of this discourse analysis is to identify patterns and tendencies within the communication, which is why it works well within a digital ethnographic analysis. The digital ethnographic aspect focuses on observations within the online community that is being studied and provides a way to identify the dynamics that occur, which in turn provides valuable context to the discourse analysis of the material. Without the digital ethnographic approach, we would not have the necessary information about the community’s norms, history, relationships, and general social practices that we need to then analyze the language accurately. So, while the discourse analysis is used to ask questions about the actual discursive strategies that the community applies to their communication and how those strategies are used to build a shared sense of knowledge and reality, the digital ethnographic analysis is there to contextualize it and connect it to the specific community being studied. Together they showcase how to build meaning in a digital space and contribute to understanding the broader implications of the material (Postill & Pink, 2012, s. 125-127; Hine, 2015; Pink et al., 2016).

This study will focus specifically on Potter and Wetherell’s (1987, pp. 14-18, 32-36) theory about discourse psychology, which compared to other approaches is more interested in how you analyze the construction of meaning and how it appears in the discourse and interpretive

repertoires that people use as tools to speak about the world around them. It does not necessarily focus on linguistic aspects of communication, instead it analyses the rhetorical structure that exists in the discourse. Meaning how people treat each other overall in their communication, what they gain from their own actions and *how* they construct their arguments (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 96; Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 1999, s. 115-116). How social relationships and identities form play an important role in this. Generally speaking, not just regarding fandoms, people's perception of reality will be affected by the group or groups they are apart of (Fiesler & Dym, 2020). Discourse psychology sees social identity theory to be the most useful perspective to analyse this, which emphasizes that people who identify as a part of a group often change their communication based on common ideas within it (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 1999, s. 102). In fandom context we can see this not just within the affinity that forms around discourse, but also in how the groups self-isolate (Tiidenberg et al., 2021).

Another applicable perspective for the analysis is what type of discursive power that occurs. Within the discourse psychology approach, they often use that concept to identify and criticize potential power dynamics or hierarchies (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 1999, s. 44). This study wants to use take a closer look at the potential hierarchies that exist within these subreddits, more specifically in relation to different LGBTQ+ identities and knowledge. Social hierarchies often occur in spaces where people from a lot of different background gather and it is important as a researcher to be aware of what type of dynamic that creates, as well as your own position of power as an academic source (Browne & Nash, 2010, s. 165-166). I want to examine how the interactions and rhetoric are maintaining or challenging these hierarchies.

5.4. Ethics

5.4.1. Reflexivity

Fandom, feminist and LGBTQ+ focused studies have long been prioritizing and encouraging reflexivity as a tool to create legitimacy within qualitative studies, as well as to make you as a researcher more aware of your own role's effect on the analysis (Pillow, 2003, p. 179). Researchers within these areas often reject the idea that separating yourself from the subject produces more objective results, instead they see reflexivity as way to accept the inevitable effect your own biases might have and reflect on how to work around them. Whether it is a quantitative or qualitative study, it is still important to not ignore the fact that you are the one deciding on the *how* and *why* of it all (Hannell, 2020, p. 37). This encouragement of reflexivity was at first a way to discuss and reflect on your own privileges in relation to your subject but has developed to also be a way to justify researching your own cultures and interests (Pillow,

2003, p. 182). Researchers within these subjects work on this throughout the entire process of the study to find a balance between not letting your personal feelings take over and not being so theoretical and distanced that the subject is not accurately represented (Browne & Nash, 2010, p. 166).

In *Fandom and the fourth wave: digital feminism, and media fandom on tumblr*, Hannell (2020) discusses her role as an “acafan”, or an academic fan, that exists both as a participant in that social space and as someone observing it. Henry Jenkins (2012) argues that these positions are constantly coexisting without necessarily causing either conflict or collaborating with each other. This can be explained as being both an insider and outsider at the same time and that you will “shift in between these roles throughout the process” (Liliequist, 2020, p. 34). The outsider perspective is seen as a method of critically analyzing your material in a more detached manner that allows you to prioritize a broader context and possibly identify more problematic aspects that members of a digital space might not notice. The insider perspective on the other hand puts emphasis on the researcher’s personal history and relationship with the media or community that they are observing. It focuses more on how participants are engaging with each other and the media they consume, as well as how communities are constructed (Jenkins, 2012). Both Liliequist (2020, p. 35) and Hannell (2020, p. 38) use this concept in relation to their method of collecting and analyzing.

I too need to acknowledge my insider position in the situation. As a queer person who has been present both within general LGBTQ+ discourse and music-related fandoms for at least 10 years I have a degree of knowledge about my subject that can be difficult to develop within the timeframe of a research project. While I have not personally communicated within the groups I am researching, I still understand most of the context being analyzed. For example, there are often conflicts between the people in these subreddits and other members of the Swift fandom that I will see discussed regularly in the spaces I am in. This is an advantage in the sense that I understand the language being used, some internal fandom jokes, references, the tone, broader context etc. and I am aware of a lot of their history. This is not only regarding the fandom spaces but also the discourse about sexuality. It is valid to critique the potential cultural blindness this can create, even if it will not affect the trust between me and any participants in the way it did for Hannell (2020) or Liliequist (2020), but that is why balancing the insider and outsider perspective is helpful and why Jenkins (2012) promotes combining them for fandom studies. The two perspectives provide different insights into the material and a convergence of scholarly work and the fan experience. My personal outsider position partially makes itself known in that I, as mentioned, have never personally been a part of any of the subreddits I am analyzing. This means that occasionally I might not understand the full context of for example interpersonal conflicts that never made it outside of the subreddits or things that have happened during times when a subreddit was private. I try to avoid this by

actively looking up information about references that I do not feel I have the full context of or through critically examining if the material contains anything that means it might make the results less reliable. This outsider position does allow me to be more critical in my analysis though since I can observe the material without any personal involvement in the space and place the results in a broader context.

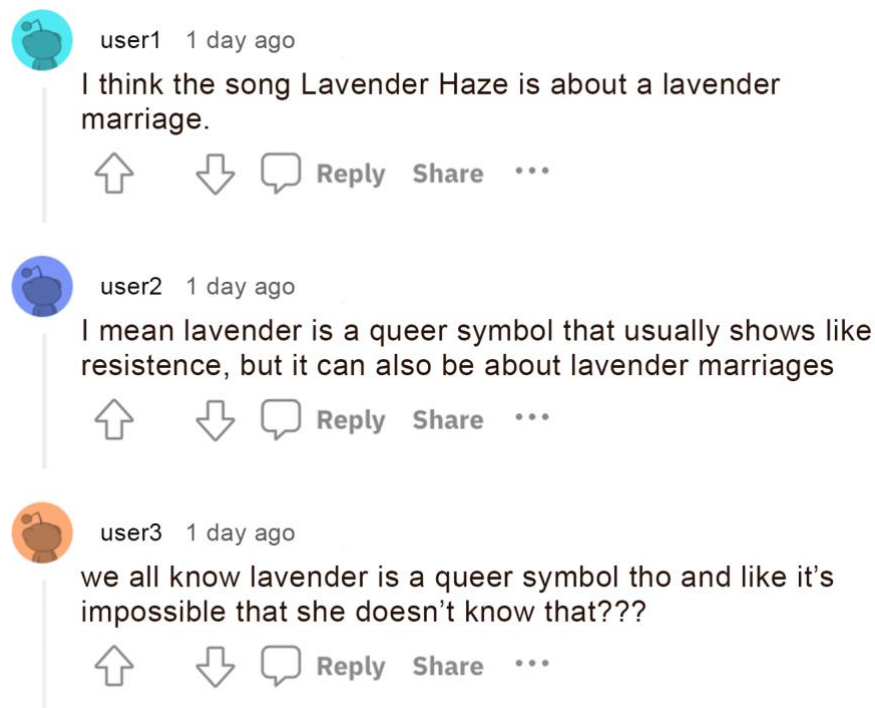
5.4.2. Anonymization

Another part of the research ethics that is important to discuss is how the material is processed and handled. A problem that often comes up in internet studies is how to find the balance between protecting the participants and not losing context. It is easy to initially look at public forums and posts and conclude that public material equals a green light to use it as you please, but we have ethical obligations to protect those who view these spaces as a safe place to have conversations about sensitive information (Cooper, 2010; Craig & McInroy, 2013). Gunnarsson Payne (2006, pp. 46-47) mention that you should avoid anonymizing to the point where it compromises the interpretation of the material, something their study solved by only anonymizing the sensitive information and nothing else, but that is always easier when you are in contact with your subject. Gunnarsson Payne (2006), Hannell (2020) and Liliequist (2020) all discuss the protection of their subjects from the perspective of interviews or survey based studies where they can openly ask about it, which this study has decided not to do. Browne and Nash (2010) argue that anonymising everything could to some extent also create an hierarchy between the researcher and subject (p. 158), but that when it comes to topics like queer studies it becomes very important to prioritize the safety and comfort of the participants (s. 149). In a study like this when behavior and communication is only observed, and where a lot of the members in these groups are trying to conceal their identities already, all the material needs to be anonymized. This will happen in several steps to ensure it is done correctly and to combat the worries around how anonymization might affect the analysis. It will as previously mentioned occur *after* the material has already been analyzed and this includes composing so called “composite accounts” of the material.

Annette Markham (2011, pp. 342-344) describes the process of creating a composite account as “on the surface, a straightforward activity of selecting representative elements from the data set and composing a new original that is not traceable back to the originals” (p. 342). It is a useful process that has emerged as a response to privacy concerns in internet-focused research, but it requires the researcher to carefully consider both the purpose of the study and the context of the case throughout the process. The most relevant part for this thesis is Markham’s description of how to create composite interactions between the participants. It includes presenting the communication in a way that retains the context and tone of the original

material, as to resonate with reader and not have it appear unrealistic for the scenario you have described which might mean the reader does not trust your interpretation. There are some possible pitfalls we face with this though. It is possible to overlook certain details to create generalizations, as well as lose sight of who the participants are individually. On the other hand, you might also convey the idealized version of a participant or conversation. It is important to factor in these possibilities as you go, but they also argue that we should not ignore how filtering the material and choosing which direction to go in is a natural part of the process. Markham has also created steps to help navigate transparency when it comes to deliberately fabricative methods. It involves identifying and describing the entire process of sense-making and explaining your reasoning; providing the reader with detailed descriptions of the social interactions; defending your authority as a researcher through “offering examples of how experience transforms into findings, or how data are (re)fabricated without loss of fidelity” (p. 348).

Therefore, below is a brief example of what comments can look like. These are not real quotes, but are similar in tone, structure and vocabulary to the ones that have been analyzed:



When these types of comments are anonymized in this study they will typically be described more generally as a group and then be combined into one by taking parts from each of them or using synonymous words and phrases. The above, for example, might be combined as:

“Lavender Haze could be about like lavender marriages or resistance. I find it really hard to believe that she doesn’t know it’s seen as a queer symbol.”

5.4. Methods discussion and reflection

I also want to briefly discuss the validity of this method. As much experience as I might have within fandom spaces and LGBTQ+ discourse, as a postgraduate student I am still relatively new to this research process compared to some of the literature and dissertations I have referenced, so I had to be extra careful with the steps required to do this ethically and thoroughly. Using previous and more knowledgeable researchers as a guide though has been a way to add reliability to the project. I chose this method not because it is the one I was most familiar with, but because I considered it the best one for the purpose of the study. As Clarke and Braun (2013) put it: “at its core, qualitative research is about capturing some aspect of the social or psychological world. It records the messiness of real life, puts an organizing framework around it and interprets it in some way” (p. 41). Which is exactly what I wanted to achieve.

I have also extensively considered my relationship with the subjects of the study despite not interacting with them directly. As an outsider in these subreddits I believe that I am able to analyze and criticize where needed, but I am aware that to be an ethical qualitative researcher like Clarke and Braun (2013) discusses, it requires me to face how complex the ethical process can be when my personal interests and online activity in music fandoms or queer spaces “intersects with the topic of research”, even if it is not through having directly engaged with these subreddits privately (p.95). My role and the ethics of the project, including the importance of protecting the identities of the people involved, has been extensively discussed with my supervisor, professors, as well as my fellow postgraduate students to ensure that I am not approaching it from a single perspective.

Lastly, Clarke and Braun (2013) note that documenting your research process is a “key practice for any competent researcher” (p. 108). All the material that was collected was screenshotted and numbered, then the usernames were removed, and finally there was a separate document for notes that referenced relevant posts. Any material with potential sensitive information has been stored correctly and not been accessible for anyone other than myself and my supervisor. No direct quotes from the material have been used beyond the notes either to make sure I do not accidentally leave in sensitive information about the users whose posts I used. Whenever a quote was used for the analysis in the final document it was anonymized first. I am aware that this process of anonymization can garner skepticism, but it

was the best choice as to prioritize users' privacy. I also kept notes throughout the process on the different stages, from setbacks to progress, as to not entirely rely on my memory for every aspect of it.

6. Analysis

The analysis will consist of two main parts. First, we will look at how symbols are used to construct facts and shared knowledge within the subreddits, mainly through their lyrical analysis. Secondly, we will look at the construction of the community itself and how it builds and maintains its structure through shared facts and parasocial relationships, as well as what happens when something leads to questioning their shared reality. It will use the theories presented from Couldry and Hepp (2017), as well as Berger and Luckmann (1966), and other relevant literature to support the claims and interpretations being made.

6.1. Symbols as facts

As previously mentioned, one of Couldry and Hepp's (2017) emerging principles in a mediated world, especially in the context of online communities and fandoms, is how media content has become an important aspect in defining these spaces. One thing that clearly defines the connection within this community is the interpretation of song lyrics as symbolism and the discussions around symbolism of sexual orientation and LGBTQ+ issues that emerges from that. In the material collected that was the main category or theme that emerged. The accuracy of the community's interpretation of lyrics or if there is any truth to it is not necessarily relevant here, but more so how they use the interpretations to further construct their shared reality and facts. Posts and comments can often start out with "x usually signifies queerness" or "y is a symbol of being in the closet" and then transition into something along the lines of "and this what that means for Person A's relationship with Person B" or "this means that Person A must have had a conversation about [insert specific quote or situation, for example 'coming out'] with Person B". For example:

"Her singing about a picket fence being sharp as knives likely is about having a traditional heterosexual lifestyle. We all know that Taylor is saying that her beard³ shouldn't see it as cheating if she's genuinely with someone else."

Common symbols being used in these discussions are different flowers, words like hairpins, and religious references that all have a history within what Oakenfull and Greenlee (2005, p. 427) referred to as "markers of gay identity" and what the group often talks about as queer flagging. This type of language is being consistently used as proof of their theories and speculations and the community has developed a communal perception of them as fact (Berger

³ Beard is commonly used as a word for someone who is publicly seen with someone romantically as a way to conceal the other person's sexual orientation. For example if a homosexual man brings a female date to an event only to appear as heterosexual.

& Luckmann, p. 82). What might have started out as mere possibilities therefore transition to being a part of their shared reality. As Potter and Wetherell (1987, pp. 14-18, 32-36; Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 1999, p. 116) bring up, these become repertoires that the community use as tools to speak about the world around them. So, let's take a look at some examples of this.

The most common symbols that are discussed are floral references in Swift's work. Specific flowers such as carnations, lavender, violets and so forth have been associated with queerness for decades through historical movements, mythology, and literature (Prager, 2020). In Gaylor subreddits they are often pointed out as "obvious signs of queer flagging". For example, several users described how Swift's songs like *The Great War* or *Maroon* contain several references like these:

"There are other queer references too: her knuckles being 'bruised like violets', the poppy in her hair, the crimson clover?? All very queer flowers."

"Violets are very sapphic."

"Carnations have been a queer symbol for aaaages. No way she doesn't know how that would look if you contrast it with roses that represent heterosexual love"

By continuously pointing out these references in relation to queer flagging they create a permanent association within the group, meaning that those symbols become tied to one explanation and that theories about Swift's intentions with using those words or phrases with time become seen as fact (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 82). The symbolism does not only come in the form of objects though, but also shared experiences. As the NRHSP (2023) explains, parasocial relationships empower people to identify with a person or organization that they themselves choose and it lowers the chance of feeling as though your personal experiences are being rejected. We can see signs of this when the topic of religious references come up during discussions about symbolism. One user describes their upbringing within an evangelical household and being involved in conservative Christian circles, right before moving onto interpreting Swift's song *Would've Could've Should've*:

"I grew up in similar circles and immediately related to the song. I believe Taylor grew up thinking being gay was a sin, but then she met a woman who made her realize her sexuality. Now she resents her because otherwise she might have gone on to marry a man and have a traditional household."

Here the user is taking their own experience and using it to legitimize how they are applying their interpretation of religious symbols onto Swift's lyrics and *her* personal experience. It is a way to reinforce the group's idea of the relationship between what they interpret as symbols and facts, while simultaneously creating specific roles for people to play within the "institution" or group as Berger & Luckmann (1966, pp. 81-84) discussed. This user, and others who have shared their own experiences in specific religious contexts, are now a part of the construction.

How these interpretations are discussed also paints an interesting but at times contradicting narrative. In the material collected there are equally as many posts and comments that say things such as: "[Swift] is using symbols to let queer people know she is one of us" or "she is only signaling to the part of the fandom willing to listen", as there are ones stating that "it is so obvious, how can people deny that she is LGBTQ+?" or "Hetlors are so oblivious, their ignorance is unbelievable". It creates a knowledge-based superiority and separates Gaylors from Hetlors or the fandom outside of this community in general.

There are also knowledge hierarchies that emerge from comments by heterosexual Gaylors. These types of hierarchies can within fandom spaces often be used to directly or indirectly justify or defend a sense of superiority (Tiidenberg, et al. 2021; Fiesler & Dym, 2020). For example, some users said:

"I am an ally but I can still analyze the lyrics accurately."

"I am straight but the symbols are obvious even to me."

Both of these comments come across as them saying that even if you are straight, you should still be able see what Gaylors see within these symbols and it contributes to the habitualization of the group. They are constructing their facts through affirmation and by using language such as "obvious" or "accurately" as a tool to legitimize their interpretations of the symbols, which are again contributing to the creation of a type of generational "cookbook knowledge" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, pp. 69, 82). They are in some ways also toeing the line between the idea that these interpretations are based on clear evidence and that the ones who understand them have a higher level of knowledge. On top of that it reaffirms the idea that everyone who opposes what they are saying should be seen as illogical and having a lower knowledge status. This in turn leads to a greater divide and a type of us-versus-them mindset which we will discuss further below (pp. 81-84).

6.2. Social construction of the community and parasocial relationships

According to Couldry and Hepp (2017) not all online groups necessarily qualify as communities based on some researchers' sociological definitions. They argue that the two main factors that contribute to communities forming are that they construct a "common we" (p. 175) and that they have long-term structures (pp. 175-176). As we have shown above, throughout the material collected Gaylor subreddits seem to consistently show that they collectively perceive certain theories as fact. As Berger and Luckmann's (1966, p. 69) theory explains, they seemingly construct their reality through other members' consistent approval. Tiidenberg's et al. (2021) use of silos is also a helpful way to look at this. The community does not only gather for shared affinities and activities, like Gee (2004) discusses, but also due to the social, moral and even cultural reasons that Tiidenberg says separates silos and fandom spaces from other social settings online. For example, several posts *and* comments contain statements that are understood as fact within the group, but that have never actually been publicly confirmed by any of the people involved. In one such instance, a reddit user starts off their comment with "as we know" which indicates that it is commonly agreed upon (cookbook knowledge) and then goes on to talk about how a lyric in one of Swift's songs "refers to a person A, not person B", with both person A and B being different women in popular theories. Another user starts off their comment with "it is funny how obvious it is", which again makes it come across as something that should be seen as fact and is using it as a tool to legitimize what is being said, and then continues to say "that this is about Person A and how they had an affair". Comments like these also receive a significant amount of upvotes and rarely any direct criticism in the replies throughout the material.

They are often describing details about what happened within certain relationships or friendships as if it is public knowledge or the public narrative. These perceived facts often include specific dates, how situations went down, conversations that happened, and so on. For example:

"We all know that Taylor got closer to Person A during this time. This was right before she started seeing Person B and her new beard relationship began."

"As soon as I heard [the song] Question...? I knew that the 'you' had to be referring to Person A and that it was about Taylor asking her if the relationship was the best she ever had."

"Person B called her in 2009 and ended any hope she had left for the relationship."

While some comments present information more as theories, quotes like these are common and all share a rhetoric that presents the info as fact rather than a theory. This is done by excluding words and phrases like “I think” or “might” that would allude to it being an opinion or possibility. This behavior also indicates a type of parasocial relationship in which they as a group are not only invested in Swift’s personal life but also believe that there is a level of intimacy there that allows for them to know the details of her personal life based on the content she has given to them. As the NRHSP (2023) mentions, the mediatization of public figures has most likely contributed to this level of parasocial relationship since it has allowed for Swift to communicate with her fans more closely by for example leaving easter eggs about her music and interacting with fans online. This of course does not necessarily mean that the entire community agrees with every statement that is presented as a shared sense of knowledge or a theory that is described as obvious, but as mentioned these comments often receive a lot of upvotes and there are rarely other users in the replies who strongly disagree that it happened. This could mean that either these are widely agreed upon facts within the groups *or* these subreddits have created an environment that discourages members from openly trying to dispute these statements. As Potter and Wetherell’s (1987) social identity theory describes, people will often change their communication based on common ideas within the group they are in and start to affirm the perceived facts that the community has constructed.

The users’ main conviction throughout all the material is the belief that Swift is a part of the community in one way or another. It is the foundation of their beliefs. One comment that received a significant amount of upvotes explains this:

“We might have different theories about what relationship was real or not, or what sexual orientation she identifies with, but we all believe that she is not straight.”

The replies to this comment are also filled with affirmation from other users. It has become a collective of multi-modal communication as Couldry and Hepp (2017, pp. 175-176) refers to it, meaning that they are building a “common we” and “long-term structures” (p. 175), and instead of focusing on having the shared physical space and practices that more traditional communities do, they have a shared type of communication. That this belief that she is not straight exists as a community-wide fact has created a separate topic of discussion though, which is that *if* she is not queer, she is queerbaiting. They have constructed the idea that *if* their analysis of everything she has put out into the world and how it is connected to her personal identity is not accurate, then she must be actively deceiving the LGBTQ+ community. This is often spoken about hypothetically rather than as a realistic alternative to the belief that she is not straight. Comments under posts that host these discussions range from calling that

alternative version of her everything from “irresponsible” to “inappropriate” to “homophobic”. As a group they tend to see the number of queer-related symbols, perceived queer flagging and some of her other actions as something that “has to be intentional” and that it is “statistically impossible” that she is not aware that she is doing it. They consistently express how disappointed they would be if her actions came from the perspective of an ally rather than someone who is a part of the community, with some users stating that it would mean that she is putting a spotlight on herself and making herself the center of an issue that in that case should not revolve around her. For example:

“Her whole thing is symbolism and posting easter eggs. She has to know what she is doing. And if she is not gay, then she is queerbaiting with these symbols. But obviously I have no doubts that she is queer, I just don’t understand how people who think she is straight can still support her.”

As mentioned in the previous research, it is important to consider the historical context around queerbaiting and especially queer *flagging* in this instance. (Oakenfull & Greenlee, 2005; Smorag, 2008). The group’s conclusions often seem to derive from the fact that historically the LGBTQ+ community has used certain words, symbols and phrases to openly communicate with each other without the general public picking up on it. They commonly use her extensive history of being known as someone who both cares deeply about the meaning behind her songs and who has expressed her love for leaves easter eggs⁴ to back up this version of events and as proof of her intentions. This part of their perceived reality only adds to the community’s own narrative around Hetlors⁵ though, as well as how it distances itself from the rest of the fandom. They do not appear to understand how fans who do *not* believe she is queer flagging can still support her and see her as someone who deserves admiration, especially not fans who themselves are a part of the LGBTQ+ community. As seen in the last quote, they often use Hetlors’ version of Swift to have conversations about the *what-ifs* rather than have direct conversations about what would happen if that foundational belief was to fall apart. This again creates an us-versus-them mindset by finding ways to justify their superiority and constructing a knowledge hierarchy through discursive power (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 1999, p. 44).

⁴ **Easter egg:** The term has often been used within for example video game, movie and comic book communities to mean hidden clues that either reference something that has already happened or hint at something that will happen in the future. Within the Taylor Swift fandom, she has used so called easter eggs to hint at what is coming next in relation to her music.

⁵ **Hetlor:** Unlike ‘Gaylor’ this is a term that people rarely willingly identify with. Gaylors often use it to describe people who either believe Swift is straight or who are actively against Gaylors as a group; its use varies slightly within the group. Those who are called Hetlors generally do not embrace the term though.

The hierarchies that exist start to not only focus on knowledge, but also the identities of the people involved. Hetlors' realities and experiences, whether that be as LGBTQ+ people themselves or otherwise, are depicted as less logical or widely applicable to the world around them. The posts and comments made about this consists of language that presents the rest of the fandom, but especially Hetlors, as "other". For example, one of the posts within the material with the most interactions expresses that they "want to understand Hetlors' perspective", but simultaneously already acts dismissive of it through calling it "illogical" and claiming that most Hetlors are probably not a part of the LGBTQ+ community.

The comments continue to develop this separation by for example stating that Hetlors could be lying about being queer, that most of them appear to be men, or that they are bisexual women in relationships with men:

"A lot of the female hetlors who say they are queer seem to be bisexual but not in a relationship with another woman."

"I think a lot of them are not actually queer, they just don't want to be called homophobic."

They seem to be attempting to separate themselves from Hetlors within the fandom through trying to eliminate all the possible ways in which they could possibly relate to one another, only strengthening their view of Hetlors as "others". As Couldry and Hepp (2017, pp. 175-176) mentions, media can be a way for collectives to emerge, but being able to correctly analyze and understand the media that the community consumes can also become a requirement to participate in the first place. And if a member does not agree with certain unspoken rules that are being constructed through their interpretations, or perhaps questions the group's core belief, the material shows that there would be social consequences for that (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, pp. 80-85).

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the purpose of this study was to explore how knowledge and a shared reality is constructed within the Gaylor subcategory of Swift's online fandom and:

- How knowledge is constructed in these subreddits.
- What rhetoric and tools that are being used during the construction of this shared reality.
- What hierarchies that can be found in this fandom space.

It has done this through analyzing the subreddits' discourse and examining the ways that their communication shapes, builds and maintains a shared reality. Berger and Luckmann has been proven to be a very helpful theory that discusses foundational forms of communication and community construction, despite being rather outdated now. While Couldry and Hepp (2017) and their reinvention of that foundation was the extra push it needed to apply to a mediatized project such as this one.

The material that was collected shows how the members of this community utilize symbols of different kinds, all with ties to LGBTQ+ history, to slowly build up communal knowledge. Their tendencies to use symbols as facts and legitimizing it, through both how they construct their sentences and by using their own personal experiences as an extra layer of proof, is a finding that can be applicable to other types of online communities too and is not necessarily unique to this fandom space. On the other hand, it also creates questions around what generalizations you can make even about one singular fandom when a subcategory such as this one has constructed a vastly different knowledge bank and reality than the rest of Swift's fans. It would also be interesting in further studies to examine the potential effects this could have on individuals' perception of reality and their communication outside of these digital spaces.

As a group Gaylors also appear to be using the dynamic of us-versus-them as both a way to bond as a community and as a shield to discuss what would happen if their core belief that Swift is queer was to fall apart. As previously mentioned, the aim of this thesis is not to determine which parts of their shared reality or facts apply to Swift herself, or if their interpretations are correct, but rather to see the communication patterns and analyze what part it plays in the community as a whole. As Morimoto (2018) points out, communities like these tend to grow isolated and protective when something causes that us-versus-them narrative and the direction Gaylors have gone in is therefore not necessarily surprising. Creating an "other" in this way has caused different hierarchies to appear as a way to separate themselves from the remainder of the fandom, which as mentioned creates a stronger feeling of community

overall. On top of that there is a dichotomy between the idea that the relationship they have with her is special in the sense that she is directly communicating with them, and how these knowledge hierarchies somewhat also rely on the rhetoric that all of these symbols are in plain sight and should be obvious to everyone who encounters them. It appears as if there is an internal battle in the community between wanting to cultivate a special relationship with Swift herself where they as a group are the only ones in the know, *and* wanting the symbols to be seen as obvious enough that they appear non-negotiable so that their shared reality cannot be questioned. Only time will really tell if this construction of a community is a bubble that will eventually burst though, or if they will continue to build upon their mountain of shared cookbook knowledge.

For future research there are several aspects I would like to explore further or dive deeper into. This study focuses more so on the communication within the actual group, but perhaps a topic like this can be used to study the celebrities' role and participation in keeping parasocial relationships going and how they stand to lose and/or benefit from these types of subcategories as well. That could potentially also be tied to how celebrities today create an entire brand surrounding their image and it would be interesting to further research the separation between their personal life and the public persona they have created. This often ties into questions around celebrities' rights to privacy as well and it would be interesting to look more into Reddit's knowledge and information-gathering culture. If given the time I would also find it valuable to in the future explore a similar purpose of study but do so through interviewing members of a community rather than observing and analyzing its content. I believe it can be beneficial to both know how they are perceived, as this study looks at, but also how they themselves perceive their community. I think interviews could potentially open the door to dive deeper regarding differences in demographic and comparing how celebrities are treated based on their own identity too. As mentioned, I chose this case because I saw a gap in research about female celebrities from this perspective, but because this was the only case used in this study *and* the demographic of these subreddits can be difficult to both discern and discuss while maintaining the integrity of the anonymization process, it was difficult to focus on that aspect of it. Interviews would allow for the anonymization process to look different though and more information about participants' identities and what role that plays could potentially be included and discussed. Overall I believe that this is only the beginning of this type of research for me personally and I look forward to all the ways in which I can explore it further.

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