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THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN CREATING A CULT OF PERSONALITY IN POPULAR CULTURE: THE CASE OF TAYLOR SWIFT

This paper explores the phenomenon of the cult of personality within contemporary popular culture through an analysis of the communication and marketing strategies that shape the Taylor Swift brand. Within the theoretical framework, the study draws on Weber's concept of charisma and Lasch's culture of narcissism, tracing the transformation of the cult of personality from a traditional, vertical model of political power to a horizontal, interactive digital phenomenon. Particular focus is placed on the role of media narratives, framing, and sensationalism in the construction of public identity, as well as the mechanisms of emotional identification and parasocial relationships. The empirical section examines the perception of Taylor Swift's specific communication strategies among members of her fandom, the Swifties. Taylor Swift is perceived as an authentic emotional brand that transcends a conventional music career, becoming a center of social, political, and economic power. The results confirm that the modern cult of personality is no longer solely a product of media manipulation, but rather the result of a synergy between highly developed strategies, self-representation, and active audience participation. The paper concludes that in the case of Taylor Swift, the boundaries between the construction of power and authenticity are blurred, creating a new form of cultural strength that is simultaneously global, intimate, and highly profitable.

Keywords: cult of personality; popular culture; Taylor Swift; media narratives; parasocial relationships; branding; digital media

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary media and cultural landscape, the cult of personality is gaining prominence in the context of pop culture and the digital social sphere. Unlike traditional political and historical figures whose influence was limited by institutional channels, pop culture stars shape collective consciousness through communication and marketing strategies. A unique case in point is Taylor Swift, who, in addition to being a musical artist, has become a cultural icon, brand (Atwal & Bryson 2025; Nigam et al. 2025), and media phenomenon (McCann et al. 2025). Swift has built a public identity that constantly oscillates between the genuinely personal and the strategically constructed (Khanal 2024). Her eras, defined by albums and visual narratives, are not just musical phases but are communicative concepts used to mobilize audiences, create discourses, and foster a sense of community within the fandom (Bright 2025). Through such narratives, intense parasocial relationships are built between the audience and the performer, contributing to the construction of a personality cult (Postoutenko 2022; Sundahl 2022) tailored to the digital age. Given Taylor Swift's frequent and strong presence in the media, on social media, and in public spaces, this paper seeks to explore the ways in which the cult of personality is constructed, which communication and marketing strategies cultivate it, and how it is perceived and interpreted by her fans. The research specifically focuses on the emotional, symbolic, and identity aspects of the passionate followers and supporters (Li 2021) and its influence in the political, social, and economic context. Through an analysis of the historical and cultural significance of the cult of personality, the development of pop culture and media narratives, and other related examples that confirm the importance of this topic, this paper lays the foundation for understanding the relationship between audiences and stars in a digitized society. Qualitative research was conducted among members of the Taylor Swift fandom, known as Swifties, deepening the insight into the perception, emotional connection, and symbolic mechanisms that shape and reflect the cult of personality in contemporary pop culture.

2. THE CREATION OF A CULT OF PERSONALITY IN POPULAR CULTURE

The phenomenon of kitsch cult status in the contemporary media and cultural landscape is taking on new significance, shifting away from exclusively political connotations toward the realm of popular culture and the digital social sphere. Unlike

traditional figures whose influence was limited by institutional channels, pop culture stars today shape collective consciousness by employing sophisticated communication and marketing strategies. According to the Croatian Encyclopedia, the term cult of personality denotes “systematic, public, uncritical praise and glorification of a single person as an infallible political leader, which is manifested in all forms of media and social life” (*Croatian Encyclopedia*, accessed 12. 5. 2026).

The cult of personality is obviously not a new phenomenon, but in the 21st century it has undergone a complete transformation. It has shifted from a vertical model of an untouchable leader to a horizontal, interactive phenomenon (Girija 2024; Crabtree et al. 2020). Max Weber describes it as a systematic process of reinforcing an individual’s dominant position through mechanisms such as blind adoration, constant visibility, mythologizing the chosen leader, eliminating critical thinking, and creating a distinction between the individual and the audience (Steinmetz 2018). Weber specifically highlights charisma, a key human characteristic that makes a person’s personality distinctive. It is an exceptional virtue specific to individuals with a divine or exalted energy and is considered a “gift from God.” Charismatic leaders base their modus operandi on emotional manipulation and persuasive, mostly visual, communication, which creates an enchantment and devotion in followers who are drawn in through the unconscious, latent process of fanaticism. Such leaders often transcend the law because their beliefs are considered to be directed toward the community’s progress, which makes them greater than existing legislative frameworks (McMahon 2024; Engelbert et al. 2025).

The cult of personality is inextricably linked to the culture of narcissism. Drawing on Christopher Lasch’s work, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Declining Expectations*, the developments of that culture are defined in relation to individuality. Narcissism is fueled by modern capitalism, mass media, and urbanization. Lasch (1991) identifies the narcissistic worker whose chief characteristic is the ability to manage impressions, enabling him to secure a better position, higher earnings, and an enviable reputation. In a capitalist society that worships materialism and individual success, the combination of talent and charisma makes the path to achieving a cult of personality extremely fertile. The systematic elements for establishing the longevity of a cult of personality are charismatic leadership, a developed model of action, dedicated followers, profit, and the selection and destruction of the leader’s enemies.

2.1. Cult of Personality: Perception and Media Influence

Although the phrase cult of personality was coined in 1956 to describe the rule of Joseph Stalin (Croatian Encyclopedia, accessed 12. 5. 2026.), but the roots of the phenomenon date back to antiquity through examples of Alexander the Great, the Roman emperors, and the Egyptian pharaohs who portrayed themselves as deities (Holy & Borčić 2025). One of the first premodern examples was Napoleon Bonaparte, who, through his 1804 coronation, media control, and manipulation of art, established modern techniques of self-promotion and propaganda. During the twentieth century, a megalomaniacal approach to power was evident in leaders like Josip Broz Tito, whose charisma was indoctrinated into the educational system and enhanced by symbols of power such as the Youth Day torch and numerous material wealth bearing his name.

The cult of personality, however, manifests itself outside of politics as well, in cultural and intellectual terms. In the visual arts, Pablo Picasso became a symbol of the mythical artist and genius, cultivating the image of an untamable avant-gardist whose image was carefully shaped by teams of public relations experts. An even more powerful example in the second half of the twentieth century was Princess Diana. She became a symbol of humanitarianism and the “Queen of Hearts,” (McGuigan 2000; Grünhagen 2010; Lea 2014; Simmons 2017) developing a deep emotional connection with millions of people around the world. Her media presence in tabloids and daily newspapers led to an inevitable mythologization and spectacle, and her funeral, watched by 2.5 billion people, remains a testament to her greatness (McGuigan 2000). Marshall McLuhan (1964) argues that “the medium is the message,” meaning that the effect of a medium on society is not in its content, but in the way the very nature of the medium changes human behavior and perception. In the modern cult of personality, the person is no longer just a carrier of content, but becomes the medium itself. The evolution of the phenomenon in the digital age has been reflected through decentralization, interaction, and algorithms. Social networks like Instagram, TikTok, and X allow cult leaders to directly control their own image and narrative, thereby making their reputation independent of traditional media and tabloids. The chosen person becomes a self-contained medium, and if “the medium is the message,” then the person becomes the message. There are three key characteristics of the digital cult of personality: intense parasocial relationships, algorithmic polarization, and the illusion of mutual participation. Through interaction with digital content, followers create a sense of knowing, friendship, and connection with the celebrity, regardless of their actual anonymity. Algorithms stimulate extreme adoration or extreme hatred,

rewarding the visibility and virality of content that elicits the strongest reaction. The cult of personality also takes on elements of intimacy, where followers feel like active participants in the leader's life and decisions.

In conclusion, the cult of personality in the digital age functions as a synergy of emotions, media constructs, and digital strategies. The phenomenon is no longer merely a product of media manipulation but rather the result of highly developed strategies of self-presentation and audience participation, which find points of identification for their own identity within these narratives. Celebrities today balance their personal identity and brand, with every aspect of their performance carefully crafted to maintain long-term relevance and influence.

2.2. Development and Changes in Popular Culture

The term popular culture emerged in the United States in the 1920s as a culture that "the people create for the people." It is intended for everyone, not just an elite group in society. Labaš and Mihovilović (2011) highlight its key characteristics – emotionality, progressiveness, conflict with tradition, contradictoriness, pleasure, and spectacle. It is typical of Western societies that cherish personal freedom, liberal democracy, and capitalism, and its ubiquity today relies on the internet and the English language.

The development of pop culture is tied to the "anarchist bomb of modernism" of 1913, when Luigi Russolo spurred the renewal of musical art despite lacking professional expertise (Roberts 2018). A key shift occurs in the late 1950s and early 1960s with the influx of students into art schools who redefined popular art. Examples such as Keith Richards and Pete Townshend show the transition from entertainers to artists through the adoption of an artistic ethos. The art school thus evolves from an institution into a movement for personal recreation and fulfillment. Different regional approaches further enriched this development – British bohemia, French and German progressive circles, and American social hubs. Andy Warhol and his Silver Factory studio, from the 1960s to the 1990s, were a symbol of a place for expressive souls outside the standards of classical art, which was followed by European examples like David Bowie's Arts Lab (Bond 2023). The goal was to make culture globally accepted and popular. Popular culture developed in parallel with industrialization and urbanization after the world wars. Mass production created new classes whose leisure interests became more refined with technological advancement. The advent of television in 1926 and the film format in 1936 brought Hollywood's spectacularity into

everyday life (Debord 1967). In *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), Guy Debord criticizes this process, arguing that visual representations have replaced human interaction. Society began to strive for access to the spectacle rather than living it. In this system, the producer of a cultural product, the artist, becomes more important than the product itself, the art. Mass exposure allows him to be quickly commercialized and to take an industrial approach to his calling.

Contemporary popular culture functions as a dominant communicative mainstream that unifies industrial production with digital social networks, primarily driven by the mechanisms of profit and consumer identification (Labaš & Mihovilović 2011). In the 21st century, the success of cultural products is predicated on transmediality, where narratives are expanded across multiple platforms to foster deep consumer investment in the content's core values. The shift from traditional music television to digital platforms like YouTube and Spotify has catalyzed the growth of fandom culture. Harry Jenkins (2009) defines fandom as a space for marginalized groups to pursue their cultural interests. Fandoms foster parasocial relationships – one-sided, non-reciprocal bonds that satisfy the human need for connection (Horton & Wohl 1956). These relationships serve as an evolutionary imperative that reduces social ostracism and promotes personal growth through aspiration (Bond 2023). Consequently, public figures receive infallible status and guaranteed profit from devoted communities through digital engagement and media exposure.

Modern media discourse has introduced a subjective and personal tone that prioritizes perceived authenticity over traditional artistic labor. This transition has birthed the phenomenon of individuals who are famous for being famous, a trend originally fueled by blog culture and now perfected by social media algorithms. In the current attention economy, platforms like TikTok monetize intimacy and immediacy. This system often leads to a stagnation of critical thinking, as selective information and algorithmically designed content encourage a superficial form of socialization. Within this framework, a celebrity's private and professional history is transformed into a highly profitable, mythologized narrative, setting the stage for the creation of modern cults of personality.

3. MEDIA, STARS AND PARASOCIAL INTERACTION

In the contemporary communications landscape, media narratives have become a fundamental tool for shaping collective perception and social reality (Labaš & Mihovilović 2011). Beyond mere storytelling, a media narrative is defined as a strate-

gically structured system of signs and symbols specifically designed to shape collective perception. The shaping of stories in print, audiovisual, and digital media finds its primary importance in its direct impact on audience perception, where headlines and content create the attitudes that consumers adopt and by which they are guided in their daily lives (Ishanova 2013). The efficacy of these narratives rests on two pillars which are cognitive simplification and the frequency effect. Media narratives reduce complex, multi-layered social phenomena into digestible stories, allowing for the simulation of public opinion that aligns with specific institutional interests. The correlation between the adoption of an opinion and its repetition is a documented psychological phenomenon. Consistent, repetitive portrayals of public figures reinforce mental shortcuts, making it easier for recipients to accept presented information without critical evaluation. By strategically selecting information and employing specific discourse structures, this system provides the foundational mechanisms for the creation and maintenance of a modern cult of personality (Ishanova 2013).

The theory of framing refers to techniques for creating mental frames or schemas, which function as unconscious structures stored as knowledge systems (Kunczik & Zipfel 2006; Lakoff 2004, 2010). Framing highlights certain aspects of reality (Zaklama 2025) while downplaying others, thereby structuring news to manipulate aspects of events (Berk 2025; Zaklama 2025). Hallahan (1999) identifies key frames – situation, attribution, responsibility, and news frames that contextually manage the audience by determining responsibility and resolution. In pop culture, framing portrays celebrities as either authentic and socially necessary or as controversial and undesirable. A prime paradigmatic example is the treatment of Britney Spears (Luckett 2025). Her media narratives in the early 21st century were framed through the lens of a mental breakdown and parental incompetence (Kristofco & Fogler Moore 2022). Photographs documented during select situations served as a visual frame for her mental instability, which resulted in a thirteen-year conservatorship, until a 2021 narrative shift transformed her into a symbol of victimhood and change. This sociocognitive process shapes media discourse, connecting news producers and audiences through syntactic, narrative, thematic and rhetorical structures (Pan & Kosicki 1993). Billie Eilish illustrates this as she was initially framed as an “anti-pop” rebel, but over time she evolved into an icon questioning imposed frames. Furthermore, framing promotes sensationalism as an emotional trigger, compelling the audience to react to affective presentation rather than information (Giles 2003). For example, the September 11, 2001 attack motivated American and other global media to use terms like “war on terror” and visual depictions of terror without contextual coverage, simply to stimulate

a continuous sense of danger (Altheide 2006; Kellner 2003). Sensationalism attracts attention through controversy rather than information, leading to emotional identification, dramatization, polarization, and mythologization. Today, celebrities are instantly and directly accessible through social media marking a drastic change from the Golden Age of Hollywood, where studios strictly controlled celebrity images and formal discourse. Currently, the intertwining of professionalism and amateurism contributes to an intensity of closeness, causing audiences to become emotionally attached through frequent exposure, creating false intimacy and parasocial relationships. The specificity of parasocial relationships lies in their one-sidedness and unrequited nature; however, they serve as an evolutionary imperative that fulfills the human need for connection, reduces feelings of exclusion, and promotes personal growth. The phenomenon of “Bieber fever,” associated with Justin Bieber, illustrates how fans claim the star as a friend due to growing up together, which can lead to extremes where fans fantasize about a real relationship. Digital platforms foster these relationships through the illusion of two-way communication. Celebrities use expressions to “address” the audience and supposedly feed their thirst for knowledge. Audience reactions, such as likes or comments, act as a catalyst for marketing techniques, while emotional resonance replaces rational distance. Thus, the audience is no longer just a spectator; it is an investor in its own emotions. The dramatization of media sensations creates moral frameworks of heroes, traitors, or victims, which inevitably leads to public polarization. Miley Cyrus went from being a “symbol of innocence” as Hannah Montana to being media-demonized in 2013 (Kellner 2015). Namely, in that year, when her rebellion was interpreted as isolated, to being perceived today as a symbol of female liberation. Mythologization and iconization are also consequences of polarization. In these processes, a person transcends their professional role and becomes a symbol with a broader meaning. Beyoncé is an example of an artist who has become a cultural myth and a symbol of Black excellence and female empowerment (Carpenter 2026). Through her performances, she incorporates ritual motifs, royal symbolism, and narrative control, especially on the albums *Lemonade* and *Homecoming*, which solidifies her status as a mystical icon who functions not only as a musician but also as a religious symbol and political figure. Mythologization also brings the ability to persuade. A conscious communication activity aimed at changing the recipient’s attitudes or behavior is called persuasion. Senjković (2008) points out that the media “inject” messages under the audience’s skin to create an addiction to the mediated image of reality. The use of emotional appeals such as fear or pride, sender credibility, and highlighting the popularity of a stance reinforce persua-

sion techniques. The success of these mechanisms is evident in the campaign by Lady Gaga's Born This Way Foundation, which successfully encouraged young people to engage in the activism it advocated by combining personal struggles with mental health and concrete social proof. These are all the long-term effects of sensationalism, culminating in emotional numbness, increased irrational fears, voyeurism, and the stagnation of critical thinking. Today, algorithms further encourage the development of a cult of personality by feeding content that provokes the strongest reactions, causing young people to find their own identities in the media instead of within themselves. The 'trend canon events' example shows how personal perceptions of identity and audience values are shaped on social media, as sensationalist stories produce a superficial form of socialization. In 2020, Adele shared the results of her physical transformation with the world, and the media and its users became formative actors who, with her news, encouraged the public to imitate her and to question their own values (Mironica et al. 2024).

4. TAYLOR SWIFT: FROM COUNTRY TEEN TO THE BIGGEST POP STAR OF THE MODERN ERA

Taylor Swift represents a paradigmatic case within contemporary popular culture in which the boundaries between individual artistic identity and a high-profit corporate brand are erased. Her career, which began with signing a deal with Sony as the youngest singer-songwriter in history and a key recording contract with Big Machine Records in 2005 (Chau 2025), was marked by autonomy from the very start. Although she had financial support from her parents, her public image was built organically. She initially began by using the MySpace platform, which allowed her direct and immediate communication with her audience. She personally curated her own reputation without public relations teams. Over time, Swift transformed into a multidimensional system encompassing media, politics, economics, and psychology, becoming the center of 21st-century emotional dynamics.

The core of her branding strategy lies in narrative continuity known as "eras" (Bentley et al. 2025). Eras are chronological and aesthetic phases of her creative work that reflect the collective memory of her fandom. This allows systematic rebranding while maintaining a sense of linear growths that fans can mirror in their own lives. Each era functions as a cohesive unit with a defined visual identity, fashion style, and a specific emotional charge, meaning a brand is not static but evolutionary and fosters long-term loyalty. The term "era" became so influential that in 2023 it was named

word of the year, and Swift strategically uses it for a rebranding where each new phase brings a “new Taylor” and attracts a new audience. The formation process began in 2006 with the self-titled album *Taylor Swift*, which introduced maturity and the narrative form to the country-pop sphere. During this era, she is portrayed as the “girl next door” (Bright 2025; Chau 2025). The 2008 *Fearless* era marked a global breakthrough and her transformation into America’s sweetheart (Chau 2025). With it, she introduced a fairytale aesthetic, golden tones, and iconic symbols like the number 13. Her self-written 2010 album, *Speak Now*, further cemented her status as a singer-songwriter who tells stories through songs that serve as letters (Bright 2025; Chau 2025). Her introspection becomes a tool for mass mobilization to confront public narratives and enemies. The transition to mainstream pop dominance culminates in 2012 with the album *Red* (Chau 2025). This era merges a retro-chic aesthetic with the complex metaphors of a twenty-year-old. A full rebirth occurs with the so-called “pop Bible” – the synthpop album *1989*. The year that album came out, 2014, Taylor Swift became a global icon. Surrounded by a famous female clan, the Girl Squad, she turns media criticism of her private life into an ironic marketing weapon. After the media persecution of 2016, the *Reputation* era brings the most layered transformation (Bright 2025; Chau 2025). During that era, Swift metaphorically kills off the old version of herself and takes control of the narratives imposed on her. The dominant comparison for Swift during those years was to snakes, which led her to adopt a dark and edgy persona to strategically combat tabloid culture. She returns to lightness and vulnerability only in 2019 with the album *Lover* (Chau 2025). For the first time, she explicitly introduces political activism into her branding. In the midst of the 2020 pandemic, Swift surprised audiences again with an indie-folk turn on the albums *Folklore* and *Evermore*. During this phase, she created her own mythology through archaic diction and fictional characters, which led to *Folklore* being hailed as the pinnacle of her singer-songwriter work. The latest phases, the intimate pop album *Midnights* (2022) and the academic-Victorian aesthetic of *The Tortured Poets Department* (2024), have further expanded her reach to millennial and literary-academic audiences, confirming that Swift is not just a performer, but an emotional leader and a cultural institution (Bright 2025; Chau 2025). In the latest phase, called *The Life of a Showgirl* (2025), Swift further radicalizes the concept of an era by emphasizing the very construction of the celebrity as a performance (Chau 2025). The aesthetic of this phase draws on cabaret glamour and the tradition of American show business, combining theatricality, self-irony, and the conscious management of her own exalted myth. Instead of an exclusively autobiographical narrative, Swift more

openly explores life under the spotlights. Her brand shifts toward a metanarrative about the entertainment industry itself, in which the performer is simultaneously the protagonist and director of her own image. The brand of Taylor Swift utilizes weaponized authenticity by strategically framing personal vulnerabilities and professional struggles. The shifts from being a profit-driven enterprise to a moral movement for artist's rights transforms a business strategy into a collective mission. Therefore, brand's consumers are turned into brand protectors rather than just listeners.

4.1. Communication Strategies in the Service of Personal Branding

The maintenance of Taylor Swift's cult of personality is based on five primary strategic pillars: gamification, the moral framing of ownership, political advocacy, experiential marketing and controlled crisis communication. The Easter eggs strategy, namely the implementation of hidden clues in music videos, lyrics, and performances (Kheraj 2022), functions as a sophisticated gamification tool. These clues create a sense of exclusivity and encourage the collective decoding of myths within the Swifties fandom, thereby turning fans into active co-creators of meaning. This strategy directly impacts profitability by encouraging collectibility and the purchase of multiple versions of the same album to decipher hidden messages. A unique communication and legal phenomenon is the Taylor's Version movement. This is a strategic response to the loss of rights over the master recordings of her first six albums, transforming the struggle for ownership into a moral and political act of resistance. By reissuing the stolen albums on her own terms, Swift redefined the concept of ownership (Khanal 2024; Detwiler 2025) in the industry and sparked a wave of ethical consumerism, culminating in 2025 with the full repatriation of rights to her entire catalog (Chau 2025). Swift also uses her platform for direct social impact. Her advocacy against discrimination and for women's rights (Aguirre 2019) has resulted in record new voter registrations (Cunningham 2018), while her fight against monopolistic practices like Ticketmaster has led to discussions in the U.S. Congress, proving a power that transcends the entertainment industry.

4.2. Eras Tour: Social, Financial, and Communication Aspects

The tour, which spanned the globe from 2023 to 2024 (Sisario 2024), represents the pinnacle of her brand in performance form. The Eras Tour can be considered a "testament to her greatness." The tour became the most profitable tour of all time, gross-

ing over \$2 billion and drawing more than 10 million attendees, thereby transcending the traditional hallmarks of a tour and becoming an urban phenomenon with measurable economic impacts (Rim 2024; Roach 2024; Dilip & Sunny 2025). The economic impact of the Eras Tour was reflected in the phenomenon of “happyflation,” (Dahlen & Mossing 2024) where host cities recorded enormous profits and temporarily changed their names in her honor, for example, to Swift City (Očko 2023) or Taylorville. On a legal level, a debacle occurred with the ticket sales (Savage & Armesto 2023). The opportunity to correct this failure manifested in the passing of new laws against bots and resellers in the US, Australia, and Brazil. Swift thus became a catalyst for global legislative change. Using experiential marketing, she designed the performance as a retrospective celebration of each era that had sparked deep emotional identification among Swifties (Shah 2024). The tour was marked by rituals such as sharing friendship bracelets, decorating surprise songs (Brooks 2024), and going to the movies to watch Taylor Swift: The Eras Tour, which ensured a high level of fan engagement (Thorp 2024). The film also extended the tour’s reach from concert halls to movie theaters, bypassing traditional distribution models. The tour was nonetheless marked by numerous crisis situations. Despite crises, such as the tragic death of a fan in Brazil due to heatstroke (Buschschlüter 2023; Jeantet 2023) or the cancellation of concerts in Vienna due to a terrorist threat (Mendez 2024; Jocechová 2024), Swift maintained the fandom’s loyal connection and support. Her crisis communication, which often involved an information blackout, silence until the danger was over (D.J. 2024; Le Monde & AFP 2024), and even censorship, drew mixed reactions, from those who justified it with security reasons to those who criticized the lack of transparency. One of her specific crises is reflected in the realm of green politics, due to her carbon footprint, and in her peer success, where her extreme competitiveness toward younger performers is evident. However, Swift still endures as a system that merges authenticity and power construction. With over 100 billion streams (Eggertsen 2023; Millman 2023), her position confirms that the cult of personality today is the result of highly developed strategies of emotional economy and audience participation.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The empirical part of this paper is focused on a deep understanding of how consumers of popular culture perceive the mechanisms of persona-building. The research focused on Taylor Swift as a unique and distinct example of this phenomenon in the contemporary media sphere. She represents a paradigmatic example of an individual who,

through sophisticated communication and marketing strategies, has transcended her primary role as a musical artist and become an autonomous socio-political and economic phenomenon with global influence. The research seeks to deconstruct the complex relationship between the strategically planned media narratives generated by her team and the actual, subjective reception of these messages within her target fan base.

The research was conducted in May 2025. It is important to note that this study provides a qualitative insight into a specific segment of the population. Due to the small sample size, the results cannot be generalized to the entire population of Taylor Swift fans but serve as an exploratory deep dive into the described phenomena (Tkalac Verčič et al. 2010).

Given that the contemporary cult of personality is no longer exclusively a result of one-way media manipulation, but rather the product of a synergy between highly developed self-presentation strategies and active audience participation, the research seeks to examine the boundaries between the construction of power and authenticity. Taylor Swift was specifically chosen as the subject of this research because her presence transcends artistic boundaries, reflecting across politics, law, economics, and psychology, while simultaneously providing insight into the strategies that make the individual the center of collective identification in the 21st century.

5.1. Objectives and Research Questions

The primary goal of the research was to examine how a cult of personality is consciously constructed in contemporary pop culture and how communication strategies brand a person in the digital age, turning their private and professional history into a highly profitable narrative. The research seeks to answer questions about the emotional experience of parasocial relationships, the perception of changes across eras, and the effects of specific tactics such as Easter Eggs and the Taylor's Version movement on fan behavior and identity. Additionally, the perception of her economic and political power in the media space was analyzed. The research aims to understand the mechanisms by which audiences are mobilized, discourses are created, and a sense of deep community is stimulated within the fandom. To achieve this goal, the research had to answer key questions:

- RQ1: What is the personal perception of Taylor Swift among fans in terms of her identity and values?
- RQ2: How do fans emotionally experience and develop parasocial relationships with Taylor Swift?

- RQ3: How do fans perceive the Swiftie fandom, and how does this community contribute to the reinforcement of Taylor Swift's cult of personality?

5.2. Method and Sample

To address these questions, a qualitative methodological approach was used, specifically the semi-structured in-depth interview method. This approach was chosen for its flexibility and its ability to obtain exhaustive, descriptive data that allow for deeper insight into the respondents' subjective experiences (Gillham 2005). The interview guide consisted of 31 questions, divided into three thematic clusters:

1. Personal Perception of Taylor Swift;
2. Emotional Connection and Parasocial Relationships;
3. Elements of the Cult of Personality.

(The full interview guide is provided as a separate document in the Appendix).

A purposive sample was used to ensure in-depth and relevant insights from highly engaged individuals (Milas 2005). The sample consisted of eight participants (N=8), with an equal gender distribution (4 women and 4 men), aged 20 to 26. All participants identify as members of the Swifties fandom, with a high level of engagement and a followership spanning from 3 to as many as 17 years, covering various developmental phases of her career and allowing for a comparative analysis of Swift's transformations across different career phases.

The data were processed using qualitative content analysis. Based on the interview transcripts, an analytical matrix was developed to derive codes and categories. Respondents perceive Taylor Swift as a "complete artist" whose is evident through fashion, relationships, and the media landscape, not just music. They view her identity as a blend of authentic emotional expression and a structured, carefully crafted brand.

Key findings highlight that despite a strong emotional connection, most respondents distance themselves from extreme forms of fandom. They describe their relationship with the artist as limited to the musical experience, which serves as a tool for emotional regulation, without obsessive identification with her private life. Her resilience, creative control, and independence are highly valued, and the Taylor's Version movement is perceived as a symbol of justice and the fight for copyright, which stimulates ethical consumerism. The tactic of Easter eggs is recognized as a successful marketing tool that reflects the audience's sustained interest and creates a sense of closeness through the shared decoding of narratives, contributing to the gamification of the audience. The mass devotion is explained by her ability to retell personal stories

that create a universal connection. Respondents believe that Swift surpasses her contemporaries because of a unique bond with her audience that develops emotionally over the years. The research results are summarized into three thematic sections (Personal Perception of Taylor Swift, Emotional Connection and Parasocial Relationships, and Elements of the Cult of Personality), to which identified categories and codes have been assigned. More details are provided below in a tabular format.

Table 1. Display of results of the qualitative content analysis.

Theme	Category	Code
<i>Personal perception of Taylor Swift</i>	Description of artistic identity	Recognizable for authentic lyrics and emotional expression
		Her presence in culture and the media makes her an indispensable figure
		A complete artist with refined songwriting
		Her influence also extends through fashion, relationships, and the media landscape
	The values the artist represents	Authenticity, independence, and strength of character stand out
		Consistency, resilience, and creative control are valued
<i>Emotional connection and parasocial relationships</i>		They are seen as someone who acts according to their own convictions despite criticism
	Relationship with the artist	Most identify as fans, but not necessarily as part of the fandom
		Music evokes emotional reactions, but does not include obsessive monitoring of private life
		The relationship is often limited to the musical experience, without identifying with the person
	Reasons for emotional attachment	The lyrics encourage emotional reflection and identification with one's own experiences
		Her honesty in the lyrics provides a sense of understanding and acceptance
<i>Elements of the cult of personality</i>		Music serves as a tool for emotional expression and regulation
	Star status	Successfully combines musical talent, branding, and emotional storytelling

		Has a global presence and sustained audience interest across various channels
		Creates a sense of closeness and importance through a carefully managed public image
	Mass audience affection	Her ability to tell personal stories creates a universal connection
		Fans emotionally grow along with her
		Marketing and a sense of authenticity are key to maintaining interest
	Brand perception versus person	Most perceive her as a combination of person and product
		She is aware of the power of marketing and uses strategies to strengthen her presence
		Her public image appears structured and deliberate

Source: Author’s work.

5.3. Interpretation of Research Results

Analysis of the collected data through the method of in-depth semi-structured interviews reveals a complex network of mechanisms that support the contemporary cult of personality surrounding Taylor Swift. The results suggest that her public image is no longer a static category but rather a dynamic construction that is continuously redefined through strategic communication and the emotional participation of her audience.

The first thematic framework of the analysis relates to the way research participants decode Taylor Swift’s identity. From the participants’ responses, it is clear that they view her persona as a symbiosis of a highly professional brand and deeply expressed personal authenticity. Respondent 1 further emphasizes her position of power within the music industry, stating:

„She is a business. I no longer see her just as a singer, but as an institution that dictates the rules to the entire industry. Her power lies in the fact that she managed to combine art with an incredible business sense.“ (Respondent 1)

Instead of a simple musical performer, she is viewed as a versatile artist whose songwriting skills are a fundamental determinant of her market distinctiveness. Respondent 6 defines her market presence as a transitional factor in the pop industry:

„Her beginnings were very modest. It was as if one sixteen-year-old girl was reading another sixteen-year-old girl’s diary. But the turning point in her career was a change of genres – it was the death of one identity and the rebirth of something else, the same, but in a different light.“
(Respondent 6)

The response illustrates a pattern of transformation in which eras function as autonomous communication systems that enable systematic rebranding without losing the follower base. Respondents recognize the intentionality in the construction of these phases, with each era defined by a specific visual and thematic code. Respondent 3 notes the depth of these changes through visual identity:

„Every era brought a completely new world. It’s not just new music, but a whole new ‘vibe’ – from the clothes to the way she talks to us. That’s what keeps us hooked because you never know what’s next, yet it’s all still Taylor.“ (Respondent 3)

This characteristic also serves as the foundation between Taylor Swift and her audience, as it builds an intense parasocial bond that in reality is based on the illusion of mutual closeness. The analysis indicates that her song lyrics serve as the primary medium for emotional identification, thereby positioning Swift as a sort of emotional leader. Respondent 7 describes this deep emotional resonance through her lyrics:

„Her songs are simply relatable; it’s a mix of different genres and it’s simply like that because her lyrics represent her life, which is a big deal in today’s pop culture.“ (Respondent 7)

From the above, it is clear that parasocial relationships in the digital age are no longer a passive pastime but an active process of investing one’s own emotions into a celebrity’s narrative. Research participants are aware of the asymmetry of this relationship, yet it still plays a powerful role in their everyday lives. Respondent 4 explains this asymmetry as a conscious choice:

„I know she doesn’t know who I am, but that doesn’t matter to me. The feeling that we are going through the same things at the same time creates this illusion of friendship that helps me in my daily life. She’s like a loud support system I carry in my pocket.“ (Respondent 4)

Swift maintains her everyday presence through specific marketing tactics that encourage participation, particularly the Easter Egg mechanism. This tool stands out as a key concept that transforms the passive listener into an active explorer. Respondent 8 recognizes this mechanism as an effective and valuable marketing trick:

„Easter eggs are the coolest thing ever. It’s such a cool concept that it actually makes us as consumers think a bit more about the content. It shows the effort that went into it. Maybe it’s a marketing trick, but I’m sold on it – give me more.“ (Respondent 8)

Similar logic is evident in the perception of the Taylor’s Version project. Participants do not see this project solely as a business move; they view it as an act of moral resistance and a fight for justice within the industry. Respondent 5 emphasizes the importance of creative autonomy:

„The entire concept she created is excellent. She has proven that people have made a lot of money off of it, and now she will be the one choosing who gets to profit from her work. She is not just a singer; she is a writer who owns her own story.“ (Respondent 5)

The response indicates how strategically communicating private crises, such as the loss of master recordings, can result in increased brand loyalty and stimulate ethical consumerism. This is just one of many examples that form a common pattern of participation in the Swifties fandom. Moreover, the pursuit of belonging and the euphoria of a shared experience stand out, which is clearly manifested in the context of the Eras Tour. Participants view the tour and themed parties as spaces of inclusion. However, a degree of criticism was also observed regarding her crisis communication, particularly in the context of the concert cancellations in Vienna in 2024. While Respondents 1 and 5 justified her silence under the guise of security reasons, others perceived it as an information blockade. Respondent 2 points out:

„I found that completely unacceptable. She went into a total information blackout, then suddenly started promoting her next concert and merchandise, and didn’t say a word about the terror. I found that heartless.“ (Respondent 2)

In late 2025, Taylor Swift released the documentary series *Taylor Swift: The End of an Era* on Disney+, in which she speaks out about the situation in Vienna after seventeen months. Overcome with emotion, she describes Vienna as a turning point on the tour while emphasizing the need for heightened security measures, highlighting the vulnerability and danger of large-scale global music events in the contemporary socio-political context. Swift highlights the psychological pressure that comes from having to simultaneously manage personal fear and professional responsibility, especially to remain calm and support her fans despite the crisis situation, which manifested as a weeks-long silence. In the documentary, she calculatedly highlights the planned importance of Vienna as a key location for filming the tour, thereby prob-

lematizing the failure of her own production rather than her concern for her fans (D.J. 2024; Mendez 2024). The contemporary cult of personality surrounding Taylor Swift is in a fragile balance between a highly controlled brand and the audience's need for constant, real-time transparency.

5.4. Discussion

The findings of this research confirm that Taylor Swift's cult of personality is a multi-layered construct maintained through a synergy of strategic "era-based" rebranding and active audience participation. By analyzing the interviews, it is evident that fans do not perceive Swift merely as a musician, but as an "institution" and a "complete artist" whose influence dictates industry standards. The research confirms that fans develop intense parasocial bonds where the artist's lyrics serve as a loud support system and a tool for emotional regulation. This aligns with Horton and Wohl's (1956) theory, but demonstrates a modern evolution bringing digital intimacy which allows fans to feel they are reading a diary or growing up together, bridging the gap between celebrity and consumer.

The Easter egg tactic functions as a sophisticated gamification tool that transforms passive listeners into active explorers. Respondents highlighted that this strategy forces fans to communicate and makes them think more about the content, effectively turning the audience into active co-creators of meaning. The Taylor's Version movement is perceived not as a mere business transaction, but as a moral act of resistance. By communicating private professional crises as a fight for creative autonomy, Swift successfully stimulates ethical consumerism, proving that the cult of personality today relies on the alignment of brand values with fan ethics.

The research revealed a critical fragile balance in the cult of personality. While some fans justify her information blackouts during crises like Vienna in 2024 for security reasons, others decode this as heartless or a lack of transparency. This suggests that as the level of perceived intimacy grows, so does the audience's demand for real-time accountability, highlighting a potential vulnerability in highly controlled media narratives.

6. CONCLUSION

The concluding reflection synthesizes the theoretical foundations and empirical findings of the paper, confirming that the cult of personality in contemporary pop culture

has evolved from a vertical model of an untouchable leader into a horizontal, interactive phenomenon adapted to the digital age. Taylor Swift serves as a paradigmatic example of a modern cultural icon embodying all the key elements of this phenomenon. Through the concept of eras and narrative consistency, Swift consciously cultivates charisma and strategic self-presentation, turning introspection into a tool for mass mobilization.

The research demonstrates that the boundaries between power and authenticity are blurred. Fans identify with her emotional journeys while simultaneously recognizing and rewarding her business sense. Tactics such as Easter eggs and the Taylor's Version project transcends music, creating a brand that functions as a socio-political phenomenon. Swifties are not merely consumers but co-authors and protectors of Swift's narrative, finding their own identities within her media-constructed eras.

Qualitative methodology provided deep insight into subjective experiences but does not allow for precise mass-scale measurement. Future research should examine how the cult of personality will be shaped by artificial intelligence and algorithms, and whether the Taylor's Version model of creative control will change lasting standards across the creative industries.

Ultimately, this work demonstrates that a modern cult of personality is no longer an exclusive product of media manipulation, but the result of highly developed self-presentation and active audience participation.

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ULOGA MEDIJA U STVARANJU KULTA LIČNOSTI U POPULARNOJ KULTURI: SLUČAJ TAYLOR SWIFT*

Sažetak:

Ovaj rad istražuje fenomen kulta ličnosti unutar suvremene popularne kulture kroz analizu komunikacijskih i marketinških strategija koje oblikuju brend Taylor Swift. U teorijskom okviru rad polazi od Weberova koncepta karizme i Laschove kulture narcizma, prateći transformaciju kulta ličnosti iz tradicionalnog, vertikalnog modela političke moći u horizontalnu, interaktivnu digitalnu pojavu.

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Poseban fokus stavljen je na ulogu medijskih narativa, framinga i senzacionalizma u konstrukciji javnog identiteta te na mehanizme emocionalne identifikacije i parasocijalnih odnosa. U empirijskom dijelu ispituje se percepcija specifičnih komunikacijskih strategija Taylor Swift kod članova njezinog fandoma Swifties korištenjem metode polustrukturiranog dubinskog intervjua. Taylor Swift doživljava se kao autentičan emocionalan brend koji nadilazi klasičnu glazbenu karijeru, postajući središte društvene, političke i ekonomske moći. Rezultati potvrđuju da suvremeni kult ličnosti više nije isključivi proizvod medijske manipulacije, nego rezultat sinergije visoko razvijenih strategija, samopredstavljanja i aktivne participacije publike. Rad zaključuje da se u slučaju Taylor Swift brišu granice između konstrukcije moći i autentičnosti, stvarajući novi oblik kulturne snage koji je istovremeno globalan, intiman i visoko profitabilan.

Ključne riječi: kult ličnosti; popularna kultura; Taylor Swift; medijski narativi; parasocijalni odnosi; brendiranje; digitalni mediji

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