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Look what you made them do: understanding fans’ affective responses to Taylor Swift’s political coming-out

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This contribution discusses how fans make sense of Taylor Swift’s versatile and constantly changing celebrity identity. More precisely, it examines how fans negotiate her post-
Reputation political revelations and expressions. This piece does so through the lens of her fandom, particularly by looking at what happens when fans’ perceptions are tested (see Hills 2018, Scott 2018, Stanfill 2020). By doing so, this piece aims to offer an insight into how fans respond to Swift when their understanding of Swift’s celebrity persona becomes contested. Or, as fan scholar Matt Hills (2018) writes: when the doxas of these fans are challenged.

Hills argues (2018) that doxas can be considered as the taken-for-granted norms, rules or conventions that govern a fandom. For the Swifties, the loyal and very committed fanbase of Swift, doxa disruptions seem common: Swift’s celebrity-text is continuously altered and carefully reconstructed when a new album is released. Think, for instance, of Swift’s stylistic reinvention for each new era in her music career – the dark and edgy Reputation persona, the pop phenomenon of the 1989 era, etcetera (see Fogarty and Arnold 2021). In the event of a doxa disruption, Hills (2018) argues, ‘dominant groups reactively fight to maintain their now-questioned dominance in a dramatically reconfigured field’ (p. 107). This implies that fans would be reluctant to endorse the artist’s rebranded image. Hills (2018) even suggests that through such events fandoms can become toxic in nature rather than supportive and collegial.

According to Wilkinson (2019), however, Swift’s transformations can happen so fluently because she is ‘able to position herself […] both as a constructed, hapless pop princess and an autonomous and savvy industry professional, all the while maintaining an “authentic” sense of hard work’ (p. 441). In other words, these changes actually contribute to the continuity of her star-text, foregrounding qualities such as resilience and adaptability, which are also discussed in her song writing on heartbreak or being an outsider. Overall, she is perceived as an authentic, hard-working musician (McNutt 2020). The emphasis on this ‘authentic’ part of her public image, I suggest, is what makes her actual private life and personal convictions even more potentially controversial. Hence, when she lifted part of that veil in 2018 by making a political statement, fans experienced her actions either as a confirmation or refutation of their understanding of Swift’s political silence (Avdeeff 2021, Smialek 2021).
The question, then, becomes: how, indeed, do fans give meaning to Swift’s political revelation? What happens when this doxa of political non-commitment is challenged? In this contribution, I aim to understand fan responses to Swift’s celebrity identity by focusing on a controversial moment in Swift’s career: the announcement of her political stance via Instagram in 2018. To better understand this moment and the responses to it, I analysed 150 posts on a Reddit thread dedicated to the topic (collected in late 2018), and I interviewed nine fans of the singer (in late 2020), belonging to her international fan base, about this moment.

In October 2018, Swift ‘finally’ broke her political silence. The singer revealed who she would vote for in the 2018 US midterm elections in a lengthy, carefully written post on social media platform Instagram. Swift posted:

In the past, I’ve been reluctant to publicly voice my political opinions, but due to several events in my life and in the world in the past two years, I feel very differently about that now. I always have and always will cast my vote based on which candidate will protect and fight for the human rights I believe we all deserve in this country.

Specifically, Swift indicated that she believed in ‘LGBTQ rights, and that any form of discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender is WRONG. I believe that the systemic racism we still see in this country towards people of colour is terrifying, sickening, and prevalent’. This explicit reference to LGBTQ rights as an issue of great importance to Swift speaks volumes about her decision on (and suggestion about) how to vote. Swift’s message immediately got picked up by the media, who reported extensively on her political coming-out. For example, ABC News described the moment as: ‘Taylor Swift breaks her political silence, endorses Democrats in passionate post on midterm elections’ (Zaru 2018), while Time Magazine reported ‘Why Taylor Swift’s endorsement could change the senate race’ (Hale 2018).

According to Marieke (Dutch, 32 years), one of my interviewees, such celebratory headlines illustrate what many fans felt – ‘a relief, because if she would have voted in a more conservative way, I think many fans would have opted out’ (all translations mine). Indeed, many fans seemed to be supportive of Swift’s political stance and agreed with her. This fan’s post on Reddit is telling: ‘Finally omg. She’s been so vague over the past and FINALLY! She says it loud and clear. I’m so proud’. Such statements indicate that although Swift revealing her political preference may have been a disruption of doxa, fans are willing to accept this new dimension to Swift’s celebrity persona. The news comes as a relief and confirms their image of the singer.

Some fans do not only accept Swift’s political coming-out, but even act on it. This becomes apparent from their response to Swift’s 2018 Instagram post, which further included a message on why she would not vote for the Republican candidate. Swift stated:

I cannot vote for someone who will not be willing to fight for dignity for ALL Americans […] Running for Senate in the state of Tennessee is a woman named Marsha Blackburn […] Her voting record in Congress appals and terrifies me.

Swift went on to explain how Blackburn voted against equal pay for women and held that gay couples should not get married. These factors led Swift to the decision to vote for two Democratic Senators in the midterm elections. In response, fans took this doxic confirmation to act upon Swift’s disapproval of the Tennessee politician. After Swift’s condemnation of Blackburn and her political practices, some of the Swifties started to post snake
emojis on Blackburn’s official Instagram account. As Pignetti (this issue) describes, the emoji is used by fans when Swift finds herself in a feud with fellow celebrities. At first, fans of the ‘other party in the feud’ (for instance Kim Kardashian fans) adopted the symbol to suggest that Swift had been ‘a snake’, but later the singer reclaimed that narrative and used the snake emoji to bite back and celebrate the rebirth of her career. Ever since that move, Swifties have been deploying it as an expression of their dislike for someone – or something. This fan practice goes a long way to demonstrate the loyalty and the commitment of the Swifties. As interviewee Sanne (Dutch, 24 years) states, ‘I wouldn’t classify myself as a real hardcore Swiftie, but I do think it shows that this fandom is a global network with a lot of people who are very, very invested in Taylor’. The level of investment, as Sanne further explains, is indicated by how fans interpret Swift’s message in certain ways and act that interpretation out, for instance by leaving the snake emoji on someone’s social media account.

Swift’s Instagram post concluded with an expression of the hope that ‘many intelligent, thoughtful, self-possessed people’ would make their vote count in the elections. By making such a political statement, the singer positioned herself as a celebrity politician (Street 2004; Krebs this issue) – a celebrity figure with (a claim to) political influence. The overall response to Swift’s political reveal may have been positive, but French interviewee Gabrielle (21 years) points out that this revelation led to a schism in the fandom nonetheless. She suggests that ‘some fans do not like that she expressed herself publicly in this way’. Although Gabrielle personally supports Swift’s politics, she acknowledges that the singer’s choice has led some fans to discontinue their fandom: ‘You could say that this leads to polarization among the fans, actually.’ This is also demonstrated by the actions of a fan in the Reddit thread devoted to Swift’s political coming-out, who reposted a comment they had seen on Facebook: ‘Loved the concert but wish you would have expressed your plans to enter politics prior as I would have saved my $200. […] poor move on your part’. Other Reddit fans suggest that Swift’s political outing may have had something to do with her tour ending and the lack (in 2018) of new music releases: ‘[Swift] is irrelevant and has been for awhile [sic] now. She’s forced to make posts like this for publicity now’. While the first comment indicates a break with Swift fandom because the fan holds different political views, the second comment dismisses the political coming-out as a career-move, but leaves open if this is enough reason to quit being a fan. Although comments criticising Swift’s political reveal are less common than those lauding her actions, they offer an insight in how fans negotiate this disruption of doxa and how they channel their fannish discontent (Scott 2018, Driessen 2020).

Swift’s political reveal, then, brings to light how fans perceive the challenged doxa as a reason to discontinue their fandom, or as a confirmation of the legitimacy of their fannish investment. Throughout her various transformations, Swift demonstrates continuity in her persona: she still sings about love, resilience and feelings of not-belonging. Moreover, Swift herself seems to use transformation of her persona to ‘move’ her fans – affectively as well as effectively – to consider what she seems to see as ‘the greater good’, whether that is Politically (in terms of American politics) or politically (in terms of the politics of the music industry, for instance her stand against Spotify, her public support of Kesha in the lawsuit against Dr. Luke, or her calling-out of music manager Scooter Braun). However, in more recent albums such as *Folklore* or *Evermore* (both 2020), Swift appears to transform, yet again, to a more a-political style (in line with other musicians after Trump’s presidency ended). So perhaps this change will invite fans to (re)negotiate their affective investments anew. However these new
developments will affect the fanbase, exploring fans’ responses to Swift’s political stance, as has become clear, enables us to more fully understand what happens when the doxas of fandom are challenged and how fans negotiate their affective investments.

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributor

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