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Drew a map on your bedroom ceiling: fandoms, nostalgic girlhood and digital bedroom cultures in the Swiftie-sphere

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of escapism in Taylor Swift's music and her fandom, referred to as 'Swiftie' culture or 'Swifties'. Swift has always been known for her personal lyrics set to catchy melodies, and in recent years, she has leaned further into leaving 'Easter eggs' for her fans to piece together through her lyrics, music videos and social media presence. Drawing upon Jenkins' (2006) work on 'prosuming' and McRobbie and Garber's (1975) 'bedroom cultures', I explore the storytelling in Swift's craft, and argue that online engagement with her work enables a productive fandom built upon nostalgic escapism. This paper interrogates the role of the Swiftie fandom in cultivating digital bedroom cultures; utilising a feminist discourse analysis of Swiftie Reddit and YouTube, I suggest that Swift's evolving view of girlhood, as well as her use of metaphor and colour, has built an alternative world of nostalgia that predominantly exists online. As such, fans are offered a community to escape into the mythology of Swift in a way that speaks to and celebrates 'girlish' emotions, cultivating digital spaces that emulate the 'real life' bedroom.

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1. Introduction: who is Taylor Swift anyway?

It is a freezing cold night in February, and my friends and I are crammed into a nightclub in South London, singing along to Taylor Swift's back catalogue, at an event entitled Swift-karaoke, a regular clubnight ran by Swift fans, (or 'Swifties'), to come together and belt out Swift's hits, as well as her lesser-known songs. Since her first album in 2006, Taylor Swift has become a ubiquitous presence in music, successfully transcending musical genres across country, pop, indie folk and, more recently, synth-pop. Swift is a cultural phenomenon and the discourses that surround her, her artistry and her fandom are important points of exploration. As Franssen (2022) notes in the introduction to *Celebrity Studies*' Forum on 'Policing the Celebrity of Taylor Swift', the field of Swift Studies is a burgeoning area of celebrity studies that utilises Swift's text to explore many issues including, but not limited to: femininity, whiteness (Prins 2020, 2022), social media (Kehrberg 2018),

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heteronormativity and capitalism (Wilkinson 2019; Driessen 2022). As Driessen (2022) writes, Swift's 'celebrity-text is continuously altered and carefully reconstructed when a new album is released' (p. 93). This is reflected at Swiftogeddon, as each of our outfits and make-up gives a nod to one of these Swift 'eras', whether it be navy glitter on the eyes to reflect her most recent *Midnights* album or the 'red lip, classic' appearance of *Red*, and everyone in the room knows the lyrics, despite the assistance of giant screens that are displaying the words. As a group of thirty-one year old women, we are three years younger than Swift and have – in a parasocial sense – grown up with her. Her music, and the distinct imagery that coincides with each album, provides us, and many other fans, with snapshots of their teenage years and early twenties.

Despite the continual shifts in her style of music and appearance, what remains consistent for Swift is her personal and vulnerable lyrics, which predominantly explore issues of romance, friendship, heartbreak, body image and mental health. This storytelling is the central focus of Swift's songs; she mythologises the minutiae of everyday life in a way that speaks to and celebrates 'girlish' emotions. For most of her career, Swift's fan base has predominantly been made up of teenage girls and young women, and *The Guardian's* recent article about Swiftogeddon described it as a 'feminine space' (Solomon 2023). However, Fogarty and Arnold notes how Swift now 'performs a contradictory image, appealing equally to six-year-old girls and sixty-year-old men (the final fanbase, at last, secured by her *folklore* album)' (2021, p. 2),¹ arguably stemming from her positioning as a songwriter who does 'the work', as well as a traditional pop star (Sloan 2021). It is her lyricism that has connected Swift with her fans (Rossman 2022); in a review of *Reputation* for *The Guardian*, her sixth studio album, Nevins highlights the 'Swiftian pastime' of 'unpacking and deciphering the references in her lyrics'. As her career has gone from strength to strength, Swift's work has – arguably – become more 'crafty', with Kheraj (2022) suggesting that she has 'turned pop into a multiplayer puzzle'. This sleuthing takes place across social media websites, wherein Swifties piece together potential clues about albums and songs in her lyrics, music videos, social media posts and even her outfits at red carpet events.

As will be discussed, there is exciting research that explores the cultural texts of Taylor Swift and her fandom (see: Chittenden 2013, Fuller 2018, Rossman 2022, Driessen 2022), and most notably, McGrath's (2023) paper focuses on the lockdown-inspired *folklore* as symbolising a desire for comfort. Importantly for this paper, there is also work that contributes to updated readings of McRobbie and Garber's (1975) 'bedroom cultures' to explore Swift's work, with Rossman (2022) highlighting how fans escape into Swiftian lore on social media, carving out 'rooms' on the internet dedicated to dissecting lyrics, music videos, and creating fan art. This paper will build upon this scholarship by exploring the ways that Swift offers an alternative world for fans to become absorbed by online, getting lost in the 'rabbit-hole' of creative storytelling that encompasses her lovelife, celebrity feuds and insecurities.

2. Mapping the literature

2.1. Digital fandoms

Scholarship on audiences has explored the productive nature of modern fandoms; notably, Jenkins (2006a; 2007, Jenkins 2008, 2014) has written extensively about

convergence culture, referring to the ‘flow of content across multiple media platforms’ (2006b, p. 3). In contrast to ‘older notions of media spectatorship’, wherein ‘media producers and consumers [...] occupy separate roles’ (p. 3), the transmedia nature of audience engagement has shifted the passive fan into a ‘prosumer’, a term to describe a person who is both a producer and a consumer of media. Citing noughties-era reality television shows like *American Idol* as the first example of this,² Jenkins argued that prosuming is integral to convergence due to the ways that fans create new media across different mediums, noting:

“[...] for most of us, television provides fodder for so-called water cooler conversations. And, for a growing number of people, the water cooler has gone digital. Online forums offer an opportunity for participants to share their knowledge and opinions (2006a, p.27)

When Jenkins made this observation in 2006, social media was in its early days (Facebook, Reddit and Twitter had only just been invented). In the years since, platforms like Tumblr, Instagram and TikTok have fuelled the transmedia nature of content, with ‘fans moving across different platforms [...] to uncover the layers of storyline related to the source text’ (Chin 2016, p. 5). As such, these websites allow fans to drive new meaning for their favourite celebrity or media text; for instance, McCann and Southerton (2019, 2021) has written about the queering of the *One Direction* fandom, Haufler (2021) has explored the role of *Doctor Who* fan art in self-expression and Shafie (2021) interrogates how K-Pop fans engage in activism on TikTok. The sharing, analysing and creating of fan content within different mediums leads Derbaix *et al.* (2023, p.5) to note that, although ‘passion is clearly at the heart’ of fandoms, prosuming is a form of work. This point is supported by scholars such as Spence (2014), who expresses concern about the potential exploitation of fans for their free labour on behalf of creative industries. Despite this, Jenkins (2014) encourages us to see the importance of fandoms beyond the economics, suggesting that there is also joy in the creativity and the community of fan-led content.

2.2. Bedroom cultures and the swiftie-sphere

In McRobbie and Garber’s (1975) landmark piece of work, they described how young women and girls use the bedroom to engage with femininity and fandoms. In the 1970s, the authors’ observed that the bedroom is a space where culture is created and explored, despite women and girls often being erased from conversations about cultural production. In 2009, at the start of her career, Taylor Swift wrote in *Time* magazine that she wrote her smash-hit ‘Love Story’ ‘on [her] bedroom floor in about 20 minutes’ (Swift, 2009). Later, when embroiled in a public battle over the ownership of her records’ masters, she described the ‘excruciating choice to leave behind’ the music that she ‘wrote on [her] bedroom floor and videos [she] dreamed up’. Throughout the lyrics of her discography, the bedroom is recurring theme as a space to explore one’s emotions and creativity, such as ‘something different bloomed, writing in my room’ (*You’re On Your Own Kid*, 2022) and ‘How long will it be cute, all this crying in my room?’ (*Nothing New*, 2022). Indeed, Swiftie-scholars have noted how imagery of the ‘ideal’ bedroom’ is an important site for nostalgic escapism within Taylor Swift’s songwriting and marketing (see: Pollock 2014, Cullen 2016, Galloway 2020). Notably, Rossman (2022) builds upon McRobbie and Garber’s work by highlighting Swift’s recognition of the bedroom as ‘central to girls’ media consumption’.

She focuses on the use of diaries during the promotion of Swift's *Lover* album in 2019, wherein four deluxe versions of the CD were sold in Target, with each package containing a diary with a different entry from Swift, as well as blank pages for fans to write their own passages. She notes how this is exemplary of the ways that Swift bridges the public/private divide, cultivating an intimacy between herself and fans, writing that:

Swift invokes this bedroom space through the discovery of her journals and asks fans to return to the space as they produce their own journal entries in the blank pages at the end of the deluxe editions [...] a specific type of girly nostalgia is created through the color scheme and design of the *Lover* album. Using pastel pinks and blues, glitter, hearts, and horses, Swift recalls the girly motifs of her own nineties-era childhood.

This quote, and the rest of Rossman's (2022) article, demonstrates how particularly nostalgic ideas of girlhood are what anchors Swift's celebrity text and fanbase. Whilst McRobbie and Garber's foundational text on the bedroom is essential reading for understanding the relationship between gender, the domestic sphere and subcultures, Rossman's work is extremely useful for locating analysis of Swift within the bedroom.

Other (non-Swiftie) scholars have presented an updated reading of bedroom cultures, with Rogan's (2022, p. 122) book on digital femininities interrogating social media as a space that is 'largely understood as the domain of the girl, in the same way as the bedroom once was', and this has renegotiated where 'girlish' practises take place, opening up previously private experiences to online communities, such as experimenting with clothes and make-up, or discussing potential romantic interests. For Rogan, young women engage with and cultivate their own internet image, as well as using social media platforms to 'hang out'. Indeed, Rossman (2022) highlights how *Taylor Nation* - Swift's management team - hosts listening parties, wherein fans can collectively stream new releases. She writes that *Taylor Nation* utilises language that obscures the commercial element of the practice (to sell albums and merchandise), and alongside marketing tools like the diaries, a 'joint girlhood space' is created. Likewise, in Resnick's (2021) research on Taylor Swift fan theories, she notes that TikTok is utilised by Swifties to develop a 'sense of community, the knowledge of secret information, and the closeness to Taylor Swift' (p.8). Moreover, Janckila (2019) notes that Swift herself has been known to 'lurk' on both TikTok and - previously - Tumblr, sporadically 'liking' and commenting on posts.

Other scholars have explored how social media is a space for fans to critique and debate Swift's celebrity text, acting as direct lines to hold their idol to account (see: Fogarty and Arnold 2021, Driessen 2022, Franssen 2022). Most recently, Driessen and Prins (2023) reflected upon the online backlash to Swift's presumed romantic links with the 'messy, amoral' rock-star Matty Healy, wherein 'tweets from fans [urged] Swift to break up with Healy' (Driessen and Prins 2023). These examples reflect Rogan's (2022) point about how young women have become both the consumer and the creator of online culture.

3. I am an architect, I'm drawing up the plans: methodology and methods

This paper utilises a post-structuralist feminist discourse analysis, a methodological approach that builds upon Foucault's (1979) understanding of discourse as meaning that is produced via language and images. Through this lens, our understanding of 'truth' constructs 'what is "real" for each of us' (Soza 2014, p. 1), and so thinking beyond

binary oppositions is essential for critically considering knowledge production. As such, Baxter (2003, p. 3) notes that FPDA challenges the categorisation of ‘victim’ versus ‘oppressor’, instead recognising the complex and fluid nature of gendered dynamics, as well as the ways that the practice of gender exists within a web of overlapping identities and social issues. A recognition of the multifaceted nature of discourse was important when interrogating the Swiftie-sphere; fans’ interpretations of Swift’s lyrics reflect their own multifarious experiences of gender, which expand her work and cultivate new knowledge within the fandom.

In exploring the Swiftie-sphere, I conducted a discourse analysis of digital spaces where fans ‘gather’ online to discuss Swift’s music. As Gill (2000) notes, “the terms ‘discourse’ and ‘discourse analysis are highly contested [...]”, and ‘to claim that one’s approach is a discourse analytical one does not necessarily tell anybody much’ (p.173). Nevertheless, I was inspired by her description of discourse analysts as seeing ‘all discourse as social practice [...]’, recognising that ‘discourse does not occur in a social vacuum’ (p.175). By seeing discourse as a tool to *do* things with (Gill 2000, p. 175), I was interested in the ways that Swift’s lyrics tell stories that Swifties then expand upon, and how their interpretations of the music speak to the construction of digital bedroom cultures. Predominantly, I drew from popular Reddit threads; Reddit is an important source because it is a “community-driven platform for submitting, commenting and rating links and text posts” (Singer *et al.* 2014, p. 517), encouraging members to communicate with one another in subReddit groups related to the main Reddit group topic. Currently, there are 885k members in the r/TaylorSwift community, with constantly updating sub-Reddits, that include everything from discussions of fan theories to Swiftian outfit inspiration. I also watched YouTube reaction/analysis videos to Taylor Swift’s work. There are a number of content creators who post about Swift, have discussions with their followers in the comments section about Swiftian ‘clues’ and create fan art/outfits inspired by album themes. Examples of creators include Ally Sheehan (104k subscribers), Niamh Adkins (450k subscribers) and Nena Shelby (107k subscribers), and I focused on these accounts due to their large followings and high engagement with the audience in the comments. However, I also watched videos from smaller accounts, such as summersentiment (6.9k), who conducts literary analysis of popular music, because her work encapsulates the deep interrogation of the fandom into Swift’s writing. YouTube and Reddit have different routes for fans to enter into the Swiftie-sphere; YouTube is algorithmic and often home to long-form video content, whilst Reddit requires users to self-select Subreddits, wherein fans can ‘deep-dive’ into specific areas of the Swiftian mythology. Despite this, the nature of transmedia platforms encourage an overlap between websites, and so Reddit ‘megathreads’ often include links to YouTube or TikTok videos and vice-versa, whilst image-based sites like Pinterest have crossover with Instagram; in this sense, although the doors to the Swiftie-sphere are different, fans end up in the same room. The methods also included an analysis of articles written about Swift by bloggers and journalists, such as Tenbarg’s piece on *mirrorball* and queerness; this helped me to build up a picture of how Swift’s work is interpreted across fan spaces and more traditional forms of media,

Practically, I uncovered the themes in the texts and videos by drawing up a Swiftian map across the internet; on a notepad, I scribbled out the connections between Swift’s work, fan theories, reactions and art. I contextualised the Swiftian lore within the

scholarship on fandoms, nostalgia and gender, interrogating the knowledge produced by both Swift and the Swifties. For example, when analysing the transcripts from the YouTube videos, I reflected upon the following questions: how is the fan contributing to Swiftie lore, and in turn, how is this shaping their own identity? How does this relate to normative understandings of gender? In what ways do these discourses contribute to digital bedroom cultures, if at all? In this analysis, two overarching themes arose: 1) fans utilise Swift's work on nostalgic girlhood as a template for exploring their own experiences of gender and sexuality, and 2) fans interrogate the use of muses and colours within Swift's writing to piece together a narrative across her discography, often adding new meaning to her music. Both themes contribute to a Swiftian mythology, wherein fans embrace falling down a nostalgic rabbit hole into both Swift's and their own past. Digital platforms become spaces for sleuthing and swapping theories with other Swifties, and this encourages a sense of escapism and community that resembles an idealised teenage girls' 'slumber party'. These corners of the internet mirror the 'real life' bedrooms described by McRobbie and Garber (1975), cultivating safe spaces to explore one's own gender and sexuality, attributing new meaning to Swift's music that draws upon fan's experiences.

4. Shout out to the mirrorball girlies: reflecting upon and re-examining girlhood

As discussed in the literature review, Swift's discography and brand image speak to themes of nostalgic girlhood (see: Rossman 2022), and her confessional style of song-writing has been described as creating 'a new template for confession as a game shared between a writer and her fans' (Powers 2021). In 2006, a sixteen-year old Taylor Swift released her first single, Tim McGraw from her self-titled first album (Betts 2015). With her Southern twang, cowboy boots and lyrics about the 'Georgia stars', Swift was positioned as a country star, and the story behind Tim McGraw – written in Swift's Math class about a boyfriend that was leaving to attend university – added an authenticity to her writing, wherein the listener can imagine her writing lyrics on scraps of paper or in her school notebook, lost in thoughts of teenage romance. Swift's early music centred around fairytale metaphors and a search for 'the one', Notably, in the song 'White Horse' from her 2008 album *Fearless*, she sings 'cause I'm not your princess, this ain't our fairytale [...] now it's too late for you and your white horse', whereas in *Love Story* (2008) she utilises Romeo and Juliet as inspiration as a metaphor for an unrequited crush, with lines like 'marry me, Juliet, you'll never have to be alone'. In her early career, Swift was criticised for leaning into misogynistic tropes of the 'other' girl, such as in the song *Better than Revenge*, wherein she sings: 'she came along, got him alone, and let's hear the applause [...] she took him faster than you could say sabotage', as well as 'she's better known for the things that she does on the mattress'. When speaking to *The Guardian* in 2014, Swift expressed regret at the song's message, noting that: 'I was 18 when I wrote that [...] that's the age you are when you think someone can actually take your boyfriend. Then you grow up and realise no one takes someone from you if they don't want to leave'. This critical reflection coincided with what Swift described as a 'feminist awakening', after previously distancing herself from the label, telling *The Daily Beast* in 2012 that she didn't 'really think about things as guys versus girls'.

Swift's introduction to feminism was seemingly fuelled, in part, due to the intensely misogynistic media coverage of her. Throughout her career, 'genre and gender [...] have 'clouded perception of Swift's particular skills and techniques' (Sloan 2021). Swift has consistently been accused of not writing her own songs, so much so that she decided to write the entirety of her 2010 album, *Speak Now*, alone. Telling *Rolling Stone* in 2019, she noted that: 'I've had several upheavals in my career. When I was 18, they were like, "She doesn't really write those songs". So my third album I wrote by myself as a reaction to that' (Hiatt 2019). Alongside this, a large proportion of the coverage of Swift mocked her for writing songs about her ex-partners, with the media vilifying her as a 'boy-crazy' manipulator (see: Carpenter 2013). Even a four star review of her 2010 album *Speak Now* in *Rolling Stone* was peppered with gendered trivialisation of her work, stating that it was obvious that Swift was inspired by 'chick flicks' and that listeners can 'already tell this guy's going to be long forgotten by the next song' (Sheffield 2010). In interviews, Swift was constantly asked to reveal who her songs were about; notably, in 2021, a clip resurfaced from 2012 of a then 23-year-old Taylor Swift's interview on the Ellen DeGeneres talk show. In a resurfaced clip, DeGeneres is shown beginning the conversation by referring to the actor Zac Efron as Taylor Swift's boyfriend, despite Swift repeatedly stating that he was not and that they had never been romantically involved. Next, a slideshow of men appeared on the screen behind the pair and, handing Swift a bell, DeGeneres requested that Swift ring it when the person appeared who Swift had written her single '*We Are Never Getting Back Together*' about (almost do 2021). In later interviews, Swift reflected upon the damage that this media framing did to her self-image, suggesting that she felt belittled by the focus on her dating life, stating:

When I was like 23 and people were just kind of reducing me to, kind of making slideshows of my dating life and putting people in there that I'd sat next to at a party once and deciding that my songwriting was like a trick rather than a skill and a craft. And in a way it's figuring out how to completely minimize that skill by taking something that everyone in their darkest, darkest moments loves to do, which is just to slut-shame, you know? And that happened to me at a very young age [...] (Apple Music 2019)

This quote reflects the changing voice in Taylor Swift's work, from a teenage girl who romanticised traditional ideas of heteronormativity, to a woman with a more nuanced perspective on gender and relationships. This is not to suggest that I do not recognise the limited scope of Swift's 'brand' of feminism, a topic which has been explored by other celebrity scholars (see: Pollock 2014, McNutt 2020, Fogarty and Arnold 2021, Jackson 2021). However, this paper is interested in how the development of Swift's ideas are a point of analysis within the fandom, rather than post-feminist conceptualisations of celebrity activism.

One example of this reconceptualisation of Swift's songs through a feminist lens is the theories surrounding *mirrorball*, from *folklore* (Folklore: The Long Pond Studio Studios 2020). The song has been interpreted in a number of ways within the fandom, all of which expand Swift's own explanation³ of the song's metaphor for celebrity (lyrics include 'I'm a mirrorball/I'll show you every version of yourself tonight' and 'Drunk as they shattered edges glisten'). For example, in an article for *Insider*, Tenbarge (2020) compares *mirrorball* to 'queer experiences like first love, being closeted and gender presentation', noting

that – like Swift – she has also had to remould herself to fit hetero-normative patriarchy. She writes:

On ‘Mirrorball’, Swift talks about the role-playing inherent in being a woman. She talks about having to change everything about herself to fit in, which resonated with the casual acting I’ve trained myself to perform in the closet [...] While Swift hides from an unforgiving media and perpetual critics rather than homophobia, the substance of her songs and the darkness in ‘Folklore’ offer a comforting sense of familiarity [...] It’s incredibly gratifying to feel a little seen, and feel a little understood, by an artist whose presence has guided you from adolescence to adulthood, like Swift’s has for me.

By comparing her experiences as a queer woman to *mirrorball*, Tenbarge encompasses the ways that Swift’s work is often utilised by fans as a vessel for interrogating their own gender and sexuality. Her feelings of comfort and ‘feeling seen’ support the notion that Swift’s music is a safe space for these reflections, wherein fans compare their own struggles with heteronormative patriarchy to Swift’s.

Similarly, on YouTube, longer form videos allow fans to break down the lyrics of *mirrorball*, contextualising them within wider socio-cultural issues, as well as their own experiences. One content creator with the username ‘summersentiment’ conducted an in-depth analysis of the song, drawing upon the Manic Pixie Dream Girl (MPDG) archetype (2022). This term describes a quirky, ethereal and beautiful woman who ‘exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors’. The MPDG’s sole purpose is to ‘teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures’ (Rabin 2007), and Vincent (2020, p. 61) notes how the labelling of the term led to the development of ‘deeply objectified and two-dimensional’ characters across popular culture.⁴ Whilst summersentiment recognises the criticisms of the MPDG, she suggests that *mirrorball* is interesting because the protagonist (Taylor Swift) is describing herself through this lens, as ‘a blank canvas for the males to reflect themselves onto’, and that ‘she is, kind of, one dimensional in this song’. Here, summersentiment positions Swift as subverting the MPDG template by commenting on the restrictions of normative femininity and, ironically, it is summersentiment who is using *mirrorball* as a ‘blank canvas’ for interrogating gender and relationships. Within the comments section, the conversation continues, and one user explains that she identifies with *mirrorball* as a people pleaser who learned to embrace her enjoyment of ‘girlish’ practices, writing: ‘I’m working on that and finally loving myself as the Taylor Swift fan and Disney Channel lover of pink stuff’. In a similar breakdown video, another content creator – Nena Shelby – makes a similar point, saying: ‘shout out to all my mirrorball girlies – the burnt out, gifted kids. The people pleasers, the show ponies, the people that look for the best in people’ (@nenashelby, 2022). Throughout the video, she refers to herself as a ‘mirrorball girlie’ and says that she has ‘lived the mirrorball experience’, demonstrating how fans apply Swift’s lyrics to their own lives and how, in turn, this enables a renegotiation of their past through a gendered lens.

Recently, in her 2022 album, *Midnights*, Swift continues to present a more complex understanding of gender. A thematic record that encompasses 13 (Swift’s favourite number) sleepless nights from throughout her life. *Midnights* was released at an important time in Swift’s career. Since 2019, Swift had been re-recording her first six albums, after a dispute with her record label over the ownership rights of her music. The re-releasing of

her music, one album at a time, invites fans to re-experience the albums, and their respective 'eras'. This creates a nostalgic callback to an earlier time in both Swift and the fans' lives, but with an added sense of maturity, encouraging fans to map themes of evolving girlhood across Swift's discography, ending with *Midnights*. A notable example of this is *Would've, Could've, Should've* (WCS) (2023). The song is thought to be written about the songwriter John Mayer, who was 32 when he allegedly dated 19-year-old Swift, and is interpreted by many fans as a reflection upon their exploitative relationship between the two ('give me back my girlhood, it was mine first'), with an unequal power dynamic ('I damn sure never would have danced with the devil/at nineteen'). At the time of *Midnight's* release, Swift was in the process of re-recording *Speak Now*, and fans were quick to highlight the link between WCS and a song entitled *Dear John* from *Speak Now*, which was also rumoured to be about Mayer. On YouTube, content creator Niamh Adkins (@niamhadkins, 2022) posted an 'album reaction' video with her friend and fellow Swiftie Nina, and noted that the song reminded her of her own experience of being groomed, stating: '[. . .] as someone who has absolutely been groomed, it's giving predator'. Both women agree that they believe the song to be about Mayer due to the line 'I damn sure never would have danced with the devil/at nineteen', the age that Swift was when she wrote *Dear John*. They discuss the gendered discourses that surrounded Swift and Mayer's alleged relationship ('you as the woman get the brunt of it, it's like, what did you do to seduce him?'), showing how fans piece together Swift's lyrics within the context of their own experiences of femininity and sexism. Another example is Ally Sheehan's (@ally-sheehan 2023) video analysis, which also draws parallels between her own trauma and Swift's. Showing a graphic of a lyric sheet for WCS as she speaks, she notes how the use of the words from the song's title build upon the narrative in *Dear John*, telling the audience:

[. . .] She repeatedly uses the words 'would've' and 'could've' throughout the song, saying 'you could have done this', talking about the changes that they could have made. And obviously, Would've, Could've, Should've is a phrase in itself. It's a way of talking about a situation that you are powerless to change now [. . .] they key difference here is that, throughout the song, she's using 'would've' and 'could've', and the only time she sings 'should've' is when she sings the title. At no point, in this song does she say 'I should have done this', because she is acknowledging, it was not her fault. The only 'Should've's' are in *Dear John*. She's almost telling us to go back and look at that, and saying 'the only regret I have, the only thing I could have done differently, is run away from you' [. . .] I was the child, you were the grown man [. . .]

By exploring the connection between the two songs, Sheehan reflects upon her own experiences of an exploitative relationship:

That realisation made me so emotional, but also so proud of her, because in *Dear John* there is a lot of self-doubt, there is a lot of questioning if she should have done something differently [. . .] for anyone who knows what that feels like, I am really sorry, because it is really hard to know that you can't change the past and that there's nothing really that you could have done to change that [. . .] but it wasn't our fault. And if this is a song that you relate to in that way, then I hope you know that it wasn't your fault either, and I just think that this song has the potential to help so many people, because it has already helped me.

In the phrase 'it wasn't our fault', Sheehan demonstrates how she is speaking directly to a community of fans who have experienced similar trauma, and by continuing with saying that the song 'has the potential to help so many people', she cites it as a tool for dealing with the emotional turmoil described in her analysis. In doing so, Sheehan echoes the

sentiment shared by other fans quoted in this section, that she is 'proud' of Swift's ability to empathise with her younger self, a self that fans have 'grown up' with. Like with *mirrorball*, Swifties contextualise WCS within wider issues of culture, identity and gender, and this encourages an exploration into the concept of 'lost girlhood' and, in turn, a reflection upon one's own past. Indeed, in the description for her video, Niamh Adkins invites viewers to 'chat in the comments about all things Midnights', and expresses her hope for cultivating a 'soft, safe space' for her audience (@niamhadkins, 2022). As the video comes to a close, her co-presenter, Nina, jokes that the vlog experience is 'so much better than, like, listening alone in my bedroom, crying'. In this sense, Swift's 'fairytale to feminist' pipeline, as well as the revisiting of her youth in her later music, enables fans to connect by untangling their own relationship to girlhood, femininity, sexuality and shame.

5. Swiftian songcraft: down a rabbit hole

Swiftie digital spaces emulate the bedrooms described by McRobbie and Garber; fans creatively engage with the music and, as a consequence of this, deeper meanings are attached to songs. So far, I have set out the overarching theme of nostalgic girlhood within Taylor Swift's work that cultivates escapism amongst her fans, encouraging them to reflect upon their own experiences of femininity through a gendered lens. In the following sections, I dig into two aspects of Swiftian lore: recurring muses and colour. Together, these components of Swift's writing spark creativity amongst fans, building digital spaces that resemble annotations in the margins of books, allowing listeners to get lost in deep analysis. Importantly, the use of collage in digital fan art across websites like Pinterest resembles a scrapbook of memories or a DIY poster that would not look out of place in a teenage character's bedroom in a 90s romcom (see: TheOdysseyOnline 2023). Indeed, this is an atmosphere that Swift has actively encouraged, explaining in her acceptance speech for Songwriter-Artist of the Decade for Apple Music that she categorises her music into three 'pen types': Fountain Pen Songs ('modern, personal stories written like poetry'), Quill Pen Songs ('old fashioned, like you're a 19th century poet crafting your next sonnet by candlelight') and Glitter Gel Pen Songs ('lyrics that make you want to dance, sing, and toss glitter around the room') (Daily 2022). Like with the *Lover* diaries described by Rossman (2022), Swift invites fans to read the lyrics of her music, and to imagine them being written by hand, cultivating nostalgic and cosy imagery of 'the craft', which contributes to the fans' focus on the mythology surrounding Swift's songs.

5.1. Swiftian songcraft: muses

As mentioned in the section on girlhood, the media and public alike have consistently been fascinated by Swift's romantic partners, which in her early career, often led to the degradation of her songcraft. However, in 2023, Jonathan Bate, a world-leading expert on Shakespeare, described Taylor Swift as 'a real poet' and 'a literary giant', due to the storytelling embedded in her music (Harrison 2023). At the heart of this storytelling is the construction of characters, whom I refer to as Taylor's 'muses', who are recognisable to fans through specific figurative language. Swift's use of metaphor and similes to describe romance and heartbreak fuel a mythology surrounding her former partners that fans

explore with rigour. For instance, on YouTube, a content creator called @theswiftologist describes the singer-songwriter Harry Styles as ‘the most compelling character in the Swiftie Cinematic Universe’. Swift and Styles dated between 2012 and 2013, a relationship that caused a media frenzy, and is rumoured to have inspired Swift’s album *1989*. This is particularly true of the blatantly-named track *Style*, which includes both Styles’ name in the title and descriptions that fit his image (‘you got that James Dean, daydream look in your eye’ and ‘you got that long hair slicked back, white t-shirt’). In another video essay for *Vox*, Kelsey McKinney notes that although Swift did not publicly reveal who the song was about, in the music video for *Style*, she is shown holding a similar paper aeroplane necklace to the one that her and Styles were pictured wearing by paparazzi, leaving clues for her fanbase. On a subReddit (2022) entitled *Songs about Harry?* (@whipcream29 2020), one user comments that ‘pretty much all 1989 is about him’, whilst another writes that multiple songs from the album are ‘all for sure’ about Styles.

In Swift’s recent work, fans connect the dots across Swift’s lyricism to Harry Styles: at the beginning of the song *Question ... ?* from *Midnights* (2022), Swift includes a sample from *Out of the Woods* from *1989*, causing speculation that *Question ... ?* is about Harry Styles. On a subReddit about *Question ... ?* (@CowboyLikeMegan 2022), fans conduct line-by-line analysis of the song, including the following:

For sure out of the woods references. but also Style. and I wish you would [...] I think of it over a span of time. Like multiple different points in a situationship, where you keep colliding together but never get it right. Reference back to Style “I watch us go ‘round and ‘round each time” [...] It has a lot of ‘out of the woods’ vibes. ‘Fall apart then fall back together’. This may be a big stretch ... but the lyrics ‘got swept away in the gray’ meaning they got kinda pulled outta their colorful romance and into the rest of the world. ‘The rest of the world was black and white but we were in screaming color’

Here, we see the ways that fans connect specific themes to Swift’s muses, following the ‘clues’ in her lyrics. The *Out of the Woods* ‘vibes’ are understood as a doomed relationship, wherein a couple are unable to ‘get it right’, and this interpretation is utilised to create a narrative that fans, and Swift, return to collectively. Arguably, the use of the *Out of the Woods* sample on *Question ... ?* was a purposeful nod to Swift’s muse, Styles, and this encourages a deeper interrogation of the music’s mythology.

Another popular theory across Swiftian social media is that Swift’s *RED* album is inspired by her relationship with the Hollywood actor Jake Gyllenhaal, and that her lyrics depict him as a ‘pretentious hipster’. For example, when Swift released *I Bet You Think About Me* (2022), a previously unheard song from her *RED (Taylor’s Version)* album in 2022, the Swiftie-sphere buzzed with discussion. Many fans argued that the parallels between songs between *RED* and *RED (Taylor’s Version)* pointed towards Gyllenhaal, with one user commenting that *I Bet You Think About Me* ‘fits into the picture she’s painted of him’ (@SharleenFrauke40) as ‘using his (then) bigger fame, money and status to make her feel insecure and less than him’ Fans highlighted how lines like “you laughed at my dreams, rolled your eyes at my jokes” mirror ‘I think it’s strange that you think I’m funny, cus he never did’ from *Begin Again* (2012) and ‘do you have all the space that you need?’ echoes a similar sentiment to ‘we hadn’t seen each other in a month when you said you needed space’ from *We Are Never, Ever Getting Back Together* (WANEGBT) (2012). On Twitter, one fan screenshotted an image from the WANEGBT music video that shows Swift singing the

line ‘you’ll hide away and find your peace of mind, with some indie record that’s much cooler than mine’, alongside an a lyric from IBYTAM, “I bet you think about me, when you’re out at your cool indie music concerts”.

Within the *RED* mythology – and Swiftian mythology in general – *All Too Well* is incredibly important. The imagery of a scarf (‘and I left my scarf there at your sister’s house/And you’ve still got it in your drawer, even now’) became a fan obsession and developed into popular culture lore, with a headline in *The Guardian* reading ‘Where’s Taylor Swift’s scarf? Is it in Jake Gyllenhaal’s drawer?’ (2021) and *The Cut* running with ‘Where the hell is Taylor Swift’s scarf?’ (Mercado 2021). When Swift re-released *RED (Taylor’s Version)*, the album included the long-awaited ten minute version of *All Too Well* and an accompanying short film (*ATWTSF*). Interestingly, Swift herself noted how the release of *ATWTSF* was driven entirely by the fans’ creating their own “imaginary cinematic universe for it”, as the song “was never a single, never had a video, it never had a visual element to it”, reflecting the interactive nature of the Swiftie-sphere (Rancilio 2021). Fans were quick to point out the various “Easter Eggs”, including a shot of a red scarf draped across the bannister of the protagonist’s home and the actors’ striking resemblance to Swift and Gyllenhaal, with some sharing side-by-side shots of paparazzi shots and the music video. Writing on the *All Too Well Megathread* (@Euh 2021), one fan commented that ‘she made an indie film much cooler than his’, drawing a link between the aforementioned line in *WANEGBT* and the aesthetics of the *ATW Short Film*.

The mythology of *ATW* is a strong example of the prosuming within the Swiftie-verse, as the fans’ interrogation of the song’s context are what transformed it from an unreleased album track, to a ten-minute song, and then into a short film. Swift has regularly spoken in interviews and on stage about how *ATW* was, initially, very difficult to perform due to the emotional turmoil that she experienced when writing the song. However, the process of *ATW* being ‘claimed’ by the fans meant that the track’s meaning evolved for Swift, telling a Chicago crowd:

[. . .] I wanted to thank you for changing it, because it’s kind of nice to sing a song that you’re proud of, but not feel pain while you sing it. It’s very nice (via Twitter user @TSUpdatesNYBU, cited in Pomarico 2018)

In this sense, the songs are themselves bedrooms, providing space for the deeply personal and private emotions of Swift’s heartbreak, where she cries alone. Yet, through her releasing the music, the songs become public; it is at this moment that the doors to the bedroom are thrust open and the Swifties move in to decorate. As such, the fragile period of youth examined by Swift is re-visited in her re-releases, but also in the Swiftie prosuming discussed in this section, wherein new meaning is given to texts.

5.2. *Swiftian songcraft: colours*

Colour is a central tool in Taylor Swift’s lyricism that illustrates her emotions, and because of this, the discovery of colour-coded ‘Easter Eggs’ is integral to the Swiftie fandom. Fans conduct deep analysis of the meaning behind colour in lyrics across Swift’s discography, fuelling Swiftian mythology and cultivating ‘insider’ knowledge. For example, in *RED* (2012), Swift uses the colour red as a metaphor for a passionate relationship (“loving him was red” and “you almost ran the red ‘cause you were looking over at me”), and in the

re-recorded version of *RED (Taylor's Version)* (2021), the infamous scarf was pictured as red in the album's imagery. Fans note that Swift refers back to this 'red' relationship in later songs; notably, on Reddit, sub-threads dissect the line 'I once believed love was burning red, but it's golden like daylight' from the song *Daylight* in *Lover* (2019), with fans commenting that this lyric symbolised Swift's growth from unhealthy to healthy relationships, and that it follows their own trajectory of teenage to adult love. For instance, comments on a *Daylight* sub-Reddit include 'it reminds me of my first love and going through it with Red. Now I'm engaged to someone else and knew exactly what it meant to think love used to be burning red, but no, it's golden' and 'I get full body chills every time she sings "I once believed love would be burning red. . .but it's golden". What a glow up' (nightmareAssylum 2019). When *Midnights* (2022) was released, fans developed a theory that the song *Maroon* is a 'mature' version of *Red*, due to lyrics that included hues of red, such as 'the burgundy on my T-shirt when you splashed your wine into me/And how the blood rushed into my cheeks, so scarlet'. Writing on a r/TaylorSwift subreddit about *Maroon* (boyackhorseperson 2023), one user commented that:

Compare the glossy, familiar metaphors of 'Red' to the intense, gritty specificity of 'Maroon' and her added maturity leaps off the page. I love them both, but 'Red' is a bright, big-hearted response to loss whereas 'Maroon' feels like waking up in the middle of the night, sweaty and dazed.

This quote further demonstrates how fans use colour to draw links between Swift's songs, conducting 'deep-dive' analysis of metaphors across her discography. On the same sub-Reddit thread, a fan notes that, whilst fans may disagree on the meaning behind Swift's use of colour in the song, *Maroon* 'takes us along on a shared emotional journey', supporting the notion of getting 'lost' in one's emotions. Indeed, colour is such an important point of exploration in the Swiftie-verse that fans have made detailed graphs (swiftdata1989 2023) to track its usage across albums, as well as fan art (tessa13steph 2023). This shows the connection between Swiftie-ism and nostalgia, as fans utilise digital spaces to return to the 'simpler' time of crafting posters for their bedroom walls.

The aforementioned colour theories are fuelled by Taylor Swift, who occasionally 'likes' analysis videos on TikTok and YouTube, but also uses them as a tool for dropping clues about new music. As fans discussed in an extensive Reddit thread, each album has an assigned colour, led by Swift's imagery within each of her aforementioned 'Eras', from the sunny gold of *Fearless* to the pastel pink of *Lover* (it 2022). Throughout the re-recording of her first six albums, Swift utilised colour to hint to fans about which music was set to be released: in the music video for *Bejeweled* from *Midnights* (released in October 2022), fans noticed that Swift pressed a purple button for the third floor in an elevator (*Speak Now* was Swift's third album) and wore purple jewellery. In May 2023, whilst on her Eras Tour, Swift posted a photograph of herself wearing purple with the caption 'Hey Nashville you're NEXT', accompanied by a purple heart emoji (dearmirrorball 2023). The following day, Swift announced *Speak Now's* release at the Nashville concert, confirming fan's suspicions. Prior to the re-release of *1989*, an album with blue aesthetics, fans documented Swift's various clues, which included a shot in the *Karma* music video showing Swift's nails painted blue and multiple blue outfit changes in *The Eras Tour*. As each album has been released, fans' social media accounts become awash with colour-coded outfits, with many Swiftie

content creators filming reaction videos wearing the relevant 'Eras' colour. This shows how the fans see the releasing of new music as a collective celebration, tweeting phrases like 'happy *Speak Now* (Taylor's Version) day to all who celebrate', along with a picture of themselves in purple.

6. Some invisible string, tying you to me: conclusion

When girls become women, they are presumed to outgrow the youthful space of the teenage bedroom, removing the bluetacked posters from the walls to make way for a more 'mature' setting (within hetero-normative patriarchy, this typically means for a family of their own). However, throughout this paper, I have argued that the digital bedroom of the Swiftie-sphere encourages a creative nostalgia that allows fans to 'return to' a bedroom constructed by Swift; a space for wistful dreaming and embracing intense emotions, that feel 'like home, somehow' (Swift, 2012). It is through platforms like Reddit and YouTube that Swifties map their own life events onto the stories told by Swift, exploring their own identity in the process. As I have discussed, this is done in different ways depending on the platform; on Reddit, long threads are dedicated to dissecting the meaning behind key words or phrases within Swift's music, and from a red scarf to a snow-mobile accident, innocuous details become key moments in the Swiftian narrative. This mapping happens on YouTube too, with longform video analysis of Swift's world-building, through deep-dives of her lyrics and celebrity text, with the conversation spilling out into the comments sections, where further musings take place. Both 'bedrooms' exist within a transmedia map of the Swiftie-sphere, cultivating hideaways to trace the 'invisible string' of Swift's music across her back catalogue and around the fans' lives. Yet, there are also questions to be asked about the consequences of the public/private boundaries (or lack thereof) when it comes to Swift and her fandom. In January 2024, the *New York Times* published an opinion piece speculating about Swift's sexuality, building upon an internet conspiracy theory from a subsection of Swifties, who posit that Swift's musical 'Easter eggs' are hinting at her closeted queerness (despite Swift and her team repeatedly stating that she is heterosexual) (Raza-Sheikh 2024). Nicknamed 'Gaylor', (a fusing of 'gay' and 'Taylor'), the theory was once 'a sign that you spent way too much time online' (Carr 2023), but as the publication in the *New York Times* demonstrates, it has now entered the mainstream. As this paper has demonstrated, Swift's music and the digital fandom it inspires has gamified parts of her life, but what does the mainstreaming of Gaylor – and Swift's clear discomfort with it – tell us about some Swifties' feeling of 'knowledge' over her identity?

Another area for further exploration is the broadening of scope within Swift's writing. On 24 July 2020, in the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Swift announced a surprise album via Instagram, revealing that it would be released at midnight of that day. Like every time before the release of a Taylor Swift album, the singer entered a new 'Era', and the cotton-candy pastels of 2019's *Lover* were replaced with grayscale images of Swift engulfed by trees, wisps of curly hair across her face, encapsulating the album's 'cottagecore' aesthetic. But *folklore* also marked a stylistic shift in Swift's writing away from solely focusing on her lived experiences, with the announcement post describing her development of fictional

characters and inspiration from historical events in the construction of *folklore's* songs, she explained:

I found myself not only writing my own stories, but also writing from the perspective of people I've never met, people I've known, or those I wish I hadn't [...] the lines between fantasy and reality blur [...] (Richards 2020)

Whilst I have briefly touched upon the impact of *folklore* in my discussion of McGrath's (2023) paper in the literature review and my analysis of the song *mirrorball*, *folklore* — and the subsequent sister album, *evermore* — are worthy of a separate project about how Swift's evolving music has cultivated new realms within the Swiftie-sphere, from the Teenage Love Triangle (a high-school romance between three characters across *folklore*) to the woman in a loveless marriage having an affair in *evermore's* *ivy*. The bedrooms Swift previously constructed stemmed from her personal life, so how have fans negotiated this new way of storytelling to explore their own identities? In what ways has it impacted the digital bedroom culture of the Swiftie-sphere? For instance, how do the blurred lines 'between fantasy and reality' play out across social media platforms? Perhaps, for Swift, this shift represents a reshaping of the bedroom into an adult space, cultivating a distance between her life and the 'mirrorball' reflection that the fans see in her music? Rather than using her own life as the bedroom, the lives of fictional others create new decor, and new reflections. Indeed, by the time this paper is published, Swift's new album - *The Tortured Poets Department* - will have been released, and so, it will be interesting to see the line she draws between diaristic confessions and the 'one-step-removed' storytelling of *folklore* and *evermore*. These ideas lay the groundwork for exciting future research within the burgeoning field of Swiftie scholarship.

Notes

1. In an article entitled *Taylor Swift and the Sad Dads* for *The New Yorker*, Kornhaber reflects upon the unlikely collaboration between Swift and indie-rock band *The National*, creating a gateway between two seemingly distinct fan bases (Kornhaber 2023)
2. Jenkins (2006, p.61) argued that *American Idol* (a talent show that auditioned singers to become 'the next big thing') was the first (alongside *Survivor*) 'big new thing that demonstrated the power that lies at the intersection between old and new media'. *American Idol*, he writes, was 'from the start, not simply a television program but a transmedia franchise' (2006, p.59).
3. In the 2020 documentary *Folklore: The Long Pond Studio Sessions*, Taylor Swift explained the concept of the song: 'we have mirrorballs in the middle of a dance floor because they reflect light, they are broken a million times and that's what makes them so shiny, we have people like that in society, too. They hang there and every time they break it entertains us. And when you shine a light on them it's this glittering, fantastic thing [...] was a metaphor for celebrity, but it's also a metaphor for people who have to feel like they have to be on for certain people' (*Folklore: The Long Pond Studio Studios* 2020).
4. Vincent uses the example of the characters Margo Roth Spiegelman (*Paper Towns*) and Alaska Young (*Looking for Alaska*) in John Green's young adult novels as encapsulating the MPDG template. She writes how 'the male protagonists in each novel are overwhelmingly infatuated with them, a hypersexualization that makes these fictitious women appear less human' (Vincent 2020, p. 59)

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Notes on contributor

Amelia Morris: I am a cultural and media theorist, with research that spans a wide range of topics, including: austerity, poverty, reality TV, gender, the body, dieting, celebrity culture and cults. Although these interests are varied, the crux of my work's focus is the relationship between popular culture and socioeconomic issues, and theoretically, I am inspired by the work of scholars such as Stuart Hall, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Noam Chomsky and Angela McRobbie.

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