

ENGINEERED PARTICIPATION IS AN ACADEMIC PAPER WRITTEN AS PART OF MY MASTER OF MARKETING AND DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS AT MONASH UNIVERSITY, EXAMINING TAYLOR SWIFT'S VARIANT RELEASE STRATEGY THROUGH THE LENS OF PARTICIPATORY CULTURE THEORY. USING FRAMEWORKS ACROSS FAN LABOUR, PLATFORM CAPITALISM, AND MANUFACTURED SCARCITY, I ARGUED THAT SWIFT'S MODEL REPRESENTS A FORM OF COMMERCIALY ENGINEERED PARTICIPATION, WHERE THE LANGUAGE OF FAN COMMUNITY IS USED TO MAXIMISE CONSUMPTION CYCLES. IT WAS AN EXERCISE IN APPLYING RIGOROUS CRITICAL THINKING TO A REAL, CURRENT MARKETING PHENOMENON, AND IT SHARPENED HOW I THINK ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AUDIENCE BEHAVIOUR, BRAND STRATEGY, AND COMMERCIAL INTENT.

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ENGINEERED
PARTICIPATION:
TAYLOR SWIFT'S
VARIANT ECONOMY
AND THE LIMITS OF
PARTICIPATORY
CULTURE



Introduction..... 3

Participatory Culture and the Swiftie Fandom..... 4

Manufactured Scarcity and the Variant Economy.....5

Parasocial Relationships, Fan Labour, and the Erosion of Trust..... 6

Re-Recordings, Empowerment, and the Limits of Disruption..... 7

Conclusion.....8

Reference List.....9

Introduction

In 2023, Taylor Swift became the first musician to achieve billionaire status primarily through music sales, touring, and merchandise (Yardbarker 2025). Her Eras Tour became the highest-grossing concert tour in history, while her twelfth studio album, *The Life of a Showgirl* (2025), was released in 38 distinct variants and sold over 5.5 million units in its first week (NPR 2025). These figures reflect a broader phenomenon termed 'Swiftonomics,' the measurable economic impact Swift exerts on global markets. Yet beneath this commercial success lies a tension central to global communications scholarship: the relationship between participatory culture and commercial exploitation.

This paper examines Taylor Swift's physical album release strategies from *Midnights* (2022) onward, arguing that her model exemplifies how fan participation can be systematically engineered into a revenue scheme. The analysis connects directly to participatory culture and how audience-producer boundaries have broken down, how digital communications challenge or reinforce dominant power structures, and how communications industries are connected to globalisation.

Swift is not alone in releasing multiple variants with Def Leppard, Kesha and Roger Waters (Pink Floyd) doing the same before her however, what sets her apart is the scale at which she operates and the deeply personal relationship she maintains with her audience. Together, these make her a compelling case for exploring the tension between participatory culture and commercial strategy. This paper focuses specifically on her variant and merchandise practices, rather than her music or political activism.

Participatory Culture and the Swiftie Fandom

Henry Jenkins' (1992) foundational concept of participatory culture, developed in *Textual Poachers*, reframed fan communities as active, creative agents rather than passive consumers. Fans, Jenkins argued, appropriate commercial media texts and rework them into original cultural productions, challenging the traditional hierarchy between media producers and audiences. He later expanded this framework, arguing that digital platforms had vastly increased the visibility of such participation while raising questions about commercial co-optation (Jenkins, Ito & boyd 2015, p. 4). Crucially, Jenkins himself asked when participation 'becomes exploitation when it takes place on commercial platforms where others are making money off our participation' (Jenkins, Ito & boyd 2015, p. 4).

The Swiftie fandom appears, on the surface, to exemplify Jenkins' model. Fans decode elaborate Easter eggs embedded in Swift's social media posts, music videos, and album packaging. They organise streaming campaigns, produce fan art, and generate extensive digital content that functions as unpaid promotional material, making the boundary between user and producer seem thoroughly dissolved. However, as Hay and Couldry (2011, p. 478) argued in their critique of Jenkins' convergence culture thesis, scholars risk adopting 'an excessive emphasis on the participatory potential of users' while underappreciating the corporate logic that structures such participation. This critique is essential to understanding whether Swifties exercise genuine cultural agency or serve a commercially engineered system.

The role of platform mediated behaviour compounds this problem. Van der Schyff and Flowerday's (2023) research on social media trust and the fear of missing out (FoMO) demonstrates that users frequently engage impulsively, self-disclosing and participating without rationally assessing risks or benefits. Their study found that "FoMO" based behaviour on Instagram in particular bypasses the cognitive risk benefit assessment that privacy calculus theory would predict (van der Schyff & Flowerday 2023). This finding is directly relevant to the Swiftie economy, where the 24 hour countdown timers, limited-edition labelling, and staggered variant announcements are specifically designed to trigger the urgency and impulsive engagement that van der Schyff and Flowerday identify as characteristic of FoMO driven participation. In this context, fan 'participation' may be less a product of creative agency than of commercially triggered impulse.

Manufactured Scarcity and the Variant Economy

Swift's release strategies represent a sophisticated deployment of manufactured scarcity. *The Life of a Showgirl* (2025) comprised 27 physical editions, 18 CDs, 8 vinyl LPs, and a cassette, alongside 11 digital variants, each differentiated by cover art, coloured vinyl, bonus tracks, or signed inserts (NPR 2025). *The Tortured Poets Department* (2024) featured 36 variants. *Midnights* (2022) employed a notable design strategy, four vinyl variants whose rear covers formed a clock when combined, incentivising fans to purchase all four. As Northeastern University music scholar Andrew Mall observed, this represents a gamification of vinyl collecting that, while not pioneered by Swift, operates at an unprecedented scale under her brand (Northeastern University 2024). Critically, each variant counts toward chart totals, inflating sales metrics beyond what a single edition release would achieve.

These strategies transform devotion into a consumption imperative. Fans on Reddit and social media platforms have described feeling pressured by staggered releases and time limited availability, with commentators noting that the approach felt manipulative given Swift's public commitment to her fans' wellbeing (The Brock Press 2025). This frustration aligns with Srnicek's (2017) theorisation in *Platform Capitalism* that digital era commercial models extract value from user engagement through mechanisms that obscure their commercial nature. Swift's variant economy presents fan service, more options, more collectibility, while functioning as a demand maximisation strategy. The total cost of purchasing all 38 variants of *The Life of a Showgirl* was estimated at US\$741 or AU\$1048, representing a significant financial commitment that few fans could realistically sustain (TV Fandom Lounge 2025).

The political economy of this dynamic reflects broader patterns in global communications. Hesmondhalgh (2019) argues that cultural industries manage demand through artificial scarcity and the creation of perceived need, a strategy intensified by digital tools. Swift's model leverages social media announcements, e-commerce countdowns, and algorithmic amplification to compress consumption cycles into hours rather than weeks. Furthermore, Flew and Waisbord (2015, p. 632) argue that even in an era of media globalisation, 'domestic actors continue to largely shape the dynamics of media politics.' Applied to the music industry, this insight illuminates how Swift's commercial strategy, while operating globally, remains structured around tightly controlled, top down release decisions that contradict the decentralised, participatory ethos her brand cultivates. Her economic influence is not a product of democratised media flows but of concentrated commercial power exercised through global digital platforms, a dynamic that connects directly to how globalisation intersects with power in communications industries.

Parasocial Relationships, Fan Labour, and the Erosion of Trust

Central to Swift's commercial architecture is the cultivation of parasocial relationships 'one sided emotional bonds between media figures and audiences' first theorised by Horton and Wohl (1956). Swift maintains these bonds through personal social media posts, surprise fan interactions, and a carefully constructed narrative of mutual loyalty. This cultivated intimacy works commercially, too. Fans who feel a personal connection to Swift often experience their purchases less as transactions and more as expressions of relational commitment.

This emotional architecture converts fan devotion into what scholarship terms 'fan labour,' unpaid promotional work that would otherwise require salaried marketing professionals (Duffett 2013). Taylor Swift fans, namely called Swifties, organize streaming campaigns, create promotional content, decode Easter eggs, and defend Swift's brand online. Their willingness to perform this labour is motivated by the strength of the parasocial relationship, even when fans partially recognise its commercial function (Duffett 2013, p. 227). The Swiftie fandom therefore serves a dual function, generating authentic community while simultaneously mobilising fans as an unpaid workforce. This blurring of emotional connection and commercial extraction shows the broader breakdown of audience/producer boundaries that participatory culture identifies as a defining feature of digital era communications.

The media's amplification of this dynamic warrants scrutiny. Pelau (2023, p. 7) demonstrates that sensationalist framing, such as breaking news style announcements, captures short term attention but reduces long term content credibility, with the perception of sensationalism significantly mediating the relationship between news presentation and audience trust. Swift's release strategies mirror this pattern, each variant drop is framed as a media event, generating social media engagement and press coverage that reinforces the perception of urgency. However, the relentless pace risks producing consumption fatigue. NPR's 2025 segment directly asked whether Swift was exploiting her fans, reporting that some devoted Swifties had cancelled orders, frustrated by a seemingly endless cycle of limited edition releases (NPR 2025). When fans begin to question the authenticity of what is being offered, the parasocial bond that sustains the commercial model weakens, precisely the erosion of trust that Pelau's research predicts.

Re-Recordings, Empowerment, and the Limits of Disruption

Swift's re-recording project is frequently cited as evidence of her commitment to artist empowerment. Beginning with *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* in 2021, Swift re-recorded her first six albums to reclaim ownership of masters held by her former label, an act widely framed as structurally disruptive, aligning with how digital technology can challenge established media hierarchies. Supporters also point to her refusal of dynamic pricing for the Eras Tour (Marciano, cited in NPR 2025) as evidence of genuine concern for fans. While these actions should not be dismissed entirely, they do not exist in isolation from the commercial strategies examined throughout this paper.

In practice, each re-release was accompanied by exclusive 'vault tracks,' multiple physical editions, and time limited merchandise, converting what was framed as artist empowerment into yet another iteration of the consumption cycle. The re-recordings may have challenged label ownership structures, but they simultaneously reinforced the same variant driven, scarcity based model that this analysis critiques. Banjac's (2022, p. 138) intersectional analysis of audience expectations demonstrates that class, race, and gender, shape what audiences can access and how they experience media products. In her South African study, Banjac found that working class audiences described media as stratified by economic access, observing that 'the one who can pay is the one who can get relevant news' (Banjac 2022, p. 138). This framework, applied to the Swiftie fandom, reveals that the financial burden of Swift's variant strategy falls unevenly, fans with higher disposable income can buy across the full range while those with fewer resources must choose between variants or accept exclusion from the fandom's collector culture. This produces a 'rank' in a fandom where economic capital determines participatory depth therefore contradicting the democratising promise at participatory culture's core.

Andrejevic (2007) provides a theoretical anchor for this critique, arguing that in the interactive media era, participation itself becomes a form of labour extraction. Users generate value through their data, attention, and creative output, while the commercial benefits flow disproportionately to producers. Swift's model extends this logic, fan participation is not merely permitted but engineered through carefully timed releases, exclusive content, and parasocial cultivation to maximise both emotional attachment and commercial extraction. Moreover, the material consequences of this model extends beyond the fandom itself. Swift's high volume variant releases have been criticised for monopolising vinyl pressing plant capacity, pushing independent artists months or even years off their release schedules (Northeastern University 2024). This represents a concrete instance of how concentrated commercial power within the globalised music industry can produce structural harm and not merely to individual consumers but to the broader cultural ecosystem.

Conclusion

Across each dimension examined, Swift's commercial strategies reveal a form of participatory culture that is manufactured rather than organic. Jenkins' (1992; 2015) framework usefully describes the creative agency of fan communities, but the Swiftie case study exposes its limitations: when a powerful artist structures the conditions of participation through manufactured scarcity, parasocial cultivation, and FoMO driven release strategies, the line between cultural agency and commercially mobilised consumption becomes critically blurred. Van der Schyff and Flowerday's (2023) FoMO research, Pelau (2023) findings on sensationalism and trust, Flew and Waisbord's (2015) analysis of persistent commercial power within global media, and Banjac's (2022) intersectional audience framework each offer a different lens through which to understand this problem in global communications

Three specific recommendations for future research emerge from this analysis. First, researchers should examine how major artist scarcity strategies affect independent musicians who depend on shared vinyl pressing infrastructure, a tangible consequence of concentrated commercial power in a globalised music industry that could be investigated through industry interviews and production data. Secondly, long-term studies tracking fan wellbeing within high-consumption fandoms, using surveys and qualitative methods to track financial strain and emotional attachment over time, would clarify whether engineered participation produces lasting harm. Third, comparative studies across artist / fan economies, contrasting Swiftie dynamics with K-Pop or other globally prominent fandoms, could determine whether Swift's model is exceptional or indicative of a broader structural shift in how the cultural industries monetise participatory culture. These directions are important not only for the music industry but for global communications research more broadly, as they address how digital platforms, parasocial relationships, and commercial strategies interact to reshape the meaning of audience participation in the twenty-first century. Ultimately, Swift's model demonstrates that participation and exploitation are not opposites but can be deeply, and profitably, intertwined.

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